

A SENSE OF THE TRAGIC IN A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF FREEDOM

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For many Christian theologians and non-Christian theorists about Christianity, tragedy has no serious place in a Christian conception of the world; at best, tragedy is an episode overcome by the triumph of resurrection. Drawing on Karl Rahner's theology of freedom, this article argues that including a sense of the tragic in a Christian conception of the world can both undermine a saccharine theology immune to the threats of contingent history and, paradoxically, be a means of reengaging a Christian theology of hope, understood as commitment to the world.

IS THERE SUCH A PHENOMENON AS “Christian tragedy”? Much thought and energy has gone into trying to answer this question. The debate forms itself around two types of questions: esthetic or literary and those regarding tragic sensibility. The former is concerned with whether particular works of art, or entire genres, usually literary (poems, plays, novels, etc.), can properly be called both “Christian” and “tragic.” Can, for example, Dostoevsky’s *The Brother’s Karamazov* or Shakespeare’s *King Lear* really convey a Christian spirit while at the same time being categorized as a tragedy, or does one of the characteristics rule out the other? In other words, the first form of the debate is concerned with an esthetic form called “tragedy,” as opposed to other forms like comedy, romance, or epic. While this is an important dimension of understanding what “tragedy” is and therefore what, if anything, “Christian tragedy” is, my concern here is not directly with the literary/esthetic debate.

The other form the debate asks: does the Christian narrative as a whole convey a tragic sensibility? Is there, indeed, *any* room for a tragic sensibility in a Christian conception of the world? One might frame this question not by asking whether Christian tragedies exist (as esthetic forms), but

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whether Christianity itself is compatible with “the tragic” and, if so, how. This form of the question is decidedly theological. The answer to it lies in wrestling with the questions that define Christianity—who is God? who are humans? how and from what are humans saved? what is the purpose of human life? It is at the theological level that I want to enter into the discussion, affirmatively answering the question of whether the tragic exists within a Christian conception of the world and gesturing toward why preserving room for a tragic sensibility in Christianity is theologically worthwhile.

THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

A small minority in the debate insists both that Christian works of art can be tragic and that a tragic sensibility is not foreign to Christian theology. The majority of Christians, however, agree that Christianity, while it may have much to say about sin, evil, and sorrow, has no room for tragedy except to surpass or to transform it. George Steiner calls Christianity “an anti-tragic vision of the world. . . . Christianity offers to man an assurance of final certitude and repose in God. . . . Being a threshold to the eternal, the death of a Christian hero can be an occasion for sorrow but not for tragedy.”¹ Even the sorrow that comes with guilt from sin, Steiner argues, is not itself tragic, because in Christ there is always the possibility of forgiveness, and therefore at most there is “only partial or episodic [Christian] tragedy.”² Karl Jaspers argues similarly that for the Christian guilt “becomes *felix culpa*, the ‘happy fault’—the guilt without which no salvation is possible.”³ Redemption offered in Christ transforms the possible tragedy of sin into hope. For those who champion a view of the tragic in Christianity, Christ’s death itself is often offered as the defining example—the “hero” of the story expresses abandonment by God and dies a shameful death.⁴ But, the rejoinder goes, this death is not final, and the “heart” of Christianity expresses God’s ultimate triumph over sin and death in Christ’s resurrection. In Reinhold Niebuhr’s succinct phrase: “The cross is not tragic but the resolution of tragedy.”⁵

¹ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1963) 331–32.

² *Ibid.* 332.

³ Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy Is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1969) 38.

⁴ For two such interpretations, see Albert Camus, “On the Future of Tragedy,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Knopf, 1968); and Roger L. Cox, *Between Earth and Heaven: Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and the Meaning of Christian Tragedy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1969).

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937) 155.

All theological rejections of the tragic depend on similar conceptions of tragedy and Christianity. Though few critics define tragedy with precision, in their refutation of its place in Christianity they tend to assign tragedy similar features: a sense of struggling against fate, the awareness that good does not always triumph over evil or that even in doing good one may inadvertently do evil, and an overwhelming sense of sorrow at unjust human suffering, with no final redemption offered to transform or resolve the suffering. A tragic view of the world is one in which things do not work out well in the end, even, or especially, for “good” people. Coupled with this understanding of tragedy is the understanding of theology as telling the story of the world from the point of view of God’s gracious action toward it. In such a story, which culminates in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, it is impossible to say that things will not work out well, that God has not ultimately and irrevocably redeemed the greatest sufferings of human life, namely sin (with attendant guilt) and death. That sorrow and suffering still remain does not undermine the central Christian belief and hope that God will reconcile all things finally and justly.

As noted above, a few voices advocate for the tragic within Christianity, and these voices may be growing louder and more insistent. Some theologians writing in the second half of the 20th century have grown dissatisfied with a Christian story that jumps too quickly to a happy ending or that promises escape from the threats of human history. If Christ’s resurrection guarantees a triumphant conclusion to God’s cosmic drama, these theologians refocus our attention on the fact that the resurrected Christ was and will remain the crucified one.⁶ Some go further than emphasizing the historical crucifixion as a locus for theological reflection on human suffering and insist that the crucifixion reveals suffering in the life of the Godhead.⁷ Far from being a “comedy”

⁶ See, among others: Orlando Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1983); Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972).

⁷ For some of the most insightful theological treatments of this topic, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols., trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–1962) 4:3.2; Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns from the 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1968); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aiden Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990).

swiftly unfolding to a jubilant end, the Christian story tells of God's self-emptying, self-immolation, and self-abandonment. As Hans Urs von Balthasar, reflecting on the mystery of Easter, has written, "Christ's redemption of [human]kind had its decisive completion not, strictly speaking, with the Incarnation or in the continuity of his mortal life, but in the hiatus of death."⁸ This hiatus—exemplified in Holy Saturday—is a unique, "second death" suffered by Christ "outside the world ordained by God from the beginning." This second death is the "'realisation' of all Godlessness," "the taking on of all the sins of the world," and the "descent into Hell."⁹ In the profound depths of the emptiness and abandonment experienced by Christ, we see that "it is really God who assumes what is radically contrary to the divine, what is eternally reprobated by God."¹⁰ If all things are restored in the end, it is only after, and indeed because of, great suffering in God's very self. According to this theological position, the ultimate tragedy—the abandonment to Godlessness—is freely taken into the life of the triune God, and therefore becomes part of the cosmic drama.

Grounding the tragic potential of Christianity in the suffering of God is, to paint with very broad strokes, akin to the position of those who are not inclined to accept a role for the tragic in Christianity: for the latter, Christianity is antitragic because things are guaranteed by God to "work out." For the former, the pathos of tragedy infuses Christianity because the final possibility of things not working out in their most absolute and terrifying sense is absorbed into the very life of God. In the end, however, even most of the theologians who emphasize the suffering of God agree with the antitragedians: in the resurrection, and especially in the hope of the final consummation, God's redemptive love prevails. Balthasar is emphatic on this point: "the Cross and burial of Christ reveal their significance only in the light of the event of Easter, without which there is no Christian faith."¹¹ Christ's unique experience of second death is, in fact, a substitution, whereby Christ spares the dead "the integral experience of death (as the *poena damni*), so that a heavenly shimmer of light, of faith, love, hope has ever illuminated the 'abyss'" by taking "that whole experience upon himself."¹² While it certainly matters to one's understanding of theology whether and how God suffers in the death of Christ, perhaps there is finally no Christian way to tell the story of God's redemptive and gracious love for the world as a tragedy, nor any compelling reason to try to do so. From the perspective of God's cosmic drama, the despair that things will

⁸ Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* 13.

⁹ *Ibid.* 52, 51, 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 189.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 52.

¹² *Ibid.* 168.

not work out is conquered by the hope of God's grace and the depths of God's love.¹³

On the grounds of God's action toward the world, it is difficult to locate a tragic sensibility within Christianity. But these are not the only grounds on which the conversation can take place. A tragic sensibility may exist within, and even be fostered by, a tradition of meaning that believes that things ultimately, or at least overall, "work out." This goes beyond simply acknowledging that Christians can rename sorrow and suffering as "tragedy" without fully displacing the Christian vision of God's loving triumph over sin, death, and despair. Rather, I suggest that a tragic sensibility can exist side by side with a hopeful sensibility, and that both of these sensibilities can be nurtured in a theology of freedom. While Christian theology does tell the story of God's gracious love and redemption of humanity, it also tells the story of the finite and concrete human lives that either accept or reject that love.

To explore the theology of this human response in a theology of freedom—and the tragic and hopeful sensibilities buried within it—I will draw heavily on the theology of Karl Rahner, who, I believe, understood better than most how the tragic exists within a Christian understanding of the world. Rahner's understanding of each person's radical freedom to say yes or no to God through the concrete particulars of life is an exquisite expression of the tragic sensibility at the heart of Christian theology. This freedom expressed in concrete choices is also, perhaps paradoxically, where the Christian's deepest hope is born. In this sense, the tragic within Christianity is a prelude to hope, or to the enshadowed possibility behind hope. Neither the tragic nor the hopeful sense completely overcomes or surpasses the other in this life, though we are both allowed and urged to hope that hope will prevail.

While my project in this article differs in many aspects from that of theologians who emphasize God's suffering, I share their dissatisfaction with a spirituality that focuses too exclusively on "the happy end." Not only does such a vision of the world abstract too quickly from horror and suffering in human history, but it also ignores the very real problem of making sense of the suffering of the cross as a site of redemption. Refusing the simple, antitragic characterization of Christianity is one way to insist that Christianity can take suffering and loss seriously, without always or too easily reverting to promises of eternal recompense.

¹³ Continuing to draw on theatrical terms, perhaps the story of God's suffering in Christ could be categorized as a "black comedy"—a story that walks up to the very edge of tragedy but does not succumb to its bleak ending. I am indebted to Shannon Craigo-Snell for this suggestion.

Rather than focus here on what mysteriously transpires in the life of God during the dark “nontime” of Holy Saturday,¹⁴ I want to focus on what transpires in the mystery of human freedom as we experience it in the time of our own histories. The tragic sensibility fostered in a theology of freedom might be described as a theology of “living in Holy Saturday,” where the dark possibility of a tragic end to one’s own story and even the cosmic story is not too quickly passed over. Of course, as characters in a larger Christian story, our experience now can never be the same as the first disciples’ experience of Holy Saturday. In the same way that the overarching narrative of God’s action cannot be fundamentally tragic, neither can the tragic sensibility in Christianity exist without the virtue of hope grounded in Christ’s resurrection. However, I want to suggest that the inverse of this statement is also true: that the Christian virtue of hope cannot exist outside a tragic sensibility.

How the tragic sensibility relates to the Christian virtue of hope I will discuss in more depth at the end of this article; here I preface that discussion by explaining what I mean by “sensibility,” for it is as a sensibility that the tragic fosters hope. “Sensibility” might most simply be defined as the capacity to feel or perceive—a use illustrated in Jane Austen’s famous juxtaposition of two sisters, one all common sense and reason, one all sensibility. The *American Heritage Dictionary* expands this meaning as “mental or emotional responsiveness toward something.”¹⁵ While the latter meaning approaches what I have in mind, I want to strengthen it by emphasizing the shaped or formed quality that pervades the term as I will use it. More than the overflow of spontaneous emotion, a “sensibility” might be imagined as a well-worn groove through which emotions flow. Not merely the heightened capacity to feel in general, a “sensibility” is more like a disposition, a formed capacity to feel or respond in particular. The tragic sensibility in Christianity, then, might be defined as formed emotional responsiveness toward the possibility of tragedy, a possibility made available through human freedom realized in the concrete particulars of historical existence. A tragic sensibility, as an inner disposition, can exist within a larger narrative that cannot properly be considered a tragedy. By a tragic “sense” to Christianity, I mean the discernment or recognition within Christianity’s self-understanding of the tragic sensibility’s existence. Cultivating this mental and emotional responsiveness is, I argue below, a means of fostering the Christian virtue of hope, but first

¹⁴ Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* 50.

¹⁵ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sensibility> (accessed October 6, 2008), s.v. “sensibility.” See also Dictionary.com.

I will explain more fully how the tragic sensibility is grounded in a theology of freedom.

Before turning to Rahner's theology and my own explication of the tragic sense within it, I will briefly engage Martha Nussbaum's work of reinvigorating, and to a degree reinventing, the tragic in relationship to Aristotelian ethics. While much in her vision of tragedy is incompatible with a Christian view as I hope to present it, her belief that a tragic sensibility is integral to the practice of ethical living more generally and need not compromise a larger ethical framework makes her a good conversation partner. Within her explication of Aristotelian ethics, the tragic possibility of life helps us make sense of the concrete, particular situations of our contingent human lives. Despite many important differences, a Christian sense of the tragic works similarly in a Christian framework; I will develop these connections, while highlighting dissimilarities.

TRAGEDY AND THE GOOD LIFE IN NUSSBAUM'S ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS

In *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum probes the relationship between morality and luck, especially as it is considered by different schools of Greek philosophy. She finds two competing visions of human life, sometimes even within the same ancient thinker: on the one hand, human passivity in the face of contingency was something to be abhorred and eliminated as much as possible through the use of reason and right ethical thinking; on the other hand, there "was always a vivid sense of the special beauty of the contingent and the mutable, that love for the riskiness and openness of empirical humanity which finds its expression in recurrent stories about gods who fall in love with mortals."¹⁶ Tragedy as a dramatic form was, according to Nussbaum, one of the main "sites" where this tension was exhibited. The attitude that later thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle expressed toward tragedy is an indication of how thoroughly they hoped to master the contingency of human life through rational philosophy. Nussbaum uses the ancient Greek sources to make a contemporary point: tragedy trains our emotional responses to contingency; rather than debilitate our ethical agency, correct emotional responsiveness becomes part of the ethical life.

At their most basic level, tragic dramas depict situations in which things do not work out well in the end—bad things happen to good people through forces they cannot control. Nussbaum thinks that tragedy on this level shows something obviously true about the world but not necessarily

¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University, 1986) 3.

threatening, “since goodness, plainly, can persist unscathed through a change in external fortunes.”¹⁷ Tragedy also shows, more problematically, “good people doing bad things, things otherwise repugnant to their ethical character and commitments, because of circumstances whose origin does not lie with them.”¹⁸ Often mitigating factors allow the audience to reserve casting moral blame on the agents in these situations: these characters may be constrained to act in no other way, or they may be ignorant as to the real state of affairs governing their actions (e.g., Oedipus’s patricide and incest). But there are other situations, the result of “tragic conflict,” in which “we see a wrong action committed without any direct physical compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature, by a person whose ethical character or commitment would otherwise dispose him to reject the act.”¹⁹ In these situations, the agent feels an irresolvable conflict between “two valid ethical claims.”²⁰ In choosing one over the other the agent violates one of the ethical principles he holds dear and is held morally culpable for the wrongdoing he commits, though he may or may not be blameworthy depending on how he reacts to the situation. Exhibiting the proper emotional conflict (e.g., disgust, despair, anger at fate) may allow the agent to distance himself from the deed he willingly performs. A lack of emotional conflict in a character’s inner conscience—or worse, embracing the deed with enthusiasm—renders the agent repulsive and mitigates the degree to which his situation is properly tragic.²¹ The agent’s emotional reaction helps to determine the emotions invoked in the audience, who are led primarily by the chorus’s response to the actor.²² Most importantly for Nussbaum’s analysis, these situations show that the agent is open to the vicissitudes of external forces—she is morally responsible for her choices but cannot control crises of conflict, which crises in turn prevent her from not acting badly no matter which choice she makes. Understood this way, tragedy does not just show that bad things can happen to good people, but that morality itself is not inviolable to contingency.

Plato rejects tragedy, according to Nussbaum, because it asks the audience to feel pity and fear (the two tragic emotions) for people who commit immoral actions by depicting these actions as somehow unavoidable due to the interference of uncontrollable circumstances. Tragedy misunderstands true goodness by portraying it as something open to conflict. The good is singular and unassailable. To know the good truly is to want to do the good; there are not circumstances in which a good person might have to choose against the good on the one hand in order to choose the good on the other. Worse still, tragedy appeals to our emotions, which are false

¹⁷ Ibid. 25.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. 43.

¹⁸ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²² Ibid. 34.

guides to truth, inciting pity where, rationally speaking, there should be none.²³

Aristotle, on the other hand, values tragedy and encourages it as morally educative. Rejecting “the Platonic external ‘god’s eye’ standpoint” of ethics, Aristotle begins his ethical inquiry not with abstract principles but with “the perception of concrete particulars” in complex human lives.²⁴ The goal of ethics, and indeed of all philosophy, is to understand how best to achieve “happiness” (*eudaimonia*). This happiness is not (or not just) a state of being, but rather acting in accordance with virtue over the course of one’s whole life. We cannot achieve *eudaimonia* simply by being good, or even by doing good; we must also achieve a “good life.” A life in which we reap the just rewards of our choices and actions, prosper, and live in harmony with our fellow humans is therefore better than one in which we *are* good but suffer unjustly, fail in our pursuits, or live in strife and disharmony. Such a view of human happiness makes sense of much of human experience, but it also leaves the degree to which we can achieve *eudaimonia* vulnerable to the threat of contingent circumstances: “the world [circumstances outside our control] makes it the case that a person who was good, who was ‘sailing straight’, falls short of *eudaimonia*.”²⁵ Great tragic poetry explores “the gap between our goodness and our good living, between what we are (our character, intentions, aspirations, values) and how humanly well we manage to live.”²⁶ While Aristotle thinks it is possible to persevere in virtue even in the face of adverse circumstances, he also thinks, according to Nussbaum, that this “gap” gives us genuine insight into the project of living the good human life, which is the aim of ethics.

The importance of tragedy for ethics resides in the tragic emotions (pity and fear) incited in the audience watching tragic drama. If it is true that “luck is seriously powerful, that it is possible for a good person to suffer serious and undeserved harm,” then the proper response to witnessing such suffering is pity.²⁷ Pity is “a painful emotion directed towards another person’s pain or suffering” felt when we believe the suffering to be both real and undeserved.²⁸ Merited suffering should not, in Aristotle’s view, invoke pity, but rather a sense of justice. Fear follows pity as an emotion directed toward the self, lest the same catastrophe befall the one watching. Because we realize that the persons affected by tragedy may be responsible for their actions but not for the circumstances that force their decision

²³ This is a radically simplified account of Nussbaum’s reading of Plato in relationship to tragedy. Her much more nuanced reading can be found in *Fragility of Goodness* 122–99. I am leaving aside entirely her discussion of Plato’s partial embrace of the emotions in *Phaedrus* (see *Fragility of Goodness* 200–234).

²⁴ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness* 378.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 380.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 384–85.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 382.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 383.

for a particular action, we feel ourselves open to the same impingement of circumstantial vicissitude. Just as the action of tragic drama reveals the truth about the possibilities and power of luck to affect the good life, the tragic emotions “are themselves elements in an appropriate practical perception of our situation.”²⁹ Feeling the right emotions when faced with tragedy is the ethical *point* of tragedy. Since ethical principles are grounded in the complex, concrete reality of human life, tragedy displays aspects of that reality and teaches us, through inciting the tragic emotions, how we are to understand situations of pitiful and fearful contingency.

Whether Nussbaum’s “reinvention” of tragedy as a site of conflicting ethical demands is compelling in light of the original Greek sources is not of central concern for my purposes. What is compelling is her insistence that a tragic sensibility can be part of a larger ethical framework, without overriding or displacing that framework altogether. One does not, on her view, have to believe that life is *merely* tragic to believe that tragedy has a real place in a true vision of the world and to believe that one can learn important ethical lessons by cultivating the tragic emotions. Similarly, a Christian vision of the world can nurture a tragic sensibility without collapsing into despair or abandoning the hope promised by God in Christ. One possible convergence between the Christian tragic sensibility and Nussbaum’s vision, which I will explore in what follows, concerns the importance of concrete, empirical existence for forming ethical judgments. The Christian sense of the tragic will be, however, markedly different from Nussbaum’s reading of Aristotle in its central definition of tragedy. The tragic possibility in Christianity is not located, as it is for Nussbaum, in the encroachments of contingency on morality. The Christian tragic sensibility rests on the foundation of human volition, explored in a theology of freedom. I now turn to Rahner for resources to develop a theology of freedom that sustains this sensibility.

RAHNER’S THEOLOGY OF FREEDOM

I want to locate a sense of the tragic in Karl Rahner’s profound meditation on the possibility of a human no to God. To prepare for the tragic aspects of this possibility, I will briefly explicate Rahner’s complex understanding of human freedom, as it is the ground by which a yes or no to God is possible at all.

Rahner’s theology takes as its point of departure the question of the human person. Rather than begin with an exposition of God, based in Scripture and ecclesial tradition, or with the telling of the story of Jesus as the culmination of salvation history, Rahner begins with “the hearer of the

²⁹ Ibid. 391.

message”—the human person who hears and can respond to God’s word in Christ. In Anne Carr’s words, “he asks . . . what light can be shed on the question of the human person by an analysis of what the Christian message presumes as true about that person, each one of us.”³⁰ The most fundamental reality of the human, according to Rahner, is that we are persons. Being a person “means the self-possession of a subject as such in a conscious and free relationship to the totality of itself.”³¹ Despite all the ways we know ourselves to be determined by forces and circumstances outside our individual control (our family relationships, race, gender, citizenship, genes, etc.), we still experience ourselves as a profound question that cannot be answered by any of the “regional anthropologies” that seek to explain us—we experience ourselves as a sum greater than any number of parts. We *are* the question that continually rises before us; the more we seek to answer the question of who we are, the more the question extends beyond us, drawing us into an awareness of our “unlimited horizon” (our awareness of ourselves as transcendent beings). “Every answer is always just the beginning of a new question. Man experiences himself as infinite possibility because in practice and in theory he necessarily places every sought-after result in question.”³² We do not transcend our finite existence, but in asking finite questions, “we constantly move beyond every limited horizon of questioning.”³³ As persons, we are concerned with the whole of ourselves, which we experience in the subjective act of questioning ourselves. For Rahner, though we are never able to grasp ourselves completely, we are persons because we are profoundly concerned with ourselves as totalities.

Awareness of oneself as a transcendent being, a being who can never be explained or answered for definitively in any finite knowledge, is also to be aware of one’s self as responsible and free. Freedom is not “a particular, empirical datum of human reality alongside of others” such that we can study human life to determine if and how much it is genuinely free.³⁴ Freedom is the experience by which we realize that we are responsible for ourselves, for what we make of the concrete realities of our lives, the givens beyond our control. Paradoxically, we become aware of ourselves as transcendent, free persons as we become conscious of the fact that we

³⁰ Anne E. Carr, “Starting with the Human,” in *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology*, ed. Leo J. O’Donovan (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 17–18.

³¹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 30.

³² *Ibid.* 32.

³³ Carr, “Starting with the Human” 20.

³⁴ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 35.

are also the “product of what is radically foreign” to us.³⁵ The more we are able to explain, reduce, and dissect ourselves according to endless modes of human inquiry and science, the more we are aware that this still does not answer the question of who we are; we still must decide what to make of all this knowledge, how to respond to it, whether to curse, accept, grow skeptical about, or even despair over it.³⁶

In responding to the givens of our life, we do not just choose to do this or that, to feel one way or another. Just as we experience our lives as totalities, sums greater than any number of parts, so freedom, for Rahner, is “the power to decide about oneself and to actualize oneself” completely.³⁷ Freedom is not the power to decide about oneself in the sense that one is always choosing between one state of mind and another, always taking on new projects for self-realization, or always open to radical transformation, though these may be aspects of the experience of freedom. Freedom is the power to decide something “final and ineradicable. . . . It is the event of something eternal.”³⁸ In our freedom we choose what we are and what we are still becoming; we say an absolute yes or no to ourselves, deciding for or against ourselves.³⁹ According to Rahner, we are truly free in being able to choose ourselves finally and absolutely, but we do not achieve this choice in one “moment,” or at least not in one knowable moment. In every choice we make in the temporal passage of our lives “we are performing this event of freedom, we are forming the eternity which we ourselves are and are becoming.”⁴⁰ The exercise of freedom occurs only in concrete, individual instances of finite and empirical lives. Rahner insists, however, that we must never confuse these empirical choices with freedom in itself. What we really choose in our freedom is who we are, finally and eternally. Throughout the course of our lives we may have strong reasons to hope or fear what our absolute choice has been by observing the choices of our empirical existence, but the certainty of our choice is always shrouded in mystery and cannot be known in this life.

Our self-realization is always self-realization before God, who is the ground of our being and the horizon of our freedom.⁴¹ In choosing who we are in our totality we affect our salvation or damnation, because in saying yes or no to ourselves we say yes or no to God. This is not to say that any choice we make about who we fundamentally are is a yes to ourselves, and therefore a yes to God, simply because it is a choice made about ourselves. Because every act of freedom is an act for the totality of

³⁵ Ibid. 29.

³⁶ Ibid. 39.

³⁷ Ibid. 38.

³⁸ Ibid. 96.

³⁹ Karl Rahner, “Theology of Freedom,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961–1992) 185.

⁴⁰ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 96.

⁴¹ Rahner, “Theology of Freedom” 186.

our being, to say yes to this totality is to act such that the whole of human nature is encompassed in this act: “everything which goes under the name of man and the life of man, happiness and despair, everyday life and starlight hours, sin and redemption, past and present.”⁴² For Rahner, only the love of God can embrace this totality: “it alone is able to unite all man’s many-sided and mutually contradictory capabilities because they are all orientated towards that God whose unity and infinity can create the unity in man which, without destroying it, unites the diversity of the finite.”⁴³ In venturing into this love of God, the whole of our selves is demanded, the absolute choice of our being in its totality is “on the line”—this is the final and eternal question of our lives in which we decide ourselves absolutely. In the face of this total demand we can say either yes or no and in so doing we realize ourselves before God.⁴⁴

Because freedom is not just a characteristic of the human, but is fundamentally part of what the human *is*, Rahner sees the human person as invested with a radical ability to achieve his or her own salvation or damnation. But Rahner also insists that the possibility of freedom is grounded entirely in the sovereignty of God. God alone makes it possible for humans to be free and in so doing makes us the kind of creatures who establish our own final ends in self-realization before God. Our freedom does not impinge upon God’s sovereignty; rather God’s sovereignty makes possible the very existence of human freedom.⁴⁵ Commenting on the perceived difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant positions on human freedom with regard to salvation, Rahner argues that our very capacity to respond with a yes to God is God’s gracious gift to us, and is not to be counted as a “work” that merits salvation.⁴⁶ In this sense, to say yes to God, while a free response, can also be counted as a work of God’s grace, belonging entirely to God’s glory and sovereignty. Such a statement might be readily assented to by many Protestants eager to safeguard God’s sovereignty in matters of salvation. Where a conservative Protestant might take most issue with Rahner is not in his descriptions of the yes to

⁴² Ibid. 187.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ A crucial part of Rahner’s theology locates the primary means of realizing ourselves before God in love of our neighbor. Rahner calls love of neighbor “the original relationship to God” and “the only categorical and original act in which man attains the whole of the concretely given reality and finds the transcendental and supernatural, directly experienced experience of God (“Theology of Freedom” 190). I cannot here explore this central idea in Rahner’s theology, but it is important as the clearest example of how Rahner imagines we “choose ourselves in freedom”—not as an abstract conceptual choice, but as a choice worked out in the concrete empirical reality of our existence.

⁴⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 105.

⁴⁶ Karl Rahner, *Grace in Freedom* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 98.

God—which might properly be ascribed to God’s grace—but in his insistence on the possibility of a genuine and absolute no to God.

There is less theological controversy in the idea that humans *do* say no to God in sin and that some may definitively say no for all eternity. What Rahner’s theology of freedom does not allow, however, is the possibility of irresistible grace. A strong doctrine of double predestination (as in John Calvin’s theology) is meant to assure us that we cannot genuinely say no to God’s grace—whoever God elects is elected in fact. The unelect are justly condemned, as it is only by grace that we are not all condemned.⁴⁷ For Rahner, on the other hand, grace is the very ground and means by which the yes is given; but it is the rejection of grace that marks the no. Rahner recognizes the horror of such a possibility and as such calls the no “something abortive, something which miscarries and fails, something self-destructive and self-contradictory.”⁴⁸ To refuse God is to refuse freedom itself. The free decision of a no to God can be made only in affirming the horizon of freedom, but in that same affirmation the object of that horizon—God—is denied. That we can say no to God requires that we exercise our freedom only to deny it: “in the act of negating freedom there is present a real, absolute contradiction in the fact that God is affirmed and denied at the same time.”⁴⁹ The possibility of such an absolute and contradictory no is dreadful to Rahner, but he considers it necessary as a possibility if freedom is truly the act of deciding ourselves irrevocably.

The starkness of this possibility is further complicated by two “problems” that plague our freedom: the limits of our self-knowledge and the burden of unintended consequences that can follow from our free actions. While I will suggest that the tragic sensibility is created in the awareness of a no to God as a genuine possible choice, we experience this possibility in the problems of freedom. In other words, it is precisely the uncertainty of knowing our fundamental choices, and the difficulty of ascertaining them through clear consequential connections, that opens the ground for tragedy in our lives.

THE “PROBLEMS” OF FREEDOM

Though freedom is an absolute, transcendental, and existential fact of our existence, we cannot objectify this freedom absolutely. That is, according to Rahner, we cannot say once and for all, with absolute certainty, whether we have said yes or no to God in the depths of our freedom.

⁴⁷ For an account of predestination along these lines, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 920–86.

⁴⁸ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 102.

⁴⁹ Rahner, “Theology of Freedom” 181.

We know that our entire lives are the answer to the question in which God offers God's very self to us, and thereby also offers us our selves in their totality.⁵⁰ We also know that this choice for or against God is not made in one empirical moment but is rather hidden in all the mundane choices of our historical, concrete, and therefore limited existence. It is true that there are great decisions in our lives in which we might suspect that we have "staked it all," and as we watch the patterns of our decisions we are given insight into the choice of our freedom. Ultimately, however, we must trust God's final judgment to reveal that choice, or in more traditional theological language, to reveal the state of our hearts.

Because our freedom is always exercised in the empirical reality in which we find ourselves, we actualize our freedom "in a situation which itself is always determined by history and by other persons."⁵¹ Our original free decisions are not only made in the world of other free humans, but these decisions also "bear the stamp" of the history of the freedom of all other humans. Not only does "freedom inevitably appropriate the material in which it actualizes itself as an intrinsic and constitutive element," but the objectifications of one person's free decision can also alter the situation in which another person chooses, and can thereby become "an intrinsic moment in the free decision of another."⁵² Herein rests one of the great paradoxes of human freedom: the result of our ability to decide ourselves absolutely is always hidden from complete objectification, yet freedom realizes itself only in the objectifications of historical human existence. Furthermore, although our acts of freedom are "personal, inalienable and unique," they are also deeply determined by the historical world of other free persons.⁵³

The historical world in which subjective freedom realizes itself is not "neutral" with respect to our free decisions but is a world "co-determined by guilt and the guilty refusals of others."⁵⁴ The realization that each person's free decisions are codetermined by the guilt of others is, according to Rahner, what Christian tradition calls "original sin."⁵⁵ That we often feel our free decisions threatened by the decisions of others and thereby painful to make is a description of human experience that Rahner assumes we will recognize. Because the ultimate ground of our motives may be hidden, even when we experience ourselves intending the good, those decisions can become "burdened with consequences which could not really be intended because they lead to tragic impasses, and which disguise the good that was intended by one's own freedom."⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 107.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 108–9.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 108.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 109.

There are, then, two problems that plague our freedom. The first is the problem of self-knowledge: we are not granted a transparent view of our motives and intentions; we are also capable of self-deception in narrating those intentions to ourselves and others. The second problem concerns the consequences of our actions: even our best actions, motivated by good intentions, can have unintended consequences. While conceptually distinct—God, at least, can judge between our true intentions and the results of our actions—these two problems intersect in our experience precisely because we are given access to our intentions only in the concrete decisions of our lives. For us, those decisions involve their consequences.

To illustrate this point, Rahner uses the simple example of buying a banana. As the buyer, I may not consider the many factors that influence the price of the banana, one of which includes the wages and working conditions of the banana pickers. The lot of the banana pickers is “co-determined by social injustice, exploitation, or centuries-old commercial policy,” all of which might be hidden from my view at the moment of my free decision.⁵⁷ Assessing where my personal responsibility for a situation codetermined by guilt begins and ends is a perilous and obscure enough task in this simple example, but we can further understand Rahner’s description of original sin if we expand his illustration. If I do have some idea of the unjust conditions of fruit-harvesting laborers, I may consciously choose not to buy the banana or, more positively, to invest in a company that promises fair wages and working conditions. What I may not know, let us assume, is that the company that advertises economic justice also buys and sells the open stock of other companies whose practices mirror those of the company I originally tried to boycott. Rahner’s larger point about “tragic impasses” or the “burden of consequences” can be illustrated in this new example: my good action, motivated by good intentions, acquires consequences I did not intend, which may even mask the original good I did intend. Assuming that bananas are a commodity I cannot do entirely without, I may be left with a “tragic” situation in which none of my possible free choices can result in the good I most deeply intend.

For Rahner, the very fact that our free choices can be burdened with unintended consequences should make us hesitate to judge our own or others’ ultimate self-decisions. The only insight we have into our free, subjective choices is offered in the objectifications of those choices in the concrete particulars of our lives. Yet, these objectifications can, and often are, masked and distorted so that even this insight is always partial and tenuous. As we watch the concrete decisions of our lives under the tutelage of the doctrine of original sin, we know that “even a person’s most ideal, most moral act of freedom enters tragically into the concrete in an

⁵⁷ Ibid. 110–11.

appearance which, because co-determined by guilt, is also the appearance of its opposite."⁵⁸ Only God can judge and reveal the true choices we have made. The consequences of our choices, however, do not cease to matter, because they can bear these unintended burdens. The comprehensive decision made in absolute freedom may indeed be mysterious, but it must still be made in this concrete, historical world. We have an obligation to strive "to alter this situation of guilt," and real successes in this project are possible. To neglect this obligation, or to ignore the effects of our choices, would itself be "radical guilt before God."⁵⁹ Nonetheless, our striving will always be imperfect. The same doctrine that teaches us the opacity of our intentions illuminates the limits of all human endeavors to eradicate the radical situation of guilt in which we find ourselves. Precisely in its description of our empirical situation as universally, permanently, and originally codetermined by guilt, the doctrine of original sin instructs us in historical pessimism. Regardless of our best efforts and our most strongly held ideals, "there is for the human race in its concrete history no real possibility of ever overcoming once and for all this determination of the situation of freedom by guilt."⁶⁰ The situation in which freedom manifests itself is radically codetermined by guilt, such that no human effort can produce a situation of perfect harmony in which all our intentions carry their intended results.

Rahner calls the awareness of freedom's situation under original sin—the "problems" that plague our freedom—"the pessimism of Christianity."⁶¹ This pessimism includes not only the abortive and horrible possibility of a final no to God but also a profound awareness that even a yes to God will be decided in a world already fundamentally marked by guilt, and that no human effort can finally transform the guilty situation of freedom. What I am calling "the tragic sensibility" in a Christian understanding of the world—much like Rahner's "pessimism"—lies in the horrible possibility of freedom's no. But as shaped emotional responsiveness, this sensibility is not fostered by meditating on the no as a bleak certainty. Rather, the sensibility is fostered in our experiences of freedom's problems: in our awareness that our ultimate decisions remain hidden, and that even our actions may not truthfully reveal them to us. Playing with Rahner's paradoxical belief that Christianity is most optimistic when it is realistically pessimistic, I suggest that the Christian virtue of hope is nurtured, not destroyed, by this tragic sensibility. A sense of the tragic grounded in a theology of freedom is distinct from both the sense meant by Christian theologians who reject it and the sense developed by Nussbaum's Aristotelian ethics. It is to my own understanding of the tragic sense in Christian

⁵⁸ Ibid. 109.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. 110.

theology, both its meaning and its import, that I will now turn, before addressing how hope and tragedy are interwoven in Christian freedom.

A REEVALUATION OF THE TRAGIC IN A CHRISTIAN SENSIBILITY

The primary concern for thinkers who reject any possibility of a tragic sensibility within Christianity is the belief that tragedy conveys a view of the world where things do not work out well in the end. According to this view, a tragic sensibility is incompatible with a Christian narrative of God's gracious redemption of the world in Christ, because in God's sovereign acts the Christian has absolute certainty that things will, indeed, work out well. To a certain degree, such an appraisal is correct. In a very profound sense Christians have reason to believe and hope that God's love and justice will prevail over all sin and suffering, regardless of the evidence to the contrary. In the mode of narrating the story of God's loving activity, Christian theology sounds this antitragic note. But the story of God's activity with the world also involves the world. For humans still caught up in the performance of their freedom, there is the real and terrible threat of things not turning out well. We are not allowed to step off the stage of freedom, or to assume a "god's eye view." The sense of the tragic in Christianity is not, therefore, located in the overarching tale of God's deeds or in some account of Christ's death as tragic, but rather in the concrete particulars of human life. We cannot thereby say, however, that the tragic possibility is not central to Christianity, unless we think that the actual existence of human beings and their relationship with God are not central. The story of God's loving actions toward the world includes God's sovereign choice to allow human freedom. In a story that involves the possibility of the "no," there is therefore the possibility of tragedy.

This possibility is distinct from the view of tragedy that Nussbaum develops within an Aristotelian framework, but it shares some features with it. For Nussbaum, the tragic sensibility is fostered by realizing that circumstances outside our control can impinge upon our project of living well and that this contingency must be met with the proper emotions of pity and fear. We Christians, like all other humans, experience conflict in our moral choices and deep sorrow at the vicissitudes of life. Christians are not exempt from finitude, fluctuations, or loss any more than other humans, and we can share with Nussbaum a sense of the tragic that locates it firmly in the messiness of our finite reality. As we have seen, Rahner's discussion of original sin emphasizes the degree to which Christians must take seriously the radical, permanent guilt of our historical situation. The "tragic impasses" of unintended consequences and the realistic pessimism about the depths of original sin are, however, different from Nussbaum's conception of contingent goodness. While it is certainly true that many things are

outside our control and that we are creatures radically open to contingent circumstances, a Christian sense of the tragic is not located in this openness. The no to God is not fundamentally open to conflict in the way that, for Nussbaum, the moral life is open to conflict. We will never have to say no on the one hand in order to say yes on the other. Although we cannot discern our fundamental choice with certainty, especially given the codetermination of our choices by the guilty situation of sin, we can and must trust God to rightly know and judge the state of our hearts.⁶²

The tragic sense in Christianity does share with Nussbaum an intuition about the nature of the moral life. Like Nussbaum's tragic sensibility, which looks to empirical human existence for its material, a Christian sense of the tragic is also grounded in the individual stories, full of contingency and complexity, of free human persons. The finitude and contingency of human existence are the stage on which we enact our freedom, and for that reason finitude and contingency matter to the utmost. This stage cannot be transcended, if by transcended we mean left behind to enter another "realm" (the purely ethical, the spiritual, etc.) where our "true" selves are cut free from earthly shackles. But in performing our freedom in the drama of finitude and contingency, we are choosing more than just between conflicting alternatives: we are choosing our very selves in relationship to God. Within a Christian framework, we are not allowed to diminish the empirical reality of human existence either by withdrawing to an ultimate perspective or by degrading it as not really "counting" in our evaluation of human life.

The tragic sense in this Christian view is awareness that we are capable of saying no to God in the mystery of our freedom. If we were given a seat in the theater of the world, to watch a human reject the grace that forms the very ground of her being would be to watch the great catastrophe of the world. Since we are not given such a seat, we can only watch the empirical choices of our own lives, the yeses and nos we say every day in the small and large decisions that form the fabric of human experience. In these choices there are ample opportunities for grief and for fear that in saying yes to injustice or no to our neighbor's need for help we are saying a more fundamental no to God. Because we do not have certain access to the state of our hearts, nor to anyone else's, we do not have to answer definitively "whether anyone, and if so how many people suffer eternal loss, or whether anyone, and if so how many people really in fact decide

⁶² I do not here wish to deny the possibility of genuine moral dilemmas, nor to suggest that they have no part in a Christian tragic sensibility. The scope of such a discussion is far wider than my discussion here. For an excellent treatment of the question of moral dilemma, though not explicitly of its relation to tragedy, see Edmund N. Santurri, *Perplexity in the Moral Life: Philosophical and Theological Considerations* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1987).

against God in their ultimate and original freedom.”⁶³ A theology of freedom that contains the possibility of a definitive no to God is not concerned with passing judgment on the world, but is nonetheless concerned with the most serious and profound possibility of human existence. The awareness of our subjective freedom confronts each of us with the truth that we can, in our innermost beings, close ourselves “into the absolute and deadly and final loneliness of saying ‘no’ to God.”⁶⁴

The possibility of the no is rarely confronted in pure form. We experience our freedom, not directly in our ultimate choices, but through what I identified as freedom’s problems: the limitations of our self-knowledge and burden of unintended consequences. Both problems contribute to the tragic sensibility. The former acknowledges the difficulty of knowing our ultimate choices. In the absence of certain knowledge, the no remains a genuine possibility. The latter further complicates the problem of self-knowledge. Because even the best of intentions can be masked by unintended consequences, we cannot read our intentions directly from the results of our actions. Unintended consequences show our openness to contingency and thus comply with Nussbaum’s definition of tragedy. Such consequences are not tragic in the sense I am developing; that is, unintended consequences do not contribute to the tragic sensibility because they demonstrate the presence of a definite no. The tragic sensibility is fostered by our *uncertainty* of freedom’s final choice. The codetermination of all our actions by guilt further complicates our ability to know our intentions with certainty. Not only is our ultimate choice mysteriously hidden from us, but also one of the clues we have to discern it, namely, our actions, can mislead us because our actions can accrue meaning we did not intend. While distinct problems, the possibilities of hidden motivations and unintended consequences both contribute to the formation of the tragic sensibility by complicating our access to self-knowledge.

To return to the definition of “sensibility” offered in my introduction, the tragic sensibility in Christianity is formed emotional responsiveness toward the possibility of freedom’s no; it is the grasping, as a subjective truth, the stakes of one’s freedom. To intuit that things may not work out well *for me* is to intuit the tragic possibility of freedom. Recognizing the prospect of freedom’s tragic choice can inspire deeper confidence and trust in the gracious love of God by which tragedy can be averted. But hope in God’s grace includes recognition that grace is offered in our freedom, refocusing our attention once again on the particularities of our lives as the site of our reception of God’s grace. As a sensibility, the tragic possibility of freedom’s no shapes emotional responsiveness. Emotional

⁶³ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 103.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 103–4.

responsiveness, in turn, quickens attention—we are tuned to the importance of all moments of our existence. Every moment of our lives becomes the chance to say yes; and every moment is worthy of our full attention because the option of our yes is not guaranteed.

In focusing almost exclusively on the possibility of the no to God, I have not meant to suggest that the sense of the tragic it fosters has a stature equal to hope in the Christian sensibility. The sense of the tragic exists always “just behind” Christian hope. Both are born out of an understanding of our freedom before God, but by God’s grace we are free first and foremost to say yes to God. The possibility of the no serves to remind us of the radical nature of our freedom, but it is always tragic because it is a rejection of the very means by which we exist as free creatures. To say that the Christian sensibility is shaped by both the tragic and the hopeful is not to say that both exist as warring forces “inside” the Christian. Rather, the Christian sensibility is shaped primarily by hope. But our hope is joined so intimately to our freedom that it cannot exist, at least not for now, without the very real, and tragic, possibility of freedom’s no. Pressing the point more strongly still, perhaps we would not need hope as we do now were it not for the possibility of the tragic. Such an understanding of hope’s connections to the tragic sensibility may require us to think differently about what we mean by Christian hope.

CHRISTIAN HOPE AS COMMITMENT TO THE WORLD

Often when Christians talk about the virtue of hope, it is hope in God’s saving and justifying grace that they have in mind. In fact, the experience of, and belief in, God’s grace is what constitutes and encourages the Christian’s sense of hope. Christians are exhorted not to succumb to despair, precisely because they can trust God’s loving action and not be overwhelmed by sinful human failings. Lack of hope might signify lack of faith, which itself can be a sign that one does not properly understand the depths and heights of God’s love, graciously offered despite one’s sinfulness. Something like this effective chain inspired Martin Luther’s exuberant injunction: “Sin boldly!” Only in the depths of our sin do we experience the grace that justifies us and gives us an abiding sense of hope. Luther despaired at earning his justification before God because the radicalism of his sin, as he saw it described in Scripture, overwhelmed all his efforts at reform. Catholic theologians affirm Luther’s simple and profound insight: we are saved by God’s grace alone. Christian hope is nurtured in this promise of God’s gracious love; despair about our own salvation may indeed manifest distrust in a trustworthy God. For Rahner, however, as for Aquinas before him, the grace that saves is the same grace that makes freedom possible. Our greatest hope and the possibility of our greatest

tragedy are both grounded in the mystery of God's sovereign choice to create us free.⁶⁵

Rahner's insistence on the fundamental and absolute nature of human freedom is not meant to breed the despair of insufficient works-righteousness or to eliminate the possibility of certitude in one's salvation. Although he problematizes the idea of absolute certainty in salvation, Rahner allows for moral certainty with respect to our salvation: in assessing the ethical choices of our empirical lives we can trust that by grace we have said yes. Our moral certainty can be further strengthened by Christian fellowship. The church, broadly conceived, can be the place where we learn the stories of God's grace, experience that grace in concrete sacraments and human communion, and are nurtured in our moral choices. Caught up in the story of God's gracious love toward us, we can learn to rest in God's faithfulness and find hope in God's grace.

Defining hope on a scale of more or less certainty of salvation, however, may itself miss the import of Rahner's theology of freedom. Insisting that we both choose our salvation in radical freedom and cannot know with absolute certainty the choice of our freedom focuses our attention on the virtue of hope in a slightly different way. If even under the most respectable bourgeois morality "there can be hidden a final, embittered and despairing 'no' to God,"⁶⁶ and if even actions motivated by a sincere yes to God can bear tragic unintended consequences, the comforting link between intention and consequence is problematized. Yet, paradoxically, our freedom has nowhere else to manifest itself than in this concrete world codetermined by guilt and sin. Our salvation, because it is chosen in our historical existence, is part of the salvation of the world and cannot, in our own experience, be separated from it. Perhaps this is what Rahner means when he says that Christian pessimism is Christianity's greatest service for

⁶⁵ Reformed theology may lead to a very similar posture of living in the world. According to Calvin, our election is hidden in the mystery of God's sovereign freedom and cannot be known certainly by anyone in this life. We can discern hope of our election in the fruits of sanctification, but we are denied the ability to judge either ourselves or anyone else absolutely. We are urged to live godly lives and to trust to the mystery of God's grace for our final salvation. A theologically fecund discussion could be had by examining further similarities and dissimilarities between Rahner's theology of freedom and a Reformed theology of God's sovereignty. Calvin wants to hide the certainty of salvation in God's mysterious, free sovereignty, while Rahner wants to hide it in the mystery of human freedom grounded in God's sovereignty. For an illuminating discussion of a strongly Reformed view of salvation worked out in the choices of empirical existence (though without any comparison to Rahner or Roman Catholic theology more generally), see Marilynne Robinson, "Onward, Christian Liberals," *American Scholar* 75 (2006) 42–51.

⁶⁶ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 102.

a better world here and now. Because we Christians are pessimistic about utopian ideals, we cannot trust in any human project as a final end to suffering and injustice. Although to effect the world's salvation is not within our power, Christians cannot make such pessimism "the excuse for not doing anything, for offering people the consolation of eternal life . . . as an opiate for the people." Our hope is our trust in God's grace, by which we have the freedom to say yes⁶⁷ and by which our world of "tragic impasses" may be restored to flourishing order. But this hope can never abstract itself from our freedom, which can only realize itself in a world marked by sin we cannot eradicate, as we continue to work for greater flourishing.

In such a vision of reality, perhaps hope should be understood as commitment to the world. More accurately, our hope is in God's gracious love, and this hope takes the form of commitment to the world. Commitment as the manifestation of hope suggests that there is something at stake in whether the world flourishes or not; that we are committed to its flourishing existentially, not just intellectually (or theologically). What is at stake for creatures of radical freedom is our very salvation. Our hope is not an assurance that we will be lifted out of the impasses that thwart our good intentions or the sorrows that haunt our joys. Rather, our hope is that, by delving more deeply into this world, here and now, we are in fact trusting to the mystery of God's grace in allowing us to choose our salvation. As we understand this mystery of freedom—however obliquely we grasp it—our hope in God's grace does not take us out of human contingency but plunges us back into it. In a world where the link between intention and consequence is attenuated, where our most profound choices are hidden even from us, our one hope is to trust the freedom that is grace and turn again to the stuff of our lives where that grace is realized.

CONCLUSION

Those who claim that Christianity has no room for tragedy, or that it is thoroughly antitragic, assume that Christianity is concerned primarily with telling the story of God's action to the world. When we focus our attention on the story of human response to God's action in a theology of freedom, new possibilities for tragedy in Christianity emerge. Insisting on a place for tragedy in Christian theology is not an obvious good in itself. On the contrary, understanding the tragic sensibility gives us insight into the Christian virtue of hope as manifest in commitment to the world. The emotional responsiveness to the tragic possibility of saying no to God calls

⁶⁷ Ibid. 110.

us to our concrete existence, wherein we will say yes or no. In our concrete existence we also find our greatest hope—that through our God-granted freedom we might, in fact, say yes to God. Our hope is manifest as commitment to the world in which our very salvation will be decided. The Christian sensibility is formed, therefore, by both tragedy and hope. Just as freedom's yes is more fundamental than freedom's no, so hope is more fundamental than tragedy; but because both are so intimately interwoven with our freedom, neither can exist without the other.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Ibid.