

# CHRIST AND SUFFERING IN MOLTMANN'S THOUGHT

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Is the world too to learn to die tranquilly, or are there hopes for the world which must be answered in personal and socio-political terms?

— Jürgen Moltmann  
*The Crucified God*

If the Easter appearances of the risen Christ are not covered by the theological answer that he is the presence of the eternal, but require the development of a new eschatology. The resurrection has seen into motion an eschatologically determined process of history, whose goal is the annihilation of death.

— Jürgen Moltmann  
*Theology of Hope*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics that distinguishes political and liberation theologies from the modern theological paradigm is the turn from epistemology to suffering as the central issue of our time. Jürgen Moltmann is one of the first twentieth-century theologians to grapple with this task. The publication of his first foray into Christology, *The Crucified God*, demonstrated the stakes of such a turn for Christianity in the aftermath of European destruction and the Jewish Holocaust. And it has produced a firestorm of controversy which perdures in some forms even today. This essay will examine Moltmann's understanding of Christ in light of his struggle with human and planetary suffering. It will begin by treating the methodological, soteriological, and political importance of Christ as the "Crucified God" in Moltmann's thought by outlining his stringent critique of the sacrifice of meaning, feeling, and communal responsibility from the public realm in church and society. It will illustrate his claims regard-

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ing the church's solidarity with the poor and oppressed. The essay will conclude by offering a critique of Moltmann's position from a feminist-liberationist perspective, which argues that the idea of the "Crucified God," however radical in its identification of God with human suffering, contains a fundamental conflict which allows it to serve primarily as a transition piece to a new paradigm of political and liberation theologies.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE SUFFERING CHRIST AND HUMAN SUFFERING

Moltmann's central theological questions self-confessedly emerge from his experiences as a German prisoner-of-war during World War II (what he calls the "concentration camp years," in Britain, [Volf 1986:5]) and less explicitly stated, from his position as a European theologian addressing the church's ongoing crisis of the meaning and identity in modernity, particularly as this manifested itself in Christianity's inability to resist fascism and in the student protest movements of the 1960s (his earlier work), and more recently, his concern with issues of global ecology.

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann identifies two key theological issues: a crisis of relevance for a church faced with anomie and despair and a retreat to a Christian "ghetto," and a crisis of identity for a church that has succumbed to cultural accommodation on the one hand and the possibility of usurpation by contemporary movements for political change on the other. Moltmann struggles with the crisis of relevance via his discussion of the apathetic God of classical Christian theology (and its human corollary, apathy and meaninglessness in the middle-class) and the "revolution in the concept of God" which his crucified God-in-Christ demands. Moltmann's crisis of relevance is coupled with his claims to a crisis of identity for the church. Concerned about the assimilation of the church to the issues of the bourgeois subject-in-despair (cultural accommodation) or in-denial (the retreat of the church to a so-called Christian ghetto), yet unwilling to relinquish Christianity as a distinctive entity, Moltmann again looks to the cross to provide a principle of differentiation. "The cross of Christ became for me the 'basis and the censure of Christian theology'" [Conyers 1988:210, citing Moltmann]. More recently, in *The Way of Jesus Christ*, Moltmann continues and nuances these concerns, while emphasizing more fully his earlier theme of the suffering of God-in-Christ as identification and solidarity with the poor. Thus, while keeping in the forefront the suffering subject of contemporary human history, Moltmann's project functions as a severe critique of the failings of modernity and of modern theology's individualistic, privatistic responses to it—its loss of its prophetic voice, its marginalization of issues of difference, its tendency toward despair, its apathetic God.

Along with other German theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz, Moltmann develops his critique of the privatization of religion in modernity and of the apathy and self-absorption of the bourgeois theological subject into what Metz has coined "political theology." This theology arose in Europe in the 1960s in response to the Christian-Marxist dialogue of the time [Conyers 1988:217, citing Moltmann]. Such a theology was not an attempt to "politicize" theological discourse, but to describe contemporary life as political (that is, concerned with concrete, historical human social arrangements and with the power to constitute such) and to reconfigure Christianity in the midst of and as a protest against massive public suffering [Chopp, 1986:101]. Thus, the term "political" in political theology referred not to a theme, but to a milieu in which theologians such as Moltmann

and Metz claimed that all theological discourse took place. In discussing his involvement in the Christian-Marxist dialogue, Moltmann says that he learned to ask,

... whether a religion or a religious community functions to provide comfort through the hope of a better afterlife, to justify unjust forms, or to stimulate the spirit of justice through which unjust forms are changed. [Volf 1986:10-11, citing Moltmann]

Thus, through his development of a political theology, Moltmann attempts to retrieve the material (that is, social, political, and economic) concerns abandoned by his theological forebears, Barth and Bultmann. Moltmann's project, then, offers much promise for a repositioning of the primary questions of contemporary theology via the perspective of those who have suffered so much on the margins of modern historical practice.

Moltmann's second issue in the crisis of identity is the issue of Christian differentiation—required in order to avoid absorption again into bourgeois sensibilities or a complete loss of *religious* identity through work on behalf of the marginalized other that denies any Christian basis.

The crisis of the church in present-day society is not merely the critical choice between assimilation or retreat into the ghetto, but the crisis of its own existence as the church of the crucified Christ ... [F]or only by Christ is it possible to tell what is a Christian church and what is not. [Moltmann 1974:2-3]

The task for the church as Moltmann conceives it in his political theology is to enter the social realm, but not to lose its identity as the Christian church [Moltmann 1974:13]. His identification of the suffering Jesus on the cross with the death of God works for Moltmann to provide the basis for the move into the social-political realm—that is, the identification of the bourgeois church with the suffering subjects on the margin of history. And the cross again functions, in this second scenario, to provide Moltmann with the philosophical criterion he requires in order to differentiate that which is “Christian” from that which is not [Moltmann 1974:7]. The worship of the crucified Christ distinguishes Christianity from all other religions, claims Moltmann, and it provides a point of pure criticism from which to judge what are and are not appropriate manifestations of the communal essence and identity.

Moltmann also wishes to oppose modernity's restriction of church and theology to the private realm and its limitation of theological knowledge to various forms of historicism, essentialism, the empty formalism of existentialist Christianity and to resist modernity's slide into a sense of fated apathy. To do so, Moltmann offers his reconstruction of Christian eschatology.

In actual fact ... eschatology means the doctrine of the Christian hope, which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it. From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and 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 new day. [Moltmann 1967:16]

Moltmann explicitly repudiates modern theology's attempts to derive a meaningful unity to history based on the derivation of an essentialist core to or an argument about the historicity of all human experience. What connects present and past, for Christians, says Moltmann, is instead "the problem of the future" [Moltmann 1967:189]. And, according to Moltmann, this is Christianity's distinctive contribution to a jaded and cynical world: "the hope that it engenders in the midst of the ambiguous and even hopeless circumstances that plague human existence..." [Runyon 1979:10].<sup>3</sup>

For Moltmann, this eschatology takes the form of divine promises, promises which move toward the present from God's future, in order to transform it in the light of that future. Christian eschatology, he writes, "is the language of promises. It understands history as the reality instituted by promise" [Moltmann 1967:224]. Moltmann's emphasis on this hopeful eschatological future provides a horizon of openness and the possibility of transformation to the historical wreckage of modernity and the church's often apathetic responses to it. Such a focus on the possible future could be argued to be some sort of utopian fantasy. But Moltmann staunchly defends the practical nature of his promissory proposal. "[T]o settle for what is now 'real,'" he writes, "is to be tied to what is passing away and soon will be no more. Far from being unrealistic, a *hopeful* approach 'alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught'" [Runyon 1979:10, citing Moltmann 1967:25]. Moltmann suggests that rather than being "realistic," to perceive and act out of history understood as a closed and tragic circle is a denial of the "realism" of God's promised future and the on-going process of re-creation.

Thus hopes and anticipations of the future are not a transfiguring glow superimposed upon a darkened existence, but are realistic ways of perceiving the scope of our real possibilities, and as such they set everything in motion and keep it in a state of change. Hope and the kind of thinking that goes with it consequently cannot submit to the reproach of being utopian, for they do not strive after things that have 'no place', but after things that have 'no place *as yet*' but can acquire one. [Moltmann 1967:25]

In a direct confrontation with the empirical tradition in theology, Moltmann retorts that

positivistic realism also proves to be illusory, so long as the world is not a fixed body of facts but a network of paths and processes, so long as the world does not only run according to laws but these laws themselves are flexible, so long as it is a realm in which necessity means the possible, but not the unalterable. [Moltmann 1967:25]

This explication of the Christian eschatological future as one which is not determined nor fixed by past experience and traditions but itself provides the impetus for flexibility and transformation offers the possibility for rethinking the kind of closed, sacrificial frameworks that have characterized so much of Christological discourse. Indeed, the open horizon which Moltmann's eschatology offers can be seen clearly in his use of it to shape his Christological position.

Moltmann describes this eschatological future as "already present in the promises of Christ" [Moltmann 1967:139]. Moltmann develops his Christ figure as the already-present

and continually open hope of the future through the use of three traditional themes: the kingdom of God as promise, the Resurrection as new creation, and the Trinity as both open and as relational. As Moltmann explains it, Jesus did more than simply proclaim the realm of God as a promised future. "The events which took place around Jesus and at his word speak on his behalf, for they are the signs of the messianic age" (Moltmann 1974:98). Moltmann appeals particularly here to Jesus' ministry with the poor, the sick, and the oppressed, filling out the formal eschatological promise he proclaims with a materiality of solidarity with those on the social margins. Eschatology here, then, becomes a "creative expectation" which both critiques and transforms present affairs in conformity with the materiality of this material promise (Moltmann 1967:335). Likewise, Moltmann interprets Christ's resurrection not as an ethereal event, disconnected from human history, but as the "future of the very earth on which [Christ's] cross stands" (Moltmann 1967:21). Moltmann's proclaimed eschatological promise, then, is not some future event to which we in the present move, but a manifestation of practical hope which comes from God's future toward us, drawing us forward and transforming the present reality in its image.

'Easter' was a prelude to, and a real anticipation of, God's qualitatively new future and the new creation in the midst of the history of the world's suffering ... For the Easter hope shines not only forwards into the unknown newness of the history which it opens up, but also backwards over the graveyards of history ... (Moltmann 1974:163)

Moltmann's use of the Resurrection, as the resurrection of *the crucified one*, then, functions not only as a description of the actuality of a promised future from God for those who live now in the shadow of the end of modernity. It is also a ground for the dangerous remembrance of those who have been sacrificed and a recognition of the claim that they make upon the future of theology and the future of the earth.

The third image that Moltmann uses to interpret the openendedness of his radical eschatology in that of the Trinity. According to Rebecca Chopp, in Moltmann,

The Trinity is the open symbol of the possibility of new creation, for in the context of the suffering in God—the suffering of the grieving Father, the suffering of the abandoned Son—the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son to anticipate and bring about a new creation. (Chopp 1986:110)

Chopp [1989] goes on to describe Moltmann as offering a "narratology" of God in which the Trinity is central and is posited as "relational and open."

What is helpful about Moltmann's analysis is the relation of suffering and openness, for suffering does not create openness nor openness depend on suffering, but rather what happens with suffering, including the memories of those who have suffered history, is an open possibility in the trinitarian history of God. (Chopp 1989:33)

What Moltmann's eschatology and his use of it as an interpretive tool for his Christology

does, then, is to offer an open and materially anticipatory horizon which comes to us from the future for the transformation of present social arrangements. As Chopp suggests, for Moltmann, God's essential nature *is* the future, which comes to the present and transforms it, calling us to a life of hope in a history that is constituted by God's promises.

Through his critique of the empty formalism of Bultmannian existentialism and of the calculated neutrality of neo-orthodoxy and via his claims regarding the bourgeois church's necessary identity with those who are "other," Moltmann offers the possibility of reconfiguring the modern theological project. He addresses this concern in two interrelated ways: 1) through his attention to the oppressed other as the primary focus of Jesus' earthly ministry and as a necessary constituent of a revitalized European church, and 2) through his interpretation of the cross as a symbol of interruptive suffering for a church become apathetic and complacent.

Moltmann draws both on his negative dialectics and a socio-political reading of the ministry of the historical Jesus to make his claim about the material subject of Christianity in our time. The Christian principle of fellowship is fellowship with those who are different, he writes in *The Crucified God*.

Thus to save all men, and in accordance with the contradiction of the cross, the church of the crucified Christ must take sides in the concrete social and political conflicts going on about it and in which it is involved, and must be prepared to join and form parties. It must not ally itself with the existing parties, but in a partisan fashion intervene on behalf of betrayed humanity and suppressed freedom. [Moltmann 1974:53]

This "betrayed humanity" Moltmann identifies as the "church of the crucified" one [Moltmann 1974:52]. That is, he interprets as necessary to the identification of the church of Christ, a solidarity with those to whom Jesus directed much of his earthly ministry—that is, to his own people, the Jewish community, and in particular, those on the margins of that Jewish society. In this way, Moltmann criticizes the church's complicity in the historical and ongoing rejection and persecution of the Jewish people in predominantly Christian arenas, and its modern turn to the private and inward religious experience of the bourgeois believer, to the exclusion of concerns for society's social, political, and economic periphery.

It was important to me to depict the Church's identity in the relation of the Church to Israel and not apart from it. It was also important to me to show the identity of the Church of Christ with constant attention to the 'People of Jesus'—that is, with attention to the poor, the oppressed, the sick and handicapped. [Conyers 1988:214, citing Moltmann]

And in his more recent writings, he extends this latter emphasis to the earth itself as a marginalized subject in an anthropocentric world.

Today a cosmic Christology has to confront Christ the redeemer with a nature which human beings have plunged into chaos, infected with poisonous waste and condemned to universal death; for it is only this Christ who can save men and

women from their despair and preserve nature from annihilation. [Moltmann, 1990:275]

Addressing himself to his own bourgeois church, Moltmann thus extrapolates that this historical attention allows that "it is right to follow Jesus at the present time in the specific activities of love, suffering, and revolt" [Moltmann 1974:63].

Central to Moltmann's use of the cross, then, are his claims that the death of Jesus was neither an accident, nor a mistake, but a political execution provoked by his disruption of a sacrificial social order [Moltmann 1974:127]. Against Bultmann, he writes that Jesus' crucifixion was not a "misconstrual" of a "religious" matter as a "political" one. Rather, he says,

How could public ministry in so tense a political situation between Roman occupying forces and popular uprising, such as existed in Palestine at that time, have remained without political effects? In the Judaism of that period, the political and the religious situations were inseparable. [Moltmann 1974:137]

Writing that Jesus' message and his public activity were "political in the extreme" [Moltmann 1974:144], Moltmann says that because Jesus' ministry was effective, it "produced reactions which took effect themselves ... [provoking] tangible political unrest" [Moltmann 1974:137,143]. What he argues, then, is not that Jesus was a political messiah, leading armed revolt against the Roman occupying powers, but—consistent with his broadening of the meaning of "political" to embrace the entire field of human social interaction—that Jesus' healing and liberating ministry to those who were sacrificed to the maintenance of that occupying power and its collaborators among the Jewish elite served to threaten those in power in tangible ways.<sup>4</sup> Moltmann's work on the cross makes clear that it is the cruelty of the particular socio-political system in power in Palestine in the first century C.E. that caused Jesus to be crucified, and not the plan of God the Father.

Moltmann's interpretation of the cross further critiques the concept of God as one who demands sacrifice through his rejection of the traditional theory of Jesus' mute acceptance of his death and through his depiction of the God of Jesus as the Father who suffers in the death of his Son. His resistance to the notion that Jesus is "an example of patience and submission to fate," [Moltmann 1974:51] serves to buttress his argument concerning the apathy, despair, and absence of hope which he says characterize the European church in our time. "... [T]he objection to hope arises from the religion of humble acquiescence in the present," he writes [Moltmann 1967:26].<sup>5</sup> As Jesus dies in agony and doubt, so also, claims Moltmann, does God the Father suffer in the loss of his son. He himself asks the question that arises from classical notion of the impassibility of the deity: "But how can the death of Jesus be a *statement about God*? Does that not amount to a revolution in the concept of God?" [Moltmann 1974:201]. Connecting the Greek idea of *apatheia* from which derives the impassible God with the emotional apathy of his own church, Moltmann writes: "Thus the metaphysical apathy that denotes unchangeability translates to an ethical apathy ..." [Conyers 1988:108: citing Moltmann], one that disengages the bourgeois believer from material suffering in the modern world. The theology of the cross, then, "brings a completely indigestible element into the idea of an apathetic God" [Conyers 1988:110]. As we shall see,

its primary purpose for Moltmann is to jar the jaded sensibilities of too-comfortable bourgeois Christians in the northern hemisphere; but it also serves to convey the intense involvement of God in the suffering of God's creation. The crucified Jesus is, for Moltmann, the "protesting God involved in human sorrow and suffering" (Moltmann 1974:226). The resurrection also becomes such a symbol of resistance and protest against unjust suffering and oppression.

In the crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus the cross represents suffering and the anticipation of judgment, and the resurrection is the demonstration of the righteousness of God that creates right for all. (Chopp 1986:109)<sup>6</sup>

What becomes apparent, then, is that Moltmann offers a theological perspective that, in many aspects, severely critiques aspects of modern theology. He does so vis-a-vis his rejection of the tragic closedness of history and through his eschatology of hope that provokes transformation of the present via its material promises of God's future. He has not only rejected the calculated neutrality of modern theology's response to the crises of historical consciousness and cultural accommodation; he has risked the ambiguity of concrete historical claims for a material subject: the suffering and the dead of history's sacrificial practice.

[Faith] is the eschatological anticipation of redemption, an anticipation through one who was an outcast, rejected and crucified. The memory of the crucified anticipator of the kingdom makes impossible for a Christian any spiritualization or individualization of salvation, and any resigned acceptance of participation in an unredeemed world. (Moltmann 1974:101)

At this point, then, we can identify four areas in Moltmann's work which challenge the narrow confines of modern theology's bourgeois project: 1) his critique of the privatism and individualism of modernity and his criticism of the two major options in the Protestant liberal project, neo-orthodoxy, and existentialism; 2) his delineation of an open horizon of religious discourse which is not just an empty formalism, but has specific material content; 3) his attention to the suffering subject of history through his development of a political theology and his description of the figure of Jesus as one who suffered a political death; and 4) his revolution in the concept of God, forcing us to consider both suffering and God together (Chopp 1986). However, the centrality of the language of suffering, sacrifice, and obedience suggest that Moltmann has not listened carefully to the voice of his material, suffering subject. As we have noted, it is in his focus upon the death on the cross as the necessary and saving event for bourgeois Christianity, in his language of suffering and obedience, and in his loyalty to the formal method of neo-orthodoxy, even as he repudiates its wholly other God, that we perceive signs, both explicit and implicit, of Moltmann's continued complicity with the limits of the modern theological project. So it is to this contradiction at the heart of Moltmann's project that we now move.

#### A LIBERATIONIST/FEMINIST CRITIQUE

While Moltmann's reconstruction of Christology and eschatology has done much to address the issue of human suffering, the work of liberationist and feminist scholars raise



serious questions about his heavy emphasis on the central and defining symbol of Christianity and his language of sacrificial suffering, obedience, and self-surrender. From their perspective, Moltmann's understanding of suffering is in some ways in direct conflict with the concern for the oppressed other which he claims in much of his work.<sup>7</sup> "The death of Jesus on the cross is the *centre* of all Christian theology. It is not the only theme of theology, but it is in effect the entry to its problems and answers on earth" [Moltmann 1974:204]. Although Moltmann is highly critical of Bonhoeffer's statement at his own death that "our joy is hidden in suffering, and our life in death" [Moltmann 1974:146, citing Bonhoeffer]—recognizing that such a statement contradicts the on-going experience of "the people of Jesus," whose history has been one of almost unmitigated suffering—Moltmann nevertheless makes the cross the central, saving symbol of Christian discourse and practice. "Through his suffering and death, the risen Christ brings righteousness and life to the unrighteous and the dying ... [as] an event of liberating love. ... Through his death the risen Christ introduces the coming reign of God into the godless present by means of representative suffering" [Moltmann 1974:185]. Moltmann claims that, "Only Christ's representative suffering and sacrifice 'for them' in his death on the cross brings hope to the hopeless, future to those who are passing away and new right to the unrighteous" [Moltmann 1974:186]. And earlier in the same text, he writes,

His death is the death of the one who redeems men from death, which is evil. In other words, they are the pains of love for abandoned men, which the mysticism of the cross apprehends when it identifies men with the sufferings of Christ. [Moltmann 1974:51]

Such explicit language of suffering sacrifice is highly suspect within a liberationist reading of the use of sacrificial death as a means to mystify and obfuscate the true nature of the violence perpetrated on those who disturb the social-symbolic order and the strategies employed to maintain it: claims of necessity, obedience, and self-denial. Yet, Moltmann's discourse repeatedly has the marks of a discourse that encourages the acceptance of suffering as a salvific work and undermines protest and resistance.

Divine righteousness 'happens' here, and the gospel reveals it by proclaiming the event of the obedience of Jesus even to the death of the cross, by proclaiming the event of his surrender to this death, and by proclaiming his resurrection and his life as the coming of the divine righteousness to the unjust. [Moltmann 1967:205]

While Moltmann is obviously concerned to express God's open future for the oppressed as the meaning of the resurrection, he undercuts its radical power by defining Jesus' death as an event of obedient acquiescence.

Thus the Spirit is the power to suffer in participation in the mission and the love of Jesus Christ, and is in this suffering the passion for what is possible, for what is coming and promised and the future of life, of freedom and of resurrection. [Moltmann 1967:212]

With such statements, Moltmann empowers the bourgeois church to face and engage the suffering of those on the margins of its modern dominance, but he does so by the glorification of suffering itself and by the use of the traditional language of obedience and sacrifice—an ironic turn of affairs in the light of Moltmann's interpretation of Jesus' death in other statements as one of anguish, fear, and abandonment. A more detailed analysis of Moltmann's use of the cross as a salvific concept, then, is needed in order to sort out the contradictions in his position.

Moltmann explicitly connects the suffering of Jesus with the suffering of God and the encouragement of Christians to take suffering upon themselves in imitation of Jesus. "The suffering of love for forgotten, despised and betrayed human beings wherever they are oppressed is concrete suffering in imitation of Christ..." [Moltmann 1974:64]. "Where we suffer because we love, God suffers in us" [Conyers 1988:116, citing Moltmann 1974:253]. "According to their own experience, the greatest Christian saints were also the most profoundly abandoned by God" [Moltmann 1974:55]. Moltmann's implied claim is that while "...suffering means being cut off from God, yet within the fellowship of Christ's suffering, suffering is overcome by suffering, and becomes the way to communion with God" [Moltmann 1974:56, citing Bonhoeffer]. Suffering, in this way of thinking, is a mystical pathway to the divine and therefore, to be desired rather than resisted.

Oddly, Moltmann himself recognizes the destructive practical impact of this kind of mystification of the cross has had, saying that the church has historically abused the theology of the cross in the interest of the perpetrators of suffering. Noting that slaves and peasants have been encouraged to accept their sufferings as their "crosses to bear," he calls such a "mysticism of suffering ... blasphemy" [Moltmann 1974:49]. He responds, in support of his own emphasis on a saving significance to sacrificial death, that "the Christ of the poor has always been the crucified Christ ... [in whom, he claims, they find] their true identity, hidden and guaranteed in the Christ who suffers with them, so that no one can deprive them of this identity" [Moltmann 1974:49]. Cone writes that "Jesus' cry of dereliction ... [shows] the depth of Jesus' agony and the pain of being abandoned by his Father ... [T]he pain of the cross was God suffering for and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression" [Cone 1975:139].<sup>8</sup>

While we may grant a certain significance to Moltmann's claims that this identity-in-suffering "contradicts the definitions of suffering and slavery" [Moltmann 1974:50], recent work in liberation theologies questions the efficacy of the cross as the central salvific image of the Jesus' narrative and the redemptive power of a suffering God. In their essay, "For God So Loved the World?," Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker reflect on the tradition of the cross as the locus of Christian salvation. In agreement with Moltmann, they grant that the commitment to the creation of a community of mutuality and justice requires openness to all of life, and that the community brought to life by God's intimate connection and participation in all aspects of our lives deserves the appellation, "redemptive." But they charge that such a statement in no way implies the necessity of the death of Jesus on a cross. Suggesting that suffering God theologies like Moltmann's imply that God in no way shared our suffering before Jesus' crucifixion, Brown and Parker make a searing critique of their implications for those on the social-symbolic margins.

By confusing 'suffering with' with action that does something about evil instead of

asserting that testifying for life is what sustains justice, the suffering God theologies continue in a new form the traditional piety that sanctions suffering as imitation of the holy one. Because God suffers and God is good, we are good if we suffer. If we are not suffering, we are not good. To be like God is to take on the pain of all. In this form of piety, pain becomes attractive—the more we suffer the more we can believe we approach God. By interpreting Jesus' suffering as a sign that chosen suffering is salvific the Suffering God theology baptizes violence done by people resistant to grace and abundant life, and uses Jesus' death to invite people to be open to all of life. This theology is offensive because it suggests that acceptance of pain is tantamount to love and is the foundation of social action. [Brown 1989:19]<sup>9</sup>

Brown and Parker's analysis, in which they directly address Moltmann's project, suggests that his interpretation of the death of Jesus serves to buttress the suffering of the oppressed rather than to expose and dismantle it. The testimony of women, of death camp victims, of African-American womanist ethicists, and others is that this kind of theologizing is guilt-producing, that it dilutes resistance to oppression, and that it opens already-devastated communities to further abuse.<sup>10</sup> As Brown and Parker write, "If you believe that acceptance of suffering gives life, then your resources for confronting perpetrators of violence and abuse will be numbed" [Brown 1989:18]. And such a theological position raises the question of soteriological adequacy—in other words, is it enough just to suffer, or is wisdom, effectiveness, or transformation of that suffering needful?

Given Moltmann's explicit citation of the oppressed as the central subjects of a new, political theology, then, it is difficult to comprehend his ignorance of how this cruciform soteriology contributes to their continued suffering. His mystification of the cross as saving, in and of itself, his explicit and repeated reference to the concepts of obedience and sacrifice, and his characterization of the suffering God suggest not a careful listening to the oppressed as theological subjects in their own right, but a discrepancy between the margins as the location of his professed material subject and what we can now identify as his emerging formal subject, the bourgeois Christian male. In order to document this discrepancy, it first will be useful to investigate in just what way Moltmann considers the cross to be saving, for whom and from what.

Several citations from Moltmann, representative of consistent themes in his work, are illuminating. The "theology of the cross is a critical theory of God" [Conyers 1988:108, citing Moltmann].

To speak metaphorically, the cross of Christ is the course of a permanent iconoclasm of the Christological icons of the church and the portraits of Jesus in Christianity; and the theology of the cross is a kind of iconoclasm of the Christological images and titles of the church. [Moltmann 1974:87]

He also writes that the cross is the call for the self-abandonment of deification [Moltmann 1974:27] and makes the bold claim that if one experiences powerlessness in pain, it is the result of unbelief [Moltmann 1974:64]. What becomes readily apparent, then, is that Moltmann's theology of the cross is constructed in accordance with the issues and con-

cerns of his methodological, rather than his material subject, that methodological subject being the bourgeois male Christian. The cross is not, for Moltmann, a historical instrument of pain, torture, and death, but a "metaphor," a philosophical negation of modern theology's accommodation to bourgeois values and of the dominant subject's sin of abuse of power, self-deification, and overweening pride. Rather than being the practical, political theology that he himself invokes, then, Moltmann's reading and use of the cross becomes merely a sophisticated update on the crisis of the non-believer, who is still his primary subject [Moltmann 1974:131]. Such discourse is a mystification of sacrificial death, for through its use of the cross as the means to jar and negate the world and values of the bourgeois Christian, Moltmann mystifies and abstracts human suffering, and in essence, makes its continuance requisite and necessary. That is to say, while Moltmann's cross of Christ may serve to call the middle-class church's attention to constrictions of its own thinking and practice and its neglect of the issue of suffering, it does so at the expense of the historical bearers of that suffering, in effect, encouraging, indeed, requiring their continued existence in order to *prevent* the church from returning to its apathetic demeanor.

There are additional indicators, however, that Moltmann's primary concern and primary theological subject is not the oppressed other on whose behalf he has so eloquently spoken. His method implicitly continues to belie his words. Moltmann calls for the theological community to engage in an *imitatio Christi* by accepting suffering upon itself. He understands himself to be calling for the bourgeoisie to be in solidarity with the oppressed of the earth [cf., Moltmann 1974:25]; to develop the capability of suffering in an indifferent world [Moltmann 1974:314]; to abandon power, self-interest, and domination for a share in the sufferings of the other [Moltmann 1974:69]. Moltmann's theology, then, is one for those who have been protected from suffering. His focus upon remedies for theological and socio-political apathy reveals his primary subject to be the one who has been able to entertain both the bourgeois luxury of apathy<sup>11</sup> and a *choice* about whether or not to allow the intrusion of suffering. As Moltmann writes, in reference to his delineation of the suffering God,

The limitations of apathy fall away. Man can open himself to suffering and to love. In *sympatheia* with the *pathos* of God he becomes open to what is other and new ... When we speak positively here of suffering, we mean in general being affected by something else. [Moltmann 1974:303]

Brown and Parker respond,

Moltmann's intent is to distinguish between what he calls 'active suffering' (i.e., chosen suffering) and acquiescence to suffering viewed as fate. But by continuing a theology that cloaks the perpetrator of violence and calls the choice *for life* a choice *to suffer*, he fails to present a theology capable of moving beyond suffering as fate to be endured. [Brown 1989:18-9]

We can follow this thread into Moltmann's discourse on solidarity. Having abstracted suffering from the concrete history of the oppressed other, Moltmann now goes on to reveal that the soteriological goal of his project of suffering in solidarity is the salvation of the "unbe-

liever," the dominant modern theological subject, through that subject's identification with the world's oppressed. The cross, says Moltmann, "distinguishes belief from unbelief" [Moltmann 1974:24]; therefore, by implication, the poor and oppressed who suffer the crosses of the world become the agents for the salvation of the bourgeois Christian. Such a position necessitates the continuation of suffering for the ongoing salvation of the bourgeoisie, while at the same time effectively blunting any possibility for a radical critique of sacrificial suffering from within the church or in opposition to it. Thus, while it can be fairly claimed that Moltmann's stated sympathies are clearly with the poor and the oppressed, his formal subject, glimpsed in his theology of the cross and, as we shall see below delineated in detail in his ties to neo-orthodox methodology, is the bourgeois Christian male, who is offered the choice of self-denial and of solidarity with the oppressed for the sake of his own salvation. His formal method becomes a dangerous one if it is taken out of the context of the constituency it was written to address and is generalized into a program to dismantle the fragile rationalities and survival mechanisms of subjugated peoples. Such rationalities and techniques are often formulated out of a tremendous creativity in the face of continued, concrete social and economic oppression, and thus, require not the call for continued suffering, nor as we shall see, the acceptance of a neo-orthodox dissonance, but safety, nurture, and compassionate listening in order to transform theological discourse from the perspective of these suffering others. This is clearly Moltmann's intention; however, one must wonder whether his embracing of suffering is not an inevitable result of his ties to an unacknowledged constituency—the privatized and privileged bourgeoisie.

Based on the analysis above, then, we can suggest that although Moltmann explicitly criticizes the material content of neo-orthodoxy's Wholly Other God, he accepts and uses its formal theological method, dialectical neo-orthodoxy, in order to offer the soteriological discourse he deems necessary for his bourgeois theological subject. Thus, I am arguing that Moltmann's project is *implicitly* sacrificial because it exhibits many of the characteristics of the neo-orthodox method, already argued above to function sacrificially by privileging the issue of identity, attempting to isolate a "pure" Christianity with which to critique other "religions," by subsuming all suffering into the Trinity (a typological move), and by using the cross as the means to answer the dominant question of modern Western Christian discourse—the question of epistemology, thereby effectively marginalizing the very issues of suffering and oppression which Moltmann has been so careful to name. Moltmann's formal subject determines his method and his method reveals the primary position which this subject occupies in his work.<sup>12</sup>

Like other neo-orthodox responses within the liberal theological paradigm, Moltmann too searches for a point of purity, outside of the troublesome vicissitudes of history, from which to launch and sustain his critical theory of the cross. In attempting to redeem the church while at the same time securing it from the "corrupted" church of the bourgeoisie, Moltmann adopts neo-orthodoxy's strategy of privileging some iconoclastic form of Christianity as "true or pure" Christianity and using this privileged position to critique "religion" (that is "corrupted" forms). For Moltmann the theology of the cross performs this particular function.

... [A] theology of the cross contradicts the 'golden calves in Christianity itself,' that

which causes Christianity to fill the role of a civil religion that provides a foundation for order of the state. [Conyers 1988:113]<sup>13</sup>

Moltmann then makes a rapid transition from the suffering of the oppressed other in history to the subsumption of all suffering into the Trinitarian history.

All human history, how ever much it may be determined by guilt and death, is taken up into this 'history of God,' i.e., into the Trinity, and integrated into the future of the 'history of God.' There is no suffering which in this history is not God's suffering; no death which has not been God's death in the history of Golgotha. [Moltmann 1974:246]

Such a perspective on the wreckage of human relations and theological discourse is helpful in that it describes God as the bearer of ultimate compassion; but it is also dangerous, for it reduces individual and historical human suffering to a purified event in the experience of God. As Metz writes of Moltmann's formulation,

It is that the non-identity of human suffering cannot be canceled out, in theological dialectics of Trinitarian soteriology, and still keep its historical character. [Metz 1980:132]

Through his abstraction of the suffering of Jesus and of all human suffering into the Trinity, then, Moltmann makes the univocal move of neo-orthodox interpretation in a way that is subtler, but no less troublesome than that of Karl Barth. While Barth's typological Christology interpreted Jesus as the ultimate signified of every signifier, in effect reducing all meaning in theological language to a univocal point and subsuming all historical differences into the single history of the Jesus who emerges from the canonical scriptures, Moltmann uses this characteristic neo-orthodox move to subsume all historical suffering into the Trinitarian godhead. The suffering of the abandoned son and the pain of the father for that child functions for Moltmann as a type and figure for all human suffering, thereby depriving it of its radically interruptive character.<sup>14</sup> "If that is taken seriously, it must also be said that, like the cross of Christ, even Auschwitz is in God himself," writes Moltmann [1974:278]. But the question arises as to whether having all human suffering hermetically sealed in the history of the godhead really offers any hope of redemption from that suffering or transformation of the world in which it continues.

Christianity is interpreted by a singular event—a sacrificial death—in such a manner that it can be understood as a pure discourse, over against other corrupted "religious" forms, including aberrant strains of Christianity. This reading of the gospel, then, can work to interpret suffering, but—as the gospel is an eschatologically pure form—suffering cannot interpret, nor critique, it [Chopp 1986:102]. Moltmann has, instead, secured the church, safe from the messiness of suffering human history. His conflicting claims both argue the necessity of the church's solidarity with that suffering, and yet belie that solidarity through the abstraction of all pain into the eschatological drama of God, which drama relieves him, in the final analysis, of the necessity of dealing with the wreckage of human history

and Christianity's complicity in it. His Trinitarian transaction may argue that we reconceptualize the apathetic God, but it is an affair of which the historically sacrificed know nothing and which would not alleviate their suffering if they did.

Moltmann's iconoclastic and abstract interpretation of the cross and suffering and his continued use of the formal methods of neo-orthodox theology allow us to conclude, then, that while he claims the oppressed other as his primary theological subject, he is primarily concerned to address the issues of the dominant subject of modern theology. While offering a searing criticism of that bourgeois church, Moltmann's reading of the figure of Jesus and the cross function chiefly to respond to two issues which have preoccupied much of modern theology to the exclusion of other concerns: 1) the epistemological question, the issue of secure knowledge of God in an uncertain world, and 2) the question of identity, the issue of the preservation of Christianity in a hostile and pluralistic environment.

As we saw above, Moltmann identifies two conflicting issues in the early pages of *The Crucified God*: first, the need for modern churches to address the issue of social relevance as a theological concern [Moltmann 1974:3], and second, his worry (which he shares with other contemporary theologians like John Cobb), that the involvement of the Christian community in movements for political change will cause Christianity to lose its distinctive identity.

When a Christian community feels obliged to empty itself in certain social and political actions, it must take care that its traditional religious and political identity is not exchanged for a new religious and political identity, but must sustain its non-identity. [Moltmann 1974:17]

Trying to critique and revitalize the complacent sensibilities of bourgeois religion in modernity, Moltmann is threatened by the abandonment of Christianity by those who are materially engaged in the political struggle for human liberation. As Sobrino writes, Moltmann has distinguished his theological project from the speculative hermeneutics of such theologians as Pannenberg by developing a theological praxis that he designates, "political." "... [M]aintaining that theology has always been political ... the real problem is to make sure that this political praxis is really Christian" [Sobrino 1978:31]. Such a concern dominates much of Moltmann's discourse on the cross and suffering, as he reveals a crisis of differentiation as central to his theological project. The church, as Moltmann perceives it, is fighting for its life, and he seeks to secure that survival through the exercise of a sacrificial process of identification, searching for what can fairly be labeled as a unique essence of Christianity. The issue of distinctiveness constitutes a consistent refrain throughout his work in *The Crucified God*, as he seeks to identify for the reader what was distinctive about Jesus' death [149] and the Christian Easter faith [173-4]. Thus while Moltmann urges the bourgeois Christian to abandon traditional Christian identity, as too tame and too safe for effective witness in the modern world, he replaces it with what he calls the non-identity of Jesus' abandonment on the cross [Moltmann 1974:16]. Faith in the cross and "the worship of the crucified Christ," says he, distinguish Christian faith from the world of religions and from secular ideologies and utopias [Moltmann 1974:33,38]. Again, we recognize in Moltmann's concern with Christian distinctiveness the heritage of

his neo-orthodox methodology, with its attempt to define a point of pure, historically undisturbed point of identity, and the intrusion of his bourgeois subject into any discussion of the function and interpretation of the cross for human suffering.<sup>15</sup>

The other theological issue associated with Moltmann's bourgeois theological subject and one which has been identified above as privileged in modern theology to the point of excluding the validity of many other concerns is the epistemological question. The cross again is necessitated in the service of the dominant subject's concerns. Struggling with the legacy of modern philosophical concern over the possibility of knowledge other than that available to sense perception and of theology's preoccupation with the anxieties which surfaced with the rise of historical consciousness, Moltmann looks again to the cross and suffering—this time as sources of pure knowledge in a historically contingent world. Moltmann again draws on neo-orthodoxy as the movement in Europe that responded to the epistemological crisis of liberal Protestantism. Arguing that liberal Protestantism wrongly located the source of religious knowledge in the individual believer, it argues that the only source of knowledge of God in the world is revelation, specifically the revelation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ. This revelation is safe from the contingencies of historical-critical speculation because it is not subject to history—rather it creates history, by interpreting and naming it. Thus, neo-orthodoxy provides Moltmann with the methodological tools for responding to the epistemological crisis—the crisis of religious knowledge. As Conyers writes, "Moltmann's approach might begin with the question, 'How is God made known in history?'"—an epistemological question [Conyers 1988:120]. And Moltmann himself contends that a primary issue in his project is indeed the "knowledge of God" [Moltmann 1974:28].

In his particular brand of neo-orthodox dialectics, Moltmann again turns to the cross and to suffering as the answers to his queries. "The knowledge of the cross is the knowledge of God in the suffering caused to him by dehumanized man, that is, in the contrary of everything which dehumanized man seeks and tries to attain as the deity in him" [Moltmann 1974:71]. As Chopp notes, for Moltmann suffering is not an interruption of human history, but formally a vehicle for the revelation of God [Chopp 1986:116]. Thus, while Moltmann explicitly claims the poor and oppressed as the material subjects of his theological treatments, it is revealed over and again that his primary subject, seen in the analysis of his formal methodology, is the bourgeois Christian non-believer. And it is to his issues that Moltmann directs his soteriological claims, to the implicit exclusion of issues for justice and social transformation (despite his claims to a "political theology"), and by means of the explicitly sacrificial practice of mystifying and necessitating further suffering and death.

## CONCLUSION

It is the contention of this essay, then, that Moltmann's project is one that both critiques and participates in the sacrificial practices of modern theology. It is a combination of material risk, in his description of the eschatological promises of God's open future, coming toward us on behalf of the poor and oppressed, and of formal surety, in the employment of neo-orthodox methodology to secure a purified church from accommodation to the apathy and anomie of bourgeois society. Moltmann forces us to think of theology and human suffering in the same context and calls for a solidarity with the poor and oppressed in the present that will lead to a transformed future. Yet, tied as he is to the dominant theological subject and his con-



cerns, he does not allow this oppressed other to radically critique his formal renderings of the cross and human suffering. At his best when he is arguing the pathos of God, he is nevertheless highly problematic within a liberationist framework when he sets about attempting to justify and necessitate the cross. Recognizing the devastation called modernity, he calls for Christians to engage the world; but like other modern theologians, he wants a faith secure from the ambiguities of that same history. In the end, it is his formal method of sacrificial security which dominates his material call for attentiveness to historic suffering. Moltmann opens a door for the transformation of Christian theological discourse on the cross as memory and hope, but his ties to the modern problematic prevent him from taking us totally through it.

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# NOTES

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (NY: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 217; Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 356.
2. For a detailed discussion of liberation and political theologies as a new paradigm, see Rebecca S. Chopp [1986].
3. African-American theologian James H. Cone cautions, however, that European political theologians were not the first to develop a theology of hope. "It is important to point out that black people in their sermons, prayers, and songs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were talking about the politics of hope long before the appearance of hope theology in Germany." Cone claims that white theologians of hope in America have been influenced far too much by the German philosophical conversation on hope and far too little "by the actual bearers of hope in our social existence" [Cone 1975:127]. Yet to Moltmann's credit, says Cone, in a public conference on "Hope and Future of Man" held in New York City in 1971, featuring Metz, Moltmann, and Pannenberg, it was Moltmann who publicly raised the issue that on the panel there was "no one from Latin America, black America, or Africa" [Cone 1975:128].
4. For an interpretation of the messianic hope in first-century Palestine as socio-political, see Richard Horsley and John Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* [1985], and the previously mentioned Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* [1987].
5. In *The Way of Jesus Christ*, Moltmann [1992] reiterates this theme in his repudiation of Dorothee Soelle's claim that his work argues "a theology of surrender," p. 175.
6. See also Cone [1986:118-9] who cites Moltmann's use of the resurrection as a symbol of protest against the suffering of African-Americans.
7. See, for example, Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy and the Christian Concept of Redemption," in Paula Cooley, et al., *After Patriarchy* [Williams, 1988], Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World," in Joanne Carlson Brown and Sharon Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse* [Brown and Parker, 1989]; Christine Gudorf, *Victimization* [1992]; Millicent C. Feske [1992].
8. Cone writes that "Jesus' cry of dereliction ... [shows] the depth of Jesus' agony and the pain of being abandoned by his Father ... [T]he pain of the cross was God suffering for and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression" [Cone 1975:139].
9. Womanist theologians such as Jacquelyn Grant [1989] counter that the cross has been and continues to be a powerfully liberative symbol for African-American women because it has functioned as a sign that God is *not* on the side of the oppressor, and thereby has offered sustenance and hope in a massively oppressive situation. Therefore, they argue, we cannot dismiss the cross as a central, salvific symbol in Christianity. While this witness is instructive to me as a Euro-American feminist, I would argue that the destructive practical effect of the cross on the lives of so many women, black, brown, and white, suggests that while the cross may continue as an important symbol of God's liberative power in certain, carefully delineated contexts, it behooves us to acknowledge the dangerous ambiguity of its power in Christian practice and to radically reconstruct the discourse about it.
10. See Thistlethwaite [1989], Des Pres [1976], and also Cannon [1988], who write of the wisdom and survival strategies of African-Americans in the face of overwhelming odds.
11. Both Sharon Welch, citing the work of African-American women writers, in her *A Feminist*

*Ethic of Risk* [1990] and Cornel West, in his review of her earlier, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity* [West 1988], identify apathy and nihilism as luxuries available only to the middle and upper classes. In their struggle for survival, they note, African-Americans have had no opportunity for indifference.

12. For an extended discussion of Moltmann's neoorthodox methodology, see Chopp, 1986, who writes, The "continual trace of Moltmann's neo-orthodox theological method" [Chopp 1986:100] can be followed through a number of characteristic threads in his work. The themes of paradox, opposition, and the alienation of human reason from God's reason all serve to shape the way in which Moltmann uses the cross as an iconoclastic epistemological principle. "A thing is alive only when it contains contradiction in itself and is indeed the power of holding the contradiction within itself and enduring it" [Moltmann 1967:337]. Moltmann confounds "human expectations and desires" [Chopp 1986:100] through his theology of the cross which represents not only a radical contradiction between God's word and human reason, but in effect, fortifies the necessity of such a sacrificial death as the paradigmatic confounding event. It is from such a position, then, that Moltmann's claim that the cross is either the beginning or the end of all Christology emerges [Moltmann 1974:41]. "In so far as and so long as the cross of Jesus is a scandal and foolishness in the world, his resurrection cannot be demonstrated to this world, except through the freedom of a faith that runs contrary to this world and is therefore constantly on trial" [Moltmann 1974:173]. While such a claim may seem to lend itself to struggle by the privileged church on behalf of the world's sacrificial victims, what is less apparent but equally true is that Moltmann's conception of the wisdom of "this world" encompasses only the self-involved bourgeois sensibilities he wishes to destroy; it cannot account for the historical desires of those who have both suffered and, through both luck and wisdom, have survived.

13. It could also be argued that Moltmann's reliance upon eschatology as the crucial saving discourse in his earlier *Theology of Hope* is another attempt to construct Christian critique and practice from a point of purity, not liable to the ambiguities and conflicts of human history.

14. Brown and Parker [1989], and Brock [1988] have argued that this kind of theology represents a theology of divine child abuse, as the abandonment of the son by the father was deliberate and intentional.

15. A similar problem exists with relation to Moltmann's use of the cross and suffering to reconstitute the concept of God. As he himself notes, such a practice is essentially an exercise in theodicy, an attempt to vindicate the deity in the face of the world's massive, historic, and on-going suffering [Conyers 1988:103,106]. In Moltmann, then, suffering serves to buttress and justify claims for a just God in a suffering world, yet does little to critique that suffering, essential as it is to his project. Writing from the perspective of the poor of Latin America, Sobrino criticizes placing the vindication of God in the center of theological discourse. He writes, "...[T]he real problem is not to justify God but rather to turn the justification of human beings into a reality...." [Sobrino 1978:36]. Latin American liberation theology "is not concerned with finding some way to contemplate God and captivity in a meaningful relationship. Instead it is concerned with the practical problem of building up and realizing the kingdom of God in the face of captivity" [Sobrino 1978:36].