

Revisiting Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* in the light of its renewed impact on emergent theology

Noel B. Woodbridge¹

Moltmann J 2009. *Theology of hope: on the ground and the implications of Christian eschatology*. Translated from German by J Leitch. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.

1. Introduction to the book and the author

The most influential work by Jürgen Moltmann is his book, *Theology of Hope*, first published in English in 1967. Amid the optimism and turmoil of the 1960s, this book by a little-known German theologian burst upon the scene. Not only did Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* reintroduce the doctrine of Christian hope in academic theological discussion, but it also thrust its author to worldwide renown. *Theology of Hope* seized the attention of the public as well as theologians. It was even acclaimed in a front-page article in The New York Times: 'God Is Dead Doctrine Losing Ground to "Theology of Hope"', announced the headline. Clearly, Moltmann's vision of hope connected with the spirit of the times.

More than forty years later, in a world that has changed in so many different ways, the impact of *Theology of Hope* continues to be felt. This book is unquestionably one of the most important books in recent Protestant theology. It has already created a considerable stir in Europe, and is now rapidly gaining recognition throughout the world as the major statement to date of a new eschatological theology which emphasises the critical and revolutionising effect of Christian hope upon the thought, institutions, and conditions of life today. This book is taught in universities and seminaries throughout the world, and its ideas have dramatically shaped our understanding of eschatology, one of the most important Christian doctrines.

¹ Noel Woodbridge (noel@sats.edu.za) holds a DEd from the University of South Africa and a DTh from the University of Zululand. He currently serves as a senior academic at the South African Theological Seminary. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Jürgen Moltmann is a German theologian and Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen, Germany. In 1944, his secular education was interrupted when he was drafted by the German army. He was sent to the front lines in the Belgian forest. He surrendered in 1945 to the first British soldier he met.

For the next few years (1945-1947) Moltmann was confined as a prisoner of war and moved from camp to camp. His experience as a prisoner of war had a powerful impact on his life, as it was in the camps that he had time to reflect upon the devastating nature of World War II, developing a great sense of remorse. In July of 1946, he was transferred to Northern Camp, a British prison located near Nottingham. The camp was operated by the YMCA. It was here that Moltmann met many students of theology. He observed that his fellow prisoners, who had hope, fared the best. After the war, it seemed to him that Christianity was ignoring the promised hope it offered for a future life.

Upon his return to Germany in 1948, at the age of 22, Moltmann began to pursue theological training at Göttingen University, where he was strongly influenced by Karl Barth's dialectical theology. In 1952 he received his doctorate from the university under the direction of his doctoral supervisor, Otto Weber, who helped him to develop his eschatological perspective of the church's universal mission.

From 1952 to 1957 Moltmann was the pastor of the Evangelical Church of Bremen-Wasserhorst. In 1958 Moltmann became a theology teacher at an academy in Wuppertal, which was operated by the Confessing Church, and in 1963 he joined the theological faculty of Bonn University. He was appointed Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen in 1967 and remained there until his retirement in 1994.

2. Summary of the book

Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* constitutes a groundbreaking work in theology. In his work, Moltmann describes Christian hope in terms of a challenge to both the desperation and official optimism of the Reconstruction that tried to return to 'the glory days of the past' rather than live in the hope of a entirely new future that comes from God, who lives not so much 'above us' but 'in front of us', and who draws us into his own future for the world. Moltmann skilfully incorporates elements of Bloch's *Principle of Hope*, Hegel's *Speculative Good Friday*, and the *Death of God* theology to introduce the Christian hope to the post-war Europe and to the world. Clearly, Moltmann's

Theology of Hope has earned itself a prominent position among the greatest works of theology in the twentieth century.

The book is entitled *Theology of Hope*, not because it sets out to present eschatology as a separate doctrine, competing with the well-known textbooks on this topic. Rather, it aims to show how theology can be derived from hope when considered from an eschatological perspective. For this reason, the book enquires into the ground of the Christian hope and into the responsible exercise of this hope in thought and action in today's world. Moltmann proposes that Christian hope should be the central motivating factor in the life and thought of the church and of each Christian.

For Moltmann, the whole of creation longs for the renewal by the 'God of Hope'. Empowered by this hope, the Christian's response should include the mission of the church to all nations, the hunger for righteousness in the world, and love for the true life of the endangered and damaged creation. The church should therefore be seen as the people of hope, who continually experience the God who is present in his promises. The coming kingdom provides the church with a much broader view of reality than merely a private vision of personal salvation. The coming kingdom also creates a confronting and transforming vision of the mission of the church as the people of God.

3. Strengths of the book

3.1. Christian faith is understood as hope for the future of man and this earth

Moltmann is known as one of the leading proponents of the theology of hope. He believes that God's promise to act in the future is more important than the fact that he has acted in the past. What is implied by this focus on the future, however, is not *withdrawal* from the world in the hope that a better world will somehow evolve, but *active participation* in the world in order to assist in the coming of that better world.

Moltmann understands Christian faith as essentially hope for the future of man and this earth promised by the God of the exodus and the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. The coming God of the biblical tradition is identified as the power at the 'front' of history rather than 'above' it. The promise of God is the propelling force of history, awakening hope, which keeps men unreconciled to present experience, sets them in contradiction to current natural and social powers, makes the church 'a constant disturbance in human society', and 'the source of continual new impulses toward the realization of righteousness,

freedom, and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come' (p. 22).

3.2. God's promise makes possible creative discipleship in an unfinished world by focusing on the 'hermeneutic of Christian mission'

By keeping history in 'eschatological process', God's all-embracing promise, far from robbing man of freedom and his historical initiative, makes possible creative discipleship in an incomplete world. A hermeneutic of hope in God's promise must necessarily be a political hermeneutic. It does not have to focus merely on the proclamation of the word or in a new self-understanding, but also on the 'hermeneutic of Christian mission' (pp. 272ff.). Christian theology thus becomes the theory of Christian practice. Its task is to clarify the radical openness of reality to new possibilities, to summon men to break away from the spell of the status quo, and to take up the task of building a new reality that corresponds better to God's promised future.

3.3. It calls for an 'eschatological hope of justice'

Moltmann expresses the socio-political implications of his theology of hope as follows: the point is not simply to *interpret* the world, history, and human relations differently but to *change* them in the expectation of God's transformation (p. 84). Moltmann's call for 'the realization of the eschatological hope of justice, the humanizing of man, the socializing of humanity, peace for all creation' (p. 329) is concrete evidence that he is providing something more than a mere rhetoric of change to the church in its effort to exercise its hope responsibly in modern society and in its confrontation with particular issues.

3.4. Its impact upon theological research models in practical theology

Moltmann's influence can be seen in the current theological research models in practical theology, especially in the use Hegel's method of contradiction, pitting a thesis against an antithesis, resulting in a new synthesis. For example, the *Zerfass* model requires that *praxis* 1 (*present* church practice) must first be examined with the use of a series of instruments from *the social sciences*. As a result, tensions become visible, leading to the emergence of impulses to act with a view to *renewal* of the existing *praxis* to form the new *praxis* 2 (*improved* church practice).

3.5. Its impact upon the Emergent Church Movement

Jürgen Moltmann's book, *Theology of Hope*, is an influential document forming a foundation for the Emergent Church Movement's revisionist, evolutionary eschatology. The 'hope' of Emergent/postmodern theology is based on the Hegelian idea that contradictions synthesize into better future realities. Emergent Church leaders recently published a book entitled *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* that cites and echoes Moltmann's ideas.

4. Weaknesses of the book

4.1. It is based on the secular philosophies of Marx and Hegel

Moltmann was influenced by Marxism and the philosophies of Georg Hegel. Hegel embraced contradiction, pitting a thesis against an antithesis with the outcome being a new synthesis. 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.

According to Moltmann, eschatological 'hope' is 'headed toward the kingdom of God on earth with universal participation.' He indicates how Hegel's ideas could be used to interpret Good Friday and the resurrection through a dialectical process that would deliver us from both 'romantic nihilism' and 'the methodological atheism of science' to a synthetic, hopeful future (p. 169).

4.2. Its hope for a bright earthly future is a false hope, since it rejects biblical eschatology

He applied Hegel's synthesis to theology and eschatology. In so doing, he decided that because incompatibilities were evolving into new and better things, God could not possibly allow the world to end in judgment. Instead of judgment, Moltmann set aside Scripture and announced that the entire world and all of creation was heading toward an earthly paradise and progressively leaving evil behind.

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 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.'

Although God's judgement of the earth is clearly predicted in 2 Peter 3:10-12, Moltmann rejects the clear teaching of the Bible and claims that 'God is re-creating the world now with our help.'

4.3. Its view that Jesus's resurrection is a view of history and not a historic event is a rejection the biblical gospel

Moltmann uses the presupposition of Christ's resurrection as the ground for a new view of history, namely, that God is still creatively involved in the process of history leading it to a glorious future:

The raising of Christ is then to be called 'historic', not because it took place *in* history ... it is 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 (p. 181).

Moltmann sees the death and resurrection of Christ as two contradictory events. The resulting synthesis is a new world (a hope-filled eschatology) with no Second Coming or judgment. Thus Emergent Theology teaches that God is renewing the world and the gospel is good news for everyone. Hence, Christians need to stop telling people that they are sinners in need of a Saviour.

The question arises: Was Jesus really raised bodily from the dead, and did he appear bodily to reliable witnesses, and should one believe in the saving value of his death, burial, and resurrection in order to be saved from the wrath of God? According to Moltmann, one cannot expect to know the answer to this multi-faceted question, because the proof of what type of world or history will be formed lies in the future, where God is bringing history.

Hence, for Moltmann, the Christian's hope is not based on Jesus's bodily resurrection that furnished proof to all men and thus made them accountable (as Paul said in Acts 17:31), but in Jesus's resurrection as a view of history with a hopeful future.

5. Conclusion

Theology of Hope is anything but a superficial affirmation of the 'power of positive thinking'. Rather, Moltmann argues that we must acknowledge the suffering and injustice that mark our present experience in the world. Only then can we feel the force of, and give witness to, God's promise to heal the

world. This understanding of Christian hope was born in perhaps the unlikeliest of places—a prisoner of war camp in the aftermath of World War II.

It is clear that Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* has had a great impact on theology over the past four decades, especially in the field of eschatology. No doubt his ideas will continue to influence theologians in the years that lie ahead, especially amongst leaders in the Emergent Church Movement.

However, it is regrettable that Moltmann, in his book on Christian hope, chose to focus on only one aspect of the gospel—the *social* gospel dealing with the hope of the social transformation of the world in the future. In my opinion, Moltmann left out the most important aspect of the gospel—the *spiritual* gospel concerning the present and future transformation of the lives (and bodies) of individual believers.

By dismissing the bodily resurrection of Christ, as a historical event, Moltmann automatically rejected the foundation of the Christian's hope, which includes 'the hope of salvation' (1 Thess. 5:8), the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit ('Christ in you the hope of glory', Col. 1:27), the hope of the believer's future bodily resurrection (Acts 24:15), and 'the blessed hope and glorious appearing ... of Jesus Christ' at His Second Coming (Tit. 2:13). Moltmann's rejection of the *spiritual* aspect of the Christian's hope is like throwing away the diamond ring, while merely retaining the casket, because it is considered to be of greater importance.

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