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The Eschatological and the Political in Moltmann's Theology

THE AUTHOR SERVES ON THE FACULTY OF CONCORDIA TEACHERS COLLEGE, RIVER Forest, Ill. In this article he analyzes Moltmann's increasing interest in "political theology" while at the same time he explores the connection between his political and eschatological thought.

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Probably best known so far for his book *Theology of Hope*, Jürgen Moltmann has recently devoted increasing attention to what he calls "political theology." Moltmann's underlying theological principle has remained basically the same as that for his theology of hope, i. e., the eschatological, but he has shifted the emphasis in order to highlight its implications for the social-political realities of the present.

Moltmann locates the axis of Christian theology in the development of the promise-fulfillment theme of the Old Testament and as dramatically presented in the New Testament in the suffering, death, and resurrection of the incarnate Christ. On the basis of God's past fulfillments of His promises, the believer's hope in Christ is in the coming fulfillments of promise. His expectation of them, however, is in the present as well as in the future.

The significance of the believer's new life in Christ is not confined to the realm of the transcendental, nor does it start first on the Last Day. Its meaning becomes apparent in his life on earth, not despite of but in the midst of his sufferings. The Christian's life of faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ is a life of hope in His ongoing lordship. Following the

Lord, who goes before him,¹ the believer brings to bear in the present his certain hope for the future. From the theological perspective of this eschatological stance of faith and hope in the risen and coming Christ, the Christian attacks the problems of the present. Moltmann writes that "Christian hope dare not evacuate the present by dreaming about the future." Rather, it must "draw the hoped-for future already into the misery of the present and use it in practical initiatives for overcoming this misery," on the one hand by means of criticism and protest, and on the other by creative imagination and action.²

It is this latter emphasis on practical initiatives spurred by Christian hope which Moltmann calls "political theology." Its basis is hope in the *Gekreuzigten* who was raised from the grave to walk before man

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, "Gott und Auferstehung," *Perspektiven der Theologie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1968), p. 48. This anthology of Moltmann's essays has been translated by Margaret Clarkson under the English title of *Hope and Planning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

² Jürgen Moltmann, "God in Revolution," *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Scribner's, 1969), p. 140.

in Lordship. Its perspective is eschatological. For Moltmann the concepts of the "eschatological" and the "political," each with its common basis of hope in the resurrected Christ, clarify basic dimensions of the other. He maintains that "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."³

To revolutionize and transform the present is, to Moltmann, the front line of Christian faith and hope. It is this emphasis that the term "political" designates. Political theology is not intended "to dissolve Christian faith into politics" nor "to replace Christianity with humanism." Moreover, Moltmann says that it would be shortsighted to fix one's attention "only on the relationship between church and state in order to make out of the church-state marriage a cooperative relationship of freer, more reciprocal criticism." A political theology of the cross has deeper dimensions.⁴ Christians holding to the Crucified One witness to a greater freedom.⁵ Political theology is the attempt to proclaim the "message of Christ within the conditions of contemporary society in order to free man practically from the coercions of this society and to prepare the way for the eschatological freedom of the new man."⁶

In general, there are two main develop-

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: Student Christian Movement, 1967), p. 16.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, "Political Theology," *Theology Today*, XXVIII (April 1971), 22, 20 resp.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

ments whereby the term "political" comes into play. One is the political repercussions of the confrontation of God's people with pagan religions, which Moltmann calls "the political relevance of . . . eschatological hope." In the sacral-political world of antiquity, believers "acted as revolutionaries." The Exodus, for instance, was "an event of religio-political liberation."⁷ Later, Christians worshiping Jesus Christ instead of the Roman emperor had political as well as cultic significance. Scorning the old gods, believers became public enemies of the state. By worshiping God in Jesus, whose crucifixion was a Roman political act,⁸ Christians "seized the nerve-center of the political religions and the religious politics of their time."⁹

Second, the term "political" has become important today because the references and questions of man, for example the recurring question of theodicy, are no longer dealt with in terms of the cosmological and metaphysical, as they were in earlier times. In regard to the question of theodicy and the category of the cosmological, Moltmann writes:

Behind that cosmological representation of the world stands the question of theodicy, the question of suffering in expectation of God's just world. If today the theistic representations of the world are outdated, this interrogation of God about evil and pain is not at all outmoded. The question has merely lost its old cosmological form. It has become more of a political and social question. Therefore, this cosmological theology can be changed into a political theology, because "politically," in the broadest sense of the word, mankind suffers and

⁷ "God in Revolution," p. 136.

⁸ "Political Theology," p. 15.

⁹ "God in Revolution," p. 137.

struggles against, but also brings forth, evil.¹⁰

In fact, the categories are not only no longer cosmological and metaphysical, they are also no longer simply existential and personalistic. They are economic, social, political. Thus Moltmann speaks of political theology as a hermeneutical category.¹¹ By fighting the social and political battles of the present, one works in terms of the thought patterns of contemporary man and at the point of his cultural experience. Challenging evil and confronting society's false gods, Christians testify to the righteousness of God in the world. Christian theology, says Moltmann, is relevant when it takes on "solidarity with the suffering" of the time and brings its cry for God and freedom to expression. He further writes: "One cannot bring God to speech (*Sprache*) before the world, if he does not first and simultaneously bring the world to speech before God."¹²

II

The point of this essay is to clarify the eschatological concept and perspective, which are basic for what Moltmann calls his political theology. There are four points of development in Moltmann's thought which lead to this unified emphasis on eschatological hope and political theology. The first is the promise-fulfillment theme that he finds implicit in God's relationship with Israel. The second is the historic faithfulness of God. The faithfulness of God in history established, Molt-

mann says, a "historic communal relationship" of God with Israel, and among the Israelites with each other in terms of this relationship with their God.

The third is that the fulfillment of God's promises goes beyond and outside Israel's immediate history. Other nations become involved, politically and otherwise. Since the faithfulness of God reveals and validates Him, the history of His faithfulness, or of His "divine righteousness," becomes recognized not only in Israel's history but in human history in general, finally "in the history and the destiny of the whole of God's creation."¹³

The fourth point is the identity of the historical Jesus and the preached Christ. Moltmann writes that the identity and the "continuity of the risen Christ with the earthly, crucified Jesus necessitates the acceptance of the historic witness about him." By this emphasis Moltmann asserts that the ongoing power of the Gospel is not a process that has to be "created." Neither is the proclamation of the Gospel something that simply "results in endurance through the course of time." Rather, the power of the Gospel lies in the raising of the crucified Jesus Christ "to eschatological life."¹⁴ By the term "eschatological" Moltmann means the new life that God holds out to all men through His raising Jesus from the dead. It sets out from a "definite reality in history," that is, Christ's resurrection, and "announces the future of that reality, its future possibilities and its power of the future."¹⁵

To proceed in more analytic detail, we see that Moltmann finds this eschatological

¹⁰ "Toward a Political Hermeneutic of the Gospel," *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, p. 100.

¹¹ "Political Theology," p. 8.

¹² "Gott und Auferstehung," p. 40.

¹³ *Theology of Hope*, p. 204.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 300—1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

perspective on the basis of God's faithfulness documented already in the history of Israel. He states that the fact that the Israelites found God's promises and actions to be trustworthy is demonstrated by (1) their taking "the wilderness God of promise with them from the wilderness along with the corresponding understanding of existence," (2) their retaining the promise and corresponding understanding "amid the totally new experiences of agrarian life," and (3) by their endeavoring "to undergo and to master the new experience in the land in the light of the God of promise."¹⁶

They found that their faith in Him was an openness to the future to which He had led them. By means of such experiences, Israel found God to be their God, and God of their present and future as well as the God of their fathers. At the same time they found the past to be a concrete documentation of where and through what He had faithfully led them. From this we can see emerging the dimension also of the future in the history of Israel, and in terms of the New Testament the implicit eschatological perspective of the Christian experience. In contrast, for example, to the traditional, Greek-oriented concept of God, Israel did not find the essence of God (and "essence" was not one of Israel's categories of thought) in "his absoluteness as such," but in His faithfulness to His promises whereby He became known to them in their experiences and history.

As indicated before, the promise-fulfillment means of God's self-disclosure, that is, His speaking and acting as He leads men to their future with Him, is not an arbitrarily selected formula. It is the

witness of the Israelites to each other and to the other nations. Their testimony is that God's promises "effectually strain towards a real, future event of fulfilment."¹⁷ By virtue of His having kept His promises, God became knowable to them. Israel, by faith it must be said, could point to its own past as a historical witness of God's trustworthiness. God's "historic faithfulness to His promises" was a means of His self-identification to them.

Israel's experience and history, moreover, testified to the fact that the promises of God were never really "liquified" by what had occurred. This is evident, for example, in that the "wilderness God of promise remained their God in Canaan."¹⁸ They found that God's promises—His words and actions—were applicable and further meaningful in experiences that lay ahead of them. The "fulfillment" of God's promises was open-ended to them. God's promises and their fulfillments never became merely historic. At the same time the historicalness of the promises of their God verified His faithfulness and also served as a human correlate, or historical base, for His promises to them of their future. One must keep in mind here that the concept of promise is intrinsically future-oriented. A promise has within itself "an unfinished and provisional character that points forward."¹⁹

The future to which God led Israel, indeed all men, became specifically "the future of Jesus Christ."²⁰ In the history of God's faithfulness to people as He by promise led them on to their future, var-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 104—5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

ious events like the Exodus served as historic evidence and reminders of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness for life to come. In the fact of the Exile along with the promise of the return, Israel in faith could look forward to the future confidently even in the experience of suffering because of God's faithfulness in keeping His promises. In that sense the Exodus and the return from Exile serve as events which are a key to their history. Moltmann writes that Israel had learned "through the voices of the prophets" to understand their catastrophes as the judgments of the "same God who called Israel into being."²¹ Events such as the Exodus and the Exile were not intended, Moltmann contends, to mold the Israelites' thought pattern to the past instead of to the future. Rather, they were historic reminders of their freedom and openness to the future on the basis of the promises of God.

The resurrection of Christ, for the New Testament believer, has become that historic event — like the Exodus to the Israelite — which is "the making of history and the key to it." In God's identifying Himself with Jesus and with the inner tendency of the resurrection event, He also identified His future with that of Christ; or we might say that the future of Christ is the future of God. The resurrection of Christ is "the source of the risen life of all believers" in God.²² It bespeaks His "lordship over every enemy, including death."²³ The future of Christ has become the distinct, all-inclusive eschatological future to which God leads man.

²¹ "What is 'New' in Christianity," *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, p. 8.

²² *Theology of Hope*, pp. 212, 211 resp.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

Thus, Moltmann sees the eschatological as a dimension of thought that is implicit throughout God's Word and action. God has not revealed Himself to man as a self-contemplating God who creates man to permit him to behold what He has always been. God has revealed Himself in Word and action to lead man to fulfillment of life in the life ahead. Moltmann exemplifies his point by explaining that God's lordship originally meant "lordship in promise, faithfulness and fulfillment." To nomadic Israel, Yahweh was the Leader who went before His people like a shepherd. His lordship did not mean, for instance, "a worldly kingship over the natural world around man, but leadership towards the lands of promise, and thus a historic lordship which showed itself in unique, unrepeatable, startlingly new, purposeful events."²⁴ In the theological terms of Law and Gospel, perhaps one can illustrate Moltmann's point by saying that Gospel is not a means of cutting back through the judgment we are under by the Law to a pristine God in His holiness and glory, but freedom from that judgment by our being redeemed and reconciled with God through the death and resurrection of Christ, who stands before us and leads us on in our new life to fulfillment.

III

The eschatological, as stated before, means that God leads men to their future in Him. The future of God in the New Testament is specifically defined in terms of the *parousia* of the risen Christ. The future brings fulfillment of the promises of God, for it holds before man the anticipation of the returning Christ. Within this

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

perspective of Christ's resurrection and His *parousia* the believer finds the fullness and the significance of his own life already in the present, the Kingdom-life — which includes the political dimension.

In the same sense that "the eschatological" and the "future" are not arbitrary categories taken from the outside, the category of "the new" is also implicit in God's action and words to men. The "new" is that which comes to fulfillment as God has promised. The phrase *novum ultimum*, which Moltmann took over as a phrase from Ernst Bloch,²⁵ in terms of the promises of God and His fulfillment of them points to that reality which lies ahead. In Judeo-Christian thought the *novum ultimum* finally becomes the *parousia* of the risen Christ when all things will reach their fulfillment in God and He will be all in all.

Specifically, the "new" is the new creation of God by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The new creation given to all men through faith in Christ is new life. As such it is life that is to be lived in a "new" way. Christians, "for the sake of the crucified one, cannot accommodate" themselves, for instance, to the political religions of the society in which they live. Rather, if they wish to maintain their identity as Christians, they become the power of liberation from them.²⁶ The "new" of the Gospel does not manifest itself simply by a correspondence "zum guten Alten," for it is a "new" creation. Similarly, the people of God are not just a

"renewal" people, but the "neue Gottesvolk."²⁷ The "new" is that which God promises and which He brings to fulfillment in the life of man as God unfolds it before Him. In terms of the Kingdom, it is a promise already fulfilled in the present. Yet, in terms of the *parousia*, the believer's life in God is also "the new" still to be fulfilled. A Christian's orientation, which Moltmann calls an "invariable," is not only to the future of Christ but also to the coming freedom from the afflictions of the present situation.²⁸

One can understand that the openness of the world per se cannot serve as a sufficient correlate of hope. Misery and nothingness in man answer to the misery and nothingness that man discovers in the world. Hope, however, is "not born out of enthusiasm." For hope can be born only out of that which "liberates us from old bonds and opens up new opportunities."²⁹ As such, Moltmann writes, the message of the cross and the resurrection is a "glad message" for the poor. As the Beatitudes show, the future of God in this world begins with the poor, the mourning, the persecuted.³⁰ The hope of Christian faith does not seek out a corresponding identity in the essence of nature, of "God," or of man.³¹ Christian hope does not compete with human progress in order to surmount it. Instead it "seeks out those with whom the crucified one has entered into soli-

²⁷ "Die Kategorie *Novum*, etc." pp. 251, 248.

²⁸ "Toward a Political Hermeneutic of the Gospel," p. 103.

²⁹ "Hope and History," *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, pp. 214—15.

³⁰ "Political Theology," p. 20.

³¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Mensch* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1971), p. 86.

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, "Die Kategorie *Novum* in der christlichen Theologie," *Ernst Bloch zu Ehren*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965), pp. 244—47.

²⁶ "Political Theology," p. 16.

darity" and become a brother. These people are "the others"³² in the civil religion of a self-confirming society. Christian hope has its base in "the God of promise, who never exhausts himself in any historic reality but comes 'to rest' only in a reality that wholly corresponds to him." For hope born of the cross and the resurrection "transforms the negative, contradictory, and torturing aspects of the world."³³ It provides a future for the hopeless.³⁴ In this eschatological perspective "lie hopes and powers" for a future in which "contradictions wholly other than social, political, and personal ones shall cease." But at the same time these Christian hopes become the "inexhaustible source for social imagination and for legal and political visions" for freedom.³⁵

Just as faith and hope do not come into their own by "becoming radically unworldly," but by going out into the world to become a "benefit to the world," so the church in following Christ's mission to the world is engaged in "following Christ's service" to the world. It is a church of God "where it is a Church for the world."³⁶ The church does not exist for its own sake. It cannot be concerned primarily with its own security, influence, and prestige in society. It must be concerned primarily with the humanity and the needs of men.³⁷ By reason of the hope within them, Christians — and this is a

constant struggle for the ecclesiastical church — "resist the institutional stabilizing of things."³⁸ Their hope and confidence in the historically faithful God testifies to an openness to and a freedom in all aspects of life. They are the "Gemeinde der Freien." As the guilty who have been forgiven, they have a "new spontaneity."³⁹ Their hope is a source of "continual new impulses" in their striving to achieve freedom and true humanity for man in "the light of the promised future."⁴⁰

The Christian church — the eschatological people of God — seeks a real transformation of life and of the condition of life. Living purposefully on the basis of the promises of God and in anticipation of the *parousia* of the risen Lord, believers break with that of the old life in the past. In the freedom of hope they "penetrate the history that its future lays open for it."⁴¹ Christians, consequently, testify of their hope in the present — the witness of one generation to another — and give answer to themselves as well as to others in the social, political, and historical particularities of the life of man.

It is evident that the scope of God's promises is not exclusive, but inclusive. God's action, that is, His kingdom, is intended for all men. His historic faithfulness is evident in that even the enemies of Israel were included under His lordship.

³² "Political Theology," p. 21.

³³ *Theology of Hope*, pp. 106, 197.

³⁴ "Political Theology," p. 23.

³⁵ "Toward a Political Hermeneutic of the Gospel," p. 106.

³⁶ *Theology of Hope*, pp. 163, 327.

³⁷ "New Frontiers of Christianity in Industrial Society," *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, p. 120.

³⁸ *Theology of Hope*, p. 324.

³⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Die ersten Freigelassenen der Schöpfung* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971), pp. 76, 38.

⁴⁰ *Theology of Hope*, p. 22.

⁴¹ Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope Without Faith: An Eschatological Humanism Without God," trans. John Cummings, *Is God Dead? XVI of Concilium*, ed. Johannes Metz (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), p. 39.

The "present of the coming parousia of God and of Christ in the promises of the Gospel of the crucified" does not take us out of time, but "opens the way for time" by setting history in motion.⁴² The resurrection hope is not an "opium of the beyond," but a power of life in the world now. The Christian church proclaims the Word of the cross not only to destroy religious idolatry and personal fetishism, but also religious superstition and political idolatry. It proclaims the Word to struggle not only against religious alienation but also against political, social, and racial alienations.⁴³ "Mission," consequently, is not simply a propagation of faith, but also a "historic transformation of life."⁴⁴

By its living in and witness to the world the church takes up the horizons of life in general "into the eschatological horizon of the resurrection" and thereby discloses to life and history their "true historic character."⁴⁵ In this sense Christian theology "is itself a historical" and we might add po-

litical "initiative."⁴⁶ As Moltmann writes in response to some of his critics who charge that he overlooks one's responsibility to the present: "The lordship of God is not only the future of the present Christ; the advent of that lordship is also at the same time the presence of Christ in relationship with history."⁴⁷ For in the lordship of God two elements are combined: "remembrance of his historic lordship and confidence in it, and expectation of his universal lordship in which the world and all nations and things become his universe, his kingdom and his praise."⁴⁸ It is this hope, says Moltmann, that declares on the basis of Christ's resurrection the historic faithfulness of God and gives eschatological and, in terms of "political theology," political perspective to the life of the Christian.

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⁴⁶ "Hope and History," p. 207.

⁴⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, "Antwort auf die Kritik der Theologie der Hoffnung," *Diskussion über die "Theologie der Hoffnung,"* ed. Wolf-Dieter Marsch (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1967), p. 226.

⁴⁸ *Theology of Hope*, p. 217.

⁴² *Theology of Hope*, p. 31.

⁴³ "Political Theology," p. 20.

⁴⁴ *Theology of Hope*, p. 330.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 303.