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Review Article

Kingdom Come: Preliminaries for a Relational Theology of Hope

ROBERT B. SLOCUM*

What is the Christian hope? The most complete answer to that question requires its restatement: *Who* is the Christian hope? The Christian hope is personally offered and personally received in the context of community. Hope is not just a thing, a fantasy, a concept or an abstraction. To share the unending fullness of relationship with Jesus is the Christian hope, and we share his love personally. As stated by the Prayer Book Catechism, everlasting life is the new existence “in which we are united with all the people of God, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other.”¹ But what does that mean?

The Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1891–1976) urges that we understand our existence and knowing in interpersonal terms.² My identity is ultimately not about just me as an isolated individual, but as I live and know in the context of others. I do not and cannot exist in a vacuum. My language, perceptions, and understanding are all aspects of the fabric of my connectedness with others. Macmurray notes that “it is the sharing of a common life which constitutes individual personality.”³ I have come through and continue in a process of mutual formation that includes me and all the others in my world. I am, indeed, a “person in relation,” which recalls the title of one of Macmurray’s books.

In *Persons in Relation*, Macmurray states that “it is only in relation to others that we exist as persons,” and that our knowledge of each other and ourselves can be realized only through the mutual self-revelation that is

* This paper was presented at the Upper Midwest Regional Conference, American Academy of Religion, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, in April 2000.

¹ “An Outline of the Faith,” *The Book of Common Prayer*, 862.

² Macmurray was not a member of any Christian Church during his teaching career. After his retirement, he joined the Society of Friends. See John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965), 21.

³ John Macmurray, *Conditions of Freedom* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1977), 37.

shared "when we love one another."⁴ This is "the basic fact of our human condition."⁵ We may come to have some knowledge of another outside the context of relationship, but it will be "abstract knowledge," which is objective in nature, and based on observations and inferences. Personal knowledge requires personal relationship with the other.⁶ This concerns all aspects of our lives, and not just an explicitly religious dimension. Macmurray states, "we live and move and have our being not in ourselves but in one another; and what rights or powers or freedom we possess are ours by the grace and favour of our fellows."⁷ Unlike Descartes, Macmurray urges that our real existence is known in our sharing with others, not in an individual thinking mind that doubts all beyond itself.⁸ Macmurray notes that "our life is indeed a common life, and we depend upon one another at every point in a thousand ways."⁹

Macmurray's philosophical understanding of personal existence and knowing is quite close to the perspective of the Scottish theologian John Macquarrie, an Anglican, who states that an "individual is only a person in so far as he or she stands in relation to other individuals," and that "the autonomous isolated I is something less than a person."¹⁰ Macquarrie uses the phrase, "There is no I without a thou,"¹¹ which parallels Macmurray's statement that the "I" constitutes both the "I" and the "You" in the term "You and I."¹² Macquarrie acknowledges that persons constitute a community, "but equally these persons are formed by the community."¹³ Macquarrie specifically contradicts the Enlightenment theory of social contract as found in Rousseau and others, whereby autonomous individuals are understood to re-

⁴ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ and London: Humanities Press, 1991), 211-212. *Persons in Relation*, based on Macmurray's 1953-1954 Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow, was first published in 1961. The lectures were titled "The Form of the Personal." *Persons in Relation* was the second volume based on these lectures, following *The Self as Agent*, which was first published in 1957.

⁵ *Persons in Relation*, 211.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁸ René Descartes (1596-1650), a French philosopher and mathematician, is perhaps best known for his formula, *Cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." His philosophical method began with universal doubt. But he could not doubt the fact of his doubting, which involved his own thought, so the starting point for his knowledge of existence was his individual thinking.

⁹ John Macmurray, *A Challenge to the Churches, Religion and Democracy* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1941), 16.

¹⁰ John Macquarrie, *Christology Revisited* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 94. Macquarrie mentions that this phrase "can be found in Buber but was actually in use at least from the time of Feuerbach."

¹² *Persons in Relation*, 28.

¹³ *Christology Revisited*, 94.

linquish some independence as a trade-off for the convenience of sharing in society. Instead, Macquarrie states, "the human person is, from the beginning, a relational being, bound up with other persons in what is sometimes called a web of life."¹⁴

Macquarrie also holds that our knowing is an interpersonal reality. Because of the "depth and complexity of a person," he states, knowing a person can "only be obtained in a relationship involving the whole person, not just the intellect." We cannot know a person in any depth on the basis of a "disinterested reporting of the objective facts of that person's life."¹⁵ To draw together Macmurray and Macquarrie again, we may see that disinterested reporting leads to abstract knowledge. This may tell us things about a person, but it will not be sufficient for interpersonal relationship.

For both Macmurray and Macquarrie, there is an interpersonal context for all our being and all our knowing. We can apply their positions to include our knowing and experiencing the Christian hope. An abstract hope will not prove to be fulfilling. Real hope is not just an idea to be considered, or information to be mastered. Our hope is the fullness of relationship with Christ, whom we know interpersonally and intersubjectively. Hope must be personal to us. Christ comes to us as loving subject and saving divine person.

It is only as "*we*" that we know our hope. Indeed, it is only as "*we*" that we ultimately know anything. As Macmurray states, "we do not live in private worlds of our own."¹⁶ Our hope is known in and with others. We know God, the personal Other, in the context of knowing other persons and being known by them. Our personal knowing requires the relatedness of interpersonal love for the vulnerability and receptivity of authentic self-revelation, which means a community of persons who share trust. Mutual trust is necessary for personal relationship with another.¹⁷ Fear can prompt us to practice "the arts of self defense" by being "on guard against being hurt," and surrounding ourselves with defenses to keep people at a distance.¹⁸ Without a community of trust, we will find ourselves isolated and distanced, and confined to knowing *about things* without sharing real knowledge or relationship. Hope is a reality in Christ that we share and know in community, not an idea to be grasped by an individual in isolation. As Macmurray states, "in ourselves we are nothing."¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., 94-95.

¹⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶ John Macmurray, *The Structure of Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 72.

¹⁷ See John Macmurray, *To Save From Fear* (Philadelphia: Wider Quaker Fellowship, 1979), 3.

¹⁸ John Macmurray, "What Is Religion About?—II," *The Listener*, Vol. LVI, No. 1446 (December 13, 1956): 984-985, 985.

¹⁹ *Persons in Relation*, 211.

The Christ who is our hope is also “not simply an isolated individual.” Macquarrie states that Jesus “stands at the centre of a whole world of relationships, reaching back into Israel and the voices of the prophets, reaching out among his contemporaries from whom he called his apostles and disciples, and reaching forward into the time of the church, including our own time.”²⁰ Macquarrie’s point is strongly supported by the biblical witness concerning Jesus and his prayers. When Jesus prays to the Father, he prays to his “Abba,” or “Daddy.”²¹ He prays to the Father in a context of relationship that is most intimate and personal. Shortly before his arrest, Jesus prays that his disciples and those who will believe in him through them “may all be one,” so that they may share the union of Jesus and the Father.²² Jesus prays to the Father, “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”²³ Macmurray likewise understands the “most telling expression” of the principle of unity to be Jesus’ last prayer for his disciples, “that they all may be one,” and states that “the success of their witness to the world is grounded explicitly on their unity amongst themselves.”²⁴ In union together as the Church we continue and are transformed by the life of Christ. Macquarrie states, “The incarnation is not just the coming of God in an individual man but the creation of a new humanity.”²⁵

Jesus teaches his disciples to pray to *our* Father for the coming kingdom, for the completion of the Father’s will, for our daily bread, for forgiveness of our sins as we have forgiven others, and for our deliverance from the time of trial.²⁶ Jesus invites his disciples to share his relationship with God the Father, so they may seek the coming of God’s kingdom and their most basic needs for life as children of God. Jesus models and makes available this relationship, so that his Father is our Father and we are joined in community with God and each other. Indeed, the Letter to the Hebrews states that “the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father,” and “Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.”²⁷

As children of God, we are brothers and sisters who embrace the context of relationship we share with Jesus. Our union of love with each other is in Christ, in whom we live and move and have our being.²⁸ This union of love is the Church, and it constitutes our living, our knowing, and our hope. Mac-

²⁰ *Christology Revisited*, 95-96.

²¹ See Mark 14:36.

²² John 17:20-21.

²³ John 17:23.

²⁴ *To Save From Fear*, 10. See John 17:20-23.

²⁵ *Christology Revisited*, 96.

²⁶ See Matthew 6:7-13; *BCP*, 364.

²⁷ Hebrews 2:11.

²⁸ See Acts 17:28-29.

quarrie states that the Church is "the community of the risen Christ" and "the Body of Christ, continuing his presence on earth."²⁹ This communion is not just a pious ideal or abstract notion. It constitutes who we are and who we are to be relative to the coming kingdom of God.

If we share with Jesus in praying to our one "Abba," we are brothers and sisters of the one Father. We therefore share the relatedness of family members, which is primarily personal rather than functional in its connectedness. It is interesting that both Macquarrie and Macmurray emphasize the importance of the "something more" that goes beyond the functional in certain relationships. Macquarrie notes that phrases such as "the people of Mexico" or "the people of the Stone Age" or "the people of the Amazon Basin" are just "factual descriptions" of human groups that share a distinguishing circumstance, "but the expression 'people of God' neither can nor does function in any such way." The "people of God" indicates a group that can be seen and heard, and therefore is "within our ordinary range of experience." But this group is not defined by empirical characteristics or abstract knowledge. The people of God are "always defined by the relation to God," so their defining characteristic is relational, not empirical or functional.³⁰ They are seen "in a new dimension of depth, in a new set of relations which lie beyond those discoverable by empirical observation."³¹

Similarly, Macmurray notes that functional relationships are task-oriented relative to specific jobs, skills, or responsibilities. In a factory, for example, the workers are defined by their skills. Their relations as factory workers are "the relations of the jobs they do." In terms of the factory and its work, the workers "are not certain unique individuals, but people with certain skills" who "can be replaced by another with the same skill." *Who* they are does not matter, and their relations in the factory "are merely functional." But personal relations are unique. Macmurray states that in personal relationships we are not just related in terms of what we can do, but "in our own right," in terms of who we are.³²

Our relatives and friends are not replaceable by others who can complete the same tasks for us. The members of a family or household may have various roles and responsibilities that are included in their personal identities. But these personal relationships are not defined by tasks or functions. A family member or friend is not just the person who takes out the trash or fixes the meal or walks the dog. These relationships are unique, personal, and not

²⁹ *Christology Revisited*, 86. The New Testament identifies the Church with the body of Christ in several contexts. See 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:23, 4:15-16, 5:29-30; Colossians 1:18, 2:19.

³⁰ John Macquarrie, *Theology, Church and Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 114-115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

³² "What Is Religion About?—II," 984.

primarily functional. The distinguishing characteristic is the relationship itself, in its own right, and not an empirically observable characteristic or skill. Personal relationships concern who we are to one another.

As children of God, brothers and sisters who claim the one "Abba" as our parent, we share relations in the Church that are to be primarily personal and familial, and not primarily functional. For example, the interpersonal life of a parish community will be degraded whenever the members are seen primarily in functional terms. When we stand as persons in relation with other members of the Church, we will not reduce them to functions. Another Church member is never just someone who pays a pledge, or leads the youth, or reads the lessons, or signs the checks, or preaches the sermon, or plays the organ. We are called to share with one another in terms of who we are, not primarily in terms of what roles we fill or what we do. Macmurray urges that "the primary religious institution is the family, in which we learn to be persons in relation, and which is itself a unity in the bond of affection and the original of all human society."³³ This position is certainly consistent with the use of the language of family in the pastoral life of churches in various traditions, where some may be addressed as "sister," "brother," "mother," or "father."

More important than titles or forms of address, however, is the reality that we are called to relationships of love rather than task or function in the life of the Church. In this way we anticipate and experience the life of the coming kingdom, which we know in community. First of all, the Church is to be a place where we can be persons in relation with God and each other, where love and authentic self-revelation can be shared. No assortment of programs, activities or diversions will fill the void if a relational context is missing in a parish. In this light we can also see that congregational growth means drawing others into authentic personal relationship in community, which involves much more than simply adding numbers or names to a parish list. Real parish growth will be difficult to measure with standardized forms or membership statistics.

The true relational context also means that our distinctness as persons is not lost in the unity of the Church. We are not to be "homogenized," or blended into an amorphous sameness. Certainly there have been religious groups or communities that have tried to submerge all individuality in the name of a spiritual ideal or goal. But these situations can hardly be described as authentic personal relationships. The uniqueness and meaning of each personal life is to be brought out in the relational context of community.

In a similar way, Macquarrie upholds the diversity of persons in the eschatological kingdom of God. Interpersonal unity need not be threatened by

³³ John Macmurray, "The Celebration of Communion, What is Religion About?—III," *The Listener*, Vol. LVI, No. 1447 (December 20, 1956): 1027-1028, 1028.

diversity. Macquarrie conceives the kingdom of God as "a commonwealth of free beings, united in Being and with each other through love." Since the love that unites is also love that "lets-be," it preserves "a diversity that heightens the value of the unity far above that of any undifferentiated unity."³⁴ In this way, "continually a richer and more fully diversified unity is being built up."³⁵ Our sharing in the eschatological kingdom of God is not "an undifferentiated unity," but a unity of persons whose individual identity and otherness does not disappear in love. We are most fully persons as we share in the loving unity of the kingdom of God, which does not take away the distinctness of who we are. In the coming of God's kingdom, as in other interpersonal contexts, the individual persons in relation are to be drawn out and completed rather than submerged. Our eschatological hope is to share the divine life of the persons of the Trinity, including their perfect unity and personal distinctness in relation to one another.

Sharing our life as children of God with the Son of God, we may pray for the coming of the kingdom on earth as in heaven. As the Eucharist is understood to be the sacramental "foretaste of the heavenly banquet," so the present Church is to be an outward and visible "foretaste" of the coming kingdom of God and instrumental in its realization.³⁶ The kingdom in its fullness is to be characterized by unity and reconciliation, and the Church today is to be an outpost and leading edge of the future yet to come, a reconciling community that embodies in the present the reconciled life of the coming kingdom. This understanding determines the present shape of the Church's life and ministry. Macmurray asks, rhetorically, "How can a church which cannot reconcile its members think of reconciling the peoples of the world!"³⁷ A Church that is captivated by its internal squabbles and divisions is not fulfilling its vocation. Accordingly, for Macmurray, "the task of religion is the realization of fellowship."³⁸ Whatever destroys fellowship or alienates persons from each other must be understood as sin, and religion must "search for the means of overcoming sin and achieving reconciliation."³⁹

Macmurray also emphasizes that the Church's focus must be beyond its own members. He specifically contradicts the notion that religion is "for the sake of the worshipping community," or for the comfort, reassurance, and strengthening of the worshiper. The meaning and purpose of religion is not

³⁴ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, Second Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 369.

³⁵ *Principles of Christian Theology*, 360.

³⁶ See BCP, 860. According to the Catechism, one of the benefits we are understood to receive from the Eucharist is "the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life."

³⁷ *To Save From Fear*, 10.

³⁸ *Structure of Religious Experience*, 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

located within the individual Christian believer. Macmurray states that the Christian "is a person 'for others,' as Jesus was; a person dedicated to the salvation of the world."⁴⁰ This identity is formed by the future hope of God's kingdom, which we know as persons in relation with Christ and each other. These saving relationships constitute the Church, and they are to be generously extended so that all may know the personal reality of salvation in Christ. Macmurray states that "Christianity is not for the sake of Christians but *for the sake of the world*," and the Church "is the community of the disciples of Jesus working, in cooperation with God and under the guidance of His spirit, to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth."⁴¹ The meaning of the Church and the shape of ministry are radically formed by the Christian hope.

Finally, the Christian hope is not "other-worldly." As Macquarrie notes, Christian hope is a "total hope" that "touches on all aspects of human life, both individual and social." It is not an "ostrich-like" immersion "in a beyond."⁴² Christian hope is not abstract, impersonal, solitary, unreal, or hypothetical. It is not a mere ideal or dream. The Christian hope is personal, the personal Christ, whom we know in relation with others in the context of community. We are to know this hope in our world and in our lives.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray for the coming of the kingdom and the doing of God's will on earth. We share in the coming kingdom in our lives and relationships, in this world, so that all may come to be persons in relation with God and each other. This context of full community is our expected future. Personal relationships and ministries in this world that incarnate peace, justice, mutuality, generosity, trust, self-revelation, and reconciliation have everything to do with the presence and coming of God's kingdom on earth. Sharing this life as persons in relation, all that we are, know, and do will be formed by our hope for the coming kingdom.

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⁴⁰ *Search for Reality in Religion*, 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴² John Macquarrie, *Christian Hope* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 1.