

Vintage Moltmann

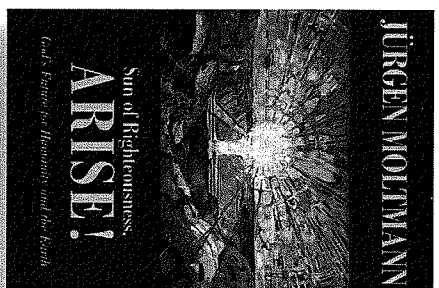
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I am not a historian, and not a biblical scholar either. I am merely a Christian theologian. That is to say, I am a Christian who struggles with his experiences of God: with the experience of God-forsakenness and with the experience of having been found by God when I was lost." Thus Jürgen Moltmann describes himself on the first page of his chapter on "Shekinah" in this book. His experience as a POW in World War II, and the religious pilgrimage which has undergirded his theological writings ever since, remain fresh in his mind, and what he has asked and said about God over the years has been constantly lively, never detachedly academic. *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!* is typical Moltmann.

He has been a major theological influence for what is now getting on for half a century. His work is not *passé*, but he is a sign of times gone by, when younger Protestant theologians from the German-speaking world were internationally influential. In this respect, no one has arisen to succeed Moltmann and Pannenberg, Jungel and, perhaps, Ebeling. There has been a marked consistency in Moltmann's writing: despite conceptual shifts and theological developments, Moltmann's accents have been much the same over the decades—Trinity, eschatology, the poor and oppressed are amongst his characteristic themes. His formal series of dogmatic explorations is now complete, and this volume is supplementary, putting together lectures or essays presented over the last decade.

Moltmann informs us that the contributions in this book cluster around "three fundamental Christian insights: God is the God of Christ's resurrection!; God is the righteousness which creates justice and puts things to rights!;

The traces and signs of God give the world meaning." These insights are distributed over four parts. The first deals with the future of Christianity, Moltmann's theses being reducible "to simple formulae: 1. The future of Christianity is the church; 2. The future of the church is the kingdom of God." We have come to the end of Christendom, and the church now comes into its own "as an independent and resisting community." So we need a new paradigm for the church, wherein—if I interpret him correctly—the charismatic paradigm supplants the earlier hierarchical and christocentric paradigms but, armed with Trinitarian insight, admits components from those in which Father or Son predominated. The claim that the kingdom is wider than the church, and that the church should be oriented to the kingdom, has long been familiar in Moltmann's work and widespread in modern theology. In dealing with "the God of resurrection," in Part 2, Moltmann adumbrates his conviction that "what is distinctively Christian is the confession of Christ and belief in the resurrection." This is reminiscent of his first major work, *Theology of Hope*, of which it has been rightly said



that it could have been called a "Theology of Resurrection." There has long been discussion of Moltmann's orthodoxy with respect to resurrection: does he believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, or is resurrection a "symbol," or is there an alternative conceptualization? Moltmann's discussion in this book is doubtless approachable from a variety of hermeneutical perspectives informed by acquaintance with his other works: from a conservative standpoint, with the suspicion that surface literalism

may partially conceal subterranean skepticism; from a radical standpoint, with the suspicion that flashes of surface modernity mask residual traditionalism; and so on. In bringing this issue to the table, we are not indulging our *a priori* preoccupations; Moltmann himself, in this book, highlights traditional questions regarding the raising of Jesus' body and the resurrection of our bodies. Not just the preoccupations, but the conclusions, look pretty traditional to me.

In entering the third part, we access the most substantial section of the volume. It is only a few pages short of being as long as all the three other parts put together. In his preface, Moltmann warns us about what is to come: "I am putting forward here an outline for an idea about the last judgment which has Christ at its center and no longer takes its bearings from the Egyptian judgment of the dead. . . . I am fully aware that here I am challenging, and putting up for discussion, ancient traditions in historical Christianity."

Actually, this occupies only one portion of this part. Moltmann also reiterates arguments familiar to his readers: the almighty God of patriarchal monotheism must be displaced by the Abba of Jesus; we want less power, more love, with power redefined. Moltmann's explorations in Shekinah theology continue in connection with the rejection of monotheism, interwoven with reflection on the perichoresis. If we pause with the last judgment, it is because Moltmann rather invites us to pause here, although it is admittedly at the expense of engaging with his constructive Trinitarian proposals.

Moltmann holds that "[t]he different biblical traditions about judgment cannot be harmonized," and he opts, on theological grounds, for the "theocentric universalism" of the deuterio-Pauline epistles, Ephesians and Colossians, as opposed to the "anthropocentric dualism" of Matthew, the Synoptic Little Apocalypse, and Revelation. According to Egyptian perspectives, humans are the sum of their deeds, so the judgment of humans is the judgment of their deeds. Cognate thinking is found in the Old Testament, but, fortunately, it is overwhelmed by notions of God's creative righteousness and justice. These felicitous notions are sometimes taken up in the New Testament, in the teaching that judgment is the rectification of injustice, not divine punitive action towards individuals, which is a spiritually and psychologically damaging idea. The basis of Christian universalism is God's revelation of himself in

Jesus Christ: this God cannot lose anyone for whom the Son of Man came—and he came for all. At the end, there will be cosmic triumph. Belief in the final separation of believers from unbelievers is disastrous. It entails "friend-enemy" thinking, whether in Christianity or in Islam: "Since for unbelievers there is no hope, they can already be punished with contempt or terror here and now. . . . To anticipate the last judgment by dividing people into believers and unbelievers (with the possible persecution of the unbelievers as God's enemies) is wrong, because it is godless."

What are we to make of this? Many readers will react to Moltmann's theology according to the content of their beliefs about the last judgment, and who but the benightedly perverse philosophical theologian or the myopic lover of exegetical minutiae will react otherwise? I do not warm to being classified with the latter groups, and certainly harbor theological valuations, but this is not just any case for universalism. What Moltmann writes is irresponsible and damaging nonsense; I am afraid that it cannot be put more mildly. His claim that traditional theology constitutes a social and political threat by virtue of its very substance is on a par with the New Atheist allegation that any religion, including Christianity, which claims to possess distinctive soteriological truth is, *ipso facto*, a menace to world peace. Not so: if I am a pacifist and a convinced Christian, my convinced Christianity does not submerge my pacifism under a wave of fear. Likewise, if I believe with sorrow that not everyone will be saved, my conviction does not overwhelm my sorrow with a wave of hostility. Moltmann has got carried away into irrationality, compounding a persistent habit in his authorship either to create false antitheses or—which is different—to proceed as though *tertium non datur*. In relation to Scripture, he chastises Elijah for slaying the prophets of Baal in the name of monotheism, and the only reason that he does not chastise Paul for saying that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10) is that he quotes only the first clause. It is possible to be a theological universalist and regret that Moltmann's theology overrides Scripture as and when he chooses; possible also to deny any sort of traditional conviction that Scripture is a norm for theology and simultaneously regret that Moltmann's theology stands in an arbitrary relation to logic. Even those disposed to defend robustly Moltmann's general theological procedure and substantive conclusions should regret the form in which he serves up his fare here.

Part 4 trades in interesting material, but it is succinct. It concerns science and theology. Moltmann's enquiry into the hermeneutics of nature leads him to repristinate some older positive attitudes, now often regarded as obsolete, toward viewing the cosmos as a system of signs. But the old can be made contemporary: "The ancient doctrine of signs can easily be translated into the modern informatics of nature." Opposition to the empirical concept of nature is not the product of theological nostalgia, but is stable in current terms. The final chapter in this book expresses the author's opposition to a Darwinian worldview and substitutes a cooperative for a competitive interpretation of nature. Moltmann's thinking is nothing if not an attempt to integrate the scientific and the ethical under the aegis of a theological worldview. In this determination of principle and display of instinct, he is at his best. Having opened this review with his words, we close it with his concluding (and representative) words, without analysis, praise, or blame: "Between the God of evolution and the God of Christian faith there is contradiction: the general 'struggle for existence' knows only survivors and victims; but the God of the crucified Christ is the saviour of the victims and the judge of the survivors. Out of the victims in the history of nature and the victims of human history, God builds his coming kingdom of peace."

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Sun of Righteousness, Arise! God's Future for Humanity and the Earth

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