2

The Costs of a Moltmannian Theological Hope

The legacy of Moltmann's theological hope abides as a contemporary doctrine, loosely articulated and broadly accepted. The broad outlines of his eschatological hope shape the presuppositions and imaginations of many theologians, clergy, and lay Christians, including some who have never engaged with his work directly. I have identified the legacy of Moltmann's theology of hope as *Moltmannian*, because it reflects his work, at least indirectly, even though it does not attend to all of the particulars of his theological scholarship. When this Moltmannian hope constitutes the exclusive resource for eschatological hope, the costs are great.

Moltmann offers Christians fresh access to theological hope, timely reconsiderations of hope in the midst of suffering, and an eschatology that embraces the future new creation of this world. His theology meets contemporary Christians where they stand with a way to reconnect with God, eschatology, and hope. Moltmannian hope demonstrates that connection through support for ecclesial commitments to inclusivity, ministry to those in need, care for the environment, resistance to injustice, and active reconstructions of social structures. Moltmannian hope reflects Moltmann's theology as it affirms efforts to rescue and sustain this world in preparation for God's transforming arrival. Moltmannian hope encourages freedom from the constraints of closed hierarchical institutions and political systems; it redirects people from the distractions of apocalyptic and other-worldly end-times speculation; and it authorizes detachment from doctrine that might seem inappropriate for today. It prioritizes action over theory, cooperates with secular social activism, and provides an

appealing and relevant way to make sense of eschatological hope in contemporary circumstances. Moltmann draws together resurrection life and the trinitarian God with the new creation of the known world, to produce an eschatological hope that has been appreciatively adopted, adapted, and embraced. The decisive mark of Moltmannian hope's widespread popularity is its ideological normativity; Christians teach, preach, and presume a Moltmannian theological hope, even when they have no conscious awareness of Moltmann's scholarly influence.

Despite the appeal of Moltmannian hope, an exclusive embrace of this hope renders largely invisible many rich theological resources, the reasons for their dismissal, and possible rebuttals to that dismissal. Almost fifty years into the era of Moltmann-influenced hope, many Christians have lost track of those aspects of hope that Moltmann drops to make room for his construction of a relevant hope for the post-Auschwitz twentieth century. Moltmann's negative appraisals of church teachings about hope are now comfortably familiar; and yet, his critiques and reconstructions do not all stand up to examination. His readings of doctrine are at times uncharitable, inattentive to systematic theological context, and narrowed by his modern and ecclesial investments. When Christians accept uncritically Moltmann's theological discernments, they lose contact with a wealth of wisdom about life lived in eschatological hope. Responses to Moltmann's theological constraints and to Moltmannian presuppositions abound within Christian tradition and doctrine; but if those responses are not acknowledged or consulted, they are not accessible as resources. Hope loses strength and fortitude.

Moltmann's scholarship features constructive work on theological loci. He challenges and often leaves behind the theological teachings with which he disagrees. He does not invest his efforts in doctrinal continuity in difference. Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson observe that

> by his own confession Moltmann intends his theology to be "biblically founded, eschatologically oriented, and politically responsible." However his methodology is somewhat more complex. In fact, there is reason to doubt whether he has a coherent theological method in any traditional sense. This lack of systematic approach arises partly from his lack of interest in correct doctrine. "I am not so concerned with pure theory but with practical theory." He sees the task of theology not so much as to provide an interpretation of the world as to transform it in the light of hope for its ultimate transformation by God.[1]

1. Grenz and Olson, 20*th Century*, 175.

Moltmann works to transform the world in the light of hope from the midst of his particular situatedness in twentieth- and twenty-first-century modernity; and his theology both reflects and speaks to the modern imagination.[2] There is no single, agreed-upon list of characteristics from which to discern the theological sensibilities of modernity. For the present purpose, I note three: newness, the authority of experience, and stand-alone biblical hermeneutics.[3]

Moltmann's initial writing on hope in 1965 celebrated the new and the future.[4] Over the course of Moltmann's scholarship, his focus of hope shifted from the completely other eschatology of radical newness to a more continuous development of new upon new. (Moltmannian hope now reflects this later emphasis.) In 1969, Moltmann emphasized the discontinuity between history and the new creation: "If, for the sake of this God, Christians hope for the future, they hope for a *novum ex nihilo*."[5] In 1979, he argued for a balance of eschatological otherness, distinct from history, and a continuum of history and the eschatological completion of history.

> The more faith interprets Christian transcendence eschatologically, the more it will understand the boundary of immanence historically and give itself up to the movement of transcending. But the more it interprets this eschatological transcendence in Christian terms—that is, with its eyes on the crucified Jesus—the more it will become conscious that the qualitatively new future of God has allied itself with those who are dispossessed, denied and downtrodden at the present day; so that this future does not begin up at the spearheads of progress in a "progressive society," but down below, among society's victims. It will have to

2. In Moltmann's earliest work, he sets out to establish connections between secular modernity and the contemporary church. He tries to legitimize each one to the other, so that theological hope can be relevant and recognizable in the twentieth century. In his later work, he presents his theology as more resistant to and critical of modernity, while continuing to sustain a hope that addresses the current circumstances of Christianity, but popular Moltmannian hope has not received those nuances.

3. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology* and *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?*, describes the priority of the new, and addresses the detachment of biblical interpretation from pre-modernity in *Faithful Interpretation*, 11–36. Rossi addresses modernity's construction of the authority of experience in "The Authority of Experience."

4. Moltmann, *Theology.*

5. Moltmann, *Religion,* 171; Neal, *Theology,* 211.

> link hope for the eschatological future with a loving solidarity with the depressed.[6]

In 1996, Moltmann described a continual progression from history to its end (which is its beginning): "Raising [of the dead] is not a new creation; it is a new creating of this same mortal life for the life that is eternal."[7] In 2007, he noted that Jewish and Christian belief looks to redemption *of*, not *from*, the world we already inhabit. "Christ doesn't lead people in the afterlife of religious escapism or flight from the world, but gives them back to the earth as her faithful people."[8] Hope leans toward the newest version of the now we know.

Moltmann consistently prioritizes the new in his readiness to dismiss older theology at will; only those doctrines that support his theology of hope warrant attention. Moltmannian hope readily sets aside wisdom of the past in favor of the new. Moltmannian hope detaches itself from what it understands to be the outdated and mistaken theology of hope offered by the classical tradition. It also detaches itself from Moltmann's concerns about secular hope and instead elides eschatological hope with the popular modern model of hope in steady improvement. Eschatological hope thus manifests as the expectation of a continuing trajectory from new improvements to an even newer and divinely-improved version of this creation here on earth. The particular character of modern newness embraced by Moltmannian hope entails an ever-developing, new-and-improved version of the present: things are getting better every day.

Moltmannian hope's priority of the future illustrates an extreme form of modernity's focus on time and its life-determining force. The future establishes hope and gives the past and present meaning. History gains importance through its incorporation into the future; the present is empty without the presence of the future. This future is not detached from current time; Moltmann corrects the "understandable misconception" of the Apostles' Creed that imagines Christ in heaven, "waiting for a time when he will all at once 'come again' to judge the living and the dead. That is the picture behind the saying about Christ's 'coming again.'"[9] Instead, Moltmann argues, "if we talk about 'Christ's coming,' then he is already in the process of coming, and in the power of hope we open ourselves today with all our senses for the experiences of his arrival. By arrival we mean a

6. Moltmann, *Future,* 17.
7. Moltmann, *Coming,* 75; Neal, *Theology,* 211.
8. Moltmann, "Presence," 587.
9. Moltmann, *End,* 88.

future which is already present, yet without ceasing to be the future. 'Jesus is in the process of coming.'"[10] The image of being in process matches contemporary expectations of personal, economic, and social development.

Rossing reflects Moltmannian hope's commitment to a particular understanding of time when she argues against the end-time theology of Rapture movements, in favor of God's continuing time. Sermons that stress hope for the future—in our children, social service, or care for the environment—often cast that hope in the context of an eschatological future, such that human efforts now will facilitate the arrival of a future that elides historical future with eschatological future. Throughout a Moltmannian theology of hope, the future claims priority as the end (although it does not itself actually end) and the beginning, and it shares in the agency of change for God and for creation.

Future-determined hope suggests that the God of hope is defined by the future and God's participation in time. The church's understanding that God is out of time and yet works within time thus gives way to an understanding of God bound by time who brings the future to a future-oriented humanity. One cost of that shift is that hope loses the assurance of a God not driven by time's limitations, not daunted by current events or future catastrophe, and not pressured by the ticking clock of earth's demise. Hope loses the open possibilites and unknowable mysteries of an eschatology shaped by the imagination of God, the creator of time who is therefore not contained in time.

Modernity's focus on newness depletes the resources for eschatological hope, by downgrading the past presentations of theological hope from the cumulative wisdom of the church to unnecessary preambles. The priority of new hope turns God's fulfilled promises to the people of Israel and Christ's resurrection into affirmations that God *will* fulfill the promises. The continually progressing, upward trajectory of hope displaces the circular, cyclical ecclesial year, in which the hope of the resurrection is celebrated on Easter and in every eucharist, and the hope of the eternal life of Christ is nurtured by participation in the liturgical year. The ongoing progression of the new toward the even newer overshadows hope in an eternal life that is entirely of God, for whom nothing is new or old.

The authority of experience stands as another marker of modernity that characterizes Moltmannian hope. Moltmann's theology of hope grows from his own particular experience of sharing with God the experience suffering abandonment; and that experience determines, includes,

10. Ibid., 89.

absorbs his own identity and God's. His experience of suffering with God who suffers defines God's experience on the terms of his experience, and that experience resonates with a broad societal sense of loss. In this account, divine experience is close enough to human experience that it can be shared and understood as a shared experience. Moltmann explains that "if a person once feels the infinite passion of God's love which finds expression here, then he understands the mystery of the triune God. God suffers with us—God suffers from us—God suffers for us: it is this experience of God that reveals the true God."[11] Moltmann here refers to the whole of the Trinity, and in so doing he has, as Paul Molnar observes, "blurred the distinction between human experience and God's experience."[12] Who God is and what God can do fits within the realm of human experience. Moltmannian hope affirms personal experience and grants authority of that experience over the wisdom and guidance of some teachers and teachings.

There are some drawbacks to claiming the revelatory authority of this particular experience of theological hope. People who do not share the experience Moltmann describes evidently do not have access to knowledge of the true God. All other knowledge of God, which is to say, all other experiences of God, do not receive the same stamp of authority. This revelation is confined to those who share (or desire to share) the particular experience of suffering as described. The description becomes a definition; experiences of hope in God that do not feature God's suffering are suspect. God's transcendence is scaled down to fit within the sphere of human experience; and without a sense of God's radical transcendence, human experience determines the possibilities of hope. Moltmann's revelatory experience exemplifies the modern sense that personal identity contains experience, even when the experience is an encounter with God. Philip Rossi draws on K. Schmitz's work on interiority to illustrate this containment: "Schmitz contends that modern understandings of subjectivity and interiority 'yield only a muted sense of trans-human reality and a muffled transcendence' inasmuch as 'various post-Cartesian strategies have absorbed reality into the horizon of subjectivity, giving us at best a shadowy and indeterminate transcendence.' As a result, any 'positive appreciation of transcendent depth and breadth. . .must capitulate to human terms and be absorbed and refracted into the horizon of human immanence before it is acceptable.'"[13] When hope is founded on proscribed

11. Moltmann, *Trinity*, 4.
12. Molnar, "Function," 684.
13. Rossi, "Authority," 275.

individual experiences of shared suffering with God, God's transcendence is lessened to fit within human experience, and the people who do not have or desire those particular experiences are excluded from the sphere of recognized eschatological hope.

Moltmann's biblical hermeneutics stands as a third modernity marker, as it displays some of the effects of modernity's prioritization of the new and (a particular sort of) experience. Moltmann's theological work coincides with an explosion of biblical interpretation methods: from textual, form, redaction, and literary criticism to structural, narrative, feminist, and postmodern criticism; however, he does not claim involvement in or debt to any particular method. He draws on some of these, but his interpretations chiefly reflect his new insights and his experience of God's love through shared suffering. Moltmann eschews those passages about law, gender, final judgment, and eschatology that apparently conflict with his theology of hope.[14] A new-and-now, experience-supported approach to interpretation cannot account for multiple senses, multiple interpretations of scripture, challenging biblical passages, or challenging biblical interpreters.

Moltmannian hope follows Moltmann's appreciation of Old Testament passages that speak of God in anthropomorphic terms. Moltmann's theological attention to such passages complements the work of Terence Fretheim and Open Theism theologians who consider anew biblical indications that God does indeed change. Christian doctrine has long grappled with the wide range of biblical accounts of God, the interpretations thereof, and the ramifications for theological hope. Moltmannian hope that takes as given recent support for a God of lessened transcendence and increased suffering misses out on centuries of debate and discernment.[15]

14. For example, Moltmann cannot make sense of Matthew's description of the last judgment. The idea that the Son of Man would send some people to eternal punishment and others to eternal life does not fit his theology of hope, in which the coming future brings new creation to humanity without punitive judgment; so he cannot accept the plain sense. He cannot discern a metaphorical sense for this separation, either. As a result, Moltmann downplays the sheep and goats image and Jesus' pronouncement of separation, in favor of the exhortation to care for the needy, in whom Christ is present. See *Coming,* 165, 250–51.

15. More than twenty-five years ago, John Barton expressed concerns about Moltmann's language for God, noting his fear that "Moltmann has not registered sufficiently that he is making some extraordinarily bold moves by applying to God terms such as 'suffering,' 'history' or 'experience.' It is difficult to escape the impression that Moltmann finds talk of God fundamentally unproblematic" ("Moltmann," 6). Since then, Moltmann's bold moves have become normative. Moltmannian hope

Moltmannian hope supports its characterization of God with an incoherent hermeneutical practice of selective literalism. The God of Moltmannian hope is affective, loving, sometimes moved to anger and disappointment with creation, but primarily responsive, compassionate, and restorative. This characterization of God comes from specific biblical passages, interpreted literally. Of course, no biblical literalism is consistently literal; readers always need to make the same sorts of discernments they make every day with spoken and non-spoken interactions. Concurrently, no biblical interpretation avoids some degree of plain-sense assessment. Moltmannian readers of scripture, like most other readers, make sense of what they read through combinations of plain sense, metaphor, allegory, community formation, and pre-existing expectations; yet Moltmannian readers often claim the authority of their interpretations based on "what the text says." As noted in the previous chapter, when Barbara Rossing argues for the authority of her interpretation of Revelation, in correction of Rapture eschatology's interpretation, she claims that what she is saying is *in* the Bible.[16] She does not, however, offer an explanation for the fact that the fundamentalist literalist Christians she opposes authorize their interpretations the same way. Attempts to cancel out one literalism with another reflect an ill-considered hermeneutics.

Moltmann adopts (without claiming) a literalist translation of many passages of the Old Testament that use anthropomorphic descriptions of God's feelings and actions in time and in responsive relationship with God's people; he understands God in the Gospels to take on human suffering. Moltmann argues that the passionate and compassionate God feels the pain of a father abandoning his son on the cross, feels the pain of the son abandoned by his father, and then feels the suffering of humanity as well.

Moltmannian hope that follows Moltmann's hermeneutics and ties itself to his particular interpretation of the character of God retains hope in a largely anthropomorphic image of a God of love. Moltmann does make a distinction between God's feelings and human feelings (as noted in chapter 1), but his literal account of some biblical passages—and the authority he grants that account— gives the impression that God is moved

now presumes that biblical accounts of the God of hope can be unproblematically understood in a plain sense interpretation (when that interpretation supports God's passionate experience of suffering).

16. Rossing, "Prophecy," 562.

by feelings the way people are and that God is buffeted by emotions the way people are.

Moltmannian hope appreciates scriptural presentations of God that describe God as loving, kind, merciful, fair, and gentle; it rejects understandings of God as sovereign and almighty, preferring instead God who shares power and weakness with humanity. John Sanders, an Openness theologian strongly influenced by Moltmann, advocates a God who takes risks, who exposes Godself to vulnerability for the sake of a particular kind of give-and-take relationship with humans. Sanders describes

> a personal God who enters into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures. Neither an impersonal deity nor a personal deity who meticulously controls every event takes risk. The portrait of God developed here is one according to which God sovereignly wills to have human persons become collaborators with him in achieving the divine project of mutual relations of love. Such an understanding of the divine-human relationship may be called "relational theism." By this I mean any model of the divine-human relationship that includes genuine give-and-take relations between God and humans such that there is a receptivity and a degree of contingency in God. In give-and-take relationships God receives and does not merely give.[17]

Sanders argues that we learn about what God is like and how to speak of God through metaphorical and anthropomorphic language of the Bible[18]; and he objects to representations of God as sovereign (impassible and immutable), and non-contingent.[19] According to Sanders, God listens, responds, and changes in response to prayers; an impassible God would mean "there is no place for imprecatory prayer."[20]

Sanders sees different interpretations of scriptural passages about God in terms of different models of God: the best model affords the best

17. Sanders, *Risks*, 12.

18. Ibid., 15.

19. Sanders cites James' exhortations to submit to God, rather than to internal conflicts and external disputes: "You do not have, because you do not ask" (4:2). According to Sanders, this passage makes no sense within a model of the sovereign God who does not listen and change course in response to prayers: "if the God of specific sovereignty wanted you to have it, then he would ensure that you asked for it." James' next sentence could be understood as clarifying the previous: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures" (4:3). However, Sanders reads that to mean that "we sometimes petition God from wrong motives and so we do not receive" (ibid., 270–71).

20. Ibid., 271.

interpretation, and scripture supports the best model. Sanders' hermeneutical approach presents a portrait of God similar to the God of Moltmannian hope, and Sanders provides a more explicit narrative of his method of interpretation. However, while Sanders recognizes different interpretations, he does not accept the possibility that scriptural passages about God may point to divine characteristics and actions through radically different metaphors.

Without a framework, or a grammar, for making sense of scriptural assertions about God and God's actions, Moltmannian hope relies on an unarticulated and unaccountable determination of what scripture "really means." The authority of Moltmannian hope rests on an idiosyncratic hermeneutic determined more by ideology and preference than by a narratable connection with the rest of scripture and the rest of scriptural interpretation. A hermeneutics without patience for making sense of apparently conflicting scriptural assertions about God makes no room for the memory of communities who have adopted scriptural passages and claimed them as their own, through interpretations specific to their immediate crises and faithful to the trusted interpreters who precede them.[21] When passages are rejected from scripture, hope can be relinquished along with the verses. A passage that seems inappropriate today might seem a welcome resource in radically changed circumstances. God's constant presence continues to provide hope regardless of the limits of human perception and imagination.

The content and method of Moltmann's scholarship trickle down into Moltmannian hope such that adherents see no reason to reconsider the possible value of the doctrine he has set aside. The first cost of a Moltmannian theology of hope is the loss of *interest* in making connections with previous and differing claims taught and received by the church across time and geography. Further doctrinal costs include: God's impassibility, Jesus Christ's two natures, heaven beyond this world, theocentric anthropology, and discipleship. When hope is difficult to sustain, and when the resources of hope are chiefly provided by one, narrowed, theological account, it is time to pay attention to what is lost.

21. I recently heard an Episcopal preacher explain to the congregation that the gospel reading from Matthew 24 did not belong with the truth about the God he knows. He was unhappy with the images of God gleaning the people from the fields, entering homes like a thief in the night, causing weeping and gnashing of teeth. He pronounced: "This is not a God I can believe in." He encouraged the congregation to join him in excising the passage from the Bible; and he continued with a description of the God he can accept, who is gentler, more inclusive, less judgmental.

Lost: Divine Impassibility and Perfect Compassion

Moltmannian hope rests on the belief that God shares human suffering in loving compassion and in response to human need and prayer. This hope assumes that God must be capable of changing emotions and actions in order to be a caring, comforting God; hope depends on a God who experiences what we experience and brings relief from those sometimes overwhelming experiences. This hope expects God to be in a non-hierarchical relation to creation. The fulfillment of this hope involves God and human collaboration. God *needs* creation for ultimate, eschatological fulfillment. The cost of this claim is God's perfect compassion that abides undaunted in the face of the suffering, despair, and death.

Moltmann's personal discovery of hope comes through his revelation of God's suffering presence with him. His theology of hope reflects that experience of divine passibility manifest in God the Father's experience of suffering and loss in the crucifixion. Moltmann argues that the resurrection victory over death is God's victory over the very absence of God. In Moltmann's account of the Passion, Jesus Christ's experience of being abandoned by God is the ontological absence of God; God the Father actually abandons the Son. Further, since God suffers when Christ suffers, God, Godself, is abandoned by God. The resurrection marks God's victory over God's own abandonment, so that humans will no longer be abandoned by God as God was abandoned by God. God embraces within Godself the brokenness and godforsakenness of creation through Christ's suffering and death on the cross. God consoles creation by sharing in the depths of total divine abandonment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's claim, written while he was in prison, that "only the suffering God can help," has become a familiar marker of Moltmannian hope, broadly understood to mean that: there is no hope in God who does not suffer; God suffers and therefore God is worthy of our hope. Bonhoeffer presents this claim with the specification that it is Jesus who is suffering, but both he and Moltmann understand God to be participating wholly in the passion, in abandoning and being abandoned on the cross, and in weakness. Moltmann underscores Bonhoeffer's phrase: "A God who by reason of his essence cannot suffer, cannot suffer with us either, or even feel sympathy. The *Deus impassibilis* is a God without a heart and without compassion, a cold heavenly power."[22] Moltmannian hope stands in opposition to divine impassibility.

22. Moltmann, *End*, 70.

Moltmann's criticism of divine impassibility depends on the theory of malign Greek philosophical influence. He imagines that Greek thought imposed itself on the otherwise wholly separate Hebrew theology and constrained early Christian theologians who could not see the true God because of their Hellenistic blinders.[23] This premise bears investigation, since it is largely based on particular claims of mid-twentieth century biblical criticism that have not been as predominant in scholarship before or afterward. Paul Gavrilyuk describes the position Moltmann adopts:

> It has become almost commonplace in contemporary theological works to pass a negative judgment upon the patristic concept of the divine impassibility. Superficial criticism of the divine apatheia on purely etymological grounds, without any serious analysis of its actual function in the thought of the Fathers, has become a convenient polemical starting point for the subsequent elaboration of a passibilist position. Such a dismissive attitude towards the patristic heritage is guided far more by the contemporary climate of opinion on the issue of divine suffering than by any serious engagement with the theology of the Fathers.
>
> A standard line of criticism places divine impassibility in the conceptual realm of Hellenistic philosophy, where the term allegedly meant the absence of emotions and indifference to the world, and then concludes that impassibility in this sense cannot be an attribute of the Christian God. In this regard, a popular dichotomy between Hebrew and Greek theological thinking has been elaborated specifically with reference to the issues of divine (im)passibility and (im)mutability. On this reading, the God of the prophets and apostles is the God of pathos, whereas the God of the philosophers is apathetic.[24]

The Hebrew/Greek dichotomy theory Gavrilyuk critiques is not socially plausible: coexisting, intermingled, and hybrid communities demonstrate more of a fluid and partial influence of ideological influences than the imposition of opposite concepts from one portion of a community on another. The theory is also contradicted by the ways that early Christian theologians worked to articulate distinctly Christian accounts of available philosophical thought. Certainly early Christian theology engages with

23. Moltmann's reading of the historical church does not allow for the possibility that early Christian theology might have been influenced by the intellectual culture of the day *and* have worked with familiar philosophical thought to articulate distinctly Christian accounts of the distinctly Christian God.

24. Gavrilyuk, *Suffering,* 3.

secular ideas, with greater and lesser degrees of discernment and wisdom. Hellenistic thought did indeed influence Christian thinking about God, but twenty-first century theological discourse would benefit from a more complicated than dichotomous account of Hellenistic influences.

The church sometimes tries to describe God who is Creator of all, the great I AM, *and* intimately related to creation, in covenant, incarnation, and salvation in terms of paradox, such that God is *passibly impassible* or *impassibly passible*. Moltmann's approach is to choose passibility over impassibility. Nancy Bedford explains:

> The Christian tradition has struggled with various ways to reconcile the *impassiblity* of God understood as a safeguard of God's transcendence and "wholly other" character, and the fact of God's necessary involvement in the passion of the Son, in order to safeguard the soteriological dimension of the cross. This led to formulations such as the 'suffering of the impassible God.' Moltmann believes that this sort of paradoxical formulation concedes too much to natural theology, particularly because in his view the more weight given to the axiom of God's impassibility, the weaker becomes the ability to identify God with the Passion of Christ. This fundamentally Trinitarian rationale (that is, the conviction that in the cross "God was in Christ reconciling the world into Godself") is what pushes Moltmann to recast the "axiom of impassibility" (*Apathieaxiom*) into the "axiom of God's passion" (*Axiom des leidenschaftlichen Gottes*), in the double sense of "suffering" (*Leiden*) and of "ardent love" (*Leidenschaft*).[25]

Moltmann determines that God cannot love without suffering; suffering expresses God's love; passibility outweighs impassibility.

The priority of passibility reflects Moltmannian hope's rejection of the grammar for speaking of God that Aquinas offers in the beginning of the *Summa Theologica*,[26] in the midst of questions about the essence of God and the nature of the Trinity. There, Aquinas presents six words, often referred to as *attributes*, as indicators of a grammar that guides speech about God. These are familiar words which, analogically, point to what God is not.[27] The six are listed in an order that demonstrates how the words work together. The first is simplicity: God is not made up of various

25. Bedford, "God's Power," 106.

26. I, q. 3–11.

27. These are not, properly speaking, *attributes*, since they are not properties that God holds.

parts. The second is perfection: God's simplicity is not a lack of complexity or multiplicity, but the whole of perfect goodness. Third, God's simplicity and perfection are not limited in size or breadth or extent because of God's infinity. God's infinity, perfection, and simplicity, do not change, cannot be depleted or added to, as indicated by the fourth, God's immutability and impassibility (frequently identified simply as impassibility), which affirm that God neither needs more nor experiences loss. Fifth, eternity marks that God's simplicity, perfection, infinity, immutability and impassibility do not bind to a particular time. Finally, God's unity shows that these attributes are not separable. God's oneness is completely perfect, limitless and endless, unchanging and unmovable. Hope for eternal life in the company of this God is hope in a life more abundantly good than any creature can fully imagine.

Moltmannian hope understands these attributes in relation to modern and anthropocentric accounts of the good, such that God's transcendent abundance seems insufficiently supportive of human needs. Thus, simplicity seems less than complexity; perfection seems to cut off possible growth and improvement; and infinity seems to downplay on-the-ground reality. Immutability and impassibility seem to separate God from human change and feelings; eternity seems to downplay the importance of the historical here and now; and oneness infringes on unique individuality. Impassibility causes the most offense to Moltmannian hope, as it seems to contradict God's identity as the God of love whose compassion grows in response to human need.

Hope that depends on a passible God and rejects these attributes loses contact with a traditional grammar for God without establishing an alternative grammar to show continuity and difference. The loss of fluency in the grammar of attributes makes communication between that grammar and different accounts of God all the more challenging. Eschatological hope that is defined by divine passibility trades in a life with God that is undeterred, undiminished, and undercut by the crises, failures, disasters, and sins of this world for hope in a passible God who loves, cares for, and shares suffering with. If God is subject to suffering, then God is not perfect, and hope must depend on an imperfect God. If God changes in response to creation, then God is neither perfect nor simple, God cannot be infinite or eternal, and unity is impossible as well, since the substance of unity is variable and inconstant. Hope in a passible God displaces the sovereignty of the Creator God with a God like us, and the divine fulfillment of creation with an eschatological end of our own design. The

resulting Moltmannian theology of hope embraces this formula and loses the possibility that the God of hope suffers in love without diminishing Godself in simplicity, perfection, infinity, impassibility, eternity, and unity. Hope in God's perfect compassion fades as hope in God's contingent suffering becomes the single, established truth. When Moltmann categorically dismisses accounts of divine impassibility as outdated descriptions of a distant, unsympathetic, cold God who cannot offer hope to creation, he oversimplifies a long theological history of careful speech about what cannot be contained in speech; and he reifies that oversimplification into a non-negotiable foundation for theological hope.

Moltmannian hope reflects Moltmann's conclusion without an appreciation of what Moltmann rejects and why. In the process, hope provided by a God who is perfectly compassionate *and* greater than the limitations of suffering and death is set aside as woefully inadequate. Moltmannian hope depends on a God who experiences what we experience and brings relief, soon. If God does not seem to prevent or alleviate suffering and despair, then it seems that God must at least *feel* that pain along with those who suffer and then, perhaps, regret and repent God's own errors which led to human suffering. Hope thus arises from the confidence that God knows, feels, and reacts to human experience with ready relief or at least comparable shared suffering. Moltmannian theology embraces the God whose love is suffering love, but it loses the God of hope who suffers in constant love through Jesus Christ and remains transcendent, in simplicity, perfection, infinity, impassibility, eternity, and unity. Moltmannian hope expects that the fulfillment of hopes involves God and human collaboration[28] and that God needs creation for eschatological completion.[29] Moltmannian hope opts for a recognizably anthropomorphic and anthropocentric God with limitations instead of a God whose divine compassion is unmoveably perfect *and* whose incarnation, Jesus Christ, shares all human suffering and dies a human death.

Lost: The Two Natures of Christ

The God of Moltmann's theology of hope is the trinitarian God of love who, on the one hand, absorbs into the whole of God all the particularity of Jesus Christ, and, on the other hand, demotes Jesus Christ to the role of

28. Moltmann, *Creation* 87; Molnar on Torrance, "Function," 80.

29. "God 'needs' the word and man. If God is love, then he neither will nor can be without the one who is his beloved" (*Trinity*, 57–58).

facilitator, such that Jesus' suffering and death on the cross make possible God's access to humanity. (Moltmann does not always clarify whether he means God the first person of the Trinity or God the One in Three.) He sets aside the two natures of Jesus Christ and downplays the efficacy of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, such that Christ is no longer *the* hope but the affirmation of God's promises, extended into the future. He declines a Christology wherein Jesus Christ lives, suffers, and dies as fully human *and* as fully divine.

Moltmann's work on the Trinity has helped stir up a renewed attention to trinitarian theology in the last few decades. His particular contributions present the Trinity as an open set of relations, into which creation will be drawn. Moltmannian eschatological hope looks toward God's indwellng of creation and creation's participation in the perichoretic relations of the Trinity itself. In the meantime, it seems, the Trinity longs for its completion through the inclusion of creation in its multiple and unified identity. The God of this Trinity shares in the human condition directly; Jesus' role on the cross is to bring God to human suffering.

Moltmann's trinitarian theology presents a social Trinity that directly engages with creation. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit share all, and Jesus' suffering and death are trinitarian experiences. Instead of a Christology of two natures, wherein Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine and suffers as fully human and remains fully divine even as the incarnation of God, Moltmann prioritizes God the Father (while claiming non-hierarchical trinitarian relations) and places shared human suffering chiefly in the person of God. Bauckham observes that, "eschewing two-natures Christology in favor of Jesus' being-in-relation and being-in-history, Moltmann seems to see Jesus as a human being whose relationship to the Father in the Spirit makes him the unique Son of God."[30]

Moltmann narrates the two-natures Christology as another ramification of (his perception of) the problematic Hellenistic influence on Christianity; he argues that Christianity developed the two natures of Christ in order to counteract the problems raised by the distant, static, philosophical God. Without these problems, Moltmann posits, the two natures would not be necessary or appropriate. He acknowledges that early church liturgy did attend to the passion and the cross,

> but theological reflection was not in a position to identify God himself with the suffering and the death of Jesus. As a result of this, traditional Christology came very near to docetism,

30. Bauckham, 208.

> according to which Jesus only appeared to suffer and only appeared to die abandoned by God: this did not happen in reality. The intellectual bar to this came from the philosophical concept of God, according which God's being is incorruptible, unchangeable, indivisible, incapable of suffering and immortal; human nature, on the other hand, is transitory, changeable, divisible, capable of suffering and mortal. The doctrine of the two natures in Christ began from this fundamental distinction, in order to be able to conceive of the personal union of the two natures in Christ in light of this difference.[31]

Moltmann's alternative establishes the Passion as primarily a divine event in which the Trinity is the agent and participant in the cross: "If the cross of Jesus is understood as a divine event, i.e. as an event between Jesus and his God and Father, it is necessary to speak in trinitarian terms of the Son and the Father and the Spirit. In that case the doctrine of the Trinity is no longer an exorbitant and impractical speculation about God, but is nothing other than a shorter version of the passion narrative of Christ in its significance for the eschatological freedom of faith and the life of oppressed nature."[32] Salvation requires the complete absorption of Jesus' suffering, which is the suffering of all creation, into God, as the content of the Trinity. "Only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness *is in God himself*, is community with this God eternal salvation, infinite joy, indestructible election and divine life."[33] By shifting the suffering of Jesus Christ into "God himself," Moltmann turns away from the human and divinely redemptive suffering of Jesus Christ and instead places God and people together as those who suffer.[34]

Moltmann's narrative of the salvific trinitarian Passion translates Jesus' suffering and death into solely divine suffering and defers Christ's role in redemption to the future fulfillment of God's promises. The key players become the suffering God and the human individual who is abandoned

31. Moltmann, *Crucified,* 227–28.

32. Ibid., 246.

33. Ibid., italics added

34. Weinandy notes that "this co-suffering of God with the suffering victim is intended to engender hope and consolation. At times one feels that what they wish is a God who feels sorry for them because of their plight—a God who authenticates and justifies their self-pity. Actually, such a view . . . radically diminishes the salvific significance of Christ's redemptive suffering and so the import of his body, as the whole church and as individual members within it, which actively co-suffers with him for its own sanctification and for humankind's well-being and salvation" (*Suffer?*, 281).

and unloved. Moltmann asks: "If the believer experiences his freedom and the new possibility of his life in the fact that the love of God reaches him, the loveless and the unloved, in the cross of Christ, what must be the thoughts of a theology which corresponds to this love?"[35] His answer involves the love of God who draws the individual into God's inner life, through the cross of Christ:

> [The believer] is in fact taken up into the inner life of God, if in the cross of Christ he experiences the love of God for the godless, the enemies, in so far as the history of Christ is the inner life of God himself. In that case, if he lives in this love, he lives in God and God in him. If he lives in this freedom, he lives in God and God in him. If one conceives of the Trinity as an event of love in the suffering and the death of Jesus—and that is something which faith must do—then the Trinity is no self-contained group in heaven, but an eschatological process open for men on earth, which stems from the cross of Christ. By the secular cross on Golgotha, understood as open vulnerability and as the love of God for the loveless and unloved, dehumanized men, God's being and God's life is open to true man.[36]

The event of the Trinity draws God and humanity into interpenetrating life together, through the cross. Jesus Christ himself need not embody humanity or divinity or both, because God and humanity fulfill each other.

Moltmann opens the Trinity to include creation in salvation, but he also narrows the Trinity by rendering the humanity of Jesus and the efficacy of Christ's salvation secondary to the assumption of suffering into God's experience. In Moltmann's account, the end of hope for humanity is full participation in the Trinity. God has taken on human suffering in order to bring humans into fellowship with God; Jesus Christ serves that end. Moltmann's theology of hope emphasizes salvation as the union of the Trinity and humanity, through God's suffering, and God's need for humanity to join the Trinity. The cost of this account of hope is hope in Jesus Christ as the model of the fulfillment of humanity in relationship with God. Humanity no longer lives in unity with Christ now, in hope of the fulfillment of humanity through Christ to come. Hope no longer rests on Jesus, who, as Kathryn Tanner notes, is God-with-us, "the one in whom

35. Moltmann, *Crucified*, 248.

36. Ibid., 249.

God's relationship with us attains perfection."[37] Tanner describes the hope in Jesus Christ that Moltmannian hope deflects:

> By way of this perfected humanity in union with God, God's gifts are distributed to us—we are saved—just to the extent that we are one with Christ in faith and love; unity with Christ the gift-giver is the means of our perfection as human beings, just as the union of humanity and divinity in Christ was the means of his perfect humanity. United with Christ, we are thereby emboldened as ministers of God's beneficence to the world, aligning ourselves with, entering into communion with, those in need as God in Christ was *for us* in our need and as Christ was a man for others, especially those in need.[38]

Tanner counters Moltmann's assumption that God's experience of Jesus' experience of abandonment by God is the determinative event of salvation, with the claim that Jesus' oneness with God is never broken, even by death. Through the divine perfection of humanity which is Jesus Christ, humanity is drawn into constant and eternal connection with God, through all suffering and death and beyond. "United with Christ, we too are inseparable from God."[39] Through the two-natures of Christ, Jesus' human life funds hope that full humanity, life with God, is possible. Jesus' death and resurrection accomplish that possibility. Tanner explains that "the perfect correspondence of identity that is Christ's life remains our hope. Already achieved by Christ, who as the very same one is both the Son giving and the human being receiving, we aim toward this unity or identity by efforts, never completed in this life, to eradicate sin and match the life intended for us by Christ's assumption of us. Not simply a future yet to be for us and not simply the past achieved by Christ but not by ourselves, our future is present in us as Christ shapes us in accordance with himself."[40] Eschatological hope looks toward the full accordance of human life in Christ.

Moltmannian hope loses the perfection and efficacy of Christs' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, and thus loses Jesus Christ as the anchor of hope, the priest and sacrifice who leads the hopeful through the veil to God's heavenly kingdom. Moltmannian hope bypasses the already/not yet identity of the ecclesial body of the two-natured Christ, and looks

37. Tanner, *Jesus*, 9.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 107.
40. Ibid., 59.

instead to God's shared experience with humanity and God's dependence on humanity for God's own completion. In these circumstances, human hope loses any anchor but its own limited resources. In order to sustain the primacy of God's suffering over the two-natured Christ who suffers as human and is fully divine as well, Moltmann attributes to the two-nature doctrine the dualism it was designed to avoid.[41] Moltmann dismisses out of hand any positive possibilities of Chalcedon's engagement with the identity of Christ. He further rejects any Christology that does not accept the primacy of the suffering of God.[42] In so doing, Moltmann separates himself and his theology of hope from any connection with the many strands of Christian theology which conflict with his. His hope, and subsequently, Moltmannian hope, lose fluency in the christological grammar that is not defined by the suffering of God. Daniel Castelo finds this singlemindedness of Moltmannian doctrine a lost opportunity for a closer conversation and sharing of wisdom with differing and alternative accounts: "Quite simply, the theological implications stemming from the identity of the one called Jesus of Nazareth are absent from Moltmann's program as it is articulated in his speculative doctrine of God; an account of the incarnation that would have created greater coherence and exchange between divinity and humanity within Christ's person is sorely missing in his project. In this instance, as in others, Moltmann has lost an opportunity to claim and be claimed by the tradition with its original parameters and warrants."[43] Hope that draws its strength from an emphasis on God and the Trinity, could be strengthened further with increased attention to Jesus Christ, beyond what he provides to God.

Moltmannian hope that hinges on God's suffering has difficulty making sense of scriptural claims about Jesus Christ and the salvific efficacy of his death and resurrection. Christ's death and resurrection stand as promissory notes to the redemption to come, the redemption that God, in passibility, is bringing. Thus theological hope loses the challenge and assurance of passages such as Paul's words to the Romans about redemption through Christ Jesus: "But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption

41. Castelo, *Apathetic* 119–20.
42. Ibid., 120.
43. Ibid.

that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (3:21–25a). When eschatological hope depends on God's diminished transcendence and absorption of human suffering, living into the body of Christ becomes irrelevant. Moltmannian hope does not appreciate Paul when he reminds the Ephesians that Christ's gifts of prophecy and teaching are intended to bring the body of Christ to its true identity in Christ, "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (3:10–13). Moltmannian hope does not resonate with the hope of the Hebrews, the hope in Jesus Christ, who is pioneer, mediator, high priest and sacrifice, who leads us into the sanctuary and through the curtain which is also his flesh (10:19–22), through judgment, to the throne of God. Moltmannian hope bypasses Jesus Christ, God incarnate, to make way for the suffering God.

Lost: Heaven Unlimited

Moltmannian hope counts on God to bring a new creation that preserves, protects, and reconfigures the world into a better version of the one we know now. Moltmannian hope rejects both an end-time devastation of this world and a heavenly life beyond this world. It assumes continuity between this world and the next determined more by the potential goods of this creation than by God's constant, unwavering, relationship with God's creation. This reconfiguration of Christian hope turns away from misguided creation-nostalgia and heavenly escapism; but the cost is eschatological hope for God's fulfillment of creation beyond the limits of human effort and imagination.

From his earliest work on, Moltmann exhibits a tension he cannot resolve between the open-ended future of Bloch and his own confidence in the universal salvation of the world. While Moltmann does not explicitly address his struggle with this conflict, his work leans increasingly toward the assurance of a recognizable future, in which God comes to join the world, and the Trinity opens up to include creation. Bloch's startling and unsettling open future of infinite potentialities that excited Moltmann in his early work loses its ominous possibilities in favor of assured universal conservation. Moltmann still sustains some sense that God's future—which is the future of creation—cannot be fully grasped by humans now; but Moltmannian hope has settled firmly into the conviction that a God worth paying attention to will provide an end that encompasses and

perpetuates the life we know, albeit with some significant improvements. The eschatological promised land foretold and foretasted by the people of God loses its divine design in favor of a human design, to be completed by God. The expectation that hope will be fulfilled in this creation rules out the possibility that God might wipe the creation slate clean through annihilation or a cosmic battle of good and evil, because a loving God would not destroy that which God has created. It also rules out an eschatology of return to the original, pre-fall creation. At the same time, confidence in a coming kingdom of preservation and improvement risks over-confidence that humans are capable of preparing themselves and the world for God. Eschatological hope then expects a tamer and more domesticated future than much of scripture and the witness of the saints claim. Miroslav Volf illustrates this expectation: hopes for continuity "between the present and future orders are theologically inseparable from the Judeo-Christian belief in the goodness of divine creation (which is a rededication not only of the original but also of the present creation, the reality of evil in it notwithstanding). It makes little sense to affirm the goodness of creation and at the same time expect its eschatological destruction."[44] Hope that depends on the continuation of what we know displaces hope that depends on the constancy of God's faithfulness more than perpetuation of geography, climate, and social structures.[45]

The persistent expectation that God will come to this world, bringing new creation to that which God has created, assumes a continuing future for this world in the face of much apparent evidence to the contrary. A creation-long lifetime of human efforts toward repentance, reconciliation, and recuperation from sin has not reversed brokenness and alienation

44. Volf and Katerberg, *Future of Hope*, 29.

45. One indication of the widespread acceptance of Moltmannian hope and its confidence about the particulars of eschatological life is N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope*. Wright is about twenty years younger than Moltmann, an evangelical Anglican, and a New Testament scholar. He is more conservative than Moltmann on matters of sexuality and marriage, and his account of eschatological hope sustains stronger connections to early and persevering Christian doctrine than does Moltmann's. Wright tries to bring together the apparently disparate hopes of beyond-earth heaven and of anti-heaven Social Gospel, noting the inadequacies of each on its own. Yet Wright's theological hope shares with Moltmannian hope the conviction that eschatological fulfillment will happen (is happening) on this earth, in these bodies. Wright equates hopes for heaven unbound by this (transformed) world with a dismissal of the bodily resurrection, the kingdom of Jesus, and the life of discipleship as citizens of heaven. By so doing, he diminishes hope for the transformation of creation beyond the possibilities of this world we already know.

among humans and between humans and God. A wide variety of efforts by humans to live with and care for the rest of creation has not led to a healthier planet. A broad range of polis constructions and governance has not corrected social disparities or cured humanity's dedication to violence and war. Ongoing medical advances and discoveries have not stopped illness, aging, or death. Humans created in the image of God and members of the body of Christ are non-negotiably called to live lives shaped by these efforts toward the kingdom of God, but God will not necessarily bring our efforts to fruition on the terms we anticipate. When eschatological hope is so focused on a conceivable future in which God comes to this improved creation, the assurance of God's forgiving, transforming grace can lull us into assuming that we can be certain about *how* God will right the wrongs of this life and establish the just and righteous life effected by Christ's death and resurrection. Hope in the resurrection of the body includes the very real death which precedes resurrection, and there is no guarantee that creation will never die. Dedicated stewardship and care of creation are essential performances of gratitude for God's gift of creation and practices of witness to hope in the resurrection of all life; but these human actions do not determine the location or character of the fulfillment of eschatological hope.

Moltmannian hope overestimates human knowledge of and readiness for life eternal with God, while underestimating God's wondrous gift of life beyond that which we can ask or imagine, and while downplaying God's awe-full gift of merciful judgment to prepare creation for that life. By focusing on the world we know as the location of the fulfillment of hope, Moltmannian hope loses touch with what we know about this world: it is finite. Tanner observes that

> the best scientific description of the day leaves little doubt that death is the end towards which our solar system and the universe as a whole move. Our sun will one day exhaust its fuel, annihilating life on this planet. The universe will either collapse onto itself in a fiery conflagration or dissipate away its energy over the course of an infinite expansion. If the scientists are right, the world for which Christians hold out hope, the world they hope to minister to as the agents of divine beneficence, ultimately has no future. Hope for an everlasting and consummate fulfillment of this world, a fulfillment of the world that would imitate the fullness of the triune life through incorporation into it, seems futile since destruction is our world's end. Because of its cosmic scope, this last failure of hope would bring with it all the others.[46]

46. Tanner, *Jesus*, 98.

Tanner notes that Moltmannian hope appears to be undaunted by such predictions, as it claims instead a continuity granted by God greater than "purely natural processes."[47] This hope asserts confidence in God to surpass the limitations of material finitude, and at the same time limits God's surpassing power to the continuity of the known world. Thus, creation depends on God's grace to continue life by moving the world "without any great interruption to its consummation,"[48] but that consummation is determined by human constraints on God's power, imagination, and possibilites.

Advocates of a this-world-oriented hope may find it relatively easy to condemn theologies of hope that anticipate global destruction in preparation for eternal life with God; but they may find it more challenging to sustain a world-based hope in the face of the persistent decline of resources on which the desired continuity depends. Gradual global devastation may become increasingly hard to ignore as its effects begin to reach the affluent global North and West. Moltmannian eschatological hope in a continuous, improved future of this world will falter when the ramifications of a faltering earth hit home. Tanner counters the over-reliance on an even better future:

> At the most fundamental level, eternal life is ours now in union with Christ, as in the future. It is therefore not directly associated with the world's future and not convertible with the idea that the world will always have a future or further time. Here the eschaton cannot be primarily understood as what comes *from* the future to draw the time of this world ever onward. It is not especially associated with any particular moment of time (past, present or future) and therefore such an understanding of the eschaton has no stake in any reworked, theological account of temporal relations in which a coming future is given primacy over present and past times.[49]

Moltmannian hope draws heavily on the perpetuation of contemporary circumstances. Hope built exclusively on this foundation loses the vision of life grounded in divine possibility, unbound by human experience, imagination, or time.

47. Ibid., 99.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 111.