

THE RESURRECTION IN JÜRGEN MOLTMANN

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"Until Moltmann and Pannenberg, no one conceived that historical inquiry could again be a ground for a Christology based on the Resurrection."¹ Although Moltmann and Pannenberg have founded their respective theologies on the resurrection, Moltmann's use of "resurrection" diverges significantly from the common conception of the term. An understanding of the social character of Moltmann's use of this symbol is vital to a proper apprehension of his work.

I. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Moltmann, Israel's religion of promise was eminently this-worldly in orientation, repudiating any notion of resignation to the beyond of epiphany religion. For Israel, death cuts one off from God and the promise. The hope of resurrection found on the periphery of Judaism in later apocalyptic has nothing to do with hope for man beyond death or with a recognition of immortal substances in which man participates. In Israel the idea of the raising of the dead was formulated within the framework of the religion of promise. It was not a case of natural reanimation but rather the fulfilling of Yahweh's promises of life in the dead bearer of the promise. Moltmann's contention that Israel clung "with obstinate exclusiveness" to the historic and this-worldly fulfillment of the promises thus forms the presupposition for understanding the resurrection of Christ as the resurrection of the crucified One and not as a symbol for the hope of immortality and the concomitant resigned attitude toward life.

Within this context Jesus' death on the cross signified the end of his life and hopes. The death of Jesus was experienced as the death of the one sent as the Messiah of God and therefore implied also the death of God. His death was experienced and proclaimed as that of godforsakenness, judgment, and exclusion from the promised life. "In this context of these expectations of life, his resurrection must then be understood not as a mere return to life as such, but as a conquest of the deadliness of death—as a conquest of godforsakenness, as a conquest of judgment and of the curse, as a beginning of the fulfillment of the promised life, and thus as a

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¹ L. Gilkey, *Religion and the Scientific Future: Reflections on Myth, Science, and Theology* (New York: Harper, 1970) 25

conquest of all that is dead in death, as a negation of the negative (Hegel), as a negation of the negation of God."² Jesus' resurrection was not therefore a private Easter for his private Good Friday but rather the beginning of the abolition of the universal Good Friday, the end of the godforsakenness of the world that comes to light in the deadliness of the death on the cross. Christ's resurrection is thus the beginning of the general resurrection of the dead.

Contrary to the traditional epiphanic view of resurrection, which turns Easter into the birth of a new *kyrios* cult by way of resignation from the contradictions of the present, the eschatology of promise takes the contradictions of this world in all their force and resolves them in the God who creates *ex nihilo*. "Resurrection from the dead" is an apocalyptic expression for the God who creates being out of nonbeing. Hence the Jesus who by his death became part of the nothingness and chaos of historical existence was as Christ created out of nothing. This recreative work of God is revelatory of his divinity and points forward to the *eschaton* in which his divinity will be revealed in all.

Because the "resurrection of the dead" is a symbol for the *eschaton*—the end of the history of unrighteousness—the resurrection of Jesus can have nothing to do with any idea of revivification of the dead Jesus or with any idea of the immortality of the soul.

"Resurrection of the dead" first of all excludes any idea of a revivification of the dead Jesus which might have reversed the process of his death. Easter faith can never mean that the dead returned to this life, which leads to death. . . . The symbol of "resurrection from the dead" means a qualitatively new life which no longer knows death and therefore cannot be a continuation of this mortal life. . . . On the other hand, "resurrection of the dead" excludes any idea of "a life after death," of which many religions speak, whether in the idea of immortality of the soul or in the idea of the transmigration of souls. Resurrection life is not a further life after death, whether in the soul or the spirit, in children or in reputation; it means the annihilation of death in the victory of the new, eternal life.³

The resurrection of the dead, understood as a present hope amidst this "body of death," contradicts the nothingness of transitoriness (*Vergänglichkeit*), not as future history but the future of history, the pledge of a new creation.

II. WHAT WAS THE RESURRECTION?

What actually happened between the crucifixion and burial of Jesus and his Easter appearances is shrouded in the mystery of the still unknown and hidden God. Notwithstanding, this event of resurrection, with-

² J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper, 1967) 211.

³ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper, 1974) 170.

out analogy in history, is described by an apocalyptic symbol for the hope that where death is concerned God will at last prove his divinity in the end. This symbol therefore looks expectantly toward the future proof of God's creative power over nonbeing.

What "resurrection of the dead" really is, and what "actually happened" in the raising of Jesus, is thus a thing which not even the New Testament Easter narratives profess to know. From the mutually radically contradictory experiences of the cross and the appearances of Jesus, they argue to an event in between as an eschatological event for which the verifying analogy is as yet only in prospect and is still to come.⁴

Because it is without analogy in experience, the resurrection of Jesus cannot be verified historically. Indeed the attempt to know historically what "actually happened" robs history of its real character as history, for in objectivization history moves out of the mode of being and into the mode of having. For Moltmann the truth of Jesus' resurrection balks at this category of having. Here he finds justification for—indeed, the necessity of—existential interpretation.⁵ "The resurrection of Jesus from the dead by God does not speak the 'language of facts,' but only the language of faith and hope, that is, the 'language of promise.'"⁶

The cross and resurrection are thus on different levels of history: the cross historical (*historisch*), the resurrection historic (*geschichtlich*) and eschatological. The resurrection is historical only insofar as it creates history by opening anew the future and anticipating the universal future.⁷

The "new" of the gospels is not equivalent to the good old days, but rather is seen in contradiction. . . . "Resurrection" has, therefore, no actual "re," as the expressions *resurrectio* and *anastasis* presuppose. It is more correct to render it the exodus of Jesus from the dead and godforsakenness, a departure out of death into life which finds its success in the death of death. *Resurrectio* is no resurrection, but rather a *promissio*. It has no *anamnesis*, but rather anticipation.⁸

"The witnesses of Easter do not recognize the risen Lord in a blaze of heavenly, supra-worldly eternity, but in the foretaste and dawn of his eschatological future for the world."⁹

How did the eyewitnesses see the risen Christ? They saw him in the pre-reflected glory of the anticipated messianic kingdom in which God will be revealed in all and the whole earth will be full of his glory (Isaiah 60).

When the crucified Jesus "appears" in glory to the women and the disciples after his death, this then means the pre-reflection of his future in the coming glory of God. Christ appears to the people concerned in the light of the future which cannot otherwise be perceived in the world as yet. One day he will

⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* 197.

⁵ J. Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Scribner's, 1969) 54.

⁶ Moltmann, *Crucified God* 173.

⁷ J. Moltmann, *Hope and Planning* (New York: Harper, 1971) 215.

⁸ J. Moltmann, "Die Kategorie *Novum* in der christlichen Theologie," *Perspektiven der Theologie: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Munich: Kaiser, 1968) 179.

⁹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* 86.

appear to the whole world as he now appears to the Easter witnesses. That is to say, his Easter appearances have to be understood as the pre-reflection of his future; and what his disciples see at Easter is, correspondingly, the form taken by anticipating perception.¹⁰

The visions that the Easter witnesses saw "were therefore not mystical transportations into another world beyond, nor were they inner illuminations, but a sight and a foretaste in the countenance of the crucified Christ of the God who was to come, a matter of being seized by the coming change in the world through God's glory."¹¹

Christ thus arose into God's future and was seen and believed as the present representative of the future of God, wherein mankind and creation are new and free. Jesus has been raised into God's eschatological judgment, and God has declared in favor of the accused, the one crucified as a political agitator and a blasphemer. Seen eschatologically, Jesus is the incarnation of God and new being.

The Christ-event is not to be understood only as the *inauguration* of the future of God, but also as the *incarnation* of the future in the misery of history. In him the future of new being is historically opened. This opening is itself already the incarnation of new being.¹²

Jesus is not a mere stand-in for God but the incarnation of God's future. He is not only its forerunner but also its realization. The resurrection of Christ is thus a theodicy for the universal hope for righteousness. "If God raised this dishonoured man in his coming righteousness, it follows that in this crucified figure he manifests his true righteousness, the right of the unconditional grace which makes righteous the unrighteous and those without rights."¹³

The Easter visions having been set forth as "pre-reflective anticipations," the question arises as to whom the witnesses saw. The disciples saw Jesus in the glory of the coming God and the glory of the coming God in Jesus in a reciprocal process of identification. The glory of God reflected in the unveiled face of Christ reveals his likeness to God as "the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4, 6; Heb 1:3). This idea of "image" recalls the general vocation for which man was destined at creation (Gen 1:26). Hence "the closeness of all men to being the image of God and the nearness of believers to that unveiled face must not be dimmed by these references."¹⁴

Having received these pre-reflective anticipations of God's future in the Christ event, the disciples returned from Galilee to Jerusalem to wait for the kingdom of the crucified Christ according to apocalyptic tradition. At Jerusalem, however, they found out about the stories of the empty tomb

¹⁰ J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (New York: Harper, 1981) 85.

¹¹ Moltmann, *Crucified God* 167-168.

¹² J. Moltmann, "Antwort auf die Kritik der Theologie der Hoffnung," *Diskussion über die "Theologie der Hoffnung"* (ed. W. D. Marsch; Munich: Kaiser, 1967) 227 (italics his).

¹³ Moltmann, *Crucified God* 175-176.

¹⁴ Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom* 86.

and accepted these as confirmation of the new eschatological belief in Jesus they had brought with them. "According to this analysis of the Easter appearances and visions, the original significance of the Easter faith is that the eye-witnesses perceived the earthly, crucified Jesus of the past in the glory of God's coming and drew conclusions from that in their experience of a call and mission."¹⁵

The resurrection of Christ is, then, a *promissio inquieta* that spurs man on in vocational hope of what will be until at last the resurrection of the dead is universally realized in the totality of new being and the alleviation of all suffering. It is only historic when viewed from the *eschaton* in the consciousness of mission.

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

Wolf-Dieter Marsch has noted that "Moltmann has stood with Karl Barth in the opinion that Christ's resurrection is the central datum of the Christian faith."¹⁶ Clearly, the later Barth stood unabashedly for the space-time factuality of the resurrection. For him it "did not take place in a heavenly or supra-heavenly realm, or as part of an intra-divine movement or a divine conversation, but before the gates of Jerusalem in the days of Tiberius Caesar and therefore in the place and time which are also ours, in our sphere."¹⁷ Moltmann's continual interaction with Barth and his aversion to aspects of existentialism have apparently influenced some interpreters to conclude that he too holds to the space-time factuality of the resurrection event. John Macquarrie says Moltmann wants "to claim that Christ's resurrection was in some sense an objective historical event."¹⁸ Dale Vree says that "Moltmann insists on the physical Resurrection of Christ."¹⁹ Gilkey maintains that Moltmann "*argues historically* for the validity of the appearances and so of the Resurrection, rather than merely accepting them as certainly 'given' because of Scriptural assertions about them."²⁰

Such comments provide examples of the failure to understand Moltmann's basic nonontological epistemological stance, featuring the processive character of reality, the ontology of the not-yet, and the lack of a finalized, objective fact in any sense of the word, since factuality presupposes the finished and static cosmos of Greek thought against which Moltmann regularly inveighs.

"The resurrection of Jesus from the dead by God does not speak the 'language of facts,' but only the language of faith and hope, that is, the 'language of promise.'"²¹ Christopher Morse correctly describes the nature of the word-event of the resurrection as mission:

¹⁵ Moltmann, *Crucified God* 168.

¹⁶ W.-D. Marsch, "Zur Einleitung," *Diskussion* 11.

¹⁷ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961) 4.3.298.

¹⁸ J. Macquarrie, *Christian Hope* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 77.

¹⁹ D. Vree, *On Synthesizing Marxism and Christianity* (New York: Wiley, 1976) 100.

²⁰ Gilkey, *Religion* 150 n. (italics his).

²¹ Moltmann, *Crucified God* 173.

As reported in the New Testament the resurrection of Jesus is not a concluded event which has become a datum of the past to be appropriated as archeological fact or as timeless myth. It is essentially the activation of a mission to all people which "necessitates" speech about Jesus as both crucified and risen. Language is the ingredient in the raising of Jesus from the dead. Proclamation is essential to the form of reality that the resurrection takes.²²

What actually happened after the historical (*historisch*) crucifixion of Jesus Moltmann cannot say. The resurrection, as promise, is an assertion of hope that has no congruence with actuality, being rather a contradiction to what is that is based on imagination's idea of what could be.²³

This Resurrection symbolism gives us a content for hope, which otherwise remains simply a regulative idea of reason in the Kantian sense. The phenomenology of freedom can now be further worked out "in the light of" an interpretation of the Resurrection texts.²⁴

The disciples and Paul are thus supposed to have utilized the prevalent apocalyptic symbol of resurrection to explain what was otherwise inexplicable.

They were able to speak of this surprising occurrence of seeing Jesus alive after his death as God's act of raising him from the dead because they already shared the resurrection hope in late-Jewish apocalypticism. . . . The event did not initiate the language; rather the language of hope was already prepared beforehand as the symbolic means to interpret what was happening before their eyes.²⁵

Despite the incontestable fact, documented by extra-Biblical as well as Biblical sources, that Jewish thought in the time of Jesus and Paul unequivocally and unanimously understood the resurrection as a physical raising to an eternal beyond, the important thing for Moltmann and the proponents of hope is the reappropriation of this Biblical symbol as a heuristic device for the purposes of world transformation. "The historical facticity of the resurrection of Christ is not essential, but rather its inner 'tendency' and 'latency,' the 'intention of God' which is announced to consciousness and which stimulates thought" toward the negation of the negative.²⁶

What Moltmann means by resurrection is therefore only symbolically understood as that which will occur in the course of human history as God identifies with the poor, who rise up in revolt against oppression. "What appears in the so-called 'Easter appearances' is not 'the presence of the eternal' but the presence of a historical dynamic of word and act which promises to overcome all that which stands in contradiction to the way of

²² C. Morse, *The Language of Promise in Moltmann's Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 51.

²³ On the significance of imagination cf. G. Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Harper, 1989), written under Moltmann.

²⁴ L. Mudge in P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 29.

²⁵ C. Braaten, *The Future of God: The Revolutionary Dynamics of Hope* (New York: Harper, 1969) 76.

²⁶ W.-D. Marsch, "Die Hoffnung des Glaubens," *Diskussion* 122.

the crucified Lord."²⁷ It is "the historical process to which all of world history is subject"²⁸ as it must indeed be, since the transformation of the dead Jesus into the eschatological Christ of God is contingent on the hope for transformation of the world that is anticipated in the resurrection symbol.

World history is symbolized by the cross and resurrection.

The resurrection was not for Jesus an exit from our brutal world into heavenly bliss above. . . . The first witnesses identified the risen Jesus by the marks of his crucifixion. The body of the risen Jesus can be identified by us in the bruised and bleeding body of mankind with which he identified himself.²⁹

Moltmann speaks of "the world of the cross, which still awaits the resurrection."³⁰ The cross discloses the world as godless; it discloses the radical worldliness of the world, in which man is destined to live *etsi deus non daretur*, as if God were not given (Bonhoeffer).³¹ Bonhoeffer's "worldly life" means . . . a life of discipleship, following Christ and participating in the sufferings of God in the world, 'sharing the life' of Christ.³²

In the way and destiny of Jesus Christ there lay for the believer the anticipation, or better, the model of the coming kingdom of human man amidst the world kingdoms. Indeed, this anticipation is not itself yet the kingdom, but is already its beginning. The crucified embodies the new humanity, which corresponds to God, under the relations of inhumanity, which God opposes. He embodies homeland (*Heimat*) under the relations of distance and freedom amidst the fetters of slavery.³³

Each person is called to continue on in the messianic "life of Christ" in recognition of the "permanent incompleteness of the Jewish hope for the Messiah."

The messianic hope which Jews and Christians received together but have experienced differently was given to them not for their benefit, but for abandoned humanity. Consequently the Messiah will not appear in Jerusalem, nor in Rome nor in Geneva. He will come among the poor, the mourners, those who hunger for righteousness and are persecuted for it. He will appear among the "beggars and lepers," in Jerusalem, Rome, Geneva and other places. Only when the suffering of those who have the messianic hope becomes the hope of those who suffer with this world will Jews and Christians really understand their provisional finality and honour godforsaken mankind's Messiah.³⁴

²⁷ Morse, *Promise* 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 33 (italics his).

²⁹ Braaten, *Future of God* 83.

³⁰ Moltmann, *Hope and Planning* 44.

³¹ *Ibid.* 106.

³² J. Moltmann, "The Lordship of Christ and Human Society," in J. Moltmann and J. Weissbach, *Two Studies in the Theology of Bonhoeffer* (New York: Scribner's, 1967) 66.

³³ J. Moltmann, *Mensch: Christliche Anthropologie in den Konflikten der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Kreuz, 1971) 167.

³⁴ J. Moltmann, "Messianic Hope: In Christianity," *Christians and Jews* (Concilium 98; ed. H. Kung and W. Kasper; New York: Seabury, 1974-75) 66.

The creative power involved in the proclamation of the language-event of the resurrection "makes man, theologically speaking, true man."³⁵ In the resurrected Christ is revealed what true humanity is and will be. The resurrection symbol "asserts that this one man has been raised before all others and that with him the process of the raising of the dead has been set in motion."³⁶ It will be noted that the resurrection is not spoken of as a completed event but rather as a process. This is necessarily the case, because since Christ's resurrection is only provisional and anticipatory its ontological status awaits the completed process of resurrection at the end of history. There can be no final end of history for Moltmann, however, lest there no longer be a future to open the process.³⁷ Hence in the strictest terms Jesus cannot ever be said to have been resurrected.

Despite their apparent irreconcilability, Moltmann juxtaposes the impossibility of an end of history with the needed eschatological horizon of new being and ontology.

In the messianic life of the gospel, the human being's likeness to God appears as a historical process with an eschatological termination; it is not a static condition. *Being* human means *becoming* human in the process. Here too, the image of God is the whole person, the embodied person, the person in his community with other people, because in the messianic fellowship of Jesus, people become whole, embodied and social human beings, whom death no longer divides into soul and body, and whom death no longer divides from God and from one another. They already live, here and now, in the process of resurrection, and in this process experience themselves as accepted and promised, wholly, bodily and socially. In history, the messianic becoming human of the human being remains incomplete and uncompleteable. It is only the eschatological annihilation of death, the redemption of the body in a new earth under a new heaven, which will consummate the "becoming" process of human beings, thereby fulfilling their creaturely destiny.³⁸

Each man necessarily participates in the "life of Christ," since man is in process. As each man is incomplete in history and must be if the process is to continue, so Jesus is incomplete insofar as he is the Messiah or the Christ, titles that are eschatological and await confirmation. Each man may become part of the Christ as he emulates the examples of the model Liberator, the historical Jesus, in the "common resurrection movement" of liberation through identification with the suffering.

³⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* 143.

³⁶ Moltmann, *Crucified God* 171.

³⁷ According to Moltmann "it is always the error of chiliasm to take a specific epoch of history for the 'end of history'" (*Hope and Planning* 192). R. Ruether is correct in concluding that "Moltmann has really not gotten beyond the dilemma of crisis theology to establish a basis for projecting the final consummation of the historical dialectic as something that could conceivably happen. This dialectic itself is perfectly adequately explained by Garaudy's description of the infinite as endless movement. The demand in human nature for a consummation of this dialectic is the *mythos* out of which he lives. This 'infinite exigency' won't ever be fulfilled" (*The Radical Kingdom: The Western Experience of Messianic Hope* [New York: Harper, 1970] 218).

³⁸ J. Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985) 227 (italics his).

The resurrection of Christ is thus still outstanding. It has begun in the anticipation of the future of Jesus but awaits completion in the mission of humanity toward community, realized in the unhistorical *eschaton*. The resurrection can apparently be realized existentially as well as socially. Moltmann recounts an experience of reading Dostoevsky while a prisoner of war during World War II. During those three years as a prisoner, reading the great Russian existentialist gave Moltmann hope "to suffer in and with people." This was the time, he recalls, when the motifs for the theology of hope came into being. Speaking of his experience in the third person, Moltmann acknowledges his existentialist reading as inducing in him the resurrection of the dead:

These impulses did not grow out of the yearning to be released and finally to "go home." Rather, hope came to life as the prisoner accepted his imprisonment, affirmed the barbed wire, and in this situation discovered the real human being in himself and others. It was not at his release but even while in prison that the "resurrection of the dead" happened for him. Faith inside the "house of the dead" is resurrection, as Dostoevsky continually emphasizes.³⁹

"In this world, resurrection happens where inexhaustible sympathy reaches the unhappy one and he accepts his suffering."⁴⁰

While Moltmann here clearly recounts an idea of resurrection that is individualistic insofar as it occurred only for him, the individualism of existentialism is generally something against which he objects in the strongest terms. Moltmann's emphasis is clearly social, and the resurrection of which he mainly speaks involves the entirety of humanity as "body."

Not the *corpse* that we can dissect objectively, but the *body* with which we identify in love, stands in the horizon of the resurrection hope. There is no meaningful hope for the body we *have*, but only for the body we *are*.⁴¹

Hence the resurrection has nothing to do with a cessation of mortality but rather with the overcoming of the conditions of this-worldly death.

Body and soul, the whole man sinks into the grave. But, this spirit of resurrection confers to life an indestructible direction and openness to the future that reaches out over death into a life which overcomes death. . . . Wherever we give ourselves wholly to this direction, wherever we live entirely in the future of God, and draw the power of this future into our lives; there we overcome death, there we surpass, as it were, the coming death.⁴²

Moltmann's resurrection hope, therefore, does not make men dream of heaven. Rather, it makes them ready to accept their mortal life and to find identity in humanizing the repressive society of "having." With Moses Hess and Karl Marx, Moltmann wants to "break the domination of the category of having over the category of being,"⁴³ this despite the fact that

³⁹ J. Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 95.

⁴¹ Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* 58 (italics his).

⁴² J. Moltmann, *The Gospel of Liberation* (Waco: Word, 1973) 136.

⁴³ Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* 59.

the category of being is replaced in Moltmann's theology by the praxis of mission,⁴⁴ on which the obtaining of an eschatological ontology is dependent. "Jesus' resurrection can be understood as the protest of life against death," "the humanization of the human condition as a whole."⁴⁵ Man cannot find identity in this life in isolation but "in going out of himself and becoming personally, socially, and politically incarnate."⁴⁶ "He finds life from the dead where in love he is delivered over to the pain of the negative"⁴⁷ after the example of Jesus. The historical person of Jesus thus provides the model of the life of liberating suffering that each man is called to emulate in history until, at last, in a nonhistorical *eschaton* beyond space and time, new being is achieved and the provisional eschatological titles of Jesus ("Christ," "Lord," and so forth) become ontological realities that all people share in the community of the kingdom.

⁴⁴ M. D. Meeks, *Origins of the Theology of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 104–105. As E. Bloch says (*Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1972] 66), the new philosophy of "not-yet-manifest" does not allow the slightest hint of an *ontos ōn*, of an ontology.

⁴⁵ Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* 59. Elsewhere Moltmann describes the "resurrection of the human being" (Dostoevsky) which he experienced as a prisoner of war as being what Marx called the "human emancipation of man" (*Experiment Hope* 87).

⁴⁶ Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* 57.

⁴⁷ Moltmann, *Hope and Planning* 24.