

THE QUESTION OF GOD: AN EXPOSITION OF MOLTSMANN'S ESCHATOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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In the sixties, when the current theological orthodoxy seemed threatened by the "death of God theology", a young German scholar wrote his now famous book, *Theology of Hope*, (Moltmann, 1967) which has replaced much of the tragic meaning attached to God. With Moltmann's hope and its theologico-political implications, a new reflection on the question of God was born.

In what follows, I shall try to present one important aspect of Moltmann's theology as it seeks to comprehend the meaning of God with 'future as his essential nature' (Ernst Bloch).

The Logic of God's Revelation

In order to understand Moltmann's theological reflection on the question of God, it is important to discuss his theology of revelation, for this constitutes the basic perspective from which he based his critical reading of the traditional proofs of God's existence, and even beyond that, his political hermeneutics.

In addressing himself to the question of God, Jurgen Moltmann links the concept of God's revelation with the language of promise. For him, the revealing of God is combined with the statement about the "promise of God". God reveals himself in the form of promise and in the history that is marked by promise, (Moltmann, 1967:42). The event of God's "uttering his word of promise" then constitutes the biblical affirmation of God's revelation, (Moltmann, 1971:17). In this sense, revelation is not simply self-disclosure, but disclosure with a future purpose. Promise implicitly presupposes God's purpose in revealing himself.

Moltmann equally understands God's revelation in Jesus in the context of divine promise which reveals not only who Jesus was, but also who he will be. In Jesus' resurrection, the promise of the inevitable "not yet existing reality" is announced and with it the revelation and future of God. God's revelation in the resurrection then has a promissory and eschatological character, (Moltmann, 1967:84).

If God's revelation is seen from the eschatological perspective of promise, then the rational proofs of God, both of Greek metaphysics and the existential proof, can have no

place in the question of God. For these ultimately cannot speak of the biblical God of hope, but only of the god of epiphanies. To interpret the revelation in terms of the proofs of God is, in Moltmann's view, to reduce the reality of God's revelation to the problem of knowledge, and thereby lose all its essential content, (1967:42)

On this basis, he rejects any "epiphany" type of biblical understanding that assumes the eternal presence of God, (1967:43). This leads him to a critical dialogue with mainline Protestant theologies of revelation.

Proofs of God

The assumption that the reality and knowledge of God can be made certain on the basis of the experience of some dimensions of reality cannot be the presupposition, says Moltmann, of the Christian view of God. This perspective leads him to a critical reflection on Bultmann's existential interpretation, Pannenberg's cosmological argument, and Barth's ontological reflection with regard to the problem of theological epistemology.

Accordingly, the logic of the existential proof is centered on the correlation of existence and transcendence. It presumes an anthropological starting point in which the knowledge of man becomes the ground for the knowledge of God. God can be understood only as "expression of our existence-itself, (Moltmann, 1971:8-9). God proves himself in the existential understanding of man's self. (Moltmann, 1967:45).

Here, however, God's reality has become a matter of "kerygmatic-involvement" so that man's decision in the internal human-divine confrontation becomes the decisive factor in the interpretation of history whose meaning, unfortunately, is limited to the individual concerned.

While Rudolf Bultmann speaks of God's revelation on the basis of the questionable-ness of human subjectivity, Wolfhart Pannenberg accordingly speaks of God's revelation on the ground of the questionable-ness of reality as a whole. 'Every statement about God is at the same time a statement about the world as a whole, and vice versa.' (Moltmann, 1971:7). Here, the reference point is the recognition of historical facts as "acts of God" which express something, though indirectly, about God himself. (1971:7).

The full revelation of God, however, takes place in the whole of reality conceived as "universal history". This view takes history as God's revelation when it is finished (Moltmann, 1967:78). In Pannenberg, the crisis of kerygmatic involvement in Bultmann has explicitly become the crisis of "historical facts". This is a *post factum* or an *a posteriori* argument for God's existence.

With Karl Barth, the reference point for the Christian "talk of God" lies in the very concept of God itself. This means that Barth has shifted the question of God from the category of subjectivity and objectivity to the question of the identity of Word and Being.

Accordingly for Barth, God's revelation of himself is expressed in his name and as such must be understood in the context of *Deus dixit*. "No one reveals God but himself alone". This is to argue, in other words, that with respect to God's revelation, the conception of God (which is expressed in his Word) necessitates the conception of his existence. The process of knowing God is, for Barth, from God to man rather than from man or the world to God. Moltmann calls this line of thinking as the "proof of God from 'God'". (Moltmann 1967:279).

Moltmann's Critique

Moltmann's critical assumption with respect to the revelation of God understood in terms of existential, cosmological, and ontological theism begins with the idea of the impossibility of subjecting the biblical God of the Exodus and the Resurrection within the framework of the logic of Greek metaphysics. The intellectual objectification of God, besides being unbiblical in its essential presuppositions, can neither demonstrate the reality of God nor can it provide a 'future' for God. It can only, at most, show the necessity of raising the question of God simply because of the 'radical questionableness' of certain aspects of reality. (1967:272).

Accordingly, if we take Bultmann's 'man coming to himself' as the governing view of revelation, then there will be no hope and meaning for the future, because here 'revelation does not open up a future in terms of promise'. It leaves the hope for the future of God empty. (1967:67-68).

This critique shows that the social dimension of the question of God has not been taken into consideration. Existential theology provides no *weltanschauung* (world-view) that can become the ground of the movement towards the realization of a real social future, (1967:67). It fails, therefore, to understand theology as eschatology.

Similarly, for Moltmann, Pannenberg's view is only a replacement from the subjective to the objective scheme of verification. The idea of historical verifiability of God's revelation at the end of the 'revealing history' provides our recognition of God's temporary and provisional character. For here the divine self-disclosure depends on the historical process moving towards the end of history, the point at which God would be fully God.

Moltmann emphasizes the fact that if we accept this 'retroflexive' method of understanding God, then we have to alter the concept of the 'historical,' which is at odd with the biblical, view of the historical redemptive revelation which has the character of promise. (Moltmann, 1967:80).

As for Barth, Moltmann maintains that ontological theism can only be the 'canon of interpretation for a fixed reality'. For if we take God's revelation in Jesus as the real ground for an understanding of God and his future, then Barth's reflection of the ontological proof

must radically be altered, for this cannot deal objectively with the biblical reports about the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth.

Because the three proofs of God, on the whole, are unable to consider the question of God on the basis of its biblical foundation, Moltmann thinks that they are in danger of becoming forms of the 'epiphany' religion, rather than the 'apocalypse of the promise of the future'. As Gustavo Gutierrez puts it, for Moltmann, the biblical revelation of God is not, as it was for the Greek mind, the 'epiphany of the eternal present', which limits itself to explaining what exist. (Inda and Eagleson, 1973:160).

Instead, Moltmann proposes a knowledge of God in terms of the dialectical process of knowing. This means that for the Christian faith, God's true revelation is experienced in the contradiction of the Cross and the Resurrection. With this view, the question of God no longer arises from the question of existence, reality, and word, but from 'concrete history, understood dialectically and eschatologically. This provides universal significance for God since revelation in the 'paradox of the cross' applies to all men. (Moltmann, 1971:3).

In summary, Moltmann's hermeneutical starting point with regard to God's revelation takes the promissory history as the event and content of the revelation in which the Christian hope for the coming God is based. In this way, the future is given a content reality objectified in the word of promise and manifested in the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead. Thus, over against the interpreters of the God-question, Moltmann assumes that the biblical God of revelation cannot simply be conceived in terms of the logic of a divine concept, neither can it be presented within the framework of the reflective philosophy of transcendental subjectivity either of God or man, nor can it be guaranteed by a cosmology which takes the whole of reality as universal history.

What is obviously lacking in all these approaches is the eschatological dimension of history understood as promise and hope and in which the future of God is announced. Any conception of God that does not speak of the eschatological dimension of faith, especially in the context of the suffering and dying humanity, does not speak of the future of the God of promise and hope. It does not possess, in the last analysis 'an eschatological epistemology or better still the 'hoping knowledge of God', (Meeks, 1974:). Such is the seeming optimistic conception of God in Moltmann's theological epistemology.

The Resurrection Question

Of central importance to Moltmann's understanding of eschatology as it relates to the idea of promise and hope in the New Testament is the question of the Resurrection. For him, Jesus' resurrection constitutes the first fruit of God's faithfulness to his promise in the New Covenant. Thus, the Easter event is interpreted not only as the fulfillment of the Old Testament expectation, but also as the beginning of the fulfillment of the future, i.e., the coming kingdom of God. Its importance is seen in the eschatological horizon of God's

promise given in this event. Moltmann believes in the reality of the Resurrection, though its historical verifiability remains a controversial question, (Moltmann, 1967:44). Because God has acted in Jesus' resurrection, the Christian hope for the promised future of God is made certain. It is finally this event that validates the promise in the Christian gospel and the hope it holds for the future without which there can be no meaning for the present. With this, Moltmann states the central thesis of his hope-theology, (Moltmann 1971:165).

Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead by God.

The attempt to give meaning and truth to the literal understanding of the resurrection as a historical factual event poses a problem to the spirit of rational criticism. It is difficult to overcome the problem of knowledge posed by modern consciousness, most of which is culturally conditioned by the objectifying tendency and criterion of historical criticism. But Moltmann rejects the historical concept of verification that is based on the objective 'factuality' of historical events. Instead, he injects the idea of 'eschatological verification' into the problem of the historicity of the Resurrection, so that the historical objectivity of the past is dissolved into the 'not yet' objectivity of the future. (Moltmann in *Harvard Theological Review*, 1968:137). As he puts it, since the historian cannot work with the world as a whole as his subject matter, but only with the part of the world one calls the past, we could add that this resurrection of Jesus is not historically verifiable as yet. It is therefore subject to eschatological verification. (Moltmann, 1969:51).

With the concept of historical verification as the new category of history, Moltmann reverses the order of knowledge by shifting the factual basis of history in which the empirical approach is grounded to the possibilities of the future.

The truth content of the resurrection as an 'event,' therefore, does not lie in the past, but in a 'real anticipation of the future of history in the midst of history', (Moltmann, in *Theology Today*, 1968:376). Because the resurrection is based on the promise of God given in this event, it implies eschatology.

Moltmann is especially critical of Ernst Troeltsch's "all pervading power of analogy" as the objective canon of historical reality. He maintains that this event is not historically possible when view from the perspective of the historical method of analogy and anthropocentric consideration. For here, human experience cannot become the "measure of historical probability". Because the resurrection defies the typical, regular, and similar occurrences in history, there can be no theology of the Resurrection. The method of analogy falsifies the historicity of the Easter event, simply because it does not preclude a "common core of similarity" which is supposedly the basis of verifiable history. Besides, the historical method is itself subject to question.

In a similar vein, Moltmann questions the existential understanding of the form-critical approach to the resurrection talk. Accordingly, the form critic stresses the importance of the historical event of the **experience** of the "Easter faith of the first disciple". This interpretation, however, sacrifices factual to existential truth. It is, for Moltmann, devoid of the past and future implications of the Resurrection.

Moltmann thinks that the knowledge of the historical character of event is grounded in its meaning for the future. In other words, the Resurrection must be interpreted from the perspective of promise, i.e., eschatologically. Its significance lies not in the historicity of the past, but in its eschatological implication, that is, the future that the promise holds. In a statement that reflects the eschatological nature of the resurrection, he writes: 'The raising of Jesus is then to be called "historic" not because it took place in the history to which other categories of some sort provide a key, but.... because, by pointing the way to the future events it makes history in which we can and must live.' (Moltmann, 1967:181).

Hence neither the existential understanding nor the positivistic, objectifying historical approach can provide meaning and significance to the event in terms of its possibilities for the future of God.

Central to Moltmann's understanding is the concept of contingency as a necessary presupposition of the nature of reality as a whole. If we can assume a contingent world where God creates something new out of his promises and **ex nihilo**, then it is possible to speak of the Resurrection as "God talk" in the context of the coming new creation of God. While skepticism rejects the view of the physical resurrection on the basis of analogy and the human experience of reality, Moltmann opts for a new historical perspective that is able to recognize the contingent nature of reality and links this concept of contingency to the category of the **novum** in the Christian eschatological understanding of the world and history. Thus he proposes what we may consider as the fundamental or central thesis with respect to the resurrection question: 'Only when the world can be understood as contingent creation out of the freedom of God and **ex nihilo**- only on the basis of this **contingentia mundi** does the raising of Christ become intelligible as **Nova creatio**,' (Moltmann, 1967:179).

Conclusion

We can say that Moltmann's reflections on the question of God constitute a significant advance over the ontological, cosmological, and existential interpretation. Indeed, the God whose presence in history claims objectivity in the Exodus and the Resurrection cannot simply be subjected to a metaphysical intellectualization of absolute reality. Here, and especially with respect to the question of resurrection, its theological importance seems to be that it provides a powerful corrective to the objectifying tendency of the modern Enlightenment epistemology.

While the interpretation of the 'proofs of God' creates no theological objections, Moltmann's appropriation of the question of the Resurrection with his conceptualization of eschatology as the interpretative primary category of history is not without serious difficulty. If, as he argues, the power of the future derives its central meaning through a grounded expectation, that is, the resurrection of Jesus, and not simply a "postulate of a utopian desire", then he must have a very strong or objective case for the historicity of the Resurrection event. But by simply ignoring seriously the historical-critical question of the resurrection event, Moltmann fails to make his case for the physical objectivity or reality of the Resurrection event, and therefore has no absolute basis and logical justification even for the shifting of the primary category of objectivity to the future through his concept of 'eschatological verification'.

One wonders, therefore, whether or not in Moltmann's theology of promise and hope, myth more than history shapes the promise'.

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