

6. “God’s Power Is God’s Goodness”: Some Notes on the Sovereignty of God in Jürgen Moltmann’s Theology

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In October 2006, I flew to Miami to meet Jürgen Moltmann’s plane coming in from Germany, so we could catch a connection together down to Managua to spend several days at the Evangelical University of Nicaragua (UENIC-MLK) at a conference reflecting on Christian faith and the transformation of culture and also belatedly celebrating Moltmann’s eightieth birthday, which had been in April. His other Latin American former student, Reinerio Arce, was also able to fly in from Cuba, and we had the splendid luxury of talking theology to our heart’s content, enjoying the wonderful hospitality of Nicaragua and the lush beauty of creation that frames all activity there. I took advantage of one of those conversations to show Moltmann the flyer for the Forum on Evangelical Theology at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, for which this essay was to be written, with its questions: “How is God sovereign with respect to creation? Does creation affect God? Does God suffer or change because of creation? If so, how and how is this related to Christology?” My own question to him was: “So, what say you about these things?” This essay does not follow the structure of the animated conversation that ensued, but is indebted to it, as indeed I am always indebted to my teachers and friends, and especially to Moltmann, who is both.

KATAPHATIC THEOLOGY

In thinking about Moltmann’s theology, a good first step is to remember that he conceives of it as an “adventure of ideas” presented in the form of suggestions (*Vorschläge*) to a community of believers—and also

of doubters. These suggestions are meant to lead to dialogue and disagreement, and do not have the pretension of standing firm with nary a contradiction. He admits that this theological method may lead at times to saying “more about God than we can actually know” but points out that precisely *because* he is awed by the mystery of God, he is able to speak freely and share his many ideas, knowing that they are offered to the community for further elaboration or correction.¹ His is a very *Protestant* approach to theology, in which the Word made flesh and dwelt among us enables us to speak by the Spirit confidently and freely, in the understanding that our words will never exhaust the riches of God.² It is, in short, what we might call a *kataphatic* theology, not in the sense of Eunomius, who—to the horror of the Cappadocians—thought he could fully grasp who God was,³ but in the Pauline sense that declares with confidence, on a Christological basis: “I believed and so I spoke” (2 Cor 4:13, quoting Ps 115:1 LXX).⁴

It seems useful to remember this kataphatic character as we think about the sovereignty of God in Moltmann’s theology, not as a mandatory

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *Das Kommen Gottes. Christliche Eschatologie* (Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher, 1995) 14–15.

2. I mean “Protestant” here narrowly in the sense of the European continental, magisterial Reformation. For Moltmann Protestantism is characterized by such freedom, or as he puts it succinctly: “Wo Freiheit ist, da ist Protestantismus. Gibt er die Freiheit auf, dann wird der Protestantismus verschwinden” (Where freedom is, there is Protestantism. Should Protestantism give up freedom, it will disappear) (Moltmann, *Gott im Project der modernen Welt. Beiträge zur öffentlichen Relevanz der Theologie* [Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher, 1997] 174). This freedom should not be understood as the narrow autonomy of the individual, but rather as a *theonomous* freedom shaped by the dynamic of the Trinitarian God. Freedom in this sense is revealed not in dominion over others (as is often the case in “autonomous” understandings), but in friendship and community; see Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes. Zur Gotteslehre*, 2nd rev. ed. (München: Kaiser, 1986) 71.

3. On this see Gregory of Nyssa *Oratio* 27, 3ff. and *Oratio* 28, 4.

4. I am borrowing the term from Pseudo-Dionysius (cf. *On the Divine Names* and *On Mystical Theology*). In a way somewhat similar to the one proposed by Moltmann above, the kataphatic mode in Dionysius has negation built into it; said otherwise, Dionysius pushes language about God to its breaking point in order to discover what cannot be said about God (see the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Dionysius: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/>). Furthermore, as with Moltmann, Dionysius is able to speak confidently on the basis of Scripture (see *On the Divine Names* 1.2 and passim). However, Moltmann’s affirmativity or kataphaticism seems to me more straightforwardly christocentric than that of Dionysius, as well as having a narrative quality that Dionysius lacks.

detour into prolegomena, but rather to remind ourselves that discourse about God generally, and about God's sovereignty in particular, has more than one genealogy. Moltmann's discourse does not belong to the genealogy of Aristotle and Thomism, nor to that of Greek apophaticism; he should be read with the backdrop of Luther, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and Barth in mind, in a dialogical relationship with Jewish scholars such as Heschel and Rosenzweig. Said otherwise, his idiom is more narrative than metaphysical, more a creative midrash on gospel themes than an exegesis of the creeds or a discourse framed by the Roman Catholic Magisterium.⁵ The safeguard that works as a corrective to his kataphatic approach is not apophaticism in the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius and of Eastern Orthodoxy, nor a Thomist framework that draws on Aristotle's principles of rhetoric, but rather the dialectic in the young Luther of the theology of the cross in opposition to a theology of glory: "*A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is*" (Heidelberg Disputation, thesis 21).⁶ The cross and its apparent foolishness, rather than "the wisdom of the wise" or the "discernment of the discerning," is what paradoxically uncovers the wisdom and the power of God, as expressed by Paul in 1 Cor 1:18—2:16. For that reason, it functions as the measure and the criterion of theological discourse. That is the context for the subtitle of Moltmann's *The Crucified God*: "the cross of Christ as the foundation and criticism of Christian theology."

The "cross" is not used reductively here, as a reference for instance only to a given theory of the atonement, but rather as shorthand for God's Trinitarian economy of salvation. God's character is manifested in the incarnation, ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, or as Moltmann puts it in the title of his more systematic contribution to Christology, in "the way of Jesus Christ." The Christ event thus both al-

5. This leads him to a way of speaking about God's sovereignty and passion that is quite different even than that of his friend and companion in political theology, Johann Baptist Metz. It is useful to keep the example of Metz and Moltmann in their convergences and divergences in mind, to understand how these different genealogies of theological discourse can mutually learn from each other in their disagreements; I shall return to this at the end of this paper.

6. See Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, in the public domain, at <http://www.augustana.edu/Religion/LutherProject/HEIDELBU/Heidelbergdisputation.htm>. Thesis 29 is also illustrative here: "He who wishes to philosophize by using Aristotle without danger to his soul must first become thoroughly foolish in Christ."

lows for confidence about who God is and functions as a corrective to the *analogia entis*.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AS THE CAPACITY FOR SELF-LIMITATION

What, then, can be said about God's sovereignty in a way that does not veer off into a theology of glory, i.e., that is consistent with the Trinitarian dynamic manifested in the cross? It must be remembered first of all that the word "sovereignty" is a political metaphor that evokes the power corresponding to a sovereign or ruler. It is, so to speak, a word which is easily diverted toward the interests of autocratic rule or of absolutism, particularly because in some forms of monarchical rule still fresh in our collective historical memories, the sovereign was deemed to have received his (or her, but usually his) extensive powers directly from the deity.⁷ To speak of sovereignty is to speak of lordship and power—a grouping of words that has often been co-opted in phallocratic ways that wrest it away from the kind of "lordship" revealed in Jesus, which is characterized by service and the empowerment of others.⁸ The constant Jesuanic subversion of the meaning of "lordship" and "sovereignty" appears in all strands of the New Testament. One example is found in the Johannine narrative of the washing of the disciples' feet: "You call me teacher and lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:13–14). It is likewise present in the synoptic story about the desire of the sons of Zebedee to sit on either side of Jesus in glory, and Jesus's subsequent admonition to the Twelve not to "lord it over" others as rulers tend to do, expecting to be served, but rather to serve as the Son of the Human Being does (Mark 10:35–45). It would thus seem that in any attempt to discover the meaning of God's sovereignty for the Christian faith, a vital way to fend

7. Moltmann often associates forms of political absolutism with a theological ideology linked to strict monotheism ("the universal monarchy of the one God"), contrasting this with possibilities opened up by a non-authoritarian, Trinitarian model; see for instance *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, 207ff.

8. As Moltmann points out, Adolf Hitler believed in God, whom he called "the Almighty" (*der Allmächtige*), the "Lord of History" who was on the side of the winners and of the strongest battalions. For Moltmann, this "Almighty" is "an apathetic deity, who determines everything and is determined by no one, who reigns over all and suffers nothing; who can only talk but never listen." (*Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt*, 166; my translation here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated).

off the autocratic corruption of "lordship," "power" and "sovereignty," is to proceed in a *christomorphic* fashion. This is precisely what Moltmann attempts to do in speaking of God's sovereignty with regard to creation: God's power can only be manifested trinitarianly, in a manner congruent with what has been revealed in the cross.

This explains, then, the approval with which Moltmann quotes Kierkegaard on the matter of God's omnipotence or *Allmacht*:

Only almighty power [*Allmacht*] can withdraw itself by surrendering itself, and this relationship is the very independence of the recipient. God's almighty power is therefore God's goodness. For goodness means surrendering oneself totally, but in such a way that by withdrawing oneself with almighty power one makes the recipient independent. All finite power creates dependence. Only almighty power can create independence—can bring forth out of nothing that which receives inward existence through the self-withdrawal of the almighty power.⁹

As Moltmann points out, Kierkegaard is arguing here *both* against Hegel's tendency to make God as dependent on the world as the world is dependent on God¹⁰ and against Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependency" (*schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*).¹¹ Moltmann paraphrases Kierkegaard epigrammatically to say that "God never appears mightier than in the act of [God's] self-limitation, and never greater than in the act of [God's] self humiliation."¹² God's self-limitation, in other words, is not a sign of God's weakness or an erosion of God's divinity, but rather a reflection of God's omnipotence interpreted not metaphysically, but "biblically and christologically."¹³ Indeed, the above epigram only makes sense if God's act of self-limitation is understood christologically, inasmuch as it is in the Incarnation and cross that God's nature is revealed to us: *crux probat omnia*.¹⁴ Kierkegaard's point—which from this

9. Translated by Margaret Kohl from the German version found in Kierkegaard's *Gesammelte Werke*, Abteilung 17, which appears in Jürgen Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 203 n. 19. I owe Professor Moltmann the reference.

10. Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 63.

11. Personal communication from Moltmann, October 30, 2006.

12. Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 64.

13. *Ibid.*, 58.

14. Luther *Weimarer Ausgabe* 179, 31; often quoted with approbation by Moltmann, as in *The Crucified God*, where it functions as a hermeneutical principal for his whole

perspective is clearly a Trinitarian argument—is that in contrast to the human exercise of autocratic power, which limits the freedom of those affected by it, God’s power and thus God’s exercise of sovereignty liberates and empowers us by means of a self-limitation that is what allows us to grow in life abundant according to God’s grace and wisdom.

From here we can return to the questions to be tackled—from various vantage points—in the essays in the present book: Firstly: *Does creation affect God?* For Moltmann, certainly creation affects God, not because creation is somehow on a par with God,¹⁵ but because God, out of love, “waits for the response of those who [God] has created, and lets their future come.” God cannot be said to be “in need of redemption”; however, God has “laid the sanctification of [God’s] name and the doing of [God’s] will in the hands of human beings” and thus out of love has in a sense become vulnerable to “bearing and enduring” the history of creation, giving creation—including humanity—time and opening up possibilities for creation to reach its fullness. God, in short, “does not want to be without those [God] has created and loves, and therefore waits for them to repent and turn back, leaving them time, so that [God] may come to [God’s] kingdom together with them.”¹⁶

The second question that has been proposed for discussion is: *Does God suffer or change because of creation?* The principle expressed that allows Moltmann to speak of the “self-limitation of omnipotence in God’s

Christological argument (see *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* [New York: Harper and Row, 1974] 7).

15. For Moltmann, God’s power, inasmuch as it is “almighty power” or omnipotence, is qualitatively different from human or finite power. This is ironically similar to Tanner’s non-competitiveness (“what makes God different from us enables closeness with us” in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001] 13), though Tanner critiques Moltmann quite harshly. Tanner holds that German Protestant theologians such as Moltmann, influenced by Hegel, have an inadequate idea of God’s transcendence, not realizing that God is not “a kind of being over against other kinds of beings.” What in my view she does not contemplate deeply enough are the “kataphatic” possibilities opened up by the Incarnation. Thus she disagrees sharply with any “speculation, unhelpful and unwise”—which she associates with Moltmann—about the meaning of the Incarnation for God (15 n. 27). But it would seem that the New Testament itself does give some opening for precisely that kind of language in exhortation and consolation, if not in speculation, particularly in the realm of pneumatology (see Eph 4:30; Rom 8:26; Jas 4:5).

16. Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 64, 66. In *God in Creation* these ideas are developed in detail, with particular reference to the Jewish Kabbalah and Isaac Luria’s ideas about the *zimzum*; see *Gott in der Schöpfung. Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*, 4th ed. (Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher, 1993) 98ff.

love" applies also to other classical metaphysical attributes of the divinity such as "omnipresence, omniscience, invulnerability and self-sufficiency." Thus, for instance, "God doesn't know everything in advance because [God] doesn't will to know everything in advance." Likewise, "God is not incapable of suffering."¹⁷ What Moltmann tries to do is to rethink these metaphysical attributes in a more narrative, biblical idiom. As he himself puts it, in his work in *The Theology of Hope* he describes the transformation of the metaphysically determined attribute of the immutability of God (God's unchangeableness) into the biblical idea of the faithfulness of God; and in *The Crucified God* he does the same thing with God's impassibility (God's inability to suffer), preferring instead to speak of the "passibility of love."¹⁸ Because this question of the passibility of God is so central to Moltmann's theology and its reception, it deserves a closer look.

"ONLY THE SUFFERING GOD CAN HELP"¹⁹

This phrase by Dietrich Bonhoeffer deeply moved and influenced Moltmann as a young theologian. He points out that in modern German theology it was quite unique as a tenet, not appearing in the same sense in Schleiermacher, Barth, Kant, Bultmann or Brunner; even Hegel, who does mention a similar thought, is referring to God as the sovereign Subject of world history, but not to the powerless, suffering God on the cross depicted by Bonhoeffer.²⁰ In a nutshell, according to Moltmann

17. Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 64.

18. Ibid., 201 n. 9.

19. The complete sentence from the letter written by Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge from the Tegel prison, dated July 16, 1944, is: "Die Bibel weist den Menschen an die Ohnmacht und das Leiden Gottes; nur der leidende Gott kann helfen" (Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* [München: Kaiser, 1970] 394).

20. Earlier in Germany the nineteenth-century "kenotic" theologians such as Thomasius had explored the suffering of God, but in Moltmann's estimation they came to a dead end: their idea of the "self-limitation of the divine" in the Incarnation easily led to a Christ who was not in any real sense "divine," and in order to avoid that problem they postulated a dichotomy in the divine attributes (the incarnate Son thus kenotically rejected "majesty" as an "outer" attribute related to the world, maintaining "inner" divine attributes such as truth, holiness and love). Moltmann characterizes this solution as an imperfect one, but points out that what the kenotics do make clear is that the "external" attributes of God (i.e., omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, immortality, impassibility and immutability) as derived from Aristotle's metaphysics are fundamentally problematic because they "have very little to do with God's attributes according to the

Bonhoeffer sees the sufferings of Christ in his death as *God's suffering in Christ*. These sufferings are furthermore not limited exclusively to Christ, but also include the contemporary, godless situation of the world: it is the suffering of God *on account of* the world and the suffering of God *in* the world.²¹

The conviction that “only the suffering God can help” made particular sense to Moltmann in the aftermath of the murder of millions of persons in the Second World War—as it did independently from Moltmann to the Japanese Lutheran theologian Kazoh Kitamori in his theology of the “pain of God.”²² As Moltmann puts it, “we rejected the metaphysics of the impassible, ‘apathetic’ Deity that from Aristotle to Karl Rahner dominated thought about God also among Christians.” God is not “the untouchable Sovereign in heaven who rules marvelously (*herrlich*) over everything,”²³ but rather the God who bears (with) us, just as a mother carries her child, as a father holds his child in his arms, or as the Good Shepherd in early Christian renderings carries the lost lamb on his shoulders. This God, who *carries and bears with* the world, is the God of hope (Rom 15:13).²⁴

But what does it mean, specifically, to say “God suffers”? To understand Moltmann’s answer it is important to remember what was mentioned above, namely, that his is an attempt to speak “christologically and biblically” of these matters. He therefore does not put in the foreground of his project the attributes that are deemed “appropriate for God” in the tradition of a Christian appropriation of Greek philosophical reflections about the divine substance. Rather, he parts from what he understands

history of God to which the Bible testifies” (*Science and Wisdom*, 55–57).

21. In German: “. . . es ist das Leiden Gottes *an* der gottlosen Welt und das Leiden Gottes *in* ihr.” For this section on Bonhoeffer’s influence on Moltmann I am quoting a manuscript written by Moltmann in 2005 on the occasion of Bonhoeffer’s hundredth birthday, entitled “Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die Theologie. Eine persönliche Würdigung” (I thank Professor Moltmann for sending me a copy of that essay); it appeared published in a much abbreviated form as “Gegen die Verächter des Leibes” in *Zeitzeichen* 1 (2006) 42–45.

22. Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond: John Knox, 1965).

23. This is a play on words that is also a nod at what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza would call “kyriarchy”: the German “*herrlich*” (marvelous, wonderful) makes reference etymologically to “lordship.”

24. “Der Gott, der diese Welt trägt und erträgt, ist der ‘Gott der Hoffnung’ (Röm 15:13).” The references from this paragraph are from “Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die Theologie,” final section.

to be the "nucleus" of the Gospels, that is, the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, and their commemoration in word, sacrament and discipleship in the life of the church. God is—Moltmann holds—implicated in the history of Christ's passion, or else that passion would not be able to redeem us. But how is God involved in this passion? Does God send Christ to suffer for us, or does God suffer for us in Christ? For Moltmann this question has soteriological implications: if God herself/himself is not involved in the passion, that is to say, if God is literally "impassible," then Jesus is simply one more tragic human figure; but if Jesus was merely human, that would mean the end of the Christian faith.²⁵

In the face of this problem, the Christian tradition has struggled with various ways to reconcile the *impassibility* 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.²⁶ This fundamentally Trinitarian rationale (that is, the conviction that in the cross "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto 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*).²⁷

Moltmann recognizes that the idea of the impassibility of God is grounded in the conviction that God is fundamentally different from all created beings, who (precisely because they are not God) are subject to suffering, changeability and death. Salvation consists in the fact that the impassible, transcendent God invites mortal creation into God's own immortality, unchangeability and impassibility, saving the creature from

25. In this section I am following Moltmann's unfolding of the theme in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, which presupposes and builds upon *The Crucified God* and the discussions it unleashed; cf. *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, 36ff.

26. "Je starker das Apathieaxiom in der Gotteslehre beachtet wird, desto schwächer wird die Fähigkeit, Gott mit der Passion Christi zu identifizieren" (Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, 37).

27. *Ibid.*, 38.

death and suffering. However, he considers that this sort of argument sets up a false alternative between an “essential” impassibility and a “fatal” subjection to suffering.²⁸ What he proposes is another understanding of suffering: the suffering of passionate love (*das Leiden der leidenschaftlichen Liebe*), that is, a disposition that is open to being affected by the reality of another. Moltmann does not reject the idea of “impassibility” altogether, but only its status as an “axiom”; he reinterprets “impassibility” on the basis of the Trinitarian dynamic of the cross as a metaphorical expression of the fact that God is not subject to suffering in the way that the creature is, that is as an expression of God’s difference and transcendence. He wants to be able to state, though, that God is able to love creation, and therefore to open Godself to the suffering that love for the creature always entails. In short: God does not suffer as the creature does out of a deficit of being (*aus Mangel an Sein*). In this regard, God can be said to be “impassible” (*apathisch*).²⁹ But God does suffer as a result of the love that overflows from God’s Being. In this sense, God is “passible” (*pathisch*).³⁰

28. “Die logische Grenze dieser Argumentation liegt darin, daß sie nur die Alternative: entweder wesentliche Leidensunfähigkeit oder schicksalhafte Unterwerfung unter das Leiden—kennt” (ibid.).

29. It seems to me that in this formulation Moltmann leaves a door open for dialogue with the sort of metaphysically oriented theology that builds upon a Thomistic understanding of immutability (as in *ST*, I.4.1, 2), inasmuch as the latter is a “dynamic” conception (my description). Cf. for instance Donna Techau’s interpretation of Aquinas when she writes: “Movement as we know it is predicated upon the Divine (as prime mover), and even if movement is not properly ascribed to God (for whom the boundaries of time and space aren’t applicable), it is analogically understood (God to creature). We know movement because we know God. We know change because we know God. God is the possibility of our mutability (that is, we are creatures predicated upon the Divine)” (unpublished manuscript).

30. Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, 39. He goes on to argue in this passage that Origen understood this differentiation and used it. It is an oversimplification to hold, as Weinandy seems to (cf. Thomas G. Weinandy, “Does God Suffer?” *First Things* 117 [2001] 35–41), that Moltmann ignores the patristic tradition or considers it to have been “hijacked” by Greek philosophical categories; what actually occurs in Moltmann’s case is a rereading of the tradition. What Moltmann *does* say is that the sort of Godtalk he is attempting is eminently Trinitarian and only makes “sense” in the context of God’s Trinitarian economy of salvation, given that the works of God *ad extra* are congruent with who God is *ad intra*. For this reason, Moltmann can say that the suffering of love in the sense he has described is not just part of God’s salvific work “toward the outside” but also characteristic for the Trinitarian communion in Godself. As he points out, neither the monotheism of Aristotelian philosophy nor the monotheism of Islam lend themselves easily to such talk about passibility, because they are not grounded in the Trinitarian

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECEPTION
(NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE) OF THIS THEOLOGY

Much has been said of this influential notion of God's passibility, often in ways that are not particularly helpful, as they tend to simplify positions on all sides; for those interested, the literature on this debate is extensive.³¹ Moltmann has stated that he believes that a true *theologia crucis* must be a Trinitarian theology, whereas conversely a Trinitarian doctrine without the cross at the center becomes abstract and lifeless; it would seem that this is one of the convictions that lead to his "kataphatic" theological formulation. He points out that because academic theologians love formulas, his reflections about the nature of God's sovereignty and God's passion have led him to be called a "theopaschite" and a "patripassionist"; if he had to choose, he would call himself a "patricompassionist" to allow for the distinction between the pain of the Father and the suffering of the Son. However, he stresses that what really interests him in all of this is what he calls the "comforting" dimensions (*die tröstlichen Dimensionen*) of this theology of the cross and of the suffering God "who can help us."³² In other words, in his own mind a fundamental piece of this theology seems to be what we might call its pastoral relevance.

It seems to me that this "pastoral" dimension is a helpful lens for evaluating the implications and limitations of his theology in this matter; and I would like to illustrate this by pondering the distaste that Rahner had for Moltmann's position. In an interview shortly before his death,

dynamic of the gospel narratives. In what we might call the "modified" monotheism of the Jewish Kabbalah and its philosophical reception, however, he does find ways into the discourses of passibility, as in the case of the *Shekinah*; see *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, 40ff., and many other passages in his writings where he references Heschel, Rosenzweig, Scholem and other Jewish thinkers.

31. For a negative assessment of Moltmann's influence on this issue, see Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) particularly 17–18; and Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, especially 101ff.; for a more positive reception see especially the Christological works of Jon Sobrino, as well as the work of some of his former students such as Lyle Dabney, Miroslav Volf, Michael Welker, and me. The feminist and womanist critiques of Moltmann carried out by Dorothee Sölle and others do not focus on the "impassibility" problem, but are based (usually from the perspective of an adoptionistic Christology) on what is perceived as a tendency in Moltmann to valorize human suffering too much.

32. Moltmann, *Weiter Raum. Eine Lebensgeschichte* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2006) 191.

Rahner criticized what he called the “theology of the death of God” in Hans Urs von Balthasar but most especially in Moltmann. Rahner said that this sort of theology seemed “gnostic” to him and pointed out forcefully that in order for one to be able to leave behind the “dirtiness” and “despair” of human existence it would be of no help at all to discover that God was just as “dirty.” Rahner adds that certainly the hypostatic union allows for a way to speak of God’s “death” (though not in a patripassionistic way), but that on the other hand what is comforting is that God, though engaged in human history, is not “cemented” into its horrors in the way that we are; therefore it is actually the *Deus impassibilis* and *immutabilis* who is the “true and authentic and comforting” God. It is notable that Rahner mentions “comfort” or “consolation” (*Trost*) several times in the interview.³³

Moltmann responded to Rahner in an “open letter” written after Rahner’s death, stating that in his own experience of godforsakenness as a prisoner of war, it was the “Son of God who died in godforsakenness” who helped him and comforted him in his time of need. He then addresses Rahner directly and says “I can find no link between comfort and apathy (i.e., impassibility) and therefore can find no access to your experience of God and of yourself.” For Moltmann it is the impassible God who is like “cement” (cold and hard and devoid of feelings). “I cannot imagine the *Deus impassibilis* as a God who is comforting in a personal way.”³⁴ Moltmann’s friends and contemporaries Hans Küng and Johann Baptist Metz, both Roman Catholics, sprang to the defense of Rahner, their beloved teacher. Metz argued that in order to keep the theodicy question open, it cannot be said that God suffers, whereas Küng posited a “theology of silence” in the face of the *Deus semper maior*. For Moltmann neither one of these answers are as convincing as the Bonhoefferian image of the suffering God who can help us.³⁵

I find these interchanges illuminating, because they show that one of the fundamental questions under the surface is the problem of how best to do justice to the God who is our Savior and Comforter. On that soteriological *factum*, there is accord; the debate is about how best to express

33. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Im Gespräch* (München: Kösel, 1982) 245f.; the text is included in Jürgen Moltmann, *In der Geschichte des dreieinigen Gottes* (München: Kaiser, 1991) 169–70.

34. Moltmann, *In der Geschichte des dreieinigen Gottes*, 170.

35. Moltmann, *Weiter Raum*, 192–93.

its implications faithfully. With this in mind, it seems wise to remember the words of Jon Sobrino regarding the passibility problem:

Some theologians are reluctant to speak of God as suffering; others are not. In my opinion, the different theoretical views of such a serious problem are less important than how the world's poor and victims think about it. . . . The poor turn to God to save them with [God's] power, and in that they see God's effective love. But they also turn to God when they find [God] close to their own suffering, and in that they see credible love. . . . Those who do not declare God dead must bear the burden of [God's] mystery. In my opinion, the mystery is that human salvation presupposes a God with alterity (a different, omnipotent and therefore distant God) and a God with affinity (like us, crucified, close by).³⁶

In view of pastoral practices and concerns, this means that spiritual discernment is necessary in order to perceive in each given context and situation how best to express God's alterity and affinity in a suffering world, that we may carry out the "ministry of consolation" that has been entrusted to us (2 Cor 1:3–7), in the midst of which we make sense of our own sufferings. I wonder whether we as theologians should make the imaginative effort of accepting the paradox that to talk both of impassibility (alterity) and of passibility (affinity) is *pastorally necessary* if we are to reflect more fully the God who is indeed the Helper in our time of need.

A THEOLOGIAN IS ONE WHO PRAYS

One of Moltmann's convictions is that in doing theology one should not write "about" God anything one would not want to say in prayer "to" God.³⁷ It seems to me that his main concern in avoiding the language of "apathy" for God is one born of prayer and intimacy with the God of love whose power is goodness and whose character is manifested in the cross. Likewise, his care to avoid any bias toward authoritarian renderings of "sovereignty" is rooted in the conviction that if God's power

36. Jon Sobrino, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, translated by Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004) 146.

37. I am thinking, for example, of his comments in Granada, Nicaragua on October 27, 2006, responding to panelists who discussed the impact of this theology in different parts of the world. The strands of narrative (with reference to the gospel story) and doxology (in praise of God) are a thread always present in his writings; see for instance Moltmann, *In der Geschichte*, 128.

is God's goodness, it is made manifest to us by the Spirit through Jesus Christ, who invites us and pulls us into the abundant life of the Triune God. God's sovereignty is a sovereignty framed by the rhythms of the gospel story, not by the practices of the rulers and would-be rulers of this present world system; God's power is manifested in empowering us, God's love for us is a passionate love. For all of us, but particularly for the weak and the marginalized of this world, that is very good news indeed: in the strictest of senses, *evangelical* news.

SAMPLE