

Review Article

Theology of Hope by Jurgen Moltmann (SCM)

Reviewed by J. Clement Connell

[p.72]

The title 'Theology of Hope' has been chosen by the author to express his attempt to find in the eschatological hope the true basis for an understanding of reality, the starting point for discussion of the Christian faith and of the action required of Christians in the world today. The whole direction of his theory may be summed up in these words from the introduction "in the medium of hope our theological concepts become not judgments which nail down reality to what it is, but anticipations which show reality its prospects and its future possibilities. Theological concepts do not give a fixed form to reality, but they are expanded by hope and anticipate future being... They illuminate reality by displaying its future' (pp. 35, 36).

Throughout the history of mankind truth has been revealed by movement into the future, by the promises of God and the fulfilment of promise which has not completed the revelation but has opened the way to further promise leading to further revelation. The author continually contrasts his approach to reality with a corpus of knowledge which has been, or can be acquired, with the concept of an external present; and with the expectation of the future but instantaneous unveiling of the whole of truth and goodness. He therefore argues against the Greek, the existential, and the utopian approaches to the discovering of reality.

Central to the theology of hope is the fact of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This unique event in the history of the world is the supreme demonstration of God as the one who is faithful to his promise, and who directs men's minds forward in active expectation of something beyond all past and present experience. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not the end of the promise. The resurrection declares that the meaning of Christ is to be found in the future. Therefore in looking to Christ the life of men is motivated by hope, by expectation of the working out of God's promise. What is already known of Christ assures us of the wealth of that which is yet to be known, and draws us onward in confident search, and in active mission to bring the world within the same divine promise.

Since the question of revelation is basic to any discussion of theology Moltmann first argues that the true revelation of God can be discerned only in the light of eschatology. He sets this over against the concepts of revelation in systematic theology which are developed either on the basis of Greek metaphysic or in opposition to it. These concepts deal with proof of God or the non provability of God, but this reduces the question of the revelation of God to the problem of knowledge, and makes it formal and static. The essential difference between the God of Israel and the epiphany gods of the other nations is that he is the God of promise, not of mere appearance, who reveals his faithfulness and in it himself and his presence. So the Christian doctrine of God is to be understood, not as an answer to the proofs of God ... nor to anthropology, the questionableness of human existence, but in the field of promise and expectation of the future of the truth.

Revelation through promise and fulfilment counters the transcendental theology of both Barth and Bultmann particularly the latter's 'theology of the subjectivity of man'. His proof of God from existence amounts to man speaking and thinking

[p.73]

of God as the factor that is enquired after in the question raised by man's existence. The subjectivity of the existentialist approach postulates a separation between man and the world, because he continually distinguishes between his being part of the world and his being his own self, and thus being his own self becomes the pure receiving of his person from God. God and the world become radical alternatives. But Moltmann asks, 'Is any self understanding of man conceivable at all which is not determined by his relation to the world, to history, to society?' Without outgoing and objectification human life evaporates into endless reflection. Theology must expound the knowledge of God in correlation between understanding of the world and self understanding. If it were possible for man to come 'to himself' in a final authenticity he would be already perfected, and would leave nothing to move forward to. This would cause believing existence to become a new form of the 'epiphany of the eternal present'. Rather in waiting for the redemption of the body believers show that they have not yet attained to identity with themselves. They are not dissociated from the world because they share with the 'earnest expectation of the creature', in its subjection to vanity and hope of release. The world cannot be the Kantian system of cause and effect, because man's hope is united with all creation, and all must be open to the eschatological promise involved in Christ's resurrection.

Moltman turns his attention to the ideas of 'progressive revelation' in which the Bible is regarded as the divine commentary on the acts of God in history from the history of Creation and the Fall to its culmination in Christ, but the final revelation extends beyond the revelation in Christ. The progressiveness of this revelation in Christ is seen in the developing of salvation according to a previously fixed plan. The real purpose of this theology of salvation history was to show that revelation looks towards world history and eschatology. It thus becomes 'progressive revelation'. But the decisive question is whether 'revelation' is the interpretation of an existing life process in history or whether revelation itself originates and directs the process of history. The theology of history as interpretation of history follows the Greek attitude which assumes the reality of the cosmos, or here the reality of history and sees God reflected in it. Thus God is known only post factum, and revelation is complete only when history is complete. Then eschatology looks forward to the completion of revelation rather than to the fulfilment of the promise. The crucial event affected by this theory is the raising of Jesus, which according to the principle of revelation as history reveals the certainty of general resurrection, but the truth is that the resurrection of Jesus was not merely the first instance of the final resurrection of the dead. The resurrection of believers will not merely be like this, but finds its source and power in him the risen one. Their future is not simply like his, but is in him. The answer to the practical atheism of the present world is not to see revelation as a history of present society, but to disclose to that society the impact upon history of the risen Lord. 'The theologian is not concerned merely to supply a different *interpretation* of the world... but to transform them in expectation of a divine transformation'.

Having grappled with the complexities of the problem of revelation, many of them due to the negatively subjective contortions of the existentialists, Moltmann turns in his second chapter to the more positive account of the promise of God under the title "Promise and History".

Contrasted with the epiphany religions of other nations, who preserved the past for the use of the present by hallowing

[p.74]

the places where the god first manifested himself, the epiphany of Yahweh was an occasion of promise calling into the future, bringing history into the category of the future. Thus the epiphany of Yahweh did not constitute a fixed event but had a historicising effect in the outgoing life of the people.

The several implications of "promise" are set out on pp. 102-106, creating a history of progress and development, but because of the tension between the promise and the fulfilment, calling for response from men in obedience and hope. Details of the promise did not always meet with the exact counterpart in fulfilment showing that God is greater than the fulfilment—and is always carrying one promise over to the next; calling for a continuous reading forward in faith and hope.

Promise and fulfilment reveal God—because in them he shows himself as the same and is known as the same, i.e. the same who makes the covenant and promises and also keeps them. We know God by recognising him in his historic faithfulness to his promises.

Moltmann returns to the discussion of the meaning of history in a later chapter, "Eschatology and history". His penetrating analysis of theories of revelation and history illuminates the value of his theology of hope for a true understanding of the nature and ways of God. But it is when he comes to deal with the fact of Jesus Christ that the implications of his particular approach to theology are most richly displayed. Here again on the negative side he rejects the Greeks type of definition employed in earlier theology, and the man centred abstractions of the existentialists. On the positive side it is still the action of God in raising Jesus from the dead, which by its revelation of promise and fulfilment reveals the living God as the God of hope, not only for the Jews, but for all mankind. Yet through stressing the forgotten importance of the eschatological hope which opens vistas of truth yet to be discovered he unduly belittles the truth of the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. The one factor which counts in the history of Jesus Christ seems to be his crucifixion and resurrection, pointing indeed towards the final consummation of his kingdom but with little or no regard being paid to the words and actions of the Incarnate. The error created by this overemphasis on one very important feature of the Christ event may appear as we consider this central and longest chapter of the book.

It opens by reminding us that the subject of Christology is approached (a) in dogmatics along the line of Greek thought, defining the nature of Jesus as being the incarnation of the God who is already known as one who possesses all the attributes of the Perfect Being; (b) in modern thought on the basis of the proposition that the radical disclosure of the historic character of human existence came in with Jesus. Both these methods, the Greek and the existentialist, work from the universal to the concrete and particular, and both do not actually need the Old Testament. But Moltmann declares that the Old Testament is the necessary foundation for our understanding of Jesus, for (1) It was Yahweh, the God of promise who raised Jesus from the dead, and (2) Jesus was a Jew. "Who Jesus is and what the human nature is which is revealed by him, emerges by his conflict with the law and promise of the Old Testament". Therefore in Jesus the concrete, unique, historic event of his crucifying and being

raised by Yahweh, the God of promise leads to the universal. A wider horizon of truth is opened as the God of Israel becomes the God of all men. It is through the event of the cross and resurrection which can be understood only in the context of the conflict between

[p.75]

law and promise, that he becomes the salvation of all men both Jews and Gentiles. It is this therefore which creates true humanity (Gal. 3. 28). We do not start from universal concepts of the nature of man and pass on to justification, but it is the event of justification which makes man, theologically speaking, true man.

In the above argument Moltmann seems to identify the Christ event with the event of the cross and resurrection. If this is so, then for him the perfect character of the man Jesus has no bearing on our understanding of the true nature of man. The credentials which, as the Fourth Gospel records, Jesus presented to the Jews, namely his words and works, doing always that which was pleasing to the Father, count for nothing except to validate his crucifixion and resurrection.

Going on to demonstrate that the New Testament proclaims God as the God of promise the author uses Paul's teaching to show that it is the promise made to Abraham, not the law given by Moses, which justifies men, and that through Christ. Here is the conflict between law and promise, which indeed Paul is at pains to make clear, yet one wonders if Moltmann has again stressed only one side of the New Testament teaching for to Paul the law remained "holy, and the commandment just and holy and good". Without this justification is reduced to forgiveness.

Discussing Paul's use of Abraham he shows that Abraham and the following line of history reaching through to the New Testament was used not as a complex of saving history, nor as the existential unprovable projection of faith, but as that which validates the gospel, the promise which assures us of the future. Moltmann's language in this section is even more complicated than usual, but at least it provides an excellent answer to the existentialists on their own terms.

Discussing the danger which beset the early church of becoming a Hellenistic mystery religion, the author traces evidence of this tendency in the church at Corinth, as well as in "the various hymns and fragments of confessions in the Pauline and deutero-Pauline epistles". The essence of Hellenistic mystery religions was that they were epiphany religions, where life is for the present, with no true eschatological outlook. Hence where the church was under their influence baptism into Christ's death and resurrection meant that the goal of redemption was already attained, that eternity was sacramentally present. Hence the emphasis on the present coming of the Spirit, through which in Christ the answer was found to the Greek search for the eternal present. They were looking not so much for the return of the hidden Lord to take up his completed Lordship on earth as to the Lord who now reigns over all the powers in the world. History thus loses its eschatological direction. Moltmann can see similar tendencies at the present time, "the transformation of Christianity into an ecstatic form of Hellenistic mystery religion, and into an ecumenical world church".

Paul's answer to this cult of "the presence of the eternal" is to demonstrate "an eschatological presentness of the future". Death is not now past but participation in the life of the

resurrection is that towards which we move in hope. Expecting the final redemption of the body our present obedience not only works out our new being now in Christ, but is determined by what we will be in the future of Christ. To say this puts Christian action in its right perspective but one may question whether, in his refutation of the concept of the eternal present Moltmann goes too far by saying that "the believer is not given the eternal Spirit of heaven, but the eschatological 'earnest of the Spirit'—of the Spirit, moreover, who has

[p.76]

raised Christ from the dead and will quicken our mortal bodies (Rom. 8. 11)". Apart from a transference of the subject of the verb in Rom. 8. 11, does he not misunderstand the sense of the word 'earnest'? The gift of the eternal Spirit is the earnest of the full life which we shall receive in the redemption of our body (Rom. 8. 23).

In his next section the author deals an effective blow to the "death of God" philosophies. He asks a number of questions about the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. Is it a reality accessible to 'historical science'; a reality concerned with the history of ideas and traditions; one that affects our own existence? But to ask these and allied questions one must define the situation which gives rise to them. Hegel and Nietzsche interpret the situation as "God is dead". An a-theistic approach to the resurrection, whether seeking to define it in "historical", 'existentialist', or 'utopian' terms does not require the idea of God as a necessary factor in the situation. When historical science, the ideas of the world, and our own existence can prove that the God of the resurrection is dead, then arises the necessity of proclaiming that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the God of *promise*.

Moltmann is so sure that the theology of promise is the answer to every question concerning Jesus Christ that he gives away too much by conceding that historical science cannot provide adequate evidence that God is alive, or that Jesus was raised from the dead. The same weakness appears in his otherwise excellent refutation of the existentialist view of the resurrection which arises from the alliance between existentialism and form criticism. The form-critical approach to the gospels leads to the conclusion that one is not concerned with the actuality of the events recorded in the gospels but only with the expression of the Church's faith reflected in the narrative, i.e. a new self-understanding of the existence of the witnesses. The resurrection is then real only in the sense in which a man is real to himself, not needing any object outside himself. Moltmann detects the fallacy here, pointing out that to say that the only thing that can be grasped as historical event is the Easter faith of the first disciples is to shift the 'reality' of the resurrection from something that happened to the crucified Jesus to something that happens to the existence of the disciples. If we agree that the account of the resurrection is not bare narrative, but proclamation, we must still ask whether it was not the event itself which compelled this proclamation and why it compelled it. To the latter question Moltmann's answer is that the event leads to the future. It is this future prospect created by the resurrection which justifies the proclamation as missionary proclamation to all men, thus making it universal. Historic events give their meaning only as they have meaning for their future.

All this is surely true, for the message of the resurrection proclaims a living Saviour and Lord who holds out a sure and certain hope for all men: it is a message which is the dynamic of mission; yet Moltmann leaves us with an uncomfortable feeling that we have no solid base for the structure of such a message, if he is correct in saying that "the question is no longer

whether this proclamation is correct in the 'historical' sense." Certainly the gospel narrative is not bare narrative, but it must be accurate narrative. If the people to whom the message goes out in missionary proclamation cannot be sure of the accuracy of the apostle's own evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, how will they be sure of the future fulfilment of the promise which is based upon that evidence. Moltmann

[p.77]

insists on the actuality of the event of the resurrection, but this actuality depends upon a deduction from the fact of the proclamation and the necessity for a message which is open to the kind of future which this event creates.

The author does not, however, sit loose to the Scriptures, but sees the truth of his theme in the revelation of the God of promise through both Old and New Testaments. He insists on the identity of the risen Christ with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. No account has been given of what took place between the cross and the resurrection, but the one who appeared as risen can be identified with the one who was crucified because he also spoke. This resurrection was an act of God, and therefore demonstrates the divinity and faithfulness of God, pointing back to the promises and on to the eschaton.

The Future of Jesus Christ, although remaining to be discovered, is not a vague uncertainty. It is the future of righteousness, of life, and of the kingdom of God. Here the author shows the vital qualities of these facts in the light of the future opened by the victory of God over death and now being in the resurrection of Christ. The righteousness of God, for example is God's faithfulness to his promise and command, the foundation for the stability of all that exists. In the coming of Christ it is the source of the new creation. Sin is having no ground, no rights, being lost in revolt against, God, therefore in nothingness. To such God's righteousness in Christ, who died in nothingness and rose into life, is justification of life, the completion of which is fulfilled in the parousia. Therefore righteousness is not only a gift, but also the power of God at work in the life of the believer. Here surely are valuable insights which can be overlooked in some formal definitions of theology, yet one misses the all-embracing account given in the New Testament of the atoning work of Christ, of personal guilt, personal judgment, of the sacrifice of Christ, of the assurance which rests upon that which he has done once and for all.

This criticism by the reviewer is intended to preserve the full orb'd teaching of the Scripture, and not to minimise the penetrating insight of the author into the implications of looking at that teaching in the light of the eschatology of promise. These implications refute the claims of subjective existentialist theology, and remind those who accept the whole Scripture as the word of God that they may be missing much by making too little of the future of Jesus Christ. Moltmann has two further chapters, one an exhaustive discussion of the philosophy of history in relation to eschatology, and a final chapter called "Exodus Church". He declares again the mission of the church to which the resurrection of Christ gives rise. The church is not to conform to the role expected of it by society, in humanising society, creating community, giving meaning to institutional life, but it is distinct from society in view of the Lord, who is its head: it serves the world in view of the coming kingdom of God, its righteousness and peace, securing the freedom and dignity of man.

J. Clement Connell, "Review Article: *Theology of Hope* by Jurgen Moltmann (SCM)," *Vox Evangelica* 6 (1969): 72-77.

The pride as well as the despair of man reflected in modern philosophies and theologies is answered in the closing words of the book. "The glory of self-realisation and the misery of self-estrangement alike arise from hopelessness in a world of lost horizons. To disclose to it the future of the crucified Christ is the task of the Christian Church".

© 1969 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in February 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
