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Introduction

I wrote this book because I believe it is hard to hope.

We invest in the people we love and the causes we care about, but people and projects may fail us. At the extreme, despair is an ordeal: physical suffering can compress attention within a present that has become unbearable, and psychological suffering may prevent a person from seeing any way forward. Although some people assert that everything will be alright, the reality of grief, anxiety, and exhaustion cannot be brushed away. Frustrated hopes are painful to maintain, so we are sometimes brought to abandon them.

Despair is directly opposed to hope, but complacency presents a more insidious challenge. Italo Calvino recounts the following story:

> A sibyl, questioned about Marozia's fate, said: "I see two cities, one of the rat, one of the swallow." This was the interpretation of the oracle: Today Marozia is a city where all run through leaden passages like packs of rats . . . but a new century is about to begin in which all the inhabitants of Marozia will fly like swallows in the summer sky.[1]

Years later, on returning to the city, the narrator finds that its inhabitants believe that the prophecy has been fulfilled. However, he comments, "The wings I have seen moving about are those of suspicious umbrellas under which heavy eyelids are lowered; there are people who believe they are flying, but it is already an achievement if they can get off the ground flapping their batlike overcoats." Those who see themselves as the oracle's fulfillment are proud of their parody of the swallow's wings. Their confidence is closed to anything other than their grim, gray reality.

I see this story as a parable of hope. The citizens of Marozia move through the city with their eyelids lowered, immune to anything beyond

[1] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 154–55.

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what is before them. Because they believe that the swallow's prophecy has been fulfilled, they have no need for the future, and they are numb to the possibility of something different from what they already possess. This indifference is more prosaic than the drama of despair, but it is equally hopeless. Where suffering and satisfaction constrain imagination within an enveloping present, hope is directed toward a future that remains unfulfilled. In Marozia, it would seem, there is no room for hope.

However, Calvino continues, "It also happens that, if you move along Marozia's compact walls, when you least expect it, you see a crack open and a different city appear." The Marozia of self-interested commerce is all that its inhabitants can imagine, but life remains capable of surprise. "It is enough for someone to do something for the sheer pleasure of doing it, and for his pleasure to become the pleasure of others: at that moment, all spaces change, all heights, distances; the city is transfigured, becomes crystalline, transparent as a dragonfly." This other Marozia flickers within a fracture in the existing order, vibrating for an instant before disappearing. "Everything must happen as if by chance, without attaching too much importance to it, . . . remembering clearly that at any moment the old Marozia will return and solder its ceiling of stone, cobwebs, and mould over all heads." The first Marozia continually reasserts itself, but its monopoly is incomplete: the prospect of transformation shimmers beneath the surface of everyday life. This suggests that hope remains possible even when the world seems to exclude it.

Human experience strings together a series of surprises, from unpredictable minutiae – the timing of the bus, the texture of a cloud – to major events. For this reason, even those whose existence is generally regular find themselves destabilized by unpredictable tragedy or delight. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity for resilience. From the minute we wake, we are propelled by desires that may not be fulfilled, but this incompletion throws us into motion. Because every relationship eventually confronts disappointment, love must endure vulnerability, but vulnerability is also what lends love its energy. From individual desires to political movements, every project we pursue is not certain to succeed, but this same uncertainty energizes action against the odds. As Calvino describes, even the most monotonous life feels the force of the future.

Disappointment is always possible – and yet people persist. This book is premised on the conviction that both the disappointment and the persistence are real, and neither should be forgotten. In my understanding, hope constitutes a disciplined resilience that enables desire to endure without denying its vulnerability. Daily life depends on a hundred small hopes, and

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this is doubly true of our deepest commitments. Because complacency and despair exert a constant pull, hoping is hard, but it is also indispensable.

A Secular Age

Like every word, *hope* has a history. In European languages, it carries connotations associated with Judaism and Christianity.[2] Hope is a central theme in the Bible, from the messianic expectations described in the Hebrew Scriptures to the florid imagery of the Apocalypse of John. The most widely recited Christian creeds include the hope for the resurrection of the body, and expectations for the future (both personal and cosmic) are central to Christian commitment. For this reason, medieval theologians identified hope as one of three virtues that are central to relationship with God. In cultures that are marked by a Judeo-Christian past, it is possible to detect echoes of this tradition when people talk about hope, even among those who no longer identify as religious. This makes hope an important site for reflection on the place of religion in secular societies.

The character and significance of secularization are hotly contested. In the 1960s and 1970s, many scholars assumed that religion was in decline, but by the end of the century most recognized that the situation was more complex.[3] Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* (2007) represents a landmark attempt to develop a more nuanced narrative. According to Taylor, secularization signifies a change in the conditions for religious commitment rather than the loss of religion altogether. Taylor notes that many people remain committed to a religious tradition, but they do so surrounded by a dizzying range of alternatives. He writes, "We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty."[4] Because modernity is many-layered, this experience is culturally and geographically specific, but I think Taylor is right that (among certain people and in certain places) it is widely shared. In many communities, religious commitment has become

[2] To take one example, the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s earliest entry for "Hope (n.)" is from a Christian commentary on the book of Isaiah: "Ne bepæce Ezechias eow mid leasum hopan, þæt God eow..ahredde" [Ælfric Homilies (c. 1000)].

[3] Compare, for instance, Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy; Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967, 1967); and Peter L. Berger, "Secularism in Retreat," *The National Interest*, no. 46 (1996): 3–12.

[4] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 11.

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one option among many, a source of anxiety rather than a site of consensus.[5]

In key respects, the secular age that Taylor describes resembles Calvino's Marozia. According to Taylor, modern science made it possible to describe the world as an order that could be understood on its own terms, without reference to anything more. Whereas the world was once porous to the supernatural, it has become self-sufficient. At the same time, religious rhythms of festival and fasting have been supplanted by the uniform time that is measured by clocks, and contemplative reflection has been displaced by the dominance of instrumental rationality. Much as the inhabitants of Marozia have lost the sense of anything beyond their daily business, many people assume that what Taylor calls "the immanent frame" excludes transcendence.[6]

Where Taylor suggests that modern science and market capitalism have banished the gaps and crevices through which something otherworldly used to appear, Calvino indicates that immanence is never entirely closed. In Marozia, the regularity of daily commerce can collapse at any time. Unexpected delight can crack the dull regularity of ordinary time, suddenly transfiguring everything. Because the old Marozia remains in force, this crystalline city is not a place that can be inhabited, but its possibility qualifies the authority of the present. In my understanding, hope unsettles the secular in precisely this way.

There is a lively debate among philosophers concerning whether religious beliefs are justified, but I think this issue is secondary: in my view, religious commitment hinges on ethics rather than epistemology. The view that beliefs ought to be justified is a judgment about how people should live, not a fact that can be demonstrated. One never knows whether one's love for another person will be a source of suffering or delight, nor can one know whether one's goals will come to fruition. Nevertheless, love sometimes endures, and people pursue desires that are vulnerable to

[5] As I discuss at greater length in Chapter 5, scholars such as Talal Asad have argued that the concept of religion was constructed in the modern era as a term of contrast to the secular state; from the outset, it was an abstraction designed to bolster the state's monopoly on violence. Similarly, before "secular" came to name a sphere distinct from religion, it referred to (Christian) clergy who lived among the laity, whereas "religious" clergy withdrew to cloistered life. Where some assume that the secular and the religious are discrete identities that stand opposed, the boundary between them is under constant negotiation, and the meaning of both is marked by the legacy of Christianity (see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993], 191–92; Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 [2009]: 836–62).

[6] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15, 542.

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disappointment. The persistence of hope indicates that, although rational deliberation is an important dimension of human existence, it is not the only one. On account of hope, it remains possible to hold commitments that transcend the immanent frame. For this reason, I will argue, reflection on hope illuminates the future of faith in a secular age.

The Problem with Hope

At the same time, I aim to show that taking secularization seriously clarifies the character of hope. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus argues that hope no longer holds purchase in a universe divested of illusions.[7] In his view, religious hope imposes meaning upon a meaningless world, and so is unsustainable. Camus claims that any comfort hope provides is prone to collapse, and I think he is correct. Perhaps there were once communities in which everyone expected a life after death, but within pluralized societies religious hopes are no longer self-evident. Those who are suffering are sometimes told that God has a plan, but when trauma is intense, easy comfort can seem obscene. Even the faithful must confront a world in which God appears to be silent; in this context, faith is premised upon endurance of doubt. Once the world is demystified, the confidence claimed by some seems like a denial of present realities and a distraction from things as they are.

Camus is committed to resolute lucidity as an individual practice, but his point also applies to politics. Attention to an outcome one desires can congeal into unjustified confidence, and this feeling of security may displace attention from improvement in the present. Along these lines, Karl Marx argues that the promise of heaven distracts people from injustice on earth; as he describes it, otherworldly hopes are imaginary flowers that hide the chain of oppression. More recently, afro-pessimists such as Calvin Warren claim that hope undercuts the critique of present injustice by positing a realization that is never satisfied. There is therefore reason to worry that hope is politically debilitating.[8]

Some Christians defend a form of hope that confirms these criticisms. In a recent book, David Elliot argues that Christian hope constitutes a confident expectation that is grounded in the promises of God. He writes,

[7] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1955). I discuss Camus's critique of hope in Chapter 3.

[8] Cf. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* trans. Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Calvin L. Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 (April 1, 2015): 215–48.

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"Theological hope . . . provides an ultimate meaning and transcendent purpose to our lives; and it rejoices and refreshes us 'on the way' (*in via*) with the prospect of ultimate reconciliation and lasting beatitude."[9] According to Elliot, whereas secular hope is fragile, Christian hope supplies life with a significance that it would otherwise lack, and it offers the guarantee of eternal life. This corresponds to the security that concerns Warren, Marx, and Camus. Where they claim that the world does not provide assurance of this sort, Elliot writes that Christian hope is "supremely confident and triumphal."[10] There is reason to worry that such confidence ignores what it is like to live in a world where religious commitment is no longer obvious.

Elliot represents one strand of Christian reflection on hope, but there are others. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul identifies hope as central to salvation – "in hope we were saved" – but this does not entail that it is certain (Rom. 8:24). He continues, "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with perseverance [*hypomonēs*]" (Rom. 8:24–25, translation modified). Where Elliot claims that Christian hope consists in confident expectation, Paul suggests that hope concerns the invisible; because this hope remains unrealized, Paul explains, Christians are suspended in a state of unfulfilled desire. Paul is attentive to the ambivalence of this situation. Immediately before this passage he writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves" (Rom. 8:22–23). This suggests that, rather than representing a triumphal confidence, Christian hope is a discipline that endures the pain of incompletion.

Because Christians believe in an invisible God, they have had ample opportunity to practice perseverance in response to disappointment. Revisiting this strand of Christian tradition in conversation with Camus's austere lucidity underscores the fact that Christian faith was always uncertain. Like modern revolutionaries, the biblical prophets are oriented by the desire for something more; for both, this hope sustains resistance to present injustice. Although the content of these hopes are different, they share the same form. Where theologians like Elliot argue that Christian hope is unique, I will argue that religious and secular hopes are both

[9] David Elliot, *Hope and Christian Ethics*, 2017, 2. [10] Ibid., 61.

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vulnerable to disappointment, and so they both require the same resilience.[11]

The Discipline of Hope

To clarify the character of hope, my argument draws on a tradition of Christian thought that foregrounds the hiddenness of God. The Torah insists that God alone should be worshipped, and so it proscribes the representation of God in graven images (cf. Exodus 20:4). Although Christians believed that Jesus Christ was "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), this paradoxical phrase suggests that God remains obscure. The Apostle Paul writes that "now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). On this view, Christian knowledge of God is imperfect – at least for now, it fumbles in the dark. Some theologians therefore insist that every attempt to represent God, in images or in words, must be accompanied by a disciplined negativity.

In the second century, theologians such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria placed this biblical tradition into conversation with Platonic philosophy to underscore that God is beyond understanding.[12] Where they called God "incomprehensible," "ineffable," "ingenerate," etc., fourth-century theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa situated this negativity within a sustained ethical practice. Gregory argues that every concept drawn from a comprehensible image only approximates the divine, and so it risks becoming an idol.[13] For this reason, he says, intimacy with God requires passage from the light of knowledge into the darkness of the divine.[14]

This tradition was given systematic expression by Dionysius the Areopagite, a fifth-century theologian – sometimes called "Pseudo-Dionysius" or "Pseudo-Denys" – who had an enormous influence on medieval theology, from Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart in the West to Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas in the East. Dionysius argues that God is beyond human understanding, and so everything humans say

[11] Since the category of religion is notoriously unstable, I do not assume that Christianity stands for every religious tradition. Nevertheless, I believe the example is suggestive – not least because, in many contexts, Christian history has shaped the categories with which this debate has been framed.

[12] See D. W. Palmer, "Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century," *Vigiliae Christianae* 37, no. 3 (1983): 234–59; Henny Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism: Knowing the Unknowable* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[13] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 96.

[14] Ibid., 97.

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about God falls short. On this view, even if Christians are right that there is a God, their understanding of God's promises and intentions remains unreliable. Since, as Dionysius says, "the mysteries of God's Word lie . . . in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence," they cannot be appropriated for the purpose of possessing certainty.[15] Instead, he affirms Christian practice as an experiment that may be mistaken.

In the twentieth century, a number of theorists with no religious commitments of their own found that this tradition – which they called "negative theology" – helped to clarify the negativity of their own work.[16] My argument focuses on Jacques Derrida, an apparently godless philosopher who engaged negative theology repeatedly throughout his career. Derrida discusses Dionysius directly at several points, but I am more interested in the implicit connections between them. Precisely because they are different in so many respects, their similarity is striking and instructive. In Derrida's account, the claim to possess metaphysical certainty serves to stave off anxiety by reinforcing the subject's present understanding. In response, Derrida's deconstructive negativity functions as an ethical practice of persistence in the face of vulnerability. In this way, like Dionysius, Derrida's negativity is inseparable from an affirmation that resists false assurance.

Dionysius and Derrida rarely speak explicitly about hope, but I think hope is implicitly at the center of their work. They come from very different times and hold very different commitments, but both authors underscore that every attempt at speech is provisional. For both of them, self-critique preserves the possibility of development beyond what the self can foresee. In contrast to bare negation, they proliferate paradoxical juxtapositions to encourage ethical transformation. Neither author takes the impossibility of knowledge to preclude speech; on the contrary, they

[15] MT 997B, 135. References to the Dionysian corpus are abbreviated as follows: DN, The Divine Names; MT, The Mystical Theology; CH, The Celestial Hierarchy; EH, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy; Ep, Epistles. Because it is the most widely available translation, page references correspond to the translation of Colm Luibhéid: *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Colm Luibhéid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). Because this translation is somewhat free, I have modified it where noted. I have referred for comparison to the translations of John Parker (*The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John Parker [Merrick, NY: Richwood, 1976]); and John D. Jones (*The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation, no. 21, trans. John D. Jones [Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980]).

[16] For reasons I discuss at length in Chapter 2, this tradition requires both affirmation and negation, so to call it "negative theology" is somewhat misleading. I use that name here because it is more common than the cumbersome alternative, "apophatic theology." Nevertheless, the reader should consider the name negated (as well as affirmed).

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both say a great deal about justice (in the case of Derrida) and about God (in the case of Dionysius). Insofar as they affirm experimental commitments that are fundamentally uncertain, Derrida and Dionysius exemplify the disciplined persistence of hope.

Although their positions are opposed, Elliot and Camus both suggest that we must choose between certitude and hopelessness. Derrida and Dionysius offer an alternative: in my reading, they describe a hope that acknowledges its uncertainty, sustaining affirmation without sacrificing self-critique. A hope of this kind does not diminish the present through unjustified confidence. Instead, insofar as it holds a longing that remains unfulfilled, hope highlights the gap between present reality and the desired future. Because hope is vulnerable to disappointment, it encourages a restless dissatisfaction with the status quo. In my view, such a hope avoids the complacent fantasy that Camus criticizes, and it is available to the religious and the irreligious alike.

Acknowledging the affinity between secular and religious hope clarifies hope's character. Analytic philosophers such as Adrienne Martin claim that hope must have an object that the hoper understands to be possible, but I will argue that this is a mistake.[17] On my account, because hope represents a discipline of the will, it may persist even when one believes the desired outcome cannot occur. For this reason, I think hope is consistent with a profound pessimism. Hope is decision added to desire, and as such it is unconstrained by calculation. A hope untethered from the rational evaluation of probabilities is perilous, for there is no guarantee that it will be fulfilled. Nevertheless, it remains an indispensable dimension of human life.

Keeping Faith in the Dark

Dionysius and Derrida do not share the same commitments, nor do they affirm the same hopes. Where Dionysius was a premodern monk, thoroughly immersed in Christian worship, Derrida was formed by a Jewish upbringing and the secularism of the French academy. However, these differences throw their affinity into sharper relief. Although Derrida does not affirm a religious identity, he draws on religious texts to describe a politics that is motivated by messianic expectation. Conversely, Dionysius

[17] Adrienne Martin, *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

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argues that Christian commitment requires self-critique; in his view, there can be no knowledge concerning the object of faith. Since religious and political commitments both exceed the available evidence, Dionysius and Derrida suggest that they both require a leap of faith, and so both must be sustained by an unknowing hope.

Following Derrida's lead, the relation between deconstruction and negative theology has served as a crucial site for reflection on religion and postmodernism.[18] Unfortunately, this literature tends to reinforce stereotypes about religion that I aim to unsettle. According to John Caputo, whereas Dionysius affirms a determinate conception of transcendence (as "God"), Derrida affirms an indeterminate orientation. Like Caputo, Jean-Luc Marion claims that Derrida repudiates negative theology; according to Marion, Dionysius secures a knowledge of God that Derrida lacks. Martin Hägglund claims that determinate faith circumscribes transcendence, and so he concludes that Derrida defends an atheism that excludes religious commitment. All three commentators claim that Derrida's indeterminacy is opposed to the content of Christian doctrine, they simply differ over which side is better.[19]

This consensus misconstrues both authors. Whereas Caputo claims that Derrida rejects the particularity of determinate religious traditions, I will argue that deconstruction is consistent with Christian commitment. (That is not to say that Derrida himself affirmed a religious identity: the point is simply that his project does not preclude it.) This is evident from Derrida's published engagement with Dionysius, but the case becomes even clearer when unpublished archival material is taken into account. Although Derrida sometimes worries that Dionysian negativity is too limited, he is clear that this concern applies to his own work as well. From the outset to the end of his career, Derrida argues that pure indeterminacy is a state that cannot be achieved. For this reason, he does not prohibit the affirmation of particular commitments, religious or otherwise. Instead, he aims to encourage an ethics of uncertainty in relation to that which is beyond oneself.

[18] Because the term "postmodernism" is frequently misleading, Derrida generally avoids it (see Jacques Derrida, "No (Point of) Madness: Maintaining Architecture," in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. II, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 87.

[19] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20–42; Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

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