

THEOLOGY OF HOPE: ON THE GROUND AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF A CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

Introduction

Jürgen Moltmann is one of the most important theologians of the past fifty years. Born in 1926, he spent most of his career (1967-1994) as a professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen.¹ Even after his retirement, however, he has continued to publish at the same prodigious pace which had characterized his entire scholarly career. The present work, *Theology of Hope*, was originally published in Germany in 1965, followed by an English translation in 1967. In many ways, the book was responsible for introducing Moltmann to an international audience, for it struck a very responsive chord with its readers. All over the world things were happening that caused people to sit up and take notice of this new theologian of hope (9-10). Reflecting on the book's impact twenty-five years after its original publication, Moltmann wrote, "I can only think that it was by bringing together eschatological redemption and historical liberation in a single coherent perspective of the future that the book could make the impact that it did" (10-11).

Meditation on Hope

Moltmann argues that we need to rethink the place and prominence of eschatology in Christian theology. Far from being a "loosely attached appendix" of "obscure irrelevancies" that concludes a systematic presentation of theology, eschatology is of vital importance for the whole of Christian existence (15-16). This is because eschatology concerns "the doctrine of the Christian hope"—a hope that is firmly grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (16-17). Such a hope "is directed towards what is not yet visible," creating in those who experience it a deep

¹ This information is taken from the following University of Tübingen webpage showing some of the Protestant systematic theologians who have taught at the university: <http://www.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/fachgebiete/sondersammelgebiete/ssg-1-theologie/theologie-in-tuebingen/ev-systematische.html> (accessed April 4, 2011).

dissatisfaction with the present state of the world (18, 21). At the same time, says Moltmann, such hope is also “the happiness of the present” (32). So important is this hope to the essence of Christian faith that despair, or hopelessness, is the greatest of sins (22-26).

Hope is characteristically oriented towards the future. In a sense, this is not surprising. The past is already gone and the present is at hand—and “who hopes for what he already has?” (Rom 8:24, NIV). Moreover, says Moltmann, the God who calls us into fellowship with himself “is a God ‘with future as his essential nature’, a God of promise and of leaving the present to face the future, a God whose freedom is the source of new things that are to come” (30). It is these “new things that are to come,” things grounded in the promises of God, that give the believer reasons for hope. And it is doubtless for reasons such as these that Moltmann conceives of the study of eschatology as a form of ‘hope seeking understanding’ (36).

Eschatology and Revelation

In this chapter Moltmann discusses some different ways in which “eschatology and revelation” have been conceived by theologians, before giving us his own (preferred) view. After crediting Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer with “the discovery of the central significance of eschatology for the message and existence of Jesus and . . . early Christianity,” Moltmann proceeds to discuss some ways in which this discovery has taken some wrong turns (37). One of the primary ways in which the study of eschatology has gotten off track is by adhering too closely to “the thought forms of the Greek mind, which sees in the *logos* the epiphany of the eternal present of being and finds the truth in that” (40). In Moltmann’s view, this is entirely contrary to “the real language of Christian eschatology,” which rather consists “in the hope-giving word of promise” (41). Indeed, Moltmann thinks it was the adoption and adaptation of an Aristotelian conception of reason and nature which “made theological talk of revelation increasingly irrelevant for man’s knowledge of reality” (44).

Moltmann uses the term “transcendental eschatology” to refer to those who have embraced such views (in one way or another). These include Immanuel Kant, Karl Barth and

Rudolf Bultmann (45-69). Kant essentially viewed eschatological knowledge as impossible, since the objects of such knowledge “lie wholly beyond our field of vision” (46). In the case of Barth, his “supra-temporal” view of God led him to embrace a concept of both the *eschaton* and of revelation that was more of an “epiphany of the eternal present” than an “apocalypse of the promised future” (57). Finally Bultmann, like Kant, could not conceive of eschatology as “a doctrine of the ‘last things’ in the world process.” Instead, “the *logos* of the *eschaton*” becomes the means “of liberating us from understanding ourselves on the basis of the world and of works” (62).

Moltmann next discusses some of the weaknesses with what he terms “progressive revelation’ and the eschatology of salvation history” (69-76), as well as the idea of “history” as an “indirect self-revelation of God” (76-84). The latter notion, based on the work of Pannenberg and others in *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, Moltmann views as promising but ultimately still too wedded to concepts derived from an unbiblical “Greek cosmic theology” (79). In the final section of this chapter (84-94), therefore, Moltmann reveals his own approach to “the eschatology of revelation” (84). Rejecting the notion of revelation as an “epiphany of the eternal present,” Moltmann argues that “the revelation of the risen Christ . . . necessitates a view of revelation as apocalypse of the promised future of the truth” (84). The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus reveal to us the “promise of his still future glory and lordship” (85). In other words, Moltmann relates eschatology and revelation by means of the notion of “promise”. “Promise,” he tells us, is (compared to the other views considered) “a fundamentally different” way of conceiving of this relationship (85). It is, in fact, the way the Bible (as opposed to Greek philosophy) presents it. Those who witnessed the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus did not see him “as what he is in timeless eternity, but as what he will be in his coming lordship” (87). Moltmann thus presents us with a much more dynamic (as opposed to static) conception of God, revelation, time, history, and the future—a future for which we can confidently hope, because it is grounded in the promises of God.

Promise and History

In this chapter Moltmann attempts to understand and elaborate upon the concept of promise, and its relation to history, especially as this can be discerned in the theology of the Old Testament. Moltmann argues that the revelational appearances of God in the Old Testament are properly understood in terms of the promises he makes and the future to which they point (100). These promises, says Moltmann, may receive numerous fulfillments throughout the history of God's people. Far from the initial fulfillment being the end of the matter, it is actually understood as a confirmation and expansion of the original promise (105). According to Moltmann, the proper "theological interpretation" of this phenomenon "lies in the inexhaustibility of the God of promise, who never exhausts himself in any historic reality but comes 'to rest' only in a reality that wholly corresponds to him" (106).

But do we really come to know God through his promises? Indeed we do. God's name and promises are "not only formulae of self-presentation, but they also tell us something 'about' God They tell us who he will be" (117). He is the God of covenantal faithfulness whose covenant "opens up specific possibilities of history" (121). In Moltmann's view, "This historifying of the world in the category of the universal eschatological future . . . makes eschatology the universal horizon of all theology as such" (137).

The Resurrection and the Future of Jesus Christ

In this chapter, Moltmann moves to a consideration of promise, and its relation to history, as it's presented in the New Testament. As the chapter title indicates, he is particularly keen to discern the historical and eschatological significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and how it relates to God's promise of the future. Concerning this, he writes that the resurrection of Jesus "has set in motion an eschatologically determined process of history, whose goal is the annihilation of death in the victory of the life of the resurrection, and which ends in that righteousness in which God receives in all things his due and the creature thereby finds its salvation" (163). It's an extraordinary vision of the future, and one that fuels the Church's

passion for accomplishing its “mission to the nations” (166). But it also raises the question of the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. Is it even possible for such an event to be proven by means of the historical method? (174-75).

Moltmann recognizes that “historical understanding” is typically conceived in terms of Troeltsch’s principle of analogy (175). The difficulty with this principle, however, is that it depends on the “presupposition of a fundamental similarity underlying all events” (176). In other words, it assumes a naturalistic view of the world and is thus biased from the outset against any sort of divine intervention in history. Moltmann recognizes that this is so (178-80), but he still thinks that theology has an obligation to contend for the truth of Jesus’ resurrection (182). At the same time, his *primary* concerns appear to lie elsewhere. The resurrection of Christ, he says, “is an event which is understood only in the *modus* of promise. . . . Hence the reports of the resurrection will always have to be read . . . eschatologically in the light of the question, ‘What may I hope for?’ It is only with this . . . question that our remembrance and the corresponding historical knowledge are set within a horizon appropriate to the thing remembered” (190). So the resurrection is for Moltmann an historical event, but its primary significance is to be found in God’s promise and man’s future hope (201).

Moltmann concludes this lengthy chapter with a brief “summary and review” of some of his key points (224-29). Here he reminds us that Christian eschatology is really all about the person and work of Christ and the promises of God in him (224). In the words of the Apostle Paul, “no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ” (2 Cor 1:20). For this reason, writes Moltmann, “the Christian hope expects from the future of Christ not only unveiling, but also final fulfillment. . . . the fulfillment of the promised righteousness of God in all things, the fulfillment of the resurrection of the dead that is promised in his resurrection, the fulfillment of the lordship of the crucified one over all things that is promised in his exaltation” (228-29).

Eschatology and History

According to Moltmann, the rise of historical consciousness in the nineteenth century placed history in something like “*a permanent state of crisis*” (232). This crisis, which might be termed the “historicizing” of history, has, in Moltmann’s estimation, left “human social life bereft of all historic character” (237). What is the solution to this problem?

Moltmann discusses (but ultimately rejects) various modern philosophies of history by scholars such as Ranke, Baur, Droysen, Dilthey, and Heidegger (245-58). The problem with these philosophies is that they attempt to wed a Greek notion of “the ever existent, the unchanging, ever true,” with the “unstable and transient” character of actual history (259). In contrast, Moltmann wants to argue that “the real category of history is no longer the past and transient, but the future” (260). He writes, “If the meaning of history is expected from the future and conceived in terms of the mission of the present, then history is neither a tangle of necessities and laws nor a tumbling-ground for meaningless caprice” (260).

The key idea in all this seems to be that we can really only properly understand the meaning of history, what it is all about, from the perspective of the end of history. Only once history has run its course and we are in the eternal kingdom of God will the meaning of history become plain (277-78). Unlike God, finite human beings cannot know the end from the beginning. This is why the meaning of history (and of our individual lives) is to be sought, not in the past, but in the future. And this is why the biblical writers are so often concerned about the future. As Moltmann observes, “all the biblical scriptures are open towards the future fulfillment of the divine promise whose history they relate” (283). And it is the divine promise that lends hope and purpose to engage in the divine mission in the present—even though we are inadequate for this in ourselves (285). The divine mission is primarily focused on Christian proclamation, “the calling of the heathen, the justification of the godless, the rebirth to a living hope”—all based upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ (302).

Exodus Church

If the Christian community is a society characterized by a future hope which is based on the resurrection of Jesus, then how should this community conduct itself in the world? This is the question which Moltmann attempts to answer in the final chapter of his book. The title “Exodus Church,” he tells us, “is meant to focus attention on the reality of Christianity as that of the ‘pilgrim people of God,’ as described in the Epistle to the Hebrews” (304).

Moltmann begins by noting that, unlike “classical and premodern” societies, modern society has been almost entirely emancipated from any “religious centre” (307). Men are thus related to one another primarily as “producers and consumers” of economic goods and services (308). Religion (including Christianity) is privatized with the result that Christianity “is dismissed from the integrating centre of modern society and relieved of its duty of having to represent the highest goal of society” (311).

Moltmann considers three ways in which Christianity has been influenced and shaped by these circumstances: “the cult of the new subjectivity” (311-16), “the cult of co-humanity” (316-21), and “the cult of the institution” (321-24). Although something good can be said about each of these reactions, Moltmann ultimately rejects all of them as socially inadequate. These forms of “Christianity” simply do not impact society in the radical way that it ought (324).

So what does Moltmann envision as the true vocation and calling of the Church in the world? It is primarily “to expend ourselves unrestrainedly and unreservedly in love and in the work of the reconciliation of the world with God and his future” (337). Whatever our calling or station in life, we are to be creatively involved and engaged in this mission—a mission that is not only intended to transform the lives of individuals, but of institutions, communities, and the world as well. This, concludes Moltmann, “is the task of the Christian Church” (338).