Many Christians would agree that the most difficult theological issue they ever face is the problem of evil and suffering. Although other theological topics occasionally capture their attention, the issue that confronts and challenges Christians across the centuries is the reality of evil and suffering. Rabbi Harold Kushner echoed this claim in his best-selling book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: “There is only one question which really matters: why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting.”

The purpose of this essay is to explore the relation between the problem of evil and suffering and the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is also a challenging intellectual and theological issue. Although I will explore several facets of the contemporary discussions of the Trinity, my primary focus will be on the implications of the Trinity for responding to the issue of evil and suffering. My thesis is that an authentically Christian doctrine of God is necessary to make an adequate response to the problem of evil and suffering. I agree with several theologians in the current renaissance in trinitarian discussions that a genuinely Christian understanding of God must accent the Trinity.

The term traditionally used for discussions of evil and suffering is “theodicy.” This term is based on two Greek words, *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice). Our English word is patterned after the title of Leibniz’s *Theodicee*. “Theodicy” can be used in at least two ways. First, it can refer to the question “Is God just?” “Theodicy” in this sense will focus on the questions raised by suffering people about the character of God. Is God good? Can God be trusted? Second, “theodicy” can refer to the many proposed answers to human suffering. Theodicy in this sense has long been a concern of academic theologians, philosophers of religion, and Christian apologists. For example, “theodicy” has been defined as “a philosophical and/or theological exercise involving a justification of the righteousness of God.”

---

This essay will comprise two major sections. First, I will briefly review some traditional Christian responses to the problem of evil and suffering. Second, I will highlight the insights of one major contemporary theologian on the relation the Trinity and theodicy. Jürgen Moltmann has given systematic attention to the relation of these two complicated issues since the 1960s. By a critical interaction with his thought, we may be able to reach some conclusions about how the doctrine of the Trinity relates to the perennial issue of theodicy.

The Problems of Evil and Traditional Theodicies

The basic question "Is God just?" is often unpacked in terms of a traditional trilemma traced back to the philosopher Epicurus. David Hume reported Epicurus's questions about God and evil: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" A theologian tries to juggle three truths or realities: God's omnipotence, God's goodness, and the reality of evil and suffering. The theodicy issue typically focuses on the goodness or character of God, but some theologians attempt to redefine God's power in these discussions. C. S. Lewis, for example, devoted separate chapters to God's omnipotence and his goodness in his classic *The Problem of Pain*.

Theologians also often distinguish two types of evil or suffering, natural and moral. 1) Natural evil includes suffering caused by the forces of nature. Events such as hurricanes, tornadoes, avalanches, floods, tsunamis, and other natural disasters are considered natural evil. Although these kinds of events are sometimes called "acts of God" in insurance policies, many Christians would resist considering God the direct cause of these disasters. 2) Moral evil consists of suffering caused by the decisions and actions of moral beings. Traditionally this kind of evil was labeled man's inhumanity to man. Murder, rape, abuse, betrayal, and other forms of injustice count as moral evil.

Theodicy in the sense of responding to the question of God's justice and goodness has attracted much attention across the centuries. A review of some of the many proposals will help set the stage for the discussion of the relation of the Trinity to theodicy. In general, my sense is that not many contemporary theodicies have paid adequate attention to the doctrine of the Trinity. A theologian such as Moltmann can help our reflections on the relation to Trinity and theodicy partly because he has highlighted this connection throughout his career.

Princeton theologian Daniel Migliore has helpfully summarized several major Christian responses to the theodicy issue. He identifies three traditional theodicies and four recent theodicies. The traditional theodicies include divine incomprehensibility, divine punishment, and divine pedagogy. The problems of evil (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Warren McWilliams, Where Is the God of Justice? Biblical Perspectives on Suffering (Peabody: Hendrickson, forthcoming).


incomprehensibility Migliore refers to the ultimate mystery of evil. We cannot know why evil happens, but we should continue to trust God. 2) Divine punishment refers to the traditional view of retribution, the belief that good people will prosper and evil people will suffer. Although this theme is explicitly critiqued several times in the Bible (Job, Ecclesiastes, John 9:1-3, Luke 13:4), many Christians still affirm that much suffering is due to their sin. 3) Divine pedagogy is the belief that suffering can trigger spiritual growth. Although suffering is painful, we can learn from our suffering important truths about ourselves and God.

Migliore’s review of twentieth-century theodicies includes protest theodicy, process theodicy, person-making theodicy, and liberation theodicy. 1) Protest theodicy highlights the questioning of God’s goodness by suffering people. The laments in the Psalms and Jeremiah’s “confessions” provide biblical evidence for this theodicy. This theodicy resists any glib, pat answers to the issue of evil and suffering. 2) Process theodicy is the effort by Christian theologians to adapt the insights of A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne to theodicy. One of the primary insights of process theodicy is that God exercises his power as persuasion rather than coercion. God does not control or manipulate the world, but he lures it towards a greater good. 3) Person-making theodicy is exemplified by John Hick, who proposed an Irenaean type of theodicy. Similar to the divine pedagogy view, Hick and others argue that God created a world in which evil can occur but we can develop as genuine persons as well. 4) Liberation theodiecs, such as Latin American liberation theology and James Cone’s black theology, are more concerned with mounting practical responses to suffering than speculating about the origin of evil.

Other standard textbooks and monographs in theology, apologetics, and philosophy of religion summarize intellectual responses to theodicy question. For instance, John Newport concisely reviews nonevangelical and biblical perspectives on evil and suffering. 9 Paul Schilling organizes his discussion around nine major responses to evil, including his own proposal. 10

In general, surveys of theodicies such as these by Migliore, Newport, and Schilling remind us that Christians and others have dedicated serious attention to the problem of relating God and suffering. Many contemporary statements indicate the need to rethink the doctrine of God, but few have attempted a clear articulation of the relation of the doctrine of Trinity and theodicy.

Of the many theologians and philosophers who have struggled with the theodicy issue, some have begun to question the value or validity of theodicy in the sense of offering rational, philosophical answers. The mood of some is captured in the title The Evils of Theodicy. Terrence Tilley’s conclusion is “that theodicy as a discourse practice must be abandoned because the practice of theodicy does not resolve the problems of evil and does create evils.” 11 Although other scholars are less harsh in their judgments, they too call for a reconsideration of the very task of attempting a logical, philosophical response to the problem of

---

10Schilling, God and Human Anguish. Schilling’s own view highlights the suffering of God (235-60).
evil and suffering. For instance, John Thiel calls for a more explicitly theological, faith-oriented response to suffering.\(^{12}\) In a very helpful essay, Dan Stiver summarized three kinds of criticism of the theodicy project.\(^{13}\) Some have called for more explicitly Christian resources to be used in theodicy. Others have rejected theodicy as an intellectual endeavor in favor of more practical responses. Others have adopted a more consistent rejection of theodicy efforts. In terms of Stiver’s typology, this essay is closest to the first view. British Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes also doubts that we can ever offer a fully satisfactory theodicy in the narrow sense of a justification of God. He proposes as an alternative using “theodicy” in “the softer sense of thinking consistently about God and suffering in one perspective. It is possible then to move by responsible argument to the edge of a great gap which we finally have to leap by faith; theodicy can enable us to identify where the abyss is, and even the direction in which we need to leap.”\(^{14}\) Some scholars who are aware of the baggage attached to the traditional term “theodicy” have opted for the term theology of suffering. A theology of suffering involves serious reflection on the relation of the Christian faith and suffering without some of the presumption of old-fashioned rationalistic theodicies. A theology of suffering could be done by a wide range of scholars, including Bible scholars as well as systematic theologians.\(^{15}\) Perhaps Fiddes’s “softer” version of theodicy approximates a theology of suffering. My own position on theodicy is close to a theology of suffering or softer theodicy perspective.

**Towards a Trinitarian Theodicy**

Although many theologians have carefully studied the themes of suffering and Trinity, surprisingly few have offered sustained reflections on the connections between these two issues. For instance, Gregory Boyd has proposed an intriguing “trinitarian warfare theodicy,” but he has not dedicated much explicit attention to the Trinity.\(^{16}\) To facilitate our thinking, I offer a critical assessment of the work of German theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann attracted attention in the 1960s as one of the pioneers in the theology of hope movement.\(^{17}\) Since then he has dealt


systematically with both Trinity and theodicy, often noting the close relation between these issues. Students of Moltmann's work have often noted his serious engagement with both Trinity and theodicy. Ideally, by interacting with Moltmann's thought, we can glean some insights that will facilitate our own reflections on these two perennial issues. The overarching question that will guide our discussion of Moltmann is "What kind of God do Christians affirm?" Moltmann's answer, and the answer of many involved in the contemporary renaissance in trinitarian theology, is that the distinctively Christian view of God is captured in the notion of Trinity. As a result of this affirmation, attempts to answer the theodicy question "Is God just?" need to highlight a trinitarian theology.

Although Moltmann writes sophisticated academic theology, he is well acquainted with the reality of suffering. For instance, he often reports his experiences during World War II and as a prisoner of war for three years. Due to such life experiences, Moltmann avoids a totally abstract discussion of theodicy which often plagues theodicies. Moltmann helpfully distinguishes two kinds of questions about God's relation to suffering. First, the onlooker’s question is "how can God let this happen?" Such a question is more abstract and leads to traditional discussions of theodicy. Second, the sufferer’s question is about God’s suffering with us. When Moltmann survived the bombing of his hometown of Hamburg, his concern about God was more existential. "Where is God? Is he far away from us, an absentee God in his own heaven? Or is he a sufferer among the sufferers?" Parly because of this existential orientation, Kenneth Surin classifies Moltmann’s theodicy as one that has a more practical emphasis.


Surin, Theology and the Problem of Evil, 112.
Moltmann is aware of a wide range of types of human suffering, but he focuses most of his attention, at least in his earlier writings, on moral evil rather than natural evil. For instance, he noted that events such as the 1755 Lisbon earthquake would attract less attention today than the evil of Auschwitz. In his later writings he devotes more attention to issues such as sickness and disabilities.

Theology of the Cross and Divine Suffering

Early in his career Moltmann noted the importance of the theodicy issue. In his seminal work, *Theology of Hope*, he noted: “Hope finds in Christ not only a consolation in suffering, but also the protest of the divine suffering against suffering. . . . Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goal of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.” In a recent book Moltmann returns to the issue of suffering, highlighting issues such as catastrophes, death, and grief. He once noted that suffering is “the central problem in most religions.”

One of Moltmann’s major concerns is that traditional Christian theology has not been sufficiently Christocentric. In works such as *The Crucified God*, Moltmann contrasted his developing theology of the cross with traditional Christian monotheism. Moltmann insisted that a distinctively Christian view of God must be based on God’s revelation in Jesus, especially his crucifixion and resurrection. “How can Christian theology not speak of God in the face of the cry of Jesus for God on the cross?” Moltmann consciously adopted the notion of theology of the cross from Martin Luther. Several contemporary theologians who critique traditional theologies make this move as well. In *The Crucified God* Moltmann highlighted Jesus’ cry of dereliction on the cross as crucial to a genuinely Christian view of God. “Jesus died crying out to God, ‘My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ All Christian theology and all Christian life is basically an answer to the question Jesus asked as he died.” Focusing on the cross of Christ should lead, suggests Moltmann, to a revolution in our concept of God. Moltmann proceeded to develop a trinitarian theology of the cross.

---

Moltmann sets his discussion of the Trinity and the cross of Jesus in the context of atheism and theism as contemporary rival views. Atheism in the western world is often based on human suffering. Thoughtful people often reject God because of the prevalence of suffering. Moltmann quoted Georg Büchner: "'Why do I suffer? That is the rock of atheism.'"\(^{32}\) Moltmann cites Dostoevsky's famous presentation of Ivan Karamazov's rejection of God.\(^{33}\) Ivan Karamazov represents protest atheism, an atheism derived from struggling with evil and suffering. Moltmann suggests that such atheism is often a reaction against conventional theism, a view of God not adequately based on the theology of the cross.

Moltmann argues that Christian theology is not the same as abstract, generic monotheism or theism. Christian theology should be Christocentric and triune, but in practice many Christians hold to "no more than a weakly Christianized monotheism."\(^{34}\) Although at this stage in his career Moltmann did not address a wide range of trinitarian issues, he was emphatic on the relation of Christology and Trinity. "The theological concept for the perception of the crucified Christ is the doctrine of the Trinity. The material principle of the doctrine of the Trinity is the cross of Christ. The formal principle of knowledge of the cross is the doctrine of the Trinity."\(^{35}\)

A key aspect of Moltmann's revolution in the Christian view of God is his emphasis on divine suffering. Moltmann is aware of the danger of the heresy of patripassianism from early church history, but he affirms that an authentically Christian view of God includes divine passibility. An affirmation of divine suffering, according to Moltmann, will help Christians avoid the dangers of traditional theism and atheism and afford a solid starting point for a Christian theodicy.\(^{36}\) Moltmann believes he avoids patripassianism because he distinguishes the suffering of God the Father and God the Son. "The suffering and dying of the Son, forsaken by the Father, is a different kind of suffering from the suffering of the Father in the death of the Son... The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son."\(^{37}\)

Traditional Christian theology stressed divine impassibility, but in the last century many theologians have argued for divine passibility. Paul Fiddes noted four major factors in this sea change in contemporary theology.\(^{38}\) Many of these factors could be illustrated from Moltmann's discussion as well. First, God's love includes his vulnerability. Love ordinarily means we are open to being affected by someone else. Several contemporary authors have pointed to biblical evidence,
especially in the Old Testament, that supports this aspect of divine suffering. Second, the renewed emphasis on Luther’s theology of the cross prompted interest in divine suffering. Third, divine suffering provides consolation to humans who are suffering. Fiddes notes, “At the most basic level it is a consolation to those who suffer to know that God suffers too, and understands their situation from within.” Generally those who argue for divine suffering insist God is not the direct cause of our suffering; rather, he suffers with us. Fourth, Fiddes points to the general influence of the contemporary world-picture. We tend to see the world now in an organic model rather than a mechanical or hierarchical model. Although process theology has highlighted this interdependence of all parts of reality, belief in divine suffering is not limited to process theology.

Moltmann clearly affirms divine suffering, but he is careful to note that God does not suffer in the exact same way humans suffer. God voluntarily opens himself to the possibility of suffering because of his love for his creation.

Moltmann is especially critical of what he terms the “axiom of apatheia” that early Christian theology borrowed from pagan philosophy. These theologians were motivated to protect God’s self-sufficiency and perfection, but they introduced the dangerous notion of divine impassibility.

Moltmann insists that acknowledging divine suffering can help Christian theology move beyond the impasse between atheism and conventional theism. God as Trinity is essential to a Christian theodicy. “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.”

Messianic Theology and God’s Power
Although Moltmann had dealt with Trinity in his earlier writings (1960s and 1970s), his deepest involvement with a wide range of trinitarian issues came in his six volumes on “contributions to systematic theology,” which he nicknamed “Messianic Theology.” Significantly, the first volume in the series was dedicated to the doctrine of the Trinity. In this and later works Moltmann explores many of the technical aspects of trinitarian theology. In this section I will highlight his understanding of God’s power. Even though many traditional theodicies focus on divine attributes, especially God’s power and his goodness, Moltmann does not offer a textbook style discussion of the divine attributes.

42 Moltmann, The Crucified God, 228-29.
43 Jürgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, 64.
44 For example, see Jürgen Moltmann, God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), xvii. This overview of the series only mentions five volumes, but Moltmann eventually added a volume on the Holy Spirit.
Moltmann does, however, clarify his understanding of God's power in relation to the Trinity and the doctrine of creation. In *The Trinity and the Kingdom* he describes God's freely chosen self-limitation. Rather than controlling the universe in a deterministic way, Moltmann suggests God offers humans their own freedom. "With the creation of a world which is not God, but which none the less corresponds to him, God's self-humiliation begins—the self-limitation of the One who is omnipresent, and the suffering of eternal love." At times Moltmann links this key insight to the writings on Isaac Luria on *zimsum*. The term *zimsum* refers to concentration or contraction, meaning that God creates a world that is distinct from him. In his *God in Creation* Moltmann returned to this notion, stressing again that creation reflects God's self-restricting, self-emptying love, attested in the Bible in Paul's famous kenosis motif in Phil 2:7.

A full comparison of Moltmann's view of God's power and other contemporary views would take us far beyond the limited scope of this essay. In general, however, his emphasis on God's self-restriction of his power in the act of creation seems compatible with other contemporary views. For instance, in his magisterial study of divine providence, Frank Tupper highlights God's power as his ability to do "the most God can do." Drawing on writers such as Tupper and Moltmann, John Sanders criticizes the popular understanding of divine omnipotence as pan-causality and advocates the view of God exercising divine self-restraint. Moltmann's view might also be close to C. S. Lewis's vivid image of the God who woos rather than ravishes.

Although Moltmann stands within the Reformed tradition, his view of divine power avoids the stereotype of Calvinistic determinism or omnicausality. In general, his theodicy, informed by his strong trinitarian convictions, is compatible with the traditional theodicy known as the free will defense.

**The Social Trinity and Suffering**

As long as we focus on issues such as Jesus' crucifixion, divine suffering, and God's power, we can see the relevance of Moltmann's proposals for theodicy. Acknowledging a "crucified God" that suffers with us and allows us some elbow room in the universe can help us understand our suffering. As Moltmann developed his full-blown doctrine of the Trinity, however, he dealt with issues that many lay Christians would find esoteric and irrelevant. Moltmann continued to insist that a fully trinitarian understanding of God was necessary for Christianity today.

---

52For short discussions of this classic theodicy, see Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 70-78 (on Alvin Plantinga), and Schilling, *God and Human Anguish*, 193-14.
One of Moltmann's signature emphases is his social doctrine of the Trinity. Moltmann realizes that early trinitarian theology, dependent on Augustine, tended to highlight the unity of God and used psychological analogies for the Trinity. Moltmann prefers to start with the revelation of God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and move toward unity. This move results in his affirming a social doctrine of the Trinity. Moltmann worries that an overemphasis on God's unity in much traditional theology has resulted in a Christian monotheism that in effect neglects the revelation of God in Jesus. Although Moltmann struggles to retain the traditional balance between the oneness and threeness of God in the Trinity, some of his critics insist he has moved dangerously close to tritheism. Moltmann envisions the relation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as a kind of fellowship, which he describes as an "open Trinity." This divine fellowship is partly open in the sense that God invites humans to enter into the trinitarian fellowship. "It is a fellowship with God and, beyond that, a fellowship in God... So the unity of the Trinity is not merely a theological term; at heart it is a soteriological one as well."

Moltmann develops his understanding of the social Trinity with the notion of perichoresis. This concept, borrowed from John of Damascus, stresses the mutual interpenetration and indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For Moltmann perichoresis eliminates any hint of subordination in the Trinity. In the last volume in his contributions to systematic theology, Experiences in Theology, Moltmann continued to emphasize the role of perichoresis for his trinitarian theology. The movement among the three persons of the Trinity is similar to a dance, and humans are invited to participate in the life of God. So, in other words, Moltmann's perichoretic understanding of the social Trinity has a soteriological payoff; humans can participate in God's trinitarian life. Although theodicy was not the main focus of Moltmann's discussion of the social Trinity, the social Trinity, at least indirectly, relates to theodicy. Our participation in the life of God would surely involve some relief from life's struggles. Ideally, the fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be reflected above all in the church, the Christian community. Moltmann also endorses the social Trinity as the ideal for human society in general. The community within the Trinity can be a social program as well as the pattern for church.

---

54 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 16-20.
55 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 131-2.
56 For example, Grenz, Rediscovering the Triune God, 85.
57 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 94-96.
58 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 96.
59 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 174-76. See also, Jürgen Moltmann, History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology (trans. John Bowden; New York: Crossroad, 1992), 84-87.
61 Moltmann, Experiences in Theology, 328. See also, Moltmann, History and the Triune God, xi-xii.
62 Moltmann, Experiences in Theology, 332-33.
Besides this strong emphasis on the social doctrine of the Trinity, Moltmann has also attracted attention for his interest in two other traditional trinitarian issues, the relation of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity and the *filioque* controversy. Both of these issues relate to the interrelations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and these issues impact Moltmann's theodicy.

1) The relation of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity has surfaced as a major issue in contemporary trinitarian discussions. Ultimately, theologians agree that there is only one God and only one Trinity, but sometimes they distinguish two dimensions of the one Trinity. The economic Trinity refers to God's revelation in history as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The term “economic” relates to God’s *oikonomia* or his orderly, purposeful revelation in history. The economic Trinity, in other words, is “the revelatory Trinity.” The immanent Trinity refers to God’s inner essence. The two trinities, so to speak, refer to God for us and God in himself. Moltmann’s discussion of the relation between these two aspects of the Trinity becomes highly technical. For instance, his thesis statements are very compressed and dense: “The economic Trinity completes and perfects itself to immanent Trinity when the history and experience of salvation are completed and perfected. When everything is ‘in God’ and ‘God is all in all’, then the economic Trinity is raised into and transcended in the immanent Trinity.”

Without entering into the details of interpretation Moltmann’s view on this technical point, most interpreters see Moltmann emphasizing the economic Trinity. His orientation throughout his career has been to stress the historical revelation of God as triune. The economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity are consistent. God is eternally triune, and he has revealed himself as triune.

2) Another trinitarian issue of perennial interest is the controversy over *filioque*. This Latin term, meaning “and from the Son” was the focus of a debate between the Western church and the Eastern church in the Middle Ages. The Nicene Creed, adopted in 381, referred to Jesus being “begotten” by the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father (based on John 15:26). Eventually the Western church added the phrase *filioque* to the creed, thereby stating that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and from the Son. The Eastern and Western churches split over this issue in 1054. The *filioque* issue has been discussed by ecumenical groups and individual theologians into the twentieth century.

Moltmann entered this theological fray on the side of the eastern church. He proposed that a compromise might be reached between the two major

---

63 For a brief introduction, see Ted Peters, *God as Trinity*, 20-24.
64 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 151.
68 For two of Moltmann’s key discussions, see *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 178-90 and *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis, Fortress, 1992), 306-309.
branches of Christianity by using language such as this: "The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father of the Son, and who receives his form from the Father and the Son." In general, Moltmann insists that the social doctrine of the Trinity must retain a nonhierarchical relationship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If the social Trinity is to be an open Trinity, inviting humans to participate in the fellowship of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, the subordinating of the Holy Spirit implied by filioque needs to be avoided.

Trinitarian Praxis

Although Moltmann has developed a distinctive theodicy based on his theology of the cross, divine possibility, and a social doctrine of the Trinity, he has not neglected the Christian’s practical responses to evil and suffering. Throughout his writings he notes numerous concrete examples of suffering. For example, in Religion, Revolution, and the Future he highlighted three kinds of alienation that afflicted contemporary life: economic, political, and racial. He concluded: “Therefore the all-embracing vision of God must be linked with the economic liberation of man from hunger, with the political freeing of man from oppression by other men, and with the human emancipation of man from racial humiliation.” He concluded The Crucified God with two chapters on psychological liberation and political liberation. Although Moltmann’s emphasis in these earlier works seemed to be on moral evil rather than natural evil, he eventually noted forms of suffering such as sickness and disability. In his small Christology he devoted a chapter to torture.

Moltmann also became increasingly concerned with ecological issues. Indeed, Moltmann can be identified now as one of the leading “green” theologians. Moltmann investigated the current ecological crisis in God in Creation and highlighted the cosmic Christ theme in his later Christology. In his later eschatology, The Coming of God, Moltmann includes the possible destruction of the earth as one example of “exterminism.”

Moltmann’s overall view of the relation of God and the world, which lies in the background of his discussions of theodicy and Trinity, is panentheism. Panentheism stresses that God is in the world and the world is in God, while pantheism (all=God) equates God and the world. Moltmann is convinced that panentheism reflects God’s true relation to the world and avoids the alternatives of atheism and traditional theism. His panentheism also has a distinctively eschato-

---

69Moltmann, Trinity and the Kingdom, 187.
72For example, Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, 188-93.
73Moltmann, Jesus Christ for Today’s World, 58-70.
75Moltmann, God in Creation, 20-52, on the ecological crisis, and The Way of Jesus Christ, 274-312, on the cosmic Christ.
77For example, Moltmann, The Crucified God, 277.
logical orientation. Moltmann frequently quotes 1 Cor 15:28: "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subjected to the one who put all things under him, so that God may be all in all" (NRSV). Moltmann’s eschatological panentheism leads him to a cautious affirmation of the restoration of all things, including universal salvation.

Besides being concerned about a wide range of examples of suffering, Moltmann offers many practical suggestions on how humans can respond to suffering. Even though he became famous in the 1960s as an advocate of the theology of hope, he has never been guilty of eschatological escapism, popularly known as pie-in-the-sky theology. In his earlier works he highlighted political responses to injustice, developing a political hermeneutic of the gospel. This emphasis on political activism influenced some liberation theologians. In the last volume in his contributions to systematic theology Moltmann dedicated over 100 pages to continuing the dialogue with liberation theologies.

One of Moltmann’s key concepts related to human responses to suffering is praxis. In an early essay on the revolution in our God concept, Moltmann insisted that “The new criterion of theology and faith is to be found in praxis.” In general Moltmann called for Christians to be actively involved in the struggle for freedom and justice in contemporary society. We cannot and will not build the kingdom of God on earth, but he described Christians as “construction workers and not only interpreters of the future whose power in hope as well as in fulfillment is God.” In his later discussion of praxis Moltmann clarified that he was not endorsing all kinds of political action. He posed the question, “If praxis is the criterion of theory, what is the criterion of praxis?” and his response was that Christ is the criterion. He insists that our efforts to alleviate evil and suffering be informed by our Christocentric, trinitarian theology.

Moltmann’s political response to evil and suffering is a consistent theme throughout his career. Due to his focus on moral evil, this kind of response is appropriate. He often favorably quotes Walter Rauschenbusch: “Ascetic Christianity called the world evil and left it. Humanity is waiting for a revolutionary Christianity which will call the world evil and change it.” Moltmann’s theodicy is a revolutionary, trinitarian, practical response to the problem of evil and suffering.

Moltmann’s emphasis on practical responses to suffering is perhaps the clearest in his later Christologies. Having devoted considerable attention to Jesus’ death and resurrection in his earlier Christologies, Moltmann focuses some

---

78Richard Bauckham, ed., *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), xv, says this is Moltmann’s favorite eschatological text.

79For example, Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 235-55.


attention on Jesus’ life and ministry in these later works. Here Moltmann highlights Jesus’ ministry to the poor, women, the sick, and social outcasts. He argues that we should practice a distinctively Christian ethic. He insists that our Christology should lead to christopraxis: “Christopraxis inevitably leads the community of Christ to the poor, the sick, the ‘surplus people,’ and to the oppressed.”

After reviewing Jesus’ teaching in his shorter Christology, Moltmann noted the implication for interpersonal relations, politics, economics, ecology, and the church.

**Only the Suffering God Can Help**

What is the relation of the doctrine of the Trinity to theodicy? The aim of this essay has been, in part, to demonstrate that a distinctively Christian doctrine of God should be trinitarian. Such a trinitarian theology should help Christians respond intellectually and practically to the problem of evil and suffering.

Since Jürgen Moltmann has reflected on both Trinity and theodicy throughout his career, I chose to let his theology guide our thinking. Based on this dialogue with Moltmann’s trinitarian theodicy, what can we say about the relation of Trinity to theodicy? A few simple theses might lead the reader to further research and reflection.

1) A full-blown doctrine of the Trinity is essential to a genuinely Christian doctrine of God. The Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle to be dismissed in a cavalier way. Rather, the Trinity is crucial to a truly Christian view of God. The biblical God is the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, not some generic supreme being. Moltmann’s emphasis on the Trinity can help us avoid a simplistic version of monotheism. Moltmann’s social Trinity may come too close to tritheism for some Christians, but at least he has helped remind contemporary Christians of the importance of the Trinity in developing an understanding of God.

2) A distinctively Christian view of God must take the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus seriously. Moltmann’s emphasis on the “crucified God” is salutary and has been widely adapted in contemporary theology. Jesus’ agony on the cross is a revelation of the nature and character of God, not merely an experience of the human dimension of Jesus.

3) A Christocentric, trinitarian theology will emphasize divine suffering. Again, Moltmann’s recovery of divine passibility has been a watershed in contemporary theology. He frequently cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous dictum, “Only...
the suffering God can help. Affirming divine suffering is a key element in a Christian theodicy. Knowing that God suffers alongside our suffering helps relieve our sense of loneliness and alienation in our suffering. We are not alone in our suffering. Some critics of divine passibility will ask, however, if this suffering God can also help us in our suffering via some divine intervention, such as a miracle. For example, Robert Letham claims that Bonhoeffer's famous dictum should be reversed: "Only a God who cannot suffer can help us." In the spirit of Moltmann's appropriation of Bonhoeffer famous saying, "only the triune God can help" might be a useful way to summarize Moltmann's response to theodicy.

4) The suffering, trinitarian God expects God's people to do as much as we can to alleviate suffering. Moltmann's emphasis on praxis stimulated some liberation theologians to struggle with racism, sexism, and classism. Some evangelical Christians have tended to highlight examples of innocent suffering such as cancer and infertility. Moltmann's concern with the social dimensions of suffering partly results from his experiences as a survivor of World War II and his knowledge of the Holocaust. Also, Moltmann's increasing attention to ecological issues reminds us about suffering in all of God's creation. Despite his ecological concern, however, Moltmann has given limited attention to animal suffering, which has attracted the attention of some theologians.

In sum, both the Trinity and theodicy are issues that will not go away. Christians who are serious about the Bible, about their view of God, and about life's difficulties will continue to seek a fuller understanding of the Trinity and suffering.

---


