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Review: A Revolution in Theology

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A Revolution in Theology*

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There are at least three vantage points from which one can approach and appraise the theological work of Jürgen Moltmann and the hope school which he preeminently represents. One can look at it from the outside, as it were, and attempt an assessment on the basis of its place vis-à-vis other theological trends; its basic intentions, antecedents, background cultural and philosophical history; its apparent affect on other concerns; its anticipated long-range influence; its morphology as an occurrence in reflection, etc. Or one can select an internal perspective and, from within, test the position for the consistency of its proposals, the intellectual discipline which it manifests in advancing premises and in drawing conclusions, the coherence of its several areas of systematic interest, and the religious and theological adequacy of its suggestion. There is a third way of looking at the movement, namely, from an almost arbitrary stance which is established to safeguard someone's privileged position (which is often that of the beholder). This is done, for example, when one examines the statements about the resurrection (or about "heaven") in hope theology by referring them to a significant range of more or less standardized opinion on the subject.

One can expect that the third of these vantage points will be the one most frequently employed during the initial stages of apprehension of a new, or novel, theological tendency. Thus, to cite a parallel case, when Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* first appeared in English translation in 1922, its immediate affect (particularly on some of the younger philosophers in Cambridge University) was to raise the query, "What will this do to the way we've been accustomed to think things through?" Similarly, when the concept of "evolution" was written into historical method in the nineteenth century, there was instant concern that the new disposition toward progress might cancel rightful preoccupations with normative origins. The same happens often in theological discussion. In the beginning, the birth of form criticism serves to put other ways of reading the Bible in apparent jeopardy, in the same way that the advent of existentialism brings all systematic ideological positions under suspicion. Moltmann's theology of hope is undergoing the same treatment at the present time; it is being looked at via the interests of other points of view.

* Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969). xvii + 220 pages. \$5.95.

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The second of the three vantage points, the internal approach, requires more deliberation and a certain increase in scholarly detachment. It is through the internal assessment that the strengths and weaknesses of a stance are made apparent. It is here that the hard, sometimes strictly analytical work goes on, for no one can claim to be a master of a position unless he has submitted himself to the discipline required of the internal analyst. Yet, because patience with theological reflection is not great in the present moment, and because new theological positions seem to come and go with great rapidity—even disappearing before they have been fully heard, and often abandoned by their own architects, who, by that time, are already up to something else—the theology of hope has not been subjected to this kind of analytical rigor. It must be eventually, however, if the intrigue which still surrounds it is going to be converted into sagacity.

Moltmann's recent book, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, is a particularly propitious document for an exercising of all three vantage points. It treats both internal and external matters with much attention and great care and exhibits a sensitivity to the arbitrarily imposed perspective. Yet the book is richest of all in defining its own scope. It seems to sense that it is a precipitant of a new set of religious affirmations. Or, to paraphrase Joseph Haroutunian's description of one of the characteristics of the theological imagination, it appears to know that it shares in an emergent cultural style and mood. It treats of things big and small by creating a framework which provides their proper setting. The claims are large, and the outlook is both great and expansive. Thus, in addressing himself to the topic of religion and revolution, Moltmann is really involved in assessing the dynamics of social change. In exploring the category of "the future" as a paradigm of transcendence, he has, in fact, taken on an analysis of the dependence of some religious truth claims on the presence of selected time tenses. In viewing the Bible as a book which can be illumined by being placed in a political setting, he is engaged in the development of a new (as well as a new sort of) hermeneutics. In conversing with Ernst Bloch, and in reporting upon some of the conversations which have taken place in Europe among Christian, Marxist, and humanist spokesmen, Moltmann is sketching some of the ways in which a new rapprochement between the three might be employed to reconstitute the theoretical bases of already operational political systems. In coupling religion and revolution, he is involved in converting the source of theological reflection from theory to *praxis*. Beyond all of this, he has proposed a notion of God which, he acknowledges, is not customarily Christian (although at one time it may have been Jewish). The new view of God does not spoil the classical view of Jesus' resurrection, as he sees it, but, instead, helps bring it to life. Similarly, the reconstitution of religious sensibilities which he calls for does not, he thinks, destroy fundamental Christian beliefs. Moltmann, obviously, is not out simply to make a splash by creating something sensational. As his

book exhibits, he is quite concerned to utilize the novelty of his approach as token that he should be known as an orthodox, resurrection-believing, Jesus-as-Lord-confessing Christian. For all of the subtleties involved in such juxtaposition of intentions, I have chosen to look at Moltmann's work by the criteria which belong to an external vantage point.

Most fundamentally, I believe, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* serves as a sketch of the rudiments and formative interests of the second of the two religions of Christianity. This is the religion which builds upon "dynamic" rather than "static" categories (to borrow the distinction from Henri Bergson) and which yields to horizontal rather than vertical structural depiction. It is oriented toward the future rather than toward the past or the present, and it locates transcendence in an anticipated temporal norm. It is regulated by change rather than by permanence, and its philosophical *Urvater* is Heraclitus rather than Parmenides. Its environment is the apocalyptic world in which light stands in sharp contrast to darkness, and the elect of God are released from their oppression by a deliberate vanquishing of the forces of evil. This is the vision of the religion of the oppressed, the design which inspired countless pilgrim bands in the past, and the story which lent coherence to the aspirations of apocalyptic communities. This is the outlook which gave some cogency to the yearnings of the poor in the first Crusades, for example, who wanted to seize Jerusalem from the infidel and turn it into a Christian city. This articulates the same perspective as that to whose spirit Joachim di Fiore referred in marshalling support for the appearance of a new age. It is in keeping with the apocalyptic enthusiasms of those who gathered about Savonarola, the early supporters of Martin Luther, the followers of Thomas Müntzer, for example, and the many other figures and groups to which Ernst Bloch draws attention (including Karl Marx) in tracing the *Geist der Utopie*. If Moltmann is correct, this is the setting which is responsible for the religious affirmations of the first Christians. It must also be implicit in the aspirations of many of those now living—the more recently oppressed—who are anticipating the year 2000 with apocalyptic propensities.

In articulating some of the characteristic features of the second of Christianity's two religions, Moltmann knows that he is engaged in a task of theological reconstruction. It is not enough that he find new and challenging expressions of the same old thing. For that reason, he develops his thought by means of a series of contrasts. He makes it clear, for example, that vertically ordered Christianity is motivated toward "the above" while horizontally ordered Christianity moves toward "the ahead." In the same way, the first of the two religions is predisposed to the theoretical categories which lend stability to the permanent features of the world, while the actional categories of the second religion are trained to underscore the reality of historical novelty. Similarly, religion *A* seems to place stress on the individual's relationship with God, while religion *B* construes salvation primarily

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in corporate terms. Both of the religions have their own myths and stories. Each, on its own, could support a ritualistic system. Though the stresses would vary, each, on its own, could provide a program of social action. The verbal side of each of the two strains can be translated into a consistent doctrinal scheme. Indeed, each carries the requisite formal apparatus as well as sufficient materials to be able to inspire and inhabit a fully expressible religious consciousness. Yet the two religions are differently oriented and motivated. Religion *A* tends to regularize permanence, while religion *B* finds its norm in change. Thus, recalling one of Ernst Bloch's sets of contrasting images, the one religion can be depicted in terms of the *cathedral* which is encyclopedic in scope and is meant to serve as the supreme cultural constant; the other religion can be likened to the *ship* which traverses restless, unsettled waters in quest of a harbor whose configuration has only been dimly outlined. And the differences between the cathedral and the ship carry large implications for the comportment of piety, ethics, and thought.

One misses the thrust of this if he simply reads Moltmann's essays in series with other recent proposals, or as the latest example of a temporarily intriguing theological trend. The last decade bears ample testimony that theological trends come and go in the same way that styles of dress change and hemlines go up or down. In series, the theology of hope can be viewed, then, as following on the heels of Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity," Cox's "secular city," the "anti-theism" (as Howard Burkle calls it) of the death-of-God school, and the descholasticized, meta-chronically oriented theology of the post-Vatican II era, and in some sort of concert with the theology of play. Chronologically, there is something to be said for such a sequential ordering. But chronological sequences do not always serve as reliable interpretative guides. Beyond that, a strict chronological account may overlook the morphological fact that the hope disposition is neither totally new nor even a mere reprimination of something old. Much more important, the hope school is an impressive current expression of one of the two principal but contrary formative dispositions of Christianity. To put it in stronger words, the hope school has given new expression to one of the two classical religions of Christianity. That expression is not complete as yet, nor has the disposition been articulated in each of its several possible dimensions. But as the index of subjects and proposals in *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* makes clear, the potentialities are there. Moltmann's program calls for nothing less than a categorical reversion to the second of the two dispositional poles. He believes he has the primitive Christian outlook on his side. And he knows he can argue his case on the basis of recent New Testament studies which have shown that the original Christian kerygma is dependent upon an apocalyptic world outlook, an outlook whose obsolescence is ruled against by recurrent human experience. The force of his argument is clear: hope theology can be regarded

as an attempt to reinstate the formative disposition of earliest Christianity. Through that fundamental elan, the future was awaited with hopeful expectation, and the present era was regarded as a time of perpetual advent. When the first vision was weakened, it was gradually replaced by the same tendencies which produced Christendom. But the initial light was never totally extinguished. In the underground, in the apocalyptic communities, that initial disposition continued to ferment. And, in our own day, that same set of avowals has emerged from the underground to challenge the status quo by offering an alternative to the religion of permanence. In short, the categorial reversion in thought which Moltmann's books outline runs parallel to the dramatic shift which, in religious and sociopolitical terms, goes by the name of "revolutionary transformation."

That point becomes very clear in the delightful preface to *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*. Though the book does not say this directly, it contains an implicit message for Americans. It records some of the lectures Moltmann gave in the United States in 1967–68 when he was visiting professor of theology at Duke University. The Tübingen (and, formerly, Bonn) professor logged an astonishing number of air, rail, bus, highway, and turnpike miles in crisscrossing the continent twice and in traveling up and down the east coast and back and forth between Chicago and North Carolina. All in all, he lectured in more than thirty academic institutions (including Harvard, Yale, Union Seminary, Princeton, Chicago, the University of California at Santa Barbara, Claremont, Vanderbilt, Pacific School of Religion, among others). The book gives some indication of the sheer breadth of those travels, and its preface provides some clues regarding Moltmann's impressions as he traveled about.

In a very perceptive way, almost as one American speaking to another, and citing John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* as the pattern for his own jottings, he tells what it is like for a European to experience life in the "New World." For him, as for Steinbeck (a portion of whose work was originally entitled "In Quest of America"), the sojourn in America bore both symbolic and diagnostic significance. Moltmann was especially concerned to trace the present forms of that impetus which led men to move from the Old to the New World. In realistic terms, he wanted to tap and reexperience the so-called pioneer spirit. In sorting out his impressions, he turns to Sydney Mead's observation that space took precedence over time in forming the ideals of America. It was this way, too, in Europe once, Moltmann notes, but Europe ran out of wide-open spaces. Hence, it became physically impossible for Europeans to pursue human freedom by following the call of "westward ho!" Instead, they turned within themselves, or sought to fit freedom with a transcendental apparatus. As Moltmann concedes, these were only temporary resolutions. Over and over again, the "inner light of freedom became the consuming flame of revolution and directed itself outward." And this is

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the same light as that which inspired Karl Marx and a host of other apocalyptic visionaries.

America, he believes, like Europe before her, will run out of space. The signs of that are already manifest. In that occurrence America will more and more experience the limitations which are placed on "freedom in space" and will find it necessary to invest itself in a qualitatively transformed world. The revolution transformation which is already imminent will involve a thorough reordering of America's visions and ideals. Moltmann thinks that this transformation is necessary if America's ideological and sociopolitical structures are to acquire the vibrancy and vitality to withstand recurrences of the tragedies of Martin Luther King, Jr. (in whose memory the book is written), and Robert F. Kennedy. If he had chosen to, Moltmann could have used Steinbeck's words: "I do know it is a troubled place and a people caught in a jam. And I know that the solution when it arrives will not be easy or simple."

It is a sober warning from one who has known oppression first-hand. It is also a reminder of a legacy and, at the same time, a warm, positive statement. Moltmann sees in the American dream a vivid portrayal of the motive force under whose auspices the theology of hope is conceived. He likes the phrase "frontier religion," for example, and sees great affinity between the thrust of his own proposals and the quest for the good land which inspired the pilgrims of yesteryear to leave his world to invest their destinies in a hoped-for Novum. But the stress is always placed on "revolutionary transformation." To put the matter in bold terms: freedom in America or elsewhere requires change, and change is effected through revolution. Indeed, God is to be found in revolution. The resurrection of Jesus indicates, at least in part, that the God of the exodus—he whom the pilgrims follow—is also Lord of the future. American is called upon to facilitate the revolutionary transformation on which the turn from freedom-in-space to freedom-in-the-promised-future-of-God depends. As Moltmann sees it, that turn is crucial not only for America but for the entire world community. In such a turn the new future is allowed to enter the open possibilities of transitory history.

This is prophetic language rather than analysis and description. The author is a man of vision, conviction, and large sensitivities. He writes with both intensity and force. His scope is monumental, and the treatment of his themes is creative and immensely suggestive. And his book may come to be known—along with the earlier, more scholarly appearing, defensively written, and more tightly controlled *Theologie der Hoffnung*—as a documentation of that enlivening disposition which is responsible for the shift in attitude and outlook occurring among Christians throughout the world, and which is effecting a categorial reversion of revolutionary proportions. In this respect, Moltmann's seven theses announced to a meeting of the World Student Christian Federation in Turku, Finland, prior to his departure for the

United States can be regarded—almost like Marx's theses on Feuerbach—as an index of a revolutionary program. The essay in which these theses are included ("God in Revolution," pp. 129–47) is perhaps the most important in the entire book. Moltmann, like Marx, is insistent that theory cannot effect change. If the world is to be made right, it must be transformed visibly, overtly, and consciously. He recognizes the inevitability of revolution and does not shrink from that prospect. Indeed, he is even willing to quote Che Guevara with approval: "The vocation of every lover is to bring about revolution." But, then, citing an alteration which one of the students in Tübingen suggested, Moltmann adds: "The duty of every revolution is bring about love."

Many will find the book refreshing, and most will find it provocative. It is the work of a disciplined thinker, a first-rate theological mind. From my standpoint, however, the book raised many more issues than it adequately treated. It is a prophetic piece of literature which, to its credit or not, does not quite survice the transition from theory to *praxis*. And, like other prophetic pieces, it is insufficiently self-critical, unaware of some of the ramifications of its program, and swept along at times by enthusiasms of the moment. The proposals which are set forth are registered with skill and force; in no sense are they inflammatory. Yet no great attempt is made to measure the proper extent and pervasiveness of the reversals which are called for. The language is so tempered that the reader can almost forget at times that the book is about revolution, and that revolution means radical or forceful change. But this is precisely the problem. The book addresses issues of great consequence without taking account of the shocks and wrestings involved in radical cultural, social, ideological, and theological innovation. The transformations it calls for cannot be effected by sheer programmatic alone but, rather, depend upon the discovery and cultivation of the most delicate of all arts. Delicacy is required because the responsibilities of religiously inclined people during eras of cultural transition are exceedingly complex.

One can suggest at least two reasons for the book's insensitivities. First, America is both like and unlike Europe. Innovative endeavors on the Continent occur against a background of history, tradition, and centuries of established order. In that setting, institutional inertia alone can prevent revolution from being as radical and thorough as some of Moltmann's words imply. Americans, on the other hand, are not as well able to presume cultural order before talking about redoing it. (One has the feeling, despite the disclaimers, that the European theologian can always fall back upon some of the pieces of a shattered Hegelian world; unlike the American, he does not have to make do with John Dewey.) Second, Moltmann also misses seeing that the theological outlook which he articulates gives expression to only one of the two formal religions of Christianity. His selectivity is noticeable, for example, when (without qualification) he states that God (without qualifi-

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cation) is to be found in revolution (without qualification). Moses may have felt that way, Abraham at times, too, conceivably. But certainly David—and lots of kingship advocates—would not have found such a statement to be adequate. Such declarations reduce subtleties to oversimplifications and complexities to truisms. Furthermore, in being partial to the theological pattern which runs horizontally rather than vertically and normalizes change rather than stability, Moltmann invites a situation in which his own position is deficient in precisely those areas in which the “other side” has strengths. His position gives stress to change, the future tense, and historical event; but it has little or no access to permanence, the past tense, and transcendence. Similarly, in working almost exclusively with *social* consciousness, it fails to reach the issues which are of perennial *personal* religious consequence. Revolutions in theology (and elsewhere) incur losses as well as gains. But perhaps this negative postscript simply indicates that two years have passed since the chapters in *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* were first given as addresses. In revolutionary terms, two years can be a very long time.