JÜRGEN MOLTMANN: THE COMFORT AND CHALLENGE OF OPEN FRIENDSHIP

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In his little book, *Experiences of God*, Jürgen Moltmann tells the story of how he became a Christian near the end of World War II. After being captured by the British in 1945, he was in prison camps in Belgium and Britain for over three years. During that time, he was forced to reckon with the horrors of Auschwitz and the other crimes of his nation, while at the same time dealing with the “death of all the mainstays that had sustained my life up to then.”¹ He had not been raised as a Christian, and when an army chaplain gave him a New Testament (with Psalms), his first reaction was to scoff.

Nevertheless, the Psalms, in particular, helped him to voice his own suffering and to discover God’s presence in it. Moltmann describes his coming to faith as a profound mystery grounded in “a hope for which there was no evidence at all.”² However, the Bible and the little chapel in the center of the camp were important signs of that hope—symbols to which he could return again and again.

Out of this foundational experience of God, Moltmann came to an acute awareness of the importance of hope for human existence. His comments about the nature of this hope are pivotal for understanding the whole of his theological writing since that time:

This experience of not sinking into the abyss but of being held up from afar was the beginning of a clear hope, without which it is impossible to live at all. At the same time, even this hope cut two ways: on the one hand it provided the strength to get up again after every inward or outward defeat; on the other hand

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it made the soul rub itself raw on the barbed wire, making it impossible to settle down in captivity or come to terms with it.3

HOPE AS COMFORT AND CHALLENGE

Both the content and method of Moltmann's theology are profoundly shaped by this two-edged hope that lies at the center of Christian faith. The content of his theology has always had two foci. On the one hand, Christians and the church are called and, indeed, drawn into a transformative life that rubs raw against the realities of evil and suffering in our world. Yet, on the other hand, the people of God continually draw comfort and confidence from Jesus Christ who is already the first-fruits of the new creation.

This second aspect is sometimes missed by Moltmann's critics who, from time to time, accuse him of emphasizing change at the expense of constancy or becoming at the cost of being. In fact, however, Moltmann's entire theological work hinges upon his and the church's confidence that the New Testament is right when it asserts that Jesus Christ is already the Lord of existence. Change and redemption are possible only because of this fixed assurance about who God is towards us and our world.

Moltmann's method for doing theology is likewise reflective of the double-edged nature of Christian hope. When he turns to classical sources of Christian faith, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, he seeks to show how such a doctrine offers profound comfort to those who feel that God is far removed from the horrendous suffering associated with modern totalitarian states and technocracies. Nevertheless, when he affirms God's depth experience of suffering, he goes on to assert that this suffering of God is the most powerful impetus for social transformation and reform. Likewise, in his studies of contemporary thinkers as diverse as Jewish mystics and neo-Marxists, he finds the signs and shape of God's redemptive activity in modern history. Invariably, Moltmann uses these thinkers to assure Christians that God is still coming to our broken world offering us hope. At the same time, he challenges Christians to resist the notion that the current world order must necessarily continue with its "business as usual" cycle of violence and emptiness.

Thus, in method and content, Moltmann's theology understands God's love for all of creation to be fundamentally the basis for both comforting assurance and bold challenges to the status quo. This double emphasis helps to explain why Moltmann's writings seem serendipitously encyclopedic, if not at times eclectic. For where previous theologians attempted to write systematically, Moltmann has sought to demonstrate the profound relevance of Christian faith to the rapidly shifting landscape of our global village. In the face of a continuing sense of despair and disempowerment among modern people, he has shown how deep within the Christian faith there is always an assuring and challenging Word.

Moltmann has written extensively upon a wide range of issues facing the modern world and church: movements for democracy and social justice, environmental ethics, church governance, and psychoanalysis, to name but a few. His theology has contributed in important ways to the thinking of Latin American liberation theologians, the new openness between the churches of the East and of the West, and to improved relations between Jews and Christians. More than being simply a writer and thinker, he has worked aggressively in Germany for nuclear disarmament, supported the work of communities for the handicapped, and has been in the forefront of the ecumenical movement.
Two broad themes tie together the wide range of his writings and commitments: openness and friendship. Each theme reveals much about how Moltmann understands the nature and activity of God in relation to our world.

OPENNESS: MAKING ROOM FOR DIFFERENCE

In the book that brought him early acclaim, *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann makes a central claim that runs through all of his writings: Hope in Jesus Christ reveals "the open possibilities of history."\(^4\) The God who creates out of nothing and raises from the dead invests all of existence with possibilities for life. Thus, far from turning the church's attention away from the present life or human suffering, hope in Christ brings "to light how open all things are to the possibilities in which they can live and shall live."\(^5\) More specifically, this means that in trusting the God of hope, people of faith are enabled to move beyond the expectations of the culture of sameness to love the "unlike, the unworthy, the worthless, the lost, the transient and the dead."\(^6\) Where the world (and often the church) closes the doors to those who are different, God throws open the doors of hope and fellowship. Comfort is given to the lost, and a challenge, as well, to move beyond the cynicism that keeps the doors of history closed.

Thus, Moltmann repudiates the two closely allied notions that the future is simply an extension of the present and that stability in church and society requires a fundamental uniformity or sameness. The tendency in communities towards "like seeing like" runs counter to the whole thrust of the gospel, as does a similar view of history that simply expects more of the same, albeit in different costumes and hues. Nothing crushes or numbs people's hope more than a view of the world as unchangeable sameness. Ironically, many church people, along with their secular counterparts, seek the supposed security of a sectarian ghetto or seek to erase all distinctiveness in an assimilating religion based upon the lowest common denominator.\(^7\) This descent into sameness contradicts the gospel because

In concrete terms, God is revealed in the cross of Christ who was abandoned by God. His grace is revealed in sinners. His righteousness is revealed in the unrighteous and in those without rights, and his gracious election in the damned.\(^8\)

In order to keep "like seeing like" from blinding us to hopeful openness, Moltmann contends that the gospel points us to seek ourselves also in what is different or opposite. For this is what God has done in the cross of Jesus Christ.

At a time when ethnic and social groups around the world are retreating into themselves and Christian denominations are more resistant to ecumenism, Moltmann's theology of openness gives a reason for such groups to look outside themselves to find themselves and God. If God is made known in the different and opposite, the church "cannot consist of an assembly of like persons who mutually affirm each other, but must be constituted of unlike persons."\(^9\) Indeed open fellowship with marginalized and devalued persons as well as with those who are simply different is a hallmark of Moltmann's ethics and particularly his doctrine of the church.

A central characteristic of a church that is faithful to Christ is "open friendship."\(^10\) By this, Moltmann means that the church must be a community in which "public protection and public respect" are given to the poor, to tax-collectors and sinners.\(^11\) Such friendship
cannot be only a private matter or one that remains at a level of superficial affection. Matthew 25 figures prominently in this conception of friendship and requires us not only to visit the least of the brothers and sisters but to recognize and respect the hidden presence of Christ in these persons. Those who are often rejected by society are not to be the objects of Christian service but must be understood as subjects in the kingdom of God and as those who are fellow members with Christ in that kingdom.12

A similar view characterizes his views on relations between Christians and Jews. The church must move not only beyond the crass forms of anti-semitism of the past but also beyond more subtle and resilient notions that the church somehow replaces or supersedes Israel in the unfolding of God’s plan for the redemption of the world. The religion that is different from Christianity is in fact a sister religion whose destiny is inextricable from that of the church. In being true to its calling, Judaism reminds Christianity that the latter has not fulfilled its own mandates and that evidence of the Messiah’s redemption of the world is far from convincing. By the same token, the church reminds Israel that reconciliation between God and the world is present reality without which true hope cannot be operable. Thus, the two religions “make each other jealous,” and are “thorns in each other’s sides” in order to fulfill their equally legitimate roles in God’s plan of salvation.13 Again, openness to that which is different is an essential place where followers of the gospel find the comfort and confidence they need for transformative discipleship in the modern world.

A final example of openness in Moltmann’s theology lies in the way he understands openness to creation or nature. He begins with the nature and activity of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He understands God’s creative activity as God “cutting God’s self off from God’s self” in order to “give God’s self away to the beings God has created.”14 The Spirit, who “broods over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2) is God’s presence with what God has previously made as God’s other—different from God.

Moltmann borrows from the Jewish mystical notion of Zimsum to make this point more dramatically.15 In creating the world, God makes a space within God’s self for that which is other than God. Put another way, God’s love and respect for creation is so great that God makes room within God for what is different from God and for what is not yet as God intends it. Thus, this powerfully maternal conception of God becomes the basis for relating to nature with the same kind of open friendship we have seen before. Nature is not simply to be dismissed as inconsequential or secondary in God’s plans. In its very “otherness” it is the place where God dwells and makes promises. Neither, however, is nature to be absorbed into God or God’s purposes, nor into our visions of a nice orderly cosmos. Nature has an integrity—the status of partnership—of its own in God’s plans for creation alongside the partnership attributed to humanity.

FRIENDSHIP

One can already see in Moltmann’s concept of openness striking traces of the other important theme of friendship. For openness to the different “other” is an essential precondition for friendship. When we move to the specific realm of friendship, however, openness takes the form of love—a love that is characterized by partnership and empathy.

Perhaps nowhere does Moltmann ground his ethics and understanding of the church more clearly in the nature of God than he does with regard to friendship. For it is loving
friendship that is most characteristic of God in relation to us as well as in relation to God's self. And, it is friendship that Moltmann describes as the fullest expression of our right-relatedness to God. Therefore, to describe the friendship Christians are called into, we must first describe the friendship of the Trinitarian God.

It is in the very nature of God to be self-differentiated as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is, therefore, fundamentally a relational being. To those who are disturbed by how God can be both "three" and "one," Moltmann answers that the key to this mystery is friendship within God. That is to say, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are unified—one—in the love that animates the life of God. Yes, as the ancient church has taught us, God is one in substance, but equally important, God is one in the unity of love among the three Persons of the Trinity. How do we know this? We know this through Jesus Christ who, while "equal with God" (Philippians 2:6), was nevertheless a distinct subject who chose to obey the Father in bearing God's friendship to the world. Jesus Christ is God the Son, not God the Father. Nonetheless, the two are one in the love, or friendship, which unites them. The same can be said of the relationship that exists between the Holy Spirit and the Father and the Son.

Moltmann is struck by how the three Persons of the Trinity can be distinct subjects and yet one without lapping into the domination by one subject of the other two or without flying apart in three different directions. For after all, this is what often happens in human relationships and social arrangements. Either our distinctions drive a wedge between us or an oppressive oneness suppresses our distinctions—one party must rule and one way of thinking must dominate.

In the case of domination by oneness, a Trinitarian theology that emphasizes the dominance of the Father over the Son and Holy Spirit will be aligned with a similar view of human relationships. For example, in such a view of church governance, one God rules over one Christ who rules over one bishop, who rules over one priest, who, in turn, rules over one congregation. In politics, one God rules over one Christ, who rules over one king, who rules over one empire. In families, one God rules over one Christ who rules over one man, who rules over one woman, who, in turn, rules over the children.

While political thinkers in the modern West do not often appeal to the divine right of kings anymore, the monolithic and hierarchical view of God continues to have power in a number of modern Christian understandings of church and family. Moreover, while politicians rarely appeal explicitly to the authority of an undifferentiated and dominating God, it is clear that such a God would describe the role played by party or personality in many modern political systems.

If, by contrast, the unity of the Trinitarian Persons is understood as the dynamic love that flows between and out of three distinct and equal subjects, then a markedly different vision of human relationships is possible. False or forced uniformity is out of the question and domination is replaced by partnership. For this reason Moltmann advocates a political system of democratic socialism because it lifts up a vision of political beings who freely choose to serve each other in order to support the common good. For the same reason, he is an antifederalist, wanting to decentralize government in order to encourage a greater sense of ownership and participation by grassroots citizens.

Likewise, regarding the church, Moltmann opposes hierarchical governance. Instead, he
emphasizes grassroots partnership and the church as a community of those who freely choose to live in mutual service to the world. He seems to suggest that Reformed churches add fellowship as a third essential mark of the church in addition to “the Word rightly proclaimed and sacraments rightly administered.” He makes similar arguments for families that are built around complementarity and equality as opposed to domination and hierarchy.

But if Moltmann successfully blunts the danger of the monolithic, unitarian God, does he not, thereby, open the door to three gods going in three different directions? And, in emphasizing the distinctness of the divine subjects, does he not thereby contribute to the centrifugal “balkanization” of modern social life where the drive for independence destroys any shred of cooperation and understanding?

First of all, it should be apparent from Moltmann’s critique of domination by oneness that what he lifts up as an alternative is genuine “partnership” or “fellowship,” not disunified chaos. But second and more important, what keeps the Trinity—and redemptive human relationships—from flying apart is empathetic love.

By virtue of their eternal love they (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one. It is a process of most perfect and intense empathy. Precisely through the personal characteristics that distinguish them from one another, (they) dwell in one another and communicate life to one another. The very thing that divides them becomes that which binds them together.

To Moltmann, it is the capacity and willingness of God to enter fully into the life of the other that makes God able to love. Thus, for example, it is God’s capacity for suffering that generates God’s love whether among Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or in relation to creation.

Far from pulling persons or social groups apart, this understanding of God envisages social relationships in which differences actually generate the energy of friendship. The love within and from the Trinitarian God is empathetic love. It is a love that is willing to enter fully into the life of the other. Thus, individuals and social groups are challenged to enter into conversation with each other in the same way the Christian has conversation with God in prayer. As friends of God, we are called, in mature prayer, not to beg, manipulate, or force God. Rather, we are invited to respect the other’s freedom, to converse, and to share energies. By participating in each others’ life, both parties are enriched. Out of this richness comes an overflowing or surplus of love which goes out into the world in search of fulfillment. This is the ultimate vision for human relationships that Moltmann derives from the Trinitarian God.

CONCLUSION

If people are to live in open friendship with each other, the cosmos, and God, then a strong hope must underlie this friendship. For, when love does flow out of redemptive friendship, it often meets resistance and despair. In order to have the courage necessary to face such obstacles, people of faith can only turn to the God who has gone before them in open friendship, who stands with them in their vulnerability and suffering, and who waits and works for the time when love will fill up all of creation. Until that time, for people of
faith, the friendship of God comforts and sustains us in every defeat. At the same time, however, it causes us to strain against the barbed wire that holds creation captive to destructiveness and despair.

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Notes
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 8.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 28.
11. Ibid., p. 121.
15. For a fuller discussion, see Moltmann, God in Creation, pp. 86ff.
17. Ibid., pp. 174ff.
18. Comments made by Professor Moltmann during a seminar at Emory University, October 1983.
20. Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, p. 175.
21. Ibid., p.221.