Our Only Hope

More than We Can Ask or Imagine

Margaret B. Adam

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Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*

Introduction 1

1 Moltmann's Hope and Moltmannian Hope 7

2 The Costs of a Moltmannian Theological Hope 77

3 A Thomistic Grammar of Hope 112

4 Provocative Hope 167

5 Our Only Hope 215

Bibliography 225

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Soli Deo gloria

Introduction

> Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.[1]

Years ago, I heard a sermon about hope as I sat with my baby girl near the back of our Episcopal church. The preacher urged the congregation to face life's challenges with hope. He gently criticized the parishioners for their tendency to sit back and let life go by, and he championed instead more active, responsible, and upbeat engagements with the world. He proclaimed the virtue of making a difference in one's own life and in the world by adopting an attitude of hopefulness. I listened to this sermon from within the depths of an overwhelming bout of depression. I have suffered from chronic depression all my life, and when I heard this sermon I was just beginning the long-term treatment and therapy that now help me function and thrive. At the time though, I had yet to reap any of the benefits of treatment and therapy. I felt most powerfully a need for hope to make it through the morning, then the afternoon, then the night. The sermon was incomprehensible to me. I could not imagine any way I could participate in the hope described. I could not pull myself up by my bootstraps and take on a life of active hope any more than I could imagine ever feeling anything other than despair. I could not imagine mustering the strength to find and act on a upbeat hope, when all of my strength was devoted to trying to hold myself together in some semblance of a person who could reasonably care for her child. Instead I felt criticized for my insufficient hopefulness.

As I sat feeling miserable, inadequate, and utterly alienated, I began to notice who else was sitting at the back of the church. Charlotte was a regular at worship, and her life was shaped by far more suffering than mine. She had been a successful ballet dancer, wife, and mother, before she

1. Eph 3:20–21; 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, 102.

was consumed by schizophrenia. She had lost her vocation, her home, and her family. She had great difficulty establishing and sustaining relationships, and she was frequently not able to receive the occasional gestures of welcome and offers of help from church members and the available community resources. She seemed to find some slight continuity of identity and community on the edges of Sunday eucharist and weekday evening prayer, participating silently or sometimes with contributions the rest of us could not understand. I doubted that Charlotte heard words of accessible hope that day. If she could make a difference in her life and the world by rallying some hopeful enthusiasm, she would have done so years ago.

A dozen years later, the baby in my lap at the back of the church was a teenager being confirmed. Confirmands and their families from several other nearby congregations had joined the congregation of our parish church (in a different state from the one above) for this annual Confirmation service. The confirmands were chiefly upper-class, suburban youths. The families carried cameras and jockeyed for pew positions with a good view of their sons in blue blazers and ties and their daughters in lovely dresses.

The preacher for the confirmation, priest of one of the visiting parishes, spoke of his experience with a particular social ministry event in Chicago, which involved counting homeless people throughout the city one night a year. He shared statistics about the demographics of Chicago's homeless people (noting especially the large number of homeless children), and he described how moved he was to make some connections with the homeless people he was counting. He explained to the confirmands that their mission of ministry was to address the needs of the homeless. He noted ways that the young people, as they stepped into adult positions of employment, could use their talents and positions to make a difference in the lives of the needy. In his conclusion, he told the confirmands that hope for the homeless now rested in their hands. While I was and still am eager for my daughter to continue to develop as a disciple of Christ through ministry to the needy, I did wonder what differentiated this sermon from any number of high school graduation speeches that proclaim the new graduates as the hope of the future. I worried that if we were investing our hope in these upstanding and promising youths, we might be missing out on hope for ends beyond the challenges of juggling successful careers with serving the homeless.

As a life-long Episcopalian who has spent many years in seminary communities, I have heard hundreds of sermons. The two sermons I

mention here represent much of what I have heard from the pulpit about hope, and I have often wondered about the emphasis on hope for present and near future improvements in life as we know it, brought about by human determination and effort. Surely there must be more to theological hope. Surely those who cannot themselves muster upbeat, life-changing hope should have access to a hope not limited by the circumstances of a broken and limited world. Isn't there something more possible in the hope of the Gospel?

I now understand that these preachers were responding at least in part to a problematic presentation of hope they perceived in the church. They were countering an incomplete version of hope that dreams of a heavenly end and ignores participation in hope through active work for God's justice here and now. They were keenly aware of the well-intentioned Christians who believe that "the poor will always be with us" means that we are not called to improve the conditions of the poor. They had seen church funds spent on new pews rather than on soup kitchens, and they knew well that comfortable visions of eternal life with God can distract Christians from attending to those systemically deprived of comfort in this life. They found support and guidance from secular and theological resources that emphasize a responsible, social action narrative and performance of hope.

The theological movement that counters a heavenly hope with a more earthly-oriented hope swings on a pendulum to the opposite side of the hope it opposes. On-the-ground hope rescues theological hope from one extreme but risks settling on another extreme. At points of extremity, alternate accounts of hope fade from view, and an integrated, less-dualistic account of hope seems less possible. In the process, reconciliation among those who are divided falls from the realms of current and eschatological hope.

The Anglican Communion currently struggles with painful conflicts within its international body. While it has historically aimed for unity in the midst of differences and strife, present issues and present members seem particularly resistant to compromise. Hope for reconciliation is in short supply. Agreements and arguments alike reveal few explicit references to any uniquely Christian accounts of hope. The Anglican Communion resembles more a couple who has decided on divorce than a couple who has begun counseling in order to restore a broken marriage. Whether or not these are the only outcomes remains to be seen.

My experience, albeit limited, suggests that hope focused on improvements people might accomplish in the foreseeable future is most appealing and accessible to people already in a position to accomplish improvements in the foreseable future. Hope in that which cannot be readily attained is much more difficult to establish and sustain, whether it is hope in healing, justice, and reconciliation now (or soon), or hope in healing and justice in resurrected life in Christ. My interest is in building vocabulary and fluency in a rich and sound theological hope that can stand up in the midst of crisis for those who are plagued by division, depression, disability, and disaster. I am looking for accessible, theological hope resources to help the families of the church work toward health and relationships that reflect hope in eschatological healing and reconciliation.

I am not here offering strategies of hope to the Anglican Communion, to the Episcopal Church in the United States, or to any other specific community looking to Christian theology for guidance about hope. Instead, I am encouraging theologians to continue critical and creative examinations of the hope they teach, promote, and presuppose; I am recommending that those examinations include a reconsideration of dismissed traditional doctrine and a readiness to consider current discourses not traditionally consulted for input on theological hope.

The length and breadth of Christian teaching might be pictured as a wide and deep river. Within this river flows Christian tradition. Christians throughout the ages discuss, debate, and teach collective wisdoms of Christianity, and they mark specifics with buoys: “Don’t stray too far toward these rocks”; “Watch out for those eddies.” On some points of faith and practice, many Christians share the same assessments of the markers within which Christian doctrine thrives most faithfully. On other points, differing communities of Christians disagree greatly about which route through the rapids is wisest. And, at still other points, Christians may mark certain rough waters as sites where differing currents of Christian tradition meet in passionate and as-yet-unresolved conflict; and yet, this conflict persists within the breadth of the wide streams of Christian thought. Despite some shifts over time and some conflicts within time about how to mark the river, for the most part, a bird’s-eye view of Christianity’s theological nautical map reveals a recognizable route. Some of the edges vary, and some streams branch off in radically distinct directions, but there is a route on this map that almost all Christians identify as the territory in the river within which Christian theology lives. Streams that lie entirely outside the buoys are more difficult to recognize as Christian

tradition. Geological features outside the river and weather may contribute to the flow and vitality of the river.[2]

Jürgen Moltmann introduced a theology of hope, almost half a century ago, that captured the imaginations of many theologians looking to respond to atheist dismissals of God after the Holocaust while developing an up-to-date theological hope for modern Christians. As Moltmann continued (and continues today) to write about theological topics, his theology of hope has developed and shifted along with his own developing positions and wider, ongoing cultural shifts. Currently, Moltmann's theology of hope shares presuppositions and sensibilities with a large body of American Christians who might describe themselves as generally liberal, ecclesially and politically. I am not attempting here to establish which came first, Moltmann's theology of hope or the ideological climate in which it flourishes. In either case, the theology of hope that can be described as a reflection of Moltmann's work resonates with some contemporary Christian assumptions about doctrines of God, eschatology, and anthropology to the extent that sharp distinctions are difficult to discern. I call this shared theological hope "Moltmannian hope," because he has articulated some of the basis for and applications of this now-familiar hope.

Moltmannian hope, the stream of theological hope that approximately reflects the work of Jürgen Moltmann, currently functions as normative for many theologians and those whom they influence. Moltmannian hope veers away from some of the older streams of tradition and toward some of the boundary buoys. An exclusive reliance on a Moltmannian theology of hope deprives the church of crucial resources for a robust eschatological hope and its practices. Critical attention to additional streams of theological hope, and to applicable discourses within and without Christian theology, provides the church with strength and resilience to sustain a distinctly Christian theological hope through and beyond disaster, despair, suffering, and death. Jesus Christ, the perfect hope, embodies the life—earthly and eternal—of humanity and its eschatological end, a life in which humans can participate, through grace and discipleship.

To make this argument, I will first sketch a rough picture of Moltmannian hope. Then I will propose some challenges and additions to that

2. As Richard King helpfully observed in a personal conversation, the image of the river of Christian tradition has a number of limitations. It does not, for example, illustrate the extent to which Christianity interacts and overlaps with, and separates from, other bodies of water (and the rest of the landscape). I wholeheartedly agree that this image has only a narrow range of applicability, and I am eager to receive recommendations—geographical or otherwise—for alternative metaphors.

discourse, in order to clarify and enrich resources of hope for the church and its mission. For the purposes of this project, I will direct my arguments and observations toward Christian theologians in the United States, especially those who are invested in the theology of hope.

Chapter 1 reviews some aspects of the theological hope offered by Moltmann, followed by examples of Moltmannian hope, which reflect—but do not necessarily accurately represent—the scope of Moltmann's theology of hope. I highlight the doctrine of God that determines the hope and the anthropology of hope in Moltmannian theology. I describe a 2007 conference about eschatology that celebrated and presented a Moltmannian theology of hope; and I present a book about hope written by a theologian strongly influenced by Moltmann. Chapter 2 identifies some of the features of theological hope that are lost when Moltmannian hope becomes the dominant ideology of hope. The costs of exclusive reliance on Moltmannian hope include a lack of critical engagement with the doctrines Moltmann rejected when constructing his theological hope. The apparent appropriateness of Moltmannian hope hinders considerations of new contributions to hope. Chapter 3 considers Thomas Aquinas's presentation of theological hope and twenty-first century treatments of hope from theologians appreciative of his systematic theology. I provide an overview of Aquinas's theology of hope as presented in the *Summa Theologica,* and I correct some Moltmannian misunderstandings of Thomistic hope. I add relevant contributions from Pope Benedict XVI, Daniel Castelo, Paul Gavrilyuk, D. Stephen Long, Kathryn Tanner, and Thomas Weinandy. Each section begins with the lyrics of a song from the distinctly non-Thomistic canon of old-timey gospel/blues/bluegrass music about hope and heaven, as evidence of faithful discourses of hope that persevere outside the realm of Moltmannian hope. Chapter 4 briefly addresses five contemporary discourses not conventionally considered as resources for theological hope and suggests how they might contribute to a more intentionally cohesive narrative and performance of theological hope. I look at nihilism, lament, disability theology, feminist theory, and feminist theology to explore the wisdom and clarity they might offer to Christian theological hope. The conclusion proposes a small exercise to help imagine on-the-ground lives in eschatological hope.

1

Moltmann's Hope and Moltmannian Hope

The patron of theological hope in the United States for the past fifty years has been Jürgen Moltmann. His celebrated book of 1964, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, reinvigorated theological scholarship about hope and still inspires academic and congregational engagements with hope. His account of hope emphasizes God's experience of crucified godforsakenness, Jesus Christ's promise of resurrection, the future coming of God's new creation, and the work of hope in this life, now. Moltmann's theology inspires a body of writing and belief—Moltmannian hope—that approximately reflects his work and functions as normative for a significant number of Christian theologians, church leaders, and lay people. Moltmannian hope tries to resist, on the one hand, the resigned escapism that gives up on this world and dreams of an otherworldy kingdom, and on the other, the superficial hopes of a commodified world. Moltmannian hope instead looks for future possibilities for a compassionate God's new creation of this world.

Our Only Hope?

In this age of unsatiable desire, hopes and accompanying proclamations of hope fill news stories, advertisements, and commentaries. Christians wanting to make sense of theological hope and theologians wanting to convey a message of specifically Christian hope must clear their ways through a flood of distinctly non-theological hope. A casual scan of

assorted media reveals a plethora of claims about the identity of *our only hope*, from a rock/metalcore/pop band,[1] to spray tanning,[2] to the Gospel.

Medical candidates for *our only hope* include stem cells,[3] charity hospitals in India,[4] IVF treatments,[5] and genetic research.[6] Those concerned about the environment argue that *our only hope* rests in organic food,[7] carbon capture,[8] desalination of sea water,[9] the sea itself,[10] or geoengineering.[11] *Our only hope* for appropriate health care is regulation[12]—or deregulation.[13] In American politics, *our only hope* might be President Obama's audacious hope,[14] the hope of his campaign's slogans: "Hope + Belief =

1. Our Only Hope. Band. Online: http://www.reverbnation.com/ouronlyhope.

2. Thomas describes how spray tanning is the only way she can get a tan without burning her fair skin, in "Spray-Tanning, The Only Hope for People Like Me."

3. Burns proposes that the metaphor for research and use of stem cells shift to "superheroes," in "You are our only hope."

4. A hospital outside Kalkata provides inexpensive care for the needy. Dhar, "Are charity hospitals the only hope for India's poor?"

5. Parents of triplets tell their story: "Cherelle and Thomas Southerland wanted a baby so badly that they couldn't think of a future without one. . . . Four ectopic pregnancies ended in miscarriage. She suffered hemorrhages and had to have both fallopian tubes removed. With each loss, she wanted a baby more. So in 1999, the Southerlands decided to try in vitro fertilization (IVF).

"'It was a little scary because it was our only hope of getting pregnant,' says Cherelle, who also works at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. 'We didn't really have the funds, but God made a way.'" CincinnatiChildrens, "Worth the Wait: Triplets Mom Counts Her Blessings." Online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfRS4ls9xFU.

6. "Hope—It's In Our Genes," is a rare disease campaign slogan translated into multiple international languages and Braille. Global Genes Project.

7. Beauley, "Organically Grown Foods: Our Only Hope."

8. Blunt, "Carbon Capture and Storage: Our Only Hope to Avoid Global Warming?"

9. Jervey, Contributing Editor and Planet Ambassador to the Pepsi Refresh Project, explains that "The tough reality of the world's increasingly dire water crisis means that desalination isn't merely an option, but a necessity. The only sensible way to power these processes—without further contributing to one of the main causes of the freshwater shortages—is to do it without greenhouse gas emissions. Without exception, desalination needs to be coupled with clean energy" ("Seawater: Our Only Hope for a Drink").

10. Cousteau, "Ocean."

11. Blunt, "Stop Emitting Co2 or Geoengineering Could Be Our Only Hope."

12. Helms, "Health Cost Problem: Is Regulation Our Only Hope?"

13. Ralston, "Universal Freedom: The Only Hope For Health Care."

14. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*.

Change,"[15] "Hope, Action, Change,"[16] or an opposing campaign slogan: "Overrated: No Hope, Just Hype."[17] Some argue that *our only* national *hope* combines American values and Christianity: *our only hope* is the radicalization of fellowship preached by Martin Luther King Jr.,[18] or the distinctive "Jesus Our Only HOPE Hoodie," which shows an illustration of Jesus in the format of the famous Obama poster.[19] During the 2012 presidential election campaign, President Obama, the leading Republican candidates (Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, Michele Bachmann, Ron Paul), and the Occupy Movement have all been named "our only hope" by their various constituencies.

Each declaration of *our only hope* names or assumes the desired end of that hope; few people are likely to confuse an online gaming quest in World of Warcraft called "Our Only Hope"[20] with a wildlife sanctuary's mission for protecting injured animals through educating potential protectors.[21] Few Christians are likely to confuse IVF treatment with the *only hope* in Jesus Christ that Christian scripture, teaching, and tradition have consistently proclaimed. However, when news reports, political propaganda, product advertising, social advocacy, and medical research use the *only hope* trope to express multiple degrees of importance and multiple sorts of hope, Christians may well find it difficult to determine precisely how Christian hope in Jesus Christ is different from all other hopes.

Initial inquiries about a specifically Christian hope today frequently meet with two sorts of Christian hope: on the one hand, there is the

15. Zazzle Hope+Belief=Change! Customised T-Shirt. Online: http://www.zazzle.co.uk/hope_belief_change_obama_08_customised_tshirt-235476764300328824.

16. VICTORYSTORE.COM. Barack Obama Hope Action Change Banner. Online: http://victorystore00.stores.yahoo.net/noname19.html.

17. American Elephant. T-Shirt. Online: http://americanelephant.com/latest-designs/anti-obama-t-shirt-of-the-day-overrated-no-hope-just-hype.

18. "Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism." King, "Why."

19. SpreadShirt Hoodie. Online: http://www.spreadshirt.com/white-jesus-our-only-hope-hooded-sweatsh-C3376A3384731.

20. World of Warcraft, "Our Only Hope" quest. *Game Atlas Guide and Data Base*. Online: http://wow.gamepressure.com/quest.asp?ID=5088.

21. Genesis Wildlife Sanctuary: "We are a haven for injured, orphaned and abused animals, dedicated to rescue, rehabilitation, release, and education. We believe that our only hope for the survival of the wildlife is the teaching of its importance to those who will be their protectors. It is in this spirit that we offer our experience to groups of all ages, but, in particular, the children."

mistaken hope that looks to an idyllic heaven in a land far away; on the other hand, there is the more responsible hope that looks to the efforts of good people to make a better world today. The older and outdated sort of hope pertains to the less-immediate and somewhat awkward topic of eternal salvation with God. "In the old days," the story goes, "the church used to care chiefly about hopes for heavenly rest; and in the process it dismissed and denigrated the urgent suffering of people living on this earth. Now we should know better."[22] The newer and more appropriate hope is practical and calls engaged church members to help the needy improve their material conditions and social positions, through personal aid and through public policy. The primary proponents of practical hope remember (or would like to remember) the sixties, when the church was socially active and cared about issues that really mattered, thereby correcting the previous detached, overly-spiritual, approach of the church. Now, they argue, the church has lost much of that enthusiastic activism.[23] Even though the church did not fully live up to this nostalgic vision of hope-filled activism for civil rights and peace fifty years ago, and even though mainstream Christianity has not, on the whole, lapsed into a dreamy belief in a pie-in-the-sky fulfillment of hope, concern for correction remains. Theologians and clergy urge parishioners toward an appropriate commitment to on-the-ground activities of Christian hope instead of succumbing to the distracting influence of fluffy-cloud idyllism or of Rapture-focused apocalypticism.[24]

Practical-hope theology shares many goals and aims that can be addressed within the sphere of United States political action. Federally funded programs and those who champion private sphere incentives both aim to benefit the less fortunate with an on-the-ground focus and a hope that supports theological priorities for the tangible needs of people, now. Thus, a theology of hope can encourage immediate, tangible care for those in the most vulnerable positions through, or in concert with, small- and large-scale political policies. With less energy spent in speculation about who will and won't end up in heaven, Christians can devote more of their efforts toward the social and political action that could make a difference in present day society; and yet, parishioners who already agree that these are the best expressions of hope still require frequent reminders to move from the pew to tasks in the real world. Theological books, essays, and

22. See Parker, "Holy."

23. See Borsch, *Outrage*.

24. Standaert, *Skipping*, 34.

lectures about practical hope offer resources to support the preaching and teaching of concerned church leaders.[25]

Meanwhile, Christians in America are finding it increasingly difficult to grasp and sustain hope in the face of unrelenting challenges. These challenges come in the form of natural disasters, human-caused disasters, economic downturns, high unemployment, housing crises, and the fact that things do not seem to be getting better every day, as previously expected. People are discouraged by tax hikes, the loss of programs through tax cuts, global terrorism, wars against terrorism, global warming, arguments about how to respond to global warming, and stalemated partisan politics. Victims of systemic oppression and inattention see little hope of relief; those benefiting from the goods of a capitalist democracy see diminished hope for retaining those goods; those who had felt that the American Dream of prosperity (or at least a somewhat more comfortable lifestyle) was almost in their grasp find their hopes dashed by a weakened economy and subsequent layoffs; those who had no hope of participating in the American Dream still have no hope of such participation. Those putting their trust in nationalism feel disappointed in the ways that the nation and its leaders do not not live up to their hopes. Those seeking reassurance from the church feel disappointed by institutional incompetence, the weakness of church leadership, irrelevance, trendy change, the closure of church buildings, and money spent on church buildings instead of the poor and needy. Those working to make a difference here and now feel frustrated that their efforts reap little visible change. Experts of science and reason argue against the bases of Christian hope, while medical research fails to eradicate suffering, death, and the common cold.

The need for hope seems greater than ever, as does the need for clear articulations and teachings of Christian theological hope. Since the 1960s, Moltmann has been the name most familiarly associated with theological hope. His work directly and indirectly influences a large body of theological hope resources today.[26]

25. See, for example: Osmer, *Teaching*.

26. A few of the theologians influenced by Moltmann include: Rubem Alves, Leonardo Boff, James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine Keller, John Polkinghorne, Paul Ricoeur, Letty Russell, and Jon Sobrino.

Moltmann's Experience of Godforsakenness and Hope

Moltmann grew up in Hamburg, in a secular, academic family. His discovery of God, his vocation, and his theology of hope began near the end of World War II. He writes:

> In the last week of July 1943, Hamburg was destroyed in a firestorm as a result of the British Royal Air Force's "Operation Gomorrah." 40,000 people perished. With my school class I was in a flak battery in the inner city as an auxiliary. It was wiped out, but the bombs which tore away the school friend standing next to me spared me. In the night, for the first time I cried out to God. "My God, where are you?" was my question. "Why am I alive and not dead like the others?" During three years as a prisoner of war I looked for an answer, first in the Old Testament psalms of lamentation and then in the Gospel of Mark. When I came to Jesus' dying cry, I knew, "There is your divine brother and redeemer, who understands you in your godforsakenness."[27]

In prison, Moltmann experienced God's presence not only in divine understanding, but also in the graciousness of the local residents and in the community of prisoners: "The kindness which Scottish miners and English neighbours showed the German prisoners of war who were at that time their enemies shamed us profoundly. We were accepted as people, even though we were only numbers and wore the prisoner's patch on our backs. But that made it possible for us to live with the guilt of our own people, the catastrophes we had brought about and the long shadows of Auschwitz, without repressing them and without becoming callous."[28] Some of the prisoners were Protestant theologians, and they gathered Moltmann and other prisoners to read and study the Bible[29]; this experienced shaped the entire direction of Moltmann's life.

Hence, as a young man, Moltmann was transformed by the horrors of war, the revelation of God's presence in the midst of suffering, the solidarity with prisoners of war, the surprising hospitality of townspeople, and the practice of Bible study in community. He reports that "the experiences of the life of a prisoner have left a lasting mark on me: the suffering and the hope which reinforce each other. When one grasps the courage to

27. Moltmann, *How*, 13.
28. Moltmann, *End*, 35.
29. Moltmann, *How*, 13.

hope, the chains begin to hurt, but the pain is better than the resignation in which everything is a matter of indifference."[30]

In 1948, once released from prison, Moltmann went to seminary, where he was greatly influenced by Barth and the Confessing Church. After serving a rural church, he returned to scholarship and published *The Theology of Hope* in 1965. In this and in his many following books (on a variety of other theological topics), he describes an eschatological hope that is affirmed and yet unfinished in Christ until God's future fulfillment in the world's new creation. He counters the idea that Christ's resurrection happened in the past to establish our future. Rather, he argues, we live in the time of not yet, a present time determined by the future that will come to history. Throughout his life, he carries forward his powerful revelation of God suffering with him in godforsakenness as the future hope of God's presence in and with the new creation to come.

The God of Hope

God suffers. Moltmann's theology of hope relies on his characterization of God as passible and mutable: God suffers and God changes. God experiences suffering, regret, abandonment, and the effects of human history. This reversal of traditional doctrine about the nature of God so permeates Moltmann's work that it might be possible to argue that his is a theology of divine passibility, with a secondary account of hope. Ryan Neal observes that "any modern treatment of divine (im)passibility has to consider Moltmann, specifically in *The Crucified God* and *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*. That many today speak of God's suffering without any conceptual or linguistic difficulty is due in large part to Moltmann and the favorable way he has been received by the academy along these lines."[31]

According to Moltmann, God's passibility determines the identity, actions, and relationships of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit—separately and as the Trinity—and God's passibility allows for the possibility of

30. Ibid.

31. Neal, *Theology*, 70. Here, as elsewhere, it is impossible to declare with certainty whether a broader shift in doctrinal assumptions precedes Moltmann's claims. Either way, he articulates a change that many Christians are willing to accept. In 1986, Richard Goetz wrote "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," and his "new orthodoxy" label has been repeated countless times since. In 2003, Sturla Stålsett named passibilism "the dominant view, a theological commonplace," in *The Crucified and the Crucified*, 490, also 435.

hope. He recounts, in a 1997 essay, how his certainty that God is passible grew out of his experience of 1968:

> 1968 brought the climax and turning-point in the mood of a new awakening. Military intervention put an end to the Prague Spring. German and Polish troops also marched shamefully into Czechoslovakia. In Rome the encyclical *Humanae vitae* set a limit to the *aggiornamento* of the church; Catholic colleagues lost their posts. On 6 April Martin Luther King was shot. The black ghettoes burned. We were in America at that time. Rudi Dutschke was shot at a demonstration in Berlin. The student protest became more bitter. For me the political dream of a united Social Democratic Europe collapsed. The end in Prague paralysed me for weeks.[32]

These events raised questions that resonated with the questions Moltmann began considering in prison camp and with the persistent post-Holocaust questions about the possibility of hope after God's apparent abandonment of all those persecuted and murdered.

Moltmann's experiences framed his understanding of God from scripture. Israel's account of God throughout the Old Testament describes a God who creates the world and establishes order for God's people. God responds to God's people when they are needy and when they stray from God's order to disordered lives. God protects, corrects, and redirects the people toward righteousness, over and over. The stories of this relationship between God and Israel often present God in anthropomorphic terms, as a divine figure—the one God—who responds to Israel's ungodliness with frustration *and* with an unwavering faithfulness to the people with convenantal constancy. In these accounts, God sighs, acts out in anger, listens to and heeds the people's prayers, and delights in the people's righteousness. Moltmann endorses this representation of God, but he differs from much of Jewish and Christian theology which asserts that throughout, God remains almighty and impassible, steadfast and undiminished by lesser powers and human frailty.[33]

Moltmann finds the idea of an impassible God contradictory to the reality of God's love and compassion as described in scripture and in God's work on earth. He understands impassibility to conflict with eschatological hope based on God's suffering and death on the cross and on God's full presence in the new creation. As mentioned above, Moltmann's first

32. Moltmann, *How,* 17.

33. Chapters 2 and 3 cover impassibility in more depth.

revelation of God occurred in the coincidence of his powerful sense of abandonment—on the battlefield and as a prisoner of war—and his encounter with the Gospel account of Jesus' passion and death. Moltmann recognized his own abandonment in God's abandonment of Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. Moltmann understood his experience as a reflection of Jesus' experience, and he felt consolation from the presence of God—newly discovered in the Bible he was given—who experienced his abandonment *with* him. A God who is not moved, changed, or wounded in the face of human suffering could not be the compassionate God revealed to Moltmann in the prison camp.

Moltmann cites Elie Wiesel's account from Auschwitz of the boy who is hanged, but dies very slowly, in the midst of great suffering. A man standing nearby with Wiesel asks, "Where is God?" and Wiesel answers, "He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows . . ."[34] Moltmann affirms Wiesel's answer and declares that "any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference."[35] Moltmann responds to those who cannot find God after Auschwitz by placing the suffering God in the midst of death at Auschwitz and therefore in the midst of all of humanity's suffering and death. He corrects those who claim an impassible God by separating divine absoluteness from divine compassion. The God of hope thus regains relevance in a world of horror and rejects divine power that would inhibit co-suffering with humanity.

Moltmann supports his account of God's passibility by noting how close early Christianity came to theological error before it was "in a position to identify God himself with the suffering and the death of Jesus."[36] Moltmann equates docetism, "according to which Jesus only appeared to suffer and only appeared to die abandoned by God: this did not happen in reality," with claims about God's impassibility.[37] Moltmann argues that this and Greek non-biblical philosophy separate divinity and humanity into distinct, separated, characters such that "God's being is incorruptible, unchangeable, indivisible, incapable of suffering and immortal; human

34. Moltmann, *Crucified*, 273–4.

35. Ibid., 274.

36. Ibid., 227.

37. Ibid.

nature, on the other hand, is transitory, changeable, divisible, capable of suffering and mortal."[38] Moltmann explains that the doctrine of Christ's two natures developed as a way to forge a connection between the impassible God and the human suffering Jesus endured, a connection that Christians hoped would bring them to a salvation of transcendence: "God became man that we men might participate in God (Athanasius)."[39] The problem with this hope, according to Moltmann, is that humans want to be immortal with an immortal God, and that hope "makes it impossible to regard Jesus as really being God and at the same time as being forsaken by God."[40]

Moltmann labels the doctrine of Christ's two natures a characteristic of theism, which he criticizes for prioritizing the oneness of God instead of the relatedness of the trinitarian persons and for maintaining an inviolable separation between the divine and the human: "The doctrine of two natures must understand the event of the cross statically as a reciprocal relationship between two qualitatively different natures, the divine nature which is incapable of suffering and the human nature which is capable of suffering."[41] Instead, Moltmann advocates a doctrine of God who is love and who loves always in relationships with the Son and the Holy Spirit, and whose love will be fulfilled eschatologically in the Trinity's open relationship with creation. Christ's suffering on the cross draws God into human suffering through God's love for creation. God's suffering love reflects the future new creation when God and creation will be wholly together in trinitarian perichoretic love.

God, the creator of eschatological relationships, provides hope through God's own suffering: "God is unconditional love, because he takes on himself grief at the contradiction in men and does not angrily suppress this contradiction. God allows himself to be forced out. God suffers, God allows himself to be crucified and is crucified, and in this consummates his unconditional love that is so full of hope."[42] God's embrace of human suffering demonstrates the victory of love over hate. "Thus [God's love's] suffering proves to be stronger than hate. Its might is powerful in weakness and gains power over its enemies in grief, because it gives life even to its enemies and opens up the future to change."[43] Moltmann argues that

38. Ibid., 228.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 245.
42. Ibid., 248.
43. Ibid., 249.