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# ON Earth AS IT IS IN Heaven

## ASPECTS OF JURGEN MOLTSMANN'S THEOLOGY

Kelly Carter

Like those to whom Paul writes in II Thessalonians, churches of Christ must be careful not to allow their beliefs concerning heaven inhibit the carrying out of their responsibilities in and for the world. Our confidence in God to bring about a "new eternal day" can dull our sensitivities to the work God wishes for us to do in the present, because we expect a mansion at sometime in the future. However, where Thessalonian Christians blatantly ceased from personal efforts to keep ahead economically (they quit working in their secular occupations because they thought the second coming imminent), the effects of our attention to riches in eternal glory may be more subtle and widespread. Specifically, our "otherworldly" perspective may hinder our efforts both to raise the standard of living of the poor today and to work for the freedom of the oppressed in the contemporary world, because we expect their present misery to be compensated in the "sweet by and by." Have we let our focus on some biblical themes, such as eternal life or forgiveness of sin, lead us to de-emphasize our social responsibilities?

Few contemporary thinkers have so consistently challenged Christians with a this-worldly concern for the poor as German Reformed theologian Jurgen Moltmann. His concern for the poor is a result of his reading of Scripture, his personal experiences, and his contact with contemporary philosophy. As a young man, Moltmann was swept up into the events of World War II, eventually landing in a British prisoner of war camp. While incarcerated, and after his release and subsequent journey back to Germany, Moltmann

longed for solace and for answers as one who was defeated and broken by war. He entered the University of Gottingen and studied philosophy and theology. There, under Hans Joachim Iwand, Ernst Wolf, and Otto Weber, he heard about a crucified God - One with whom the shattered and broken survivors of his generation could identify.<sup>1</sup> He also read

Karl Marx, G.W.F. Hegel, and a contemporary philosopher of hope, Ernst Bloch. All of this helped him conceptualize God as One who is ultimately on the side of the poor and oppressed.

In 1964 Moltmann published **Theologie der Hoffnung** (E.T., **Theology of Hope**, 1967), which brought him to prominence among theologians. Since then he has published a major Christological work, **The Crucified God**; an ecclesiastical treatise, **The Church in the Power of the Spirit**, a volume on the trinity, **The Trinity and the Kingdom; God and Creation**, and numerous works consisting of collected articles or sermons. Three themes which are prominent in his writings form the basis of his concern for the poor — 1. The Future of God; 2. The Crucified God; 3. The Trinitarian History of God. These themes define who God is and what he is doing in the world, and all reflect a concern for the poor. This article will look briefly at these important themes and then evaluate them in light of their usefulness for our tradition.

### The Future of God

Moltmann's views of the last times, or eschatology, are unique. He calls into question traditional beliefs such as the timeless future of eternal life and heaven. These traditional foci, Moltmann contends, are grounded not so much in biblical theology as in the Greek philosophical notions of an immutable, timeless, static God who has prepared an abiding "place" to

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which the redeemed will journey when life has ended. Christian men and women have traditionally centered their aspirations on this "continuing city" to which God will one day transport them; a place where there is no pain, no death, and no sin.

For Moltmann, the traditional notion of a timeless eschatological future works against the "ref-

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ormations, renaissances, and revolutions of external conditions" which Scripture indicates are characteristic of the coming kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup> Christianity was intended by God as a movement and fulfillment of his reign which encompasses a revolution in earthly conditions. For believers to focus on a timeless place to which God will remove them from earthly life, releases them from social responsibilities and makes the present world nothing more than an "insignificant waiting room for the soul's journey to heaven."<sup>3</sup>

From Moltmann's perspective, traditional Christianity has avoided its responsibility to help change the mundane circumstances of the poor by focusing on God's timeless future of eternal life and heaven. Because Christians believe in a better world waiting both for themselves and for all who follow Christ, they are not moved to work to bring about equality and mutual happiness for the poor of the world. One can easily overlook the earthly needs of others when one knows that heaven awaits those who come to Christ. The evangelistic efforts of conservative churches have, therefore, preached a spiritual message of heaven rather than the revolutionary message of "good news to the poor," "freedom for the prisoners," "recovery of sight for the blind," "release [for] the oppressed," or the Lord's jubilee (Luke 4:18-19).

Moltmann proposes an alternative with motivation for social action on behalf of the poor. He presents a system which substitutes, for the eternal, abiding and salvific elements of traditional Christian eschatology, a view of last days grounded in the dynamic and transforming future of God. God's future is revolutionary because it is the **future of God**. God's future is dynamic and open to new possibilities because it is God's **coming future on the way**.<sup>5</sup> And because **God is coming** with a new dynamic future for human-

kind, those living in the present can expect and proleptically<sup>6</sup> anticipate a new existence for the poor and oppressed whom God loves and with whom he identified in Christ. Moltmann calls men and women to recognize and to bring about the influence and reality of God's coming future, today. Anyone who hopes and expects the coming kingdom, replete with righteousness and justice for all, will work to see righteousness and justice realized now.

Lending support to his notion of the coming future of God as a force for social and political change, Moltmann heavily leans on the biblical motifs of promise, hope, and resurrection. He sees both the promises to Abraham in Genesis and the numerous hope oracles in the prophetic literature, as pointing to the coming future of God.<sup>7</sup> A significant force in God's scheme to bring about his future is the power for new possibilities found in the resurrection of Christ. Something new has broken into the world with the resurrection, and the church, as it lives through the power of resurrection, will act as a proleptic anticipation of that to which the resurrection points - God's new future. Moltmann combines hope in the resurrection with God's promises and the open possibilities of the future to influence believers to make positive changes in the world.<sup>8</sup>

He says in **Theology of Hope** that

it is impossible for the man of hope to adopt an attitude of religious and cultic resignation from the world. On the contrary, he is compelled ... to guide all things toward their new being.<sup>9</sup>

Christian faith strives to reach God and Godlikeness by obtaining the ultimate good for humankind; by reaching God's promised future. If God is characterized by freedom, goodness, love, peace, etc., it is logical that hope for his presence and the fulfillment of his promises would include concern for the world. Succinctly put, "Hope in the happiness of the future is realistically present and effective in the criticism of present misery."<sup>10</sup> Those who hope in God's coming future, in his promises, and in the One capable of resurrecting everything to a new existence will work on behalf of the poor.

### THE CRUCIFIED GOD

The personhood and ministry of Jesus, and more specifically the theme of the crucified Christ, is central to Moltmann's entire theological proposal. In fact, Moltmann's view of the resurrection and last days literally arises from the crucifixion.<sup>11</sup>

Moltmann took a theologically significant step forward in **The Crucified God** by carrying the biblical depiction of the crucifixion to what he sees as its logical conclusion. For him the death of Jesus was efficacious in ways usually overlooked by most readers

of the New Testament. Significant here is Moltmann's emphasis on the abandonment by God of One whom he loves and with whom God has been unified. Moltmann calls this rejection "total inextricable abandonment."<sup>12</sup> The Father didn't just "give" or "send" Jesus into the world; instead, the Father "casts out and annihilates" the son and subjects him to the power of Satan's corruption.<sup>13</sup> Then, because Father and Son are one, the Father rejects and separates himself both from the One whom he loves and from the one who is himself. The Father feels the infinite pain of rejecting his Son and of being rejected in his Son.

As Moltmann explores ever deeper the dynamics of the crucifixion and the effect of the cross on the nature of God and on the world, he also examines the relationship between the crucifixion and Christian social consciousness. He concludes that the pain of God on the cross occurs in solidarity with those who suffer and who live with little hope. Moltmann says that God, through the abandonment of the one who suffered, becomes "the crucified God ... near to everyone."<sup>14</sup> The inescapable suffering and despair which is epitomized in so many of the hurting millions on earth is seen, on the cross, to exist in the Holy Father. God's suffering, then, through Jesus and with Jesus, is suffering along with suffering humans. Where once those who suffer on earth appeared to be the ones abandoned by God, now Jesus, through his own abandonment by the Father, brings God - God's sympathy, God's salvation, and God's eternal life - to these hurting ones.<sup>15</sup> In one great act God has endured death, abandoned himself, vicariously suffered with and for humankind, and has entered into a covenant with those who agonize.

Moltmann says that "through sympathy, man corresponds to the pathos of God."<sup>16</sup> The point is that the Christian necessarily suffers with God in total sympathy with his mission. God suffered for others. Because men and women, through Jesus, are in a covenant with God (a God of pathos) they "can take part in the life of others, and can rejoice and suffer with them."<sup>17</sup> In fact, because the mission of God was to suffer for the unfortunates of the world, those who wish to be disciples must carry on that mission. The implication here is revelatory: for one who claims to follow God to ignore personal responsibility in suffering with those who suffer is a direct violation of the personhood and reconciling acts of God! Moltmann says that through his

own abandonment by God, the crucified Christ brings God to those who are abandoned by God. Through his suffering he brings salvation to those who suffer. Through his death he brings

eternal life to those who are dying. And therefore the tempted, rejected, suffering, and dying Christ came to be the center of the religion of the oppressed and the piety of the lost.<sup>18</sup>

Moltmann's perception is that Christian theology has so relegated Christ to a purely "spiritual" function, and thereby ignored the gospel's implications for this world, that Christians have reached a general apathy regarding societal and political evils. Christians have, according to Moltmann, propagated their own "self-confirming society" which is apathetic to the hurting masses and which acts irresponsibly in a diverse world.<sup>19</sup> This apathy cannot be overcome "without the life-giving memory of the suffering of God on the cross."<sup>20</sup> If the church "truly remembers the crucified Christ, it cannot allow a bland, religious indifference to prevail."<sup>21</sup>

### The Trinitarian History of God

In addition to the areas discussed above, Moltmann makes use of several other biblical themes as framework for his concerns. He presents his thoughts concerning the church, creation, freedom, love, the trinity, and what may be called "the dialectic of suffering and resurrection" with eyes turned to the poor. He carefully examines each biblical theme and discerns behind these concepts a God who loves the poor and is working on their behalf. In his look at each theme social justice is the goal toward which

**...the pain of God on the cross occurs in solidarity with those who suffer and who live with little hope. Moltmann says that God, through the abandonment of the one who suffered, becomes "the crucified God ... near to everyone."**

Moltmann directs his insights.<sup>22</sup>

The tying together of all these themes occurs in what Moltmann calls the "trinitarian history of God." This history represents the entire process and history of the world by which God works to bring about the glorification and unification of all things in himself. In creation, the history of Israel, the mission and ministry of Jesus, the glorifying work of the Holy Spirit, and in the church there is a movement toward the final goal and eschatological consummation in God. These elements comprise the trinitarian history of God which

is moving toward the fulfillment of all things.

In this progression, Moltmann conceives of both God and humankind as having a significant role. God is certainly at work within his history, propelling all things forward. But God is not the only one who bears this responsibility. He insists that all of creation, including mankind, must be unified with the Father before the fulfillment of God's kingdom becomes a reality. In fact, it is God's nature and plan that his own final glorification and unity cannot occur until the Spirit of God brings about the unity of all creation with the Father.<sup>23</sup> As long as the world is not glorified, as long as death reigns, as long as men and women are oppressed and have to endure injustice, as long as separation is present between the world and the coming kingdom, God is not finally unified and glorified. This demands, then, that humanity works in this world for the glorification of God. The church liberated by Christ works in history to fulfill the meaning and goal of the history of God. While only God can bring about the final unity within himself, humans are called to a social mission which ultimately effects the completeness of God's glorification.

Moltmann further ties together the earthly mission of Christians with the mission of the trinitarian history of God when he writes,

to proclaim the gospel of the dawning kingdom is the first and most important element in the mission of Jesus, the mission of the Spirit, and the mission of the church; but it is not the only one. Mission embraces all activities that serve to liberate man from his slavery in the presence of the coming God, slavery which extends from economic necessity to God forsakenness.<sup>24</sup>

His point is that the "spiritual" mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God is prior to, but must include, activity on the socio-political level. The two cannot be separated theologically. For him, the forgiveness of sins is no less nor any more a part of the progressing trinitarian history of God moving toward God's unity and glorification than is the physical freeing of the oppressed. As long as social, political, and cultural potentialities exist which will overcome the power of death and help creation to draw closer to the kingdom of God, there is a call for Christian mission.<sup>25</sup>

## Observations

Although this introduction to Moltmann's thought is necessarily brief, it is evident that positive benefit can come to those in churches of Christ by a study of Jurgen Moltmann's thought. His study of biblical themes is rich and deep and will teach those willing to wade through his thick theological jargon. Some of his works are written specifically for those in full-time ministry or church leaders without advanced

theological education. **Experiences of God, On Human Dignity, The Experiment Hope, The Future of Creation, The Passion for Life, and The Power of the Powerless** are places to begin reading Moltmann.

The three themes introduced above are the dominant principles that inform Moltmann's thinking concerning the poor. His treatment of systematic themes and his emphasis on Christian service to the poor can inform churches of Christ at several points. This is possible because Moltmann's status as a thinker and a theologian regarding the poor lies in his grounding of Christian social action in the great systematic themes of Scripture. For example, God as loving creator, Christ as suffering servant, the Spirit as motivator and power source, the cross, resurrection, the church, reconciliation, exodus, sin, and freedom are all central to Moltmann and biblical theology. His focus is on the teaching of the Bible. His wish is to make Christian theology relevant to a world which has misused, abused, and refused to use God.

Much of Moltmann's work, of course, will be unacceptable to those in churches of Christ. His conclusions must be read with the recognition that his final product may include opinions antagonistic to the biblical faith. Much is simply not biblical. His future is too open, too undetermined. Scripture simply does not allow for the ambiguity in God's future which Moltmann asserts.

Moltmann denigrates the place of eternal reward because he believes it justifies social oppression and creates a lack of desire to relieve suffering in the world. Yet, it is not the biblical eschatology which should be altered in order to take away unjust circumstances. What is needed is a positive doctrine of social action built around a theology of love, of sacrificial service, with equal emphasis given to spiritual rebirth.

Neither is Moltmann's view of the cross completely acceptable. While the death of Jesus does stand in judgment over suffering and pain in all of its forms, the salvation which Jesus brings through his death was first intended as the reconciling act offered by God to man. The purpose was forgiveness of sins, not as a by-product, but as the focus of the sacrifice.

Much of Moltmann's motivation for universalizing the liberation of Christ is found in his concern over suffering and the suppression of human rights. He balks at the thought that God would be so cruel as to allow suffering in any form, and that God would then offer eternal life as a belated reward which comes to those who suffer. His answer is that God does not willfully allow suffering, and that God expects his followers to work for the alleviation of suffering in the world. In fact, Christ was crucified in order to nullify the effects of death and to proclaim freedom from suffering for all men. From a biblical perspective suffering and pain can be explained from a vantage

point which need not include the salvation of the whole world.

Moltmann's trinitarian history of God presents the personhood of God as something which changes qualitatively along with historical progress. In this he makes significant departures from the biblical message. God may not be as immutable as conservatives have traditionally allowed, but neither does God's nature need to grow or develop to completeness.

Despite these negatives the treatment Moltmann gives the three themes we have delineated is instructive. The proleptic presence of the future of God is a positive element in his thinking. We have in recent decades not taken seriously enough the coming future of God.<sup>26</sup> We have been justifiably fearful of the excesses of pre-millennial dispensationalism, focusing our thinking on reasons why the second coming of Christ is neither predictable or imminent. But this raises a question, posed to us by Moltmann's eschatology, as to whether or not we have simply become too comfortable with the status quo. We need to take more seriously the concerns of Jesus — "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We would take more seriously the biblical imperative to social action if we sensed the proleptic call of God's coming future.

Christianity has not allowed the coming future to have proper influence in the way it views the hurting, oppressed, or lonely people in this world. Too often the church finds itself too preoccupied by selfish concerns including the maintenance of the institutional church, or it is drawn away from real needs in the present by its vision of an eternal home of rest where no pain will exist. Too often, the North American attitude of manifest destiny has prevented the church from being salt or light, or seeing Christ in the naked and thirsty of the third world. He demands that Christianity allow its concern for the coming kingdom of God to transcend and govern its concern for national economic and political policies. Then, he would say, the Christian faith can positively transform those policies.

Moltmann's explanation of the effects of the cross for Christian life and theology correctly recognizes in Jesus the initiating act which leads to the final defeat of death in all of its forms. From here he is able to view social action as a continuation of the mission of Christ and as a practical carrying out of the effects of the cross. Jesus died for freedom, both spiritual and political, which demands that his followers do likewise. Jesus died as a political agitator, meaning that his death is itself a critique and protest against political authorities. Here Moltmann makes a valuable contribution. The Crucified God should, therefore, be read by

those seeking greater insight into the work of Jesus on the cross. His focus is on the cross of Christ and the centrality of the crucifixion event is a call for theology to return to the cross as the heart of the Christian message, a call we in the churches of Christ must hear.

Moltmann would have us see God's character in more dynamic ways as we reflect on his trinitarian history. God is affected by the events of his creation. He is moved emotionally and has the capacity to change his mind and act in new ways. We need a greater sense of the dynamic character of God. He is

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not as static, limited, and as easily defined as we have thought. In churches of Christ, God has too often been the immutable monarch who, having once laid down his law, refuses to depart from the codified system he has established. We have clung tightly to the picture of God in Exodus 19 and 20, ignoring the God of Exodus 32:11-14; I Samuel 12:16-25, 14:38-45; II Chronicles 30:18-20 or the Christ of Mark 2:18-3:5. Such passages reveal a God of great affection and mutability, willing to change his mind, willing to make judgments on the basis of his heart, rather than on the letter of the law.

Moltmann would have us see the vital interest God holds for the reconciliation and fulfillment of all his creation. We need to take more seriously the notion that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22). This cannot help but draw us into the numerous social and ethical issues of our time, and not just into the abortion debate or hunger relief. We will enter into discussions of topics such as women's rights, nuclear disarmament, human rights in the third world, the imbalance of trade, the ethics of multi-national corporations, and passivism. We will work to see the world and history conform ever closer to the will of God in areas we have thus far generally ignored.