

Moltmann's Theology of Hope---

A Review Article

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THE *Theology of Hope* by Jurgen Moltmann¹ has been received in American theological circles with a stir of excitement. An indication of the seriousness with which Moltmann is taken are the conferences held on the Theology of Hope in the Spring of 1968 at the Divinity School of Duke University and at Princeton Theological Seminary. It will be our purpose to review the essential points of this position and to raise some critical problems. The critical issues are in no way meant to reflect negatively on the stimulating quality of this work. The remarks will be organized under three headings: (1) General Position, (2) Promise, and (3) Resurrection. Time does not permit us to consider either Moltmann's excellent evaluation of the position of various philosophers of History (i. e. Baur, Droysen, Dilthey, and Heidegger) or his view of the social implications of his theology, which he calls "creative discipleship."

General Position

In order to understand Moltmann's eschatological theology, it is necessary to note how he views his position to be different from others. He contends that "Christianity in its social form took over the heritage of the ancient state religion. It installed itself as the 'crown of society' and its 'saving centre,' and lost the disquieting, critical power of its eschatological hope." (41-2) The reason

Christianity has undertaken an improper social function is because of an inadequate theological foundation. Instead of basing its theology on the eschatological understanding of reality offered in the New Testament, Christianity has been theologically tied to Greek philosophy and mythology—"Hence every formulation of the Christian tradition according to the standard of classical tradition . . . is wrong." (299) Moltmann's purpose is "to attain to a liberation of eschatological hope from the forms of thought and modes of conduct belonging to the traditional synthesis of the West." (42) His purpose rests on the highly questionable assumption that it is possible for contemporary western man to transcend the traditional synthesis which has dominated our "Christian" culture for at least the last sixteen hundred years and return to the eschatological world view of the New Testament.

Moltmann contends that we must view eschatology neither as a mystery nor as a mythological expression but, rather, as a promise of a literal future. The fulfilling of the promise is our hope. Our hope is for a future or eschaton beyond the limits of death. The eschatological hope is for a negation of death. On the basis of this eschatological hope, Moltmann offers a modified Hegelian view of history—a view in which history is judged in light of our eschatological hope. From the perspective of this view of history, he develops an eschatological, dialectical understanding of the resurrection of Jesus which serves as the basis for our hope of being raised from the dead. Moltmann establishes a theological criterion for evaluating his theological endeavor. He contends that "the truth of doctrinal

¹ *The Theology of Hope*, by Jurgen Moltmann. Harper and Row, New York, 1967. 342pp. \$8.50. All page numbers at the end of quotations refer to this work.

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statements is found in the fact that they can be shown to agree with **the existing reality which we can all experience.**" (18, *my italics*)

Promise

For Moltmann, the key to eschatology is to be found in the promise of God. Promise is equal or almost equal with revelation. He contends that "revelation is understood from the standpoint of the promise contained in the revelation." (100) This promise is man's fulfillment in or with God, but man has a role to play in the fulfillment of the promise.

... a promise does not announce an inescapable fate, but sets men on a road that leads to another land and another reality . . . originally promise is combined with obedience, and obedience with a change of place and a change of existence. It is necessary to arise and go to the place to which the promise points, if one would have part in its fulfillment. (120)

According to Moltmann, the promise seems to have a history which is different from the normal history of man. Reality which is not part of the promise is rejected as the true reality of history. Reality is only history when it is part of the promise. One cannot talk about true reality except in the language of promise.

The problem with Moltmann's thesis centers on the issue of how the promise is to be determined valid or invalid. The history of religions is full of promises proclaimed to be from the deity. Moltmann indicates that the problem occurs at "the point where the promise itself is rendered questionable by non-realization or by delay in its fulfillment." (122) He attempts to deal with this problem by saying that God is free to adopt new ways to fulfill his promise. Man falls into the trap of thinking that God's promise must be fulfilled within given structures and institutions, but God can destroy old structures and institutions as part of his means of fulfilling the promise. The key is whether there is

any evidence which would invalidate a promise of God. In essence, Moltmann says there is no possible evidence which would render invalid such a promise. When we question the validity of God's promise it is because of our limited perspective. For him, God and promise seem to be united. To permit the possibility of evidence which would question the validity of the promise is at the same time to question the existence of God. The existence of God and his promise are unproven contentions which for Moltmann are not open to question. We previously indicated the criterion established by Moltmann for a doctrinal statement being true—"shown to agree with the existing reality which we can all experience." Since it is not possible to evaluate the promise on the basis of any acceptable use of evidence, it is difficult to see how the promise can find its conformation in the existing reality we can all experience. Of course Moltmann attempts to deal with this problem by his contention that reality which is not part of the promise is not true reality. What Moltmann in effect is saying is that he will not accept any view of reality which is not supportive of his theological perspective.

Resurrection

Within the demythological world of contemporary theology, the way one is to deal with or interpret the resurrection of Jesus remains a central issue. Are we to take the resurrection as a literal event, or are we to interpret it as a mythological or existential explanation of what Jesus meant to his followers after his death? Focusing on this issue, Moltmann contends that "Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead by God." (165) He rejects the view that the reality of the resurrection is either mythological or existential. Moltmann presents a literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The term "reality" is the key to understanding his view of the resurrection. The "reality of the resurrection" involves the fact, the witness and

the eschatological hope. We recall that he contends that true reality is the reality of promise. This means that the reality of the resurrection is the reality of promise. One cannot understand the literalness of the resurrection except from the perspective of the reality of promise. It is not clear whether Moltmann means that one would not have seen the resurrected Jesus, unless one had operated within the reality of promise, but this seems to be the implication of his view of the reality of the resurrection. If this is his position, it is certainly an interesting type of "literal" resurrection.

Moltmann devotes much time to his contention that the resurrection of Jesus is a historical event. The interesting thing is the way he defines the term "history" or "historical." He contends that to be historical an event must be eschatological. This is but another way of saying that true or historical reality is the reality of promise, since eschatological denotes the promise for the future. For contemporary man the term "historical" often carries with it an emotional thrust. Many feel that if something is not historical then it is a fraud, or at least of limited value. Moltmann desires to retain this emotional quality by retaining the term "historical," while at the same time defining the term to mean almost the exact opposite of its contemporary meaning. One might suggest that this approach leaves something to be desired in regards to communication. In fairness to Moltmann, we should indicate his acknowledgement that on the basis of the modern perspective of the historically possible and probable "the assertion of the raising of Jesus by God is a 'historically' impossible and therefore a 'historical' meaningless statement." (174) If this is the case, it would seem more appropriate for Moltmann to have rejected totally the term "historical". He is careful to contend that, even though the resurrection of Jesus is a historically impossible statement, "the modern concept of the historical lead(s) neither to

the fundamental provability of the resurrection nor to fundamental historical scepticism." (174) He is accepting the fact that the resurrection is impossible to those in the reality of non-promise, but he is careful to contend that the impossibility of the resurrection to them is not based on final proof. Since the method of modern science rests on what is possible and probable and never on the contention of final proof, it may be that Moltmann is stressing a point which also becomes a meaningless statement to contemporary man.

Moltmann's "historical" method is to approach the resurrection from the New Testament "experience of history." If one is to deal with the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, it is necessary to view this resurrection from the perspective of those who experienced it. On the one hand, he is doing nothing but expressing in different words his contention that one must stand within the reality of promise in order to understand the resurrection. On the other hand, Moltmann seems to be implying that it is possible for contemporary man to place himself within the experiential perspective of the New Testament person. When one reviews the history of Biblical theology, one cannot help but be struck by the many opposing positions proclaimed to us as the proper understanding of the historical view of the world held by the New Testament person. Moltmann's eschatological interpretation, as opposed to Bultmann's demythological view, is but one striking example of this situation. Not only does Biblical scholarship offer us limited comfort, but contemporary man finds himself in an existential situation which appears to be radically different from the situation found in the New Testament. It may be that contemporary man needs to take seriously the impossibility of placing oneself within the experiential perspective of the New Testament person. If this limitation seems "probably" to be valid, then not only the resurrection of Jesus but also Moltmann's historical approach may be

for contemporary man "a 'historically' impossible and therefore a 'historically' meaningless statement."

Moltmann further contends that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham concerning the Law and the giving to man the promise of eternal life — a new eschatological promise.

The promise finds in the gospel its eschatological future, while the law finds its end. The 'newness' of the gospel is thus not 'totally new'. It proves its newness by asserting itself against the old, against human nature in the context of law, sin and death, and thereby bringing about the 'oldness' of the old. It proves its eschatological newness, however, by using the previously proclaimed promise of God as the means of its explication. (152)

He makes a distinction between "the temporal final" (*das Endzeitliche*) and "the conclusively final" (*das Endgültige*). On the basis of this distinction, he is contending that the "Christ-event" is final within time but that salvation is to occur within the future. Moltmann contends that to take the Christ-event to mean completed salvation without fulfillment in the future is to make Christianity a mystery religion. He is rejecting the position, held by many in the history of Christian thought, that the death and resurrection of Jesus immediately made it possible for those of faith to participate in the Kingdom of God. For Moltmann, the resurrection affords us the eschatological promise that we will participate in God's Kingdom.

This hope for a future participation in the Kingdom of God is not for Moltmann some form of religious escape. We are not to withdraw from the joys and cares of this world because of some expectation for the future. This hope forces upon man, Moltmann contends, a social responsibility for sharing in the plight of the world and in the process sharing with the world the hope offered by the Cross and resurrection.

Faith does not come to its own in

becoming radically unworldly, but by hopeful outgoing into the world it becomes a benefit to the world. By accepting the cross, the suffering and the death of Christ, by taking upon it the trials and struggle of obedience in the body and surrendering itself to the pain of love, it proclaims in the everyday world the future of the resurrection, of life and righteousness of God. (163)

The hope, made possible by the resurrection of Jesus by God, will be fulfilled in the Second Coming of Jesus and the general resurrection of the dead. "What happened between the Cross and the Easter appearances is then an eschatological event which has its goal in future revelation and universal fulfillment." (201) Moltmann contends that the verification of Jesus' resurrection is to be found in the future event of "our own experience of being raised." (198) He does not develop in any detail his contention concerning the verification of Jesus' resurrection by the general resurrection, but this point did receive special emphasis by Moltmann and some of his respondents at the Duke University Conference on The Theology of Hope. The issue of verification raises the problem of evidence both for the resurrection of Jesus as well as for a general resurrection in the future.

In 1967, a colloquium on "The Credibility of 'God'" was held at Muskingum College, with Charles Hartshorne and Schubert M. Ogden being the chief participants. On page 56 of the published remarks, Professor Ogden was asked the following question.

Question: The vast majority of Christendom has seen and does see Jesus as a divine Son of God. Now, Professor Ogden, I wonder—wouldn't it be best for us in this day and age simply to be honest and say that Jesus was a great prophet, that he had a human father, that he was a good man, but lived in sin just like the rest of us, that he died and decayed like everyone else, and that he was not resurrected?

Professor Ogden: In general my answer to the question is Yes. But there are certain assumptions in the question that I would like to examine.

(He goes on to examine these assumptions.)

Underlying this question appears to be the evidence offered by modern science, which for many calls into question the possibility of a resurrection on the part of Jesus. We are all aware that if the heart stops beating for around seven minutes, such brain damage will occur as to make the "resurrected" person less than human. A person who was resurrected after being dead for thirty-six hours or more would at best be non-functional. Moltmann attempts to deal with this problem in two ways. We have indicated his first way, which is his contention that you must be in the reality of the promise in order to understand the reality of the resurrection of Jesus by God. On first reading, this contention has emotional appeal. After some reflection, one is forced to suggest that whatever it may mean to participate in the reality of promise does not make the evidence presented by the medical sciences disappear. On the other hand, Moltmann attempts to deal with this problem by contending that Jesus in the resurrection is a new **creation ex nihilo** by God. Again this assertion is not without emotional appeal, but just what does a new **creation ex nihilo** mean? Having rejected Greek philosophy as being a distortion of Christian eschatology, Moltmann appears to be relying upon a Greek perspective in an attempt to understand "the reality of the resurrection." Even if we accept this phrase, it implies that the resurrected Jesus is something radically different from the crucified Jesus. Yet, Moltmann contends that the resurrected Jesus is definitely and essentially tied to the former Jesus. It is difficult to understand how the resurrected Jesus can be a new creation by God while being one with the crucified Jesus.

The other problem concerns the general resurrection. One is never quite sure what "our own experience at being raised" is to be like. Moltmann does not go into the details we find in Augustine, but he does inform us that we are

to be raised into a spiritual existence. Jesus was raised in a body which could be seen by others who participated in the reality of promise. Moltmann implies that our resurrected state will be essentially different from that of Jesus. One feels at home with these traditional assertions, but upon reflection as a contemporary person, one begins to wonder what the terms "general resurrection" and "spiritual" mean. Stripped of their emotional content, we have no experiential evidence to understand what being raised spiritually from the dead can mean. Considered empirically, we have no evidence to support the probability of such evidence. One would have hoped that Moltmann would have confronted these issues, which seem to dim the "hope" of many contemporary men. All he really says to contemporary man is that if you live in the reality of promise you will understand. This is almost like saying that if you believe it is true, but we all realize that belief has nothing essentially to do with whether such an empirical event has or can occur.

Moltmann uses the general resurrection as validation of the resurrection of Jesus. There is a problem in this approach on two levels. On the one hand, our resurrected state is to be essentially different from that of Jesus. It is difficult to understand logically how one type of resurrection, if it should occur, could validate another type of resurrection, if it did occur. What Moltmann really wants to contend is not the validation of the resurrection of Jesus but the fulfilling of Jesus' promise by the general resurrection. Since the promise of a general resurrection is not new to the history of religions with Jesus, one could not be sure that, if a general resurrection did occur, it was necessarily fulfilling the promise of Jesus. On the other hand, Moltmann is really using the resurrection of Jesus, which he identifies with promise, to convince us of the possible reality of the future general resurrection. Having convinced us of that position, he then attempts to use

the general resurrection to validate Jesus' resurrection. What we have here is a circular argument based upon a complete lack of empirical evidence relevant to the reality of many who consider themselves contemporary men. The argument is interesting and well developed, but it leaves the non-believer in contemporary society outside the private world called "the reality of promise." In all fairness to

Moltmann, we should indicate that he realized that this was a problem. "To call the raising of Jesus historically verifiable is to presuppose a concept of history which is dominated by the expectation of a general resurrection of the dead as the end and consummation of history. Resurrection and the concept of history then contains a vicious circle for the understanding." (82)

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