



Hope as Religious Heritage: Toward Hopeful Coalitions for Sustainable Development

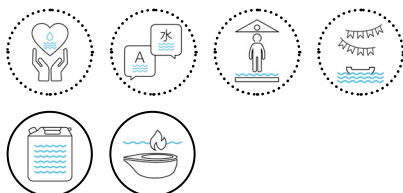
Jan Jorrit Hasselaar

Amsterdam Center for Religion and Sustainable Development, Vrije Universiteit

The effects of climate change can evoke fear and a sense of apocalypse. Invoking the apocalypse in discourse about the future, however, can lead to denial or fatalism. This article considers the concept of hope as an attitude and ritual practice that defies the dichotomy between secular and religious. Practicing hope, trust and empathy can stimulate dialogue and cooperation around climate change and upcoming water challenges. The article discusses a case study of a learning exchange between South Africa and the Netherlands on hope regarding climate change and water.



KEY THEMES



Introduction

“How should one respond to climate change? Tata?” asks Irene. In this case, Tata (Polish for father) is the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and he answers his daughter by stating that it is wrong to divide the world into optimists and pessimists. He says that there is a third possibility: a hopeful response to climate change (van Rootselaar 2014). Bauman’s remark merits close attention. In the view of the cultural critic Terry Eagleton, hope “has been a curiously neglected notion in an age which, in Raymond Williams’s words, confronts us with ‘the felt loss of a future’” (Eagleton 2015, xi). Nevertheless, recently, Femke Halsema, the mayor of Amsterdam, and Geordin Hill-Lewis, the mayor of Cape Town, referred to the importance of hope when it comes to the challenging issues in their cities and the future of society (Halsema 2020, 123). In this article I argue that religious heritage can offer guidance for all involved, both secular and religious, as they seek to respond to water issues in times of climate change. No one saw it coming, but suddenly it was there, climate change, expressed in a three-year drought with a 2018 peak in Cape Town, South Africa. In 2018, the Netherlands experienced a serious drought also, but it was nothing compared to the drought of the summer of 2022. On 3 September 2022, the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* presented a survey indicating that fear of the consequences of climate change has grown among the Dutch as a result of the 2022 drought. The survey also indicated concerns about the future. More than six in ten people with (grand)children fear that the world will become less livable for their descendants (Bijlo 2022, 1). The survey is in accordance with the insight that environmental issues like climate change often evoke fear, polarization and a sense of apocalypse about a radical uncertain future (Bruckner 2013, 2).

Water in times of climate change – as described in terms of sea-level rise, changing rainwater patterns, consequent flooding and drought – is often surrounded by an atmosphere of fear and apocalypse. It reminds us of the universal flood narrative in our religious heritage of which the Hebrew version can be found in *Genesis* (chapters 6–9). It may evoke a politics of apocalypse of which we can also find versions in the *Book of Daniel* (Hebrew Bible) and the *Book of Revelation* (New Testament). It is a kind of politics often found in the way climate change is presented in novels such as *Dry* (2018) and *The End of the Ocean* (2020) and movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *Don’t Look Up* (2021).

These novels and movies with their apocalyptic images can help to signal a rupture, but they can also easily lead to denial, paralysis and fatalism regarding climate change. Therefore, one can wonder whether storytelling should be left to novelists, filmmakers and poets. There is more than one way of interpreting a radical uncertain future. Water in times of climate change does not carry with it its own interpretation. How, then, do we tell the story?

The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum highlights hope as the opposite of fear (Nussbaum 2018, 211). But she also indicates that philosophers haven’t discussed hope extensively (Nussbaum 2018, 202). Where can we find sources for hope?

Maybe surprisingly, it is religious heritage that provides and articulates a profound understanding of hope that goes beyond the Western distinction of secular and religious. A global leading thinker here is the late Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020), British intellectual and former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. Sacks’ understanding of hope is derived from religious

heritage, the narrative of the Exodus. This narrative is not only part of the religious heritage of Judaism, but also that of Islam and Christianity. What is more, in the view of Sacks, this narrative is the meta-narrative of hope of Western civilization. The reason for this is that in Western societies for generations people have used this narrative to create perspective in dark times. It was, for example, Dr Martin Luther King Jr who said: "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream" (King 1963). In formulating his dream, King was inspired by words from the Exodus.

Hope as religious heritage is not simply copying truths of generations before us. Hope needs to be born again in every time and generation by interpreting and living sensitively and creatively the assumptions highlighted in the Exodus. Only then can religious heritage enrich and deepen contemporary times and questions. Some key principles are change of identity and empathy (*chessed* in Hebrew). Identity is seen as the images people live by – images of themselves, others and the world. Some identities may have been useful in the past, but that does not mean that they are still useful when it comes to water in times of climate change. The Exodus highlights a journey in which people gradually learn to change the identity they live by. In the first part of the journey, the people have hardly any understanding of what is going on, because their identity is still defined by their past. In the second part of the journey, the people gradually change that identity by themselves. The new identity is based on a shared vision of the future that creates space for all involved. This change of identity takes time, because it is impossible to suddenly change the images people live by. An example here would be the director of an environmental NGO and the CEO of an oil compa-

ny creating meaning by learning together how to take responsibility for a shared future.

The driving force of this transformation is empathy, a certain type of love. This driving force calls for an opening up of one's identity and learning to see oneself and the other, especially the one not like me, as valuable in themselves, regardless of merits or use for others. Empathy does not seek the affirmation of one specific position. Plurality is of crucial importance for opening up identities that may have been useful in the past but are not useful anymore. Hope then is not the conviction that today will be better than tomorrow. Hope is also not found in a faraway utopia, a promised land. Hope is found in the land of the promise. In the present, parties even with conflicting interests can decide to exchange a promise to learn together how to create responsibility for a shared future.

This understanding of hope is anything but a naïve invitation to a better world. During the journey, the motivation to learn how to create space for oneself and the other (empathy) is constantly in danger of being undermined by the status quo, pure self-interest, fear, doubt, misunderstanding, opportunistic behavior, false turns and so on. Therefore, this motivation can never be taken for granted. It can develop and degrade. In order not to lose one's way in times of transition, Sacks' concept of hope raises questions about how to shape the process of the transformation. What kind of architecture is required to stimulate hope in the midst of reality?

Hope does not only raise such questions, but provides at least two creative answers, namely a covenant and a workplace of hope. Briefly, a covenant is an argumentative association; it does not seek the affirmation of one position but stimulates opposition as a way to open the

identities of those involved in order to create a new and common identity: “In the short term, our desires and needs may clash; but the very realization that difference is a source of blessing leads us to seek mediation, conflict resolution, conciliation and peace – the peace that is predicated on diversity, not on uniformity” (Sacks 2011, 203).

Second, entering into a covenant does not mean that everybody agrees with one another. The covenant is an argumentative association in which the dignity of difference is valued. The differences between people are essential for opening up one’s own identity in order to be able to create a new “we.” Key to Sacks’ understanding of hope is what I have called a “workplace of hope” (Hasselaar 2023, 121). This workplace goes beyond a simple dualism between secular and religious, because it is a ritual to stimulate hopeful cooperation between all involved, because responses to water in times of climate change are never immune to setbacks like difficulties, disappointing summits, opportunistic behavior, feelings of fear, futility or skepticism. A workplace of hope recognizes all of this, but does not surrender to it and facilitates taking small steps forward together based on four dimensions (Hasselaar 2020, 233–34):

Utopia now

a regular moment that celebrates a new “we” that parties may barely glimpse in the present.

Neutral space

a neutral space in the public domain that values differences among the participants, because it is only the experience of sharing a common world with others who look at it from different perspectives that can make people aware of their own identity and open them up to the possibility of developing a

new and common identity.

Catalyst of empathy/love

A workplace of hope stimulates practices and, by doing so, protects and strengthens relations of empathy that seek to include the well-being of the other, especially those still excluded, as well as one’s own self-interests.

Embodied knowledge

it stimulates the development of meaningful relations between subjects, not only via reflection and practical steps forward, but also via the power of music, poetry, eating together and imagination.

But hope does not live in abstractions. Hope needs to feed on particulars. In 2019, the international symposium *Water in Times of Climate Change: A Values-driven Dialogue*, was organized by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, so-called “Green Patriarch” (Chrysavgis 2015, 12). Focusing on the urban areas of Jakarta, Cape Town and Amsterdam, the symposium aimed to deepen scientific, economic and political approaches by tapping into the richness of cultural and spiritual values to foster societal resilience. To strengthen cooperation between these approaches and between the three cities, the silver “Chalice of Cooperation” (in Dutch: *Hensbeker*) dating back to 1717 and used by water authorities as a symbol to confirm agreements for the greater good, now often preserved in a museum - was reinvented. In the words of Gerhard van den Top, chairman of the Waternet Amsterdam Regional Water Authority: “The old crests of the historic water districts that were engraved in the original silver chalice were replaced by an image of the world. This image of our globe represents cooperation on water issues between cities and utilities worldwide in times of climate

change, and between the ‘worlds’ of science, economy, politics and religion. The image was printed on a reusable ‘Dopper’ bottle, to inspire stakeholders to also choose reusable over single-use water bottles” (Van den Top 2021, 126–27). The old-new chalice was used to support hopeful concrete steps by new coalitions between cities and disciplines.

Let me mention one more concrete step. On 24 November 2022, an agreement was signed for the Blue Deal South Africa Phase 2, which runs from 2023 to 2030. Part of this agreement is a project that aims to decrease the impact of the diffuse pollution of water upstream in Theewaterskloof municipality, part of the catchment area of Cape Town. In this project, concepts like community enrollment, Indaba and the politics of hope are piloted to stimulate and deepen co-design and ownership by all parties involved. Indaba is a model of community building derived from South African traditions, and related, but not limited to Sacks’ understanding of hope. As Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, successor of Desmond Tutu, puts it: “God understands isiZulu too” (Makgoba 2019, 226). This pilot will be part of an equal learning exchange between South Africa and the Netherlands, in which concepts from both sides are explored and used to practice hope, trust and empathy to stimulate cooperation around climate change and upcoming water challenges.

I have argued that our religious heritage highlights hope as a third and inclusive way, besides pessimism and optimism, to respond to climate change and water challenges. Such an understanding of hope is neither abstract nor far away. It is just beyond where we are. The only thing we have to do is to respond to its call. To put it in the words of Amanda Gorman’s poem, recited at the inauguration of Joe Biden on 20 January 2021:

For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it, if only we’re brave enough to be it.

That we all may become beacons of hope.

Acknowledgment

This contribution was peer-reviewed. It was edited by members of the editorial team of the UNESCO Chair Water, Ports and Historic Cities: Carola Hein and Hilde Sennema.

References

- Bijlo, Esther. 2022. "Extreme Summer Increases Climate Anxiety, but invites Sustainable Action." *Trouw*, 3 September, 2022. <https://www.trouw.nl/duurzaamheid-economie/extreme-zomer-vergroot-klimaatangst-maar-nodigt-ook-uit-tot-duurzame-actie~b-2801fe9/> (in Dutch).
- Bruckner, Pascal. 2013. *The Fanaticism of the Apocalypse: Save the Earth, Punish Human Beings*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chryssavgis, John. 2015. "The Green Patriarch: Eumenical Patriarch Bartholomew." In *An Ongoing Conversation: The Green Patriarch in the Netherlands*, edited by Jan J. Hasselaar and Peter B. Smit. Amersfoort: Oud-Katholiek Boekhuis.
- Eagleton, Terry. 2015. *Hope without Optimism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Gorman, Amanda. 2021. *The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country*. New York: Viking Books for Young Readers.
- Hasselaar, Jan J. 2020. "Hope in the Context of Climate Change: Jonathan Sacks' Interpretation of the Exodus and Radical Uncertainty." *International Journal of Public Theology* 14: 224–40.
- Hasselaar, Jan J. 2023. *Climate Change, Radical Uncertainty and Hope: Theology and Economics in Conversation*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2018. *The Monarchy of Fear*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halsema, Femke. 2020. "Closing Word." In *After the quarantine*, edited by Alexander R. Kan. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans. (in Dutch)
- King Jr., Martin L. 1963. "I have a Dream." In *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Makgoba, Thabo. 2019. *Faith & Courage. Praying with Mandela*. Ohio: Forward Movement.
- Rootselaar, Florentijn van. 2014. "Man Cannot Think Globally." *Trouw*, 15 February, 2014. <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/de-mens-kan-niet-wereldwijd-denken~b1d47b61/>
- Sacks, Jonathan. 2011. *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. London: Continuum.
- Top, van den, Gerhard. 2021. "Reflection." In *Water in Times of Climate Change: A Values Driven Dialogue*, edited by Jan J. Hasselaar and Elisabeth C. IJmker. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.



Jan Jorrit Hasselaar, theologian and economist, is director of the Amsterdam Center for Religion and Sustainable Development, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He is a research fellow of the University of the Western Cape (South Africa). Jan Jorrit chaired the working group “Sustainable Development” of the Dutch Council of Churches (2011–2019). From 2009 until 2011 he served as policy advisor of a federation of trade unions. In that position he was a member of the committee on sustainability of the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER).

Contact: j.j.hasselaar@vu.nl