

Introduction: A Bright Sorrow

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*The knowledge of the fallen world does not kill joy,
which emanates in this world always, constantly, as a bright sorrow.*

Alexander Schmemann

Why joy—and why now? It is perhaps counterintuitive for joy to occupy a central place in a Christian theology, or at least in a theology capable of taking seriously the state of the world in which we live. Have not the masters of suspicion sufficiently warned theologians away from commending religious sentiments that, in their spiritual purity, distract their subjects from the material situation of life and issue in a total flight from the world? Did not the manifold tragedies of the mid-twentieth century disabuse theologians once and for all of their Pollyanna-ish penchant for progress, their sure confidence in the sacred endowment of the ingenuity of human beings and their potential to build kingdoms of God on earth? Is not the perspective of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history—that history is no “chain of events,” and certainly not one moving toward a paradise, but “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage

upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet”¹—the only credible theological perspective on life this side of the eschaton?

When we stand in the shadow cast by the towering wreckage of history, joy fails to stand out as the most obviously promising candidate among possible pivots of theological thinking. On the one hand, joy, an emotion, might seem too fickle or fragile to withstand the assault of suffering and the crushing magnitude of pain. Joy, taken in this instance to be tantamount to high-octane happiness, fades under duress and is incapable of being sustained by or sustaining someone across the vicissitudes of life. On the other hand, an injunction to be joyful might seem ethically irresponsible and politically dangerous, too close to peddling just one more religious opiate to the oppressed masses. To enjoin human beings to “rejoice always (!),” as does St. Paul (*Phil. 4:4*), might verge on a demand to be content with the status quo, to insist that one should be happy with whatever little one has and with any suffering that comes one’s way and, thus, never question what material and social conditions have conspired to put one in one’s place. As opiates do, such joy might, for a moment, minimally increase the quality of one’s life, but it would do so to the detriment of the *dis*-content arguably necessary to motivate movements for substantial change.

The essays in this volume on joy and human flourishing wrestle with these concerns, among others. At their center is the conviction that joy stands at the very core of Christian faith, life, and practice, and that the dearth of sustained scholarly reflection on joy has left theologians bereft of a key resource for articulating a compelling vision of the good life capable both of pushing against the tide of suffering and of resisting the shifting tides of a culture unmoored from transcendence.²

1. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257.

Whether by reason of the prevailing sentiment described above or some other motive, focused reflection on joy is strikingly absent from contemporary scholarly theology. Notable exceptions to this, of course, include Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology and Joy* (1973), Karl Barth's deeply eschatological account of joy in volume 3 of the *Church Dogmatics*, and Hans Urs von Balthasar's brief reflections on the relationship between joy and suffering in the Trinity in volume 5 of *Theo-Drama*.³ These studies are, however, exceptions that largely prove the rule,⁴ which stands in amazing contrast to the seeming ubiquity of joy in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The potential for theologians to mine the scriptural witnesses for these references is immense. In terms of a Christology, the life of Jesus is flanked at either end, as it were, by joy: the tidings of his birth ground a joy intended for all the world (Luke 2:10), and the saving interventions of

2. On the importance of the relation to transcendence and an account of the vital role religions stand to play in the public square insofar as they cast visions of the good life trading on the same, see Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming 2016).
3. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London: SCM, 1973). Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/4, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), 374–85. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 250–56, 268.
4. The argument here is not simply that references to joy are rare in theological literature (such a thesis would be difficult to substantiate, in any case, even if it has incidentally proven true in our research), but that the disciplines of the modern theological academy have neglected to pursue studies giving joy the pride of place it, arguably, enjoys in the Scriptures. Noteworthy, too, is a promising increase in interest in joy, evidenced, for example, by the recent work of Ellen Charry (who echoes our sense of the lack of sustained reflection on joy in theological discourse and contributes to the diagnostics of why this is the case); see her *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) and “The Necessity of Divine Happiness: A Response from Systematic Theology,” in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and the New Testaments Teach Us About the Good Life*, ed. Brent A. Strawn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Joy serves, moreover, as the point of departure for Pope Francis’s *The Joy of the Gospel: Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*, 2013. See also the dissertations of John Mark Capper (“Karl Barth’s Theology of Joy,” PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1998) and Đorđe Petrović (PhD diss., Pontificium Institutum Orientale, 2015). In getting the lay of the theological landscape with regard to joy, I am much indebted to the extensive research pursued by Mark Berner under the auspices of the John Templeton Foundation’s Office of Strategic Initiatives.

his life hurtle toward joy as their telos (Heb. 12:2). In terms of a moral anthropology, joy is listed by St. Paul among the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), and to “rejoice always” is, again, famously among the injunctions he issues to the church at Philippi (Phil. 4:4). In terms of the doctrine of God, the three parables of Luke 15—the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son—all describe God’s reaction to the repentance of sinners in terms of joy. This is an echo and amplification of the significance of joy in the Hebrew Bible, perhaps most clearly stated when Psalm 16 boldly declares that “in [God’s] presence there is fullness of joy” (16:11).

These are but three examples of doctrines into which the biblical testimony on joy promises to breathe new life, and the essays in this volume treat many more. Together, they attempt to remedy the paucity of contemporary theological reflection on joy, to sketch in an admittedly provisional way its nature, and to map its potential ramifications for the whole of Christian life and doctrine, in the hope of occasioning a broader consideration of joy both within Christian discourse and outside it, among the members of what, we hope, will become an inter- (and non-) religious alliance for joy.

Though each of the essays stands on its own as a substantive contribution to the study of joy and to the discipline from which it hails—and biblical studies, systematic theology, pastoral theology, political theology, and ethics are all variously represented here—the volume as a whole moves in the following way.

We begin with an essay by Jürgen Moltmann that, rooted in reflection on his previous efforts toward a theology of joy, attempts to conceive of the whole of Christian faith, worship, and life in its terms. For him, “Christianity is a unique religion of joy,” expressed in its

liturgical feasts, its depiction of God, and its treatment of theodicy.⁵ Motivating the whole of Moltmann's investigation here is a concern for how theologians can commend rejoicing when so many live under conditions of extreme suffering. The thick account of joy that follows points up the way in which human joy is grounded in God's own joy, famously depicted in the parables of Luke 15 as the abundant, excessive rejoicing of the father at the repentant return of the prodigal. Christian joy stands in contrast both to what Moltmann provocatively terms the "fun society" (*Spaßgesellschaft*) and to the opiate-like joy characteristic of Friedrich Schiller's "Ode to Joy." Instead, Christian joy both motivates dissatisfaction with conditions of suffering and is a deep wellspring of abiding hope in God's work of redemption: "Joy in life's happiness motivates us to revolt against the life that is destroyed and against those who destroy life. And grief over life that is destroyed is nothing other than an ardent longing for life's liberation to happiness and joy."⁶ Moltmann's sketch of Christianity as a religion of joy introduces many of the key themes, scriptural passages, and sociopolitical questions treated in the other chapters of the volume and, thus, serves in large part as the frame for all that follows.

Next are two essays by Marianne Meye Thompson and N. T. Wright that treat the most important references to joy in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Thompson focuses on the Greek *chara* and identifies three strands of biblical thought on joy: joy as a good response to good things, joy over the removal of affliction and distress, and joy in the midst of affliction and distress. The first two constitute what Thompson denotes *joy because* (of something good), while the third constitutes *joy notwithstanding* (some deficiency). Nonetheless, *joy notwithstanding* is still rooted in *joy because* on

5. See Chapter 1, 6.

6. *Ibid.*, 14.

account of its being made possible by the eschatological horizon of Christian discipleship. It consists in a *joy because* of God, in terms both of the consolation one enjoys by virtue of God's continuing presence in the midst of one's suffering and the hope one has in God's eschatological redemption of the evils one presently suffers.

For his part, Wright emphasizes the way in which biblical joy consists in “the fresh *presence* of God . . . [and] the fresh *act* of God,” as God acts to save in accordance with God’s promises.⁷ He draws a helpful comparison between the balance of joy and hope in the worldviews of early Christianity and Second-Temple Judaism, suggesting that, on the whole, the former put the weight primarily on joy and the latter on hope. The reason for this, he speculates, is on account of the Christian conviction of the already-realized cosmic sovereignty of Jesus, exemplified particularly in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. The Christian can “rejoice always” on account of Christ’s already-binding lordship and is, indeed, enjoined to this end in order to bear public witness to his sovereignty, over and against the lordship of Caesar. Together, Thompson’s and Wright’s essays catalogue and map the bulk of biblical perspectives on joy, and they point us not to an otherworldly, passing sentiment but to the sturdy confidence in the good of the salvific working of God that is the wellspring of true rejoicing.

Following this is a detailed and programmatic sketch by Charles Mathewes of how the main loci of Christian theological reflection can be thrown open by organizing them around joy. Structuring Mathewes’s theology of joy is an Augustinian anthropology of desire that posits partaking “in the endless joyful round of love that is the Trinity” as our end and eschatological destiny.⁸ Joy itself consolidates the fundamental dynamics of Christian life, involving an agency

7. See Chapter 3, 48–49.

8. See Chapter 4, 65.

which Mathewes very helpfully describes in terms of “the middle voice”: joy is genuinely our own response, and yet, it also comes to us as a gift—it is something that happens *to* us, and yet, also something in which we actively participate.⁹ Mathewes proceeds to develop a robust ecclesiology of joy, conceiving of the churches as the sites in which God makes us “fit to bear the joy that is our eschatological destiny.”¹⁰ That is, the purpose of the churches is to be training grounds of right rejoicing, and the formation of persons undertaken in them has immediate and far-reaching political ramifications, fostering resistance particularly against the anesthetizing effects of joyless consumer capitalist culture (the diagnosis of which by Mathewes hearkens back to Moltmann’s discussion of *Spaßgesellschaft*). Mathewes’s theology of joy is a political theology insofar as it is a church theology, and a church theology insofar as it is a political theology.

Mary Clark Moschella, then, offers up a vision of how practices of pastoral care can be oriented around joy and its cultivation. Noting the dominance heretofore of a pathology-driven diagnostics imported into pastoral theology largely from Freudian psychoanalysis, Moschella strives to locate best practices of care that take the experience of joy as their telos and their source. Understanding joy as being rooted in one’s giving attention to the goodness of God, she avers that joy shifts the human perspective from a logic of scarcity to one of abundance, making possible transformative visions of the world as it *could* (and should) be. On this accounting, pastoral theology and practice should take as its point of departure a holistic vision of flourishing, joyful life, rather than simply reacting to the manifold crises of human living as they come. Examples of practitioners of care of this sort abound for Moschella,

9. Ibid., 66–67.

10. Ibid., 65.

but for the purposes of the essay in question she takes as her primary test case the work of Paul Farmer, the founder of Partners in Health, whose life indicates two of the “seeds of joy” she thinks to be most integral to pastoral ministry: “a sense of vocation and a practice of compassion.” She remarks that Farmer’s joy offers him “access to a deep sense of hope, even in circumstances that are often daunting and sometimes painfully discouraging” and fuels his efforts to increase the well-being of the poor.¹¹ Pastoral theology stands to gain much from paying attention to the wellsprings of joy exemplified in the lives of Farmer and others, and Moschella’s reflections very helpfully point the way forward for reconceiving pastoral practice primarily in terms of well-being rather than restricting its considerations to pathology-driven models of caregiving.

The volume culminates with Miroslav Wolf’s summary vision of a theology of joy, gathering up many of the various strands of thought set out in the other essays into a synthetic account of joy and its relation to the good life. He conceives of joy as an emotion having a particular object—and, indeed, a particular object perceived as a *good*. Joy is, as he puts it, an “emotional attunement between the self and the world—usually a small portion of it—experienced as blessing.”¹² Wolf presupposes an integrative account of the good life having three dimensions: agential (the good life is the life that is *lived well*), circumstantial (the good life is the life that *goes well*), and affective (the good life is the life that *feels good*). Joy is a summation of the affective dimension of the good life and, at the same time, consolidates *all three dimensions*. As an emotion that perceives its object as a good, joy requires that one’s life is marked by a good (so, the life that goes well and is led well) and that one is properly oriented to this good as good. Joy is, therefore, the *crown* of the good life, not simply in

11. See Chapter 5, 113, 118, 124.

12. See Chapter 6, 130.

that it is its third and final dimension—the proverbial icing on the cake, as it were—but more properly in that joy is the expression and manifestation of the good life, just as the crown is an expression and public manifestation of royal authority. On Wolf's account, joy cannot be given adequate exposition without making reference to the good life, and, likewise, the good life cannot be envisioned in its fullness without reference to joy.

At this point, let us revisit the twin concerns raised at the outset regarding suffering and ideological alienation by teasing out, briefly, just two of the most common strands of thought among the essays assembled here.

First of all, suffering presents perhaps the most urgent challenge to a theology of joy. Wright and Thompson are pushed by Pauline passages like Romans 5–8 (“We also boast in our sufferings” [Rom. 5:3]) to posit *some* relationship between suffering and joy—even to such an extent that Wright himself avers that this is not “joy *despite* suffering, but . . . joy *because of* suffering.”¹³ Nonetheless, both Wright and Thompson understand the joy in suffering described by St. Paul as being made conceivable in terms of sharing in Christ’s own suffering: as Thompson puts it, “In that sense, *joy notwithstanding* is indeed a joy *because of*, that is, joy because Paul is joined precisely *in* his suffering to the Lord Jesus Christ who ‘will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory’ (Phil. 3:21).”¹⁴ Considered along these lines, it is not suffering *per se* that is the cause of Paul’s declaration that “we also boast in our sufferings” but, rather, a sharing in the sufferings of *Christ*, on

13. See Chapter 3, 55.

14. See Chapter 2, 29–30.

account of which Paul hopes also to share in Christ's resurrection. As Thompson emphasizes, this means that one cannot properly rejoice *in* suffering or injustice but only rejoice *notwithstanding* suffering and injustice and in their midst. This principle is thrown into further relief by Wolf, who explicitly describes taking suffering *itself* as the object of one's rejoicing as "masochistic"; rather, one is made able to rejoice rightly notwithstanding conditions of suffering on account "of some good that is ours despite the suffering (for instance, God's character, deeds, and the promise of redemption) or because of a good the suffering will produce (for instance, a child for a mother in childbirth)."¹⁵ The surprising realization that experiences of joy are compossible with situations of suffering marks not just the resilience of joy in itself but the particular resilience of religious joy, whose object is God. Moltmann goes so far as to assert that the condition of possibility for both suffering and joy are the same—the opening up of oneself to the other in which *love* consists. "Compassion," he writes, "is the other side of the living joy."¹⁶ We might, with good reason, call joy of this sort "a bright sorrow," following Alexander Schmemann.¹⁷ As the bright sorrow of this present dispensation, joy *notwithstanding* implicates one in the economy of redemption, in the drama of God's turning of our mourning into dancing (Ps. 30:11). All of these constitute promising points of departure for future clarification of this precarious nexus.

Second, joy pursues an oblique politics. As Wolf puts it, that joy would be political at all is "surprising, because joy doesn't explicitly advocate any values or social ideals." True joy does, however, involve a right relationship to the good in which one rejoices, and joy,

15. See Chapter 6, 131.

16. See Chapter 1, 14.

17. Alexander Schmemann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann 1973–1983*, trans. Julian Schmemann (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 137.

as an “eternity-seeking” emotion (Nietzsche), wills the perpetual continuation of that good. “In this willing,” Volf avers, “joy sets itself tacitly against features of the world over which one cannot or should not rejoice, and does so without resentment or judgment.”¹⁸ This *joy against* the world¹⁹ aligns well with Wright’s suggestion that joy is the outward, public manifestation of Christian conviction in the lordship of Christ. Insofar as the joy of early Christians was rooted in the already-realized sovereignty of Christ, it set itself against the alternate sovereignty of Caesar. Joy issues glad tidings “of a different empire, a different *kind* of empire,”²⁰ one that fundamentally reconfigures our preconceived notions of sovereignty precisely by way of the manner in which it is brought about: crucifixion and resurrection. The capacity of joy to stand *against* the world is likewise echoed by Mathewes, who finds in an ecclesial “soul crafting and community creation” aimed toward cultivating dispositions of joy a profound resource for combating, for instance, the deadening fog of consumer culture. The political intervention here is, indeed, oblique on the churches’ part, but its efficacy is secured on account of the fact that “the maladies of the soul that the churches diagnose are not unrelated to the maladies of the polity that much political discourse currently laments.”²¹ It is Moltmann who perhaps best encapsulates the politics of *joy against*—which, for him, always already raises the question of the relation between joy and suffering. Joy is, itself, the wellspring of motivation for revolt against injustice insofar as joy casts a positive vision of what life is truly *for*: “Otherwise we would accept innocent suffering and destroyed life as our fate and destiny,”²² acquiescing

18. See Chapter 6, 132.

19. Willie Jennings has very provocatively (and helpfully) described this as “joy *contra mundi*” in a paper prepared for one of the Templeton Foundation-linked consultations on joy at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. See his “Joy That Gathers,” http://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/jennings_-_joy_that_gathers.pdf.

20. See Chapter 3, 61.

21. See Chapter 4, 69–70.

in resignation to the vision of history so powerfully depicted by Benjamin's angel.

On the accounting put forth in these essays, joy is neither an ideological opiate serving to placate and pacify the dispossessed, nor a sentiment as fragile as garden-variety happiness and, thus, as incapable of weathering situations of exigent suffering and stress. Joy, we think, stands to fund both perseverance and critique, both resilience and resistance. The bright sorrow of joy as we experience it in our present dispensation is but a foretaste of the abundant delight that will characterize the eschatological banqueting of the coming kingdom, the fullness of rejoicing that will consist in our sharing in the very joy of the triune God. These essays are offered in invitation to further reflection on joy and the concrete dispositions in which human flourishing consists, pursued with attention to the shadow cast by the towering wreckage of history and the resurrection splendor of glory radiating behind it.

22. See Chapter 1, 14.