

***Title: Describe and evaluate Moltmann's portrayal of the Father and his relations in *Trinity and Kingdom****

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**DECLARATION**

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

## Introduction

In *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Jürgen Moltmann begins his 200-plus page treatise on the subject by first devoting more than half of it to examining the views of others on the matter. He explains what he agrees or disagrees with. Indeed, when the subject matter is Yahweh “in his uniqueness and incomparability”<sup>1</sup>, any attempts to comprehend or compare the infinite God to the created world are bound to fall short in some respect. In similar fashion to apophatic theology which embraces such a process of negation in weeding out inapt analogies<sup>2</sup>, Moltmann introduces, analyses and discards views that he finds wanting.

In my evaluation, such a process of theological and philosophical pruning is necessary to pare away accumulated presuppositions we absorb from our surrounding culture (church culture included). We are all passengers boarding the ship of the Christian faith, 2000 years in the sailing, inevitably influenced by the attempts of prior occupants to comprehend and articulate the nuances of the religion – and should not any deadweight be jettisoned to smoothen the voyage?

Nonetheless, to Moltmann a vital clue in properly understanding the divine Trinity and its members is to be found in the very imagers that God created – us as human beings. God is the “archetype” of His human imagers (p.15), and therefore the only way to really comprehend God is by knowing oneself. A person’s own self-knowledge then becomes God’s “self-revelation” to that person (p.15). God is revealed in history which involves humanity (p.4).

In the West, the thinking about the nature of the Trinity has been dominated by a methodology whereby we begin with the unity of the One God. From there, we attempt to reconcile and comprehend how this God who is one in substance can simultaneously be three in persons (pp.17-18). In fact, his own teachers – Karl Barth and Karl Rahner – themselves concluded along these lines (p.viii).

To Moltmann, this causes too much stress to be placed on the Unity and too little placed on the Tri-unity – the former crowds out the latter. In his opinion this leads to a form of Modalism, which he describes as “one subject, three modes of being” (p.17) and derides as “mere aspects of the one subject” (p.18). Such a way of thinking leads “inescapably to the reduction of the doctrine of the Trinity to monotheism” (p.18). In my evaluation, the term monotheism is being used by Moltmann in a way which corresponds to my definition of the term Unitarianism: “that GOD is ONE; in the strictest meaning of the word, ONE; One Person, One Being, One intelligent, conscious mind ... directly the contrary, of a plurality of Persons in the Godhead”<sup>3</sup>.

Moltmann instead espouses a reversal of the flow in that stream of thinking – we should start from the Trinity and move to the Unity of God, in order “to develop a social doctrine of the Trinity” (p.19). We need to think about the Trinity in terms of relationships and fellowship, and not as a numerical unity or isolated objects (p.95).

Hence, my examination of Moltmann’s understanding of The Father and His relations shall also begin with a look at how he describes the members of the Trinity.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham/USA: Lexham Press, 2015), 31,35.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge/UK: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Frederick A Farley, *Unitarianism Defined: The Scripture Doctrine of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. A Course of Lectures* (Wentworth Press, 2019), 10.

## The Father

Moltmann rejects the understanding of the term father as referring to God's sovereignty, ownership or power. The Father is called such because He is eternally the father of The Son: "In the tri-unity, the Father eternally loves the Son" – and that is why The Father even created the world (p.46).

Citing G.A. Studdert Kennedy's *The Hardest Part*, Moltmann asserts that God's true character is revealed by "the Cross in the end – God, not Almighty, but God the Father, with a Father's sorrow and a Father's weakness, which is the strength of love" (p.35).

Even in the Old Testament paradigm, the people of Israel being taken into God's service is not a burden, but "their exaltation and their mark of distinction" as it "gives their lives meaning". The First Commandment at Sinai was not a loss of freedom, but conversely an invitation to be "completely free from other things and other powers" and enjoy "the extraordinary freedom of having to have 'no other gods' beside him" (p.219).

Directly related to this issue is the way in which God is understood to be free. In the Western-influenced way of modern thinking, freedom is inextricably tied up with the notions of power, ownership and sovereignty – to have total freedom means having nothing else controlling us. But there is another understanding of freedom, that of friendship and equality – where none lords over the other (p.56).

These different conceptions of the term free find their echoes in the sequence of God's salvation history, each corresponding to a member of the Trinity – the kingdom of The Father as our sole Lord and Creator of His servants; the kingdom of The Son making us into children of The Father; and the future kingdom of the Spirit who indwells us and makes us friends who have a direct relationship with God (pp.219-220). According to Moltmann, it is this friendship desired by God which led to creation – not out of the desire for power (p.106).

In my evaluation, Moltmann has a point here – indeed this member of the Trinity is specifically The Father, and not The King or The Creator. This fact is evident in that there was no world to rule or lord over in the eternity past preceding the creative decree: "Before he ever created, before he ever ruled the world, before anything else, this God was a Father loving his Son."<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Moltmann's life experiences living through World War II Germany<sup>5</sup> and his passion for liberation theology (culminating in his *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*) possibly skew his view of The Father. The scattered indictments against the flaws in human relations seem to point towards this (p.xiii). Indeed, by placing as his final chapters various recommendations for praxis in human relations, one is reminded that the title of Moltmann's book is not merely *The Trinity* – it is *The Trinity and The Kingdom*.

By my own estimation, in seeking to establish that the Bible in no way encourages a "doctrine of authority" (p.200), Moltmann artificially limits his interpretation – can the term father not refer to *both* an eternal relationship with The Son, *and also* the status of lord and owner? Refusing to allow other connotations of the term father paints one into a corner, for example in making The Son into The Father in Isaiah 9:6 – we should instead recognize that "The Hebrews used the term father in a great variety of senses - as a literal father, a grandfather, an ancestor, a ruler, an instructor."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (IL/USA: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Robert T. Cornelison, "The Development and Influence of Moltmann's Theology," *The Asbury Theological Journal* Vol. 55: No. 1 (Spring 2000), 15-28.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Barnes, "Albert Barnes' Notes on the Whole Bible", *Truth According to Scripture.com* (accessed 06-May-2021): <https://www.truthaccordingtoscripture.com/commentaries/bnb/isaiah-9.php#.YJNdXaERXIU>

## The Son of The Father

In seeking to establish the relationship between The Son and The Father, Moltmann attempts to strike a balance between the twin but opposite heresies that stem from God's unity – Arianism whereby The Son is less divine than The Father, and Sabellianism whereby The Son *is* The Father (p.132).

Moltmann argues that the focus on the incarnated person of Jesus is not as prophet or Messiah, but on The Son who is sent (p.75). At the Baptism He is called The Son – bringing to mind Psalm 2:7 (p.66). During His ministry He is called God's beloved son – recalling Old Testament themes of Isaac as the beloved son, Israel as God's firstborn, and the king and Messiah as God's son (p.67). Moltmann's view is clear: The Son's primary identifying characteristic is that He is simply the son of The Father.

Jesus Himself refers to The Father as “my Father” and not “Father” or “Our Father” (p.70). Jesus used the term of endearment ‘Abba’ which was not Israelite custom and revealed “an unheard-of intimacy” (p.69). Although The Father fashioned and rules all creation, Jesus did not use terms specific to these notions – indicating that He viewed His identity relationally, as “the Son of the Father” (p.70). Even with the future realization of the final eschaton where “anyone who knows that he is eternally loved by God becomes God's eternal Son” and “those who return his love become ‘sons of God’ (Rom. 8.14)”, they yet “do not become ‘the only begotten Son’” (p.107).

It is this eternal and close relationship that was such a weighty sacrifice at Golgotha. With regards to Jesus' cry *Eloi eloi lama sabachthani* on the cross and the view that this utterance was merely Jesus claiming the entirety of this prophetic Psalm onto Himself<sup>7</sup>, Moltmann fully rejects such an apologetic (pp.77 & 80). He argues from clues such as Jesus “does not want to be alone with his God. He is evidently afraid of him.”, is seeking “the protection of his friends”, and that The Father “does not hear his prayer. He rejects it.” (p.76). The real Passion is The Son's “Abandonment by God” (p.77) – in stark contrast to Jesus' consistent references to My Father, on the cross “for the first and only time in his life, the Son addresses God, not as Father but as God” (p.80).

But lest we be mistaken that The Father coldly abandoned The Son isolated and alone to bear this indescribable burden, Moltmann is adamant that “if the Father forsakes the Son, the Son does not merely lose his sonship. The Father loses his fatherhood as well” (p.80). After all, if relations require more than one person, then the absence of the other person severs the relationship: “The Father knows this agony, including the agony of his own separation from his Son.”<sup>8</sup>

In my evaluation, I would concur with Moltmann that the main relationship between The Son and The Father is just that – son and father, it is self-descriptive. I also agree that there is, after all, no division between the persons of God: “Are these experiences only of the Son, and not of the Father? The persons of the Trinity are not divided, but the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son”<sup>9</sup>. Therefore then, the agony of The Son must not have been limited to The Son alone; it would have reverberated through the entirety of the Trinity: “it was not only merely the Son who suffered but the entire Triune Godhead, the Father included”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms Vol. 1* (Edinburgh/UK: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 362.

<sup>8</sup> John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (NJ/USA: P & R Publishing Co, 2013), 417.

<sup>9</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 416.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (MI/USA: Baker Publishing Group, 2019).

## **The Holy Spirit From The Father**

Moltmann's view of the Holy Spirit sheds clear light on his focus on the Trinity as relational. It is informed by his attitude towards the generation of the Holy Spirit – specifically, on the issue of Filioque. In this millennium-old disagreement between the churches of the East and the West<sup>11</sup>, Moltmann sides firmly with the East in rejecting the procession of The Spirit from The Son. In Moltmann's understanding, John 15:26's statement *the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father* (ESV) clearly limits the procession of The Spirit to The Father alone (p.182).

Nevertheless, The Son still plays an integral role in relationship with The Holy Spirit – Moltmann clarifies that the fact of proceeding solely from The Father speaks only to the origination of The Holy Spirit, not to the inter-Trinitarian relations. As explained earlier, Moltmann does not view the term The Father as referring to the title of Creator or Sovereign, but rather as a relational term – The Father shows Himself as such “solely and exclusively in the eternal generation of the eternal Son” (p.183).

In keeping with this relational understanding of the term, The Father is the *source* of The Holy Spirit but not the *father* of The Holy Spirit – in context of the Trinity, eternally The Father is solely the father of The Son (p.183). Hence if the eternal source of The Holy Spirit is one known as The Father, the very term presupposes the existence of one who is relationally The Son (p.184). Indeed, one could say that the existence of The Son is a prerequisite, in order that “an infinitely holy and sacred energy arises between the Father and Son in mutually loving and delighting in each other”<sup>12</sup>.

The Holy Spirit is sent into the world to open the Trinity to humans to be “integrated into the history of the Trinity”, thus showing that “the Trinity is an open Trinity” (p.90) – and this leads to what is perhaps a more controversial view of Moltmann on God's nature, which will be elaborated upon later in a latter section of this essay.

## **The Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit**

As described at the beginning of my study, Moltmann opposes attempts to comprehend the Christian God by starting with the Unity and moving to the Trinity; to him, it should rather be the other way around. Hence fittingly, Moltmann subscribes to perichoresis, an indwelling and interpenetration and circulation of oneness of the three persons of the Trinity – “they are alive in one another and through the others” (p.174) and “By virtue of their eternal love they live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one” (p.175). The idea of perichoresis is in contrast to any interpenetration among human persons which cannot result in perfect unity, hence “it is because of this perfect interpenetration that the three persons are one God”<sup>13</sup>.

To Moltmann, it is only perichoresis that can resolve the tension between the unity and the three. Conjectures about the homogeneity of the one divine substance, identity of the absolute subject or any one person of person of the Trinity are insufficient (pp.150 & 157). Moltmann blurs any difference between perichoresis and a social concept of the Trinity (p.189). In his view, the personhood of God's human imagers is defined by their fellowship relations with other persons (pp.155-156, 189), and the same goes for the holy persons of the Trinity (p.150): “the relations consist

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<sup>11</sup> A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (NY/USA: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4-6

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “An Unpublished Essay on the Trinity”, *Monergism.com* (accessed 05-May-2021): <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/Edwards,%20Jonathan%20-%20An%20Unpublished%20Essay%20on%20the%20Tr.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Karen Kilby, *Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity* (New Backfriars, 2000)

in the persons and the persons in the relations” (p.186). The Trinity is a unity of equality, with no subordinationism (p.176) – The Father is only the origin, but not the ruler over the other members in the perichoretic unity (p.177).

### **The Trinity Plus**

As promised, having covered the ‘orthodox’ members of the Trinity, we now turn to Moltmann’s controversial belief: that the divine Trinity has eternally intended – nay, needed! – to leave themselves open to the addition of further “participants in the trinitarian history of God himself”. They are “open for unification with believers, with mankind, and with the whole creation.” Moltmann is confident about the clarity of this issue: “The deification of the world and humanity is the necessary conclusion: anyone who knows that he is eternally loved by God becomes God’s eternal Son” (p.107).

Moltmann explains that the culmination of history is the persons of the Trinity’s “opening of themselves for the reception and unification of the whole creation” (p.157). The divine perichoresis intends to “throw open the circulatory movement of the divine light and the divine relationships, and to take men and women, with the whole of creation, into the life-stream of the triune God” (p.178). When the final consummation is fulfilled: “All people and things then partake of the ‘inner-trinitarian life’ of God” (p.127).

There is a poetic beauty in this inclusion of all creation, for to Moltmann it is really a re-inclusion of God into Himself: citing Isaac Luria’s panentheistic concept of *Zimzum*, creation that is not-God can only exist by God’s first withdrawing from Himself; after all, what is there that is not-God, since He is infinite and omnipresent (pp.109-110)? In my evaluation however, despite Moltmann’s assertion that this concept allows us to avoid pantheism (p.110), I cannot visualize how God’s future bringing of all that is *outside-God* back to *inside-God* – especially when our current conditions are supposedly already at the stage of pantheism! – at all dodges that conclusion.

Indeed, Moltmann’s favouring of the term “That God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28) is abundantly clear from the ten times he cites this single portion of Scripture. He enlists Romans 5:3 *God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us* (ESV) and Joel 2:28-29 / Acts 2:17-18 *God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh... even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit* (ESV) to strengthen his claim Biblically (p.111). When this glorious promise is fully met, the immanent and economic Trinity will be one and the same (p.161). This truth is symbolized and revealed by the “explicitly triadical formulations” of baptism where believers are baptized into the name of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit (p.90).

The Father and his relations are key to all this. The entire desire and need to create and include imagers into the Trinity stems from The Father’s eternal love for The Son, which is a love of “like for like” and presupposes love for the ‘Other’ as well (p.46). God seeks to love the other for this the perfection of selfless love (p.106). In fact, both these kinds of love are intertwined because it is through The Son that all creation arose: “the idea of the world is already inherent in the Father’s love for the Son” (p.108).

The way Moltmann sees it, God has from all eternity intended to create us and bring us into fellowship with the Trinity (p.107) – it is not merely an arbitrary decision of His free will (p.106). It is the signature event of the Christian faith – the Passion of The Son. Moltmann rejects the impassability of God which he paints as “apathy” (p.23). To his mind, the incapability of suffering points not to perfection, but imperfection. For God to be capable of love for another, He must be capable of suffering – a suffering which comes from the “superabundance and overflowing of His being” (p.23).

Even in Old Testament history we find this attested to – God as *Shekinah* present in Israel, suffering with Israel, cutting Himself off for the sake of beloved Israel (pp.27-30). In love, God seeks counterparts who freely love in return – it is this love for freedom that drives God to even create at all (p.30).

Passion and Shekinah, to Moltmann these demonstrate that God did not merely plan the cross as a reaction to sin or even as a mere decision – it is an inescapable part of God’s very eternal nature of love, which is a capacity for suffering (p.32). It was never not part of God’s plan, for The Son is described in Revelation 5:12 as “the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world” (pp.8 & 159). The centre of the Trinity is the cross (p.83).

If perfect love is selfless, then it is necessary that God perfectly gives up Himself in self-forsaking (p.33). The Incarnation of The Son was not out of deficiency but abundance of creative fulness; not merely the answer to sin, but the fulfilment of God’s desire to bring us to participate in divine love (p.46). In contrast to Karl Barth’s view that God is fully free and merely elected to have fellowship with humanity, Moltmann asserts that God needs us – how could God be fully self-sufficient before deciding to create us, yet not after? God’s suffering love contradicts the idea of “impassable glory” (p.53).

In my evaluation, Moltmann’s view has a certain elegance in explaining *why* God even chose to create anything at all. In Moltmann’s estimation, God didn’t have a choice! That statement feels extreme to me, and recalls the controversial concept of Essential Kenosis that is championed by Thomas Jay Oord: “God’s loving nature *requires* God to create a world with creatures God cannot control”<sup>14</sup> (emphasis mine). So adamant is Moltmann’s insistence on God needing creation that Paul Molnar cautions this view as being equal to “there is no God independent of the world”<sup>15</sup>. With such comparisons and criticisms in mind, care must be taken before unreservedly embracing Moltmann’s conclusions.

## **Conclusion**

Moltmann’s thesis on the Trinity – Father, Son, Spirit and their intertwining relations – draws extensively on historical Christian (and even non-Christian) thought on the nature of God. If nothing else, his overview and the inspirations he cites serve to open up our eyes to just how wide, diverse and seemingly irreconcilable the many views about our God are. Although Moltmann himself is confident that the perichoretic, social model of the Trinity which he champions is the best candidate, in my own evaluation his tome does not put this two-millennia old debate to rest. Indeed, the true nature of the Trinity might very well be one of those secret things that belong to God (Deuteronomy 29:29). If Moltmann is correct about what “That God may be all in all” entails, perhaps we will one day find out for ourselves – when we are fully unified with the Trinity.

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (USA: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 146.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce McCormack, ed., *Theology As Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology: A Festschrift for Daniel L. Migliore* (Grand Rapids/USA: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2009), 160.

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