

## Advent Hope

# Movements of Embodied Hope and the Common Good

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### Abstract

What's become of the "common good"? Given the current state of polarization, and the systemic and structural nature of social injustice, is it still possible to hope for justice? The article proposes that the basis for working together is not necessarily sharing "common ground" but a pursuit of "common ends." A keynote presentation and response at a *Society of Adventist Philosophers* conference provided an opportunity to test the thesis. Could a secular philosopher (Sally Haslanger, MIT professor, founder of *Critical Social Theory*) and an Adventist theologian engage in a serious common pursuit of hopeful change without stumbling over worldview differences? The article provides a case study in self-aware and self-critical conversation "across a divide." It asks, can "Advent Hope," rejecting the distortions of *escapism*, *apocalyptic sensationalism*, *political quietism*, and *individualism*, become a "movement of embodied hope," *en route* to the coming Kingdom of God?

To say we are living in dark times seems obvious, if not downright trite. Europe is experiencing a refugee crisis unlike anything seen since the Second World War. Human life and wellbeing have been significantly impacted by pandemic and now by war. But just beneath the surface of these major disruptions (and contributing to their severity) is a thorny problem that has been insidiously growing for some time. That is thorough-going polarization: the

sense that we are living in radically different worlds that are rapidly becoming incommensurable. And if we have no 'common measure' (or 'common ground') is it still possible to seek for the 'common good'?<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, as recent critical social theory lays bare, these social worlds that structure our lives, while constructed, acquire the allure of 'being just the way things are' and thus have the power to resist our attempts to change them. Thus we seem to be stuck with social constructs that now have the rarified force of 'reality,' so that no matter how unjust, they seem to be self-preserving and self-perpetuating. The divides are becoming more pronounced. Can we still talk with each other? In particular can we talk across the 'secular-religious' divide so constitutive of our times?

Given our current socio-political situation, it is easy to become discouraged in the belief that we can find 'common ground' in our quest for *any* sort of 'common good.' And it is even more discouraging to acknowledge that there might be quite rational reasons for being so discouraged. What then are the prospects for hope? In a moving passage, Rebecca Solnit reminds us that:

Cause-and-effect assumes history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal, and change comes upon us like a change of weather. All that these transformations have in common is that they begin in the imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty is better than gloom and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk. ... I say all this because hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say it because hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you

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<sup>1</sup> "What's become of the 'Common Good'?" was the theme for the 2021 annual conference of the *Society of Adventist Philosophers* in San Antonio, TX. An earlier version of this essay was presented (in written and oral forms) in response to the keynote oral address "Hope not Optimism" by Prof. Sally Haslanger. I must also, gratefully, acknowledge the help and input from my son, Craig, who regularly works directly with these issues both intellectually and practically.

out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action. (Solnit 2016, 3–4)

In what follows, I will attempt just such an exercise in hopeful conversation about action. The recent annual conference of the *Society of Adventist Philosophers* provided such an opportunity. I was asked to provide a response (indeed an “Adventist response”) to the keynote address by Professor Sally Haslanger, who is the Ford Professor of Philosophy at MIT, and a leading figure in the development of “Critical Social Theory.” While she is a philosopher, with considerable understanding of theology (e.g. she is an expert in medieval philosophy), and I am a theologian, with some interest in and familiarity with philosophy, what we lacked was precisely *a common ground*. Could a secular philosopher and an Adventist theologian engage in a serious common pursuit of hopeful change without stumbling over our worldview differences? The presentation and response was intended to be a case study in self-aware and self-critical conversation ‘across a divide.’ A hopeful conversation about hope. My thesis then and now is that the basis for working together is not necessarily sharing “common ground” but pursuit of “common ends.” What can provide a basis for common action is working for the same goals, even though we might do so for very different reasons.<sup>2</sup>

Thus this essay is not a ‘neutral research paper’ in the normal scholarly sense, but an engaged conversation (although here you get it filtered largely through my voice) between a non-theist and an Adventist about change and hope.

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<sup>2</sup> The result of the conference experiment was widely perceived to have been a success. Undoubtedly, this was also due to her personality and engagement. Unlike some invited keynote speakers who just come for their presentation, she attended every session of the conference, knitting and engaging with speakers and participants. After her keynote address and my response she ended up talking about her exposure to the world of religion and faith in taking her adopted children to the AME church each week so that they could continue their formation in the faith of their family of origin. What started with Critical Social Theory ended up with the power of the social practice of ‘singing’ to form and direct action for social change across racial and religious divides.

First, I will follow Haslanger's analysis of the problem facing us, then pick up the question of hope (and here I will focus on "Advent hope" as a case study) before exploring the prospects for any practical steps forward in our quest for a 'common good'.

### 1. The Social Construction of Reality and the Difficulty of Change

Today we hear much talk of social problems being "systemic," "structural" or "institutional." What do we mean by such notions? Haslanger gives us a helpful example drawn from the tragic history of racism: "In 1963, after the bombing at the 16th St. Baptist Church that killed four girls (Addie May Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson), Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a eulogy at the funeral for three of them. One passage reads: 'They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. And so this afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death. ... They say to us that we must be concerned *not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.*' (King/Washington 1991, 221)."<sup>3</sup> They died because of "the system."

But "how should we understand systemic and structural racism? What does it mean to say that injustice is systemic or structural? Are these different terms for the same thing?" According to Haslanger, societies are complex,<sup>4</sup> materially

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<sup>3</sup> <http://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/awweb/awarchive?type=file&item=434085> [taken from a slide in Haslanger's oral presentation in San Antonio; italics supplied].

<sup>4</sup> Haslanger argues that we can recognize three types of organization: *simple*, *chaotic* (disorganized complexity), and *complex* (organized complexity). Societies are *complex* systems. Complex systems are self-organizing, self-reproducing/adaptive, non-linear/stochastic [i. e. non-predictable]. While the behaviour of individuals in the system is stochastic, nevertheless their interactions give rise to stable (emergent) features of the whole by virtue of an internal structure. Examples: ecosystems, economies, climate, brains, ant hills, societies (etc.) ... The structure of a system affects the individuals in it and the interactions that are possible. In such systems, local interactions can spontaneously self-organize *without external intervention or central authorities* [taken from Haslanger's presentation slides]. For a more in depth analysis see Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Of course, all this has become embroiled in a divisive political brouhaha under the banner of "Critical Race Theory" in the USA. Even a Supreme Court nominee had to be grilled on the topic.

embedded systems;<sup>5</sup> and structures are the networks of relations<sup>6</sup> that go to make them what they are. Social relations (as kinds of “structure”) are formed by *participation in practices*.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes these social practices can become what we can call “second nature.”<sup>8</sup> But while they may seem “natural” (the way things inherently are) they are in fact only “*second nature*” (i.e. learned relations and practices). And some of the learned practices (that might even become “second nature”) are *ideological* (in Haslanger’s use this means they are problematic and unjust/harmful). And thus, if “not only racism, but other social ills, are integral parts of social systems, is there any hope for justice?”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Social systems and structures: a) *are material* – they are not simply composed of mental states or actions. (Think of transportation systems, healthcare systems, judicial systems ...); b) they are *also embedded in broader physical systems* – their environment – that affect their functioning; and c) the broader systems may impose constraints (physical laws), or provide inputs (e.g. weather, climate); and d) the environment of a system may include other systems – and *because systems do not entirely saturate a social space, systems can overlap and intersect.*” (Ibid.)

<sup>6</sup> “Structures are ‘networks of relations.’ As such they form the skeleton of the system: They consist of nodes and relations. Social relations are established in practices, e.g., x is a mother of y is a biological relation, but is also a legal and social relation. Social relations are formed by **participation in practices.**” (Ibid.)

<sup>7</sup> “What is a ‘social practice’? It is coordination around resources, i.e., things of (+/-) value. It is a fundamental human task, and our ability to develop flexible forms of coordination that can be passed down through social learning is the key to our evolutionary success (Sterelny 2012). Coordination relies on meanings, symbols, default assumptions and associations – that is, culture, or what I call a *cultural technē* – to shape our behaviour. We not only learn what is edible, but develop cuisines, menus, daily and holiday rituals .... On my account, an *ideology* is a cultural technē gone wrong: it obscures or distorts what is valuable and/or organizes us in unjust/harmful ways.” (Ibid.)

<sup>8</sup> “Practices rely on social meanings – including categories, signals, norms, background assumptions, and material infrastructure (‘apparatus’ in Althusser) – to solve the problems. Solutions establish stable social relations and produce individuals who are highly motivated to conform. Those who are fluent in social interactions needn’t think twice about what to do: performing one’s role comes ‘naturally’ – but it is *second nature*. It is useful to be able to rely on the same categories *across tasks*, so networks of social relations form that regularly position individuals in one category together, fulfilling roles that *build up broad competencies* and *shape identities.*” (Ibid.)

<sup>9</sup> “Tying some of the threads together: A cultural technē is the *cultural dimension of the local social-regulation* system; When internalized by individuals, it provides tools for *psycho-somatic self-regulation* that enables fluent coordination with others; it also structures our subjectivity. We don’t need to be coerced to fulfil our social roles. We do it ‘all by ourselves.’ (Althusser); Because of its coordinating function, the structure has *normative force*; Yet insofar as it regulates our interactions

That is the question put to us by Haslanger's careful analysis of social construction and systemic injustice. I believe that she invites us to ask the hard question together: *If societies are complex systems that reproduce injustice, and are self-regulating in the face of reform, then how do we hope for justice?*

I'd like to respond in that same mode of humble questioning. As humans in the world right now, it is hard to hope well. That is: in ways that cultivate wise and loving action towards radical change.

In a section of Solnit's book entitled "The Branches Are Hope; the Roots Are Memory" she reminds us of Walter Brueggeman's statement that "memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair" and then she comments:

It's an extraordinary statement, one that reminds us that though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past. We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation. A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope." (Solnit 2016, xix)

For a few moments I would like us to reconsider *our* Adventist memories and 'takes' on the past, in order to tell "a more complicated and accurate story." So, in light of what we have just read, I invite you to consider what Adventists commonly call "Advent Hope." I propose that we explore it as a long-term, passionate, flawed, yet precious case study. Perhaps this can help us, and others, think and feel our ways forward.

## 2. "We Have This Hope"

In 1962, more than a half-century ago, Wayne Hooper composed a simple theme song for the Seventh-day Adventist church's General Conference Session that was to be held in San Francisco's Exposition Auditorium from July 26 to August 4. It was entitled "We have this Hope:"

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in ways that are problematic (morally, epistemically, politically), *it is an apt target for critique and we ought to change it. But HOW?*" (Ibid.)

We have this hope that burns within our heart, Hope in the coming of the Lord. We have this faith that Christ alone imparts, Faith in the promise of His Word.

We believe the time is here, When the nations far and near Shall awake, and shout and sing Hallelujah! Christ is King!

We have this hope that burns within our hearts, Hope in the coming of the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

To say it captures a quintessential aspect of Adventist spirituality would be an understatement. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the same piece of music was selected again as the theme song for the 1966, 1975, 1995, and 2000 General Conference Sessions. Perhaps it is not too glib to say that what we call the “Advent Movement” is a movement of hope. For it does go from fewer than 50 disappointed individuals in New England in 1844 to some 22 million (more or less) hopeful adherents in 212 countries today (with more than 90% now living in the 2/3 world).

However, if we are interested in “a more complicated and accurate story” there is more we have to say. For, if truth be told, Adventism has repeatedly struggled with four besetting and beguiling distortions of hope. Let me briefly deal with each in turn.

### *2.1 Escapism*

Here hope is distorted by becoming merely a form of flight from the injustice, oppression and turmoil of the present.<sup>11</sup> This is a sort of ‘pie-in-the-sky-by-e-and-by-e’ view of hope.<sup>12</sup> Suffering must be endured, because in this life it can-

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<sup>10</sup> A clip of people from around the world singing it: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-92g\\_oXvq4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-92g_oXvq4). See also: <https://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/w/h/t/h/whthhope.htm>; <https://adventist.news/news/we-have-this-hope-composer-wayne-hooper-dies>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgG9plezoTc>. By popular demand, it has also been incorporated into Adventist church hymnals and translated into dozens of languages, e. g. *SDA Church Hymnal*, 214.

<sup>11</sup> This is, of course, one dimension of Marx’s take on religion as the “opium of the people.” The other dimension is less commonly known and noted: Religion can also serve as a needed sedative to assuage the pain of alienation.

<sup>12</sup> The origin of the phrase “pie in the sky” is interesting. “It comes from the Industrial Workers of the World, the anarchist-syndicalist labour organization formed in the US in 1905, often called the Wobblies. The Wobblies concentrated on organizing migrant and casual workers; one of the ways

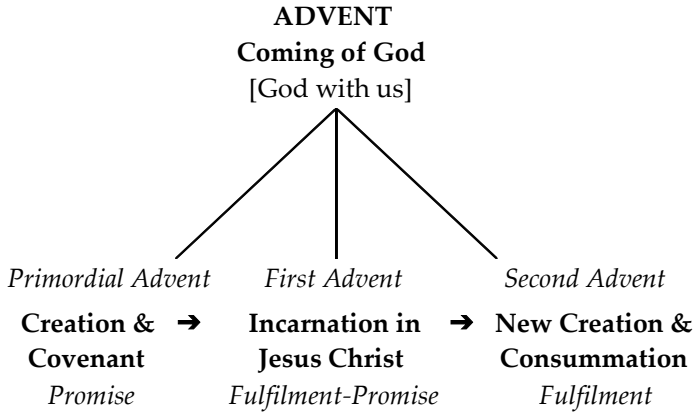
not be cured. Hope rests in getting delivered out of the mess. Hope thus becomes an excuse for avoiding social responsibility in the here and now. One way of singing “we have this hope” is to interpret the “coming of the Lord” as simply a future event, the only thing worthy of true hope. No use trying to work for racial or gender justice in the present, or be concerned about climate change – for we cannot solve these problems. It is all about a purported *future* event that is all of God’s doing.

But, however prevalent, this rendition is a distortion of Advent Hope. For it fundamentally misunderstands the “Advent” or “Coming of the Lord” as merely a future event. But to talk of the “Second Advent” or Second Coming of Christ (as Adventists do following the New Testament) necessarily implies that there was a “First Advent” that preceded it. And even Christmas, while indeed understood as a singularity, is not *de novo*, for it is to be seen as the fulfillment of promises made long before. [As Moltmann reminds us this reflection on the Coming of God is a theology of hope!] Here then is a diagram that captures this “Adventist” meaning of “Advent:”

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in which they brought such disparate and fragmented groups together was by song. Every member got a little red book, containing parodies of popular songs or hymns (the book had a motto on the cover: “To Fan the Flames of Discontent”). One of the early ones, predating the IWW, was *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum*. One IWW member was Joe Hill, a Swedish-born seaman and hobo (one of the martyrs of the union movement: he was convicted of murder on dubious evidence and executed in 1915) [Joan Baez memorably sang a folk song about him]. He wrote several popular pro-union parodies for them, such as *Coffee An’*, *Nearer My Job to Thee*, *The Rebel Girl* and *The Preacher and the Slave*. This last song, dating from 1911, was aimed directly at the Salvation Army, a body anxious to save the Wobblies’ souls, while [they] were more interested in filling their bellies. The Wobblies hated the Sally Army’s middle-class Christian view that one would get one’s reward in heaven for virtue or suffering on earth. The song was a parody of the Salvation Army hymn *In the Sweet Bye and Bye*: *Long-haired preachers come out every night, Try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right; But when asked how ’bout something to eat, They will answer with voices so sweet: CHORUS: You will eat, bye and bye, In that glorious land above the sky; Work and pray, live on hay, You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.* By 1911, other expressions using *pie* had already been around for some time, such as *nice as pie* and *easy as pie* and it had begun to be used for a bribe or political patronage (of rewards being distributed like slices of pie) so *pie* was already in the air, so to speak.” (from: <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-pie1.htm>; accessed June 7, 2022; italics in the original)





This means we are living “between the times”<sup>13</sup> in the midst of a *theodrama*, the emerging reality of the Coming of God.<sup>14</sup> To sing “we have this hope ... in

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Merz, 1923–1933, which was the leading journal of the dialectical theology movement which flourished in the aftermath of the First World War. Karl Barth, along with his good friend Eduard Thurneysen, and later Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann and Emil Brunner began the journal to highlight the tension within which Christians live “between the times” of the crucifixion/resurrection and parousia/eschaton. With the rise of the Nazis and their Christian sympathizers (including, for a time, Friedrich Gogarten) and those Barth considered unconscious apologists (specifically Brunner and Bultmann), the journal collapsed. Nevertheless, the perspective at the heart of Barth’s project is one that calls for active social and political involvement, in the interim, “between the times.” Christians are to live with the dialectical tension between the promise of the coming consummation and transformation of the New Creation, while all the time still immersed in this reality of sin, evil, and death. The hope for coming consummation must drive us to transformative action in the present.

<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Advent of God is a single (yet complex) purported event; and Christian theology is the ongoing attempt to *interpret* this event. Likewise, Christian life is the never-ending quest to live life in light of the Advent. The Advent of God is thus both the object and subject-matter of Christian theology, and the complex event from which everything in Christian life is derived and normed. Viewed one way (i.e. from what we might construe as a God’s eye perspective) it is a single sustained movement of *God with us* (for all its complex historical unfolding and deepening subtlety). Viewed another way (i.e. from our temporally structured perspective) it is a single drama or ‘play’ unfolding in three grand ‘acts’ (Creation, Incarnation, Consummation). From both perspectives the Advent is God’s free act of self-sharing love, wherein God graciously encounters us where we are (addressing us with a Word of both judgment and salvation); giving Godself to us (in covenant and incarnation) and adopting us to Godself (through resurrection, ascension, and glorification). It is thus both an act of revelation and salvation. And not merely as a means to

the coming of the Lord” is not only an expression of hope in a future redemptive event, it is also to evoke the memory of “the coming of the Lord”<sup>15</sup> in all its forms (i.e. those that have already happened, including the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost) and those that continue to happen in the here and now (i.e. in Sabbath and Eucharistic presence “where two or three are gathered together in my name”<sup>16</sup>). For the One we expect is the “One who *was*, and *is*, and *is to come*” (Rev. 4:8).

## 2.2 Apocalyptic Sensationalism

Here Advent hope morphs into a cheap adrenaline rush. The latest headline is taken to be a portend of the end of the world. Fear and hope are often whipped up in equal measure. Unfortunately, all too many Adventists have been unduly susceptible to this kind of distortion of hope. For example, in the aftermath of the pandemic, the reasons why it has been so easy for some Adventists to latch onto conspiracy theories and give them an apocalyptic twist,

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some other end, for it is itself the *telos* (goal) of all the ways of God. Advent – Emmanuel: God with us, and us with God, for eternity. *This* is the Christian Gospel. Christians (certainly Adventist Christians) are commissioned to join the past and present crowd of witnesses that are called to proclaim it “to every kindred, nation, tongue and people.” “We are Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Cor. 5:20).

<sup>15</sup> “*Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?*” Matt. 11:4, is the central question that revolved around Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, as recorded by the Gospel writers. Already in Isaiah we read “*Behold, your God will come ... and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy*” (Isa. 35:4 ff). In Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry, which opens with his sermon at Nazareth, Jesus explicitly calls attention to this promise of God’s coming as the context in which to understand what he was about, and adds, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). There is an obvious centrality to the First and Second Advents in the New Testament. Christ has come and will come again. The New Testament is about nothing if not the story of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, “God with us.” But it would be very difficult to wrest from its pages the promise that “this same Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11), without unravelling the coherence of the whole account. It would be equally hard to deny that Hebrews 9:28 is a sort of summary of the gospel: “So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” If you add to this the Old Testament’s *eschatological* and *messianic* themes, then you have a very significant biblical theme indeed.

<sup>16</sup> Matt. 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

will have to be looked into.<sup>17</sup> You would think Adventists would have developed some immunity to all this over time. But, apparently, we do not yet have “full herd immunity.”

Of course, this is deeply ironic given that not only was Adventism founded on a mistake – what is referred to as “the Great Disappointment” of October 22, 1844 – but that this memory is kept alive and counts as the start of the Adventist story (rather than say 1863, the date the church was officially organized). You would think we would have learnt our lesson. Of course, we are officially opposed to any sort of date setting, but this does not prevent the lure of apocalyptic sensationalism from warping and distorting Advent hope. While it is possible to sing about the coming of the Lord believing we have a calculus as to when it will happen, this is not genuine Adventism. For an Adventist is one who seeks to live life well together in the present, in light of the (threefold) Advent; humbly acknowledging that they don’t know it all, and open to the ‘Other’ as the foreshadowing of the One who will come (i.e. the “messianic structure of experience”).<sup>18</sup>

### *2.3 Political Quietism*

Here Advent hope is seen as the decided opposite of socio-political activism. I remember growing up with the joint idea that Adventists must stay out of politics, and that this was to be seen as a virtue! It is true that in many places

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<sup>17</sup> In response to vaccine mandates, some Adventists have been vulnerable to FUD (fear, uncertainty and doubt); others have been attracted to conspiracy theories (although the specifics of Adventist apocalyptic beliefs have provided some resistance to their wholesale adoption); while still others (probably the majority) have been all too easy to rally to the ‘infringement of religious liberty’ bandwagon promoted by the religious right.

<sup>18</sup> For Derrida “the messianic structure” is the universal structure of experience. It is the waiting for a future that you know will come though you do not know how, in what shape, in what way that which comes is determined or what it will determine. It is the impossible possibility of any future. Cf.: “As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come: that is the opening of experience. Someone is to come, is now to come. Justice and peace will have to do with this coming of the other, with the promise.... This universal structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future, for the coming, and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with justice – this is what I call the messianic structure” (Derrida 1997, 22–23). See also Derrida 1994, originally given as a lecture in 1993 at University of California, Riverside, down the road from my own institution.

this has now decidedly changed. But the uneasiness one senses in the air when addressing the problems say of structural racism or gender equality, go well beyond the general problems of “white fragility” or patriarchy – for in addition I think it betrays the fact that we are not yet done with this distortion of hope. We still hear all too often the old slogans: “The Gospel is about salvation from sin, not liberation from oppression;” for after all “Jesus stayed out of politics” and anyway “you will have the poor with you always,” and ultimately “our citizenship is in heaven, and not of this world.”<sup>19</sup>

Of course, it all depends on how we tell our story. If memory is to produce hope, then it matters what story we tell. My late colleague Charles Teel, along with so many others, never ceased to retell the stories of early Millerite and Adventist activism in the abolitionist cause and other reform movements of the day (Charles 1995, ch. 1). Not only did he march with Martin Luther King Jr., but over the years took thousands of students to walk in the revolutionary footsteps of Anna and Fernando Stahl in the Altiplano of Peru. He reminded us that the Stahls understood missionary work to include not only proclamation, healthcare and education but also courageous political action on behalf of the indigenous peoples they served. My La Sierra colleague Ron Osborn is hard at work ensuring that the memory and legacy of Adventist John Weidner’s heroic work in the French Resistance, saving the lives of Jews and others on the Dutch-Paris Escape Line during the worst days of Nazi oppression, will be an inspiration to new generations ([weidnerfoundation.org](http://weidnerfoundation.org)). And I had an opportunity to play a small part in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the aftermath of apartheid.<sup>20</sup> And these references only scratch the surface. I suppose (to re-evolve Solnit) we can choose to tell of a past that was nothing but distortions of hope, or even try to conjure up some illusory golden age now irretrievably lost – but alternatively we can commit to telling “a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst ... a memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of

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<sup>19</sup> It has been pointed out to me that Bull and Lockhart’s sociological study of Adventism, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, was provisionally entitled *The Quiet Americans!*

<sup>20</sup> I was asked to work on and write the response of the Southern African Union Conference (of the SDA church) to the TRC. See: [http://www.religion.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image\\_tool/images/113/Institutes/Archives/submissions/DOCUMENT\\_TO\\_THE\\_TRUTH\\_AND\\_RECONCILIATION\\_COMMISSION.pdf](http://www.religion.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/113/Institutes/Archives/submissions/DOCUMENT_TO_THE_TRUTH_AND_RECONCILIATION_COMMISSION.pdf). Also for the full TRC report, see Vol. 4, chap. 3. on Faith Communities: [https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/volume\\_4\\_0.pdf](https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/volume_4_0.pdf).

participants, a memory that includes our power” – memories that produce that “forward-directed energy” we call hope.

#### 2.4 Individualism

The fourth distortion of Advent hope, and perhaps the most widespread and insidious, is the assumption that it is hope for a personal and individual good rather than for a universal common good. This distortion has two roots: the individualism of post-enlightenment liberal western culture in general, and the specific individualism of evangelical belief and piety.<sup>21</sup> This is the idea that the only hope that really counts is an expectation of individual salvation after death. One’s hope is directed to the idea of “going to heaven when we die.” We are but “brands plucked from a fire.” The earth is going to burn up (i.e. hell) and the only hope is to be saved from it. Thus, why worry about saving the planet or caring about gender dysphoria or fighting for racial justice, when at best these goods would be transitory gains, while real hope resides in eternal salvation – which is simply assumed to be *individual*.

The real problem is that we hardly balk at this or even think much about it. We simply assume it to be the ‘reality’ of the matter. We tend to take Christian faith, hope and love as *individual* virtues, whereas Paul describes them as *communal* virtues. Of course, this focus on the individual is a theological construction (*à la* “social construction”), but like with race and gender we think of it as “natural” not constructed. Of course, there is a lot of sloppy talk these days about things being merely “social constructs” (often implying that they are thus “unreal” and would just go away if we changed our minds). But this is not so, for social/theological constructs are *real* even if they are to be *resisted*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, these two are intimately connected, for both are products of 17th century enlightenment. I think we should think of liberalism and fundamentalism as in the same bed together, just facing in opposite directions.

<sup>22</sup> See of course, Haslanger 2012. I regard this title as belonging to that limited set of extremely aptly named books where the title captures everything in a nutshell. In that, I would rank it up there with Karl Popper’s *Conjectures and Refutations* – understand the title and you get the gist of critical rationalism. Cf. p. 29–30: “The title of the book, *Resisting Reality*, is intentionally ambiguous. On one hand, it reflects a common resistance to recognizing the reality of the social world and the tendency of theorists, in particular, to opt for an anti-realist approach to social categories such as race. I reject this approach and argue throughout for the reality of social structures and the political importance of recognizing this reality. On the other hand, given that much of the

Perhaps we need something in theology akin to “critical social theory.”<sup>23</sup> The individualist frame is *real* but it is to be *resisted*, both because it props up ambivalence to caring about the common good, and because it betrays the essential universality of the Gospel.

However, here is where a re-envisioned Advent Hope could make a difference. Because this sort of hope is for universal cosmic renewal, not just for individual escape. We truly are in the same boat together. The shape of the ultimate vision matters for what we do in the here and now. We even see this in Hooper’s song (for all its limits): “We believe the time is here, *when the nations far and near* shall awake, and shout and sing: Hallelujah! Christ is King!” Advent hope looks for “the healing of the nations”<sup>24</sup> not just the salvation of souls. True hope cannot be privatized, it is hope for the healing of the nations and all who live in them. Also, unlike most other Christians, Adventists believe in a universal bodily resurrection of all who have ever lived.<sup>25</sup> Our hope is not individualized escape from this mess, but a renewed and healed world. This means that we must work for penultimate (Bonhoeffer), “fitting” (H. Richard Niehbur) and “analogical” (Barth) goals in the here and now that correspond with the values and ultimate vision of the promised “New Heav-

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(very real) social world consists of unjust social structures, I think this reality must be resisted. Another theme in the book is that one of the main goals of social constructionism is to lay bare the mechanisms by which social structures are formed and sustained so that we are better positioned to locate the levers for social change. We should not resist seeing the reality that we should, in fact, resist; in fact, disclosing that reality is a crucial precondition for successful resistance.”

<sup>23</sup> We might even want to call it “critical ecclesial theory”!

<sup>24</sup> Rev. 22:1–2 paints this picture of the New Jerusalem: “Then the angel showed me a river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the main street of the city. On either side of the river stood a tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit and yielding a fresh crop for each month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” See also Rom. 8: 18–25, where the whole universe itself is to be saved from mortality.

<sup>25</sup> Most Christians believe that when we die our immortal souls either go to heaven or hell. Yes, Christians have always professed (following the NT) a “resurrection of the body” but this quickly became a far distant event, and one only for the saved. While I note that Thomas Aquinas (13th century) accepts the universal resurrection of the body for all (*Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, Question 75), this has not become the focus of popular Christian hope. It is true that Adventists talk about two resurrections (following Rev. 20), with different outcomes for each, but this does not detract from the fundamental move: “In Adam all die, in Christ all are made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22).

ens and New Earth.” This is also why (unlike many other apocalyptically oriented communities) Adventism has invested so much of its resources and efforts in a global network of healthcare, education, welfare and development work. For we are to “occupy till He comes.”

Now, this fourth distortion of hope (i.e. hope as an individualized and even privatized good) raises again the question of the *common good*, to which I will turn in the final part of the paper. But before that, let me return to our key question: *If societies are complex systems that reproduce injustice, and are self-regulating in the face of reform, then how do we hope for justice?*

### **3. The Advent Movement: A Movement of Embodied Hope?**

Is it possible, despite our failures, for the Advent Movement to be (or perhaps become?) a movement of embodied hope? I will outline what I think would be required for this to become a possible outcome:

(1) Could we (now, “between the times”) consider the Advent as the coming of a qualitatively and essentially different social being – i.e. a radically other **complex system**, animated by love, freedom and justice? For while the Advent is the Coming of God, it is the Coming of God for the purpose of being “God with us.” Therefore it is not only an act of God but also the emerging of a new community, a different (new) social being (or kind of complex social system) among others.

(2) Then to have this hope in the Advent is not merely (or even primarily) a cognitive experience, asserting truth-values regarding statements of past and future events.

(3) Rather it is the choice, the experience, and the symptom of *participating* in that new complex system (called the Body of Christ, or the proleptic Kingdom of God), already *here and now*, although aligned to its future consummation.

(4) Of course, this participation is surely incomplete. We are still in the dominion of evil, of what some call “Empire” (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000; and we might want to call “Babylon” or Christendom which is Christianity in its imperial form lasting from the 4th to the 20th century). However, despite this, can we not already “taste” that other world, and recognize it as a different life?

(5) This would give our hope for systemic change its dual character. From within the ideology of Empire, it is irrational. “There is no alternative.” But as participants in Christ’s body, it is *second nature* (cf. Haslanger’s use of this term).

(6) Is this then a way to answer the question we posed at the beginning? *We can hope, through participating in the shared practices already of a not-yet-realized new complex system.* This calls for some further explication:

First this calls for **humility**. For, as we have already noted, this hope can be distorted! In fact, the grave danger (that Adventists in particular should be attuned to!) is being co-opted by the Empire.

What is meant by **Empire**? Empires in general are complex systems that conquer and rule many peoples under the sovereign power of a ruling elite. There have been many around the world, through time. “The Empire” as I use it here, borrowing from many others, refers to the now-globe-spanning specific system that emerged through the European colonization of the Americas, the slave trade, capitalism, and military-industrial-driven “growth.” This Empire has important roots in Christendom’s poisoned marriage with Rome. Early Christianity, and early Adventism, both arose as utterly *against* and aspirationally *other than* this Empire. Empire’s sin is masquerading one specific complex system (i.e. society), and its rulers/rules, as the “One True Way” with forced conversion/conquest/assimilation. Adventists have always had some of this in mind when (in light of Rev. 14’s three angels’ message) they have linked “Babylon” with Christendom (the longest lasting temporal-spiritual empire)<sup>26</sup> and seen their vocation as to echo the call to “Come out of her my people.”

But what does “Come out of her my people” mean? Adventists have always thought of it as leaving “Babylon” and becoming part of the true **Body of Christ**. But note, to leave the Empire is a communal process. We die to one

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<sup>26</sup> After the conversion of Constantine (±300 C. E.), Christianity quickly moved from the margins to the centre of power, from a “faith of pilgrims” to the “state religion.” The Church took on the form of the Empire. As history makes clear, Christendom (imperial Christianity) is one of the longest lasting empires in human history. Despite morphing at least five times – They are (note some overlapping): (1) the Eastern Byzantine Christian Empire (300–1453 C. E.); (2) the Early Roman (Latin) Christian Empire (300–476 C. E.); (4) the new Holy Roman Empire in the West (800–1806 C. E.); (5) the Multiple European Colonial (Christian) Empires (1480s–1960s; but at its zenith in the 19th century) – and splitting twice (in the 11th and 16th centuries) it has lasted almost two millennia. “Christendom” defined as Christianity in Imperial form essentially ends in the 20th century (“fall of Babylon”; “deadly wound”); but actually it continues in “shadow mode” in the form of Global Western (American) Free Market Capitalism (1800–today; what Rev. calls the “healing of the deadly wound”). See [www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/longest-lasting-empire-in-history/?fb\\_comment\\_id=908289045888748\\_949562308428088](http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/longest-lasting-empire-in-history/?fb_comment_id=908289045888748_949562308428088).



social being, and are born to another. We appropriately use the word “adoption.” It is not primarily an intellectual process, but a material one – a matter of our practices [recall Haslanger’s discussion of social practices]. We can think for example of practices such as the Eucharist, Sabbath-keeping, Foot-washing (and Singing!). But this also has an economic, political, reproductive dimension. For we are a “people” among peoples. Furthermore, the Body of Christ is not dependent on Empire, for it has its own autonomy, and horizontal support network. (Think of the Adventist parallel infrastructure.)<sup>27</sup>

Finally, we need to note that this will call for a sort of **pluralism ... in practice**. So we can ask: How do we build resistance to being co-opted (again) into Empire? There are several resources: (a) *Theology* reminds us that God is beyond any of our social forms! Thus the Coming of God (the consummation of the Advent) remains out of our control and it thus relativizes all that we are and do; (b) *philosophy* reminds us that action for the “common good” need not require a universal “common ground” (see section 4) since “common ground” anyway usually defaults to the dominant hegemony;<sup>28</sup> (c) *action* or praxis reminds us that perhaps we should seek to encounter others in as much fullness of their otherness as possible. From these encounters with ‘other’ others, we may grow into shared practices – but they will always be contingent, changing, penultimate yet sacred.

In practice we might have very different grounds for working for common goods; but we can still do so by forming *ad hoc* alignments, held together by nothing other than the pragmatic pursuit of those goods themselves. Here the “we” become movements of engagement. These will be *ad hoc* alliances, where solidarity emerges from and in action, not necessarily theory (i.e. one “no” many “yesses”). This may seem “weak” to those weaned on the Empire’s cen-

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<sup>27</sup> Note: We are emphasizing the radical difference between Empire and not-Empire. I.e. the difference between attempting justice through reform vs. through the death of Empire and the becoming of something profoundly other. And yet, are not all systems interwoven, their boundaries more or less firm depending on perspective, nesting within and beyond each other? Thus, this is an essential tension. Here there is no place for dogmatism. Of course, the “Body of Christ” is bigger than Adventism, as we confess in Fundamental Belief #12 and #13.

<sup>28</sup> Thus “we are lost without it”! (See the responses of both the left and right in the U.S. to the fading elite liberal consensus.) And finding a “lowest common denominator” may not inspire the deepest alignment.

tralized versions of power; but “blessed are the meek.” And we must remember that many ecologies, neural nets, and other complex systems are deeply resilient precisely *because* of their “weak” links between nodes!

*We can thus hope to hope, through participating in the shared practices here and now, of an embodied movement – e.g. an Advent Movement, as a not-yet-fully-realized new complex system.*

Finally, let me return to the quest for the Common Good, which was the problem that I raised at the start.

#### **4. Is Common Ground Necessary for the Common Good?**

The problem is that if “memory produces hope,” it would appear that it can only flourish within communities of shared memory. More broadly, the question can be put this way: “Is not common ground necessary for the common good?” The answer has usually been “yes.” Let me briefly recount three representative and classic answers (in rough chronological order): Classical Greek (Aristotle); Medieval Christian (Aquinas); and Modern Liberal (Stout).

##### *4.1 Classical Greek City-State (Aristotle’s Communitarian Virtue Ethics)*

What makes an act “right”? Character, virtue, deliberation and practice! But we must note that this can only take place in communities of practical (prudential) wisdom. For this is the necessary context for the practice of the virtues and the avoidance of vices. So, for example, temperance (or moderation) is finding the mean between excess and deficit. But since we can only learn temperance by “doing,” it is essential that we have a community with agreed exemplars of such virtues. Thus, “good behaviour” is to be understood as what a person of good character would do in the given situation to further the end (*telos* or goal) of life (*eudaimonia*, happiness, or living and faring well). It involves deliberation about appropriate means to an end, and requires action shaped by moral virtues acquired through practice and normed by community exemplars of moral excellence.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This is, of course, an extreme précis of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. What makes for a good act is a good person. Only persons of virtuous character can truly act well. And the virtues (e.g. justice, temperance, courage, etc.) can only be developed in communities that care about them, model them, and provide for the training essential to develop them. From this perspective, a good act is an act that is done with due deliberation (about means to an end, i.e. about the best way to

Here you can only achieve the common good by having common ground (i.e. prudential communities of shared agreement on the virtues). Of course, the Achilles' heel of all this was the severely limited scope of the community. Only free male persons were counted as citizens.

While the drawing of the citizenship boundary has changed over time, this limitation still dogs the attempt to secure the common good. Who belongs? Who gets to be counted as a citizen?

#### *4.2 Medieval Christendom and the Concept of "Natural Law" (Aquinas' 'Treatise on Law')*<sup>30</sup>

Law is something pertaining to reason. Ultimately, all law is based on and derives from the Eternal Law which is equivalent to the mind and plan of God. But no one has direct access to the mind of God (and thus to Eternal Law). However, in the very act of creation God has "imprinted" the Eternal Law into nature itself. So we can through careful observation, deliberation and reflection work out the principles of the Natural Law. We can think of this as a sort of "reverse-engineering." For example, a car's engine is built according to a blueprint; but with effort we can figure out its design and how it works from its physical reality. Aided by Divine Law (i.e. revealed law in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures) and based on Natural Law, human laws can be created such that they are just. And as just they have the power to "bind the conscience" because they ultimately derive from the Eternal Law.<sup>31</sup> Aquinas offers this summary of the nature of law: "*Law is an ordination of reason for*

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attain to proximate goals that lead ultimately to the goal of life itself – happiness; living and fairing well), facilitated by the exercise of the moral virtues (states of character acquired by practice) in which one finds the "mean" between excess and deficit.

<sup>30</sup> In addition to incorporation of Aristotle's virtue ethics, Aquinas elaborates a conception of natural law. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* Part II/1.

<sup>31</sup> Human laws have several characteristics that must be considered. First, human laws are established for the benefit of human beings – although perfectly virtuous humans do not require human laws (Q. 95, Art. 1). Second – and this is absolutely crucial – human laws have their force insofar as they derive from natural law. Human laws derive from natural law in two ways: as conclusions from first principles and as specifications of general principles (Q. 95, Art. 2). Third, as Isodore points out, human laws should be "virtuous, just, possible by nature, in accord with a country's customs, suitable to time and place, necessary, useful, so clear that they contain nothing obscure ..., and decreed for the common benefit of all citizens" (Q. 95, Art. 3). Fourth, human laws may be categorized according to their characteristics: as they are derived from the natural

*the common good* by one who has care of the community and promulgated” (Q. 90, Art. 4, emphasis added).

Now, in all this, it is critical to note that this can work in medieval Christendom because there is a common ground – the belief in God as Creator. Interestingly, it is not because all persons were Christians – they were not – but because despite their heterogeneity (13th century medieval European society was composed of Christians, Jews and Muslims) they all shared this common ground. Thus *all* rational persons could join in the making of human laws based on universal natural law.

#### 4.3 *Modern Liberal Democracy (Jeffrey Stout’s Democracy and Tradition)*

With the erosion of confidence in a Creator God, turmoil in the post-reformation breakup of Christendom, and a general “flight from authority”, (Stout) a new conception of common ground emerged in liberal modernity. The common ground thought necessary for a nation state to survive was to be found in the “rules of engagement” rather than in the content of its citizens’ beliefs. Specific (and heterogeneous) beliefs were to be tolerated (as long as they were privatized) and everyone agreed to play by the newly devised democratic/market rules. These “rules of the game,” became the civil religion of liberal democracy.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Jeffrey Stout asked whether we can hold democracy together despite our fractures over moral issues? Could the citizens of a modern democracy still reason with one another? In answer, he carves out a controversial position between those who view religious voices as an anathema to democracy (e.g. Rorty) and those who believe that democratic society is a moral wasteland because such voices are not heard (e.g. McIntyre).<sup>32</sup>

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law, as they are ordained for the common good, as they are established by the ruling authorities, and as they direct human actions (Q. 95, Art. 4). Finally, human laws should be formed in general rather than particular terms; and while they do not prohibit all vices, they do command all virtues (insofar as all virtues tend to the common good) (Q. 96, Art. 1–3). Probably the most significant of all the characteristics of human laws, and the characteristic is crucial for understanding Thomas, is that human laws derive their just authority from being in accordance with the natural law.

<sup>32</sup> See Stout 2004. “Drawing inspiration from Whitman, Dewey, and Ellison, Jeffrey Stout sketches the proper role of religious discourse in a democracy. He discusses the fate of virtue, the legacy of racism, the moral issues implicated in the war on terrorism, and the objectivity of ethical norms. Against those who see no place for religious reasoning in the democratic arena, Stout champions a space for religious voices. But against increasingly vocal antiliberal thinkers, he argues that

But that was back in 2004. What about now, after January 6, 2021? The real (and perhaps new) crisis is that it seems we can no longer agree on the “rules of the game.” Power seems to be the only norm. We seem to have irretrievably lost (a) homogenous communities of character; (b) confidence in the existence of so-called “Natural Law;”<sup>33</sup> (c) and now the agreement to “play by the rules” of the democratic game. What now?

We could follow leading communitarian moral philosophers like Alisdair McIntyre who have argued that it is just this lack of common vision that is plunging us back into a “moral dark ages.”<sup>34</sup> Or we could dare to challenge the assumption itself. Is common ground necessary for achieving the common

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modern democracy can provide a moral vision and has made possible such moral achievements as civil rights precisely because it allows a multitude of claims to be heard. Stout’s distinctive pragmatism reconfigures the disputed area where religious thought, political theory, and philosophy meet. Charting a path beyond the current impasse between secular liberalism and the new traditionalism, *Democracy and Tradition* asks whether we have the moral strength to continue as a democratic people as it invigorates us to retrieve our democratic virtues from very real threats to their practice.” (Publisher’s blurb).

<sup>33</sup> Although, it needs to be pointed out that modern talk of “human rights” is a sort of continuation of natural law without the appeal to Divine Creation to back it up.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. the famous (and now almost prophetic) last paragraph of McIntyre 1981/1984/2007, 263: “It is always dangerous to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another; and among the most misleading of parallels are those which have been drawn between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages. Nonetheless certain parallels there are. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead – often not recognizing fully what they were doing – was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.”

good? I would like to venture the thesis that it is *not*. *We might have very different grounds for working for common goods; but we can still do so by forming ad hoc alignments, held together by nothing other than the pragmatic pursuit of those goods themselves.* Let me indicate three important qualifications and then offer a couple of illustrations to conclude.

(a) Who are the “we” we are talking about? Communities of character, McIntyre was urging in *After Virtue*. Richly textured by their own story, traditions and complex social practices (or communal gestures). But now not movements of withdrawal, but movements of engagement. Engagement with what? Selected social, political or other “common goods.” I believe Adventism to be such a community of character. I suggest that Advent Hope can become a *movement of embodied hope*. Working (with a range of others) to fight injustice here, and enhance flourishing there.

(b) These *ad hoc* (i.e. not systematic, fundamental, ideological, grounded, or permanent) alliances will be based on the hope that some common good might be achieved, rather than that some “lowest common denominator” type of intellectual (theoretical, or even theological) agreement exists. And these alliances will, no doubt, change from issue (good) to issue (good). Such hope is compatible with either optimism or pessimism! In fact, Advent Hope, if it is to be true to itself and its own source, must be a hopeful (for penultimate goods) pessimism (for while evil can be reduced, it can never – short of the consummation of the Advent – be totally eradicated).

(c) Solidarity comes in action (common cause) not in theory (common ground). To play with the powerful title of Prof. Haslanger’s book: The common good resides in the *resisting* and not in a shared vision concerning *reality*. To conjure up a hypothetical example. Feminist philosophers who wish to eradicate the categories “men and women” [though not male and female] (e.g. MacKinnon), and evangelicals who might believe that God created men and women different but equal (e.g. Davidson) *might* be both willing and able to join together in fighting for a renewed push for the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment; see Haslanger 2012, 35–82; Davidson 2007). No guarantees. But also no inevitable impossibility. Or to allude to a real example. In the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement brought a diverse range of people into the streets, who would almost certainly not share a common ideology or even vision of where we are to go from here. It might not have enduring or staying power, it might not have been enough to

finally succeed in needed police reform, but we can allow ourselves glimmers of hope in the fleeting solidarity.

Just two, more first hand, examples. My eldest son, who was in NYC at the time, tells of an incredible solidarity across all sorts of divides in the days after 9/11. Disasters can do that.

I personally remember standing in line to vote in Somerset West in the first election in the New South Africa (1994). It was almost a liturgical moment. People who had never had much to do with each other, in some cases had been on opposite ideological sides, and even some who had been in violent conflict – were joining together in a complex social practice that was itself a “common good.” Was utopia ushered in? No. Was it thus a pointless failure? No. It was a moment of embodied hope in the messy thing we call the struggle for justice.

To return to Advent Hope and Wayne Hooper’s song. Even for Adventists, I suspect that singing this song can prompt a whole variety of reactions: Some might feel rather uncomfortable with its implied triumphalism; some might feel a fleeting moment of nostalgia; others might perhaps experience a flashback recalling their life’s journey from literalism to a more mature appreciation of symbolism; while still others might find themselves distinctly “cross-pressured”<sup>35</sup> in doing so.

But perhaps it is even more pertinent to note the fact that in all likelihood we would probably have *very* different notions of what was *meant* by the words we were singing. For some of us it might be a rather traditional expression of longing for the literal second coming of Christ on the clouds of heaven and all that is said to accompany such an event (along with visual images from childhood); for others it might be a different yet still realistic expectation of a coming *Parousia*; for others it might evoke nothing more than a vague longing for a better world to come; for still others it might actually elicit an urge to push back against what could be perceived as mere other-worldly escapism.

In the face of the global challenges of rising polarization, social fragmentation, and political malaise, what we would appear to need is some common ground to work for the common good. What hope is there for that, when even

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<sup>35</sup> “According to Charles Taylor, faith in a secular age is cross-pressured; that is, it is contested by the presence of multiple accounts of belief and unbelief in contemporary Western culture” (<https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:13001>; accessed June 7, 2022). See Taylor 2007.

a relatively small global subculture (with highly homogeneous religious practices, at that) cannot even bank on common ground when singing its most famous theme song?

One song, evoking different memories and meanings, even for those singing it. But in the singing we would be doing something together. A complex social practice (singing) that for a moment would embody the solidarity we were singing about.<sup>36</sup> Is it possible that witnessing, even participating in an expression of hope in a very different communal frame, can still inspire and evoke our own hope? Our challenge is for those differences to become a source of alignment, not assimilation; of solidarity, not sameness. The spirit moves through us, in mysterious ways. It is not up to us! But it matters what we do.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

According to Haslanger:

(1) *Structural injustice* occurs when the practices that create the network of positions and relations (a) distribute resources unjustly, (b) distort our understanding of what is valuable, or (c) organize us in ways that are unjust/harmful/wrong.

(2) *Systemic injustice* occurs when an unjust structure is maintained in a complex system that is self-reinforcing, adaptive, and creates subjects whose identity is shaped to conform to it.

(3) *Hope* is a syndrome of attitudes, motivations, beliefs, centred on one's scheme of ends. One has reason to act to promote one's fundamental ends, even in the face of obstacles. Such reasons, when aligned with the will, are a source of motivation; hope is not merely passive. Those who value social justice should be prepared to take on the risks and costs of pursuing it. We should not give up

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<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, before the General Conference session in 1995, with the theme "United in Christ," Hooper was asked to write a second stanza. In thinking about 1 Corinthians 13, he decided to centre the whole second stanza on love as the uniting force in Christ. Second Stanza of "We have this Hope": "We are united in Jesus Christ our Lord. We are united in His love. Love for the waiting people of the world, people who need our Saviour's love. Soon the heav'ns will open wide, Christ will come claim His bride. All the universe will sing: 'Hallelujah! Christ is King!' We have this hope, this faith, and God's great love, we are united in Christ."

<sup>37</sup> Recall the Adventist belief that we can prepare the way for the Second Coming – hope is a call to action! May we have hope, and thus faith, in love.



hope in justice, even if success is unlikely (Haslanger's final slide in the presentation titled "Hope not Optimism").

In this article, I have explored the possibility that "Advent Hope" could become a movement of embodied hope, that in *ad hoc* collaboration with others, takes a stand (again and again) against structural and systemic injustice, precisely because it believes it is not futile, for the One who *was*, and *is*, is to *come again* (Rev. 4:8).

Following on immediately from the quote on p. 1, fn. 1 (above) Rebecca Solnit writes: "At the beginning of his massive 1930s treatise on hope, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch wrote, 'the work of this emotion [hope] requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong.' To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable" (Solnit 2016, 4).

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### Zusammenfassung

Was ist aus dem „Gemeinwohl“ geworden? Kann man angesichts der aktuellen Polarisierung und der systemischen und strukturellen sozialen Ungerechtigkeit noch auf Gerechtigkeit hoffen? In dem Artikel wird vorgeschlagen, dass die Grundlage für eine Zusammenarbeit nicht unbedingt eine „gemeinsame Basis“ ist, sondern nach „gemeinsamen Zielen“ zu streben. Ein Hauptvortrag und Reaktionen darauf auf einer Konferenz der *Society of Adventist Philosophers* boten die Gelegenheit, diese These zu testen. Können eine säkulare Philosophin (Sally Haslanger, MIT-Professorin, Begründerin der *Critical Social Theory*) und ein adventistischer Theologe ernsthaft gemeinsam einen hoffnungsvollen Wandel anstreben, ohne über weltanschauliche Unterschiede zu stolpern? Der Artikel ist eine Fallstudie für ein selbstbewusstes und selbstkritisches Gespräch „über Trennendes hinweg“. Er fragt, ob die „Adventhoffnung“, die die Verzerrungen des Eskapismus, der apokalyptischen Sensationslust, des politischen Quietismus und des Individualismus ablehnt, zu einer „Bewegung der verkörperten Hoffnung“ auf dem Weg zum kommenden Reich Gottes werden kann.

### Résumé

Qu'est devenu le « bien commun »? Tenant compte de l'état actuel de polarisation et de la nature systémique et structurelle de l'injustice sociale, est-il encore possible d'espérer la justice? L'article suggère que la base du travail en commun ne soit pas nécessairement le partage d'un « terrain d'entente » mais la poursuite de « buts (ou objectifs) communs ». Une présentation principale et une réponse à une conférence de la Société des Philosophes Adventistes ont permis de tester cette thèse. Une philosophe laïque (Sally Haslanger, professeur au MIT et fondatrice de la *Critical Social Theory*) et un théologien adventiste pouvaient-ils s'engager dans une recherche commune sérieuse d'un changement porteur d'espoir sans buter sur les différences de vision du monde? L'article présente une étude de cas de conversation consciente et autocritique « par-delà les clivages ». Il pose la question suivante: « l'espérance de l'Avent », qui rejette les distorsions de l'évasion, du sensationnalisme apocalyptique, du quietisme politique et de l'individualisme, peut-il devenir un « mouvement d'espoir incarné », en route vers le Royaume de Dieu à venir?

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