

## ‘HOPE FOR THE EARTH’ Biblical perspectives and trajectories

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### Introduction: The notion of ‘hope for the earth’

The notion of ‘hope for the earth’ calls for some clarification. The context within which it is used here is that of a larger research project, with the same title, registered at the University of the Western Cape. The aim of this research project is *to investigate the viability of an eschatological approach to an ecological theology, spirituality and praxis within the South African context.*

The notion of an eschatological approach to ecological theology is based on a very helpful typology suggested by John Haught.<sup>1</sup> He has identified three major approaches to an ecological theology, i.e. an apologetic, a sacramental and an eschatological approach. Since I have discussed this typology elsewhere in more detail,<sup>2</sup> a few brief comments on an eschatological approach to ecological theology may be sufficient here.

The basic intuition of this approach is that an environmental spirituality and praxis can (only) be empowered on the basis of a notion of (Christian) hope that includes hope for the earth itself. Without any hope, without any vision of a future for the earth itself, an environmental praxis will soon lose its impetus. One of the consequences of the environmental crisis is precisely that it has led to a widespread sense of despair for the longer term future of the planet. David Hallman comments that, ‘The problems of ecological destruction and global poverty are certainly of a magnitude and intractability to elicit unmitigated despair.’<sup>3</sup> Indeed, ‘Hopelessness is the greatest killer - of joy, of initiative, of loving concern, of social and ecological responsibility, even of physical life’.<sup>4</sup>

The question therefore seems to be: Where can a vision of hope be found amidst such a sense of environmental despair? In what way can this hope include a sense of hope for the earth itself?<sup>5</sup> What hope is there ultimately for us as human beings? Is the Christian hope one of salvation for human beings *from* the earth<sup>6</sup> or does it include some vision of hope *for* the earth itself? And how can such a vision of Christian hope inform and empower an environmental praxis and spirituality?

There is, in other words, a need within a ‘theology of hope’ (Moltmann) to gain clarity on the continuity and discontinuity in the complex relationships between *kosmos* and *eschaton*, between present salvation and final consumation, between this earth and the ‘new

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1 See Haught (1993).

2 See Conradie (1997b).

3 Hallman (1994:8). He immediately adds that what emerges from literature on the environment is often not resignation but an astonishing conviction, vision, celebration, humour and hope.

4 Nürnberger (1994:148).

5 Santmire (1989:267) comments that ‘... no single theologian has yet explored the implications of the theology of hope substantively for the ‘theology of the earth,’ that is, the biophysical world, the cosmos, or nature.’

6 Granberg-Michaelson (1982:23) uses the very apt image of a helicopter (God’s work in Jesus Christ) hovering over a burning and sinking ship (the earth) in order to rescue the crew (human beings only) to safety (heaven one day). With reference to John 3:16-17, Granberg-Michaelson insists that God’s loving care includes the whole cosmos. The sinking ship itself must be rescued.

heaven and the new earth', between our human bodies and the Christian hope for the resurrection of the body, between the finite life *on* earth (as well as the finite life *of* the earth) and the Christian hope for 'life everlasting', between the finite dimensions of space and time and God's presence in eternity.

These questions form the heart of an inquiry into the viability of an eschatological approach to ecological theology. They also set the agenda for the research project that is envisaged. This will require a thorough investigation of the meaning, content and scope of Christian hope. The following aspects of this research project have been identified:

1. An assessment of the problem of despair, including the cosmic, planetary, environmental, South African and more personal dimensions of despair;<sup>7</sup>
2. An analysis of inadequate (false, shallow, human-made, vain, cheap and ecologically fruitless) forms of hope, hope which excludes the earth;
3. A reconstruction of the story of the cosmos as a narrative of hope;<sup>8</sup>
4. A reconstruction of Biblical trajectories on the theme of 'hope for the earth';
5. An investigation of various models of cosmic eschatology in order to formulate a vision of Christian hope for the earth,
6. An assessment of the relationship between eschatology and ethics, between hope for the earth and environmental responsibility
7. The collecting of stories on a Christian environmental praxis embodying this hope for the earth.

The first essay in this volume relates to the problem of despair (see 1. above). It investigates various dimensions of despair, especially in the context of environmental degradation.

The other essays are derived from papers delivered at a regional colloquium, held at the University of the Western Cape, October 1997, on the theme of 'Biblical perspectives and trajectories on hope for the earth.'

A few comments on an investigation of 'hope for the earth' in the Biblical roots of Christianity are important:

While the notion of 'hope for the earth' may not be prominent in the Biblical texts, the category of hope itself is certainly used pervasively throughout the Bible. In some Biblical texts, the content of this hope does include a cosmic dimension, while this seems to be excluded in others. A sensitivity for the plurality of Biblical texts and for the socio-historical background within which these texts originated therefore calls for a careful historical reconstruction of the content and scope of hope in specific Biblical texts and the significance of this hope for the communities in which these texts were produced. In others words: Can a vision of hope be identified in a given text in and for a particular context? What is the content expressed in this vision of hope? And did this hope include a vision of hope for the earth?

Such a reconstruction of the theme of hope in a variety of Biblical texts will (hopefully!) enable one to discern some 'trajectories' in the historical development of a cosmic dimension to hope in the Bible. The task of the larger research project will be to 'extrapolate'<sup>9</sup> these trajectories towards a contemporary vision of hope which could empower an ecological theology, spirituality and praxis in the South African context.

7 See the contribution in this volume.

8 See Haught (1993) for one contribution in this regard.

9 For the notion of 'extrapolation' see Nünberger (1991, 1994) and my contribution in this volume.

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