

HOPE: A BIBICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: *In our struggles in life, hope acts as a beacon of light. Psychological literature emphasized the importance of hope for individual development and well being. Research evidence revealed Biblical scripture as the basis of drawing hope in countering psychological issues such as depression, stress, suicide, etc. This paper takes an alternative perspective – a Biblical one, on hope, that reveals the interface between psychology and Christian theology often seen at crossroads with each other. A Christian understanding of hope is proposed that is anchored in Biblical scripture. Finally, Snyder’s psychological theory of hope acts as the lens to position Biblical hope.*

Keywords: *hope; Christian; Bible; Snyder’s hope theory.*

Introduction

This paper is an outcome of my personal spiritual journey as a Christian, and how my faith interfaces or at times is at cross purposes with the discipline of psychology. Christian theology and psychology have been viewed at odds with each other, though a shared focus for both is human nature, and the well being of the individual. I draw comfort from Watts’ (2002) observations that the two disciplines are not that incompatible, and that there is scope for them to mutually, and constructively influence each other. In this paper, I endeavor to draw from both these disciplines to dwell on hope. Why you might ask is hope important? Hope, I believe allows us to have faith that we can approach life’s problems, tackle them, and thereby grow and develop as human beings. Further, when we hope, we believe in our own capacity to determine the kind of life and future for ourselves and even others. As a Christian, I derive and cultivate hope many a times from the scripture or Bible- the Old and New Testament in my life’s journey.

Hope has been much touched and researched on in psychology, especially in relation to happiness, and well being. Positive psychology particularly, has made strident leaps in focusing on the role of hope in human living. History reveals that healthcare even in the realm of mental health, and religion has been related in one way or another amongst diverse human populations. A plethora of research evidence indicate the reciprocal relationship between religion and health- both physical and mental. For example, the positive effects of religious beliefs and activities (prayer, Bible reading and church attendance) on remission of depression among the elderly

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is noteworthy (Koenig, George and Peterson 1998). Moreover, yoga has been seen to reduce blood pressure (Murugesan, Govindarajulu, and Bera 2000), benefit patients with asthma, heart failure and even mood disorders (Malhotra, Singh, Singh, Gupta, and Sharma 2002). Further, anxiety and depression are seen to be treated speedily by Islamic-based psychotherapy (Azhar and Varma 1995; Razali, Hasanah, Aminah, and Subramaniam 1998).

For believers, scriptures as bases for religions serve as guidelines and moral compasses. In essence, they represent for believers, the voice of their God(s) or Goddesses. In a similar vein, the Bible serves as the written word of God for Christians. Moreover, in the Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit mediates and applies God's written word to believers in the faith.

The relationship between psychology and the Bible is one of unease, particularly amongst professionals in counseling psychology. For some people, the Bible holds authority; for others there is very little overlap between Biblical and psychological data. It can be argued that as psychology projects itself a science that is secular and reliant on facts, hitherto, it is at odds with Biblical theology that is commonly understood as relying solely on faith. However, theologians have argued that Biblical faith is based on solid, demonstrable historical facts, and hence this is even a common misrepresentation. What is noteworthy of course is that the Biblical doctrine of The Trinity which espouses that there is one God who exists in three distinct persons- the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, cannot be demonstrated by reason.

The importance afforded to scripture passages is that a Biblical verse or verses may provide comfort and protect people that might otherwise breakdown with having to struggle with no clear answers as to the why of a particular suffering or sufferings. For some, scripture reading serves to help change their outlook, or better yet, their life circumstances. In a way, Biblical scripture enables individuals to open up to new ways of experiencing God and growing in self-awareness. Having perused literature, I found that Biblical content addresses many psychological problems that people face such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem, boundaries, trauma, and marital discord (e.g., Allender and Longman 1994; Armentrout 1995; Powlison 1999, 2000; Stover and Stover 1994; Tripp 1994).

Thus, the *objective* of the paper is two-fold. Firstly, to briefly expound on the conceptions of hope in psychology, particularly the theoretical framework of Snyder's model of hope in positive psychology. And secondly, to propose a Biblical or Christian perspective of hope through the lens of Snyder's theoretical framework. Hence, this paper attempts to engage, reflect and wrestle with scriptural text to propound an alternative perspective- a Biblical or Christian one to hope that is essential for human well being.

Religion and health

In recent decades, interest has grown in medical and scientific communities to explore

and understand the relationship between religion and health (Levin 1996). Why is religion central to people's lives, even our health? The answer perhaps lies in research evidence that states that religious beliefs serves to provide greater meaning in the lives of people, and thereby assist them in coping with their ailments or diseases (Foley 1988; Patel, Shah, Peterson and Kimmel 2002). Religions differ in their outlook towards human suffering, yet a common thread among many is their view that pain and suffering are consequences of sin; though many also see the upside of suffering and pain such as stimulating personal growth, resilience, strength and even faith.

The Bible as scriptural text informs, maintains and sustains the beliefs, faith, spiritual and religious lives of Christians. For believers, their physical, psychological, social and spiritual lives are intertwined. This is in line with researches that demonstrate positive outcomes in both the physical and mental health domains for individuals with spiritual beliefs (Hall, Dixon, and Mauzey 2004). Religious involvement (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, and Koenig 2000), church attendance (Becker 2011) are linked to good physical and mental. Interestingly, in their study with African-American cancer survivors, Hamilton, Powe, Pollard, Lee and Felton (2007) revealed that the survivors believed their survival to be God's gift.

Christian clinicians utilize Biblical passages to aid clients in their insightful understanding of their feelings and behaviors, and also learn new ways of coping with difficult life situations (Mohr 2006). Further, Biblical scriptures also serve as cognitive interventions, for example, to challenge and change dysfunctional beliefs, reframe and understand problems from a spiritual outlook, among other things (Richards and Bergins 2005). However, Sisemore (2007) cautioned that usage of Biblical passages in clinical settings have to be in line with the client's religious and cultural beliefs. Therefore, psychological literature does acknowledge the beneficial effects of religion and spirituality on all domains in an individual's health.

Since religious activities and beliefs have implications on health outcomes, this article focuses on hope that is pertinent to human health and well being.

The psychology of hope

Hope occupies an important place in literature in psychology, particularly, positive psychology. Peterson and Seligman (2004) looked at hope as a character strength. Numerous scholars collectively opined that hope refers to the perception that one's goals can be attained (Menninger 1959; Cantril 1964; Melges and Bowlby 1969; Frank 1975). On the other hand, Snyder, Rand and Sigmon (2005) articulate that hope pertains to a belief that one knows how to reach one's goals signifying pathways. Further, they also emphasize that hope is also a belief that one has the motivation to use those pathways to reach one's goals thereby referring to agency. Hence, for these researchers, hope entails both the will (Agency) and the way (Pathways) to pursue certain ends in life. This focus on agency and pathway also resonates closely with Bandura's (1977, 1992, 1997) notion of self-efficacy, though marked differences with the concept of hope are noted (Magaletta and Oliver 1999) in terms of nature of

goals, thinking and perception. Further, hope also is seen to emanate from the human ability to imagine and to see what is not present in the here and now, that results in an outlook that all will be well amidst life's adversities (Snyder, LaPointe, Crowson, and Early 1998).

Theoretical perspectives of hope

Conceptions of hope have been varied. For Seligman (2002), hope can be understood as optimism whereby optimistic people are very goal-oriented. Positivity is viewed interchangeably with optimism (Frederickson 2009) that pushes us to see possibilities and seek opportunities, rather than focus on the negatives. Alternatively, Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) postulated that hope is fostered when we attend and effectively meet our psychological needs such as competence, relatedness and autonomy. Scioli, Ricci, Nyugen and Scioli (2011) viewed hope as an emotion associated with mastery, attachment, survival, and spirituality. For this model of hope, culture, family and spiritual beliefs play a pivotal role; as also personal belief and faith that are not necessarily religious in nature. Interestingly this approach to understanding hope incorporates the self, relational and social, and spiritual aspects that are self-sustaining.

Charles Snyder's popular conception of hope to which this paper pivots itself when explaining Biblical hope is outlined in the following section.

Snyder's hope theory

I utilized Snyder's theory of hope to draw parallels and contrasts with my own understanding of Biblical hope. Because this model of hope is robust and rigorously subjected to research and testing (Lopez et al. 2004; Kauffman 2006; Riskind 2006), unlike other conceptualizations of hope. It encompasses the cognitive and even the emotional aspects of hope, it would benefit when explaining Christian hope. In his seminal book, titled "*The psychology of hope: You can get there from here*", Snyder (1994) asserts that 'hope is the sum of the mental willpower and waypower that you have for your goals'. This assertion stresses on the cognitive aspect of hope, in addition to its emotive element as hope is 'the perception that one can engage in planful thought' (Snyder 2002). Hope, thus is a positive motivational state (Snyder 1994). Agency (goal-directed energy) and pathways (means to goals) are the bases of hope. Hence, individuals with hope possess abilities to motivate themselves through agency-thinking, and thereby achieve desired goals through appropriate pathways. Therefore, hope is seen to comprise of three components, agency thinking, pathways thinking and goals. Snyder terms desired or imagined objects, experiences or outcomes in our minds as goals that need attainment.

Further, this perspective also stresses on goals playing a pivotal role in anchoring purposive behavior (Snyder 1989, 1994, 2000) that is necessary for their attainment. In a nutshell, goals are ends that are hoped for. Interestingly for Snyder, goals involving hope fall somewhere between an impossibility and a sure thing. Pathways

on the other hand, involve means or plans to reaching the end-goals. Crucial to plan-setting for the accomplishment of goals is of course, the energy or agency cognitions. Agency thinking refers to thoughts about one's capabilities to set out in pathways for reaching end-goals. Arguably, for any hopeful endeavor in realizing one's goals, one needs to engage in both pathway thinking and agency thinking. They are thus, inseparable to have hope. The assertion then is that they are not mutually exclusive and reciprocally influence each other (Snyder et al. 1991).

Snyder posits that hope is not only a process of goal-direction, but also pertains to beliefs about one's ability to realize set goals. The model articulated three kinds of hope (i) Global or trait hope that refers to one's belief about his or her abilities to attain goals, (ii) Domain-specific hope that pertains to hope in diverse domains or life areas such as family life, academics, work, leisure, social relationships and romantic relationships and (iii) Goal-specific hope pertaining to set goals.

Snyder's model on hope has its share of critics. Tong, Fredrickson, Chang and Lim (2010) argued that Snyder's theory is not in line with people's experiences of hope; hope has more to do only with agency, rather than pathways in their goal attainment. For Tong et al. (2010), Snyder's view is not as heuristic as it is made out to be since it is evident only in situations where there is personal control over the attainment of hope. Other criticisms levelled against the theory is its clear lack of integration and even incorporation of similar conceptions of self-efficacy and optimism (Lazarus 1999, 2000; Peterson 2000, 2006). The neglect of the affective element and appraisal of others in influencing hope was also critiqued (Aspinwall and Leaf 2002). Moreover, for these researchers the model's main drawback was its emphasis on personal agency that fails to grasp the importance of social contexts in human existence where hope is yearned.

Despite these concerns, understanding the theoretical know-how of hope can alleviate frustration and despair of human beings, that in turn contributes to the well being of society (Snyder 2002).

Hope: Its meaning for Christians

The Christian or Biblical understanding of hope is almost antithetical to the secular or worldly notion of hope. Hope stems from the belief that sustenance, facilitation and deliverance from life's difficulties vests in God. The scriptural position, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is (Jeremiah 17:7, King James Version) attests to this. For Christian believers, the Bible contains the very words and presence of God. Not only are they God's words, they are His words to his people. Thus, the scripture acts a balm when we are hurting, confused, worrying and even rejoicing. The Bible serves to be a comfort, and also builds hope—hope that God will deliver and keep his promises.

What is noteworthy is that in the Old and New Testament of the Bible, words rendering hope are Hebrew or Greek in origin. For example, the Old Testament uses

the Hebrew words of 'tiqvah', and 'yachal' to represent hope. 'Tiqvah' literally means a cord or attachment that symbolically connotes hope that endures when tested and tried. On the other hand, 'yachal' means to wait expectantly as revealed in this verse of assurance of hope, "For in you, O Lord, I hope; You will hear, O Lord my God" (Psalm 38:15). The New Testament employs the Greek word, 'elpis' meaning to expect or anticipate with pleasure, that denotes 'hope'. Hope here pertains to a firm grasping and trusting of the promises of God, in and through Jesus Christ. The personhood of God through Jesus Christ, central to the Christian faith epitomizes hope. Romans 8:24-25 (New International Version) personifies this deep-seated expectant trust of Biblical hope when it says, "For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance". It is widely acknowledged in theological literature that the Book of Romans is a book of hope that egg believers to abound in hope (Romans 15:13).

Background of Christian hope

Abraham's life's journey as scripted in the Old Testament of the Bible serves a good case study in understanding the intersection of faith and hope. As human beings we all relate to being doubtful about everything, even with God's purpose and promises in our lives. During crises and at the lowest points in our lives, we even question God's intent for us. So did Abraham. The book of Genesis that details Abraham's life also revealed God's promises to him. Abraham was called upon by God to come out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and go to a land that God would show him; that land was promised to Abraham as his own and for his descendants. God promised Abraham saying, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3). The godly man that he was, Abraham heeded God's instructions and went where God would lead him, believing and placing firmly his hope in God.

Throughout his journey with God, promises were made to Abraham: "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted" (Genesis 13:16). As years passed Abraham questioned God's plan for him as no child was born to him and his wife, Sarah. So Abraham and Sarah came up with their plan to produce a child by way of her maid-servant Hagar. However, God reiterated in Genesis 17:19 saying, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him". Truly, Isaac was born, fulfilling God's promise to Abraham. Thus, Abraham's hope was not in vain as God delivered on his promises.

However, one day, Abraham's faith and hope was again tested when God asked him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, to which he agreed. In obedience to God's call, Abraham was on the verge of sacrificing his only son, Isaac, when "The angel of the

Lord called to Abraham a second time and said, 'I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore' (Genesis 22:15-17).

The Biblical text from Hebrews 6:17 affirms the promises God made to Abraham through an oath by himself. God was not only creating and instilling faith in the father of the faith (Abraham), but also hope. When he laid his son, Isaac on that altar and took the knife in hand, he did so in the hope of the resurrection from the dead, as we read that "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19). Abraham was certain of God's promises and thus his unfailing hope. The umbilical cord to Abraham for Christians is not severed, as Galatians 3:29 asserts that "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." God's confirmation of his promises to Abraham by his own oath is carried over to us today who believe and hope in Christ. Just like Abraham, we are also led to believe and to accept God's promises, and in them our hope.

A Biblical perspective of hope

Since, religious activity has been positively related to hope and optimism (Koenig 2007; Ider and Kasl 1997), elucidating on Biblical hope is the intent of this article. Using the lens of Snyder's Hope theory, I attempt to posit the notion of Biblical hope that perhaps might appear contrary, yet at times similar to the former. Juxtaposing a secular model of hope such as Snyder's in articulating a perspective that is rooted in a religion, such as Christianity, may offer insights into how Christian believers view and live hopeful lives. With absolute Biblical conviction, the central figure of Christian hope is Jesus Christ. Hebrews 6:18 refers to "...the hope that is offered to us", that is Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2). Christians have much to rejoice as their hope is based on certainty, like that of their forefather, Abraham. The assertion here is that hope is one of absolute assurance. Secular theories of hope including that of Snyder's cannot offer the same assurance. In fact, Snyder postulates in his framework that goals involving hope fall somewhere between an impossibility and a sure thing. So there is no such sure thing in his theoretical positioning for individuals to secure hope.

Scriptural passages have been crystal clear for where our hope lies. For example, John 3:16 tells us "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life". This hope in Christ stems from God's promises that as believers we will be raised from the dead and have eternal life. In John 5:24, Jesus promised, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned;

he has crossed over from death to life". Our hope that is greatly encouraged lies in Jesus, "an inheritance that can't perish, spoil, or fade - kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1: 4). For Christians, hope is a mode of being, in which the eternal life in Christ is anticipated in the present. So yes, this state of hope in Biblical theology echoes a motivational element that Snyder expressed in his theory. Moreover, Christian hope is not mere goal-attainment. It refers to the attainment of hope for the specific love of the Trinity- the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, which is not static. Rather it drives the believer towards a hope-filled future that is beyond their journey in this physical world. The inheritance that 1 Peter 1:4 expresses is hope eternal in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, for Christians hope is ubiquitous, irrespective of time and space. It reflects the historical past, anticipation in the present and for the future.

Notably for me, conceptions of agency and pathways central to Snyder's postulations is one and the same in Biblical hope. Scriptural or Biblical positioning reiterates in Roman 5:1-2 that God through Jesus Christ is the agency and the pathway to a hope-filled life. Arguably then, the notion of personal agency or control stressed by Snyder is also contested as Christians are driven to look to God for hope. The scriptural position, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is (Jeremiah 17:7, King James Version) attests to God as the external agency. This flaw in Snyder's model is also observed by Tong et al. (2010) who argued that this theory is not as heuristic as it appears to be, especially in situations where there is little personal control. Overemphasis on the individual and personal control is one of the hallmarks of the discipline of psychology itself to which the model of hope also subscribes to. Perhaps in the secularization of the subject, human beings have been presented as self contained entities, where too much is always expected of them.

Further, Hebrews 6:19-20 (New International Version) states, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek". This passage symbolizes Christ as the hope and anchor that is firm and secure for our souls as we are tossed in the watery seas and storms in our lives. As a high priest, Christ secures our place in God's presence for eternity. The central tenet of hope as a marker of resurrection after death in Christianity is also a departure from Snyder's perception that hope is vested in the individual. The Christian understanding of hope transcends the bodily state for the much-needed salvation of human souls too. Hence, a transcendent nature of hope is characteristic in Biblical theology that is absent in Snyder's secular hope.

The social element of hope that I witnessed among Church congregant members who represent collectively the body of Christ connote that salvation is not merely personal, but corporate, and extends even beyond to the entire human believing world. This social element has been neglected by Snyder's theory and critics (for example, Aspinwall and Leaf 2002) have alleged that the model focused only on personal agency ignoring the social contexts. This shortcoming of Snyder's outlook

pertains even for the most part to the discipline of psychology, where individuals are decontextualized, and too much focus placed on the individual without historical and social mooring. Hope for Biblical believers is also instilled, sustained and nurtured by the church community which plays an important social role.

Further, the cognitive element present in Snyder's concept of hope is also evident in Biblical hope. Christians are encouraged to renew their minds in keeping with their hope. For me, this is a valid point of intersection between Biblical and Snyder's concept of psychological hope. I believe that Snyder's emphasis on both the affective and cognitive elements of hope parallels that of the Christian notion of hope that encompasses the same. However, the contention is that in Snyder's account, emotions serve only as cognitive highlighters (Stobart 2012) to the cultivation of pathway thinking and agency thinking of hope. The social moorings of emotions that can act as a bridge between the individual and society (Averill & Nunley 1992) is exemplified in the emotionally charged Christian congregant practices of worship, intercessions, missions, fellowship, etc.

Another parallel seen in the two perspectives is the motivational nature of hope. Christians view hope as more than just mere experience. Rather, it is a confident expectation that change can and will occur in their lives. This aligns closely to Snyder's theoretical outlook of hope as a positive motivational state. However, it would be prudent to emphasize here that Christian hope is theocentric and descends from above, while Snyder's "willpower and waypower" appear to be anthropocentric and emanates from within. Christian hope by definition needs a transcendent point of reference, not so with most secular conceptions of hope

Thus, this paper is my attempt to encapsulate a Biblical or Christian perspective of hope that is centered on scripture content. Though I have used Snyder's model of hope to glean insights into the notion of hope touched on in Biblical scripture, the reflections are largely personal.

Concluding comments

In our present world of change, speed and uncertainty, we need hope as the anchor of our lives. Typical of human beings, we fear. And we forget that we have hope especially in a higher power. The Biblical or theological stance on hope is unfettered and premised basically on one's belief in a higher power. Snyder's postulations serve to explain to a certain extent, even for believers, the importance of willpower and waypower in the makeup of goal-driven hope. However, since the nature of hope is prescribed by a higher power or God, the combination of individual agency and pathways is limited. Rather, pathways are more in terms of grace and agency in terms of spirit. Further, the emotional component of hope stressed on by Snyder is also evident in congregant practices such as worship, intercessions, confessions, missions, etc. Thus, this paper attempts to bridge psychological conceptions with scriptural passages on hope that perhaps may complement, and thereby build on the well being of human beings in their everyday struggles.

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