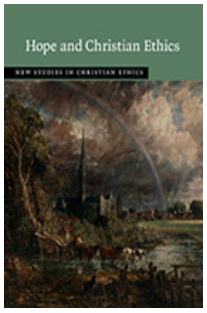
Book Review



David Elliot
Hope and Christian Ethics (New Studies in Christian Ethics)
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In the book of *Hope and Christian Ethics*, David Elliot proposes the virtue of hope as an answer to the age-old question of finding happiness while addressing the urgent contemporary problems of despair and demoralization. Elliot denotes happiness as *eudaimonia*. In the pursuit of happiness, there exists an *eudemonic* gap between what we want and what we cannot achieve. To find *eudemonia* or happiness, Elliot proposes the virtue of hope which leads to a "good" life and contributing to social goods. Hope also prevents demoralization and despair which are caused by sloth and "presumption". Presumption is defined by Elliot as a wrongful assumption. After rejecting attempts to bridge the gap by different philosophers and other theologians, Elliot proposes Aquinas' hope concept which enables humans to seek after the perfect happiness and wait for its completion at the eschaton.

Elliot first makes an important distinction between natural beatitude and theological beatitude. The former is the regular type of joy rested on earthly goods and the latter is a virtuous life with God as the object of happiness. This distinction is vital in contrasting the type of happiness sought by philosophers and utilitarianists. Aristotle, neo-Aristotelian theologians, and Utilitarianists all acknowledge and attempt to provide a solution to the *eudaimonic* gap. Elliot criticizes them to have failed because they eventually conclude that one has no choice but to forego happiness when disasters strike, focus merely on superficial earthly pleasures, or set a standard too high causing people to give up. The result is melancholy and despair. On the contrary, theological beatitude proposed by Aquinas seeks the fullest sense of God as the object of happiness on a personal level and social justice on a corporate level. While earthly pleasures can provide some satisfaction, God, as the object of our happiness, can sustain us during the pursuit. Elliot skillfully argues that the pursuit of happiness, though arduous, is still enjoyable. Happiness or beatitude thus is not limited by the temporary lack earthly goods. Therefore, theological hope avoids the pitfalls of other philosophical theories of becoming vulnerable to earthly misfortune and foregoing happiness.

Elliot then defines hope and its activities. He again distinguishes theological hope from natural hope. Natural hope refers to the regular desires for earthly goods which is linked to the subsequent chapter on worldliness. Theological hope refers to a life of virtuous pursuit. Hope as a virtue requires a lifetime of activities. It is not stagnant. Human agency is a crucial component in the pursuit of this hope virtue and the exercise of hope involves the "will" of the human agency. This volition process integrates all human's desires and passions. It aims over a lifetime's endurance and perseverance. The

process itself is enjoyable because it seeks God and relies on God's assistance. The ultimate happiness will not be achieved within this lifetime, but in the future eschaton. With this futuristic perspective, hope can fight against the temptation of demoralization and despair. Elliot acknowledges that "fortune" which is more appropriately referred as "misfortune", threatens us with demoralization and despair. But theological hope sustains and helps us focus on the transcendent God and the forthcoming perfect beatitude. Thus, hope anchors on the fruition of the eschatological perfect happiness. Interestingly, this eschatological perspective rings a similar tune of Kant's "afterlife" theory which Elliot criticizes. Kant argues that happiness can only be achieved in an afterlife in which the moral conduct during the present lifetime can be rewarded. It would have been beneficial if Elliot could further explain the difference in the two approaches in the book.

Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope was influential in the last century. It is just appropriate for Elliot to give an assessment on Moltmann. Elliot did a good job in summarizing Moltmann's theology and pointing out its inadequacy. He first challenges Moltmann's theological orientations on the denial of God's pre-existence and insistence on God's need to work with humans. He then perceptively points out that Moltmann's concept of hope is burdened with Hegelian and Marxist's type of baggage and deflates the power of hope. Under Moltmann' concept of social reform, hope is the impetus to social reforms. Yet, those who need hope the most are the ones who are incapable to practice hope. Thus, there is a need to find an alternative which is found in Aquinas' concept of hope. Aquinas' hope concept empowers life by focusing on the final life with God and reliance on God's help throughout this life journey. Human is "*homo viator*" or "wayfarer," who is on the way but has not reached the destination of the heavenly homeland (*patria*). Indeed, Moltmann's concept of hope relies on human's work with God and the social reform envisioned is human-oriented. In contrast, Aquinas' concept of hope anchors on a humble dependence on God and the practical social reform is based on charity. The orientation of the two concepts cannot be more different.

The discussion on hope then turns to grace, specifically *auxilium* which is defined as "helping grace." Although Elliot briefly mentions other types of grace such as habitual grace, healing grace, it is *auxilium* which enables humans to hope and to endure. Elliot also devotes a section to discuss hope's relationship to faith and charity. Elliot introduces other terminologies such as "unformed faith", "unformed hope", self-love (*amor concupiscentiae*) and charity love (*amor benevolentiae*). Unfortunately, Elliot does not clearly define the terms, delineate the necessity for these terminologies, or explain how they contribute to the discussion of hope.

In Chapter 3, Elliot discusses the Rejoicing Action of Hope. This section explains more fully on the meaning of true happiness with a focus on its connection with God. Elliot refers the desire of the perfect or ideal happiness as *desiderium*. This desire causes humans to trust in God's grace and with hope, humans can confidently look forward to the perfect beatitude and the lasting grace. Through a lack of earthly materials, humans are reminded that the ideal happiness is yet to come, and the need of material goods stimulates people to hope. Again, hope requires "*considerio*" which is the exercise of hope.

The most succulent section of the book is Chapter Four on "Presumption and Moral Reform." In this chapter, Elliot discusses the vices

of despair and presumption. Elliot accurately points out today's problems of indifference. Sloth and acedia which is bitterness lead to despair. Humans no longer desire fellowship with God but resent the costly demand of discipleship. Instead, they are content with mediocrity. "Presumption" is defined as "a bloated likeness or parody of hope." Complacency and downplay of the need for God's grace are serious problems among Christians. Elliot rejects Jeffrey Stout's "Emersonian piety" which is grounded on self-reliance and self-sufficient presumption. Per Elliot, Stout secularizes the virtue of hope and replaces hope in God with self-reliance. This complacent presumption contradicts the Christian concept of grace. It is superfluous, unworthy and pathological. On the opposite extreme, there are those who lean too much on grace. Elliot insightfully cites Aquinas' "glory without merits" analysis. This "glory without merits" presumption assumes forgiveness without repentance. Christians with this view leans on God's mercy and shirks accountability and moral work. This type of hope is false hope. They treat hope as a bribe for rewards in the afterlife. Even worse, sometimes complacency leads to apathy for those who are suffering. To counter such apathy, charity is crucial.

In chapter 5, Elliot discusses despair and consolation. This chapter is an elaboration of the earlier discussion on humans' vulnerability to demoralization and despair due to misfortune and trials. Elliot cautions the need to be sensitive to those who suffer from earthly pains. Hope which anchors on the perfect beatitude to come, motivates humans to overcome the imperfections in this life. Citing Aquinas' correspondence of the seven fruits of the Holy Spirit to the final beatitude, Elliot points to the "poverty in spirit" as the fruit corresponding to hope. Yet, before giving a more in-depth discussion on this collaboration, Elliot turns the discussion to Bowlin's Stoic hope which he rejects as risking in falling into self-blame. The discussion on Stoic hope resembles points made earlier in the book.

The promising section on the Holy Spirit's fruits and hope occurs in the final two chapters. Elliot refers to the dual citizenship of this world and of heaven. He defines worldliness as an excessive attachment to external earthly goods. Here, Elliot injects more terms such as "*ge*", "*kosmos*", and "*aion*" but the connection between these term and theological hope is a bit unclear. The discussion on the "blessed are the poor in spirit" finally occurs in the latter part of the chapter. The brief discussion makes a brilliant argument that being "poor in spirit" provides a correct recognition of human conditions being vulnerable, limited, needy and dependent on God. This connection ties the entire discussion back to the humility and dependence on God. (p. 172) This poverty frees humans from the vice of worldliness. Regrettably, the discussion is surprisingly short and brief, leaving readers to desire more elaboration.

Hope is threatened by worldliness. Elliot briefly points out that worldliness leads to greed which prevents humility, a pre-requisite to theological hope. In fact, worldliness is a stumbling block to the entire Christian walk. It would have been better if Elliot had elaborated more on this threat particularly as to hope. Thus, the connection between hope and "poverty in spirit" could have been a lot fuller. As humans are citizens of society, they are called to labor for the common good and appreciate their community. Hope enables the beatific vision which is to be consummated in the eschaton. In the meantime, hope helps us believe that situation can get better, but not necessary will get better during this lifetime. Thus, hope

provides concrete and practical assistance to overcome despair and melancholy.

In summary, this book provides a good exposition on hope in its analysis of today's problems with complacency and self-reliance. Hope is a virtue that requires a life time of activities. The eschatological perspective is also important. Yet, the book tries to address too many issues and utilizes too many terminologies. At times, the connection between these terms and the hope discussion is unclear. Overall, the discussion on hope as a virtue is instructive and is much needed.