

Dr. Covin

Summary of Jurgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope

It is significant and noteworthy that Jurgen Moltmann's theological formation was not shaped in a vacuum, nor exclusively in the context of academia. Jurgen Moltmann was a prisoner of war during World War II, from approximately 1945 through 1947. Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany served as the political and cultural context, informing the social milieu of Moltmann as a young man. It was this reality that would inform Theology of Hope in juxtaposition to the dire zeitgeist permeating Europe in the wake of an estimated sixty million deaths resulting from the war. In addition, Jurgen Moltmann was influenced by the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch as well as the thinking of Georg Hegel for better or worse depending upon one's theological tendencies.

Jurgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope has a number of important themes that it focuses upon which are significant to understanding his theology. The fundamental themes of Theology of Hope are; hope, resurrection, eschatology, faith, and future.

Moltmann begins with his assertion that hope is a fundamental necessity for life itself. Life without hope is a dystopia for Moltmann. "Totally without hope one cannot live. To live without hope is to cease to live. Hell is hopelessness. It is not accident that above the entrance to Dante's hell is the inscription: Leave behind all hope, you who enter here."¹ It is not surprising that Moltmann's experiences in World War II Germany would evolve into a major theological tenet in Theology of Hope. Hope is the most fundamental aspect of human existence; however, it is not a hope that is abstract for Moltmann or hope that is not grounded in something. That grounding

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), p.32.

for Moltmann leads into the future informed by potential. “For our knowledge and comprehension of reality, and our reflections on it, that means at least this: that in the medium of hope our theological concepts become not judgments which nail reality down to what it is, but anticipations which show reality its prospects and its future possibilities.”²

In a *Theology of Hope*, Jürgen Moltmann demonstrates the interconnectedness of faith and resurrection. Christianity is able to give hope to the hopeless through the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Christianity must first start with the resurrection of Christ and move forward from this moment in history. “Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead by God. In the New Testament there is no faith that does not start a priori with the resurrection of Jesus.”³

For Moltmann, in a *Theology of Hope*, resurrection is redefined or repurposed to lead us not so much into the past, however, into the future. Moltmann challenges traditional theology and how resurrection is traditionally understood, as a past historic event that is complete and relegated to history. It is in the resurrection for Moltmann that the future finds hope for humanity. “The raising of Christ is then to be called ‘historic’, not because it took place in the history to which other categories of some sort provide a key, but it is to be called historic because, by pointing the way for future events, it makes history in which we can and must live. It is historic, because it discloses an eschatological future.”⁴ Moltmann, describes the event of the resurrection not as a morbid defeat of humanity through the triumph of evil and death, but that the suffering and death of Christ is paradoxical and counterintuitive and is the means through

² Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 35.

³ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

which humanity has life. "The raising of Christ is not merely a consolation to him in a life that is full of distress and doomed to die, but it is also God's contradiction of suffering and death, of humiliation and offence, and of the wickedness of evil."⁵

Eschatology for Moltmann in *Theology of Hope*, challenges theologians to understand the eschaton not as confined to the end of things, not as the completion of human history, however, to synthesize the present into our eschatological thinking. Eschatology then is the radical change of the present. "From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected day."⁶

Assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses

Theology of Hope is vulnerable to criticism in certain theological circles because it is in conversation with Ernst Bloch, Georg Hegel, and Marxism. Writing in *Revisiting Moltmann's Theology of Hope in the light of its renewed impact on emergent theology*, Noel B. Woodbridge observes the following; "Moltmann was influenced by Marxism and the philosophies of Georg Hegel...However, Hegel's ideas are philosophical and have not been proven in the real world. Moltmann took Hegel's ideas and created a Christian alternative to Marxism (which is also based on Hegel's philosophy) that he called a theology of hope."⁷ This criticism is misguided because it

⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ Noel B. Woodbridge, *Revisiting Moltmann's Theology of Hope in the light of its renewed impact on emergent theology*, https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://www.sats.edu.za/userfiles/Woodbridge_RevisitingMolmansTheologyOfHope.pdf

intimates that philosophical ideas are always and necessarily antithetical to Christian systems of belief or theology. It is true that some ideas borrowed from philosophical ideas are hostile to Christian thought. Ideas, however, are conceptual to all of humanity and are not limited to parochial boundaries of religious thought, that is assuming one is not confined to the notion of revelation exclusively to Christians. Ideas or concepts which improve the human condition should be incorporated into Christian theological and ethical thought.

Jurgen Moltmann's futuristic theology is vulnerable to criticism of quietism if one is not careful to understand Theology of Hope. In communities of color this theological typology is often referred to as the religion of the oppressor or the oppressive class. A type of religion to placate communities into accepting their social conditions and to anticipate better conditions in the next life. This type of theology when misunderstood was utilized by southern plantation owners to maintain order within the system of slavery. It is here that Moltmann renders a strong refutation of the notion of quietism. "That is why faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world..."⁸

The criticism that Theology of Hope is futuristic and does not give full autonomy to the person of God is a vulnerability to some. To these critics, Moltmann appears to have elements of Process Theology, to the extent that humanity has a role in aiding God in the rescuing of the creation. "According to the theology of hope proclaimed by Moltmann and his Emergent disciples, 'the truth will only be known with certainty in the future.' Therefore, this uncertainty results in the

⁸ Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 21.

consequent heresies that 'God is recreating the world now with our help' and the world has a universally bright future with no pending, cataclysmic judgment."⁹ If we love God, and God's creation, then elements of Christian universalism are appealing as opposed to eternal damnation. Is it more Christian to hope for in the resurrection of Christ the reconciliation of all creatures and not others? Critics of Moltmann here are selective in their biblical leanings. Perhaps the text in the gospel of John could be applied. "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd"¹⁰ (John 10: 16, The King James Version).

Relevance of Work

"Hundreds of kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of a rope. Picture cards photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling the postcard showing a photograph of the lynched Negro."¹¹ Such is the context and experience of African Americans in these United States; from slavery to Jim Crow, terrorism was the daily existence from circa 1619 and culminating in 1981 with the lynching of Michael Donald in Alabama. Theology of Hope provides a theology to all oppressed people that says there is a future in Christ, in the resurrection and in the eschaton, which offers hope beyond the present reality. The kinship between Jurgen Moltmann and many of the Liberation Theologians and Black Theology Theologians is found in the salvific hope of all who suffer presently, in their marginalized experiences in the United States, Latin America, and other desperate locations around the world;

⁹ Woodbridge, *Revisiting Moltmann's Theology of Hope*, 110.

¹⁰ John 10:16 KJV

¹¹ James H. Cone, *The Cross And The Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2011), p.1.

and that their presently reality will yield to the hope found in the resurrection of Christ and the future in the eschatological hope. The Theology of Hope is a pedagogy of life for the pulpit, the seminary student and the public square. At its best it is not assigned to oppressed people; however, people who are concerned about the plight of all of humanity.

Bibliography

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KJV

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