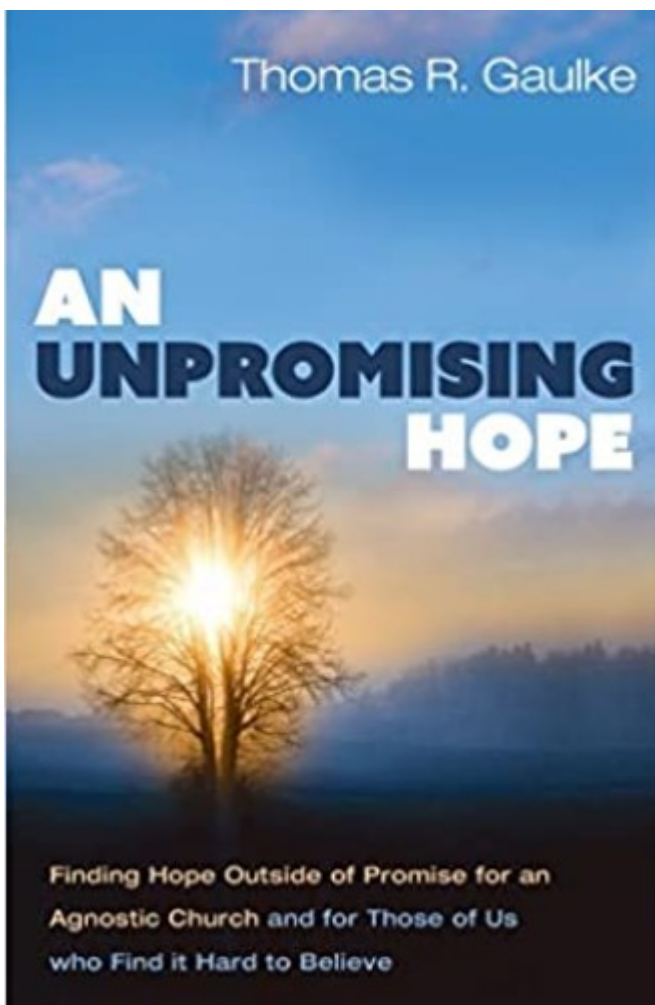


Hope without promise?

Thomas Gaulke constructs a “belief-fluid” theology of hope.

by [Clint Schnekloth](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue

In Review



An Unpromising Hope

Finding Hope Outside of Promise for an Agnostic Church and for Those of Us Who Find It Hard to Believe

By Thomas R. Gaulke

Pickwick Publications

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So much of 21st-century theology is still coming to terms with the legacy of Jürgen Moltmann. His influential works, most famously *Theology of Hope* and *The Crucified God*, transformed much of the theological landscape of the 20th century.

Moltmann's work on hope was influenced in large part by the Jewish philosopher Ernst Bloch. Which is to say, Moltmann developed a Christian theology of hope out of a secular Jewish Marxist philosophy of hope. One could argue that Thomas Gaulke's book is an essay on fixing the supersessionism of Moltmann's approach—while simultaneously deepening and enriching the global and ecumenical scope of his influence. In this way, Gaulke responds to the spirit even more than the effect of Moltmann's work.

Gaulke's task in *An Unpromising Hope* is rather fascinating. He is asking whether we can think about two complex theological terms, *promise* and *hope*, as riding alongside each other in such a way that we can establish a secular theology of hope that does not rely on Christian promise. (Gaulke defines the latter as a guarantee of a future reign of God, which is given or passed down to us.)

Can we speak theologically of hope completely within what Charles Taylor calls an immanent frame? This is Gaulke's question. He wishes to speak of hope as a dream emerging within and out of community, a foretaste of what is to come from which that community serves up its own aperitifs, whetting its own appetite for an as yet uncertain hoped-for future, inspiring a homesickness for a home already sketched out but only partially assembled.

So Gaulke commits in this book to finding hope apart from promise. In doing so, he brings together two major concepts in Christian theology, each emerging out of different strands of Protestant thought.

In Lutheranism, Gaulke's home tradition, theologians have frequently thought of the gospel in terms of promise, even the gospel as promise. Because Gaulke

insufficiently references crucial theologians of promise in Lutheran thought such as Oswald Bayer, I think this is the weaker part of his book, as he has an inadequately robust (and thus excessively negative) definition of promise.

In the second strand, Moltmann's ecumenical (but still Reformed) Protestantism, Gaulke mines the broad global network of theologians influenced by Moltmann who have committed to theologies of hope. On the hope side of the equation, Gaulke serves up a rich feast.

As I began rereading Gaulke's book in order to write this review, I kept asking myself, "What does he believe promise *is* or *means*?" The exploration of the concept of promise in another book by a Lutheran theologian, Gregory Walter's *Being Promised*, kept coming to my mind, especially since Gaulke posits a connection between belief and hope. Walter writes, "God's promise repeats with and beyond this ancient scripture, credible or not, wonderful beyond measure but hidden, masked, and mixed with the lowly and ordinary. *If impossible, this promise is God's. If incredible, promise engenders belief beyond belief, if there is a promise worthy of the name.*"

Compare this to Gaulke's assertion, midway into his book, that

hope feeds hope. Our hopes are fed, not dictated, by surplus hopes and dreams. Freed from promise, we need not conform, but, rather, create. The iconoclastic impulse: it is perhaps time to turn this impulse toward the promise. Freed from its restrictive confines, we might find hope anew: a hope without a promise, an unpromising hope. Freed from the confines of promise, we might taste the hungry hopes all around us.

This passage contains what is most fascinating and simultaneously most puzzling about Gaulke's book. On the hope side, we discover hope as fed by the hungry hopes all around us. That thesis, which he illustrates by reading a wide set of liberationists, womanist theologians, and spatialized eschatologies, is attractive and compelling.

On the other hand, to claim as Gaulke does that promise restricts or confines, that promise dictates, is a misunderstanding of promise itself. Gaulke unnecessarily ascribes something to promise that is really more like a guarantee. As a speech act, promise is more tenuous than that. This leads to Gaulke setting in opposition two

terms that could have complete synergy.

Yet this false opposition funds creative insights anyway. To be true to Gaulke's own aesthetics, guided as they are by the idea that music is one of the great carriers of surplus, we might say that Gaulke *punks* promise. He fails in one part of the lyrics, but this makes his proposal concerning the attractiveness of weak forms of hope somehow all the more compelling.

This leaves me wondering: Is there a promise beyond promise, the way there is hope beyond hope and apparently belief beyond belief? As Walter Benjamin remarks, "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope."

Over the course of the book, Gaulke offers multiple ways into considering the manner in which hope is a weak force—one that inspires people in community without guaranteeing that what is hoped for will come to fruition. As one excellent example, Gaulke notes that Ernst Bloch declared, "Our heritage is the Peasants' Revolt!" Historians are aware that the Peasants' Revolt did not succeed in winning its demands, and it was in fact violently suppressed. Nevertheless, for Gaulke, Bloch "looks back not to go back or be 'great again,' but, rather, in order to hope and dream as the peasants hoped and dreamt, even as we hope and dream anew."

Through much of the book, Gaulke riffs on concepts present in the works of the Brazilian theologian and poet Rubem Alves, particularly through the somewhat untranslatable Portuguese term *saudade* (loosely, "nostalgia"). Alves juxtaposes two possible shapes for hope: messianic humanism and humanistic messianism. The first understands humans as their own messiah; the second understands God as a humanist. Here we see the continuation of the concept, present in Bloch, of the surplus value of the immanent itself. Humans are both themselves and more than themselves. Or God is God while also a humanist.

In a later chapter, *the Holler*—womanist theologian A. Elaine Brown Crawford's term for primal cries of pain, abuse, and separation—functions as a wellspring of hope. And in the concluding chapter, hope appears in Vitor Westhelle's utilization of the Greek term *chora*, a space of opening, listening, attentiveness, and readiness to receive. In Westhelle's reading, the *chōra*, the empty space, is tenuous because to move from it requires a crossing the likes of which can't be guaranteed, not unlike the movement of Abraham and Sarah, who set out from Chaldea not knowing the way they were going or where they would arrive.

I find myself at the end of this book somewhat mystified about the distinction Gaulke would draw between what he calls “unpromising hope” and what I would call “faith.” And yet, somehow, in reading this book I feel freer and more interested in faith than previously, so perhaps in spite of the terminological puzzlement Gaulke has accomplished something momentous.

After all, he coins a term, *belief-fluid*, that might help those of us who talk about faith in secular contexts do so in ways that do not supersede other forms of belief and nonbelief, but rather come alongside them communally. As Gaulke asserts late in the book, in a lovely turn of phrase, “hope is to be sipped from wherever it is found.”