

UNIT 7: JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

Notes by D. Densil Morgan

I. The formation of a theologian

Moltmann was born on 8 April 1926, the second son of a middle class family initially from Hamburg but who belonged to a rural self-sufficient commune in a place called Buchenkamp. His parents were teachers and self-consciously humanistic or secularist, living according to a rationalist Enlightenment creed tinged with a back-to-the-land romanticism. They were not overtly political and did their best to live apart from the momentous changes which were occurring throughout Jürgen's youth (he had a severely disabled brother Hartwig, b. 1924, who died as a victim of Hitler's euthanasia policy in 1940, a sister Marianne, b. 1929, a brother Eckhart, b. 1937 and another sister Elizabeth, b. 1941). The family was not, however, wholly immune from the political upheaval and as a boy Jürgen, like everyone else, became a member of the Hitler youth. If his father's interests were in philosophy and the arts, Jürgen's would be in science, physics especially. His aim was to study the subject at university level. The war, alas, put paid to that aspiration and he found himself, in February 1943 not yet 17 years old, being conscripted as an air force auxiliary and sent to serve as an anti-aircraft gunner to defend Hamburg.

His first traumatic experience was in 'Operation Gomorrah' when for nine consecutive nights in July 1943 the RAF pulverized the city in the first of its carpet bombing campaigns. 50,000 people were killed, the vast majority of whom were civilians: women, children, the middle aged and the elderly. In an explosion his closest friend was decapitated standing beside him.

During that night I cried out to God for the first time in my life and put myself in his hands ... My question was not 'Why does God allow this to happen?', but 'My God, where are you?' ... During that night I became a seeker after God.¹

After fifteen months as an air force auxiliary, in July 1944 – the month of the Normandy invasion – Moltmann was drafted into the infantry as a fully-fledged soldier. At eighteen years of age he found himself fighting mostly on the Belgium and Dutch borders against British and American troops who were working their way westwards from the landing beaches on the French coast and southwards from the drop zones of the Netherlands. Never politically engaged, now he found himself wholly disenchanted with Germany and its regime and when rumours began circulating of the mass extermination of the Jews, rumours which were confirmed by his father who had also been serving with the army in France, his disillusionment

¹ Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography* (London: SCM, 2007), p. 17.

became total. Following much misery, suffering, grief and sorrow, in February 1945 he was taken prisoner and held in camps first in Belgium, then in Scotland and finally in the English Midlands. He was nineteen years old when captured; the war would last another three months and it was only then that the depth, the abject horror and enormity of the tragedy really sunk in:

In September 1945 we were confronted in the camp with pictures of the Belsen and Buchenwald concentration camps ... Was my generation the last of many to be driven to death so that the concentration camp murderers could go on killing and so that Hitler could live for a few months more?²

The collective national guilt, compounded by survivor's guilt – why had he been allowed to live when so many of his friends had been taken? – was crushing. According to his own witness, he too would have been totally destroyed, psychologically and spiritually, were it not for the ministry of a military chaplain who visited the camp and distributed copies of the Bible, a book which was, for him, totally alien, unknown and unread.

In that camp, hungry as we were, I saw other men collapsing inwardly, how they gave up all hope, sickening for the lack of it, some of them dying. The same thing almost happened to me. What kept me from it was a rebirth to new life thanks to a hope for which there seemed to be no evidence at all.³

He elaborates on this in his autobiography:

One day a well-meaning army chaplain came to our camp and after a brief address distributed Bibles. Some of us would certainly rather have had a few cigarettes. I read the book in the evenings without much understanding until I came upon the psalms of lament in the OT. Psalm 39 caught my attention particularly:

I am dumb and must eat up my suffering within myself.
My life is nothing before Thee.
Hear my prayer O Lord and listen to my cry.
Hold not thou Thy peace at my tears,
For I am a stranger with Thee and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.

This was an echo from my own soul, and it called that soul to God. I didn't experience any sudden illumination, but I came back to these words every evening. Then I read Mark's gospel as a whole and came to the story of the

² Ibid., p. 20.

³ 'Why I am a Christian', in Moltmann, *Experiences of God* (London: SCM, 1981), p. 7.

passion; when I heard Jesus' death cry, 'My God, my God, have you forsaken me?' I felt growing within me the conviction: this is someone who understands you completely, who is with you in your cry to God and has felt the same forsakenness that you are experiencing now ... I summoned up the courage to live again, and I was slowly but surely seized by a great hope for the resurrection into God's wide space ... This perception of Christ did not come all of a sudden ... but it became more and more important for me, and I read the story of the passion again and again, with preference for the Gospel of Mark.⁴

There are two things that stand out in Moltmann's description of his conversion:

- (1) that the idea of hope is the key, the overcoming of bleak despair through the resurrection: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead' (1 Peter 1:2).
- (2) a conviction that God in Christ was a fellow sufferer; that Christ too had experienced radical godforsakenness, alienation and rejection before being vindicated by the Father. These two themes would be developed in his first two internationally significant works, *Theology of Hope* (1964) and *The Crucified God* (1971).

I have never decided for Christ once and for all, as often demanded of us. I have decided again and again in specific terms for the discipleship of Christ when the situation was serious and it was necessary. But ... after almost sixty years, I am certain that then in 1945, and there in the Scottish prisoner of war camp, in the dark pit of my soul, Jesus sought me and found me. 'He came to seek that which is lost', and so he came to me when I was lost.⁵ (ibid.)

God in the dark night of the soul, God as the power of hope and pain: this was the experience which moulded me in what are a person's most receptive years, between eighteen and twenty one. I am reluctant to say that this is why I became a Christian because that sounds like joining a party. Because I believe that I owe my survival to these experiences, I cannot even say I found God there. But I do know in my heart that it is there he found me. I would otherwise have been lost.⁶

It would be until April 1948, three years after the war, that he was finally repatriated and returned to his family.

These three years in a prisoner of war camp, however, were not wasted. It was there in a camp near Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, established in order to prepare German

⁴ Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, p. 30.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Moltmann, 'Why I am a Christian', pp. 8-9.

soldiers for rehabilitation, that Moltmann decided against a career as a physicist and chose instead to study theology. Here he was instructed in his new found faith, began worshipping regularly, and such was the strength of his conviction that he began preparation for a calling as a Protestant pastor, in his case in the Reformed Church. When he enrolled, much to the consternation of his secularist father, as a ministerial student in Göttingen aged twenty-two in September 1948, his future path was clear.

II. The background to *The Theology of Hope*

Between 1953 and 1958 Moltmann served in pastoral ministry in East Germany before being appointed lecturer in the church seminary at Wuppertal, a seminary whose roots were in the pre-war anti-Nazi Confessing Church. In 1964 he proceeded to Karl Barth's former chair of systematic theology in Bonn and then, in 1967, to Tübingen where he spent the rest of his career. Yet it was in Göttingen where he studied for his undergraduate and doctoral degrees – his doctoral dissertation was on the concept of election and predestination in seventeenth century Reformed theology – that laid the foundations for his *Theology of Hope*.

His teachers there were Gerhard Von Rad in Old Testament, Ernst Käsemann and Joachim Jeremias in New Testament, Ernst Wolf in early church history, Hans Joachim Iwand in Luther and the Reformation and Otto Weber in systematic theology. This was a veritable constellation of stars in European theology of the second and third quarters of the twentieth century, and what is more they all partook of the Christ-centred Biblicism which had proved so effective during the 1930s in challenging the effects of an alien philosophy within the German Protestant Church. All, apart from Weber, had belonged to the Confessing Church, and even he in later years had become an unflinching proponent of the theology of Karl Barth. For Von Rad and Käsemann in particular, the Bible pointed forward, the OT culminating in the coming of the messiah, but the NT too looked towards to the future consummation of all things when the returning Christ would hand over the Kingdom to his Father and God would be all in all. Their shared emphasis on revelation in history (and not on Bultmann's a-historical idea of God making himself known in the existential encounter to the individual soul) would be complemented in Moltmann's case with his later discovery of the Dutch Protestant theologians A. A. Van Ruler and J. C. Hoekendijk of the 'apostolate', that the church was open to the concerns of the world and existed to witness to the coming Kingdom of God not just in churchly terms but those which were engaged with secular realities as well.

The main inspiration for the *Theology of Hope* however was not, paradoxically, a theologian at all but an atheistic Jewish Marxist philosopher called Ernst Bloch (1885-1977). His volume *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* ('The Principle of Hope') was published in 1959 and Moltmann read it during the summer vacation in which 'the beauty of the

Swiss mountains passed me unnoticed' he recalled.⁷ His was a philosophical treatment of hope which was both indebted to Marxism – itself indebted to messianic Judaism – and transcended it, especially the tarnished Russian and Eastern Bloc version of 1950s communism which had become a byword for repression and social stagnation. Just as Karl Marx in the nineteenth century had prophesied the overthrow of capitalism within history as an effect of the inevitable march of progress, Bloch believed that the future was the only real category in which human freedom could function and be fulfilled. Human history was radically open to the future and 'truth' is something which people strive towards. Humankind was in the process of becoming. The future moves backwards, as it were, to meet us as we ourselves strive to create a better tomorrow. Nothing is preordained or inevitable. History is an unfinished process which is governed by utopian confidence or what Bloch termed 'hope'. This hope is intrinsic to humankind, part of our ontological makeup, our very being. This is not unfounded optimism but corresponds to the structures of human reality; it is not escapism or unrealistic dreaming but part of what we actually are. Unlike Marx who was critical of all religion, Bloch saw the revolutionary potential of messianic religion. Far from being 'the opium of the masses', chiliastic religion or millenarianism, has embodied this hope and as such not been the source of alienation or repression. Hope, therefore, judged the present, it criticized the status quo, while this future-oriented utopian striving justified radical political action. Marx had famously said that his aim was not to understand the world but to change it. To be human, for Bloch, meant to hope and to act on the basis of hope.

When Moltmann read this he thought that Bloch has understood the eschatological thrust of the Christian Bible better than the Christians themselves. 'Why has Christian theology paid no attention to the subject of hope?', he asked.

Surely this is a theme it ought to make its very own? ... Christianity is completely and entirely and utterly hope – a looking forward and a forward direction; hope is not just an appendix ... Eschatology is not just one of Christianity's many doctrines. It is quite simply the medium of the Christian faith, the keynote, the daybreak colours of a new expected day which bathe everything in their light'.⁸

The *Theology of Hope* published in 1964 was not, according to Moltmann, just a Christianized version of Bloch's volume. It was a reworking of the biblical material in the light of a thoroughgoing historically based eschatology. It differed from Bloch in as much as it rejected his atheism (as one would expect) and held firmly to the historical resurrection of Christ. For Bloch all reality is basically materialist, even hope being a completely human aspiration. For him transcendence was a function of a wholly natural reality which is latent in matter. For Moltmann on the other hand, that

⁷ Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, p. 11.

⁸ Ibid.

which guarantees the objective truth of an ontology of hope is God's revelation in Christ, on the plain of history but made known by faith. That which challenges hope absolutely is death, and even Bloch's scheme could not overcome death. However in the gospel God himself has transcended utter hopelessness by resurrecting Christ from the dead. God creates *de novo*, *ex nihilo*. There is no continuity between death and life. Life has to be created anew. It is in Biblical religion which affirms the reality of God that the crucified and Godforsaken messiah has been vindicated by his Father in the victory of the empty tomb. The key difference between Moltmann and Bloch was in the affirmation of God and the historical reality of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

It is only in following the Christ who was raised from suffering, from a God-forsaken death and from the grave that [faith] gains an open prospect in which there is nothing more to oppress us ... Hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith believes to have been truly promised by God.⁹

This is not so much a hope for an ethereal, otherworldly 'heaven' but for the radical renewal of this sin-blighted earth: 'It seeks in the resurrection of Christ not the eternity of heaven, but the future of the very earth on which his cross stands'.¹⁰

III. The content of *The Theology of Hope*

The *Theology of Hope* contains an introductory meditation on the Christian concept of hope and five chapters, Chapter One on eschatology and revelation, Chapter Two on the eschatological promise within history, Chapter Three on Christ's resurrection from the dead, Chapter Four on the concept of history itself, and Chapter Five which is a practical exposition of the church's mission in the world. The two key chapters are Chapter Two, on the OT, and Chapter Three on God having raised his Son from the dead.

The starting point is the story of a revelation which occurred in history witnessed to in the Bible. It is very specific. It is not a general idea about God or a philosophy of human religiosity but the concrete reality of Israel's history replete with prophets and culminating in the messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth. For Moltmann (like Barth), this biblical revelation must be understood on its own terms, allowed to create its own categories of reality and to raise its own questions. This does not mean that it is sealed off from all general religious considerations or secular, mundane history as such, but that it claims its own universality which draws other human realities and questions into dialogue with itself. Christianity's own claims to universality must be taken seriously. When this is accepted, fruitful dialogue with other perspectives can begin.

⁹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM, 1967), pp. 19-20.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21. Subsequent references are contained in parentheses in the text.

The first key concept for Moltmann is not epiphany but promise. Epiphany religions are a-historical; Christianity (and Judaism) are rooted in history. The idea of a changeless, timeless eternity is the result of non-biblical philosophies corrupting Christian faith. The whole genius of OT religion is that it occurs in history. In the Exodus a nomadic tribe responds to the God who has gone before it and calls it towards the future. 'I am who I am' can be translated in fact as 'I will be who I will be'. The divine promise contradicts present reality and calls people onwards. Israel's God 'is the one who makes possible for the very first time the feeling for history in the category of the future' (p. 100). Moltmann describes the Biblical promise thus: the promise announces a future which does not yet exist; it initiates an historical movement towards its fulfilment; by so doing a feeling for the past, present and future is created, in other words a concept of history (this is unique to Biblical religion; it functions as a judgement on the present which in turn creates a desire for a future corresponding to the hoped-for reality; this puts paid to resignation, fatalism or any sense of the inevitability of the present; it is God who both initiates the process and makes himself known within it; that the element of surprise, the unexpected and novelty is contained within this movement towards the future. It is, says Moltmann, 'an expanding history of promise'; the process of redemption 'constantly overflows history ... in the inexhaustibility of the God of promise' (p. 106). The biblical God has pledged himself to this history while revelation points forward in time.

This leads to Moltmann's second key concept, the historical resurrection of Christ. 'Christianity', he claims, 'stands or falls with the reality of God having raised Jesus from the dead' (p. 165). The key concept in eschatology is the resurrection of the historical Person of Christ: 'Christian eschatology is at heart Christology in an eschatological perspective' (p. 192).

In the NT eschatology is set forth in terms of Jewish apocalyptic. The apocalyptic element had been an embarrassment for the older biblical scholarship. For the liberal theologians of the turn of the nineteenth century, Jesus had to be rescued from his context – the end of the world, the cosmic clash, the second coming to bring history to its consummation – and turned into a great moral teacher shorn of these primitive apocalyptic appendages. To engage the respect of bourgeois Christianity, Jesus needed to be non-miraculous and domesticated – as he was in the thought of Harnack and others. But then came two historians of early Christianity who stated boldly: this does not accord with the evidence. The first was Johannes Weiss (1863-1914), author of *The Preaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom* (1892), and secondly Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965). In his *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), Schweitzer fleshed out Weiss's analysis that the kingdom of God was not another term for the effortless spread of virtue and goodness but something which breaks into history violently from beyond. Apocalyptic is its very essence. In other words, Jesus was not the benign teacher of a disembodied (and harmless) ethic, but he personified the Kingdom which breaks into history from the side of God. His death was violent and

his resurrection (for Schweitzer) was an enigma. In Christ God's judgement on all human religiosity becomes a fact: it is an uncomfortable, disconcerting, disorientating reality. This, at least, is what the NT actually teaches. Neither Weiss nor Schweitzer knew what to do with this apocalyptic Jesus, but they created a new consensus in NT scholarship which was forced to take the category of apocalyptic seriously. Moltmann's teachers, Käsemann especially, had found apocalyptic to be the key to understand Christ's resurrection. In Jewish apocalyptic, the resurrection had been promised for the Last Day. It would be a general resurrection at the end of time, where God would vindicate the faithful, raise them from the dead and create a new heaven and a new earth. In Jesus, however, this had already occurred within history in anticipation of the promised and predicted End. He was, as Paul had said, the first fruits of our redemption (1 Cor. 15). Moltmann affirms this (in Chapter Three), which had in any way become the accepted interpretation of Jesus' resurrection according to St Paul, but he emphasises that it is the *crucified* Jesus who had been resurrected, the One who had experienced Godforsakenness for the sake of all of humankind. Jesus' resurrection looks forward to the eschatological consummation, the resurrection of humankind and Christ's lordship over all, so the category of promise is still in play.

It is worth considering the detail of Moltmann's understanding of the resurrection. For Moltmann we must begin not with mundane history as such, or with Bultmann's existential approach that the resurrection did not occur as an event in history but in the subjective experience of his followers. Rather we begin with the NT and the early Christians' own understanding of the phenomenon. The reality into which the NT believers were initiated was one which was open to God's future. Everything has to do with the veracity of God's promises, the resurrection of the dead and the new heaven and new earth in which righteousness will dwell. It is this reality that challenges secular realities and existentialist ones. The historical resurrection of Christ is unprecedented, without parallel or analogy and radically new, in fact it embodies its *own* reality and as such creates a new understanding of history which is, in turn, open to God's future.

The resurrection of Christ is without parallel in the history known to us. But it can for that very reason be regarded as a 'history-making event' in the light of which all other history is illuminated, called in question and transformed (p. 180).

It is not an aberration or a quirk or something which appertains only to Jesus of Nazareth. In opening up the future, Christ's resurrection paves the way for God's promised future which includes the renewal of all of humankind:

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 the 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 (p. 181).

Briefly, Moltmann's third key concept which is hinted at in the *Theology of Hope* and explained more fully in *The Crucified God*, has to do with the dialectic of cross and resurrection. For Moltmann cross and resurrection are totally contradictory entities. The cross symbolizes not just death but radical negation of being, wholesale and absolute God-forsakenness. God, in a phrase popular in the 1960s, is *dead*.

The experience of the cross of Jesus means for [the disciples] the experience of the God-forsakenness of God's ambassador – that is an absolute *nihil* embracing also God. The experience of the appearance of the crucified one as the living Lord therefore means for them the experience of the nearness of God in the God-forsaken one, of the deity of God in the crucified and dead Christ – that is, a new totality which annihilates the total *nihil*. The two experiences stand in radical contradiction to one another, like death and life, nothing and everything, godlessness and the deity of God (p. 198).

This is not bare paradox but it reflects the unique quality of the cross and resurrection of Christ. The resurrected Christ cannot be in latent continuity with the living Jesus. Christ died and was rejected. But in the resurrection this same Christ is not resuscitated but is raised anew, a new creation occurs just as God in the beginning created the world. God creates a *new* continuity within this radical discontinuity which had been made inevitable by Jesus' death. Yet even this points forward towards a new future. It is partial, as yet unfulfilled in its entirety, and waiting to be filled out (as it were) by the future response of the community of faith in its mission to the world.

The knowledge of the future which is kindled by promise is ... prospective and anticipatory ... [it is] also provisional, fragmentary, open, straining beyond itself. It knows the future in striving to bring out the tendencies and latencies of the Christ event of the crucifixion and the resurrection, [and] the possibilities opened up by this event (p. 203).

In opening up the future, the resurrection fulfils God's universal promise for the destiny of humankind and the renewal of his marred creation, and draws people forward to make their own contribution to the future of the world.

To sum up: theology, for Moltmann, is predicated upon the future, it opens up radical possibilities for the a better tomorrow which accords with the biblical promise for the coming of the Kingdom of God, its guarantor is the fact that God has resurrected Jesus from the dead, and it is radically this-worldly. As the resurrection of Jesus occurred not on some a-historical plane but temporally, in time and space, its significance is universal. Whatever criticism can be made of the detail of this scheme,

it set a path for ecumenical theology for the remainder of the twentieth century and into our own.

IV. The context and structure of *The Crucified God*

There is little doubt that part of the success of *Theology of Hope* was that it tapped into its *Zeitgeist*, that it resonated so strongly with the optimistic strain which characterized the mid-1960s. By then the memories of the war were receding and the economic progress of the decade opened the way for social change which was deemed to be liberating and revolutionary. Moltmann himself more than once has listed the changes which contributed to his book's impact: 'In 1964 the *Theology of Hope* evidently met its *kairos*. The subject was, so to speak, in the air, in the church and in public life'¹¹ Technology had produced a new sensibility for an open future, that anything was possible and that people were no longer shackled to the past. Architecture was futuristic, social planning was in vogue, new towns, new cities and new material dreams were the order of the day. The Kennedy era in the USA (1960-63) was one of optimism and the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King gave hope to oppressed minorities everywhere. In Moltmann's Europe there were signs that the Stalinist era had passed and that 'socialism with a human face', as championed by Alexander Dubcek's liberal regime in Czechoslovakia, would soften the politics of the eastern bloc. In Roman Catholicism Vatican II, inaugurated by 'good' Pope John XXIII in 1962, had opened up that church to modernity, the term was *Aggiornamento* or 'opening up'. Moltmann himself, along with the Catholic theologian Johannes Baptist Metz was heavily involved in the Christian-Marxist dialogue, while the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968, would endorse all the social and political emphases which Moltmann espoused. The 1960s certainly began as the decade of hope.

But then it all came unstuck. American optimism turned into cynicism with the deepening tragedy of the Vietnam War (1965-72); Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, President John F. Kennedy's younger and more socially radical brother, were assassinated in 1968; Russian tanks rolled into Dubcek's Czechoslovakia to crush the 'Prague Spring' also in 1968; the peaceful change of the beginning of the decade turned to ugliness and violence by its end and youthful idealism gave way to cynical despair. In the Catholic Church a much more conservative era was instigated under Pope Paul VI who presided over the close of the Vatican Council in 1965. The Christian-Marxist dialogue came to an abrupt end.

In the sixties we saw a great many different hopes, which collapsed in resignation or anger or violence under the pressure of first opposition ... But in the face of growing difficulties and disappointments in the movements I have mentioned, in which I had been passionately involved, the other fundamental experience came to the fore again, personally and theologically:

¹¹ Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, p. 98.

the experience of God in the experience of forsakenness and desolation. I took this up in the form of a theology of the cross, which was published in 1972 under the title *Der gekreuzigte Gott (The Crucified God)*.¹²

The Crucified God is more tightly structured than *Theology of Hope*. It consists of eight chapters, the first two having to do with questions of relevance and with traditional interpretations of the cross majoring on Paul and Luther especially, though not including (curiously) an assessment of the classic atonement theories. The next three have to do with the Person of Christ and his passion in which deity is intimately involved with Jesus' suffering humanity; these three chapters include the heart (crux?) of Moltmann's biblical exegesis of the passion narrative in which the dialectic between cross and resurrection and resurrection and cross, or (if you like) between hope and passion and passion and hope, are essential to his reading of the gospel material:

In terms of history and its sense of time, Jesus first died and was then raised. In eschatological terms the last becomes the first: he died as the risen Christ and was made flesh as the one who was to come. In historical terms Christ can be called the anticipation of the coming God on the basis of his resurrection from the dead. In eschatological terms, however, he must be called the incarnation of the coming God in our flesh and in his death on the cross.¹³

In other words, the resurrection does not cancel out the cross nor does the cross undermine the fact that Jesus is the One who is to come. It is the crucified Christ, God's incarnate Son, who is resurrected, complete with his wounds, and the resurrected Christ in whom God announces his eschatological victory over death, suffering and hell. The theological novelty of the book comes in Chapter Six, entitled 'the crucified God', in that the Father to whom Jesus called in dereliction 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' from the cross, and the divine Father who raised Jesus from the dead, is intimately involved in the darkness, God-forsakenness and suffering of the Son to such an extent that God himself experiences abandonment, dereliction and rejection in the event of the cross: 'With the Christian message of the cross of Christ, something new and strange has entered the metaphysical world' (p. 215). The final two chapters, seven and eight, discuss the spiritual and social implications of this fact for human experience. These chapters, though shorter than those in *Theology of Hope*, are more tightly packed. '*The Crucified God* is a complex work, in which a number of major themes are intertwined and are not easy to unravel'.¹⁴

¹² Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, pp. 13-14.

¹³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), p. 184. Subsequent references are contained in parentheses in the text.

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Moltmann: Messianic Theology in the Making* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1989), p. 60.

V. The content of *The Crucified God*

The book is more a series of insights, intuitions and (sometimes brilliant) speculations than a cool and logical progression of thought. The themes of suffering, God-forsakenness, alienation are always present and considered from a wide range of different angles. According to traditional theology, God exists as a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The eternal Father, who is usually referred to as the fount of deity, is seen as the Creator (He is also immutable and impassable, i.e. beyond suffering); the Son, who is perpetually obedient to the Father, took flesh and came into the world in order to redeem humankind; and the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father (in Eastern theology, from the Father and the Son in Western theology) represents the link between the two which is shed abroad in order to make effective the redemption which Christ has achieved. On the basis of the cross, claims Moltmann, this rather static and functional understanding of God needs to be judged and revolutionized. Its weakness is that it does not take the radical nature of Christ's suffering *deity* into account, or that of his heavenly Father: 'The Son suffers and dies on the cross. The Father suffers with him, but not in the same way. There is a Trinitarian solution to the paradox that God is "dead" on the cross and yet is not dead, once one abandons the simple concept of God' (p. 203). 'When one considers the significance of the death of Jesus for God himself, one must enter into the inner-Trinitarian tensions and relationships of God and speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (p. 204). In other words, the whole event of the cross needs to be understood an event *in God* and not apart from him. This is a radical extension of, though not (Moltmann would claim) a departure from, true biblical thought. '[I have sought only to] radicalize the traditional Christian theology of the cross in such a way that it is capable of meeting the experiences of modern catastrophes'.¹⁵

For Moltmann the mission of the Son is not only to take upon himself the burden and guilt of human sinfulness in order to achieve redemption and reconcile men and women to God, but in Christ God saw fit to put *himself* in that place where absolute alienation and God-forsakenness occurred. In Christ God not only became man but became an outcast, rejected, accursed and damned. Luther had already spoken of Christ as the ultimate sinner, and Barth, in Moltmann's own day, had claimed that it was not Christ's humanity which had been revealed in his obedience unto death but his very deity: 'God is not proud. In his high majesty He is humble' (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* VI/1). Moltmann takes this insight even further: 'Humiliation to the point of death on the cross corresponds to God's nature in the contradiction of abandonment' (p. 205). This humiliation and abandonment is a reflection of God's inner life or his essence. Traditional orthodoxy had claimed that God, being immutable, could not suffer. Christ suffered certainly, but only in his human nature, and only during the time of his incarnation and passion. Moltmann claims that this analysis neither takes the unity of Christ's person seriously – it is in the totality of his

¹⁵ Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, p. 195.

person that Christ, the God-man, suffers – nor does it consider the depth of divine suffering in the Father. For Moltmann, the suffering of Christ is taken up into God: ‘The theological dimension of the death of Jesus on the cross is what happens between Jesus and his Father in the spirit of abandonment and surrender’ (p. 207). When this is taken seriously, impassability is not an option. The idea of immutability, for Moltmann, is an alien intrusion of Greek philosophical thought and should be challenged by the concept of the suffering God: ‘Faith must understand the deity of God from the event of the suffering and death of the Son of God and thus bring about a fundamental change in ... metaphysical thought’ (p. 215).

This presents a radical challenge to theism and to atheism alike. Both, claims Moltmann, are the products of natural theology, that is believing, or not believing, that God exists as a logical deduction on the basis of perceived evidence. Both come to differing conclusions according to the same rational means. Christianity, however, begins and ends with the cross and resurrection of Christ. The God of theism is Aristotle’s God who cannot, by definition, suffer. (‘The God of theism is poor, he cannot love nor can he suffer’ (p. 253)). Did not Dostoevsky in the *Brothers Karamazov* write: ‘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’ (p. 222)? ‘Protest atheism’ occurred as a moral revulsion against an idea of God which was radically unbiblical, the idea of God’s omnipotence as a philosophical axiom. But the God who has revealed himself in the suffering Christ is not this kind of God at all:

The only way past protest atheism is through a theology of the cross which understands God as the suffering God in the suffering of Christ ... God’s being is in suffering and the suffering is in God’s being itself, because God is love (p. 227).

This being the case the question of protest atheism, ‘Why does God allow suffering?’, loses its sting.

Whereas Moltmann is critical of the classic two-natures doctrine as being conceptually dependent on an unbiblical, philosophical concept of deity, he realizes that even within the sphere of Christian thought, theologians have moved towards an idea of the suffering God while holding to the traditional scheme. Luther, in his concept of the *communicatio idiomatum* or the ‘interchanging of the two natures’ in the unity of Christ’s person, is the prime example of this, though Moltmann was later introduced to the Anglican kenotic theologians of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century who, while retaining the two-natures doctrine, were moving in the same direction.¹⁶ Consequently what was basic to the two-natures doctrine, viz, that God was immutable or unchangeable, could be retained in a radically revised form. Hence although God cannot be changed by anything outside of himself, he is free to

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

allow himself to be changed *if this is his will*; that the cross shows that, on the basis of the love which lays in his essential being, that *he has allowed himself to be changed* by something outside himself: 'active suffering, the suffering of love, in which one voluntarily opens himself up to the possibility of being affected by another' (p. 230) has, in God's case, occurred: 'Were God incapable of suffering in any respect, and therefore in an absolute sense, then he would also be incapable of love' (p. 230); yet throughout this process, *God retains his lordship over this suffering* due to the omnipotent quality of his love.

Moltmann, however, goes further than Luther for whom the incarnation enveloped God's suffering, by taking this suffering up into God himself: 'The Father who abandons him and delivers him up suffers the death of the Son in the infinite grief of love' (p. 243). Alienation, in other words, occurs not merely in history, on the cross, but in God himself: 'This deep community of will between Jesus and his God and Father is now expressed precisely at the point of their deepest separation, in the god-forsakenness and accursed death of Jesus on the cross' (pp. 243-4).

If one conceives of the Trinity as an event of love in the suffering and death of Jesus ... then the Trinity is no self-contained group in heaven, but an eschatological process open for men and women on earth, which stems from the cross of Christ (p. 249).

This God has shown himself to be God not only in the suffering of the divine Christ in history, on the cross, but also in resurrecting Jesus from the dead: 'No Christian eschatology is possible without the knowledge of the God who creates from nothing and raises the crucified Christ' (pp. 218-9). God, the divine creator who has demonstrated his deity in history through resurrecting Jesus from the dead, is the one who exists as the eternal fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For God the temporal or historical work of Christ reflects the deep unity of being between Father and Son not only in love and community but in pain and alienation, while the Spirit, who binds together Father and Son, has also been active in moving creation on to its ultimate eschatological fulfilment: '[God is] transcendent as Father, immanent as Son and opens up the future of history as the Spirit' (p. 256).

In *The Crucified God* Moltmann has been accused of a range of faults: metaphysical speculation, patripassianism, theopaschism, tritheism even, confusing the immanent trinity with the economic trinity and confusing the two natures of Christ. Despite the speculative nature of his ideas, by maintaining his faith in the Trinitarian nature of God and the absolute deity of Christ, he has remained broadly within the scope of Christian orthodoxy. What he has sought to do is to take seriously, in the context of a post-Auschwitz world, the implications of Bonhoeffer's statement: 'only the suffering God can help' ('The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering ... Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world ... It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in

the secular life. It is allowing oneself to be caught up in the messianic suffering of God in Jesus Christ', *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London; SCM, 1971 ed.), p. 361; quoted in *The Crucified God*, p. 290).