The Promise of Christian Humanism

Thomas Aquinas on Hope

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
HOPE AND CHRISTIAN HUMANISM  1  
- The Question and an Overview of the Argument  
- Method  
- The Meaning of “Christian Humanism”

**Chapter One**  
THE RENEWAL OF CHRISTIAN HUMANISM:  
CHARLES TAYLOR AND NICHOLAS BOYLE  6  
- The Christian Humanist Project in the Twentieth Century  
  - Christian Humanisms: Past, Present, and Future Orientations  
  - Jacques Maritain and the Quest for Synthesis  
- Charles Taylor and Nicholas Boyle  
  - Taylor’s and Boyle’s Christian Humanisms  
  - Taylor’s and Boyle’s Christian Humanist Interpretations of Modern Identity  
- Conclusion

**Chapter Two**  
THE SOURCES OF CHRISTIAN HUMANISM:  
THE PROBLEM AND A PROPOSAL  24  
- The Limitations of the Contemporary Renewal of Christian Humanism  
- The Limitations of Boyle’s Christian Humanism  
- The Limitations of Taylor’s Christian Humanism  
- A Partial Solution: Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray on Faith in the Incarnation  
  - Jacques Maritain  
  - John Courtney Murray  
- A Proposal: Thomistic Hope as Theological Source for Christian Humanism  
- Clarification by Contrast: Rowan Greer’s *via media*  
- Objections to the Proposal  
  - Gordon Kaufman  
  - Jürgen Moltmann  
  - Nicholas Wolterstorff  
- Conclusion
Chapter Three  PREPUSPOSITIONS OF AQUINAS'S DOCTRINE OF HOPE  49
  • The Creator-Creation Relationship as Non-competitive
  • Creation's Participation in the Creator as the Origin of Its Being
  • Creation's Return to God as the Ultimate Good
  • The Natural Desire for God
  • The Intellect's Desire for the Vision of God
  • The Will's Desire for the Absolute Good
  • The "Need" for Grace
  • Grace Perfects Nature
  • Grace Moves Human Nature to Its End
  • Grace as Participation in God's Nature
  • Conclusion

Chapter Four  AQUINAS ON HOPE  72
  • From Grace to Virtue
  • The Passion of Hope
  • Hope as an Infused, Theological Virtue
  • Hope Distinguished from Faith and Charity
    • Specification
    • Faith
    • Hope
    • Charity
  • Hope Related to Faith and Charity
  • Conclusion

Chapter Five  HOPE AND RELIGIOUS TRANSCENDENCE  96
  • From Religious Transcendence to Theological Hope
  • Faith, Hope, and Charity as the Potency, Motion, and Act of Christian Humanism
    • The Meaning of Hope as motus
    • Hope's Motion as the Process of Actualizing the Humanistic Potency of Faith
    • Charity as the Act, or Culmination, of Christian Humanism
    • Benefits of Understanding Faith, Hope, Charity as the Potency, Motion, Act of Christian Humanism
  • The Existential Significance of Specifying Transcendence as Hope
    • The Way of Transcendence as Cruciform
    • The Goal of Transcendence as Eschatological
  • Conclusion
Table of Contents

Chapter Six  HOPE AND THE PRESENT HUMAN GOOD  119

- Eschatological Hope Protects and Sustains Secular Hopes
  - Eschatological Hope Protects Secular Hopes
  - Eschatological Hope Sustains Secular Hopes
  - Despair Shows Hope as the Underlying Modality of Secular Action
- Secular Hopes Participate in Eschatological Hope as the Means of Its Realization
  - Clarification by Contrast: Spe salvi on the Relationship between Eschatological and Secular Hopes
- Eschatological Hope Orders Secular Hopes to Their Transcendent Goal
  - Secular Hopes Constitute the Means of Eschatological Hope's Realization
- How Secular Hopes Prepare the Person for God: Two Examples
  - The Fourth Commandment
  - The Fourth and Fifth Beatitudes
- Hope in the World: Not Resignation but Re-Creation
  - Not Resignation ...
  - ... but Re-Creation
  - Conclusion

Conclusion  THE HUMANISM OF HOPE  145

- Addressing the Conflict of Interpretation over Vatican II
- Fundamentalism: Substituting Security for Hope

Select Bibliography  154

Notes  163
Index  226
Endcards  232
Chapter One

THE RENEWAL OF CHRISTIAN HUMANISM: CHARLES TAYLOR AND NICHOLAS BOYLE

The Christian Humanist Project in the Twentieth Century

From some quarters, it may look as though the conversation about Christian humanism has run its course. It no longer provides a widely chosen medium to express and advance theological ideas, as it did in the preconciliar heyday of Christopher Dawson, Jacques Maritain, and John Courtney Murray. Its signature document, *Gaudium et Spes*, has been charged with naïve optimism. Other movements, such as liberation theology and radical orthodoxy, have since captured the theological imagination. More challengingly, the ever-greater use of cultural studies in theology undercuts any talk of “the human” as some timeless, universal essence. Aware of the manifold expressions of Christian belief across time and space, theologians can no longer straightforwardly appeal to the pleasing generalities of Christian humanism.

Nonetheless, two leading Catholic intellectuals, Charles Taylor and Nicholas Boyle, frame their powerful critiques of modernity in the terms of Christian humanism. That theological choice raises some interesting questions. Do they genuinely retrieve, and not merely repeat, earlier versions? Do they rework the idea such that it offers a distinctive contribution to contemporary theological reflection?

Christian Humanisms: Past, Present, and Future Orientations

The newness of Taylor’s and Boyle’s Christian humanism can be gauged by the following broad comparisons with two previous influential Christian humanists, Christopher Dawson and John Courtney Murray. These comparisons reveal significant differences in the temporal foci of their work—that is, the times to which these thinkers look for the adequate social expression of Christian belief. For Dawson, it was the past
Chapter Two

THE SOURCES OF CHRISTIAN HUMANISM: THE PROBLEM AND A PROPOSAL

The work of Taylor and Boyle represents a distinct development in, and promising revival of, the Christian humanist tradition. Their reflections on the common good—whether on the affirmation of ordinary, secular life or on the experience of meaningful time in a consumer culture—gesture towards the enveloping movement of religious transcendence in which such ethical concerns must finally be set. But gestures do not tell the whole story. Closer inspection invites further questions and can even reveal assumptions or omissions that require explanation or completion. For while Taylor and Boyle significantly advance the project of Christian humanism, both their accounts, at critical points, require further theological elaboration. In particular, the connection between religious transcendence and the human good remains, at times, unclear or incomplete. To address that problem, I return to the more theologically trained mid-twentieth century authors. Two of the most influential among them, Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray, ground Christian humanism explicitly upon faith in the Incarnation, the belief that the Word became human in Jesus Christ out of God’s great love for the world. While Taylor and Boyle advert to this doctrinal source of Christian humanism, Maritain and Murray spell out this dependence. Consequently, their thought reinforces the contemporary retrieval of Christian humanism by its sustained attention on the doctrinal paradigm for the relationship between sacred and secular.

Despite the crucial contribution of Maritain and Murray, however, the appeal to faith in the Incarnation does not exhaust the theological sources of Christian humanism. The tradition of Christian humanism, after all, encourages the internalization of religious ideals and the construction of the common good. One must therefore cast a wider net beyond doctrinal assent. I shall propose that Thomas Aquinas’s account of the virtue of hope strengthens the theological sources of a Christian humanism that must meet the challenges so acutely diagnosed by Taylor and Boyle. I will then clarify this proposal by way of contrast with another reflection on Christian hope offered by Rowan Greer. Finally,
Chapter Three

PRESUPPOSITIONS OF AQUINAS'S
DOCTRINE OF HOPE

If Aquinas's doctrine of hope bears no intrinsic relation to the present human good, then the hypothesis of this inquiry immediately fails. A distinctively Christian humanism cannot be grounded on a general metaphysical yearning; nor could it be truly humanist if it failed to address the fundamental moral demand for justice. How, then, can Aquinas speak to a contemporary Christian humanism that understands religious transcendence to bear directly upon the modern preoccupation with social and political justice? To answer this question requires at least some knowledge and appreciation of the more important presuppositions of Aquinas's doctrine of hope. Without this awareness, the link between Christian humanism and hope will remain weak, especially in light of the preceding objections. But grasp Aquinas's theological vision as a whole, and the force of these objections dissipates. In fact, some of the key claims informing that vision show the deeply humanistic spirit of his theology.

The secunda secundae's account of hope, then, does not exist in isolation; it presupposes several metaphysical, philosophical, and theological claims. Three are crucial for understanding the humanistic significance of hope. (1) Creator and creation are not competing causes. On the contrary, creation both participates in God as the source of its being and moves to God as its final good. This noncompeting relationship establishes the metaphysical possibility of the concordance between the present human good and religious transcendence. (2) The human person naturally desires God. The philosophical arguments supporting this principle reveal an innate, distinctively human attraction to God. (3) God's grace perfects human nature. This classic principle of Catholic theology understands the fulfillment of this natural desire as God's noncoercive, graced elevation of human capabilities.

Together, these three presuppositions undergird the claim that hope can incorporate the present human good and religious transcendence. No doubt, as the history of Thomistic thought shows, these presuppositions and their interpretations are complex and controverted.
Chapter Four

AQUINAS ON HOPE

The presuppositions explored in the previous chapter illustrate the deeply humanistic spirit of Aquinas's theological system. But one cannot remain at their level of generality. Even the natural desire for God is a pre-Christian potency whose completed act (the beatific vision) is a post-temporal state. But Christian humanism principally concerns the distinctively Christian contribution to this life. One must therefore narrow the focus from the comprehensive treatment of the human person (from natural desire to the beatific vision) to the specific examination of the theological virtues in via. For as Aquinas wrote at the beginning of his most succinct and accessible summary of Christian thought and life, the Compendium theologiae: "The Apostle, in 1 Corinthians 13:13, taught that the whole perfection of this present life consists in faith, hope, and charity, as in certain brief headings outlining our salvation: 'Now there remain faith, hope, and charity.' Why these three? Aquinas's answer to that question gives a prospect for this chapter's study of hope: because "human salvation consists in knowing the truth [faith] ..., in the intention for a fitting end [hope] ..., [and] in observing justice [charity]." But before examining these virtues, one must first distinguish them from grace, the last presupposition examined in the previous chapter, to see their distinctive contribution to Christian humanism.

From Grace to Virtue

Even to focus on grace—the source of the human movement towards God—is still too broad a compass for a study of the theological sources of Christian humanism. One must pay closer attention to the dispositions and operations that flow from grace, if one wishes to understand better how the human person approaches God as her ultimate good. For acts pertain to the operation of the soul, whereas grace, strictly speaking, transforms the soul's essence. But Christian humanism looks beyond the healing and elevation of the soul, to the concrete actions that flow from this renewal of heart and mind. And to talk of the soul's operations, one must use a new category, that of virtues, whose acts manifest grace.
Chapter Five

HOPE AND RELIGIOUS TRANSCENDENCE

The preceding exegesis of Aquinas’s account of the theological virtues forms the basis of the following constructive reflections on the significance of hope for a contemporary Christian humanism. In this chapter, I explore how Christian hope specifies and deepens the idea of religious transcendence; in the next, how it underlies the task of constructing the present human good. These two chapters put to the test the guiding hypothesis of this study: namely, that since contemporary Christian humanism insufficiently integrates its two principal features of religious transcendence and the human good, the virtue of hope provides a critical theological source because it both moves toward God as future happiness (final cause) and relies on God’s help now for any good (efficient cause). Hope thus promises to integrate in a single virtue what is potentially disparate in contemporary Christian humanist reflection. Can that promise be fulfilled? Does Aquinas’s doctrine of hope articulate a credible movement of religious transcendence toward God alongside convincing grounds for moral action in the world? Can it inform and deepen what is meant by religious transcendence?

The task of this chapter—to explore how Aquinas understands hope as the movement of religious transcendence toward God and to unpack the significance of that understanding for Christian humanism—is approached in three stages. The first develops the exegetical findings of the previous chapter to show that hope, unlike faith or charity, essentially pertains to motion and thus can be thought of distinctively as religious transcendence. The second offers what I consider to be a legitimate development of Aquinas’s account of the theological virtues. I argue that if hope be the motion that constitutes the transcendence advocated by Christian humanism, then faith and charity may be considered, respectively, the potency and the act of Christian humanism. This interpretation of faith, hope, and charity as the potency, motion, and act of Christian humanism helps to articulate how the theological virtues, in distinct yet related ways, mutually inform Christian humanism. In the third and final stage, I argue that a consideration of hope’s distinctive kind of motion—as pertaining to difficulty—underscores the specifically
Chapter Six

HOPE AND THE PRESENT
HUMAN GOOD

Christian hope binds together the secular and the eschatological. Exploring the nature of this connection will reveal, in two parts, how Christian hope builds up the temporal human good. First, eschatological hope, precisely because it radically differs from and transcends secular hopes, protects and sustains them, especially as they encounter difficulty. It therefore grounds human moral action in via as its underlying modality, nor least by countering despair. Second, secular hopes can themselves anticipate and participate in eschatological hope by preparing the person for God. In fact, Christian hope gathers those secular hopes into eschatological hope as the very means of realizing that transcendent goal. Thus, contrary to Wolterstorff’s objection, Thomistic hope is not a narrowly “other-worldly” hope detached from earthly justice. Rather, the intimate participation of secular hopes in eschatological hope demonstrates the appropriateness of this virtue as a key source for a contemporary Christian humanism. To illustrate that participation, two examples, drawn from Aquinas’s discussion of the law and of the beatitudes, develop the contention that Christian hope supports and empowers the construction of the temporal human good—not despite, but because of, its promotion of religious transcendence.

Throughout this chapter, Benedict XVI will be an important conversation partner. His opening brace of encyclicals, on love and hope, powerfully restate his influential reflections on eschatology and manifest his intention as pope to focus on the core aspects of Christian identity. In his 1988 set of retreat lectures, he described the theological virtues—the theme of the retreat—as “those fundamental attitudes in which human existence opens itself up to God and thus becomes truly human.” His views on these virtues are therefore important to this study on Christian humanism. But while his recent document, Spe salvi, shows how eschatological hope differs from and sustains secular hopes, it does not sufficiently account for how secular hopes participate in eschatological hope. Perhaps this reticence stems from his Augustinian theological sensibilities—heightened by his firsthand witness of a totalitarian regime—which emphatically caution against the perennial tendency to