

THE EYE OF CHARITY: JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN'S PRACTICAL THEODICY

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Introduction

In recent decades there has been a significant shift toward privileging practical approaches to the theodicy problem. It is frequently argued that the conundrum of God and human suffering by its very nature does not lend itself, existentially speaking, to detached theological reflection. The purported “answers” provided in such discursive fashion are portrayed as irrelevant at best and complicit in justifying radical evil at worst. In this article I will examine the validity of such claims by highlighting some of the key theological impulses entailed in Jürgen Moltmann’s practical theodicy that can be helpfully clustered around the fundamental tropes of hope, solidarity, and life. It will be noted how Moltmann’s approach to this problematic can only be properly elucidated when situated within the wider ecology of his theological convictions. In the concluding remarks of this article I will provide a brief critical overview of his theological contribution to the issue in question.

1. Theodicy and the Promise of Hope

The confluence of eschatology and praxis has been a trademark of Moltmann’s theological thinking since at least the publication of the *Theology of Hope*¹ in 1967. More than just a mythologized appendix to more urgent theological themes, “the teleological principle of thought,” so Moltmann contends in his seminal work, “penetrates the very heart of the Christian message.”² Consequently, Christianity is best defined as “eschatology, hope, forward-looking and revolutionizing and transforming the present.”³ Whenever this hope is abandoned, argues Moltmann, we are left with a world purged of transcendence. Consequently, we are doomed to a pathos of apathetic sameness,⁴ encapsulated in a worldview “in which nothing new can ever happen. It is the world of the eternal return of the same thing.”⁵ The

¹Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1967).

²Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation: Collected Essays*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 90.

³Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.

⁴For an excellent critique of postmodern formalistic conception of hope, see James K. A. Smith, “Determined Hope: A Phenomenology of Christian Expectation,” in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Miroslav Volf and William H. Katerberg (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁵Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl, Gifford Lectures: 1984-1985 (San Francisco: Harper & Row,

only possible notion of transcendence that could possibly be conjured up here is one where the “qualitative infinity of heaven is . . . replaced by the quantitatively indefinite endlessness of the universe’s extension . . . [a] transformation of qualitative infinity into quantitative endlessness.”⁶

Moltmann is equally critical of Ernst Bloch’s rendering of the category *novum* in purely immanentist terms, where the revolutionary capacity of the future is seen as contained within the present possibilities of the world and is expected to evolve within the process of future’s becoming.⁷ “According to Bloch’s ontology,” writes Douglas Meeks, “. . . the future comes from the not-yetness of the present: the *futurum* comes out of the process of the womb *physis* (nature).”⁸ Starting from such a vantage point, “Bloch’s philosophy of utopia presents certain inalienable, not-yet-conscious and not-yet-realized potentialities of the human self, providing an alternative to the alienated, reified existence of the capitalist money economy.” The potentialities in question “offer hope for a revolutionary future utopia, beyond the oppressive bureaucratization of life by the State.”⁹ Moltmann as a Christian theologian rejects this approach and argues to the contrary that the *novum* of Christ’s resurrection contains something beyond our possibilities, something to be brought about by God’s free act in the future.¹⁰ The resurrection of Christ is seen as the *novum ultimum* standing over against “the similarity in ever-recurring reality and also as against the comparative dissimilarity of new possibilities emerging in history.” As such, “the resurrection of Christ does not mean a possibility within the world and its history, but a new possibility altogether for the world, for existence, and for history.”¹¹

In the aftermath of the *Theology of Hope*, however, questions have been raised whether terms such as “promise” and “hope” betray the presence of a modified eschatological theodicy that inadvertently allocates evil a redemptive space within some grand divine teleology. Moltmann responds to these criticisms by saying that eschatology, at least on his terms, “is not a final theodicy according to the motto: if the end is good, everything is good.”¹² In distinction to some other forms of theodicy, the theology of hope is not to

1985), 163.

⁶Ibid., 163-164.

⁷For the role of Bloch’s thought in Moltmann’s theology, see M. Douglas Meeks, *Origins of the Theology of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 16ff.

⁸Ibid., 85.

⁹Kornel Zathureczky, “A Critique of the Messianic Theology of Jürgen Moltmann through the Messianic Philosophy of Walter Benjamin: Staying with the Negative” (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 2005), 42.

¹⁰Meeks, 86.

¹¹Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 179.

¹²Jürgen Moltmann, *Hope and Planning*, trans. Margaret Clarkson (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 50.

be taken as a disguised attempt at justifying suffering. While being aware that any belief in a benevolent God has to fall back on the notion of trust sooner or later, he at the same time dispenses with those theological narrations that locate such trust in the “mystery of the divine counsel,” in predestination, in God’s pedagogical employment of affliction, i.e. in all those attempts at reconciling evil and providence. In place of such explanations we are offered a fiduciary certainty that God will eventually work everything out perfectly. Moltmann’s eschatological theodicy is not an explanation; it is a confession. It is an invitation to believe despite God’s chilling silence on this matter.

But doesn’t all this smack of ideology, one could ask, a finely-tuned device for postponing justice until some imaginary future? Moltmann would certainly say, No! “Only in its aberrant forms,” argues Richard Bauckham on behalf of Moltmann, “and probably less often than is sometimes supposed, has resurrection faith been an opiate, a justification for leaving this world unchanged.” A prayerfully nurtured eschatological consciousness has “often sustained people in otherwise unbearable conditions which they had no means of changing and enabled them to resist the dehumanizing power of such conditions.”¹³ Real hope is a mobilizing power leading to action, because “hope finds in Christ not only the consolation *in* suffering, but also the protest of the divine *against* suffering.”¹⁴ Such anticipatory consciousness is a “poetic imagination” or “productive fantasy” of sorts that helps us envision “the still unrealized future in order to anticipate and shape it in thought and pictures.”¹⁵ Here Moltmann takes on Nietzsche’s revulsion against Christianity’s supposed other-worldliness by defining Christian hope as that which “moves men and women to ‘remain true to the earth’, even in the face of individual, collective and universal death.”¹⁶ A biblically faithful and culturally relevant political theology is but a concrete outworking of this vision and as such presents, as Moltmann specifically claims, “the practical answering to the theodicy problem.”¹⁷ Such political theology offers a clear reminder that our penultimate efforts, our little hopes are not useless, but are, instead, set “within a horizon of ultimate meaning and hope,” ensuring that “none need be left without hope.”¹⁸ “The question

¹³Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 45-46.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵Jürgen Moltmann, “Where There Is Hope, There Is Religion,” in *The Experiment of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 23.

¹⁶Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 264. Also see Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966), Prologue, §3.

¹⁷Jürgen Moltmann, “Theology as Eschatology,” in *The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology*, ed. Frederick Herzog (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 47-48. For this quote I am indebted to Bauckham, 85.

¹⁸Bauckham, 45.

of theodicy,” adds Moltmann, “leads us into these struggles. Only the future of the coming God leads us out of them.”¹⁹

But how long? the cry goes. Isn't the prolongation of suffering a theodicy problem *par excellence*? “Why then does the kingdom of freedom,” as Moltmann puts it, “not arrive all at once? What justifies its delay? Doesn't the problem of theodicy return to Christianity in the form of ‘delayed parousia?’”²⁰ Isn't this simply a veiled attempt at begging the question? Moltmann does not provide an answer, nor can he, given the self-imposed conceptual restrictions. He can only repeat his basic axiom that “no one can answer the theodicy question in this world, and no one can get rid of it. Life in this world means living with this open question, and seeking the future in which the desire for God will be fulfilled, suffering will be overcome, and what has been lost will be restored.”²¹ Indeed,

only with the resurrection of the dead, the murdered and the gassed, only with the healing of those in despair who bear lifelong wounds, only with the abolition of all rule and authority, only with the annihilation of death will the Son hand over the kingdom to the Father. Then God will turn his sorrow into eternal joy. This will be the sign of the completion of the trinitarian history of God and the end of world history, the overcoming of the history of man's sorrow and the fulfillment of his history of hope.²²

2. Theodicy and Kenotic Solidarity

When we turn to Moltmann's other seminal work, *The Crucified God*, we note that the notion of *promissio* as developed in the *Theology of Hope* has been “deepened by the additional theme of God's loving solidarity with the world in its suffering.”²³ The question now becomes, where is God *now* in our suffering? Throughout the book he has “in mind those people who because of their exposure to suffering are not receptive to the anticipation of a future resurrection but still could be reached with the message of the crucified one.”²⁴ He takes seriously Ivan Karamazov's version of protest atheism and admits the force of his challenge:

¹⁹Moltmann, *Hope and Planning*, 51.

²⁰Ibid., 44.

²¹Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 49.

²²Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM, 1974), 278. For this quote I am indebted to Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (London: B. Blackwell, 1986), 129.

²³See Bauckham, 11.

²⁴Hermannus Heiko Miskotte, “Das Leiden Ist in Gott,” in *Diskussion Über Jürgen Moltmanns Buch Der Gekreuzigte Gott*, ed. Michael Welker (Munich: Christlicher Kaiser, 1979), 90. Translation by the author.

It is in suffering that the whole human question about God arises; for incomprehensible suffering calls the God of men and women in question. The suffering of a single innocent child is an irrefutable rebuttal of the notion of the almighty and kindly God in heaven. For a God who lets the innocent suffer and who permits senseless death is not worthy to be called God at all. Wherever the suffering of the living in all its manifold forms pierces our consciousness with its pain, we lose our childish primal confidence.²⁵

Moltmann essentially sides with Ivan's refutation of traditional theism and admits that the value of human dignity does not allow for something beyond itself that would justify the ruining or extinction of human life. "There is no explanation of suffering," he claims, "which is capable of obliterating pain, and no consolation of a higher wisdom that could assuage it. The person who cries out in pain over suffering has a dignity of its own which neither men nor gods can rob him of."²⁶ He admits that

suffering as punishment for sin is an explanation that has a very limited value. The desire to explain suffering is already highly questionable in itself. Does an explanation not lead us to justify suffering and give it permanence? Does it not lead the suffering person to come to terms with his suffering, and to declare himself in agreement with it? And does this not mean that he gives up hope of overcoming suffering?²⁷

The traditional theistic response will not do any good, so thinks Moltmann, because "the question of the existence of God is, in itself, a minor issue in the face of the question of his righteousness in the world." According to him, "this question of suffering and revolt is not answered by any cosmological argument for the existence of God or any theism, but is rather provoked by both of these."²⁸

Moltmann's iconoclastic deconstructing of divine *apatheia* rests significantly on his persistence in asking the question, "what does the cross of Jesus mean for God himself?"²⁹ On his count, what sets Christ's death apart from other otherwise horrible deaths is the ontological aporia that Jesus experiences in the fear of his eternal separation from the Father. It is a death marked by "a unique abandonment by God,"³⁰ claims Moltmann, where we find God taking side against himself.³¹ In this event a "stasis" within the being

²⁵Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 47.

²⁶Ibid., 47-48.

²⁷Ibid., 53.

²⁸Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 221.

²⁹Ibid., 201. For a recent defense of divine impassability, see David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

³⁰Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 149.

³¹See Bauckham, 89.

of God takes place so that Jesus' cry of dereliction could be modified so as to say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken thyself?"³² "We must not allow ourselves," he writes, "to overlook this 'enmity between God and God.' . . . The cross of the Son divides God from God to the utmost degree of enmity and distinction."³³ "There God disputes with God; there God cries out to God, there God dies in God."³⁴ In this process the Father and the Son are so united in their will "that they present a single surrendering movement."³⁵ Accordingly, the cross presents us with a new threshold even for God. It is an event that "reaches into the very depths of the Godhead and . . . puts its impress on the trinitarian life of God in eternity."³⁶ At this cross-section of the trinitarian history of God, then, something happens that "does not pass God without leaving a trace"—the crucified God becomes God's eternal signature.³⁷ Tyron Inbody summarizes Moltmann's point here as follows:

Although God is not changeable in every respect, God is free to change Godself, able to allow Godself to be changed by others of God's own free will by the incarnation in Christ. Furthermore, God does not suffer like creatures; creatures suffer unwillingly, but in Christ God voluntarily opens Godself to the possibility of being affected by another. Suffering, therefore, is not a deficiency in God, but God suffers out of the fullness of God's being, that is, out of God's love.³⁸

More could be said of that, particularly on the issue whether Moltmann's grammar of God with its apparent *patripassian* tendencies presents a confusion of God and history.³⁹ Of our immediate interest, however, is the undeniable power of Moltmann's vision that leads us "beyond the poverty-stricken God-concepts of theism," presenting us not so much with a "new idea of God," as a "new God-situation."⁴⁰ It clearly speaks to the truth that God, by taking into himself the contradiction of the world and identifying himself with its condition, becomes vulnerable and susceptible to the mutability that the experience of suffering brings with itself. A person that suffers, that is blinded by pain and afflicted, cries out to God in the incomprehensibility of his or

³²See Miskotte. The citation of Moltmann is from *The Crucified God*, 151.

³³Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 152.

³⁴Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, 65.

³⁵Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 174.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 173.

³⁷Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, 76. For a further exploration of this theme, see, e.g., Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

³⁸Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 170.

³⁹For a recent critique of this position, see Hart, 155-175.

⁴⁰Meeks, 147.

her situation, looks at the crucified God and is able to see, not the silence of divine aloofness, but the ultimate pathos of God. “This in itself brings his liberation from suffering. . . . In the experience of God’s love the sufferer recovers his sense of human worth and the hope which maintain his protest against suffering and enable him to resist its dehumanizing power.”⁴¹

Only under the presupposition ‘God in the face of the crucified one’, i.e. God no longer as the heavenly opponent but rather as the earthly and humane God in the crucified one, does the cross of Christ acquire its full judicial significance and future meaning within the question of theodicy. God is no longer the defendant in the human question of theodicy; rather, the answer is found in this question itself. The cross of Christ then becomes the ‘Christian theodicy’—a self-justification of God in which judgment and damnation are taken up by God himself, so that many may live.⁴²

For Moltmann, therefore, the cross event rightly understood could indeed be a message of comfort to those that suffer. Theodicy is resolved, argues Dorothee Sölle, “into *theophany*: the God who is not an executioner must become a co-sufferer, one who indwells (incarnates) himself in the suffering realities of his creation.”⁴³ As Moltmann puts it,

Among all the un-numbered and un-named tortured men and women, that ‘Suffering-Servant of God’ is always to be found. They are his companions in his suffering, because he has become their companion in theirs. The tortured Christ looks at us with the eyes of tortured men and women. Of course, not every tortured person feels this subjectively, not even every tortured Christian. Of course, ‘the dark night of the soul’ is to be found too in the torture chambers and the isolation cells, that night where all bearings are lost and every feeling dries up. But objectively the tortured Christ is present in the tortured, and the God-forsaken Christ in the God-forsaken.⁴⁴

Although Moltmann would be first to admit that that does not solve the problem of suffering, it is such interpretation of reality that makes God an ally in all forms of liberating praxis through which conditions of suffering are exposed and challenged. The matrix of interpretation that legitimizes abusive, violent, and annihilating conditions, relating them in some way to God’s purpose, is here radically deconstructed. God is on the side of the victims; he suffers and is crucified with them. “Christ’s cross stands between all the countless crosses which line the paths of the powerful and the violent, from Spartacus to the concentration camps and to the people who have died of hunger or who have ‘disappeared’ in Latin America.”⁴⁵

⁴¹Bauckham, 89-90.

⁴²Moltmann, *Hope and Planning*, 43.

⁴³Surin, 119.

⁴⁴Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 65-66.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 39.

3. Theodicy and the Affirmation of Life

There is no doubt that the increasing dominance of pneumatological categories in Moltmann's theology has led to some very exciting and intricate theological insights. His particular take on the *filioque* debate, his sharp criticism of Barthian revelation/experience dualism, his development of ecclesiology, where the church is defined as an eschatological creation of the Spirit—these among others are issues Moltmann tackles with creative lucidity. However, it is his treatment of the Holy Spirit as the *fons vitae*, the Well of Life, that is particularly relevant for this discussion. Starting from the conviction that “God is in all things and all things are in God,” Moltmann begs for a theology of life that is critical, among other things, of excessive anthropocentrism, of all rhetorical evocations of power, domination, violence, and of all legitimatizations of the “culture of death” we inhabit. In such a theology the traditional theological language of justification and sanctification is pushed beyond its original soteriological ramifications in a concerted effort to affirm life in all its complexity and interconnectedness. Accepting the christological origin and eschatological goal of God's Spirit, he goes on to develop a pneumatology expanded beyond its traditional redemptive and ecclesiological confinements as found, for instance, in Yves Congar. A widened cosmological framework, or the “discovery of God's cosmic breath” as Moltmann has it, enables him to construct a doctrine of the Holy Spirit relevant to the concerns of humanity at the beginning of a new millennium. “The purpose of Moltmann's revision of Western pneumatology,” writes Kornel Zathureczky,

is to re-infuse the doctrine of the Spirit with the eschatological energies found in messianic expectations. It is on the horizon of these messianic expectations that the artificial and detrimental separation between Christology and pneumatology, immanence and transcendence, and finally creation and redemption is irrevocably removed.⁴⁶

One of the more interesting moves Moltmann has made in developing his pneumatology was to appropriate the insights of early rabbinical theology and the kabalistic doctrine of the Shekinah. The indwelling Spirit of God, the Shekinah, permeates the entire cosmos with life-giving energy, preserving it in life, and all the while transforming it into a new life. “Through the powers and potentialities of the Spirit,” Moltmann writes, “the Creator indwells the creatures he has made, animates them, holds them in life, and leads them into the future of his kingdom.”⁴⁷ It is a life-giving energy of healing and wholeness, an ever-present force wooing and prompting us toward different forms of penultimate integrative existence. The Shekinah is not to be seen simply as “a divine attribute. It is the presence of God himself. But it is not God in his essential omnipresence. It is his special,

⁴⁶Zathureczky, 102.

⁴⁷Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 14.

willed and promised presence in the world.”⁴⁸ It also draws our attention to the “*sensibility of God the Spirit*. The Spirit indwells. The Spirit suffers with the suffering. The Spirit is grieved and quenched.”⁴⁹

To fully articulate the kenotic ecstasy of primordial Beauty, Moltmann draws together all the threads of the Shekinah-concept and weaves them into a tapestry in which the Holy Spirit of God is understood as the immanent-transcendence of God in time and space as both God’s self-identity and God’s self-differentiation. Here Moltmann calls upon Franz Rosenzweig’s use of the Hegelian term of “God’s self-distinction” as the most appropriate terminology in that it

preserves the sovereignty of God above the suffering history of his Shekinah. If we talk about a divine ‘self-distinction’ of this kind, then we are assuming a difference in God between what distinguishes and what is distinguished, between the self-surrendering and the self-surrendered God, but we are still at the same time holding fast to the identity of the One God.⁵⁰

This concept of the Shekinah, according to Moltmann, “points towards the *kenosis of the Spirit*. In his Shekinah, God renounces his impassibility and becomes able to suffer because he is willing to love. The theophany of the Spirit is not anthropomorphism, but is made possible through his indwelling in created being.”⁵¹ Such pneumatological rendering of the Shekinah helps us flesh out the idea of God’s solidarity beyond God’s unique historical identification with suffering humanity on the cross. We are not just consoled by the fact that God became a human being, and that through his life and death he has shown us that he genuinely participates in our sufferings, but also that he feels our pain and identifies with us as in the here and now.

Unfortunately, all too often we seem to be “paralyzed by a chilly apathy.”⁵² Our society’s attitude “toward the starving people of the third world, the hardcore unemployed, the migrant workers, the prisoners, the handicapped, and the so-called unfit” is, according to Moltmann completely unacceptable. “People such as these are ruined not because of their inability but because of our indifference.”⁵³ We are not any longer moved by misery. In such a context, “knowledge doesn’t mean power any longer. Knowledge means powerlessness. . . . Humanity is likely to die of apathy of soul like this

⁴⁸Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 49.

⁴⁹Ibid., 51.

⁵⁰Ibid., 48.

⁵¹Ibid., 51.

⁵²Jürgen Moltmann, “The Passion for Life,” in *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann and Douglas Meeks, trans. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 21-22.

⁵³Ibid., 20.

before it founders in social or military catastrophes.”⁵⁴ The unfortunate consequence is that “instead of an open and vulnerable society, we have a closed and unassailable society with apathetic structures. The living, open, vulnerable life is poured into steel and concrete. That is the modern death called apathy: life without suffering [*Leiden*], life without passionate feeling [*Leidenschaft*].”⁵⁵ In response, Moltmann proposes a spirituality of life able to “drive out the bacillus of resignation, and heal painful remembrances.”⁵⁶ The *ruach* of God “quickens our senses” and we can again “participate in life.” This “sensuousness of the divine Spirit”⁵⁷ breaks down the cancer of apathy individually and socially. We sigh with the oppressed and express a solidarity that has always been “the real sign of the Holy Spirit in history.”⁵⁸ Such spirituality of life is one of conscientization, deconstructing apathetic structures in which we seem to be enmeshed. It is a protest theodicy *par excellence*, a pneumatological infusion of the power of resurrection which calls us to cry, but not despair; to experience pain, yet have an unquenchable hope; longing for the face of God, yet decrying the forces of death today. It reminds us that loving God means to “believe in the beauty of bodies, the rhythm of movements, the shining of eyes, the embraces, the feelings, the scents, the sounds of all his protean creation. . . . [Because] the experience of God deepens the experiences of life. . . . It awakens the unconditional yes to life.”⁵⁹ It propels us to a determined commitment “to guide all things towards their new being.”⁶⁰

4. Theodicy as Vision and Praxis

John Swinton in his book *The Rage of Compassion* defines practical theodicy as “a mode of resistance that addresses issues of evil and human suffering through engagement in particular forms of specifically Christian practices that are carried individually and corporately.” The goal of such an approach is that “by practicing these gestures of redemption, to enable people to continue to love God in face of evil and suffering and in so doing prevent tragic suffering from becoming evil.”⁶¹ Swinton himself proposes the following practices as specific embodiments of the universal call to Christo-praxis:

⁵⁴Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 21.

⁵⁵Moltmann, “The Passion for Life,” 21-22.

⁵⁶Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 95.

⁵⁷Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, 86.

⁵⁸John J. O’Donnell, *Trinity and Temporality: The Christian of God in the Light of Process Theology and the Theology of Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 122-123.

⁵⁹Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 98, 96.

⁶⁰Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 224.

⁶¹John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 85.

listening to silence, lament, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, and hospitality.⁶² Moltmann could not agree more. As we have seen, it is his contention—to use Bauckham’s summary of Moltmann’s position—that any “adequate theological response to the problem of suffering must contain an initiative for overcoming suffering. If it is not to justify suffering, it must, on the contrary, help maintain the protest against suffering and convert it into an initiative for overcoming suffering.”⁶³ Such a praxis-centered impetus is clearly derived from the wider ecology of his theological convictions, here grouped under the key theological tropes of hope, solidarity, and life.

It is clear then that the theodicy question in Moltmann’s thought has undergone a significant conceptual relocation. He clearly realizes that the “discrepancy between the ‘explanatory space’ occupied by the modern theodicy, for whom theodicy is essentially a matter of making judgments, and the ‘explanatory space’ inhabited by those who seek to combat evil in all its historical manifestations”⁶⁴ is simply too great to be overlooked. We can no longer be satisfied with treating the theodicy question as a puzzle-solving exercise. By moving this perennial question, as Moltmann has done, into the realm of political praxis and spirituality, we have changed the nature of the problem, making it explicitly a religious one; a problem whose only proper articulation is to be found in the liturgies, creeds, narratives, practices, songs, and prayers of the *communio sanctorum*.

Approached from another angle, we could say that Moltmann’s theodicy rests on a rhetoric of radical *metanoia*, an act of strategic reorientation of our gaze to the reality of God as the Ground of emerging *novum*, the self-diffusive Good manifested through the nonviolent Eucharistic hospitality of the crucified Christ. Such ocular conversion—“seeing” God for who he *really* is—invites us to affirm the fundamental goodness of God as one who is for us and with us. Our God is a suffering God who took our pain into himself. He is in solidarity with us, gives us hope, and quickens us to life through the Spirit of life. To recall one of the images mentioned above, his cross is one cross among many crosses; or as Alfred N. Whitehead’s famous adage aptly puts it, “God is the companion—a fellow-sufferer who understands.”⁶⁵ Gone then is the understanding of God as an inflated and apathetic Loner, “possessing a number of clearly specifiable characteristics”⁶⁶ such as omnipotence and omniscience that then have to be brought into congruence with existing reality by inventing some forms of causality, some ways of linking suffering to God. Such reconciliatory exercises with their palette of powerful euphemisms are exposed as handy devices for ideologically tainted justifications of evil.

This reminds us of the kind of argument that David Bentley Hart is

⁶²See *ibid.*, 245.

⁶³Bauckham, 81-82.

⁶⁴Surin, 21.

⁶⁵Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 351.

⁶⁶Surin, 4-5.

pursuing in his *Doors of the Sea*,⁶⁷ where the answer to the theodicy problem—in so far as we can call it an “answer”—lies in this sort of ocular conversion.⁶⁸ The answer in question is not arrived at through some modally Leibnizian logical deduction—he after all affirms Ivan Karamazov’s “rage against explanations”—it is a matter of conversion of sight, of seeing a different world. Hart builds upon thinkers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Bonaventure, Maximus the Confessor, and Thomas Traherne in crafting his own aesthetic response to the theodicy problem, where we are cajoled and invited to view the world as suffused with God’s benevolent presence despite the reality of unrelenting evil.⁶⁹ Like Job, the Christian is schooled

to see two realities at once, one world (as it were) within another: one world as we all know it, in all its beauty and terror, grandeur and dreariness, delight and anguish; and the other the world in its first and ultimate truth, not simply “nature” but “creation,” an endless sea of glory, radiant with the beauty of God in every part, innocent of all violence. To see it this way is to rejoice and mourn at once, to regard the world as a mirror of infinite beauty, bas glimpsed through the veil of death; it is to see creation in chains, but beautiful as in the beginning of days.⁷⁰

Moltmann’s theology is fertile with conceptual resources to help us sustain precisely such a vision of cruciform Beauty.⁷¹ We could say then that theodicy on this count does not take the form of a tightly reasoned argument for the simple purpose of supplying us with a logically consistent discourse on the nature of God; the framework is not one of justification, but the conversion of “sight.” Clearly, the proper dealing with this existential aporia necessitates

⁶⁷David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁶⁸For a highly illuminative discussion of the centrality of ocular conversion, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), esp. §I. Note in particular the twofold aspect of the theological aesthetics: theology of sight and theology of rapture.

⁶⁹Miroslav Volf, dealing more specifically with memories of wrongs suffered, proposes his own version of ocular orientation, that of remembering. He reminds us that “every single Christian confession is an exercise in memory” (*The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 97.) One important way in which we are to address such memories is to juxtapose them and in turn define them in light of sacred memories such as that of identity, community, and God (96-102).

⁷⁰Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 60-61. For a helpful discussion on the consolatory power of mystical experience, see chap. 8 of Michael Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics’ God: Towards a Mystical Theodicy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

⁷¹What Hans Urs Balthasar notes about Augustine on this point is certainly true of Moltmann as well: “He . . . sees Christ’s *kenosis* as the revelation of the beauty and the fullness of God” (*The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2, *Studies in Theological Styles: Clerical Styles* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983], 123).

a discourse of personal and communal transformation. If someone like Pseudo-Dionysius, to name but one example, is correct in his claim that the correct understanding of the divine is fundamentally dependent on the spiritual and moral aptitude or receptivity of the Christian⁷²—the patristic epistemological principle of *analogia* between the knower and the known is evoked here—than we can see how an authentically Christian engagement of the theodicy question cannot itself be separated from this sort of spiritual initiation. Because “to see the world as it should be seen, and so see the true glory of God reflected in it” as a counter-resonance to the pervasive presence of evil, “requires the cultivation of charity, of an eye rendered limpid with love.”⁷³

While I could not agree more with the conjoining of this specific brand of theological aesthetics and praxis, there are still nagging questions that remain. For one, Moltmann does not tell us anything about the nature of God’s impotence, or to state it differently, the reasons for God’s nonintervention in some or most instances of human suffering. For it does not seem that Moltmann’s God cannot intervene, if by “cannot” we imply some sort of metaphysical restriction as we have it in deism, pantheism, process panentheism, or some form of open theism. That is to say, if Moltmann believes that in the coming kingdom of God all our wrenching queries will be given a satisfactory answer, we need to wonder about the sort of answer he envisions we will receive. If it is not to be found in the meta-framework of God’s inscrutable providence, or in metaphysical purification implied in Irenaeanian soul-making theodicy, or perhaps in some sort of divine self-limitation as in different variations of warfare theodicy, what is it then? While Moltmann does not need to give us an explanation—after all, as Hart rightly observes, our “Euclidian” minds are profoundly limited in grasping the nature of ultimate reality⁷⁴—he at least needs to tell us *why* it is that we don’t have an explanation. A simple fallback to practical theodicy that does not attend to this issue is an intellectual sleight of hand; it wrongly assumes that our claims to ignorance somehow make us impervious to the devastating effect of Ivan’s critique. The paradox of a compassionate, suffering, yet powerful God who is mute in the face of senseless suffering is *the* existential question we are faced with; there is nothing obscene, spiritually speaking, in struggling with this issue. In this regard, Terrence Willey’s blanket claim that traditional approaches to theodicy are to be seen as addressing “abstract individual ‘intellects’ which have purely theoretical problems of understanding evil,”⁷⁵ is an oversimplification to say the least.

⁷²See *ibid.*, 175.

⁷³Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 60.

⁷⁴See *ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁵Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, n.d.), 229. For a recent exploration of the problem of evil in modern philosophy, see the important study by Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Perhaps changing the emphasis would be more fruitful. The problem with traditional theodicy “answers” is not that they are always essentially misguided as proponents of practical theodicy tend to argue—one should resent the imputation that the search for such answers makes one somehow complicit with evil—but that they always come too early or too late when our own personal pain or the pain of those within our circle of concern is addressed. The unanswerableness of the theodicy question is thus essentially tied to our human finitude marked by an ontology of concentricity. The further “out” someone on my circles of concern is—my family, my church, my neighborhood, my city, my country, and so on—the more the emphatic pathos naturally weakens, and the more I am able to offer a general theodicy.⁷⁶ I am only really able to ask, “Why me?” or “Why my wife, child, friend?” So theodicy fails not in the sense that it doesn’t offer an good explanation—Alvin Plantinga’s free-will defense provides in my view a more-than-cogent response to the question, *Si Deus est, unde malum?*—but that I am not able to absorb it, completely anyway, at the moment when it is most needed. The reason again being that my finitude carries with it a sense that my life and the life of those I am concerned with most is somehow of exceptional value. In other words, it is not necessarily that the fallacy of theodicy is exposed for what it is in the experience of suffering—an abstract language game perhaps—but that such boundary situations seek to lay claim to and, in turn, to define God in ways I *know* him not to be.

To use an illustration here. Perhaps the “answer” that C. S. Lewis had given in the *Problem of Pain* was later rejected by him in his *A Grief Observed* as inadequate not because it was wrong, although it well might have been, but because in the wake of his wife’s struggle with cancer the “answer” could not be existentially absorbed, the way one might absorb it without qualms were we referring to the death of a completely unknown. Thus it is either the state of detachment or the state of universal unconditional attachment of which only God is capable of that makes theodicy “rational.” In other words, we are encountering a paradox where our ability to “answer” the problem of suffering is inversely correlated to empathy. Quite apart from the discussion of what “answer” is more biblically faithful than others, acknowledging the structural limitation of “answers” does not mean demonizing them or rendering them useless; it simply means allocating them their proper role, be it apologetic or otherwise. In that case, the either/or reasoning of abstract versus practical theodicy should be rejected as an unhelpful dichotomy.

These reservations aside, we feel a fair degree of indebtedness to Moltmann for the strong incentives to compassionate service his practical theodicy leaves us with. The proposed path is not easy, as it clearly pushes us beyond detached and noncommittal objectivity. It is a path of discipleship, a path of kenotic solidarity resting on the conversion of sight and heart that

⁷⁶In exceptional circumstances our altruism extends to unknown others who have been brought to the forefront our conscious. But even then the collective catharsis often moved by genuine empathy not infrequently hides guilty feelings of, “I am glad it is not me.”

constitutes the existential pathos of *imitatio Christi*. It is also rooted in the deep realization that the question of the goodness of God, conveyed in Moltmann's theology through a doxological narration of trinitarian ecstasy, is indeed the central and most fundamental question of all theology.