

# Eschatology as Politics

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by Fergus Kerr, O.P.

Christianity is nothing if it is not eschatology: a hope in a promise for the future. This is what Jürgen Moltmann is inviting us to take seriously, in his very important book.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, a difficult book, at least for the non-theologian; and perhaps the best way of giving a fair account of its value is to present, in some detail, the argument of the concluding chapter (the appendix on Ernst Bloch has been omitted from the English edition). The problem is to show how Christianity as eschatology actually *happens*. What visible form and observable shape does this hope in a promised future, which believers share, actually take in the complicated business which is modern life in an industrial society such as ours? What in fact is the relationship between the Church and the world?

We have to decide whether, as believers in modern society, we form what Moltmann calls an accommodating group, a group capable of being absorbed and assimilated by society, or a group which is inassimilable and non-conformist. We have to ask if this hope in the future which we have, compels us to resist being assimilated and adjusted to modern society. Moltmann is, of course, going to argue that if believers really conduct their lives and their thinking in the context of their hope in God's promised future, then there will always be tension between the believing community and modern society . . . whatever modern society may happen to be (Moltmann clearly works in terms of the society to which he belongs: western industrial capitalism).

## 1. MODERN SOCIETY

Moltmann accepts Hegel's analysis of what is characteristic and defining about modern industrial society. Some of the typically Hegelian concepts are muffled by periphrastic constructions in the English translation: I shall highlight them in my summary of Moltmann's argument. His principal source is Hegel's *Philosophy of Law* (1820).

Believers have to do with the society they are in, if they have to do with any society at all, which is the question. In our society it has seemed evident, at least since Hegel's time, that the whole network of relationships created and sustained by the industrial-commercial system of labour extends far into our social-political life and deeply

<sup>1</sup> *Theology of Hope*, by Jürgen Moltmann, S.C.M. Press, 1967, 45s.

affects our private-domestic life. Following Hegel, as Marx did too on this issue, Moltmann takes it for granted that in an industrial-commercial society such as ours it is the relationships established among us by our work, the interdependencies created by the conditions, demands and goals of our labour, which shape and structure the rest of our relationships: our political relationships (our political system has to do either with preserving or with changing our industrial system) and our domestic relationships (home life is dominated by working life, either because we use the privacy of family life as an escape from the drudgery of work or because the drudgery of work makes it impossible for us to use our leisure creatively at all). Neither our social-political nor our private-domestic relationships lose their substantial autonomy, but they are under constant pressure to do so. Commerce, the exchange of things between one man and another, the exchange of commodities of one sort and another, tends to affect all our relationships: one has only to think of how metaphors from business deals and commercial transactions spread into the language of politics and of personal relationships.

This is what Moltmann calls the reduction of all human relationships to terms of things, *die Verdinglichung aller Beziehungen*. We allow all human relationships to be affected, if not created and defined, by commercial transactions, by the exchange of commodities, by market values. You begin to wonder what you can get out of other people, you begin to treat people as things, and so on.

What is defining about our society, then, is that in contradistinction to all previous societies, human relationships are determined and structured primarily in terms of the conditions, demands and goals of the industrial-commercial system. Everything else (this is the crucial point) is excluded from the category of what is essential for human relationships. We are related to one another as producers and consumers, we are related by the roles which we play in the industrial-commercial system; but we need not be related to one another in any other way whatever. It is no longer important, for instance, that we should live in our own tribe; it is no longer important that we should all worship together. We just have to do our jobs, and for the rest we are *free*. If it is true that the only necessary social bonds we have with one another are basically and definingly the industrial-commercial relationships which we have with one another, then we are *liberated* from one another in new ways, as well as in danger of thinking and feeling only in terms of the exchange of things. For, as Hegel himself pointed out, what so many of those who go on about the horrors of modern society often forget, is that the time in which we are newly tempted to treat people as things is also the time in which we are newly enabled to treat people as persons, as individuals. *Verdinglichung* goes with *Individualität*. The society in which the only necessary bonds which unite people are

the industrial-commercial ones, threatening as they do to destroy all our other relationships, is also the society in which people are freer than ever before to enter into relationships. Marriage for love, friendship, trade unions . . . there is a whole spectrum of phenomena which indicate the freedom we have now as individuals, precisely because the old tribal, religious and suchlike bonds have vanished. You don't, for instance, have to worship in our society; you have only to work, and this is what makes it so different from any previous form of society.

All the other relationships we have, except the relationships created by our work, have ceased to be socially necessary and become optional. We must *choose* to worship. The mass-society created by the modern industrial-commercial system is also, in principle, a society in which the individual can be freer, and can thus be more of a person, than in any previous form of society. We can experience ourselves as subjects, precisely because the society of *Verdinglichung* is also the society of *Individualität*, in Hegel's terminology. Organization man can, in principle, be more of an individual than any form of man who has ever lived. Conformity and individualism have their roots in the same datum: in the fact that the only essential, socially necessary relations which we have now are our industrial-commercial ones. Destroying as it has done the whole tribal-feudal-sacral society that went before it, modern society has, in principle and to some extent even in practice, made it possible for us to be more choosing, more individual, than was ever possible before.

The task is, of course, to maintain the tension between mass-organization of the industrial-commercial system (*Vermassung*) and the development of personal choice in relationships (*Subjektivität*), so that we may become more and more individuals without lapsing out into eccentricity and eventually into privacy and solipsism.

## 2. CHRISTIANITY IN SOCIETY

Moltmann can now ask what has happened to the Church during this period in which society has developed into a mass-society carrying with it the possibility of more privacy than ever before. In the pre-industrial era the Church continued to play the role which it had been given by the Emperor Constantine in the middle of the fourth century: Christianity was in fact the state religion, the *cultus publicus*, the sacralization of the status quo.<sup>1</sup> Religion was socially necessary. Everybody was a believer. Every member of society was at the same time a member of the Church, unless he publicly opted out, which was often a dangerous course to take. You worshipped with the same social pressure and necessity to do so as you worked. But in the new industrial society, from the late eighteenth century onwards, you no longer had to worship . . . all you had to do

<sup>1</sup>Cf. 'Priesthood and Ministry', by Cornelius Ernst, O.P., *New Blackfriars*, December 1967, especially p. 131.

was to work. There is no denying how destructive this was for millions of people: what happened to the English peasants and rural labourers, uprooted from the feudal-sacral society with its securities, including compulsory religion, is a matter of history. The destruction of social bonds exposed several generations to unprecedented exploitation and brutality, though in the long run it was to make a new freedom possible.

Christianity ceased to be the established religion. It ceased to be so at least in principle and in effect, though it has gone on, in this country at least, entirely and ceremonially oblivious to this until our own time. Instead of being the *cultus publicus*, Christianity became a *cultus privatus*. Going to church, worshipping God, seeking the absolute, has ceased to be a public obligation and a social duty, and become an optional, voluntary, private activity. A man's religion is now his own affair.

This opens the way to one form of Christianity which Moltmann attacks with vigour: Christianity as the cult appropriate to the new individualism possible within mass industrial society. Here, it is clear, he is attacking the influence of the theology of Rudolf Bultmann. Out of the German Lutheran tradition itself, that is to say, he is making the kind of criticism which Brian Wicker has made on various occasions.<sup>1</sup> We could practise some self-criticism as Catholics on this score too.

This is the kind of theology which accepts the division between man as trapped in industrial-commercial relationships and man as a private person, and goes on to abandon the whole social-political side of human life to concentrate on saving man as a private person. The situations in which Christian faith is regarded as operative are our 'encounters', so long as they have nothing to do with the structures of the social-economic system in which we live. Faith is regarded as so 'transcendental' that it occurs outside the context of any meanings and purposes which are socially and politically communicable and verifiable. It is consistent with this that Christian experience cannot be shaped by institutions of any kind. Christian love is something that happens in the pure spontaneity of intimate I-and-thou situations; but the whole social-political dimension of human life, not to speak of the industrial-commercial system, is reduced to mere organization, devoid of any human meaning. Politics is merely a matter of keeping the streets clean. Your neighbour is the man you meet in personal encounter, not the man with whom you are involved in any social-political situation. The man begging at the door may be your neighbour but not the people in the Third World whose fate may be slightly affected depending on your vote at the next election.

This theology, which locates the God-experience in the consciousness of the individual who has despaired of society, is the form that

<sup>1</sup>Cf. 'Secular Christianity', by Brian Wicker, *New Blackfriars*, May 1966.

Christianity takes when we accept the *cultus privatus* theory of religion. The God-experience is permitted to make a difference to us and to the people we meet, at least if we can create I-and-thou situations of spontaneous intimacy; but it makes no difference whatever to our situation in its totality as social-political and industrial-commercial. This form of Christianity, for all its rhetoric of being radical and existential, for all its talk of encounter and decision, is not a faith that the world is ever going to hate (John 15, 19; 17, 14). It is a faith that makes not the slightest difference to anything, outside the circle of one's immediate friends. Nobody is going to challenge this faith, it is too private to make enough difference to anybody for him to react to it at all, far less to react hostilely. Privatized like this, the God-experience is irrelevant, it has nothing to do with society at all.

The second form of Christianity which Moltmann detects and denounces is what he calls the cult of *Mitmenschlichkeit*. This conception has its roots deep in the original Romantic reaction against the new industrial society, and the characteristic formula is the distinction between community and society, between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Society is the organization it takes to run a great industrial conurbation, while community is where we meet face to face as persons. This is an ideal of community which can play an important critical and therapeutic role in humanizing society; but it is also very easy to slide into abandoning the struggle to reconstruct society. It is easy, Moltmann suggests, to romanticize the local church-community into a refuge from the anonymous, faceless society. Here, in the limited group, you can have all the human warmth and seriousness, the genuine community, which the conditions of modern society make impossible. The Church can be a kind of Noah's ark for us in our alienation from society; in the great sea of structures and relationships which one can do nothing whatever to change, one can have these islands of fellowship and authentic humanity. You can change nothing in the brutal facts of how all that is truly human is being annihilated in modern society, you can merely provide sanctuary, so that people can endure the horrors of modern society on the strength of occasional withdrawal into genuine community.

This is the idea that the Church only happens in the interstices of society, in the holes where we take shelter. That the God-experience does occur in such privileged community-situations need not be denied: it is surely what Karl Rahner's diaspora ecclesiology involves. The point is to ensure that the experience of true community is not merely a refuge from the pressures of society but a stance of protest and critique against structures that prevent the diffusion of this experience.

The third posture which Christianity takes up in our society is what Moltmann calls the cult of the institution. So much of our life

is institutionalized that it seems appropriate that the Church should regain, or retain, its function as the institution which ultimately guarantees the status quo, the stability, the sense of security, which so much institutionalization creates, or is supposed to create. Christianity in this case becomes part of the milieu, not only not changing anything but actually confirming and conniving with the existing order of things, whatever it may be in any particular situation.

Granted, then, that there is this tension now between the social-political-structural-institutional and the individual-personal dimensions of human life, we can see that each of these three postures which the Church takes up in our society, really evades the burden of bearing or reconciling this tension. The first two opt out of it by writing off the social-structural side of life by saying that there is nothing one can do about it. Either you must withdraw into the privacy of your own subjectivity, to preserve *that*, or you must withdraw with your friends to create some oasis of genuine community, in the face of the pressures of the anonymous society. The third possibility is to refuse the strain by simply continuing the traditional ecclesiastical role of sanctioning and sacralizing the existing public order, to allow the Church to be a stabilizing institution among all the other stabilizing institutions (don't rock the boat).

All of these are postures which the Church is put into by modern society. But Moltmann's point is that the believing community cannot acquiesce in any roles forced upon it or demanded of it by modern society. The Church must choose its own role in society; or rather, the Church must fulfil the mission demanded of it by God.

### 3. ESCHATOLOGY AGAINST SOCIETY

Faith, hope and charity is how our God-experience happens: it is charity and the other theological virtues by which the human heart is put into relationship with God (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia, IIae, Q. 68, 8; IIa, IIae, Q. 151, 2). How our relationship to God happens, if it happens at all, is what we call faith, hope and charity. To write a 'theology of hope' is to write a theology of our 'experience of God'. Of course Christians have an 'experience of God': it is what we speak of in terms of faith, hope and charity.

We may assume that the God who has raised our hopes expects more of us than modern society does. Our relationship to modern society will be fruitful, as Moltmann says, only if it is conflict-laden. It is only where our resistance, our refusal to be adapted and neutralized in one way or another, shows us up as a group which cannot be assimilated, that we can begin to communicate our hope to society. The believing community in its common hope must be a source of permanent unrest and disturbance in society, which nothing can silence or allay or accommodate. And this will not happen, Moltmann argues, if all our challenging is done in ways in which the public-social-structural dimension of human life is left intact.

It is precisely by breaking the status quo, by breaking the silence in which the assumptions of our society are carefully kept, that we make our presence felt as people with an eschatology. It is true that when theologians and preachers speak of eschatology our hearts sink: eschatology seems to have no application anywhere, at best it sounds like poetry, at worst like theological verbalizing; but in fact, of course, far from being something nebulous and transcendental and unsubstantial, eschatology is precisely what is practicable, creative, productive, constructive and relevant in our God-experience, if anything is. Christianity is eschatology; our God-experience is nothing if it is not the sense of the claim on us of the eschaton and the promise to us of the future; and it is this, precisely, which must make us permanently dissatisfied with any existing or imaginable social order.

It is our eschatology which must make us keep asking awkward questions—but to be awkward our questions must be heard and then answered not in the sanctuary of the individual conscience only, not out on the fringes of society where groups have opted out, but at the centre of society. The question which the God-people have to put to the world, the hope which the God-people bear to the world, is not for this or that individual or for any fringe group but for the world as a whole, for society as a whole. The question we have to put and the hope we have to bear, as the God-people, can never be private. The God-experience which is faith, hope and charity, can in fact be neither the state religion of the Roman Empire or of the Lyndon Johnson empire nor the private religion of any world-weary élite group. Our God-experience cannot be either the *cultus publicus* or a *cultus privatus* in any existing or imaginable social order. Christianity is both public and private or it is nothing.

It is because Christianity is eschatology that Christianity is politics, in the sense in which politics means the whole area to do with the *polis*, the city, the human community (which need not necessarily always mean party-politics: in many situations it is possible that involvement in party-politics is just a mystificatory evasion of real involvement in total politics). If Christianity is relevant to society it is not in spite of the eschatology but precisely because of the fact that Christianity is eschatology. It is as eschatology that Christianity becomes politics (in the sense defined). Christian eschatology occurs as politics.

*Lumen Gentium* §35: 'We show ourselves children of the promise when, strong in faith and hope, we redeem the present time and look forward in patience to future glory. But we must not conceal this hope in the depths of our hearts but on the contrary express it through the structures of ordinary secular life, in permanent conversion and in conflict with the rulers of the world of this darkness, the spirits of unrighteousness.'

If the Church is to be the Church-for-the-world, this cannot

mean that the Church must be the Church which the world wants, or even the Church such as the world will allow it to be. It has to be the Church with its mission to the world, to society, happening all the time in the context of the expectation of the coming of the kingdom of God, not in the context of the social roles which society may expect of it or impose upon it. The Church is not for the world in the sense of preserving the world and of maintaining the status quo . . . 'The Christian Church is not supposed to serve mankind so that this world may remain exactly what it is; on the contrary, the Church is supposed to serve mankind so that the world, society, may be transformed and become what it has been promised.'

For the believing community, the gospel which Jesus preached and which we now preach in proclaiming his resurrection from the dead, is that the rule of God has broken in upon us and that this means that our whole perspective and prospect has changed. We must see ourselves in a totally new light, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, and this means that, far from being able to put up with ourselves and the existing order of things, whatever they may be in any particular instance, we can no longer put up with ourselves as we are, our past selves, or with things as they are, the structures of this world. We must always be seeking to surpass them, to change them, in view of what is to come.

Moltmann rightly takes up, at this point, the full biblical sense of salvation (*yesha*, deliverance, liberation), and insists that it is no mere rescuing of the individual soul from this wicked world but on the contrary the hope of righteousness, *tsedaqa*: the righteousness of God which occurs as right relationships in the human community. How the present is affected by the future is in our hope in *tsedaqa*. Jesus has been raised for our *tsedaqa* (Romans 4, 25), the city of *tsedaqa* (Isaiah I, 26). The kingdom of God hasn't to do only with individuals; the *tsedaqa* of the promised future is a community. Refusing to conform to the principles of this society doesn't mean personal conversion in the sense of just becoming different inside yourself, it means changing the structure of the whole society in which one's God-experience occurs . . . changing it in opposition to it and in creative expectation of its future, the future which God has promised. It is precisely the relationships that exist here and now among men and between men and things that those who have had the God-experience in Christ cannot stand any longer. As Moltmann says, we simply cannot put up with the status quo, we must constantly seek to shift all social institutions out of their tendency to stabilize and rigidify, to unsettle them, to open them again and again to the pressure of the future: 'in constructive opposition and in creative reshaping, Christian hope puts the existing state of things, things as they are, into question, and in this way prepares the way for what is to come . . . set as it is on the new situation which is always expected, Christian hope is always trans-



ending the existing situation, whatever it is, seeking opportunities to correspond more and more to the future in history which has been promised.'

Moltmann launches out into a severe attack on the traditional Lutheran conception of the Christian vocation as merely doing one's duty within society. Merely keeping things going as they are could never be the Christian vocation. 'Creative discipleship' (a phrase from Ernst Wolf) cannot consist in adjusting to and conserving the existing social and political order, whatever it may be, still less in giving it religious backing. The key phrase is, however, from Ernst Bloch, the unorthodox Marxist philosopher on whose work Moltmann leans heavily for inspiration: 'creative expectation', *schöpferische Erwartung*. Christianity is eschatology, Christianity is hope, Christianity is expectation; and expectation which inaugurates and stimulates critique and transformation of the existing order of things, whatever it may be, in view of the city of righteousness, the true human community, which God has promised in the the resurrection of Jesus—the promise that self-sacrifice for others prevails in the end, despite all the evidence to the contrary, over violence and hatred.

Eschatology occurs as politics. If you get some idea of the community offered in the promise God has made, then you must be shocked by any existing or imaginable social-political order. You must find yourself protesting and criticizing. Your eschatology, if you take it seriously, is inevitably a stance from which to criticize any existing order of things; it is bound to bring you into permanent conflict with much of what you see around you. There would be something wrong with believers who found nothing to protest against in their social-political situation; this would mean that their eschatology had become ineffective, that their hope in the future God has promised must be weak. Eschatology is the sense of community which God has promised to us; if we really hope in this, our experience of the *polis* as it is here and now must be subjected to radical critique and reconstruction. It is difficult to suppose that the creative-critical role which Christian eschatology might play in politics has ever been more persuasively described than it is in *Theology of Hope*.

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