

A critical account of the way salvation through Christ has been understood by Jurgen Moltmann, showing how much this understanding reinterprets traditional ideas for contemporary contexts.

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The Western church was plunged into serious crisis by the events of World War II. So much suffering had occurred that many began losing faith in a God that had traditionally been characterised as unable to feel pain or to be affected by humanity in any way, a God utterly separated from them in their suffering. This God had let them down in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen, as they watched family, friends and countrymen suffer and die cruelly at the hands of the fascist Nazi regime. It was during the war that, ironically, the young Jurgen Moltmann (born April 8, 1926) found a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Whilst serving in the German Army he was taken prisoner by British forces and spent the ensuing years in P.O.W. camps where his conversion to Christianity and subsequent interest in theology first began to take hold. Speaking of his time at theological seminary following the war, he says, 'A theology which did not speak of God in the sight of the one who was abandoned and crucified would have had nothing to say to us then.' (1974: 1) The church was in crisis; what was centrally at stake was the salvific power of the cross of Christ, what was missing was an adequate theodicy.

Traditionally, God was not believed to have actually suffered in Him/Herself when Christ died at Calvary. This is because Christ, the God-Man, both human and divine, was deemed only to have suffered in his divine nature. It was this kind of distance between God and humans, as traditionally characterised, that Moltmann says rendered belief in the Christian God impossible. (1972: 27) How could one really believe that an omnipotent and benevolent God really existed in the light of such suffering? Moltmann had complete sympathy for those who chose atheism as the

only moral position (Bauckham, 1987: 76) - how could one not protest against such a dubious concept of God? And even if such a God existed, many felt it morally compromising to believe in him/her.

The historic doctrines of the immutability and impassibility of God are among the main theological reasons for the idea of God as distant and detached from the pain of human existence. Immutability refers to the inability of God to change, and impassibility to his freedom from human and consuming passions - his inability to feel. In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann elucidates this further, with damning and powerful language, echoing the cries of protest from the death camps of Nazi Germany: '... a God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is also a loveless being.' (Moltmann, 1974: 222) A key reason for the emergence of the doctrine of impassibility in the early Church was the heresy of Arianism, which said that God was open to change in a way akin to that of his creatures, and indeed at the hands of his creatures. To the early Fathers, the doctrine of the impassibility of God was deemed to be the only alternative to such 'unorthodoxy', however Moltmann suggests a third option: 'active suffering, the suffering of love, a voluntary openness to the possibility of being affected by outside influences.' (Moltmann, 1972:31) As regards a theology of the cross, he insisted that a soteriological approach alone was insufficient, and that only through understanding how it affected God in and of him/herself, could we arrive at an adequate soteriology (Bauckham, 1995: 54).

Moltmann's theology of an actively suffering God was drawn essentially from a revised theology of the cross. Firstly, he dispensed with the idea that Christ only suffered in and of his human self. In doing so he avoids the paradox of having Jesus, Gods Son,

suffer and die, and yet God not suffering in and of him/herself. Instead he sees the cross as an event of abandonment of the Son by the Father, willingly accepted by the Son, which in turn produced the Spirit (1974: 30), and as such a Trinitarian event. He affirms that the suffering occurred in both Christ's divine and human nature, and therefore in the 'oneness' of God's nature: God was crucified. Thus he characterises the cross as having 'inner-Trinitarian significance'. (Bauckham, 1995: 54) He arrives at this conclusion by understanding 'God' as a concept that is construed retrospectively from the events at Golgotha: God in Christian terms *is* the event of the cross. (1974: 247). His thesis here is based upon a restructuring of the traditional concept of God as Trinity, which made a distinction between the immanent and economic trinity; in other words, the traditional concept of the trinity distinguished between the trinity as it is to us, and the trinity as it is in itself. Moltmann wishes to do away with this distinction, and asserts, in effect, that the economic trinity is the immanent trinity: that God as he/she is to us, *is* God as he/she is in his/herself. This can be seen as derived from Rahner's work, and in fact it was him that convinced Moltmann to make the cross the defining feature of all Christian theology. (Bauckham, 1995: 156; Moltmann, 1974: 69, 202, 240) Quoting Emmanuel Kant, he says that 'concepts without perceptions are empty', and then proceeds to advocate basing our concept of the trinity of God on the perception of those relationships as we see them unfolding at the cross of Calvary; further to that he states that the trinity is the 'formal principle of knowledge' of the cross. (1972: 241) In other words, the cross is the only real event that leads us to conceive of God as Trinitarian. And so, for Moltmann, the cross and the Trinity are mutually explicative - the cross reveals the Trinitarian nature of God, and the Trinity is best expressed through the events of the cross. (1974: 241) He sees the cross, as that which divides's the persons of the trinity, distinguishing them from each other, and at the same time conjoining them in undeniable unity. (Bauckham, 1987: 97) Hence he can insist that God really suffered in him/herself, when Christ died on the cross. It can

be said therefore that he can relate to us in our pain, because he has participated in it through his 'active love'.

Underlying Moltmann's Trinitarian theology of the cross and therefore his soteriology, is a dialectical understanding of the cross and resurrection. This was in part derived from Hegel's work on the subject, but stands as a very significant and creative theological tool, largely unprecedented within traditional Christologies. (Bauckham, 1995: 2) He sees the two events as being in contradiction with each other, one showing the absence of God and the other the presence of God, and yet both having as their subject God, in the person of Jesus. God then, in raising Jesus from the dead, resolved the dialectical contradiction. This corresponds with the contradiction of earthly reality, of the present as it is, and the future as it is hoped to be; with the sense that believers have of the presence of God's Kingdom, and yet the full realisation of that Kingdom reserved for the promised future occasion. (Bauckham, 1989:295) The significance stretches further, so that Jesus death reflects that pain and hardship of reality as we experience it. Moltmann categorises this pain as godforsakenness and godlessness, and sees Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross as the ultimate identification of God with man in this condition. However, the full soteriological significance of this can only be grasped when it is held in tension with faith and hope in the resurrection. (Bauckham, 1977: 308) As Bauckham says, 'since ... Jesus was raised, his resurrection constitutes God's promise of new creation ...'. (Bauckham, 1989: 295) This is how Moltmann's theology gains its eschatological focus, which as Bauckham says, enables him 'to see the cross and resurrection as an event of universal eschatological promise in which Jesus was identified with the godforsakenness of all reality in hope of the eschatological resurrection of all reality.' (1987: 6) In fact, Moltmann himself says that without the eschatologically orientated hope of resurrection, the cross becomes merely a transitional stage; with it, the cross becomes a saving event for us, as we also hope for the fulfilment of its promise in reality. (1972: 30)

By insisting on the essential eschatological focus of biblical Christianity, Moltmann was not saying something new, nor even that which was not commonly understood at the time. (Macquarrie, 1992: 321) However, he was the first to write New Testament based theology that took it really seriously, seeing its significance for modern, post-war soteriology and ecclesiastical application. He believed that such a reading of the cross reflected the vigorous progressive spirit of modernism, and the utopian ideal offered by seemingly boundless technological and economic advances. He said this forward-thinking, striving characteristic which envisaged utopia not in terms of the renaissance of the old, but in terms of the new, was unprecedented in history (2002: 220), and that it bore a lot in common with the biblical utopian ideal of the kingdom of God. (2002: 223) For these reasons he believed that the eschatological focus in his work would resonate deeply with the modernising, progressive psyche of post-War Westerners. Macquarrie however believes that here he misses his mark entirely, insisting that the modern futuristic concern is materially focused and that 'such ideas as the promises of God or the resurrection of the dead are quite irrelevant to them.' (1992: 322) He even goes on to reduce these ideas in Moltmann, rather unflatteringly, as 'gropings toward modern ideas of progress.' (1992: 322) Regardless, Moltmann has famously said that '... from first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope.' (2002: 16)

Another very significant way in which Moltmann reinterprets traditional ideas, and one which acts as a keystone in his theology of the cross is through the 'dialectical principle of knowledge'. This report of how one acquires understanding is directly contrasted with the 'analogical principle of knowledge'. (Bauckham, 1977: 304) Its basic tenet, applied theologically, is that God is known only through his/her opposite, or in other words, through that which contradicts him/her. God cannot be known through that which he/she is, ostensibly, similar to, for example, creation. The motivation in the acquisition of each form of knowledge is the important factor.

Analogous knowledge seeks, in self-righteousness, a deification of the self, whereas 'dialectical knowledge' is a 'crucifying form of knowledge' (ibid: 304), available only to the godless with no such aspirations, and is chiefly revealed through the cross and its godlessness: 'It is the dialectical knowledge of God in his opposite which first brings heaven down to the earth of those who are abandoned by God, and opens heaven to the godless.' (Moltmann, as cited by Bauckham, 1977: 305) This epistemological principle, although sketched in a very limited way by Moltmann, can be seen in God's loving abandoning of himself to the godless, in order to bring salvation to them, and in the dialectical understanding of the cross and resurrection. (Bauckham, 1977: 308)

It is chiefly through the concept of solidarity that Moltmann understands salvation taking place. This brings us back to a point made briefly earlier on, that Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross was the ultimate form of identification God could make with man. Moltmann postulates that, to the early Church Fathers, the issue of the abandonment of Christ by God the Father on the cross of Calvary, was the central theological nettle which they had difficulty grasping, and as has been made clear this is chiefly due to their concept of God which was more influenced by Greek philosophy than by the biblical revelation. (1972: 31) In grasping this nettle, Moltmann characterises the cry of Christ, not as a cry of despair, but of protest; a cry to God whom Jesus called Father, to step in and halt the injustice he, as an innocent, was suffering. (1972: 29) This is important because he is very careful never to justify human suffering for the 'greater good', or for 'God's plan'. God enters into a dialectical contradiction with himself in order to identify with humanity and protest with them against injustice - injustice he promises, through the resurrection, to set right. Subsumed within the dialectic of the cross and resurrection mentioned earlier, is the dialectic of judgement and salvation, whereby God in Jesus becomes judged, by way of bringing salvation. Judgement is synonymous in Moltmann with godlessness (1974: 242). So God becomes godless, the righteous one becomes sin, and the judge

becomes judged. Here we can see again the dialectical principle of knowledge coming into play, where God loves that which contradicts him/herself - God loves the godless. As Bauckham says, 'In self-emptying love the Son of God abandoned his divine identity and entered the situation of godless men, adopting both the weight of their godforsakenness and the cry of the godforsaken to God. He did this for the sake of the godless, out of the creative love which makes righteous the unrighteous, and brings new life to the dying and liberation to the oppressed.' (1977: 307) So we see that salvation occurs when people are brought into relationship with God through his/her 'self-emptying' love and solidarity, evidenced through the chosen suffering of both Father and Son at the cross. And secondly, this solidarity must be viewed alongside an eschatological promise of the resurrection of Christ.

Moltmann furthermore postulates a theory of history whereby the immanent trinity (the only trinity for Moltmann) contains all human history, in a strange way, by experiencing in his/her eternal being, all of the wretchedness of our existence: 'God experiences a history with the world in which he both affects and is affected by the world, and which is also the history of his own Trinitarian relationships as a community of divine persons who include the world within their love.' (Bauckham, 1989: 296) This is made possible by the Trinitarian dialectic of the cross whereby God, united in love for the world, takes into him/herself the gulf of godforsakenness created by the sin of godless people, via the willing separation of the Father and the Son. 'Only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself, is community with this God eternal salvation, in finite joy, indestructible election and divine life.' (Moltmann, 1972: 246)

All this compares very starkly against the background of the history of the different theories of atonement. For example, the Ransom theory held that God 'paid off' Satan (who since the Fall had obtained authority over people), or bribed him, with the

death of Jesus. Satisfaction theory held that Jesus, by his death on the cross, paid the price for the sin of humanity, and restored to God the honour due to him, which had been tainted by the sin of humanity. Penal Substitution theory, still widely accepted today, holds that the sin of humanity incurred a debt, and that punishment by death was deserved in recompense; so great was the dishonour caused to God, that only the death of a sinless being would suffice. In conclusion then, we have seen that the core of Moltmann's soteriology is still the cross of Christ, but emanating from this, vitally, are the joint themes of the suffering of God in his Trinitarian nature, and the eschatological hope offered by the cross when understood dialectically with the resurrection. We have seen how he develops a fresh concept of God, guided in part by the dialectical understanding of knowledge, which involves dispensing with some key long-held traditional ideas about God, including the doctrines of immutability, impassibility, omnipotence, and by necessity, the dual nature of Christ.

Finally, it may be pertinent to ask some further questions regarding context. We now live in what many are calling a post-modern era, where, due in part to World War II but also the various environmental crises, the energy supply crisis, frightening events like those of '9/11', international terrorism and indeed the apparent recklessness of world leaders regarding the war against terrorism, the notion of progress has lost steam. Western people in particular are experiencing the onset of a deep pessimism of spirit, and great fear regarding the possibility of future life at all, never mind the realisation of utopia. How do Moltmann's revision's of traditional soteriology apply in today's postmodern context? Perhaps, with the under girding of Bloch's philosophy of hope, they are more relevant today than ever. It is more probable however, that there remains an ongoing need for the reinterpretation of traditional theologies for contemporary contexts.

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