

# Review of Jan Jorrit Hasselaar's *Climate Change, Radical Uncertainty and Hope: Theology and Economics in Conversation*, Amsterdam University Press 2023, 180 pp.

Steven C. van den Heuvel  
*ETF Leuven*

Readers of the *JETR* probably do not need convincing that there is promise in the dialogue between the disciplines of economics and theology—but should there nevertheless be any doubters, these can now be pointed to a great new addition to this field, in the form of Jan Jorrit Hasselaar's book, *Climate Change, Radical Uncertainty and Hope: Theology and Economics in Conversation*. This is the published version of Hasselaar's PhD dissertation, which he defended at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 2021. Hasselaar, a theologian and economist, takes as his starting point the context of the climate emergency. To battle this emergency, he argues that we need both disciplines, since each of them brings crucial insights to the table.

The methodological framework Hasselaar uses in this regard is that of transversal reasoning—drawing specifically on the outworking of this framework by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, who does so in a postfoundational manner. Crucial for van Huyssteen's method to work, there needs to be a focus not on a-contextual concepts, but on *specific theologians interacting on a specific issue*. Hasselaar abides by Huysteen's approach by bringing theology and economics into dialogue on the issue of climate change and—in so doing—by working with specific interlocutors.

On the side of economics, he chooses as his interlocutors Bart Nooteboom, Samuel Bowles, Dan Ariely, and John Kay & Mervyn King. On the side of theology, he has only one interlocutor: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020), former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. Sacks thought deeply about the nature of hope in the context of radical uncertainty. In his reflections on the book of Exodus, he argues that God pulls his people towards the promised land, acting first, but then inviting their participation in his action. This is action against an 'open future', in a context of uncertainty. Hasselaar quotes Sacks on "... the constitutive uncertainty of our lives as we walk towards the undiscovered country called the future" (Sacks 2012, 96). Towards this open and uncertain future, we should act with *emunah* (a form of trust) and with *chessed* (a form of love). Hope, then, for Sacks, is a moral and motivational commitment, an engagement towards a better tomorrow, in which we ourselves are actively involved.

Hasselaar argues that these and other reflections by Sacks on the nature of hope resonate well with insights developed by the economists with whom he interacts. Hasselaar argues, for example, for the proximity between Sacks and the economist Samuel Bowles (2016). The latter speaks about ‘social preferences,’ by which Bowles “refers to ethical and other-regarding motives” (Hasselaar 2023, 108). Hasselaar calls this ‘social preference 1,’ stating, “Sacks and Bowles converge in the view that human motivation goes beyond self-interest, by arguing for *chessed* (Sacks) and for social preference 1 (Bowles)” (110, italics original). This chiming of viewpoints between theology and economics not only can be mutually fruitful, Hasselaar argues, but also is important, in the context of the radical uncertainty brought about by climate change.

There are many things I like about this book. First, I see it as an excellent example of public theology done well. Hasselaar—who currently works also as public theologian at the Vrije Universiteit—offers a textbook example of how public theology aims to contribute to the *general* discourse around pressing societal issues. The aim of this endeavour is not to develop a specifically Christian viewpoint such as (in this case) the ethical challenge of climate change. Instead, the Christian tradition is a conversation partner in a wider dialogue. A good description of the task of public theology is offered by the Czech Catholic theologian Tomáš Halík. According to him, public theology “has to express itself in language that is comprehensible beyond the boundaries of theological academia and the Church. ... Public theologians strive to comment competently, intelligibly, and credibly on events in public life, society, and culture” (Halík 2024, 23). Hasselaar’s project is an excellent example of such a public theology.

A second point of appreciation that I would like to mention is the nuanced and rich treatment of *hope* offered by Hasselaar. In the context of climate change, we are often treated to an unhelpful binary between (naïve) optimism, on the one hand (for example, among some eco-modernists), and pessimistic despair, on the other hand (for example, among some that are affiliated to the Extinction Rebellion movement). In contrast to both, Hasselaar offers an account of hope that eschews the laziness that can come from optimism, as well as the resignation that can come from despair; instead, he “sees hope as a journey in which people gradually learn how to include the ones yet excluded, here among others the climate, people in areas affected by climate change, climate-refugees, young people and yellow vests. The journey of hope is not a straight line or a smooth path” (153). This is an apt description of hope as a virtue, one of increasing importance in our warming world.

Despite the overall appreciation I have for Hasselaar’s book, critical questions can be asked about it as well. First, while Sacks’ thinking on the nature of ‘hope’ affords rich opportunities for dialogue with economics, it does strike me as peculiar that Hasselaar, a Christian theologian, makes no use of the thought of ‘the’ theologian of hope, Jürgen Moltmann (1926–2024). Moltmann became famous because of his book *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Moltmann 1964), in which he argues for a fundamental re-evaluation of Christian eschatology: instead of being treated in the last chapters of handbooks on dogmatics, the

expectation of the completion of Christ's *Parousia* should be the central orientation point for Christian theology, as it decisively colors dogmatics as well as ethics. Consequently, Moltmann argues for an anticipatory ethics of hope: contrasting a closed, deterministic view of the future (a *futurum* view, which extrapolates what we think we know about the world and about ourselves) with an open, hopeful view (an *adventus* view, in which there is room for genuine new-ness). In his later work, he renames this distinction as one between an apocalyptic (closed) view of the future, versus an eschatological (open) one. Moltmann's outworking of this eschatological view deeply resonates with Sack's account of hope, and I believe that it would have strengthened the theological character of Hasselaar's project if he had made this connection.

Second, while one of course always must limit oneself in terms of literature used, it is in my view a missed opportunity that Hasselaar does not refer to various contemporary interdisciplinary research projects on hope. There is *The Hope Project*, an interdisciplinary research consortium of which I am a part; we have published on the dialogue between economics and theology in understanding hope (van den Heuvel & Nullens 2018 and van den Heuvel 2020). Others do important interdisciplinary work on hope in the context of the climate crisis. One example of this is the work of the Canadian hope researcher Elin Kelsey, who wrote the important book *Hope Matters: Why Changing the Way We Think Is Critical to Solving the Environmental Crisis* (Kelsey 2020). A more concerted effort at cross-referencing with these and other initiatives might have been beneficial: mutual interaction between hope scholars is to be encouraged, particularly as there is great potential for mutual enrichment.

These critical points stand, however, as footnotes to an overall positive recommendation of this valuable and important book.

## References

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