

Accounting for Hope

Douglas John Hall
McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Introduction

Columbia Seminary's "Campbell Seminar," the literary results of which will soon appear in print,¹ concluded that, "The mission of the Christian Movement in the twenty-first century is to confess hope in action." The following piece is intended as an addendum to that thesis. Unfortunately in our 'activist' North American society, the word 'action' too consistently implies a denigration of thought. The English language is sprinkled with homespun proverbs that reinforce precisely such a put-down of thinking (hence of theology, preaching, teaching) in the name of direct action: "Deeds speak more loudly than words"; "Put your money where your mouth is!" and so forth.

Such proverbs have their place, of course. If one has lived in universities most of one's life, as I have, one has no illusions about the vacuous nature of much alleged thinking, 'research,' talk, and writing. A Kierkegaard or a Kafka could write a telling essay on the actual if unacknowledged *despair* of our Western society by studying the role of the so-called intelligentsia during the Modern period. Hope that is genuine *must* issue in act.

But it must also be grounded in thought. And if the universities are guilty of actless thinking, the churches--especially the more engaged of them--are frequently guilty of thoughtless acting. This essay intends to argue that "hope in action" begins with and never abandons a search for depth of understanding.

Our Altered Situation: 'Diaspora'

"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (I Peter, 3:15). That sentence was written for Christians who lived twenty centuries ago, but it fits our situation almost as immediately and relevantly as it did theirs, for we have much in common with them.

Like them, serious Christians today know that they live in a religiously pluralistic world; they can count on little external support, whether legal or cultural; and in many places they are likely to be a minority--a scattering of Christian believers in the midst of a secularized, multicultural, and highly variegated social context.

This is the assumption of the salutation that opens the first epistle of Peter. It contains the very interesting Greek term, *diaspora*. That is, it understands the Christian Movement to consist of small *koinonia* scattered about like seeds cast from the arm of a sower. "Peter," the salutation reads, "an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the dispersion [the diaspora]." The word was used by Jews to denote those Jewish communities scattered throughout the Mediterranean world, far from Jerusalem, the holy city and spiritual home of Judaism. The term is still often used by contemporary Jews to describe their world condition. Here, the author of the first epistle of Peter picks up this Jewish concept and applies it to the early Christian 'fellowships' found here and there in that ancient world.

Increasingly, the Christian church in *our* world is becoming a diaspora. And we

can be pretty sure that the diaspora-status of Christianity will become ever more conspicuous in the century that lies ahead. This was the studied conclusion of the theologian whom many regard as the most important Roman Catholic thinker of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner:

Insofar as our outlook is really based on today, and looking towards tomorrow, the present situation of Christians can be characterized as that of a diaspora . . . the Christendom of the Middle Ages and after, peasant and individualistic, petty-bourgeois Christendom, is going to disappear with ever-increasing speed.²

The church of the future, Rahner believed, will consist of little flocks here and there--communities of faith, in which one has membership, not because one was born into a Christian society or family, but because one has chosen this faith: chosen it, not in a once-for-all way, but through a decision taken over and over again, and in the face of much opposition and evidence to the contrary.

We already know a little of this diaspora situation in North American churches. It is more evident in some denominations than in others, and in some places more than others. In Canada, as in Europe, the reduction and diminution of old, established Christendom is a conspicuous reality. In the United States, Christendom can still often appear to be intact. But all who consider the broader picture of the Christian movement in the contemporary world, no matter what our local circumstances may be, know that Christian churches can no longer count on congregations to automatically replenish and renew themselves, with generation after generation filing obediently into the pews vacated by their deceased progenitors. The days of automatic Christianity--Christianity by convention--are virtually over. This becomes clearer with the passing of each new decade. From now on, Christianity must stand on its own feet; its vitality, its credibility, its very survival depends, not upon religious convention and social habit and family tradition, but upon the *inherent capacity of this faith to commend itself to the minds and hearts of people*.

And how shall it do this? How, deprived of its social props and historic buttresses, can Christian faith commend itself in such a post-Christendom world?

Necessary but Inadequate Forms of Christian Witness

Certainly the church can commend itself through its *deeds*. When Christian persons and congregations and denominations stand up for peace and justice in a world of violence and inequality, they make a statement about their faith. When Christian men and women engage in activities aimed at overcoming sexism and racism and homophobia, they are acting in concrete ways to demonstrate the consequences of Christian belief. When Christian people take the side of labor against unchecked capital, or local and national cultures against an ever-expanding and faceless globalism, or marginalized classes and ethnic groupings against the dominant majority, they enact something vital about the nature of their faith. When Christian individuals show compassion and kindness towards others in a world that is increasingly impersonal, individualistic, and rude, they demonstrate the way in which faith expresses itself in human relationships. God's love in action remains the most concrete manifestation of Christian faith and hope. Nothing in the realm of thought, nothing merely ideational

and doctrinal, can ever replace love's enactment in *deeds*.

And yet deeds alone, indispensable as they are to Christ's discipleship, are not sufficient to commend *the faith* that is their motivation. For one thing, such deeds are not the exclusive practice of Christians—fortunately! For there is not one significant issue of personal or social ethics today that can be met by Christians alone. The great instabilities and problems of our world require the cooperation of many persons and groups. Each group, whether religious or secular, engages in the activities that it selects out of *motives* that, for the most part, remain unspoken. The deeds may be the same, but the rationale for the deeds usually differs--sometimes differs markedly--from group to group. Deeds motivated by Christian faith may be commendable in themselves; but as such they do not commend *the faith*--unless some reason, some explanation of their motivation, is asked for, and given.

Again, Christianity certainly commends itself through its realization of *human community*. In cities filled with individuals who meet, if they meet at all, only in the restrictive and often artificial atmosphere of business, work, or public event, a community that achieves something approaching genuine human encounter and caring may well seem unusual and desirable. In a society of lonely people--of single parents who seldom have the opportunity for discourse with other adults; of aging and aged persons who have almost forgotten the sound of their own voices; of young families longing for support and encouragement in the difficult business of fashioning a real home: in such a society, the Christian church may indeed commend itself through its achievement of communality, fellowship--what the early Christians called *koinonia*.

And yet, Christian community, essential as it is, does not suffice as commendation of the Christian faith as such. Like our deeds, our communality is a *consequence* of something else. Communities are not held together just by the desire for community, great as that desire may be. They are the result, rather, of some commonly cherished beliefs, traditions and goals--some shared vision of what life is intended to be. Christian community, like Christian deeds, may arouse the curiosity and interest of the world, if it is sufficiently authentic. But our fellowship as such will not commend our faith--unless, once again, we are able to explain and interpret the beliefs, traditions, and shared goals that are the basis of our fellowship.

Besides deeds and communality, there are other ways in which, in a secularized, pluralistic, post-Christendom society, Christianity may commend itself to people. For instance, it may commend itself to people through its exemplification, in its worship, of its openness to mystery, transcendence, spirituality--qualities that many of our contemporaries are again seeking. Or it may do so through its resistance of evil. It may commend itself to people through its resistance to the evils of arbitrary authority, or oppressive regimes and systems; or the crass consumerism and frivolity of our allegedly "developed" world, or through the enactment of ritual and ceremony and pageant in which individuals may find some meaningful ways of marking their own 'rites of passage.' There is, in fact, no end to the ways in which, in such a society as ours, the church of the Christian diaspora may live out its faith in such a manner as to draw a certain attention to itself.

And yet, it is not in fact *itself* to which, when it is true to its charter, *the Christian church wants to draw the world's attention*. Or rather, when it happens that such a thing does become the object of the church's mission, then, as the history and present reality of the churches overwhelmingly demonstrates, things go very wrong! The

church as such never has been and never will be either an adequate or a believable object of its own mission. "We preach not ourselves . . ." (2 Cor. 4:5).

The apostolic community points, rather, to the new reality that has brought it into being, sustains its life, and is the foundation of its communality and the motivating energy of its deeds. That new reality, which is shown only in a partial and tentative way in its deeds, its fellowship, its spirituality, its resistance of evil and all else, transcends both the being and the doing of the church. It also transcends the church's thinking, praying, and public address --its preaching, its teaching, its theology! Yet the gospel of the Word *made flesh* forever drives towards articulation in *human words*: for language, for all its limitations and dangers, belongs in an indispensable way to our peculiarly human kind of creaturehood. We are, as Athens insisted, *thinking* animals; but, as Jerusalem knew better than Athens, we are also and therefore *speaking* animals. Communication, which certainly does not exclude the deed and all non-verbal associations, occurs most decisively only when persons engage each other in speech. Thus, while our deeds, our communality, our spirituality, our compassion, and other consequences of faith may indeed arouse the world's curiosity, until we are able to bear witness to the new reality--to gospel!--in language, everything else that we do will convey mixed and often confusing messages--at least to others, and probably also to ourselves!

That is why, writing to those little flocks of dispersed Christians in the first century of the Common Era, the author of the first epistle of Peter admonished them: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (NRSV)--or, as the old King James version put (with, it seems to me, much greater directness!): "*Be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you.*" It is not enough to *have* such hope. It is not enough to resist the evil and do the good that such hope inspires. An account has to be given, whenever it is called for; and in a world where *genuine* hope is rare indeed, a reason for hope is nearly always, implicitly or explicitly, called for!

Accounting for Hope: The Fatal Flaw of Christian Establishment

Let's be honest: in these old, established and so-called 'mainline' denominations of ours, we have never been very good at accounting for hope. Even where our hope has been authentic, and not just the practiced optimism of the well-off classes, we have rarely struggled to understand for ourselves and interpret for others that *foundation* for Christian hope that is called 'gospel'. With exceptions, some of them glorious, ours has been a business-as-usual Christianity: our theology has been under developed and half-hearted; our preaching has been sedate or chatty, with more of law than of gospel in it; our missionary outreach has been routine and lacking in critical imagination and commitment. Few congregations of the Protestant mainstream have felt the need to study seriously the doctrine and history of the faith. Christian preaching (again, with exceptions!) has usually assumed, without much reason for doing so, that congregations are comprised of convinced Christians who require no introduction to the basics of the faith, let alone *metanoia*! Our missionary activity, both at home and abroad, has usually devolved upon the few who "went in for" that sort of thing.

And why not? We could assume, we old, established churches, a certain practiced nonchalance about all that because, with the rest of Western Christendom, we believed heretofore that our continued existence was assured. We could expect to survive and

even to thrive without great effort and originality. Being part of the general social establishment (like banks and schools and boards of trade), our place in the future seemed guaranteed.

But now, in the growing situation of diaspora-scatteredness into which divine Providence [sic!] is thrusting us, we can no longer afford or even sustain such grand assumptions. The great and mysterious processes that are pushing Christianity towards the periphery of society will not honor fifteen or sixteen centuries of Christian establishment in the West. Our churches will simply, eventually, atrophy and disappear unless, within the next hundred years, we become clearer and more articulate about the basic reason for our existence—our *raison d'être*! That is to say, our churches will atrophy and disappear unless we are renewed and revitalized by the hope that is the core of . . . *gospel*! Our deeds alone will not keep us going (though God help us if we cease performing them!). Our communality alone will not preserve us (though if we are at all earnest about this faith it will certainly be visible among us). Only if, over the next decades, we prove ourselves capable of “giving a reason for the hope that is in us” will these once mainline churches that have been so important, historically, for the evolution of our civilization, continue to challenge our society’s present reality and help it fashion a better future.

Many commentators on the religious scene in North America today notice that, while most of the older denominations are experiencing quantitative losses, doctrinally explicit and fundamentalistic expressions of Christianity often indicate growth—sometimes spectacular growth. There are of course many reasons for this, not all of them religious! But one reason that moderate and liberal Protestants are apt to overlook is that the growth of the once-less-than-respectable forms of Christian belief is inseparable from the fact of their former exclusion from the realms of social respectability and approval. Precisely because they were *not* part of the Establishment; precisely because their survival was not, and could not even seem, a sociological inevitability, these once-sideline faith-communities *had* to develop a message—in their terms, certainly, gospel. Personally, I do not much like their message. I think it reductionist and, frequently, embarrassingly simplistic—and often politically dangerous. But that is not the point just now. The point is: they had and they have *a message*. They could not have survived without it.

There is here an unmistakable lesson for Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican, and other ‘mainstream’ churches: If, in the post-Christendom, diaspora situation, when we can no longer count on external social conditions to sustain us, we want to continue, we shall have to develop a far better, deeper and more engaging gospel than, on the whole, we have had heretofore. Not programs of church growth; not full slates of church activities; not slogans and “friendliness” and spectacle—none of that will keep us in existence, but only a new and vibrant appropriation of the wisdom hidden in our biblical and Reformation traditions. Christendom, the rule that applied to the Christian Movement *before* Christendom is again normative: “Be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you.”

A Door Closes, A Door Opens

That, of course, is a very large order. For we are still, we Christians of the most firmly established old churches, conditioned by the belief that we can carry on as we have always done: that God, or simply custom, will always supply our needs; that

people will show up at our doors; that money will be provided for our ministries and our programs; that the usual patterns of our religious institutional existence will hold, world without end. But that road to the future is being barred forever; that door, for most of us, is already shut. Some will try to squeeze through cracks in the doorway, hopeful of 'getting by' for another decade or so; but the wise among us will certainly not depend upon that possibility. From now on, we must assume that Christianity by convention and ancestry is largely a thing of the past. By the end of the twenty-first century, those who remain Christian will have done so only because they have been able to account for the hope that their faith engenders.

With God, however, biblically understood, when doors close, other doors open, and that, I think, is also the case with the closing of the door called Christendom--which was in any case always a questionable entry into a Way so different from the "broad" way religiously-inclined humans have habitually sought. The future of the Christian Movement will be attained through another door altogether. And that other door is the one that is beautifully and succinctly identified in the Petrine text. It is called hope.

There is a reason why the writer of that text puts his exhortation to the little churches of that ancient world in the way he does--in the language of hope. "Be prepared to give a reason for the *hope* that is in you." Why not for the faith, or the love? Why not for your compassion, your hospitality, your sense of fellowship, your readiness for good works? No, he wants them to be ready to explain their *hope*: to explain why they do not give in to despondency, failure, despair.

It isn't terribly difficult to grasp the writer's rationale in this matter. What more desperately than hope do human beings, individually and corporately, need? To be without hope is to be lost, to die inwardly, to capitulate to the sorrow and gloom that haunts even the outwardly cheerful. "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here": the words Dante in his *Inferno* caused to be written over the gates of hell. Hope is the great, the eternal quest of the human spirit. And in times of failing hope, or in times of false and deceptive hope, the quest for true hope is strongest of all. And somewhere between those two conditions our age languishes.

The community that hopes is a community that will have something to say to humankind, no matter what humanity's religious inclinations of the moment may be. That community, however, must have a *genuine* hope--not a cheap hope, not mere optimism and coffee-hour chattiness. It must be a hope grounded in something greater than the mere need of human beings to be hopeful. It must have foundations in the very ground rock of creation, and in the promises and acts of Earth's Creator.

And it must be a hope that can *articulate* its grounds as well as act out of its reality. To hope is good; but a hope that is dumb, that can find no words to explain and commend itself, can not become gospel. The door that is opened to us as the door of Christendom closes, the door of hope, is a marvelous entree into the human soul and the heart of a groaning creation. But if we would enter this portal, we Christians who are called to live through and beyond the ending of old Christendom, we shall have to become more disciplined, more thought-filled, more ardent searchers after wisdom than most of our forebears were. We ourselves, in a language that both honors our traditions and addresses our 'here and now', will have to learn to account for the hope that is in us. And we shall have to do so knowing that, while we shall never fully account for that hope, the unwillingness to *try* will always evoke in others the question whether we ourselves are living from and towards such hope.

Notes

¹Walter Brueggemann, ed., *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

²*Mission and Grace*, vol. I (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 20-24.