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All correspondence on editorial matters should be
sent to:

John Stacey, Room 195, 1 Central Buildings,

Westminster, London SW1H 9NR.

Evolution and Creation

(9) In Moltmann's Doctrine of Creation

RICHARD BAUCKHAM

Jürgen Moltmann's most recent major work, God in Creation,¹ is an indisputably important contribution to the theology of creation. Its treatment of the problems of relating a Christian understanding of creation to scientific theories of evolution is relatively brief, but is significant because of its place within Moltmann's much broader theological exploration of the doctrine of creation. This broad context sets the problems in a fresh perspective and facilitates Moltmann's creative theological interpretation and appropriation of evolution. We must therefore begin by sketching the outlines of Moltmann's doctrine of creation in general, before turning to the specific question of its relationship to evolution. In the limited space available, I shall confine myself to exposition of Moltmann's views, leaving critical assessment to the reader.²

I. AN OUTLINE OF MOLTSMANN'S DOCTRINE

I. An ecological doctrine of creation

THIS is the subtitle of the work and indicates the contemporary context which guides Moltmann's interest in the doctrine of creation. The ecological crisis is a crisis in the human relationship to nature, in human beings' understanding of themselves in relationship to nature. So it requires, theologically, a renewed understanding of nature and human beings as God's creation, and therefore also a renewed understanding of God's relationship to the world as his creation. Moltmann's doctrine of creation is a doctrine not just about the origin of the world, though that is included, but about God's relationship, as Creator, to his creation, about the world as God's creation, and about human beings as part of God's created world. The result is not, as we might expect from Moltmann, a theology which leads at all explicitly into specific recommendations for ecological *praxis*: in this respect it is disappointingly, sometimes frustratingly, lacking in concreteness. Indeed, at its worst this is a book whose argument takes flight into a kind of pure speculation in which Moltmann in his more recent work seems to have developed a tendency to indulge. But at its best, it achieves an understanding of 'God in creation' which critiques the *attitudes* to the natural world that underlie the ecological crisis and promotes alternative attitudes, from which a different kind of *praxis* can emerge.

The kind of human relationship to nature which has created the ecological crisis and must be superseded is that of exploitative domination. Related to this is the way of knowing nature which was characteristic of the modern scientific enterprise until recently: that of objectifying, analytical thinking, in which the knowing subject masters the object by analyzing it. An ecological theology requires instead a participatory kind of knowledge, in which things are perceived in the totality of their relationships and the human subject perceives itself as a participant in the natural world. The purpose of such

knowledge is not to dominate nature, but to restore the human sense of community with nature, respecting its independence and participating in mutual relationships with it.

But since, for Moltmann, anthropology always relates closely to an understanding of God, a reconception of the human relationship to nature requires a reconception of God's relationship to nature. An understanding of God as the monarchical ruler of creation encourages an understanding of humanity, his image on earth, as similarly distinguished from nature in a dominating relationship. In order to ground an emphasis on mutual relationship in nature, rather than hierarchical sovereignty, Moltmann appeals to the kind of doctrine of God which he has developed in his earlier works and further develops it with reference to the divine relationship to creation.

2. A trinitarian doctrine of creation

God in himself is not a divine hierarchy, but a trinitarian community of persons, who relate to each other in a relationship of mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*). God's own life therefore provides a pattern for the life of his creation as an intricate community of reciprocal relationships: 'All living things—each in its own specific way—live in one another and with one another, from one another and for one another' (17). Moltmann's longstanding theological principle of relatedness—understanding things not in themselves but in their relationships to other things—which he applied, for example, to ecclesiology in *The Church and the Power of the Spirit*, as well as to the doctrine of God in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, becomes in the present book a general cosmological principle: 'in reality relationships are just as primal as the things themselves' (11). For this principle he can, of course, claim scientific support, implicit, for example, in his use of the term 'symbiosis', but theologically he grounds the principle in the trinitarian *perichoresis*. Its anthropological implication is that, for all our distinctiveness, humanity's fundamental place in creation is that of a participant in the mutually dependent, ecological community of creation.

However, God's trinitarian life is more than a model for the symbiotic life of his creation: it is also the form of God's own relationship with his creation. Since *The Crucified God*, Moltmann has emphasized the Trinity's openness to the world. The relationships of the three divine persons do not form a closed circle in heaven, but an open community in which the life of the creation may participate. God has a *trinitarian history* with the world, a history of mutual relationships, in which God not only acts on the world but is affected by the world and the trinitarian relationships themselves change as human history is taken within them. Moreover, this trinitarian history has as its goal the kingdom of God, which Moltmann has long conceived as an eschatological panentheism, in which 'God will be all in all': creation will be glorified through its participation in the divine life and God will be glorified in his indwelling of his creation. Moltmann's stress on the divine *involvement* in history was originally, in *The Crucified God*, especially christological, but since then has become increasingly also pneumatological. This means that now, as he extends the concept more explicitly to the whole of the natural world, it is the Spirit, among the trinitarian persons, who takes the centre-stage. The immanence of God in his creation is not, for Moltmann, the cosmic Logos-Son of the early Fathers: Moltmann's divine Son is too centrally

the incarnate, human God, the crucified and risen Jesus, for this to be appropriate. The Son is the mediator of creation, rather than the life-giving divine energy within it. Rather, Moltmann tells us, 'By the title "God in Creation" I mean God the Holy Spirit' (xi), and as well as calling his doctrine 'a trinitarian doctrine of creation' (14, 86), he can also call it 'a pneumatological doctrine of creation' (xii; cf. 9).

Thus, not only is the trinitarian God a perichoretic community and his creation a perichoretic community, but also God's relationship to his creation is one of mutual indwelling. God is not only, as the Father, creation's transcendent Lord, but also, as the Spirit, an immanent divine presence within it. This is the point at which Moltmann's persistent polemic against 'monotheism' (meaning unitarianism) really impinges on the doctrine of creation. Trinitarian theology requires us to think, not of a simple dichotomy between God and the world, but of a tension within God himself, who is both transcendent beyond the world and pervasively immanent within it:

The trinitarian concept of creation binds together God's transcendence and his immanence. The one-sided stress on God's transcendence in relation to the world led to deism, as with Newton. The one-sided stress on God's immanence in the world led to pantheism, as with Spinoza. The trinitarian concept of creation integrates the elements of truth in monotheism and pantheism. In the panentheistic view, God, having created the world, also dwells in it, and conversely the world which he has created exists in him. This is a concept which can really only be thought and described in trinitarian terms (98).

In other words, because God is transcendent beyond the world, it dwells in him, and because he is immanent within it, he dwells in it. Moreover, because of the trinitarian relationship between the transcendence and the immanence of God, the Spirit in the world not only differentiates and binds together all things in the community of creation, but also keeps the world open in self-transcendence:

If the cosmic Spirit is the Spirit of God, the universe cannot be viewed as a closed system. It has to be understood as a system that is open—open for God and for his future (103).

3. A messianic doctrine of creation

By this term (4–5) Moltmann intends to designate his doctrine of creation as a specifically Christian doctrine of creation, i.e. creation understood in the light of the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah. As we should expect from Moltmann, this means that creation is given an *eschatological* orientation towards the messianic future opened up by the history of Jesus. The purely protological view of creation, to which the Genesis creation narratives confine themselves, has to be supplemented by the eschatological view of creation, which already developed in the Old Testament but for Christians is defined by Jesus' introduction and anticipation of the eschatological kingdom. Creation understood in the light of the redemptive history which leads towards the coming kingdom is revealed as a not yet completed creation, subject to the

power of nothingness from which it requires redemption but open to its future goal of transfiguration in the kingdom of glory. Moltmann is here developing the conviction which can be found in his theology from *Theology of Hope* onwards: that the kingdom of God represents the eschatological goal not only of human history but also of the whole material cosmos. Redemption and eschatology do not, therefore, serve to lift humanity out of the material world, but confirm humanity's solidarity with the rest of God's creation in its longing for eschatological liberation. This thought is, of course, an echo of Romans 8:19–23, which is one of the most fundamental texts for Moltmann's doctrine of creation, since it links the Christian experience of the eschatological Spirit with the bondage and hope of the whole creation.

The effect of this is to turn the doctrine of creation into a *history* of God's relationship to his creation. In the beginning the initial divine act of creation *ex nihilo* produced a *creatio mutabilis*, an 'open system' with its goal beyond itself in the future. Creation is not static, nor is its redemption a mere restoration of a paradisaical origin. Rather creation is from the beginning orientated towards a goal which will surpass its origin: the eschatological new creation in the kingdom of glory. Therefore the divine activity of *creatio continua*, which leads from the initial creation to the eschatological consummation of creation, is not only a preservative activity of sustaining the created world, but also an innovative history which anticipates and prepares for the new creation. Moreover, whereas the initial creation was an effortless act of divine creativity, the continuing history of creation-redemption is a history in which God suffers his creation as well as acts on it. Moltmann's distinctive emphasis on divine passibility here enters his doctrine of creation: 'The inexhaustible creative power of God in history always makes itself known first of all in the inexhaustibility of the power of his suffering' (210). The immanent Spirit co-suffers with creation in its bondage. The Spirit suffers creation's tendency to close in on itself and die, keeps it open beyond itself to life and to the future, and thereby turns creation's history of suffering into a history of hope.

In all this we can see a fairly thorough fusion between creation and redemption in Moltmann's thought, along with a thorough-going assimilation of the creative and salvific activities of the Spirit. Sin and death have their counterparts in the non-human world: its subjection to transience and the power of nothingness. Hence the history of nature is a tormented struggle in which the Spirit's indwelling is a kenotic presence and redemptive suffering. Just as in the history of the church the Spirit is present as the eschatological Spirit, producing anticipations of the coming kingdom but at the same time suffering the contradictions of the present age and keeping humanity's history open in hope for the kingdom, so in the natural world the immanent Spirit is the eschatological Spirit, filling the natural world with promises of its future transfiguration and keeping it open in self-transcendence towards the future. It is important to note that, in consequence, the present indwelling of God through the Spirit in the world does not make nature a theatre of God's glory, in the manner of a natural theology which sees the world as a simple reflection of the divine nature. The divine immanence in nature is historically situated in the messianic history of God with the world: it is a kenotic, suffering, contradicted presence, which can do no more than point towards the future kingdom of glory. Only then will creation be lifted beyond

transience through participation in God's eternal life and God's glory will fill his creation.

4. A sabbatical doctrine of creation

Of the four terms I have used to describe Moltmann's doctrine of creation, this is the only one which is not actually used by Moltmann. But he comes close to it when he claims:

the doctrine of the sabbath of creation becomes the identifying mark of the biblical doctrine of creation, distinguishing it from the interpretation of the world as nature. It is the sabbath which manifests the world's identity as creation, sanctifies it and blesses it (276; cf.5-6).

Moltmann's interpretation of the sabbath as the eschatological goal of creation brings together the messianic orientation of his doctrine, which we have just noticed, and the ecological concern with which we began this account of his doctrine. It does so because it characterizes the world as *theocentric* (and therefore *creation*) rather than *anthropocentric*.

The first Genesis creation account, which has so often been interpreted in such a way as to represent humanity as the crown of creation for whom the rest of creation exists, is only amenable to this interpretation, Moltmann points out, if one confines one's attention to the six days of God's work and neglects the seventh day of God's rest. In fact, it is the sabbath, in which God rests from the work of creation in order to enjoy his creation, which is the crown of creation. The sabbath is the anticipation of the eschatological goal of all God's creative work, in which he will come to rest in his creation and his creation will participate in his rest. The goal of all his work, beyond doing and making, is the joy in existing which the sabbath represents. But if it is in this sabbath rest of God that creation comes to completion, human beings, though holding a special position in creation, as the image of God, must not behave as owners of nature. They belong with nature in a community of creation which has its goal in God. And when human beings anticipate the completion of creation by keeping the sabbath, not interfering in their environment by labour but simply letting it be itself, then they acknowledge creation to be God's creation, with its own value for God.

II. EVOLUTION AND CREATION

The theological structure which we have so far outlined is not without an input from the natural sciences, but is not determined by them. Its main features result from the theological directions already established in Moltmann's early theology, but sharpened in certain respects under the impact of concern about the ecological crisis. In the latter context, theology has a contribution to make which cannot come from science: 'The sciences have shown us how to understand creation as nature. Now theology must show how nature is to be understood as God's creation' (38). Nevertheless, this theological task presupposes and must seek to integrate scientific findings. It can do so insofar as the latter are not confined to objectifying, analytical thinking, but go on to the ecological thinking which seeks to understand each thing in its relationship to the whole. In the end, theology must relate to scientific theories about the universe and the whole process of nature, recognizing that, in view of accelerating scientific progress, these will never

be more than provisional drafts. Consequently, 'a theological theory of nature will also be both variable and provisional' (37), a conclusion not at odds with Moltmann's general view of the nature of theological work.

Moltmann's treatment of scientific theories of evolution is in line with this programme. He seeks a broad interpretation of the whole history of nature as an evolutionary process—an interpretation which tries to do justice both to particular scientific findings and to the broad structures, established on theological grounds, of his doctrine of creation. In order to do so he focuses, inevitably, on the respects in which scientific theory appears most amenable to the theological interpretation along the lines he has established. The resulting synthesis of theology and scientific theory is necessarily provisional.

In seeking to overcome the supposed opposition between the Christian belief in creation and the scientific understanding of evolution, Moltmann first confronts the hermeneutical issue. Throughout the book he takes the Genesis creation narratives very seriously as theology. Indeed, he is apt to squeeze theological significance out of them in a way which is too little controlled by historical exegesis. But an interesting hermeneutical observation frees him from any need to take them literally as science. The biblical traditions about creation, he points out, are products, at more than one particular point, of a history of reflection on belief in creation, in which new insights into nature had to be continually integrated into the understanding of creation. Thus the particular syntheses of belief in creation and knowledge of nature which they represent are in principle revisable and require reformulation in the light of fresh understandings of nature.

Moltmann discerns and responds to three further problems about the relation of creation to evolution. In the first place, evolution seemed opposed to creation because 'creation' was too narrowly understood in terms of the *initial* creation, after which it was conceived as finished. Moltmann's emphasis on the openness of the original creation, which is only on the way to its completion in the kingdom of glory, plainly leaves room, indeed positively welcomes the scientific understanding of nature as an unfinished process which not only has evolved but continues to evolve.

Secondly, and linked to the view of creation as static, God was understood in relation to creation too exclusively as the transcendent cause of creation. Moltmann's emphasis on God's involvement in his creation in a variety of different kinds of relationship, including relationships of mutuality, makes it much easier to see the immanent creative Spirit at work in the processes of natural evolution. We have already noticed how he distinguishes the kind of divine activity involved in the act of initial creation from the kind with which we are concerned in the subsequent history of continuous creation. Of the latter he says: 'Because it is a fundamentally suffering and enduring creating, the activity of God in history is also a silent and a secret one' (211). The creative activity of the immanent Spirit is not distinguishable, as a supernatural intervention, from the processes of nature, but is an unobtrusive accompaniment of them. It has to be conceived as

a whole series of relationships: God acts *in* and *through* the activity of his creatures; God acts *with* and *out of* the activity of his creatures; created beings act *out of* the divine potencies and *into* a divine environment; the activity of created beings is made possible by the divine patience; the

presence of God in the world is the space free *for* the liberty of created beings; and so on (211).

Moltmann's fundamental model of God as the transcendent environment of the world and the pervasive divine immanence in the world thus proves able to accommodate an appropriately complex account of God's relation to the evolutionary process. Moreover, it proves capable of transcending the opposition of creation and evolution in their religious implications:

When eyes were turned towards the initial contingency of the world, theism always presented itself as the obvious philosophy; for theism distinguishes between God and the world. But when we are thinking about the evolution of the cosmos and of life from the contingency of events, dynamic pantheism seems much more plausible: the matter that organizes itself also transcends itself and produces its own evolution (212).

But the trinitarian doctrine of creation unites the transcendent Creator *ex nihilo* with the immanent Spirit of creation's self-transcendence.

Thirdly, evolutionary theory, which made humanity a link in the evolutionary chain, was resisted as an affront to the modern, *anthropocentric* view of the world. Moltmann, however, finds the evolutionary origins of humanity entirely appropriate to his understanding of creation. They highlight the extent to which human beings, as in the first place a product of nature, are members of the community of creation, having as much in common with the rest of creation as they are distinguished from it—as Genesis 1 itself makes clear. Moreover, the understanding of the world as *theocentric* frees us from the need either to understand the whole evolutionary process as having its goal in humanity, or to understand humanity as purely a means to some further goal of the process. Every product of evolution has its own meaning with reference to God.

This last point should indicate how Moltmann's incorporation of evolution into his doctrine of creation at the same time gives it a creative interpretation in line with the particular features of that doctrine. This emerges more fully in the last topic we shall notice: his attempt at 'a hermeneutical theory of evolution', i.e. of the whole series of evolutionary processes from the evolution of the cosmos through the evolution of life to human history. His proposal that systems of matter and life must be understood as 'open systems', i.e. systems open to a partially undetermined future, leads to the question whether the whole universe itself is an open or a closed system. If, by analogy with its parts, we understand the universe as an open, self-transcending system, then we must

assume that the universe itself has a transcendent encompassing milieu, with which it is in communication, and a transcendent future into which it is evolving (204).

In other words, the evolutionary model of the universe coheres with the doctrine of creation as existing in God and towards his future:

God is [the world's] extra-worldly encompassing *milieu*, from which, and

in which, it lives. God is its extra-worldly *forecourt*, into which it is evolving. God is the origin of the new possibilities out of which its realities are won . . . Theologically, the world is comprehended as an open, participatory and anticipatory system once we grasp the history of creation as an interplay between God's transcendence in relation to the world, and his immanence in that world.

Notes

- 1 J. Moltmann, *God in Creation: An ecological doctrine of creation* (tr. M. Kohl; London: SCM Press, 1985). Page numbers in my text refer to this edition. For the background in Moltmann's earlier theology, see R. Bauckham, *Moltmann: Messianic Theology in the Making* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1987).
- 2 For some critical engagements, see C. Link, 'Schöpfung im messianischen Licht', *Evangelische Theologie* 47 (1987) 83–92 (with a response by Moltmann: 93–95); P. Lønning, 'Die Schöpfungstheologie Jürgen Moltmanns—eine nordische Perspektive', *Kerygma und Dogma* 33 (1987) 207–23. More general critiques of Moltmann's doctrine of creation, with less reference to this book, are B. J. Walsh, 'Theology of Hope and the Doctrine of Creation: An Appraisal of Jürgen Moltmann', *Evangelical Quarterly* 59 (1987) 53–76; D. J. Schuurman, 'Creation, Eschaton, and Ethics: An Analysis of Theology and Ethics in Jürgen Moltmann', *Calvin Theological Journal* 22 (1987) 42–67.