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Universalism in the theology of Jürgen Moltmann

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Introduction

The scope of this paper as a contribution to the debate about universalism is quite limited and the intention a simple one: to explore Jürgen Moltmann's strongly universalist theology as a way of adding to our discussions and increasing understanding both of his own theology and of the subject as a whole. To the contributions that have gone before, therefore, this paper acts as a kind of footnote to what has been written. Universal salvation is implicit in all Moltmann's theology from the beginning even if it does not always surface. It becomes most explicit however in his final 'systematic contribution to theology' entitled *The Coming of God: Christian eschatology*.¹ Here he devotes twenty pages (235-255) to the theme under the heading, 'The Restoration of All Things'. Because of the restricted range of the text being considered footnotes will here be kept to a minimum.

In this paper I attempt to follow his line of argument with a view to seeing how it might illuminate our topic, 'Is Universalism an Evangelical Option?' It should be seen that Moltmann attempts to present arguments that count both for and against universalism and is, in my judgment, quite fair in presenting the arguments against it even though he finally believes them to be overcome.

The double outcome

Moltmann begins his exposition by referring to the received assumption of traditional Christian theology that salvation has a double outcome, eternal life or eternal death. Originally however, in his view, the Last or final Judgment was conceived as a hope cherished by the victims of history that divine justice would triumph over injustice. Moltmann's intention is, we might conclude, to recover this positive view of Judgment and to rescue it from what it became, especially (he claims) after Constantine, namely a final Criminal Tribunal on the model of imperial Roman justice.

Not only medieval Catholicism but also Reformed theology has conceived

1 (London: SCM Press, 1996).

and disseminated this idea of judgment and has done so as a means of creating the distress of conscience that might awaken justifying faith in the Gospel. So judgment was transformed from a joyful and liberating hope for the final triumph of divine justice into a threatening and intimidating one intended to bring humans to the point of decision. In turn this has poisoned the Christian idea of God psychologically for many people by stressing the punitive dimension, a state of affairs that needs to be rectified by a re-appraisal of our assumptions about Last Judgment.

Behind the question of the double outcome, eternal loss or eternal salvation, lie questions about the nature of God. Do we conceive of God as the creator who goes with all created beings into life, death and resurrection or as one who stands over against the created sphere to pardon or condemn? How can a God who loves what he has created condemn those creatures in themselves, as distinct from condemning the evil they may do? And if Jesus is to be the Judge, how can one who taught love for enemies judge in the end by a different law of righteousness than that revealed in his life? What we expect in the Last Judgment would in this case be in conflict with what God has revealed in the history of Jesus Christ.

So we are presented with a matter that has been, to Moltmann's mind, unsolved in the church's theology since the times of Origen and Augustine.

History of interpretation

Moltmann is clear that mainline theology has consistently rejected Origen's doctrine of *apokatastasis*, the hope for the final reconciliation of all things, including of the devil, and has tended to side with Augustine's view that out of the mass of sinful humanity only a limited number would be redeemed. He argues that when universalism re-emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries it did so from a surprising source, not out of Anabaptism or liberalism or humanism as might be assumed but out of Pietism. Specifically he cites the biblicism of Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) and his pupil F. C. Oetinger (1702-1782) as key articulators of this hope: 'There is certainly final judgment, and heaven and hell, but everything serves only the consummation of God's universal kingdom. Consequently the torments of hell are not everlasting; they are aeonically limited' (238). This tradition within Pietism was carried forward significantly by the revivalists Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-1880) and his son Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842-1919) in their confession of universal hope, and by means of them was passed on to a number of twentieth century theologians and in particular to Karl Barth.

Barth's apparent tendency towards a universal hope was disputed by Emil Brunner who insisted with the tradition that scripture taught a double outcome of salvation and damnation. Brunner was supported in this by Gerhard Ebeling who argued that the notion of *apokatastasis* went beyond scripture, the witness of which to a double outcome was unanimous. Universalism was therefore from this perspective a premature attempt to harmonise positions that scripture left

open. In turn this accords with the theology of Paul Althaus which Moltmann identifies as a mediating position between Brunner and Barth such that:

- (1) It is theologically necessary to preserve the *fear* of being eternally lost, and so the idea that it is possible to be lost should also be maintained;
- (2) It is equally necessary to preserve the *idea* that the providence of God will set all things to rights; so
- (3) We must think both thoughts simultaneously, both the idea of the double outcome and the idea of *apokatastasis*, without seeking a premature synthesis.

According to Ebeling, both the explanation of the origin of evil and the mystery of its end are hidden from us. But for Brunner, Althaus and Ebeling universalism as a doctrine leads to a 'light-headed recklessness' which undermines both the impetus to lead a good and righteous life and the urgency of proclamation since there is no necessity to preach what is going to happen anyway irrespective of our preaching.

Although he reports it, Moltmann is clearly not content with this position since it remains problematic on two counts. One is the incoherence of arguing that God has created human beings, loves them and yet will only redeem the least part of them, when in fact he has the power to redeem them all. The alternative construct is also problematic, that salvation is limited by a person's faith or lack of it. He sees this, as the Reformed theologian he is, as making God indispensable by granting to human decision the power that finally rules. This is a point he goes on to elaborate in due course.

The biblical witness

Because Moltmann takes the Bible seriously, and because those who debate the question typically see it as the final arbiter on this matter, he engages in a relatively brief overview of the biblical material *pro* and *contra* universalism. Clearly there are things to be said on both sides. The debate comes down to giving priority to one or other set of data and relativising the alternative in the light of it, which is what tends to happen. In resolving the issue in the light of the universal texts a key issue comes down to what is meant by the word 'eternal'. Moltmann sees this as meaning 'time without a fixed end, a long time, but not time that is "eternal" in the absolute sense of Greek metaphysics' (242). Properly speaking only God is eternal. Salvation and damnation are therefore not symmetrical and the Bible itself sees a distinction between a kingdom that has been prepared 'from before the foundation of the world' for the blessed, and damnation, concerning which no such language is used. Hell-fire is therefore essentially purifying and corrective. Unbelievers may be given up for lost, but not to all eternity. Damnation is therefore 'aeonic' and belongs to the end-time rather than being eternally everlasting. It is penultimate, not ultimate, since the very last thing is that God makes all things new (Rev. 21:5). Yet contrary to this universalist position is the argument that the proclamation of the biblical message is not a speculation but rather a call to decision, and there is a finality to human decision,

human decision being a serious business. But if in the end all human beings are to be saved the decision of faith becomes superfluous and its finality dissipated. There is a universal hope indeed that we may hold but, so the non-universalist believes, it is as to the universal *possibility* of salvation not its *actuality* and this is where the strands of biblical witness may properly be integrated. There is provision for the salvation of all but as a matter of fact not all will be saved.

Theological arguments

Here Moltmann wants in speaking against a double outcome to assert that God's grace is more powerful than sin. Love outbalances wrath. Wrath is God's temporal No to sin for the sake of a Yes to humanity in eternity. God's grace is everlasting, but God's wrath is not. 'The anger with which the righteous God condemns the unrighteousness which makes people cast themselves and this world into misery is nothing other than the expression of his passionate love' (243). All judgment serves the higher and more final purpose of the reconciliation of the universe to God. However (putting the other side of the argument) what might speak against universalism is the seriousness with which God regards the decision of faith. Salvation is not a force of destiny nor is it achieved by compulsion. It is dependent upon mutuality and persuasion such that the assumption of universalism fails to take seriously the place of human response. Yet for Moltmann universalism is an expression of boundless confidence in God whereas the double outcome is the opposite, an expression of confidence in the human will. The idea that human beings damn or save themselves he sees as a peculiarly modern view that puts human beings at the centre. If God is truly for us, not even we ourselves can be against us. And in Christ we see that God is indeed for us. Our faith does not create salvation, rather salvation creates faith. To imagine otherwise is to humanise God whilst at the same time deifying human beings.

Doctrines of election

This leads Moltmann into a discussion of various doctrines of election. It is worth listing his review of the options:

- *True particularism* for instance is the doctrine of double predestination characteristic of Calvinist orthodoxy as defined by the Synod of Dort. According to this God by no means wills that all humans should be helped to find salvation. The universalism in play here is that of divine glorification, that both in the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the reprobate God's glory should prevail; in one this is the case in the manifestation of divine grace and in the other the expression of God's justice. Behind this he locates not a theological motive as such but an Aristotelian preoccupation with the beauty of symmetry, the co-called 'theorem of juxtaposition' in which salvation and damnation elegantly balance each other.
- *Hypothetical universalism* (Amyraut) affirms the universalism of divine

election, but this is a conditional election dependent on the reception of faith. God's intention is therefore universal but the outcome is particularist with a dual effect of the Gospel on believers and unbelievers. Although Moltmann does not make the comment, there does not seem to be much distance between this and Arminianism.

- *True universalism* as put forward by Schleiermacher takes the opposite view in seeing that salvation will be universal but is achieved through the particular election of believers for the ultimate good of all. Particular election is the means to a universal end.
- *Open universalism* is the view associated with Barth in his re-working of the doctrine of election. Christ is both the Elect and the Reprobate One and so is himself the object of double predestination. In him all human beings are elect and also redeemed by Christ's having undergone damnation in their place. But universal salvation remains open. Human beings are *ontologically* redeemed through Christ but this needs to be realised *ontically*, and is so realised by the Holy Spirit expanding the circle of the elect. In principle it is universal, but it is not to us to set limits either to the grace of God or God's freedom. We may and must hope for all therefore and see all people as reordered in Christ. Salvation cannot thereby be reduced to a comfortable doctrine of universalism yet all are to be regarded as Christians *in hope*.

It seems that Moltmann is closest to Barth in the way he formulates his doctrine. But he goes beyond Barth and does what Barth does not do in affirming the final salvation of all. Any alternative to this is for him inconceivable. In the new heaven and new earth which is being brought about by divine grace and divine judgment all things will be made new. This for Moltmann must include all human beings though all time and is the work of the justifying God who creates justice as the foundation of the new creation, puts all things right and justifies. For all his appreciation of other lines of argument this is something about which Moltmann is ultimately clear.

The cross of Christ as the foundation of universal hope

Moltmann is equally clear that his doctrine does not in any way lessen or deny damnation or hell. 'On the contrary: it assumes that in his suffering and dying Christ suffered the true and total hell of God-forsakenness for the reconciliation of the world, and experienced for us the true and total damnation of sin' (251). His language is remarkably robust at this point, and highly Lutheran. Christ descended into hell. This means that his forsakenness upon the cross was the forsakenness of one who had been damned for all eternity. Hell in this understanding (following Luther, Calvin and von Balthasar) is not a place but an existential experience. Yet in enduring this Christ absorbed it, swallowing up death in victory (1 Cor. 15:54-57). This is where, according to Moltmann, 'we find the certainty of reconciliation, and the true ground of the hope of "the restoration of all things", for universal salvation, and for the world newly created to become

the eternal kingdom' (250). This delivers universal salvation from being derided as in any sense cheap grace. Far from it: 'It is born of the profound suffering of God and is the costliest thing that God can give: himself in his Son, who has become our Brother, and who draws us through our hells. It is costliest grace' (254). Moltmann concludes: 'In the divine Judgment all sinners, the wicked and the violent, the murderers and the children of Satan, the Devil and the fallen angels will be liberated and saved from their deadly perdition through transformation into their true created being, because God remains true to himself, and does not give up what he has once created and affirmed, or allow it to be lost' (255).

Concluding reflections

Is Universalism an Evangelical Option? In the light of the foregoing discussion are we able to attempt an answer to this question? (I do not enter into the discussion whether or in what sense Moltmann is an evangelical, neither is it a necessary debate for our present purposes). The following may be said.

Clearly universalism is an option in that, descriptively speaking, *some evangelicals choose it*. They do so with integrity. Furthermore, it is possible to believe in universalism for *evangelical reasons*. Moltmann noted the emergence, or re-emergence, of the doctrine from Pietism which, along with Puritanism, remains our heritage. Furthermore there is a long-standing link in some theological quarters between a Calvinist emphasis on divine sovereignty and the universal scope of that salvation premised on the understanding that God has both the power and the will to save. This approach excludes a doctrine of double predestination as this has been commonly understood in Calvinist orthodoxy, though note Barth's new perspective on this which sees the double predestination, and indeed the double outcome, focused entirely on Christ for the benefit of all creation. Moltmann is a Reformed theologian in the Calvinist tradition. He interprets this as having a boundless confidence in God, which provides greater ground for hope than supposed Arminian anthropocentrism. Note also his cross-centred approach as he outlines a robust doctrine of substitutionary atonement that would make Steve Chalke blush, and which in no way underplays doctrines of divine wrath, judgment and damnation, yet restores them to their constructive place in Christian thought. This is not a capitulation to 'Liberal' theology or a milquetoast mentality.

Nonetheless Moltmann appears to be lacking an exposition of the realisation of salvation by means of receptive faith. Salvation is not automatic, nor is it compelled. It requires relationship. Given that many (most?) die without faith, and that the reception of salvation requires response, how are we to imagine the continuing search of God for the lost beyond death which a universal hope almost certainly requires? Justification is through faith at whatever point it occurs whether in this life or in worlds to come. Moltmann says little about this but surely some further development is required at this point?

We might also ask whether we really wish to be, indeed is it helpful to be, as dogmatic about universal salvation as Moltmann, and Gregory MacDonald in

the text which sparks this debate, affirm. There is value, so it seems to me, in Althaus' mediating position between Barth and Brunner and which Moltmann reports. And is Barth so dogmatically universalist as is sometimes claimed? In this respect we are inclined, along with Barth and others, to leave greater room for the freedom of God and therefore greater room for both reverent caution and reverent hope. MacDonald contrasts a 'hopeful universalism' with what he describes as a 'non-dogmatic dogmatic universalism'.² He indicates in this way that although there are strong doctrinal grounds for moving in a universalist direction, he cannot be sure that he has understood scripture aright, and so cannot foreclose on his own interpretation. Such humility is laudable. I suggest it is for this very reason that the biblical testimony is diverse. Scripture is given not to bestow upon us all the answers but to create a narrative context in which we may live and in which certain matters remain constructively if agonisingly open. We need to be preserved from complacency and self-satisfaction. In scripture we do indeed find massive grounds for a greater hope and are entitled to believe that all manner of things shall be well. The Judge of all the earth will indeed do what is right. But we cannot underplay the mystery of human resistance to the divine and I for one am reluctant to exclude this impossible possibility from view. Nor can we presume upon the holy love of God and put God to the test. The doctrine of eternal loss holds before us the serious nature of human response to divine grace. Conversely the persistence of divine love holds before us a reminder of the wideness of God's mercy and that God is able to do far more abundantly than we imagine or think. Perhaps this is as good a place as any to rest.

Abstract

This article adds to the discussion of universalism by examining closely Jürgen Moltmann's mature reflections on the subject. Although the universalist tendency of Moltmann's theological project is evident from the beginning, this comes to explicit expression in the final volume of his 'systematic contributions to theology', *The Coming of God*. He examines the history of interpretation relating to the 'double outcome' of heaven and hell, drawing particular attention to the emergence of the doctrine from Pietism, before coming to a strong assertion that the cross of Christ means that Christ has endured damnation on behalf of all and so we may have hope for all.

2 *The Evangelical Universalist: The biblical hope that God's love will save us all* (London: SPCK, 2008), 4.