



Moltmann, Jürgen

The Living God and the Fullness of Life

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015. Pp. v-229.

ISBN 978-0-664-26161-0

Reviewed by Jonathan Huggins

Quite remarkably, Jürgen Moltmann continues to be a profound and productive theologian at nearly ninety years of age. His latest work satisfies the mind and heart of a thoughtful Christian as much as any of his earlier works. Though this short book is aimed at a more general audience and builds upon themes taken up in his larger works, it still makes a remarkable contribution. The work builds especially upon two previous contributions: *The Spirit of Life* (1992) and *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (1997). Readers familiar with Moltmann's work will hear echoes of other works as well. The present work provides some additional insights, and (most significantly) orients those ideas around his central theme – embracing the fullness of life that the Living God gives.

The purpose of this book is to articulate and commend an understanding of the Living God over against a world in which life is “reduced” or “diminished” by most of the prevailing systems of thought. The living God brings life to everything, and joy is a constitutive aspect of life. Therefore, Christianity is a “religion of joy,” and God intends to give joy to all who live in loving fellowship with God and his world. Moltmann writes, “Joy is the meaning of human life. Human beings were created in order to have joy in God. They are born in order to have joy in life” (195). This joy in life trumps all other reasons for existence. It is more essential than any ethical goals or ideals that humans might strive for. Thus, for Moltmann, joy is essential to life. It is essential to human existence. It is, therefore, constitutive of the image of God. This idea of joy and life are rooted in the very heart of the Christian gospel. He writes, “This book is meant to be a reminder of the living force that the message of Christ as ‘the resurrection and the life’ set free among the early Christians” (ix). Some of the book's key ideas are found

when Moltmann is engaging with Feuerbach and writes, “Where God is, there is life, for God is the living God. The enjoyment of God (*fruitio Dei*) is the enjoyment of life, and God is experienced through the affirmation of life, not through its denial. Religion, in Christianity especially, is true joy in life, because Christ makes of life “a festival without end” (13).

Moltmann begins the book with a series of reflections on life in the modern world. Here he argues that life has been *reduced* and *diminished* by humanistic and materialistic worldviews. This introduction is followed by the two main parts of the book. Part One focuses on who God is. Here Moltmann is concerned to “free the God of Israel and Jesus Christ from the imprisonment of metaphysical definitions, which are due to Greek philosophy and the religious Enlightenment” (xi). He addresses some of the classical theistic attributes such as divine impassibility, immovability, and omniscience. These attributes, and others, miss the mark in describing the Living God of the Bible, according to Moltmann. Such attributes make God nearly impossible to relate to and life nearly impossible to bear. Yet in challenging these classic definitions, Moltmann does not reject orthodox understandings of God. He is eager to keep our vision of God as near to the Biblical story as possible. In fact, it is scripture that guides his understanding and articulation of God’s attributes. The Christ event, especially, leads Moltmann to reject certain attributes in favor of more gospel-oriented ones.

Readers may be especially interested in the last chapter of this section, “The Living God in the History of Christ.” This chapter contains some Trinitarian reflections that make sense of a Christian understanding of God. This understanding is inextricably linked to Jesus. Moltmann argues that “Christians believe in God *for Jesus’ sake* (emphasis added), and believe in no God other than the God of Jesus Christ. Here “God” is not a general religious term; it is shaped by the form and history of Jesus Christ” (60).

Part Two focuses on human life in the light of this Living God. Here Moltmann discusses how human life flourishes in the light of God’s joy, love, and freedom. He also includes an affirmation of the bodily senses. These are vital to human joy and flourishing. Another important aspect of full life is the ability to think across frontiers. This includes a compelling explanation of how Christian hope and action are enlivened by a proper

use of memory and anticipation. Grasping life's potentialities means thinking imaginatively about the past and the future. This section closes with a reflection on, and endorsement of, a saying by Athanasius; "The Risen Christ makes of life a never-ending festival." This makes for a fitting conclusion to Moltmann's work because it highlights his conviction that life is good apart from any utilitarian purpose. Human life should be full of praise and adoration to God, without anxiety over one's usefulness. The Living God would have us joyful and full of life. It is for this reason that Christ came, died, and was raised – to break the power of death and set creation free.

This work can be labeled as "inspirational," in the best sense of the word. Some parts remain theologically complex, but they serve the larger purpose of helping readers see that God is indeed a living God who gives joy and flourishing to his world and his people. The devotional segments of the book are a real treasure. Many readers will find Moltmann's insights on prayer to be the most valuable part of the book.

I think this work is a good gateway into Moltmann's thought. One can get a sense of both Moltmann's theological mind and his pious Christian heart. It introduces the reader to many of his most important theological themes. It also helps readers see how theology can be a joyful, and life-giving, enterprise. It stands against any notion that theology is an irrelevant, dry exercise. This is theology that matters for the world, for the church, and for the human heart. I would especially recommend it to theology students. Informed church members outside the academy should read it as well. And since this is the work of one of the most important, wise, and masterful theologians of our time, all those working in theology should give it good attention – not only for *what* it says, but also for *how* it says it.