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The Kingdom of God in Moltmann's eschatology: A South African perspective¹

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Jürgen Moltmann's understanding of the notion of the Kingdom of God as formulated in his eschatology. The Kingdom of God is understood in many different ways in the Christian faith. Some understandings emphasise its anthropologically focussed formation, while others emphasise its divine- and transcendent nature. Moltmann seeks to find an alternative to these approaches by seeking the Kingdom's relevance in the context of life, history, the cosmos and God's own eschatological journey. The article suggests that Moltmann's model is valuable to the South African theological- and social contexts as new questions are asked about God in our newly formed democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of the Kingdom of God is a well-debated topic in the Christian faith. The main argument relating to the Kingdom of God concerns the relevance and immanent existence of the Kingdom in the world. With the rise of secularisation in the South African context, this debate has risen afresh as we seek to question and defend the teaching of the Kingdom of God, emanating from the Christian faith. Jürgen Moltmann offers an understanding of the Kingdom of God that I believe is particularly relevant to the South African search for meaning surrounding this notion. In Moltmann's theology we find a definition of the Kingdom of God that is neither exclusively transcendental- nor exclusively anthropologically based. It further resonates well with the different South African theological understandings surrounding this notion and will therefore prove to assist in our understanding thereof. In this article, I will use Moltmann's work on eschatology entitled "The Coming of God: Christian eschatology"² as my main source, outlining his understanding of the different levels in which we experience, and think of, the Kingdom of God.

1. THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS TRINITARIAN KINGDOM.

Before we investigate the finer details in Moltmann's concept of the Kingdom of God, we must mention that Moltmann formulates his theology from a Trinitarian perspective. It is very important to keep this in mind as this serves as the backdrop of his entire argument. Without the Trinity, Moltmann's theology simply could not exist.

1 This article is based on research done for the degree Magister Artium (Theology) in the Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics in the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. The supervisor was Prof C J Wethmar.

2 Moltmann, J. 1996. *The Coming of God: Christian eschatology*. Translated by M. Kohl. London: SCM Press

1.1 Creator and creation.

To Moltmann the starting point in speaking of God in the context of creation is by acknowledging that there is a distinct and purposeful difference between God and creation (Moltmann 1996:307). It is in God that we find the uncreated, infinite and immortal, while creation contains the exact opposite of these descriptions. So far most Christian perspectives can agree with what Moltmann has to say. The next may be more controversial. Moltmann, seeing the differences between Creator and creation, suggests that the notion of the Kingdom of God serves as evidence that God seeks reconciliation and community with creation (Moltmann 1981:88). This journey of building relationship and community is God's initiative.

Although Moltmann sees this move towards reconciliation as God's initiative, it should not be taken for granted that this is a one-sided affair! If it was – God being the only one seeking relationship – then one could see the process as an over-handed move by God to have His will done in creation at the expense of the possibility of free will. In other words, if God were the only one seeking relationship with creation and achieving it, the question could be raised concerning the wilful response in relationship offered by creation. Such a teaching would be nothing more than predeterminism.

To Moltmann, the motive of the Kingdom of God goes beyond grace (understanding it solely as a one-sided initiative by God) and God's supreme will, to the motive of love and true reconciliation between two parties (Moltmann 1981:53). This requires a mutual will by both Creator and creation to be reconciled in relationship. Furthermore, we can deduce that this reconciliation is not an instantaneous event, but is a journey that is travelled by both God and creation. The telos is a true and complete reconciliation, which Moltmann views as being the consummated Kingdom of God (Moltmann 1981:220).

Moltmann borrows a Trinitarian model of the Kingdom of God from Joachim of Fiore in order to describe this journey. The Kingdom of God is described in terms of three developmental stages in the relationship between the Creator and creation and are labelled as the Kingdom of the Father, the Kingdom of the Son and the Kingdom of the Spirit.

In the Kingdom of the Father, God chooses to reveal God-self to creation (Moltmann 1981:53). If God seeks to have a relationship with creation, then creation must know that a God exists whom it can be in relationship with. The difficulty in the Kingdom of the Father, is that the revelation needs to be such, that the focus is not on God asserting God's authority and ownership over creation, but that God reveals Himself in such a manner to creation that creation can identify with the Creator, without God compromising His identity or divinity (Moltmann 1981:59). The Kingdom of the Father therefore points to the Kingdom of the Son. Jesus, being locked in identity with the Father (1981:70), continues the work of the Father by being both fully God and fully human. It is in Jesus that the relationship between Creator and creation changes from "partnership" to "friendship". The Kingdom of the Son points to the Kingdom of the Spirit. The Spirit is the one that restores creation to its initial relational state with the Creator as creation responds favourably to God's offer of communion (Moltmann 1992:61). Through the Spirit's work of transformation, God is able to make creation God's dwelling place. The relational state between Creator and creation is once again transformed into one where creation is considered to be sons and daughters of God (Moltmann 1981:220).

The Kingdom of God, which is the fulfilment of the Kingdom of the Father, Son and Spirit, is understandably not an instant transformation, but is in itself an eschatological hope.

2. THE MEANING OF LIFE.

So far the argument is abstract and does not seem to have the potential to make a valuable contribution towards the lives of ordinary people. A more focussed question is: "How does this

understanding of the Kingdom of God influence our experience of life?" To this question Moltmann seems to respond with an even more focussed statement: "It all depends on what you understand life to be!"

The question posed to Moltmann's Trinitarian Kingdom is a valid one. It is a question that surpasses race, nationality and belief systems. The one thing all human beings have in common, is the way in which we try to understand life. To draw this communality even further: It is the way in which we try to understand the meaning of life in the light of death.

2.1 Moltmann's understanding of life

We find that Moltmann's views on life are argued *via negativa*. Moltmann first describes two common understandings on life. The first is described as living life with death as the ultimate goal (Moltmann 1996:49). In this view life is regarded as either being the totality of existence, or as a mere stepping-stone in which we are prepared for a fuller definition of existence. The first description can be linked to the Sadducees' theology, while we witness the second in militant religious behaviour. Moltmann's criticism on this view is severe. It is in his opinion that if one should minimise the importance of life by placing death as the focus of existence, that one actually refuses to live (1996:50).

The second view is described as living life as if there were no death. Many of us live life from this perspective, as it is easier to accept the death of those around us, while we simply cannot perceive our own mortality. Moltmann is just as harsh in his criticism of this view: "The suppressed awareness of death buries us alive, killing us while we are still living through the force of its suppression." (Moltmann 1996:51).

So, if life isn't merely the state of existence where we either fully focus on or ignore death, then what is it? To Moltmann, the first understanding of life should be one where we do not place life and death in opposite corners. Life consists of more than the physical awareness of being. It consists of living, dying and being resurrected from the dead (1996:66). To Moltmann, it is only when this complete definition of life has been accepted by the individual, that they are able to live (1996:66). The purpose of life can then be deduced as being able to love. "True human life comes from love, is alive in love, and through loving makes something living of other life too." (1996:53). This love does not only extend to the living, but as life in essence also includes death, so it is also the task of the living to love the dead as well (Moltmann 1990:189).

If we were to look for an example of this definition of life, then we need to look no further than Jesus Christ (Moltmann 1996:105). It is in Jesus' life, death and resurrection that we find life being revealed in its totality. To Moltmann, the resurrection is especially significant, as he states: "[of the dead] They find themselves in community in which the frontier of death has been breached. Through Christ's resurrection, God has thrown open the future to everyone, the living and the dead." (Moltmann 1990:189).

It is therefore the Kingdom of the Son that reveals the meaning of life. It is the Kingdom of the Father that gives it's authenticity as the Father claims the Son at His baptism. It is the Kingdom of the Spirit that validates the revelation of the Son as He is raised from the dead. Those whose lives are transformed by this revelation therefore experience the Kingdom of God (in journey).

2.2 The relevance of this concept of life to South Africa

As we as South Africans are in the business of reconciliation, we should take note that we are not only working towards the reconciliation of different races. The bigger task is the reconciliation of different world-views. One of these views is the understanding of life.

If we were to identify the main views held within our context, we could do so by generalising. The two main views could then be seen as the Western secular approach (which is generally

speaking a “White” approach) and the African communal approach (generally speaking a “Black” approach). From the individual’s perspective, it is interesting to see that both these approaches find their identity within the context of community, but differ in their point of departure.

The Western secularist may see community existing for the benefit of self. Martos and Rohr, both being American Catholic priests observed the following:

“A recent survey of boys in the eighth grade of Grammar school revealed that ninety percent of them see their primary goal in life as ‘making money’. Not falling in love and raising a family, not inventing or discovering something new, not exploring the secrets of nature, not making the world a better place, but simply making money – and lots of it.” (1996:64).

This clearly displays this position’s self-centred approach. Western secularism’s individual needs the community in order to do well. If the community does well, the well being of the individual will follow. It is in this life that death is avoided at all costs. Ancestry does not seem to matter (Moltmann 1999:86). Perhaps this is so because the dead are not considered to be able to make a valuable contribution to the life of the living individual?

The African communal approach starts from the other side. The individual exists for community. The concept of Ubuntu as well as the different traditional Black creation stories create the impression that the individual comes into being within the context of community (Setiloane 1986:9) and it is therefore the individual’s responsibility to contribute towards this communal state of life. Ancestry is important as those who have lived before are the ones who have passed on the gift of life to the living (Mbiti 1970:179).

Moltmann’s model speaks to both these worlds. As the secularised world has robbed the African communal model of its identity- and economic contribution in the past and continues to do so through westernising Black youth, Moltmann’s model reminds us that life is not only about the existence of self. My legacy of life is more than what I have been able to gain at the expense of the community at large. We are called not only to remembrance, but also to reflection (Moltmann 1999:78). The meaning of life will therefore not be found in the midstream of schedules, but in the reflection and “making sense” of one’s actions through contemplation within the context of community.

Moltmann’s view equally challenges the African communal view in emphasising the importance of individual lives that find meaning outside of the often-perceived Marxist definition of community.

Moltmann’s personal eschatology seems to bring these two worlds together as it searches for a place where the Black person can say “I am an empowered person!”, without negating responsibilities to the community, while the White person can say “I am who I am because of other people!”, without negating the responsibilities of caring for the needs of the community in which they exist. Perhaps we find an example of this life in Jesus.

3. TRANSFORMATION OF HISTORY.

Is the first step towards the Kingdom of God then found in the personal transformation of a person in history? If we were to answer “Yes”, we would very easily fall into the trap that post-millenarianists have been caught in and seek to induce the coming of the Kingdom through human means. The Kingdom of God in Moltmann’s eschatology does not centre on personal salvation (if one were to equate personal eschatology with personal salvation). To Moltmann, personal

eschatology is proof of a greater reconciliatory journey, namely that between God and history (Moltmann 1996:131). But even in this journey we must differentiate between historical end-point as being either *Finis* or *Telos*.

3.1 Finis

Finis is a Latin word meaning literally “End”. To Moltmann, finis of history is something that we must consider as it is an existential reality (Moltmann 1996:135). Stephen Hawking reminds us of this reality when he writes:

“The universe would expand to a very large size and eventually it would collapse again into what looks like a singularity in time. Thus, in a sense, we are still all doomed, even if we stay away from the black holes.” (Hawking 1988:147).

This approach to the understanding of the end of history is vitally important in the theology of pre-millenarianist evangelicals, as the coming of God is something completely new and at the peril of the exiting order of creation.

Moltmann identifies a second kind of historical finis, namely the end of people’s concepts of Utopia that are created by political- and/or economic systems (Moltmann 1995:202). Moltmann cites the reactions of people dedicated to the Marxist-ideologies after the collapse of socialism in the former Eastern bloc. The reactions to this historical event among those directly involved can be described as being nothing less than the fall of society and the total absence of hope (Moltmann 1995:202). Moltmann, although being mindful and recognising the reality of an end of life on this planet, challenges the other interpretation of finis. Is the end of a Utopian age really the end? It can only be the end for those who “...dominate and enjoy the present [and] want to extend their present into the future and are afraid of any alternate possibility.” (Moltmann 1995:202).

3.2 Telos

Telos is a Greek word meaning “Goal”. Moltmann sees different players in history attempting to shape creation in such a manner to achieve a certain goal. The first method of doing this is through political activity where major powers intervene in different contexts, believing that transformation into their model of existence would be a “good end” for the receiving nations. These, Moltmann call “Redeemer nations” (Moltmann 1996:168). When referring to this behaviour, we know that the Church in history has not been innocent in the practice thereof. Ecclesiastical post-millenarianism has used the banner of the Kingdom of God to advance its own motives. Here Moltmann cites the example of the Roman Catholic Church’s role in the promotion of Roman ecclesiastical rule, especially during the era of Pope Gelasius I (Moltmann 1996:180). Neither the Redeemer nations nor the post-millenarianist ecclesiastical models work, for they do not acknowledge the possibility of the existence of community depending on the diversity found within the world.

Moltmann’s historical eschatology leads us to a position where both these concepts meet. Although the world will end, it must be stated that we as created beings cannot bring the world to a divine telos by means of our own ideas or intervention. To Moltmann, the end of history must once again return to the initial intent of the eschatological journey, namely the relationship between the Creator and creation. But how is the Kingdom of God promoted within the context of history without being seen as a human-driven ideology? To Moltmann, this is the role of the Church (Moltmann 1967:10).

With all fairness we can say that the Church has fallen into the trap of seeking to be relevant in a world that is entrenched in a post-millenarianist approach. The only way in which the Church

will “feel” relevant is by participating in the practice of building a Utopian society within the parameters of societal expectations. This is where the Church fails and becomes irrelevant.

Moltmann acknowledges the fact that the Church should be involved in socially-uplifting practices, but adds that this should be done as the mission of the Kingdom of God (1967:11). “The real point is not to spread the Church, but to spread the Kingdom” (1967:11). The role of the Church is therefore significantly different to that of politics. Where politics is concerned with power, authority and popularity, it is the Church’s role to promote the rule of Christ. This is not by promoting theocracies or by adopting a pious response to poverty and need. It is the outright declaration that issues like poverty, hunger and peace are at the heart of the Kingdom of God.

3.3 The relevance to the South African situation

I find three issues in Moltmann’s description of historical eschatology to be particularly applicable to our South African historical development. The first is the issue relating to attitudes that arise with the end of a Utopian era.

The question that we need to raise concerning this observation is: “How much has the fall of the Apartheid-regime influenced the way in which we view our new experiences?”. This question does not only apply to those who supported and enforced the regime, but also to those who found their identity in fighting against it. Is there something to be learnt from the Eastern bloc? If the general attitudes of pessimism and of entitlement are caused by Utopianism or the fall thereof, then we certainly will be able to find healing as we open ourselves to the possibility of change.

The task of the Church in this context is not only to restore dignity to those who have been oppressed, but also to include in this activity those who find themselves in a desert of meaninglessness. I would think that this is the type of community that Moltmann speaks about in his eschatologically united humanity (Moltmann 1992:226).

The second issue that I find relevant is that of the Church’s role in the community. Many denominations in South Africa fought very hard against the former regime from a theological perspective, but what should the Church be doing now? Former Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Mvume Dandala outlines the basic duties of the Church in post-Apartheid South Africa (Dandala 2001:31-39):

- The establishment of visionary leadership;
- Ground based support and initiatives;
- Social transformation through fairness and justice;
- A search for a common understanding of truth;
- Remembering the past.

This certainly sounds like the responsibility of politicians and local leadership within communities. What makes the church’s contribution significantly different to that of politics? Dandala then rightly asserts that this is only possible if the Church engages with these issues from what it learns from the person of Christ (2001:38).

The third issue relates to South Africa’s contribution to the rest of the continent of Africa. We should heed Moltmann’s warning not to become a “Redeemer nation”. South Africa has a moral obligation to use its resources and experience to guide and assist our fellow brothers and sisters, but we cannot allow the rest of Africa to be re-created in the image of South Africa, as if the South African model is the only option.

Moltmann’s model helps us not to fall into the trap of self-idolising. It reminds us that the Kingdom of God is not something that we can manufacture. As we look to the cross and resurrection, we are reminded that God is at work in history and that when we respond and participate in the relationship with God, the Kingdom of God will find its place in our historical midst.

4. WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF CREATION?

Although we have described Moltmann's eschatological Kingdom of God as being a co-operative journey between Creator and creation, we find that we have so far only included humanity in the journey towards reconciliation. What about the rest of creation? Without getting into the debate whether cats, dogs and the rest of the created order go to heaven, Moltmann does not allow this aspect of God's relationship with the rest of the created order to become a minor issue that should be discussed for the sake of aesthetic- and/or political correctness.

In this perspective of Moltmann's theology we find personal growth and a development of opinion. It is William French (1988:79) who sees this growth when he states that Moltmann's earlier works such as "*Theology of hope*" display a clear eschatological development that focus on soteriology and comes at the expense of the rest of creation. It is in Moltmann's more recent works like "*God in Creation: An ecological doctrine of creation*" and "*The Coming of God: Christian eschatology*" that we find creation playing an equally important role in the eschatological journey of the Kingdom of God. Moltmann uses two themes to describe the significance of the Kingdom of God in creation. These are the Sabbath and the indwelling of the Spirit.

4.1 The importance of the Sabbath

Using the creation-narrative in Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Moltmann suggests that we should refrain from seeing humanity as the pinnacle of creation and rather see the Sabbath as being the main focus (Moltmann 1999:114). What difference would such an approach make? The impact is quite phenomenal. Viewing the Sabbath as the pinnacle of creation suggests that God's intent for creation is to live in complete relationship. No aspect of creation is therefore more important than the other and no section of the created order can claim to have sole sovereignty over the rest of creation. Humanity has done precisely this. We have viewed ourselves as the pinnacle of creation, the reason why the rest of the created order exists. We have claimed creation as our own and we have exploited the planet we live in. To make matters even worse, we have not even been able to live in harmony with one another! It is no wonder that we are faced with ecological disaster.

To Moltmann, the first Sabbath serves as a picture of what God wants for creation (Moltmann 1996:259). The Fall is therefore not only a human problem, but is a universal problem, affecting even our environment. The Kingdom of God therefore not only contains a soteriological significance for humanity, but also has a redemptive role for the whole of creation. As Christians we do not only celebrate the Sabbath as the climax of the creation-event, but we celebrate the Sabbath in remembrance of the resurrection of Christ. The Sabbath is therefore the celebration of the New Creation under Christ (Moltmann 1985:6).

4.2 God's dwelling place

The question that is often asked of a dualistic view of life and the afterlife is: "If God wanted us to live in heaven, why then did God not create us there in the first place?"

Moltmann seeks to do away with the understanding that "real life" will only be experienced after we have been liberated from this physical venue through means of death. The understanding of life in creation can only be fulfilled through the activity of the Spirit: "The Spirit of God is called the Holy Spirit because it makes our life worth living, not because it is alien and estranged from life" (Moltmann 1992:x). For what reason does God initiate a relationship with creation? If God and creation both achieve full relationship and communion, what more can we expect? Where will God be? To Moltmann the consummation of the Kingdom of God finds its fulfilment in the consummation of God's creation, being the fulfilment of the Spirit's indwelling in creation (Moltmann 1981:212).

The purpose of creation is therefore not to serve as the dwelling place for all that is created, but to serve as the perfect venue where God and the created can feast in fellowship. The Church is therefore not only the gathering of people in order to worship and fellowship, but becomes the ideal vehicle through which God can bring restoration to creation through God's Spirit (Moltmann 1992:64).

4.3 South Africa's response

Perhaps the main lesson that we can learn from Moltmann's Cosmic eschatology is in the manner that Moltmann approaches life. But what do the concepts of life and reality mean to us? Nürnberger (1987:54) suggests that a common human approach to reality (whatever it may mean to us) is: "... reality can be improved continuously in terms of human interests." The big word that many associate with happiness, is the word "progress".

What is progress? Is it progress if everyone in South Africa owns a car? Is it progress when the Rand is stronger than the U.S. dollar? Is it progress when we have a booming industrial sector? These questions are all relative. For as much as we all understand and are passionate about the negative effects technological advancement has had on our environment, I am happily typing this article on my computer, which is on a desk which once was a beautiful tree. What shall we do? Throw away our computers and write on our laps? Moltmann warns that if we should negate the Sabbath for the sake of progress, we would be losing ourselves and become slaves of work and consumerism (Moltmann 1989:87). As we journey in our country's new path, it will be wise to be reminded that true progress is founded on the development of community: a sense of community among each other, a sense of community with creation and a sense of community with God. Whatever else we gain from this life, is a gift.

5 THE KINGDOM WHERE GOD IS GOD.

Is a Divine eschatology necessary? The term "Divine eschatology" is not actually a good description of what Moltmann is trying to convey. It may give the impression that God is somehow incomplete. If God is incomplete then we are faced with the dilemma that God may not be God – yet.

Where is Moltmann going with this description of the Kingdom of God? Moltmann's conclusion of the Kingdom of God is found in the principle that the Kingdom is the place where God is glorified (Moltmann 1996:323). Is God then a narcissist? No. As Creator, God seeks a relationship with His creation. The Fall has hindered this intended relationship and both God and creation are on a journey to be re-united. Through Moltmann's Kingdom of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God reveals God-self and reveals God's intent for relationship. The point is that even in all of this revelation, creation does not have a complete understanding of who God is. Who is God when God does not have to redeem, reveal and sustain? This is a question that can only be answered once creation has been fully redeemed, takes part in eternal life and has a full understanding of who God is.

To Moltmann, "To 'glorify' God means to love God for God's own sake, and to enjoy God as he is in himself." (Moltmann 1996:323). The real eschatological journey is therefore not the search for our own lives, but the search by creation of a God who seek to be in relationship with it. "When God is known face to face, the freedom of God's servants, his children and his friends finally finds its fulfilment in God himself." (Moltmann 1981:222).

1 John 3:1-2 gives a clear description that Moltmann's argument is not a unique Christian perspective. In our sinful and suffering environment, we have sure hope that we will be united with God and restored in our relationship with God. When the Son hands over the Kingdom to the Father, then too is our completion handed to us. This is perhaps difficult to see sub specie temporis.

The journey for us as South Africans is therefore not only to discover what it means to be African in the true communal sense of the word, but to discover who God is. What Moltmann has to offer is a Kingdom where God (and our identity) will not be found in the conventional anthropocentric searches, but in the most challenging places that demand the best of our humanity to come forth.

To Moltmann, God is present where God's Kingdom is needed most: among the suffering (Moltmann 1981:32). If the Kingdom of God is centred on relationship and community, then we cannot assume that it only includes the transcendental relationship between deity and the created. God longs for a relationship with all and will therefore not ignore those who find it the most difficult to be in relationship with God. To find the Kingdom of God in South Africa requires social responsibility. It requires the Church to minister to those in need. The Kingdom of God requires ecological responsibility, caring for God's dwelling place. The Kingdom of God requires personal healing, loving the life that we have been blessed with.

6. CONCLUSION

I think that Moltmann summarises his eschatology very well in the following sentences:

“The Deity who is in himself complete, self-sufficing and blissful, is also complete, self-sufficing and in itself blissful self-love. This causes all living things to join in the divine self-love when they begin to love God and find their happiness in Him.” (Moltmann 1996:325).

South Africa has many challenges that face us. By dealing with South Africa's challenges in a negative and pessimistic manner does not promote life, nor does it create community within our own lives. Moltmann's model of the Kingdom of God gives us hope. It tells us that our journey is not only the journey of a small country on the Southern tip of Africa, but that we are part of a great journey where God and creation can feast together in peace and fulfilment. This, to me, is what the Christian Gospel is all about: hope. It is not a hope that is described as “wishful thinking”, but the belief that St. Paul and Moltmann describe as the place where “...God will be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

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KEY WORDS

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TREFWOORDE

Moltman
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