



HOW HOPE BECOMES CONCRETE

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Over the last year, many of us have found our hope to be tested. Against this background, I believe theoretical reflection can clarify the resilience required to acknowledge and address the challenges we face, both personal and political. Because this is the aim of my book, I am grateful for these responses from four readers whose work I admire. Although their comments diverge in important ways, they constellate around a question that I see as central: how does hope become concrete?

Michelle Sanchez writes that, on its own, theological discourse “is an empty cloth without bodies to wear it.” As her own research shows, theoretical texts address real people, and they can be taken up in new ways to inform particular lives (Sanchez 2019). My book focuses on two figures, Jacques Derrida and Dionysius the Areopagite, whose work is famously abstruse. Despite their reputation, I was drawn to both authors because they helped me to better understand my own life and that of the communities I care about. In my experience, disappointment sometimes hits hard, and yet people somehow persist. Through Dionysius and Derrida, I found tools to illuminate this persistence, which holds hopes while acknowledging the possibility of loss.

As Sanchez points out, since my book appeared the prevalence of loss has become painfully apparent. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread suffering, and it has shattered established patterns of normalcy. Against this background, Sanchez agrees that hope should take negativity seriously, but she presses me to say more about the rituals through which hope is cultivated.

I think Sanchez is right that communal practices are indispensable. Whereas the first half of my book presents hope as an ethical discipline, the later chapters argue that the personal practice of hope is also political. In my view, hope enables the receptivity and resilience through which genuine community is possible, and the bonds established in this way nurture hope in turn. Although relationship is always a risk, hope is the discipline that empowers people to pursue desires that are vulnerable to disappointment. For this reason, it is the precondition for mutual care and political mobilization.

For me, the reciprocal relation between individual hope and communal action became particularly clear through the isolation imposed by COVID. During Melbourne’s long lockdown, my neighbor would walk by the window of my home most afternoons, and his daughters told me what they did that day at school. It was a lonely time, but this quiet ritual recharged my powers of persistence, thereby enabling me to contribute to the communities that support me – for instance, by working with my union to defend academic workers against mounting calls for austerity.

Sanchez asks, "What are the practices, the rules, the rituals fit to foster hope in a secular age?" In my view, there are too many to list! In the last year my own hope has been bolstered by eating, drinking, hiking, marching, walking, chanting, playing, praying, and even (heaven help us) Zooming with others. However, I am conscious that each person faces different challenges, and so others will find support in other ways. By describing features of hope that might apply contexts other than my own, my book encourages readers to explore the pluriform practices through which hope takes form.

Anna Rowlands takes up this invitation by placing my account of hope into conversation with the experience of Christian and Muslim refugees living in the UK. Rowlands provides a crisp summary that captures what my book does, as I understand it, and what it does not do. As she says, the negativity that concerns me is primarily ethical and embodied rather than propositional: it unfolds in the diachronic movement of actual lives. Rowlands observes that this suggests a phenomenology of the forms of negativity that individuals and communities experience. As she points out, not all negativity is the same.

The refugees that Rowlands interviewed experienced negation, she writes, through "the loss, trauma, privation and disordering of time experienced in the asylum process." Much as I argue that hope is oriented toward a future that is uncertain, these people held hopes that they were not confident would be realized. Both my hope and theirs are not limited by predetermined plans, but Rowlands notes that they were guided by the past even as they were directed toward the future. As they suffered experiences that shattered normal time, they wove together memory and promise, past and future, through communal practices connected to prayer and textual interpretation.

As Rowlands observes, my argument in the book centers on the individual will. In my view, the unknowing associated with negative theology clarifies a capacity for disciplined resilience that individuals may draw upon when confronted with uncertainty - whether that is the uncertainty of religious faith or that of material precarity. However, given that my account of hope is (as I have explained) intentionally formal, I think Rowlands is right that there is more to say about the communal resources that hope requires to thrive.

Like the refugees that Rowlands interviewed, I situate hope in the context of ritual action and reading practices. The negative political theology I develop in the final chapter of the book gestures, somewhat schematically, toward the power of collective action (Newheiser 2019, 147-53; cf. viii, 57, 127-29). Similarly, insofar as my book develops a constructive argument by retrieving traditions, it relies on the link between memory and hope that Rowlands describes (cf. 11-13, 77). As a question of emphasis, however, her response helps me to see how my account of hope can be clarified and extended (cf. Rowlands 2013; 2018).

I am an appreciative reader of Marius Mjaaland's work, but I believe his objections to my book are premised on a misunderstanding. Where Mjaaland says that I "claim identity (!) between texts that are relatively different," I frequently emphasize that Dionysius and Derrida differ in many respects (cf. 8-9, 63, 73). Where Mjaaland objects that hope is not *explicit* in their work, my

argument is that it is *implicit* (e.g. 39, 62, 68-72). Mjaaland writes that my ethics of hope is moralistic, but I explicitly refuse to use hope to divide (as some do) between better and worse behavior (15-16, 82-84, 154). My account of hope is intended not as an exhortation but rather as a description of a capacity that is often misunderstood.

I suspect that Mjaaland and I disagree less than he thinks, but it seems that we do differ on the importance of ethics. Mjaaland suggests that grace is opposed to human activity; against a political and ethical will, he says we must wait for a gift. In my view, this willed suspension of the will is paradoxical, and so it cannot consist in a simple passivity. Where Mjaaland implies that we must choose between responsible action and dependence on gift, I think hope enables us to act as best we can while remaining open to that which comes from beyond ourselves.

In my reading, much as Mjaaland suggests, deconstruction and negative theology are both oriented toward a gift they cannot control. However, both Derrida and Dionysius recognize that pure passivity cannot be willed without contradiction. (After all, any such act of will would no longer be passive.) For this reason, both authors recommend a discipline of openness that plays out over time. Rather than insisting upon a simple silence that would be achieved all at once, they continue to speak provisionally through an uncertain hope. On this view, hope enables an affirmation without assurance, which acts while acknowledging the limits of the individual's will.

Andre Willis elegantly describes the motivation of my interest in hope. He writes, "The political argument for this kind of hope presupposes a real, collective trauma that is a result of centuries of injustice and the recognition of the impossibility of the realization of justice under current political conditions." Insofar as every person holds desires that are subject to disappointment, I see hope as central to human life. At the same time, as Willis suggests, I think hope is particularly important for communities that have been subject to persistent injustice. In my understanding, the ethical discipline of hope sustains the collective struggle for justice.

The pandemic has made clear that all of us are vulnerable, but (as usual) the pain has been unequally distributed. Although many people know someone who has suffered from COVID, in the United States and the UK Black and brown people have died at higher rates than others (cf. Bassett, Chen, and Krieger 2020; *BBC News* 2020). This is simply the most recent chapter in a long history, from colonialism and slavery to mass incarceration. Since systemic inequality is reinforced by the politics of racial resentment, I think it is dangerous to suggest that we must merely wait for a gift from above. Even if we cannot simply will the world to be better, we are responsible to work as well as we can - and for that we need hope.

As Willis says, my account of hope seeks to take seriously the dark night of long-suffering anxiety. Although every individual is situated within networks of interdependence with others, we each may find that our capacity for endurance is sometimes tested. Willis writes that the hope I describe nurtures the "open-minded curiosity and the dogged courage to 'keep pushing' in the face of disappointment." To acknowledge trauma without being crushed by it requires a lucid resilience that is personally demanding. In my understanding, courage of this kind enables the collective action required to address structural injustice.

As Michelle Sanchez observes, in the present moment negativity is sometimes tinged by resentment. This mood often arises from histories of injustice, and it can mobilize efforts to resist them. However, there is a risk that iconoclastic critique can crowd out the affirmation of positive aims. In my reading, Dionysius and Derrida both insist upon a negativity that calls every hegemony (including that of negation) into question. In different idioms, they encourage affirmation to proliferate as a hopeful experiment that is subject to continual revision.

Looking back on the last year, I am reminded of two scenes that exemplify this unruly affirmation: Melbourne's march for Black lives (in which ten thousand people gathered to oppose racist violence) and the triennial hosted by the National Gallery of Victoria. A march and a museum are very different, to be sure, but they both provide space for bodies to circulate, proliferating meaning alongside others. In my understanding, both contexts exemplify a negative political theology that is capacious enough to incorporate mourning, memory, celebration, contemplation, anger, excitement, delight, exhaustion – along with many other moods, the people who experience them, and the forms that express them (cf. Newheiser 2020).

This is how hope becomes concrete: against iconoclasm and hegemony, an affirmation that flows.

References

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