

## SEMINAR ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

### THE TRINITY AS COMMUNITY OF PERSONS

The purpose of the seminar for which this paper was prepared is to explore the soteriological and eschatological dimensions of the doctrine of the Trinity. Following the format of the seminar, the first part of the paper will provide a brief analysis and critique of the Trinitarian theology of Jürgen Moltmann, above all as this is summarized in his book, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, pages 50-65. The second part of the paper will be devoted to some personal reflections on the topic of the seminar.

#### I. REFLECTIONS ON MOLTSMANN'S *THE CHURCH IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT*

In a series of books published within the last two decades, Jürgen Moltmann has laid out a new understanding of Christian eschatology which looks, not only to the "four last things" for the individual, but likewise to the end of the present world order, the goal or ultimate purpose of the human race. His reflections on eschatology, moreover, are clearly shaped by antecedent belief in the reality of the three divine persons and their active role in human history; the end or purpose of creation is the glorification of the Father through the Son and in the power of the Spirit. Accordingly, his theology seems to be an apt frame of reference for a discussion of the soteriological and eschatological dimensions of the doctrine of the Trinity, as proposed for this seminar. In my remarks this afternoon, I will limit myself largely to an exposition and critique of Moltmann's Trinitarian scheme for the salvation of the world.

In his first major work on the subject of eschatology, *Theology of Hope*,<sup>1</sup> Moltmann from a philosophical point of view tried to sketch an understanding of human history as open-ended, capable of radical transformation in terms of what exists here and now as a promise. Whereas according to the normal canons of historiography the past is the best index of what is likely to happen in the future, Moltmann argued that there is and indeed should be a basic discontinuity between the past and the present, on the one hand, and the future, on the other. For the future is disclosed in promises which stand in contradiction to the past and the present and thus challenge human beings to abandon the past with all its limitations and work for the achievement and/or fulfilment of future goals. Truth, insofar as it is identified with the content of a promise, is accordingly not to be understood as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, the corres-

<sup>1</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. by James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

pondence of the mind to reality as it is presently constituted, but rather as *inadaequatio rei et intellectus*,<sup>2</sup> the lack of correspondence between the mind and reality as it will one day exist; this lack of correspondence, however, challenges the individual human being, as noted above, to overcome the discrepancy between the present and the future through disciplined effort here and now. Granted this basic philosophical approach to time and history, Moltmann then developed a theology of the resurrection in which what happened to Jesus two thousand years ago is represented as a promise of what still lies in the future for Jesus himself, for the human race and for the world process as a whole. As Moltmann comments, the future of the risen Lord, and together with it the future of all creation,

is still outstanding, has not yet come about, has not yet appeared, but it is promised and guaranteed in his resurrection, and indeed is given along with his resurrection as a necessary consequence: the end of death, and a new creation in which amid the life and righteousness of all things God is all in all.<sup>3</sup>

Some years later, in *The Crucified God*,<sup>4</sup> Moltmann was at pains to correct certain popular misconceptions which had arisen as a result of *Theology of Hope*. The resurrection, after all, is the new life which came to Jesus only after he had equivalently suffered the pains of the damned in his passion and death. That is, he experienced on the cross alienation: not only from his fellow Jews, in that he was convicted of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin; and from the Roman authorities, because he was accused of treason; but also from God, his Father, since in his dying moments he lost the sense of the latter's presence and support which had been with him all through his previous life.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, if Jesus experienced on the cross the temporary loss of his Sonship, his special relationship to the Father, then, speculated Moltmann, the Father must likewise have lost his Fatherhood at that decisive moment. "The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son."<sup>6</sup> In that moment of utter desperation, of course, the Father and the Son are reunited with one another in a new and deeper way through the power of the Spirit. One might well question various details of Moltmann's doctrine of the Trinity here.<sup>7</sup> But the basic thrust of his argument still seems to be valid:

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86; 118-19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> In my judgment, Moltmann is engaging here in rhetorical exaggeration which confuses rather than clarifies the issues. His main point seems to be that the three divine persons must experience human desolation in order to redeem it, incorporate it into their plan for the salvation of the world. But, for that purpose, is it necessary to say that God the

namely, that the new creation which is guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus will be achieved only at a price. Human beings will have to learn to imitate the suffering love of the three divine persons for each of their rational creatures. Just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have willingly taken on pain and suffering in the effort to bring the world process to a blessed end, so human beings, in order to cooperate with the divine plan for the salvation of the world, will themselves have to endure pain and suffering, at least to the extent of sacrificing their own self-interests for the sake of the Kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in the third member of the trilogy, namely, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*,<sup>9</sup> Moltmann spells out in detail his vision of the "new creation" in Christ and the role of the Church in bringing about this new stage of existence for all God's creatures. His attention, naturally, is focused on the present era prior to Jesus' second coming, but he likewise has some remarks on what will happen at that fateful moment when a new age of the world will begin. The scriptural notion of glory or *doxa* is the key concept here. During his earthly life, Jesus glorified the Father by his unswerving obedience to the Father's will; the Father, in turn, glorified Jesus through his resurrection and exaltation.<sup>10</sup> The Spirit here and now glorifies both the Father and the Son by freeing men and women for fellowship with them, filling human beings in their freedom with joy and thanksgiving. Wherever, accordingly, "the Gospel is preached to the poor, sins are forgiven, the sick are healed, the oppressed are freed and outcasts are accepted, God is glorified and creation is in part perfected."<sup>11</sup> At the end of the present era, Christ will hand over to the Father all of creation, insofar as it has been perfected by the invisible sanctifying power of the Spirit. Thereby the pain and suffering of the present era will not be erased, as if it never happened, but will instead remain, albeit in a transfigured state, as the basis for the new life of joy and happiness in the age to come. As Moltmann comments,

The history of God's suffering in the passion of the Son and the sighings of the Spirit serves the history of God's joy in the Spirit and his completed felicity at the end. That is the ultimate goal of God's history of suffering in the

Father truly experiences the loss of his Fatherhood and the Son the loss of his Sonship so as to be reunited with one another again in the power of the Spirit? It would seem to be enough to propose that the Son in his human consciousness has the feeling of abandonment by the Father and that the Father empathizes deeply with the Son in this feeling of abandonment. In other words, from an ontological perspective they are never separated from each other, for that would be contrary to their basic existence as a divine community. But, psychologically speaking, they are made familiar with the pain and mental anguish of the feeling of abandonment which can be such a trial to human beings at different moments in their lives. Furthermore, even among human beings, abandonment by God is real only in terms of feelings, not as a matter of fact, as Moltmann himself never tires of repeating. God's chosen ones are precisely the poor and the oppressed of this world (cf. *The Crucified God*, pp. 176-77).

<sup>8</sup>Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, pp. 277-78; 317-38.

<sup>9</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60.

world. But once the joy of union is complete the history of suffering does not become obsolete and a thing of the past. A suffering that has been endured, and which has brought about liberation, eternal life and union, it remains the ground of eternal joy in the salvation of God and his new creation.<sup>12</sup>

The new creation which begins with the second coming of Christ is therefore not simply a restoration of what was damaged or lost as a result of sin over the centuries, but rather something genuinely new which has come into being paradoxically only because of sin and its initial effects on the God-world relationship.

Basically, I find myself in agreement with Moltmann on this last point, and indeed with his entire scheme for the reinterpretation of traditional Christian eschatology. That is, I too believe that creation has been from the very beginning, but especially from the appearance of the human species in the evolutionary process, a source of "pain" for the three divine persons, but that they have willingly undergone this pain and suffering in order to experience the even deeper joy of surmounting these evils through the self-giving love characteristic of their own life in community. Furthermore, through the invisible action of grace in the minds and hearts of all human beings, and through the example of Jesus' life, death and resurrection for those who have been positively affected by the preaching of the gospel, the divine persons have been miraculously able to arouse in a great many, if not all, of their rational creatures some rudimentary instinct for that same spirit of self-giving love. Precarious as this gift of the Spirit might be, given the harsh and dreadful circumstances of so many human lives, it still represents for the individuals thus touched by God their unique opportunity for salvation, i.e., union with the persons of the Trinity in their never-ending exchange of life and love. Creation, therefore, was and still is a trial for the three divine persons, but it is a trial which, so to speak, brings out the best in themselves and in their (rational) creatures.

The weakness of Moltmann's position, as I see it, lies not in his eschatological vision as such, but rather in the vague and imprecise metaphysics which undergirds that same vision. That is, whereas I agree with him that the history of creation is part of the history of God, hence that the mission of the Church is simply an extension of the visible mission of Christ and an ongoing representation of the invisible mission of the Spirit in the world,<sup>13</sup> I cannot make sense out of his further remarks that God is a God with "future as his essential nature," someone "whom we therefore cannot really have in us or over us but always only before us, who encounters us in his promises for the future, and whom we therefore cannot 'have' either, but can only await in active hope."<sup>14</sup> One cannot have it both ways. If the history of the three divine persons in their involvement with their (rational) creatures is open-ended and incomplete, then they do not exist in the future any more than we humans do. For them too the future is still non-existent, although

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>14</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 16.

clearly through their "primordial nature," as Whitehead suggests,<sup>15</sup> they have an unparalleled conjectural knowledge of what is likely to happen at the next moment, next year, indeed to the end of the world. Hence they can offer to all their creatures, but above all to their rational creatures, actual grace or, in Whiteheadian language, "initial aims" . . . "initial aims" which will effectively guide them into the future. Only in this qualified sense are the three divine persons collectively a God of the future; i.e., their impact on the lives of their creatures in and through initial aims is always with an eye to the future, to the fulfillment of promises initially made in Christ and already to some extent achieved in the invisible work of the Spirit.

## II. THE TRINITY: A COMMUNITY OF PERSONS

In the first part of this paper I presented an overview of Jürgen Moltmann's trinitarian theology, together with some critical comments on what I perceive to be the limitations of that theory. Here I will offer a sketch of my own Trinitarian theology. Some of it has already been published.<sup>16</sup> Much of it is still in manuscript form, but I hope it will be published as a book within the next year. In any case, I will presume no prior knowledge of my own approach to the Trinity in this brief overview.

I propose that the Trinity should be conceived as a community of three divine persons who love one another in perfect freedom and through their continuous interaction with one another constitute that higher reality which is their unity as one God. In other words, God is Spirit (John 4, 24), but Spirit is a shared or communitarian reality, the reality of three persons loving one another in perfect freedom and thereby constituting an indissoluble community of life and love. The Holy Spirit is the personification of the life principle animating all three persons. That is, as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, he brings them together as a community and is himself their third member. Philosophically speaking, of course, this presumes that not individual substance, but community is the first category of being, that which ultimately exists. Persons, to be sure, ultimately exist; but precisely as persons they exist in community. To be a person is to be a member of a community and vice-versa. Hence the Father, Son and Spirit are persons and therefore exist in their own right, only because they are simultaneously related to one another within the divine community.

This communitarian understanding of the Trinity can be represented diagrammatically as follows. Imagine three circles in the shape

<sup>15</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*; corrected edition edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), pp. 343-44. In a recent journal article, I make clear how Whitehead's conception of God can be reinterpreted in a genuinely trinitarian sense. Cf. "Process Philosophy and Trinitarian Theology," *Process Studies* 8 (1978), 217-30.

<sup>16</sup> Besides the article cited in footnote 15 above, cf. "The Holy Trinity as a Community of Divine Persons," *Heythrop Journal* 15 (1974), 166-82; 257-70; also *What Are They Saying About the Trinity?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

of a triangle: two at the base and one above and between the other two. The one at the base on the left-hand side I will designate as the Father; the one at the base on the right-hand side, the Son; and the one above and between the other two, the Spirit. The three circles touch one another to indicate the three divine persons designated by the circles are in constant interaction with one another. The Father as the source of life and being within the Godhead communicates himself totally to the Son. The Son, in turn, responds perfectly to the initiative of the Father. The mediator between the Father and the Son, he who facilitates the exchange of life and love between them, is the Spirit. As such, the Spirit brings the process of self-giving love which is their common nature to its inevitable climax or perfection. That is, three (and only three) persons are needed to constitute the divine community, since with the third person there is present, not only mutual love between the Father and the Son, but shared love between three distinct persons. Shared love, rather than mutual love as such, is truly self-giving love, the hallmark of genuine community.<sup>17</sup>

How then does creation fit within this scheme? If infinite means, not only that which is non-finite, but also that which somehow comprehends everything else, then creation as finite being must be a process which takes place within infinite being, i.e., within the interpersonal process which constitutes the divine nature. To be specific, creation proceeds from the Father as the source of all life and being, is part of the infinite reality of the Son, and through the Son is reunited with the Father in the mediating power of the Spirit. In terms of the three-circle diagram mentioned above, creation may be represented as follows. Imagine within the circle at the base on the right-hand side (that proper to the Son) two other concentric circles, one within the other. The larger one represents creation as a totality, the smaller one, the human community. The human community is thus the key process within the overall process of creation, but creation is part of the inner life of the divine Son who is himself involved in the ultimate process, the communitarian life of the three divine persons. The common center-point of these concentric circles is, of course, Christ who as the God-man enjoys both the divine life proper to the Trinity and at the same time is the focal point of creation and the new head of the human race. Yet, while Christ is, ontologically speaking, the focal point of creation and the head of the human race, indeed the center-point for all his creatures without difference or distinction, he is not acknowledged as such by most of his creatures at the present time. Salvation then has to consist in the gradual recognition by all of God's creatures that Christ is the center-point of their being and activity, and that through union with Christ they can offer due honor and worship to the Father in and through the power of the Spirit. Salvation, in other words, consists, primarily for human

<sup>17</sup>For this insight, I am indebted to the trinitarian theology of the medieval theologian, Richard of St. Victor. Cf. my article in the *Heythrop Journal*, pp. 264-65; cf. also an excellent article on Richard of St. Victor's trinitarian theology by Ewert Cousins, "A Theology of Interpersonal Relations," *Thought* 45 (1970), 56-82.

beings, but likewise for all of God's creation in some measure, in being admitted into the communitarian life of the three divine persons by reason of a closer identification with the person of Christ.

Perhaps all this can be better understood by recalling what happened to Jesus after his death on the cross. At the moment of his resurrection, Jesus experienced a transfiguration of his entire being. For at that moment he himself in his human nature was lifted up in closer identification with the person of the Son. He realized for the first time in his human consciousness who he really was, namely, the Eternal Son of God, and thus began to share much more deeply than before close interpersonal relations with the Father and the Spirit within the divine community. In my judgment, what happened to Jesus in his human nature at the resurrection will likewise happen, *mutatis mutandis*, to all his brothers and sisters at the moment of their death or, in any case, at the Last Judgment. That is, they will find themselves together with Jesus drawn into the communitarian life of the three divine persons. With Jesus they will offer honor and praise to the Father in and through the power of the Spirit. Furthermore, just as Jesus thereby experienced a transfiguration of his physical being, so too all his brothers and sisters will "live a new life" as a result of their incorporation into the life of God.

Material creation, as one of the subordinate circles within the circle proper to the Son, will likewise survive in a transformed state after the Last Judgment. But, as I see it, only as much of material creation will endure as will be necessary for human beings (and any other embodied spirits in the universe) to lead an existence proper to their new *physical* condition. Human beings, in other words, will not be disembodied spirits in the new era, but like Jesus will have risen bodies for which some sort of material environment, however altered or transformed, will be necessary. My basic reason here is that God is the name for an interpersonal reality, namely, the community of the three divine persons. Hence, whatever survives after the Parousia in union with God will have to be either a personal being or somehow related to personal beings as part of what they need to lead their lives as (incarnate) persons. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin seems to be making the same point when he describes Christ as the Omega Point of the process of evolution in the universe. As he remarks, for example, in *The Phenomenon of Man*,

what is the work of works for man if not to establish, in and by each one of us, an absolutely original centre in which the universe reflects itself in a unique and inimitable way? And those centres are our very selves and personalities. The very centre of our consciousness, deeper than all its radii; that is the essence which Omega, if it is to be truly Omega, must reclaim.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the material universe is unified in the being and activity of each human being, and the human beings themselves find their unity in Christ

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. by Bernard Wall (New York: Harper Colophon Book, 1965), p. 261.

as Omega Point, the personalizing centre and goal of the entire evolutionary process. What is missing, of course, in Teilhard's presentation here is the connection between Christ as the Omega Point of the evolutionary process in creation and the other two divine persons, with whom he is one God. The diagram of the three circles, noted above, might be helpful at this point. For, in line with that diagram, Christ is clearly the center point of creation and the human race, the goal of the movement within the world process towards greater and greater centralization and interiorization, as mentioned above. Yet, since he himself is part of a greater reality, only one of the three large circles proper to the divine life, Christ thereby brings creation as a whole and the human race in particular into the flow of life proper to all three divine persons. Thus union with Christ as the Omega Point is only an intermediate goal for human beings; the ultimate goal is union with all three persons within the interpersonal life of the divine community.

At the end of his book, *Death and Eternal Life*, in which he investigates the doctrine of the eschaton in all the major world religions, John Hick sketches his own vision of the goal of the world process as follows:

There will be many persons, in the sense of many centres of personal relationship, not however, existing over against one another as separate atomic individuals but rather within one another in the mutual coinherence or interpermeation (*perichoresis, circuminsessio*) which has been predicated of the Persons of the Trinity. The many persons will accordingly no longer be separate in the sense of having boundaries closed to one another. They will on the contrary be wholly open to one another. There will be a plurality of centres of consciousness, and yet these will not be private but will each include the others in a full mutual sharing constituting the atman, the complex collective consciousness of humanity.<sup>19</sup>

As his reference to the Trinity might suggest, Hick also believes that this ultimate community of all human persons with one another will somehow be related to or incorporated into the life of God, however the latter is understood by the various world religions. For Christians, in any case, the idea of the human community as part of the divine community is fairly easy to accept, once one has accepted the more basic, purely philosophical hypothesis that persons, whether divine or human, ideally do not exist over against one another as separate atomic individuals but rather within one another in mutual coinherence or interpermeation.<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, our human knowledge of persons is limited at present to life in the body, where persons *de facto* stand over and against one another as separate atomic individuals. But the whole point of an eschatology or doctrine of the last things is to liberate one's imagination from things as

<sup>19</sup> John H. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 461.

<sup>20</sup> As the doctrine of the Trinity makes clear, the presence of persons (both divine and human) to each other is primarily intentional, not physical. That is, through acts of knowledge and love they are mutually present to one another even when, as is often the case with human persons in this life, they are physically, i.e., spatially or even temporally, separate from each other.

they now are in order to place one's hopes in what might some day come to pass.

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