



THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

By Christopher McMahon

The horrific cry of those millions who senselessly suffered and died as the result of Nazi atrocities and Allied indifference has profoundly shaped twentieth-century theology and made it come to terms with Christian theology's own role in the concrete suffering of millions. There is probably no better example of the impact the Holocaust has had on Christian theology than the work of Jürgen Moltmann, who, like many theologians in the twentieth century, has worked to connect God with human history, particularly through his conviction concerning the nature of God, revelation of that nature, and the process of history.

Revelation is not to be understood as a supernatural incursion into the natural world; rather, revelation is a promise about the future, experienced and anticipated in the here and now. God becomes known, indeed becomes God, within history. In his book *The Crucified God*, Moltmann begins with the bold truism that the concept of God is determinative for a given culture, society, and individual. If humans are cruel and vindictive, their “god” tends to be cruel and vindictive.

Without a revolution in the concept of God . . . there can be no revolutionary faith. Without God’s liberation from idolatrous images produced by anxiety and hubris, there will be no liberating theology. Man always unfolds his humanity in relation to the divinity of his God, and experiences himself in relation to what appears to him as the highest being.¹

The modern God is a God of apathy, and the modern human is the apathetic person of success. “Faith in the apathetic God leads to the ethics of man’s liberation from need and drive, and to dominion over body and nature.”² The result of this apathy is carelessness about one’s actions and the suffering and

oppression that they create. This apathy is poignantly reflected in the scene from Elie Wiesel’s *Night* in which three prisoners are hanged for attempting to escape from a Nazi internment camp. One of the condemned prisoners, a small boy, dies slowly as the other prisoners are forced to watch. As the prisoners file past, someone asks, “Where is God?”



Moltmann responds that, in the context of Wiesel’s story, we can only talk about God’s presence in the person of the youth hanging from the gallows. In other words, God is present as the suffering one. Such a notion deeply disturbs the Western concept of the *apatheia*, or impassibility, of God since it serves to reinforce the relationship between God’s freedom and God’s love. Traditionally, Christian theology accepted a concept of love that demands absolute freedom: “True love arises out of freedom from self-seeking and anxiety, and because it loves *sine ira et studio* [without passion or prejudice], one understood apathy as the presupposition for *agape* [love].”³ Moltmann argues



that the classical idea of God's *apatheia* cannot be fully reconciled with the Jewish and Christian experience of God. In the prophets and in the story of Jesus, both the Jewish and Christian traditions insist that God suffers with and does not stand apart from the oppressed. Post-Holocaust theologies like that of Moltmann serve to recall such powerful traditions.

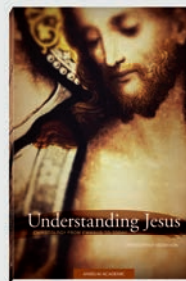
The Christian experience builds on the message and promise of the prophets in continuity with the covenant of Israel, but Christians also find themselves in a new "God-situation" as a result of their experience of Christ. In the cross of Christ, Christians find their own inescapable suffering as it exists in God. So if humans form themselves and their societies based on their image of God, a revised image of God then creates a different kind of society, one not built on progress, success, and action, but on fellow-suffering, sympathy, and radical patience. In such a theology, God cannot be the God of the establishment, whether church, government, or dominant social class. God must be identified with what and who are marginal; the suffering of the marginal is to be recognized as the suffering of God and as something to be embraced. In the end, what emerges is something like Lonergan's "law of the cross."

Where [human beings] suffer because they love, God suffers in them and they suffer in God. Where this God suffers the death of Jesus and thereby demonstrates the power of his love, there men also find the power to remain in love despite pain and death, becoming neither bitter nor superficial. They gain the power of affliction and can hold fast to the dead . . . and despite [this] remain in love. (Moltmann, "The Crucified God," *Theology Today*, 17)

Moltmann transforms Christian doctrine through an appeal to the historical specificity of the encounter with God. This appeal enshrines the virtue of hope rather than so-called progress. The hopeless world is condemned to progress that is determined by the canonization of general bias, condemned to rely upon its own devices, which are unequal to the good intentions of humans. Such a world ignores suffering and cannot embrace the God who

suffers and yet promises liberation. For Jews and Christians, God is the one who suffers with humanity amid the promise that suffering is not the last word; rather, God calls humans to faithfulness, to live beyond the desire to control that lies at the heart of progress. Jesus is the sure sign to Christians of God's suffering with humanity and the hope that history will unfold God's lordship over time.

This article is an excerpt from Understanding Jesus: Christology from Emmaus to Today, by Christopher McMahon (2007, 2013). Winona, MN: Anselm Academic. Copyright © 2007, 2011 Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.



Christopher McMahon holds a doctorate in theology from the Catholic University of America. His areas of interest include Christology and Scripture.

1. Jürgen Moltmann, "The Crucified God," *Theology Today* 31 (1974): 16–18, 16.
2. *Ibid.*, 11.
3. *Ibid.*