

# Jürgen Moltmann: Trinity and Suffering

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Moltmann is one of the few contemporary German theologians whose works are widely read and widely discussed in the English-speaking theological world. Partly this is because his writings — pungent, energetic, and filled with lively historical reference — are more easily translated into a foreign milieu than the more abstract and severely academic work of some of his contemporaries. Partly it is because he himself is familiar with English-language theology and with the English-speaking theological scene through his frequent lecture-tours to the United States and Britain. And partly his popularity is due to the fact that some have looked to his writings for the theological weight behind movements which command widespread attention, such as the theology of liberation or feminist theology.

Moltmann is Professor of Systematic Theology in the Protestant Faculty of the University of Tübingen. His main published work so far is the well-known trilogy *Theology of Hope* (ET, London, 1967), *The Crucified God* (ET, London, 1974) and *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (ET, London, 1977). Alongside these substantial volumes are a variety of shorter works — collections of essays and sermons, and shorter monographs on specific theological themes. Of the many theological trails which Moltmann has followed, this article picks up his presentation of the Christian doctrine of God in *The Crucified God*.

By any standards *The Crucified God* (hereafter referred to as *CG*) is a remarkable piece of theological writing. It is perhaps best approached as an extended essay on the critical function of the cross in Christian theology, spirituality and church practice. As such, its exposition is both positive and critical, seeking both to recover a strand of Christian doctrinal reflection which Moltmann feels to have been unduly neglected, and on that basis to interrogate aspects of classical Christian orthodoxy which he finds inadequate. In what follows, I shall try to identify some of the main emphases of the book, and to offer an initial evaluation of its viability as proposal and critique.

Before looking at the book in detail, however, it is important to note that the style and manner of Moltmann's presentation is very different from that in many more familiar English-language discussions of the areas of Christology and the doctrine of God. Some of the best recent English writing in these areas has been characterised by a cautiously analytic approach, alert to questions of logic and procedure in theology and demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of the various shades of opinion to be found within the classical Christian tradition. However one might evaluate the theological positions advocated in such books as Geoffrey Lampe's *God as Spirit* or James Mackey's *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*, their very considerable strength lies, in part at least, in a consistent refusal to resolve the Christian tradition into something neatly accessible (and therefore neatly disposable). By contrast, Moltmann's writing is rhetorical, dramatic, and almost extravagantly personalist. One of the most engaging (and, I shall try to suggest, ultimately one of the most puzzling and unsatisfactory) features of his work is the ease with which he talks of God as one who has a "history" or a "lifestory". The bold use of narrative categories and modes of expression in talking about God is, I suspect, both a strength and a weakness of his presentation: a strength, because it enables him to table some very large theological moves in a way which much current English writing finds uncomfortably forward; a weakness, because it leads him often to elide distinctions and eschew definitions which might make his case less sharp.

*The Crucified God* is one of a number of recent works which have found in parts of Luther's theology a resource

*Dr John Webster continues his survey of contemporary continental theologians with an examination of the work of the German scholar Jürgen Moltmann.*



for both contemporary accounts of the doctrine of God and for a contemporary Christology. In particular, Moltmann stands in line with others who have taken from Luther's fiercely realistic and dramatic portrayal of the place of the cross in Christianity a sense that it is in the events of Good Friday that we are to discover that which makes the Christian faith — and especially Christian faith in God — what it really is. Here he is in company with older German writers such as Adolf Schlatter and Walther von Loewenich, with his teachers Hans-Joachim Iwand, Otto Weber and Ernst Wolf, and with contemporaries such as Gerhard Ebeling and Eberhard Jüngel. Luther has been found particularly attractive by those who have witnessed the demise of the liberal ideal in both politics and religion, and so who have sought an alternative source of theological enrichment, and one apparently more alert to the brutalities of the present.

"The cross is not and cannot be loved. Yet only the crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the world because it is no longer afraid of death. In his time the crucified Christ was regarded as a scandal and as foolishness. Today, too, it is considered old-fashioned to put him in the centre of Christian faith and of theology ... Today the church and theology must turn to the crucified Christ in order to show the world the freedom he offers. This is essential if they wish to become what they assert they are: the church of Christ, and Christian theology" (*CG*, p. 1). As he works through *CG*, the alert reader soon finds himself sensing that he is dealing with a piece of theology which is not so much interrogative as interrogated, constantly questioned by the object of its inquiry. It is this which makes the book in certain ways a restless piece of writing — its theme is never quite brought under control or subsumed into a conceptual scheme. The point is, of course, more than stylistic. It is bound up with a theological and spiritual conviction that the cross is not so much an acceptable part of the conceptual and symbolic apparatus of Christianity as an irritant: the cross is that which refuses to be dealt with, which cannot be rendered harmless and domestic. The cross, far from offering clarity and security to Christian faith and theology, stands as a symbol of the unsettled character of our dealings with God. And so the cross "is the negation of everything which is religious ... of all deifications, all images and analogies and every established holy place which promises permanence" (*CG*, p. 38).

The cross is for Moltmann the criticism of all religion and all theology; it is the sole criterion of their adequacy as ways of responding to the presence of God. And as *CG* proceeds, much energy is devoted to ensuring that the cross is not assimilated into a theology or spirituality which might blunt its cutting edge. Thus Moltmann is especially concerned to recover the significance for Christian theology of the offensive nature of the cross in the minds of the first Christian believers and their Jewish and Pagan opponents. Like Hans-Joachim Iwand, Moltmann

suggests that the cross has become so effectively lodged in Christian cult and reflection that its originally scandalous nature has been obscured from view. "We have," wrote Iwand, "made the bitterness of the cross, the revelation of God in the cross of Jesus Christ, tolerable to ourselves by learning to understand it as a necessity for the process of salvation ... As a result the cross loses its arbitrary and incomprehensible nature" (cit. CG, p. 41). For Moltmann, the process of inoculation has been nowhere more evident than in the relationship between Christian affirmations about the cross and Christian accounts of the nature of God.

This takes us to the heart of Moltmann's proposal in the book, which is that it is at Calvary that God defines himself. Moltmann envisages his book as a contribution to a "critical theory of God" (p. 69): as an attempt to trace the damage which the cross does to habitual ways of conceptualising the divine presence and action in the world. Here he sets himself consciously in the tradition of Luther in the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518. Luther sets the *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory) of the schoolman in antithesis to the *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) of Paul. A theology of glory fails precisely because it defines the nature of God without reference to his act of self-definition in the crucified. By, in effect, excising the cross from the Christian understanding of God, it loses not only a part of Christian theology but the whole: "*Theologia crucis* is not a single chapter in theology, but the key signature for all Christian theology" (CG, p. 72). By way of counter-suggestion, Moltmann again and again presses the point that God cannot be understood apart from Jesus' death in godforsakenness, for "every theology which claims to be Christian must come to terms with Jesus' cry on the cross ... in the face of Jesus' death-cry to God, theology either becomes impossible or becomes possible only as a specifically Christian theology ... By the standards of the cry of the dying Jesus, theological systems collapse at once in their inadequacy. How can Christian theology speak of God at all in the face of Jesus' abandonment by God? How can Christian theology not speak of God in the face of the cry of Jesus for God on the cross?" (CG, p. 153). It is those questions which the central sixth chapter of the book seeks to answer.

It soon becomes apparent that Moltmann believes that such questions can only be effectively handled after surrendering the traditional alliance between Christian theology and philosophical theism. In company with some other recent Continental theologians, Moltmann works with a low evaluation of "metaphysical" or "philosophical" theism because he senses that it imports into the Christian doctrine of God categories which effectively insure the theologian from submitting to interrogation by the cross. He draws particular attention to two areas where the alliance of metaphysics and theology breaks down.

The first concerns the route by which knowledge of God is attained. Moltmann suggests that the cross reveals God in contradiction: here God is known in the opposite of God — suffering, shame, helplessness, degradation. Accordingly, "the epistemological principle of the theology of the cross can only be this dialectical principle: the deity of God is revealed in the paradox of the cross" (CG, p. 27). For Moltmann, this serves to identify Christianity's resistance against one of the most familiar moves of philosophical theology, namely its persistent use of analogy as an epistemological principle. Use of analogy as a procedure for attaining knowledge of God involves an affirmation that worldly states of affairs, because they derive from God, offer springboards for apprehension of his transcendent reality. This Moltmann refuses. Taking a lead from Luther's critique of the schoolmen, he suggests that Christian theology, because it is a theology of the crucified, must develop a radically distinct epistemology, one "led by the visible nature of God in the cross" (CG, p. 213). That is to say, it must take with full seriousness the paradoxical and contradictory character of God's self-definition: "God reveals himself in the contradiction and the protest of Christ's passion to be against all that is exalted and beautiful and good ... So his knowledge is achieved not by

the guiding thread of analogies from earth to heaven, but on the contrary, through contradiction, sorrow and suffering ... To know God in the cross of Christ is a crucifying form of knowledge, because it shatters everything to which a man can hold and on which he can build, both his works and his knowledge of reality, and precisely in so doing sets him free" (CG, p. 212).

Moltmann's quarrel with metaphysical theism extends further than this, however. His disagreement is not simply over method but also over content, since he charges classical Christian theology with adopting from philosophical theism an understanding of God from which the cross is absent. His sketch of the territory here is, to say the least, rather hazy. But in broad outline he proposes that metaphysical theism attains a definition of God by excluding from the divine being all the characteristics of created being in its finitude and instability. God thus becomes characterised in terms of his removal from the mutable, divided, passible reality of creation; if this were not so, God would not be able to offer a support and stay against the inherent mutability of finite existence. As a consequence, "If this concept of God is applied to Christ's death on the cross, the cross must be 'evacuated' of deity, for by definition God cannot suffer and die. He is pure causality ... The God who was the subject of suffering could not be truly God" (CG, p. 214f).

Out of this negative evaluation of the influence of metaphysical theism on the development of Christian doctrine comes Moltmann's critique of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ as it was formulated in Chalcedonian Christology. He shares a common dissatisfaction with that doctrine as implicitly dualist. One of the presuppositions of Moltmann's account is that Christology "must begin from the totality of the person of Christ" (CG, p. 206). He refuses, that is, to allow any theological conception which appears to threaten the unity of Jesus as an historical subject and agent; accordingly, he casts doubt on the viability of the two natures doctrine because for him it enables an improperly clear separation of humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus Christ. Certainly Moltmann admits that the doctrine of the two natures was deployed by the theologians of the early church because it enabled them to state God's independence from suffering at the hands of an outside agent: by limiting the suffering to the human nature of Christ, God's essential impassibility could be retained. Nevertheless, for Moltmann the background of the doctrine of the two natures is metaphysical, in a concept of God uncorrected by the cross. "Traditional Christology", he writes, "came very near to docetism, according to which Jesus only appeared to suffer and only appeared to die abandoned by God: this did not happen in reality. The intellectual bar to this came from the philosophical concept of God, according to which God's being is incorruptible, unchangeable, indivisible, incapable of suffering and immortal; human nature, on the other hand, is transitory, changeable, divisible, capable of suffering and mortal. The doctrine of the two natures in Christ began from this fundamental distinction" (CG, p. 227f).

Moltmann is decidedly unfair in his appraisal of the motives and content of the doctrine of the two natures. However much that doctrine may be open to abuse, in its sophisticated forms it is by no means dualist. Indeed, the whole thrust of the Chalcedonian definition is that an adequate Christology has to regard as axiomatic the unity of the person of Christ as "one and the same Son". To talk of the union of the natures is not to talk of Jesus Christ as an amalgam or a hybrid; nor is it to afford a means of classifying the experience of Jesus, so that aspects of his life can be ascribed to his divinity and other aspects can be ascribed to his humanity. The doctrine of the two natures is intended to emphasise that in the God-man Jesus we have to do with one logical subject with an integrated identity.

Nevertheless, Moltmann's critique does raise a significant set of questions for incarnational Christology. How can the suffering of Jesus Christ be attributed to God himself without thereby calling into question God's freedom, his

aseity? How can God be said to suffer in the Son without thereby becoming subject to that which is beyond himself, so qualifying his absoluteness? Moltmann feels that the doctrine of the two natures, by limiting suffering to the humanity of the Incarnate Word, is an attempt to answer those questions. But his own answer lies in seeking to take further the trinitarian dimensions of Christian faith.

Faith in the crucified Christ and belief in the doctrine of the Trinity are inseparable in Moltmann's presentation. "The doctrine of the Trinity is (not) an exorbitant and impractical speculation about God, but is nothing other than a shorter version of the passion narrative of Christ" (CG, p. 246). Above all, the doctrine of the Trinity offers Moltmann a way of formulating how the whole Godhead is involved in the event of Calvary without God thereby ceasing to be free, self-caused, the beginning and end of his own ways. Trinitarian formulae, that is, are a way of underlining the *voluntary* nature of God's suffering. "To understand what happened between Jesus and his Father on the cross, it is necessary to talk in trinitarian terms. The Son suffers dying, the father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son" (CG, p. 243). By making distinctions at *this level* (that is, by distinguishing between the different sufferings of Father and Son rather than between the humanity and divinity of Christ), Moltmann attempts to retain a sense of both real participation in suffering by God and real independence from threat and mutability. He is enabled, in other words, to talk of death *in* God rather than the death *of* God.

## Reflections

The most immediate issue which Moltmann presses upon his readers in CG is the way in which Christian theology handles the relation between Christology and the doctrine of God. Out of this comes his renewed interest in Trinitarian theology, as well as his material on the nature of divine suffering. These themes are taken further in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (ET, London, 1981), where Moltmann explores at greater length the voluntary, active nature of suffering and also the dimension of the Spirit in Trinitarian theology (a dimension rarely mentioned in CG). It is not, however, in these areas that I want to offer some critical reflections upon Moltmann's book. Rather, I wish to return to a feature noted above, namely the highly dramatic, personalist account of God which he offers. Because of his conviction that "the nucleus of everything that Christian theology says about 'God' is to be found in this Christ event" (CG, p. 205), Moltmann's theology as a whole is impregnated with a sense that God has a history, and, indeed, a human history in identification with Jesus. And so Moltmann speaks of God as a self whose "history" is something which he "experiences": "Through his love for the Son, who suffers from sin and experiences sin itself in his death on the cross, God 'experiences' something which belongs essentially to the redemption of the world: he experiences pain" (*The Future of Creation* (ET, London, 1979), p. 93).

At one level, I find this kind of language highly attractive: it offers a rich restatement of incarnational Christology, and takes very seriously indeed the revisionary effects of faith in Jesus Christ on our understanding of divinity. Nevertheless, my fear is that Moltmann has not registered sufficiently that he is making some extraordinarily bold moves by applying to God terms such as "suffering", "history" or "experience". It is difficult to escape the impression that Moltmann finds talk of God fundamentally unproblematic. Because God is defined by reference to historical events of the utmost finitude, he tends to assume that language about God is in the end relatively easy to devise. To talk about God is to talk about the actions and episodes of a self which is very closely similar, even identical, to a human self. The world of CG is the world of persons, with God himself as an actor in the drama — an

extraordinary actor, to be sure, but one who can be described with much the same fluency and narrative ease as we might be able to discover in describing a finite human agent.

It is this feature of Moltmann's work which, I suspect, lies partly behind his rough handling of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Moltmann is impatient with that doctrine because it does not allow the kind of unproblematic narrative account of God as self or agent which he recommends. In effect, by envisaging God in Christ as a "simple" self, he goes near to what Wolfhart Pannenberg has called "inverted monophysitism" (*Christian Spirituality* (ET, Philadelphia, 1983) p. 83), in which distinctions between humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ are rendered completely superfluous in all contexts. Against Moltmann, it might be argued that part, at least, of the motivation of language about the two natures of Christ is its sense that simply to identify God as a human agent in an unqualified way is unsatisfactory because it makes an account of the transcendence of God remarkably difficult to fashion. Moltmann does seek to retain a sense of divine freedom by his use of the doctrine of the Trinity. Nevertheless, even there the reader can hardly fail to notice how his account subtly erodes some of the starker problems of talking about God by grounding trinitarian doctrine so unambiguously in the events of Good Friday.

My suggestion, then, is that Moltmann's work needs to give greater attention to a large question for incarnational Christology, particularly when it is used as the basis for constructing a doctrine of God. That question concerns the strain which words and concepts undergo when they are applied to a divine subject, and particularly when we try to use them to narrate the adventures of God. Moltmann's narrative account of the actions of God often steers round the problems too neatly, and so tends to suggest that the form of God's acts (because it is located in the human events of Calvary) can be unequivocally delineated. By way of response, I suggest a couple of lines of inquiry.

First, there is need to balance Moltmann's emphasis on the radical visibility and knowability of God by a corresponding stress on God's unknowability. To talk of God as unknowable is not necessarily to deny the reality of his accessibility in revelation; nor is it to undermine the central significance of the events of the life and death of Jesus for our apprehension of the divine. Rather, it is simply to underline that God is free, and cannot be comprehended, conceptually circumscribed, delivered up to us for our intellectual consumption. As Vladimir Lossky, the great theologian of the Eastern tradition, put it, God is "radically ungraspable, unobjectifiable and unknowable, because he is personal, because he is the free plenitude of personal existence" (*Orthodox Theology* (ET, New York, 1978) p. 24f).

Second, Moltmann needs to develop a more nuanced account of the ways in which language about God functions. Moltmann's writing is richly anthropomorphic. Whilst there are persuasive arguments in favour of the use of such language by incarnational theologians, Moltmann himself seems to envisage such language as unproblematic, and hence he is much less aware than his Tübingen colleague Eberhard Jüngel of the resources of metaphor and analogy. Moltmann, in other words, needs to develop a way of talking about God as active in the world without thereby becoming part of the world.

That being said, the book remains a powerful and disturbing vision of a central Christian theme, and one which gives the reader access to a strand of the Christian tradition easily overlooked in contemporary liberal theology and in those parts of evangelicalism whose roots lie more in Calvin than in Luther. The great Anglican biblical theologian Sir Edwyn Hoskyns once wrote that "The Church has always a dagger at its heart, for it cannot long escape from its own theme, the theme which is bound to proclaim — Christ Crucified" (*Crucifixion-Resurrection* (London, 1981) p. 85). Moltmann is resolute in refusing to escape. And as such, he may cause his readers to think again what discipleship to this God might involve.