

## Article

# Unshakeable Hope: Pandemic Disruption, Climate Disruption, and the Ultimate Test of Theologies of Abundance

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**Abstract:** Leaders on the forefront of the rapidly escalating climate crisis continually seek effective strategies to help communities stay engaged without burning out or spiraling into despair. This paper examines the concept of adaptive change for its potential to reframe disruption and intentionally harness its potential for building resilience in both practical and psychological ways. In particular, social science suggests that secure communal bonds lay the foundation for the adaptive ability to build resilience through and from disruption. Swiss history offers an intriguing example of this phenomenon: held up as a model for its social, political, and ecological resilience, Swiss democracy evolved as part of the restructuring of society after a series of disruptive historical pandemics. This paper uses the Swiss example and the current COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease) pandemic in order to explore the potential of transcendent and adaptive sociological and theological frameworks for the development of robust concepts of resilience in the face of climate destabilization. It further argues that a wide theological interpretation of Eucharistic abundance offers a lens through which to claim the liberative resurrection of disruptions, even, or perhaps especially, in the extreme case of human or planetary annihilation.

**Keywords:** climate change; adaptive change; climate resilience; climate theology; climate ethics; ecojustice; political theology; liberation theology; pandemic resilience; empathy; hope



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## 1. Introduction

In the midst of the already highly disruptive and destructive era of climate change, the global COVID-19 pandemic has added an additional, smaller scale but more distinctly defined disruption. In cases of sufficient stability and support, societies can take advantage of these disruptions: with new awareness around social inequity, many communities have responded with new creative solutions to address gaps in access to societal security and safety nets. This particular pandemic effect channels sudden, disruption-driven changes in awareness into high impact momentum for the common good (Stiglitz 2020; Liu et al. 2020).

How can societies better understand, prepare for, and utilize disruption more intentionally, in order not only to reduce and prevent suffering but also to create a more resilient future? Social scientists note that cycles of adaptive change, in societies, smaller human organizations, and in ecosystems, require certain levels of connective stability in order for a disruption to yield an overall increase in function, for the good of the overall system (Holling 2001). Stable human communal connections provide the foundation for the mindfulness, empathy, and altruism required to transcend, alleviate, and prevent future suffering.<sup>1</sup> Such a transformation occurred in Switzerland in the late 19th Century, where growing networks of social solidarity took advantage of a series of epidemics to spur the development of what is now considered the most robust form of democracy in the world (O'Sullivan 2020).

This paper begins with a general overview of socioecological cycles of adaptive change, specifically the need for connective foundations that allow disruptive change to bring about greater resilience. It then uses the historical example of Swiss democracy to examine the ways such communal connections provided the theological and socioecological

foundations necessary for resilient adaptation in response to various disruptions. It further explores the ways theological ethics intentionally draws upon both connection and disruption as a way to formulate strategic approaches to the unprecedented disruption of the climate crisis. It argues that non-attached approaches to survival, such as from wilderness skills practitioners, provide an important piece of the connective foundation needed to formulate climate change frameworks of adaptive change that offer resilient kinds of hope in the face of possible human extinction. In particular, it explores the ways in which the climate crisis presents a kind of acid test of the application of disruption-based theological frameworks of hope: for example, the viability of the transcendent promise of resurrection in the face of human annihilation. It argues that close examination of biblical narratives and theologies of disruption and hope reveals their appropriateness and utility for contemporary applications to today's greatest disruptive challenges.

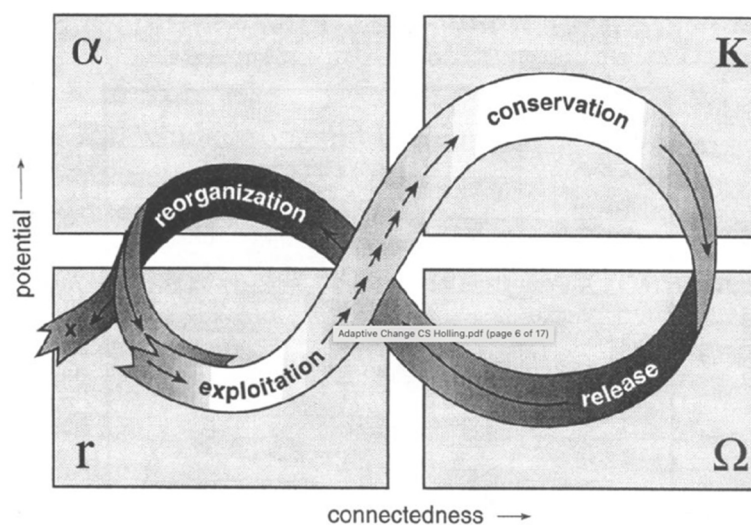
## 2. The Ambivalence of Disruption: Destruction as an Essential Part of the Creative Cycle

The word 'disrupt' includes the idea of 'rupture,' to break apart. Though we instinctively shy away from disruption due to its inherently destructive nature, we also recognize the necessity for disruption, or change, in order to achieve growth. The amniotic sac literally ruptures to allow a woman to birth a child. Disruption—rupture—must continually occur, in some form, for life to exist; in other words, the moment we let go of disruption is the moment we die.

Social scientists note this dual, cyclic nature of social and ecological disruption and change in the development of models of adaptation and resilience.<sup>2</sup> These models recognize the destabilizing nature of disruption as an essential precursor for the possibility of rapid social and ecological—and thus, interconnected socioecological—restructuring that integrates needed forms of resilience. C. S. Holling measures socioecological sustainability based on the resilience of what he calls a 'panarchy': the interconnected cycles of disruption and reorganization within larger ecosystems and in societies, "interlinked in never-ending adaptive cycles of growth, accumulation, restructuring, and renewal" (Holling 2001, p. 392). In a panarchy, periods of stability actually lay the groundwork for future disruptive phases, which in turn lead to highly resilient periods of reorganization, tolerant of novel arrangements and the possibility of failure (see Figure 1). Holling further argues that this model reconciles nature's dual conservative and creative functions into a comprehensible system; periods of restructuring—such as following a wildfire—provide the most resilient moments:

*[A] fertile environment for experiments, for the appearance and initial establishment of entities that would otherwise be outcompeted . . . many will fail, but in the process, the survivors will accumulate the fruits of change. It is a time of both crisis and opportunity.* (Holling 2001, p. 395)

Holling notes various ecological, economic, and political examples of this phenomenon; for example, habitat disruption, such as the wildfire mentioned above, suddenly releases the "resources accumulated and sequestered in vegetation and soil", such that "the tight organization is lost". Social systems, such as large corporations, can over-accumulate stability; in such cases, their overly rigid structures require disruption in order to spur reorganization and therefore build new resilience, a process economists call "creative destruction".<sup>3</sup> Importantly, systems cannot always recover in this model; panarchic adaptation relies on a critical mass of the previously laid foundations of stability in order for a system to withstand severe disruption well enough to reorganize and function, rather than collapse (Holling 2001, pp. 394–96, 399–400).



**Figure 1.** Stylized representation of Holling’s Adaptive Cycle for ecological, economic, social, and cultural change. Four distinct sectors ( $\alpha$ ,  $r$ ,  $K$ , and  $\Omega$ ) represent phases of greater and lesser stability and disruption, with corresponding variations in connectedness and potential: the more connectedness a system builds during periods of heightened implementation ( $r$ ) and codification of efficient functionality ( $K$ ), the greater the potential for disruptions, or crises ( $\Omega$ ), to build new forms and levels of resilience during periods of reorganization ( $\alpha$ ).<sup>4</sup>

To apply this model to human communities, the stable connectivity Holling mentions could correspond to the secure attachment required for proper development of empathy and the ability to transcend and withstand disruption and crisis. The “empathy–altruism” hypothesis describes the ways that securely attached relationships in early childhood lay the foundation for the later ability to turn toward suffering with a sense of kinship and an understanding of the wider context in which crises occur (Davies and Frawley-O’Dea 1994, p. 65). In other words, a foundation of secure emotional connection allows people to view crises from a more mindful perspective.

This application of the empathy–altruism framework draws upon the three “stances of the self” described by psychologist David Wallin: people respond to difficulties with either an embedded, reflective, or mindful approach. Children who have experienced abuse and neglect often exhibit the rigid, chaotic ‘embedded’ stance, which conflates reality with the crisis: the self remains trapped in and controlled by the crisis, unable to escape its influence or envision alternative meaning constructs (Schore 2001, p. 237). The ‘reflective’ stance is able to see the wider context in which difficulties unfold and reflect on possible interpretations and contributions to the crisis or challenge, from an often defensive but more stable mental state. Lastly, the ‘mindfulness’ stance integrates full awareness of the challenges of the present moment with a neutral curiosity toward whatever unfolds; without any external change, mindfulness carries a sense of both connection and even contentment (Wallin 2007, pp. 137–39).

These contributions from social psychology show how Holling’s model of adaptive change can work in individuals and societies: communities that include sufficiently stable and healthy relational bonds build the psychological foundations through which to transcend suffering and embrace a vision of meaning and purpose beyond specific moments of disruption. With sufficiently connected foundations, the greatest disruptions actually have the potential to allow forces to emerge that transcend the greatest forms of human suffering and create space for evolved organizational forms. Biehl and Locke describe this sociological approach in ethnographic studies with poor urban communities in Brazil and Bosnia-Herzegovina: notably, this empowering lens respects the agency and potential in these communities for the process of ‘becoming’:

individual and collective struggles [can] come to terms with events and intolerable conditions and [can] shake loose, to whatever degree possible, from determinants and definitions . . . [I]n contexts of clinical and political-economic crisis . . . the unexpected happens every day, and new causalities come into play [for] human efforts to exceed and escape forms of knowledge and power and to express desires that might be world altering. (Biehl and Lock 2010, p. 317)

These cycles of disruption and adaptive change offer a useful lens through which to examine crises and resilience; but how helpful are they in the face of the unprecedented disruptions of today? The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating climate change have left the entire world reeling. To explore the potential for this approach to deal with current crises, this paper will first more thoroughly analyze a specific successful example: how the country of Switzerland used pandemics of the past to forge a notably resilient, stable, and functional democracy.

### 3. A Contextual Example: How Switzerland Used Historic Pandemics to Build Socioecological Resilience

In discussions of modern democracies, Switzerland always emerges as a shining example. Nestled at the crossroads of Germanic, Latin, and Slavic cultures, this tiny country somehow manages to perform astonishingly well on index after index: among the very highest for political rights, civil liberties, freedom of the press, wealth per capita, economic competitiveness, human development, quality of life, ecological sustainability, and political transparency (and, therefore, lowest for political corruption).<sup>5</sup> Switzerland's unique system uses a political economy that combines direct democracy, multi-party collaborative political coalitions, and an approach to capitalism that prioritizes access, transparency, and the middle class (Lucchi 2017). As a result, Switzerland represents the kind of adaptive panarchy described above: it has experienced relatively less COVID-19 disruption and a comparatively fast economic recovery (SWI 2021). How did Switzerland develop such a robust, resilient society?

Although a combination of factors contributed to modern day Swiss democracy, a large part of the credit apparently goes to past pandemics. In 1867, a cholera epidemic spread rapidly in Zurich, particularly in the poorest areas. The new public health authorities tried to contain the spread and unite the community, but wealthier residents fled to the countryside, and nearly 500 people died. Zurich citizens had prided themselves on their just and equitable society; many were truly shocked at the actual disparity in health and economic vulnerability that cholera had uncovered. The resulting demonstrations led to a power shift away from wealthy families and toward more democratic rule.<sup>6</sup> Zurich implemented a new local constitution that allowed for direct democracy through referendum; soon other cantons followed suit, ending with a new federal constitution in 1874 that lasted until 1999 (O'Sullivan 2020).

Not far away, in Basel, cholera and then typhus had recently claimed the lives of thousands. Similar to Zurich, reform included a collaboration between former conservative elites and the new, more liberal centers of gravity; in efforts to promote both health and equity, medieval city walls came down, open gardens sprung up, and primary schools eliminated tuition and added large windows for plenty of fresh air and sunlight. By the late 19th Century, organized labor had helped end child labor and established workers' rights and other socialist reforms, which spread across the whole country (Habicht 2008, pp. 129–37).

Importantly, both of these cities embraced the interplay among various centers of power—merchant guilds, wealthy dynastic families, workers unions, and Protestant and Catholic religious bodies.<sup>7</sup> Within the context of a strong sense of connectedness for the wider community, the evolution of Swiss democracy included a push and pull in which governance regularly shifted from election to election. Key leaders gracefully—albeit reluctantly—relinquished their power and respected this ebb and flow as part of a larger picture of change over time. In Zurich, Alfred Escher had established some of the most

important institutions for modern day Swiss technology and economics before he was forced to give way to new liberal leaders (FDFA 2020). On the other side of the political spectrum in Basel, Wilhelm Klein's far-sighted vision for social equity simply overwhelmed conservative concerns, such that he lost his position to more conservative and religious leaders (Habicht 2008, p. 135). In 1918, the Swiss intentionally implemented proportional representation rather than majority voting, thus solidifying their system of compromise and collaboration among many political parties (Nappey 2010, pp. 68, 78).

The traditionalism of Swiss culture must remain front and center in this picture. As another example of connectional stability, Swiss culture rejects progress for its own sake. Women did not achieve suffrage, for example, until 1971, with the most conservative areas holding out until forced to concede in 1990 (Nappey 2010, p. 78). Even today, Swiss people prioritize traditional, closely knit family culture as a primary source of social support (SWI 2017). Their skepticism is understandable: in a carefully engineered society that ticks along like a well-made watch, why fix something that is not demonstrably broken? Somehow, the Swiss embody the panarchy—integrating both protest and conservatism, innovation and slow deliberation—with an eye toward overall socioecological resilience.

Interestingly—and not accidentally—these historical pandemics also unfolded in a theological context of comparative tolerance and notable humanism, a sense of connection with all humanity. Various influential thinkers from Erasmus to Calvin found both physical and intellectual refuge in cities like Basel, Zurich, and Geneva, partly through open-minded universities and an enthusiasm for the access offered by the printing press. A true cultural crossroads, Basel in particular tended toward tolerance over bloodshed (Habicht 2008, p. 64–84). Prior to the brutal Thirty Years' War, the loosely connected cantons of Switzerland had already gone through their own, comparatively mild upheaval and hammered out a way for each canton to choose its Protestant or Catholic identity (Nappey 2010, pp. 30–37). The evolution of its contextual theology clearly played a significant role in Switzerland's ability to withstand, manage, and benefit from disruption.

#### 4. Connectional Theological Ethics That Transcend Disruption

As a foundational part of the human experience, disruption naturally plays a central role in theological meaning constructs for human societies. Prophets of the Hebrew Bible recognize disruption in the cosmos, in communities, and in the form of intentional sign act protests, as both indictment of current injustice and the inbreaking promise of future justpeace.<sup>8</sup> Frequently using birth symbols, these prophets, along with psalmists and other biblical writers, holistically capture the inequitable and devastating impacts of crises, while they simultaneously situate disruption within a larger theological and metaphysical frame in which the Sacred Cosmos unfolds through a power greater than any individual moment of suffering, liberation, or healing. This section explores the ways disruption theologies have offered meaning constructs that transcend the destructiveness of disruption and how to apply this approach more broadly to climate disruption.

##### 4.1. Disruption Theologies of Healing and Abundance

The cosmic frame mentioned above, within which earthly disruptions occur, offers a meaning construct that includes human suffering and yet transcends it. Ancient and modern theologians continually explore the various dimensions of the inherent challenge of human and earthly suffering, tackling its thorny complexities head on: Can suffering ever be considered inherently good? If healing follows pain, does that end 'justify the means,' making the pain ethically 'good'?<sup>9</sup> What ethics apply when one person's struggle represents another's healing liberation? How do ancient and modern martyrs achieve such deep inner peace that they joyfully embrace what normally looks like traumatic tragedy? Are experiences of suffering and transcendence therefore mutually exclusive, or a matter of interpretation, spiritual maturity, or even choice?<sup>10</sup> How do these interpretations of human suffering—and healing—integrate with and/or apply to the rest of Creation?<sup>11</sup> Lastly, how

can we apply the theological ethics of disruption to the wider issue of climate disruption and its role in human meaning?<sup>12</sup>

As these important questions show, theology must offer frameworks that incorporate both the destructive and creative aspects of disruption in order to offer ultimate meaning and hope in the face of humanity's great challenges. The following two examples show how models of adaptive change can apply in the exploration of some of these theological questions.

Calling today's landscape of intersectional oppression and socioecological destruction "radical evil", Christine M. Smith draws upon themes from liberation theology to argue for the potential of preaching to create connective space that allows for deep transformation. She contends that a combination of homiletical weeping, confession, and resistance builds a communal foundation strong enough to carry both the fullness of suffering and the possibility of hope. Faithful weeping, like biblical lament, offers an expression of radical faith, a proclamation of "life in the midst of death . . . hope in the midst of despair". Likewise, confession that embraces the full truth of our diverse, complex, challenging reality leads to resilient forms of hope that "resist the seductions of segmenting life, reducing life's complexities to false simplicity, or collapsing life's paradoxes to immobilizing moralisms". Lastly, faithful resistance intentionally turns toward the most difficult challenges of our time; the transcendent frame in this example relies on openness to the movement of the Spirit through all persons and creatures. Beyond "truthful speech", homiletical resistance confronts radical evil with integrity by inspiring acts of courageous discipleship that transcend the fear that disruption can bring based on a sense of trust in a larger historical and pneumatological paradigm (Smith 1992, pp. 4–5).

Like Smith, Traci C. West also explores the ethics of resistance in the face of massive forces of societal oppression. For West, suffering caused by intentional disruption counterbalances existing, oppression-based suffering; therefore, a larger vision of ultimate justice both motivates and transcends individual moments of suffering. West urges an intentionally disruptive social ethic, "to find a way to force a rupture between prevailing cultural arrangements of power that reproduce oppressive conditions, like poverty, and communal tolerance for permanently maintaining such conditions" (West 2006, p. xviii). She suggests the intentional use of diverse resources to forge stronger communal connections that reveal and reshape unexamined theological assumptions:

Multicultural theoretical approaches can assist Christians in making liturgical choices that enhance their recognition of human diversity as good, as well as their intolerance for unjust social relationships among diverse human communities. Multicultural understandings can offer guidance in creating worship rituals where Christians are more likely to be offered the chance to participate in disrupting a commitment to white dominance than encouraged in going along with it and similar repressive social practices. (West 2006, p. 134)

Both Smith and West intentionally utilize strategic disruption as a way to address other forms of oppression-based disruption. This approach harnesses the adaptive potential of connectional bonds by introducing targeted disruption into the overall communal system, as a way to spur reorganization for the goal of new levels of socioecological justice. They employ theologies that include and transcend disruption, such as the integration of lament as an expression of radical faith, and the call to turn toward suffering with a moral courage that arises from a wider vision more powerful than human fears.

In terms of climate disruption, people understandably often assume the goal for adaptive change to include humanity's survival; yet scientific and ethical honesty compels us to consider the possibility of human annihilation and to examine whether these adaptive models and related theological meaning constructs still hold. To explore this challenge, we turn next to concepts that arise from a community that regularly and intentionally faces the question of survival: those who practice and teach survival skills.

#### 4.2. The Contributions of Survival Non-Attachment to a Climate Resilience Mindset

Wilderness and disaster survival practitioners offer a useful approach through which to consider human and planetary survival because they have long studied the factors that make the difference between life and death in extreme situations. In addition to obvious preparatory and response skills, they work to build a foundational source of survival resilience: the ‘Survival Mindset.’ Without this mindset, people cannot effectively utilize the practices and resources available to them in survival situations. In short, the mindset itself often plays the biggest role in whether or not someone survives, and a key part of this mindset includes letting go of the fear of death. To put it another way, true survivalists practice non-attachment about survival itself as a way to survive (McMahon 2010; Pollard 2012).

Survival ‘non-attachment’ can feel counterintuitive or confusing unless carefully distinguished from either ‘detachment’ or ‘attachment.’ In ‘detachment,’ people respond to frustration or suffering by complete withdrawal from the pursuit of temporal goals, effectively ‘giving up.’ Unlike the secure attachment bonds described above, survival ‘attachment’ involves the fixation on temporal goals in the hopes that their achievement will bring fulfillment. In contrast to both alternatives, ‘non-attachment’ involves “a transcendent evenness of mind which enables one to participate in the temporal process without attachment”. In other words, release of attachments to specific goals, through the focus on a larger frame that transcends those smaller goals, paradoxically enables a fuller engagement in their pursuit, and therefore, a higher chance of actually achieving the goals (Nagley 1954, p. 307). The concept of ‘transcendence,’ both as used here and in this overall discussion, does not have to include specific theological commitments, but simply a wider understanding or framework that allows individual events to continue to ‘make sense’ and even contribute toward a broader purpose or meaning construct.

Despite the widespread popularity of both the concept and practice of non-attachment, it seems to hit a wall when confronted with its ultimate test. Applying it to the largest climate issues generates an explosion of resistance. Is it possible to expand survivalist approaches to non-attachment to include climate devastation, our children’s future, and the survival of all humankind? Ironically, the great difficulty in letting go of these attachments indicates the even greater importance for developing the Climate Resilience Mindset through non-attachment to these exact ideas and outcomes. Moreover, non-attachment addresses the demands of compassion: it effectively both embodies and reinforces our commitment to the places of deepest suffering.

Frances Moore Lappé describes this counterintuitive effect in *Eco-Mind: Changing the Way We Think, to Create the World We Want* (Lappé 2011). Lappé argues that certain modes of thought around climate change—what she calls “Thought Traps”—appear helpful and logical on the surface, but they actually reinforce a sense of isolation and scarcity that freezes us in overwhelming despair:

It’s too late! Human beings have so far overshot what nature can handle that we’re beyond the point of no return. Democracy has failed—it’s taking way too long to face the crisis. And because big corporations hold so much power, real democracy, answering to us and able to take decisive action, is a pipe dream. (Lappé 2011, p. 145)

While she acknowledges the stark reality of climate disruption, Lappé uses the present reality of suffering to challenge the utility of narratives of scarcity:

Half the world is getting by right now on a daily sum equal to the price of a single American latté—or less. About 1 billion of us lack the food and water we need. In the Global North, millions are struggling and stressed as well. Even before the Great Recession, it was estimated that almost 60 percent of Americans will live in poverty for at least a year during their adult lives. In short, catastrophe is already the daily experience of huge numbers.

So here’s my question: Too late for what? (Lappé 2011, p. 146)

In contrast, she advocates an intentional shift to narratives that face our current reality with a focus on connection, which generates resolve, joy, gratitude, and abundance:

I agree . . . it is too late to prevent massive change in the climate we humans have taken for granted for thousands of years. Erratic, extreme, and destructive weather is already with us. It is too late to prevent suffering. Terrible suffering is already with us.

But it is not too late for life. Life loves life . . . That's just what we do. In other words, the very essence of life, including the version we call human, isn't changed by climate chaos. It is not too late to be ourselves. In fact, for our species, with its passion for shared action toward common ends, maybe now is the time to be alive.

When facing staggering setbacks . . . most human beings don't end up ruining life. What makes us miserable isn't a big challenge. It's feeling futile, alone, confused, discounted—in a word, powerless. By contrast, those confronting daunting obstacles, but joined with others in common purpose, have to me often seemed to be the most alive. (Lappé 2011, p. 146)

Importantly, Lappé demonstrates not only acceptance of the realities of the climate crisis but also a practical approach that does not rely on limited definitions of success. Through these thought traps and their alternatives, Lappé points to the possibility of a wider, more resilient vision: the possibility of unshakeable hope as part of a transcendent socioecological framework large enough to include even worst-case climate futures.

#### 4.3. *Non-Attached, Unshakeable Hope as an Adaptive Framework for Climate Theology*

Discussions of the climate crisis inevitably include the question of hope. Common interpretations of hope hinge on the 'success' of certain tangible goals—hope *for* specific outcomes; yet as noted above, determination of adaptive 'success' depends on the definition of success. In the survivalist mindset, ultimate 'success' does not necessarily require survival itself but rather the ability to maintain intentional, mindful, grounded internal focus, regardless of the external outcome. The ability to be mindful in survival situations arises from an unshakeable connection to concepts of success that transcend survival for both self and other. These understandings of success reflect the 'most alive' feeling Lappé notes, which come from the conviction that there are things worth doing, regardless of the outcome. In the doing itself, with the sense of shared purpose toward a noble cause, a seemingly doomed event transforms into a 'finest hour.'<sup>13</sup>

This discussion highlights the need to reclaim wider conceptions of hope itself. The word 'hope' has always included multiple meanings. The most common usage, attached to specific outcomes, helps clarify goals, inspires a sense of excitement, and focuses efforts, yet it also carries a downside. When a situation does not work out the way people hope it will, they can feel destabilized, like the sense of a rug being pulled out from underneath. This externally-dependent, fragile kind of hope can plummet quickly into a sense of failure, depression, and despair.

An older definition of hope conveys a 'hopefulness,' or 'trust,' not necessarily associated with any particular outcome.<sup>14</sup> This non-attached hope arises out of a deeper sense of meaning and purpose: the determination to remain faithful to shared principles and a wider vision, no matter what happens.<sup>15</sup> It embodies the sense of the greater worth of a life well-lived, regardless of what happens. This kind of hope transcends attachment to specific outcomes; therefore, in theory, it persists regardless of survival, even the survival of all humankind.<sup>16</sup> It inspires the ability to 'go for broke': as Lappé describes above, the sense that these intense moments can enable us to reach deep inside ourselves and find the hopeful place that nothing can touch—even death.<sup>17</sup> This kind of hope is truly unshakeable.

Ethically speaking, the concept of unshakeable climate hope arises through deontological faithfulness, 'doing what is right,' rather than as the result of teleological survival. Theologically, it suggests the necessity of letting go of the attachment to survival in order



to find true liberation, or salvation. Many biblical stories reflect this call for faithfulness, such as to a larger vision and covenant for justpeace, over attachment to survival; these stories used community narratives to invite readers to find that kind of unshakeable vision and hope in their own times of disruption and despair.<sup>18</sup> In the face of climate despair, these narratives can be applied interpretively today in similar ways: for example, Moses faithfully led the people to the Promised Land, knowing he would not enter it; in today's terms, can the reader, too, work for the healing of Earth, even if humanity as a species will no longer dwell there? As the early church knew, Jesus and Paul each chose to journey to Jerusalem knowing full well the powerful forces that threatened their lives. The authors of the gospels had already experienced the utter devastation of the Jewish War, yet they still held to the transcendent purpose of Jesus and Paul, a vision greater than survival: a healing rebirth, resurrection, or liberation, from brokenness and oppression. Can the reader, too, choose faithfulness and liberation over survival?

These narratives are not outdated, limited examples of smaller crises and disruptions. Rather, they arise out of overwhelming suffering and destruction and unflinchingly face the hardest questions of what it means to be human: when push really, truly comes to shove, where is a larger vision and purpose? How can communities find it, and how can it offer divine salvation? The book of Revelation offers yet another example: even in the midst of the most terrifying situation imaginable—where “nations will be in anguish and chaos at the roaring and tossing of the sea . . . People will faint from terror, fearful of what is coming on the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken”—the author urges the readers to “stand up and lift up your heads. New life, redemption, is drawing near”.<sup>19</sup> These passages speak *precisely* to very human attachments, fears, and suffering in the face of planetary annihilation.

These disruption-based narratives present three main ideas to the reader. First, they offer understanding and compassion: they validate the overwhelming fear, suffering, chaos, and destruction of crises. Second, they offer a theological framework, or container, big enough to carry the crisis, no matter how big it is. They repeatedly situate end-of-the-world scenarios into a larger vision of cosmic justpeace, which calls humanity to faithful participation in a hope grounded in something bigger than our own survival.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, they personally invite the reader into the vision.

Eucharist theologies provide a good example of such a broad, invitational vision: the brokenness of crucifixion, symbolized in the broken bread and poured-out cup, offers validation and compassion for the suffering, fear, and sense of chaos experienced within disruptive crises. The larger resurrection vision of cycles of death and rebirth, as part of the liberative salvation process of a Divine Creation, offers the container of meaningful hope that interprets crises as part of cycles of adaptive change that ultimately bring the Cosmos closer to the Divine kin-dom. Finally, Eucharist narratives also invite the reader to participate in this courageous, hopeful vision, embodied in the communal ritual itself. They offer the disrupted, broken bread and poured-out cup to the reader, as if to say, here, amidst brokenness, is a communion, a connection, that yields abundant life: will you receive it?

As with the disruptive theological ethics described earlier, a theology of unshakeable hope does not passively accept suffering, deny it, sanitize it, or condone it. It does not rest upon simple reassurances of a happy afterlife. It does not flow from places of privilege, shielded from the worst effects of disruption. These expressions of transcendent peace and courage arise from the oppressed margins, as from generations of brutally enslaved Africans who insist, ‘This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,’ and, ‘I ain’t gonna let nobody turn me ‘round.’<sup>21</sup> In popular culture examples, they urge us to *run toward* what is coming, shouting, “Death! Ride, ride to ruin and the world’s ending!” (Tolkien 1995, p. 826). They sing, “Let the sky fall; when it crumbles, we will stand tall, face it all together” (Adkins et al. 2012).

These examples show how other generations have also faced the possibility of annihilation and still found sources of unshakeable hope. We must also find a way through this climate crisis that not only acknowledges the real possibility of human annihilation but

also uses this possibility as a powerful resource for even greater inspiration, resolve, and courage—as Tinyiko Maluleke says, “to make peace with death, not merely to accept its inevitable approach, but to actually meet death halfway” (Maluleke 2021, p. 338). These narratives invite the following question: can we, like those who came before us, embrace the healing liberation of our planet, work for it with all our strength, even if we as a species will not survive?

## 5. Conclusions: Are We Able?

In the face of accelerating climate destabilization, efforts to halt and mitigate climate change often try to motivate more engagement through an increasingly determined insistence that if everyone pitches in, we can ‘still turn this ship around.’ These noble efforts to unite and inspire nonetheless cannot adequately address the mounting concerns of more and more citizens, people who want to do their part but feel increasingly terrified and hopeless.<sup>22</sup>

Socioecological models of adaptive change offer a helpful way forward, providing frameworks for non-attached hope that enable us to transcend the question of our own survival. These adaptive models illustrate how resilience can evolve through cycles of disruption and reorganization. As illustrated by the positive consequences of historic Swiss pandemics, successful adaptive change requires robust connectedness as both the foundation for successful recovery and the source of potential for new concepts and structures of resilience. Thus, in terms of planetary climate disruption, humanity’s role contributes just one part of a larger picture of planetary adaptation: rather than fixation on survival, we can mindfully redefine ‘success’ as the greatest possible human contribution to the overall socioecological connectivity and therefore adaptive resilience of the planetary panarchy. By providing this larger framework, these models offer a non-attached, mindfulness-based process through which to transform burnout, overwhelming feelings, anxiety, and despair into resources for motivation, courage, and resolve.

These sociological frameworks go hand in hand with many theologies of disruption, which also offer unshakeable hope in a vision larger than human survival. As Cornel West says, “These oppressive systems are mighty; but they are never almighty. What breaks the back of fear? Love. And love is the ability to learn how to die” (West 2017). These theologies insist that humanity already bears witness to the labor, travail, and birth pangs of Creation’s Promised Land. Whether we survive to participate in it or not may depend on our ability to call forth a sacrifice of praise for something bigger than our own survival, thereby setting us free to work for this greater vision with bottomless wells of courage and hope. This audacious kind of liberation theology invites us not just to face our own annihilation, but to do what seems impossible: to embrace this moment, and sing.

From a foundation of powerful, enduring connections, with one another, their shared vision, and the Creation, our biblical faith ancestors clearly found the courage to do the impossible. They let go of survival for something bigger, an enduring vision of cosmic justice. Their stories invite us to ask ourselves the same, age-old question as well, which still ‘whispers down eternity’: are we able?

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## Notes

- 1 For an overview of the empathy–altruism hypothesis, see (Davies and Frawley-O’Dea 1994, p. 65); for secure attachment and mindfulness, see (Wallin 2007, p. 4).
- 2 For example, the socioecological theories of Deleuze and Guattari on synergistic, interconnected becoming (esp. Deleuze and Guattari 1987), (see Michon 2021), and the socioecological resilience theories of adaptive change (Holling 2001).
- 3 Holling quotes Schumpeter here (Holling 2001, p. 395), who actually argued that capitalism would eventually destroy itself through this process; see (Schumpeter 1950, pp. 82–83, 139).
- 4 From *Panarchy* edited by Lance H. Gunderson and C.S. Holling. Copyright© 2002 Island Press. Reproduced by permission of Island Press, Washington, DC (Gunderson and Holling 2002).
- 5 For various indexes, see (Schwab and Zahidi 2020, p. 15; TEIU 2020, p. 9; RWB 2021; FH 2020; TI 2021; Mercer 2019; UNDP 2020; Mulhern 2021). Note that like everywhere, Swiss history includes success and failure: for example, the cautionary tale of the effective but highly toxic pesticide DDT, for which a Swiss scientist received the Nobel Prize. Subsequent use in warfare and awareness of its danger to human ecological health helped give the Swiss their understandable ambivalence about scientific and technological ‘progress’ (Buschle and Hagmann 2015, pp. 103–7).
- 6 Many authors have noted the opposite scenarios, in which pandemics result in, or are exploited for, further power imbalance and oppressive or exploitative social structures, e.g., (Maluleke 2021, pp. 328–30; Klein 2007, pp. 8–20).
- 7 Although it is tempting to view Swiss banking as an aberration, its mixed history reflects the same push and pull among the values of neutrality, protection of privacy, conservatism, innovation, equity, and democracy, such that despite valid criticisms, Swiss people do not view their banks and banking history in a simple and negative light; for a good summary, see (Thomasson 2013).
- 8 For example, see (Alter 2019, e.g., pp. 617–20).
- 9 As noted, many scholars have offered theological frameworks that harmonize this apparent paradox; see particularly (Sölle 1975, e.g., p. 164) and a more recent comprehensive overview (Merrigan and Glorieux 2012). Others have explored the idea of suffering as much broader than pain and requiring physical, psychological, and spiritual resources; see (Amato and Monge 1990, e.g., p. 15).
- 10 Biblical writings obviously vary; in addition to ideas of Divinity as ‘Love, broadly defined,’ other passages depict a Divine Sovereign who intentionally inflicts vengeful suffering on both humans and Creation, and not always for the sake of justice. Understandably, such narratives cause confusion: is not every divine act necessarily ‘good’? Some scholars argue that these texts satirically describe a ‘Monster God,’ as a way to criticize unjust human rulers by disguising them as Yahweh in the narratives. Simple interpretations nonetheless lead to theologies of inherently redemptive suffering, which cause highly problematic religious frameworks. Beyond simple comfort in divine omnipotence, such ideas have been used to justify, perpetuate, and even glorify the unjust suffering of children, women, enslaved peoples, and otherkind. The idea that Jesus *willingly* bore the cross—a symbol of unjust torture and execution—gets twisted around and used to pressure people to feel grateful for trauma. For the Monster God hypothesis, see (Fretheim 1994, pp. 361, 364; Crenshaw 2005, p. 179; Panchansky 1999, pp. 5–17); for a summary of the problematic of redemptive suffering, see (Trible 1984, pp. 2–5; Fitzpatrick et al. 2016).
- 11 Of course, Leonardo Boff addresses this question exquisitely (Boff 1997, esp. pp. 104–14); for climate change specific discussions, see also (Estok 2019; Wapner 2014; Berzonsky and Moser 2017, e.g., pp. 163–64).
- 12 Susanne C. Moser discusses this issue in terms of new leadership strategies needed today (Moser 2012).
- 13 A recent article about pandemic resilience references the film *Apollo 13*, which depicts the incredible series of challenges that were overcome in order to bring the astronauts back to Earth alive. The author suggests that this historic moment offers “a great example of how to rise to a challenge for which there was no playbook or blueprint, with resourcefulness and determination”. In particular, he notes the powerful impact of narratives and frameworks: this space mission “could be the worst disaster NASA’s ever experienced”, vs. “With all due respect, sir: I believe this is going to be our finest hour” (Eriksen 2020). These examples allude to Winston Churchill’s speeches during World War II, which relied on wider concepts of success to inspire common purpose toward noble causes, his definition of a ‘finest hour’ (for a good summary analysis, see HOTN 2000).
- 14 This somewhat archaic usage can be found in many dictionaries; for example, see (Merriam-Webster 2022). For an overview of different understandings of hope, see (McCarroll 2014, pp. 7–16).
- 15 Sometimes these two ideas are distinguished by the terminology of ‘hopes’ (attached to outcomes) vs. ‘hope’ (larger sense of hopefulness); see (McCarroll 2014, p. 24).
- 16 Alexander Hampton talks about the need to reconsider the role of humanity in nature in order to implement the highly effective solutions we already have at our disposal; the pandemic and the climate crisis disrupt our assumptions about human agency and authority and offer opportunities to consider more eco-centric perspectives that may have felt unimaginable in the past. See (Hampton 2021, pp. 17–9, 57). In the same volume, Lisa Sideris describes ways to decenter humanity that yield both humility and courage (Sideris 2021, pp. 202–3, 209–10, 214–15).
- 17 Jürgen Moltmann attributes this kind of eschatological despair to the human tendency to want to be in control, or godlike; this desire stems from the sin of pride and thus results in the sin of despair, in which we no longer engage in what we are called to do

and become. To escape this eschatological despair, we give up and try to reconcile ourselves to, or rationalize, the status quo. See (Moltmann 1993, pp. 20–22).

18 For a summary of the role of the reader in biblical narratives, see (Ska 1990, pp. 61–63). For an example of the application of a biblical, cosmic frame in which to situate the current pandemic and other crisis, see (Claassens 2021, esp. pp. 271–75).

19 My interpretive translation of Luke 21: 25–28.

20 See (Vaai 2021, pp. 213–14) for a blended Wesleyan and Samoan example of a cosmic-centered, rather than human-centered, theology of pandemic and climate disruption.

21 Lyrics from African American spirituals; Howard Thurman writes about this present moment-focused eschatological hope, based on knowledge of the sacredness of the inmost self (Thurman 1979, pp. 217–18). For more examples of theologies of hope in the face of death, see (McCarroll 2014, esp. pp. 35–37).

22 The New York Times just published yet another article about the epidemic of climate anxiety (Barry 2022).

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