

## “Love of Life”—The Impact and Influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life and Thought on Jürgen Moltmann

Christine Schliesser

“My attitude towards life or what is nowadays called spirituality.” This was Jürgen Moltmann’s answer when asked what areas of his own theology he felt were most prominently impacted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>1</sup> As the interview continued, Moltmann offered Bonhoeffer the highest of praise, particularly *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which he called an “eye-opener”<sup>2</sup> in its ideas of this-worldliness, the polyphony of life, and the *cantus firmus*. What is strikingly clear, in both discussions with the author and a survey of his work, is that Bonhoeffer

1. Personal interview of the author with Jürgen Moltmann on February 08, 2013 in Tübingen. My translation.

2. Interview.

has been a steady companion on Moltmann's theological path.<sup>3</sup> Not a companion that he would always agree with. Far from that. But one that he has enjoyed interacting with, taking up some of his ideas and developing them further, while utterly rejecting others. A companion who was present at the very beginning of his theological career,<sup>4</sup> kept him company on the way—though sometimes in a silent manner<sup>5</sup>—and is still visible in Moltmann's later works.<sup>6</sup>

It seems only fitting, then, that when Moltmann himself reflected on the way his interaction with Bonhoeffer has shaped his theology, he described it not as a “theology after Bonhoeffer” or a “theology beyond Bonhoeffer,” but rather a “theology with Bonhoeffer.”<sup>7</sup>

However, Moltmann was “not impressed” following his first encounter with Bonhoeffer.<sup>8</sup> That was in Norton Camp, Nottinghamshire, in 1947, during Moltmann's three-year captivity as a POW. Moltmann had been given Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship and Life Together*—a gift to the POWs by the ecumenical commission for the

3. Bauckham's assessment therefore seems somewhat too little differentiated when he writes that Moltmann later “diverged in general from the thinking of Bonhoeffer.” Bauckham is right, however, when he writes that with regards to the teaching of the mandates “Moltmann broke with Bonhoeffer.” Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 1995), 114. Yet there surely is more of Bonhoeffer in Moltmann than Bauckham's statement implies.
4. His “first independent publication” (interview), in 1959, when Moltmann left his pastorate in northern Germany to teach at the Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal, was on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Jürgen Moltmann, *Herrschaft Christi und soziale Wirklichkeit nach Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1959). Jürgen Moltmann and Jürgen Weissbach, *Two Studies in the Theology of Bonhoeffer* (New York: Scribners, 1967), 21–94. There, Moltmann discusses extensively and critically Bonhoeffer's conception of the mandates, which, as he says, did not convince him because it was “too rigid” and “a little far-fetched” (interview). This was followed by Jürgen Moltmann, “Die Wirklichkeit der Welt und Gottes konkretes Gebot nach Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *Die mündige Welt*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1955–69), 3:42–67.
5. Müller-Fahrenholz holds that Bonhoeffer's influence on Moltmann declined with the beginning of the 1960s. Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *Phantasie für das Reich Gottes. Die Theologie Jürgen Moltmanns. Eine Einführung* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000), 27. This might be a bit too general, however. For instance, Moltmann's *Crucified God* is clearly impacted by Bonhoeffer's idea of the suffering God. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974).
6. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethik der Hoffnung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010).
7. Cf. Moltmann's reflection on Bonhoeffer's influence on him in, Jürgen Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Die Gefängnisbriefe,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffers Theologie heute. Ein Weg zwischen Fundamentalismus und Säkularismus?/Dietrich Bonhoeffers Theology Today. A Way between Fundamentalism and Secularism?*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, Stephen Plant, and Christiane Tietz (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 17–31. Opening address of the X. International Bonhoeffer Congress in Prague 2008.
8. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 18.

pastoral care of POWs in Geneva. Moltmann found the language of *Discipleship* “very churchy” and therefore for him, who had hardly any church background, little accessible.<sup>9</sup> *Life Together* was too narrow for him, who had had enough of communal life in trenches and POW camps.

It was *Letters and Papers from Prison*, published in 1951, which “hit like a bomb”: “I was thrilled, enraptured, and like liberated from my existentialist tendency towards guilt and failure, abyss, despair and loneliness. . . . Through them [*Letters and Papers from Prison*] I won a new love of life and atheology of full life. Bonhoeffer’s theology of life accompanies me until this very day.”<sup>10</sup> These words, spoken in 2008, summarize the essence of the impact and influence Bonhoeffer had on Moltmann and his theology and resemble what he says five years later.<sup>11</sup>

When looking at the evolvement of Moltmann’s theology over the past decades, there are some Bonhoeffer themes that stand out in particular. Themes, or concepts, that seem to have been especially intriguing to Moltmann. Intriguing to the degree that they keep surfacing in different contexts on subject matters as diverse as ethics, ecology, ecclesiology or his understanding of the Trinity. In the following, I will use Moltmann’s own thoughts on Bonhoeffer’s influence on him as a framework, while delineating the wider consequences these concepts have for specific areas of his theology.<sup>12</sup> Moltmann has himself described Bonhoeffer’s influence in four particular areas: (1) this-worldliness of Christianity, (2) fealty to the earth, (3) a world come of age, (4) a suffering God.<sup>13</sup>

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Cf. footnote 1.

12. Certainly, each aspect could correspond to more than one area. I have chosen to focus on the one area that I think fits best. One needs to keep in mind, however, that in Moltmann’s theological thinking the different theological topics are closely interrelated.

13. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 19. In his interview, Moltmann refers to all four aspects as well, while putting special emphasis on Bonhoeffer’s idea of this-worldliness. In his insightful essay, G. Clarke Chapman, Jr. identifies five areas which reflect or interpret Bonhoeffer’s influence on Moltmann: (1) the ultimate/penultimate distinction, (2) loyalty to the earth, (3) Christology, (4) ecclesiology, and (5) ethics. G. Clarke Chapman, Jr., “Hope and the ethics of formation: Moltmann as an interpreter of Bonhoeffer,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 12 (1983), 449–60.

### “This-Worldliness of Christianity”: Ethics<sup>14</sup>

“[F]aith’ is something whole and involves one’s whole life. Jesus calls not to a new religion but to life.”<sup>15</sup> It is this that keeps fascinating Moltmann. Like Bonhoeffer, he grew up in a secular family, though in Moltmann’s case the influence of the free-masons was prominent. And like Bonhoeffer, he has little use for theological evasions into a better afterlife. His attention belongs to the here and now. Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*, published in German in 1964 and establishing him as an internationally renowned theologian, breathes the spirit of a profound this-worldliness.<sup>16</sup> His eschatology does not put Christians off to the kingdom come, but rather encourages them to see the kingdom of God with Christ in this world. History becomes an open space full of possibility and the world becomes “history that is open to God and to the future.”<sup>17</sup>

Moltmann turns to the Old Testament and finds a God who is the God of the covenant, who reveals himself in “historical faithfulness to his promises.”<sup>18</sup> We find Moltmann here in line with Bonhoeffer who writes from prison: “By the way, I notice more and more how much I am thinking and perceiving things in line with the Old Testament.”<sup>19</sup> This leads Bonhoeffer to a new appreciation, or rather an uncompromising affirmation, of this world, an eschatology that is not beyond but has its starting place right here: “Only when one loves life and the earth so much that with it everything seems to be lost and at its end may one believe in the resurrection of the dead and a new world.”<sup>20</sup> To both Moltmann and Bonhoeffer, transcendence and immanence touch each other. In Moltmann’s words: “If in Christ God’s reality entered the world’s reality, God can only be found in the midst

14. The term “ethics” is meant here in a broad sense and refers to the concrete political and social implications of Moltmann’s theology.

15. DBWE 8, 482.

16. The impact of Bonhoeffer’s notion of this-worldliness on Moltmann is also stressed by Ton van Prooijen, *Limping but Blessed: Jürgen Moltmann’s Search for a Liberating Anthropology* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), 51ff.

17. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 93.

18. *Ibid.*, 104.

19. DBWE 8, 213.

20. *Ibid.*

of the world and not in separated religious spaces. Experiences of God take place within experiences of life."<sup>21</sup> Or as Bonhoeffer puts it: "God is the beyond in the midst of life."<sup>22</sup>

Both theologians are close in their point of departure, yet they come to different conclusions. While Bonhoeffer is hesitant to leave the realm of (Lutheran) theology,<sup>23</sup> Moltmann is far less scrupulous: "It (the promise) has not yet found its answer, and therefore draws the mind to the future, to obedient and creative expectation, and brings it into opposition to the existing reality which has not the truth in it."<sup>24</sup> Being free of much of Bonhoeffer's Lutheran "theological baggage,"<sup>25</sup> it is easier for Moltmann's theology in general and his eschatology—and ecclesiology, as we will see—in particular to embrace concrete political implications. In doing theology as "political theology,"<sup>26</sup> Moltmann opens theology up for political and social engagement. To Moltmann, it is clear that Christians take concrete (political) action against poverty, oppression, and misery.<sup>27</sup> In this sense his theology is a "theology of resistance":<sup>28</sup> "Delight in Christ's resurrection makes Christians what Christoph Blumhardt aptly called 'protest people against death.' And that includes the protest against the political and economic forces

21. Moltmann, "Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 20. My translation.

22. DBWE 8, 367.

23. Even in his famous essay on "The Church and the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer sees "to seize the wheel itself" as *ultima ratio*, a "direct political action" that would have to be legitimated by a church council first. DBWE 12, 361–70. Only later, he comes to accept free "responsible actions" for himself (DBWE 8, 46). He understood his move into active resistance, however, as an entirely personal decision, never turning it into a principle that he would require every Christian to follow.

24. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 118.

25. "Less influenced by Luther in his thinking, Moltmann also pays less attention to the law/gospel dichotomy. This frees him from much of its theological baggage: the incessant pressure of duty, the moral ambiguity of all institutions, and the need thereupon to explicate an exceptional deed that might transgress the law." Chapman, "Moltmann as an Interpreter of Bonhoeffer," 453.

26. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984); Jürgen Moltmann, ed., *How I Have Changed: Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology* (London and Valley Forge, PA: SCM, 1997); Jürgen Moltmann, ed., *Wie ich mich geändert habe* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997).

27. Here, Moltmann is inspired by Christoph Blumhardt the Younger (1842–1919), whom he calls the "spiritual father of . . . the Theology of Hope." Moltmann quotes Blumhardt: "Das Ziel Gottes ist das Diesseits. . . . Jesus ist der Trotz gegen die Armut, gegen Sünde und alles Elend. . . Die Bibel – Jesus, die Propheten und Apostel – wollen nicht eine Religion, wollen nicht das Christentum, sie wollen eine neue Welt, sie wollen die Herrschaft Gottes über alle Wirklichkeit" (Moltmann, "Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 21f.).

28. Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *The Kingdom and the Power: The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (London: SCM, 2000), 237.

which have made a covenant with death.”<sup>29</sup> Moltmann sees eye to eye with Bonhoeffer on the Christian necessity to resist evil, yet they depart when it comes to forceful or violent resistance. While for Moltmann force as part of the political engagement of the Christian is acceptable, Bonhoeffer was struggling hard to align his decision for active resistance with his understanding of discipleship and never completely freed himself of the guilt he saw inevitably connected to it.<sup>30</sup>

### “Fealty to the Earth”: Ecology

It is a characteristic of Moltmann’s theological thinking to do “theology in critical involvement in contemporary affairs,”<sup>31</sup> something he didn’t have to “learn” from Bonhoeffer, yet surely found and respected in him,<sup>32</sup> particularly in his later writings.<sup>33</sup> Moltmann is known for taking a clear position on different social and political problems, in areas as diverse as human rights, racism and sexism, nuclear threat or medical ethics. In the following, I would like to highlight one area in particular, in which Moltmann himself draws the connection to Bonhoeffer: his discussion of ecology. By publishing his *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* in 1985, Moltmann made his own contribution within the heated context of an awakening “environmental movement” in Germany. To him, Christian misinterpretation of Gen. 1:28 “Subdue the earth!” is partly responsible for the current ecological crisis: “Christian belief in creation as it has been maintained in the European and American Christianity of the Western churches is therefore not guiltless of the crisis in the world

29. Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 26f.

30. For a detailed discussion of Bonhoeffer’s attempt to theologically think through the problem of accepting guilt for the sake of the other person see Christine Schliesser, “Everyone who acts responsibly becomes guilty.” *Bonhoeffer’s Concept of Accepting Guilt* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008). To Moltmann, Bonhoeffer’s struggle with his perceived guilt is an unnecessary one, for Christians have the right to (violent) resistance.

31. “Theologie in kritischer Zeitgenossenschaft.” Michael Welker, *Theologische Profile. Schleiermacher, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann* (Frankfurt: Edition Chrismon, 2009), 261.

32. Moltmann describes Bonhoeffer as a typical and significant martyr of our times, along with Paul Schneider and Oscar Arnulfo Romero. Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 202f.

33. Bonhoeffer discusses current events particularly in his *Ethics*. There we find, for instance, his critique of the Nazi euthanasia program (DBWE 6, 190ff.).

today.”<sup>34</sup> In his attempt to provide an alternative, he finds inspiration in Bonhoeffer. In his 1932 lecture in Barcelona on “Your kingdom come,”<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer proclaims boldly that only they “who love the Earth and God as one, can believe in God’s kingdom.”<sup>36</sup> Praying for God’s kingdom is fused together with “fealty to the Earth, to misery, to hunger, to death.”<sup>37</sup> Moltmann not only appreciates Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on “the most profound solidarity with the world” rather than on one’s “own salvation,”<sup>38</sup> but also his reasoning behind it. “It is remarkable that Bonhoeffer does not think here of the incarnation as he does in his *Ethics*, but rather of the resurrection on earth and that he binds the kingdom of God to the earth by equating it with the resurrection.”<sup>39</sup> Moltmann very much agrees with Bonhoeffer that the Christian hope of resurrection is defined by the fact that it “refers people to their life on earth, in a wholly new way.”<sup>40</sup> As Chapman comments, “This balance of hope and ethics, ‘prayer and righteous action,’<sup>41</sup> the arcane discipline and worldly life, is a most important legacy of Bonhoeffer to Moltmann.”<sup>42</sup> Though, one might add, the concrete visions of how this “righteous action” and this “worldly life” should look like often differed.<sup>43</sup>

Moltmann then takes Bonhoeffer’s reasoning one step further and sets it in the context of the ecological crisis. To him, it is precisely these different forms of religious escapism from the world, the denial of our “fealty to the earth,” which are responsible for the devastation of nature and climate disasters. Even though Bonhoeffer was not aware of the ecological crisis, Moltmann utilizes these aspects in his thinking to provide both an explanation of and a possible way out of humans’

34. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 21.

35. DBWE 12, 285–97.

36. *Ibid.*, 286.

37. *Ibid.*, 289.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Bonhoeffer,” 23f. My translation.

40. DBWE 8, 447.

41. The new translation now has: “prayer and doing justice among human beings” (DBWE 8, 389).

42. Chapman, “Moltmann as an Interpreter of Bonhoeffer,” 452f.

43. One example of their different perspectives is their view on the state. Moltmann, being an avid defender of a strong democratic system, has little sympathy for Bonhoeffer’s insistence on a clear “above” and “below.” DBWE 6, 391ff. This is part of the reason why Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* in general could not convince him (Interview).

earth- and, ultimately, self-destructive practices. “The new ecological doctrines of creation, ecological feminism and the Gaia hypothesis of earth as one living organism are major progresses on the way to attain Bonhoeffer’s ‘fealty to the earth’ under today’s circumstances.”<sup>44</sup>

### **“A World Come of Age” and “Religionless Christianity”: Ecclesiology**

Of all of Bonhoeffer’s writings, it is his *Letters and Papers from Prison* that Moltmann appreciates most. He appreciates in particular the fact that Bonhoeffer takes the reader along on a journey with uncertain outcome. It is the participation in an open movement with questions rather than fixed answers that makes Bonhoeffer “so interesting” to Moltmann,<sup>45</sup> possibly because it corresponds to his own way of doing theology.<sup>46</sup>

Moltmann is also very critical of some of the ideas developed in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. According to Moltmann, Bonhoeffer was wrong both in his prediction of our world having come of age and of a religionless modernity. Bonhoeffer wrongly transfers the idea of individual developmental progress to the development of humanity.<sup>47</sup> The dictatorships of the twentieth century show clearly how very little “of age” people have become. As for Bonhoeffer’s false diagnosis of a religionless modernity, Moltmann maintains that rather than becoming “religionless,” “religious yearning for redemption” is en vogue while we are also being threatened by “religious fundamentalism.”<sup>48</sup>

Moltmann is intrigued, however, by Bonhoeffer’s idea of

44. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 25. My translation. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, “Die Erde und die Menschen. Zum theologischen Verständnis der Gaja-Hypothese,” *Evangelische Theologie* 53 (1999): 420–37.

45. Interview.

46. “From the beginning, to me theology has been an adventure with an uncertain ending, an expedition of ideas into an inviting mystery. My theological virtue has not been humility, but rather curiosity and imagination for the kingdom of God.” Moltmann, *Wie ich mich geändert habe*, 30. My translation.

47. Moltmann calls this idea, a little ungraciously, “nonsense” (interview). Cf. also Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 28.

48. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 28.

“religionless Christianity” and his call for a “nonreligious” hermeneutics of biblical terminology. He himself is openly critical of “the return of religion” in our age,<sup>49</sup> particularly when understood in a one-sided redemptive manner and exclusively or predominantly oriented towards the great beyond. His own interpretation of this “worldly” hermeneutics—that Bonhoeffer never finished explicating in detail—is a political one. Moltmann points us to the kingdom of God, a primary category for Moltmann’s entire theology. As Müller-Fahrenholz notes, “‘Kingdom of God’ is the basic symbol for the eschatological dimension which shapes his [Moltmann’s] theology.”<sup>50</sup> To Moltmann, the kingdom of the coming God has an essentially political and critical power. It is synonymous with the “kingdom of freedom,” aimed at liberating the oppressed and suffering, thereby characterizing Moltmann’s theology as a “*single great exploratio liberationis Dei*.”<sup>51</sup> With regards to the challenge of a nonreligious Biblical message this means: “‘Religionless Christianity’ is consequently a discipleship of Christ, which is directed politically towards the kingdom of God and his justice on this earth.”<sup>52</sup> Moltmann thus employs Bonhoeffer as a warrantor for an interpretation of the kingdom of God that implies direct and concrete political and social consequences.<sup>53</sup> He pours this into the formula: “Non-religious hermeneutics of the Gospel is its political hermeneutics.”<sup>54</sup> While from within Moltmann’s train of thought this certainly is both stringent and plausible, one wonders, however, in how far this is still in conformity with Bonhoeffer’s own line of thinking. As has been seen above, Bonhoeffer’s own visions of concrete consequences from his theology, particularly with regards to the political sphere, could be rather different from Moltmann’s suggestions. It seems here, therefore, that Moltmann’s political interpretation of a nonreligious hermeneutics

49. *Ibid.*

50. Müller-Fahrenholz, *Theology of Moltmann*, 221.

51. *Ibid.*, 222.

52. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 27.

53. According to Bauckham, Moltmann “developed his concern for social ethics and the church’s involvement in secular society” from Bonhoeffer as well (as from Ernst Wolf). Bauckham, *Theology of Moltmann*, 2.

54. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 27.

might be a little more in the line of “theology beyond Bonhoeffer” than “theology with Bonhoeffer.”

What are now the implications of “religionless Christianity” for Moltmann’s understanding of “the Christian” and the “Christian institution” par excellence, the church? Moltmann utilizes here Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on Christ not bringing a new religion into the world but life. Through Christ, we become not only Christians, but—maybe more importantly—humans.<sup>55</sup> “Christian existence is the truly human, come of age, and responsible existence in the midst of the conflicts of this world.”<sup>56</sup> This has consequences for Moltmann’s understanding of the church as well. In his ecclesiology, he both utilizes as well as sets himself apart from Bonhoeffer. Moltmann has little regard for Bonhoeffer’s early ecclesiology as laid out in his *Sanctorum Communio*.<sup>57</sup> But even the later Bonhoeffer’s well-known phrase “the church is church only when it is there for others”<sup>58</sup> provokes Moltmann’s objection: “It begins with the church being *with* the world and *then* one can be *for* the world.”<sup>59</sup> Bonhoeffer’s understanding of deputyship (*Stellvertretung*), developed from Christology and applied to people being with each other, is too hierarchical for Moltmann. It reminds him of Bonhoeffer’s admiration of the squire of his time, who takes good care of his servants, yet certainly is not with them.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, Moltmann’s own ecclesiology

55. DBWE 8, 486.

56. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 28.

57. Quite different from his friend Michael Welker, Moltmann describes *Sanctorum Communio* as a dated sociological approach that might have been adequate in the 1930s/1940s, yet has little relevance for Germany after World War II (Interview).

58. DBWE 8, 503.

59. Interview. Moltmann illustrates this with an example from his own five-year experience as a pastor in a Northern-German village: “If a pastor is only for his congregation but not with his congregation, he cannot achieve anything. . . . You first have to play cards with the farmers and then they will listen to you. . . . ‘I don’t want to owe you anything,’ they say. So when you ask them: ‘Is there anything I can do for you?’ they would usually say ‘no.’ That is why you first have to be with them and then you can be for them” (Interview).

60. Moltmann is surely right that Bonhoeffer was no staunch defender of democracy, to say the least, but rather favored a society clearly structured by different stands. Yet while “elitist” (interview) by birth and education, Bonhoeffer was later forced to join those “below,” as he himself describes. “It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering” (DBWE 8, 52). When Bonhoeffer wrote of the church’s necessity to be for the other

employs friendship as a fundamental category. Church is the “fellowship of the friends of Jesus.”<sup>61</sup> Friendship, for Moltmann, has ecclesiological-ecumenical as well as ethical and spiritual dimensions,<sup>62</sup> which take shape for one in ecumenicity, understood as an expression of friendship: “True and lasting ecumenical unity will be lived on the basis of united endurance and shared suffering.”<sup>63</sup> Friendship is also expressed in worship, a feast of “joy in the freedom of Christ”<sup>64</sup> and of “encouraging the liberations of this world.”<sup>65</sup> Ecclesiology is, of course, only one area of the vast field of theology in which Moltmann’s strong social and egalitarian convictions<sup>66</sup> shine through<sup>67</sup> in marked contrast to Bonhoeffer.

### “Suffering God”: The Doctrine of the Trinity<sup>68</sup>

Bonhoeffer had nothing at all to do with my *Theology of Hope*. . . . Nor with my Christology [*The Way of Jesus Christ*]. . . . I learned a lot from Bonhoeffer with *The Crucified God*: “Only the suffering God can help.”<sup>69</sup>

Moltmann’s theology is shaped by his experiences of the horrors of World War II. When, during the firestorm of Hamburg, a bomb tore apart his best friend standing next to him, it was the cry “My God, where are you?” which imprinted itself on Moltmann and his theology

in 1944, it seems that his perspective had changed in some way from a hierarchical squire’s mentality to that of being with those “below” him. One wonders if Moltmann takes Bonhoeffer’s own change of perspective adequately into account.

61. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Open Church, Invitation to a Messianic Life-Style* (London: SCM, 1978), 60.

62. Cf. Müller-Fahrenholz, *Theology of Moltmann*, 116.

63. Moltmann, *The Open Church*, 89.

64. *Ibid.*, 71.

65. *Ibid.*, 72.

66. This leads Moltmann to a concrete institutional critique of the church, not only but also within the German context: “The more the Protestant churches turn from being state- and people-churches [Staats- und Volkskirchen] to free churches, the clearer their witness of peace to the world will be.” Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethik der Hoffnung*, 230. My translation.

67. Another prominent field is Moltmann’s understanding of the Trinity—his “social doctrine of the Trinity.” Moltmann, *Trinity*, 35. Here, he draws deeply from the orthodox idea of *perichoresis* and works out its critical potential with regards to hierarchical structures, for instance, in politics or marriage and family.

68. For different dimensions of Moltmann’s understanding of the Trinity see Michael Welker and Miroslav Volf (eds.), *Der lebendige Gott als Trinität* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), and Daniel Munteanu, *Der tröstende Geist der Liebe. Zu einer ökumenischen Lehre vom Heiligen Geist über die trinitarischen Theologien Jürgen Moltmanns und Dumitru Stăniloae* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2003).

69. Interview.

up to this day. Faced with the challenge of a theology after Auschwitz, the question of theodicy is never too far away for Moltmann. And he finds one answer in Bonhoeffer. For it is only in Bonhoeffer—from within the whole of German theology of the nineteenth and twentieth century—that Moltmann finds the idea of a suffering God.<sup>70</sup> “God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us.”<sup>71</sup>

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann approaches the cross, not from the question of its salvific potential in the one crucified for us, but from the question of what the cross means to/for God. Inspired by Jewish theologians such as Franz Rosenzweig, Moltmann finds in the concept of the divine *schechina* a model of thinking of God as companion and fellow sufferer.<sup>72</sup> “God’s being is in suffering and suffering in God’s being itself. Why? Because ‘God is love.’”<sup>73</sup> God’s suffering is as encompassing as God’s love. “That is the only way in which the question of theodicy can be endured, as it cannot be answered.”<sup>74</sup>

Moltmann’s perception of the suffering God cannot be properly understood apart from his social understanding of the Trinity. God is not a “lonely Lord of heaven” but the triune God is rather “a communal God, rich in inner and outer relations.”<sup>75</sup> Moltmann’s *theologia crucis*, therefore, is always to be understood in a Trinitarian manner: God suffers the death of his son.

God’s suffering has several aspects. Because love and suffering are inseparable in God and because love always longs for the beloved, God’s love is suffering as long as the beloved, God’s creation, is not yet

70. Anglican theology in England from 1860 has brought forth a fruitful discussion concerning God’s capability to suffer. Since Bonhoeffer was a pastor in England from 1933 until 1935, Moltmann supposes that his time there brought him into contact with the notion of a suffering God. Moltmann, “Theologie mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 29.

71. DBWE 8, 479. To Bonhoeffer, “the idea that God himself is suffering has always been one of the most convincing teachings of Christianity.”

72. Moltmann’s concept of the suffering God also brings him into contact with liberation theology, black theology, the Minjung-theology of South Korea, as well as with Kazoh Kitamori’s notion of the “pain of God” in Japan.

73. Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 230.

74. Müller-Fahrenholz, *Theology of Moltmann*, 144.

75. Moltmann, *Erfahrungen theologischen Denkens*, 271. My translation.

reconciled with God. God therefore not only suffers the death of God's son, God also "suffers with and for the world."<sup>76</sup>

God's suffering has an anthropological dimension as well: "liberated men and women suffer with God and for him."<sup>77</sup> Here, one is immediately reminded of Bonhoeffer's well-known poem "Christians and Heathens": "People go to God when God's in need, find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread, see God devoured by sin, weakness, and death. Christians stand by in God's own pain."<sup>78</sup> This in turn carries an ethical dimension for Moltmann. People not only "go to God when God's in need," they also go to their fellow humans in their suffering. Moltmann's understanding of the cross contains concrete ethical—and ecclesiological—implications: The churches ought to cut their ties with the powerful and enter into solidarity with "those who, in their society, are visibly living in the shadow of the cross: the poor, the handicapped, the people society has rejected, the prisoners and the persecuted."<sup>79</sup> Put more pointedly, it is exactly in the poor that we find the coming Christ expecting us.<sup>80</sup> This demonstrates very nicely how closely the different areas of theology are interrelated to Moltmann, in this case ethics and ecclesiology. It is in this manner, therefore, that we need to understand his formula "*Ubi Christus—ibi Ecclesia*."<sup>81</sup>

There is one more aspect that sets Moltmann in a—although rather loose—connection to Bonhoeffer here. Moltmann's wrestling with the problem of theodicy awakens his interest in the mystical experience of God as the "dark night of the soul."<sup>82</sup> Though neither Bonhoeffer nor Moltmann would describe themselves as mystics,<sup>83</sup> both knew of the terrifying experience of being left alone by God. "The prison cell of the martyr and the cloister cell of the mystic are not very different."<sup>84</sup>

76. Moltmann, *Trinity*, 60.

77. *Ibid.*

78. DBWE 8, 461.

79. Moltmann, *The Open Church*, 97.

80. Matt. 25:35–36, 40. Moltmann, *The Open Church*, 126.

81. Moltmann, *The Open Church*, 121ff.

82. Moltmann, *Wie ich mich geändert habe*, 28.

83. For a discussion of the mystical element in Moltmann's theology see Müller-Fahrenholz, *Theology of Moltmann*, 230–44.

84. Moltmann, *Wie ich mich geändert habe*, 29. My translation.

### “Love of Life”

With the exception of his dissertation, which he wrote when he was mere 21, and his *habilitation*, which he simply wrote too fast in just one semester when he was 23, Bonhoeffer has fascinated me more than Karl Barth.<sup>85</sup>

Of one who for a while thought that theology after Karl Barth is no longer possible—because everything had been said and had been said so well<sup>86</sup>—this is quite an exceptional statement. Yet one should not overestimate the impact and influence of Bonhoeffer on Moltmann, either. Moltmann is too multifaceted, too creative himself to be tied down. Or, as he himself says: “I drink from many springs.”<sup>87</sup> There are certainly areas in Moltmann’s theology that reveal Bonhoeffer’s signature overtly, while others take more effort to decipher. It seems only fitting to let Moltmann himself have the last word: “It is love of life that connects me to Bonhoeffer very much.”<sup>88</sup>

85. Interview.

86. Moltmann, *Wie ich mich geändert habe*, 25.

87. Interview.

88. *Ibid.*