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Theologian Profile
Constructive Theology

Jürgen Moltmann is one of the foremost theologians of the second half of the twentieth century. He was a professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen from 1967 to 1994. (Bauckham, 147). He has raised ideas that have challenged contemporary theologians and has been in written engagement with his peers since his the publication of his first major work, *Theology of Hope*, in 1967. His work, however, must be viewed through the lens of his personal experience and theological development. Born in Hamburg, Germany in 1926, Moltmann grew up in a secular environment idolizing German scientists (Neal, 867). During World War II, he served the German military and spent three years as a prisoner of war. In that context he was introduced to the Psalms and New Testament, and used the prison camp's library to study theologians including Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr (Ibid.). Much of Moltmann's work around the duality of hope through God and God's presence in suffering is informed by his presence in the war, "the suffering and guilt of the German nation [and] not least the legacy of Auschwitz" (Bauckman, 147).

After the war, Moltmann began his formalized studies at the University of Göttingen, where he worked extensively with the writings of Karl Barth under the tutelage of professors including Otto Weber and Ernst Wolf (Ibid.). He also continued his study of Bonhoeffer, who, along with Wolf strongly influenced Moltmann's ideas about "social ethics and the church's involvement in secular society" (Ibid.). Much of Moltmann's formation came to a head when he began engaging the work of Ernst Bloch, ultimately viewing *Theology of Hope* as a theological parallel to Bloch's Marxist philosophy of hope (Ibid.). This engagement would help set the tone

for Moltmann's consistent interweaving of theological ideas and praxis with ideas and actions drawn from the larger world.

Moltmann's theology is developed through questioning and challenging. As such, his theological interests "lack typical confinement and restraint to only a few theological loci" (Neal, 870). Yet despite the wide-ranging nature of his thoughts and philosophies, there remains a central core. "The determining factor for Moltmann's theological judgments, regardless of time or topic, is hope" (Ibid.). While Moltmann has written prolifically, his major works are generally broken into two major thematic and chronological categories. First is the trilogy of *Theology of Hope, The Crucified God, and the Church in the Power of the Spirit*. These works, released between 1967 and 1977, approach God and eschatology; Christ and the cross; and church and the Holy Spirit, respectively (Bauckham at 148). The second set of works is a collection of six volumes, published between 1981 and 2000, each emphasizing a discrete doctrine as informed by ideas presented in the earlier trilogy (Neal, 871).

Moltmann's theology of hope is "thoroughly Christological, since it arises from the resurrection of Jesus" (Bauckman, 151). He views all of God's history as engaged with Jesus Christ. Generally, Moltmann associates the cross with death and the present, and the resurrection with life and a promised future that is not burdened by human history. In other words, resurrection embraces a future that is not burdened with human past, including the holocaust. He argues for a vision of the trinity that is three elements strongly defined, but also strongly interrelated. "Moltmann insists on speaking of three persons in relationship. Related to this is his radical conclusion that monotheism is an inappropriate label to affix to the doctrine of God, but

rather the result of misplaced reductionism” (Neal, 876). This belief has led to criticism that his views are tritheistic.

Drawing from his trinitarian view, Moltmann argues that “God’s relationship to the world [is] a reciprocal relationship in which God in his love for the world not only affects the world but is also affected by it” (Bauckman, 154). In so doing, and in his heightened view of the cross, he embraces “divine passibility” -- in other words, the idea that God can experience pain. He suggests that “a being who loves is open to suffering; a being who cannot suffer, cannot love” (Neal, 875). Moltmann’s view of eschatology is that it is not only about the end, but also about the beginning and the present, claiming that “the power of God lies in the present anticipation of the divine future” (Webb, 2). Further, “the new creation . . . is a promise for this world, not just the next. Moreover, the new creation is a cosmic and not just a personal hope for salvation” (Ibid., 3).

This view that the world can be changed and drawn into a new creation leads Moltmann (following Wolf and Bonhoeffer) to the strong interaction between politics and theology. “Moltmann has never reduced the gospel to its political aspect, but he has consistently emphasized it” (Bauckham, 157). Moltmann’s eschatology also emphasizes divine indwelling -- the idea the God is present in all of creation -- and universal salvation (Neal, 879). “In the divine judgment of all sinners . . . will be liberated and saved from their deadly perdition through transformation into their true, created being, because God remains true to himself, and does not give up what he has once created and affirmed, or allow it to be lost (Ibid. (citing Moltmann)).

Moltmann is still alive and his work seems well-suited to both the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is deeply rooted in biblical tradition -- from both

the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament and emphasizes the need to understand the connections between biblical descriptions of the Christ, the hope presented there, and the need for the hope to be working in the world. His strong trinitarian views fall outside of traditional theology, and he has been criticised for not using precise enough philosophical language. Yet his work is built from and crafted for engagement with the world, with other thinkers and with other ideas. This is exemplified by Karl Barth whose work Moltmann would steer away from, but whom he found very influential in his early years of exploring theology. Barth described Moltmann's early work *Theology of Hope* as a work of "spiritual force and systematic power," and declared it both a "stimulating and an irritating book" (Farrow, 427). Many are likely to continue to find agreement with those words as Moltmann's influence continues.

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