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Scott R. Paeth, *DePaul University*



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JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN'S PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Scott R. Paeth

Assistant Professor of Religious Studies
DePaul University, Chicago, IL 60641
USA
spaeth@depaul.edu

ABSTRACT

Jürgen Moltmann's theology has always been characterized by its concern with questions of political and social life. His political hermeneutic is based upon a dialectical relationship between the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a dialogue with the philosophy and social theory of Ernst Bloch and the Frankfurt School. Theologians such as John Milbank and Arne Rasmussen have criticized Moltmann's approach as leading to a pagan captivity of Christian theology, and suggest instead the creation of a Christian social theory independent of secular categories. Yet, a proper understanding of Moltmann's conception of the "Exodus Church," coupled with a theory of role of civil society in modern life, demonstrates that Moltmann's theology more authentically represents Christian aspirations with regard to society than the approach of his critics.

1. Introduction

Jürgen Moltmann often speaks of his theology as being experimental, open to adjustment and revision.¹ Theology, he states, is "an adventure of ideas. It is an open, inviting path" on which, he says, "*the road emerged only as I walked it.*"² Beginning with his attempts in *Theology of Hope* to recover the eschatological basis of Christian theology, as well as his extension of those ideas in *The Crucified God*, Moltmann has attempted to offer a way of doing theology that was both open to that which is culturally new and at the same time rooted in scripture and tradition. He has certainly not lacked critics. Yet he has maintained throughout the evolution of his thought both a commitment to his

1. This article has been adapted from my dissertation "From the Church to the World: Public Theology and Civil Society in Dialogue with the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann" (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2004).

2. Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000), xv. Italics in original.

belief in the eschatological basis of Christian theology and the obligation of Christian theology to remain open to the world and responsive to the ethical demands made of it by its social situation. As Richard Bauckham writes: “for Moltmann Christian political engagement is no substitute for Christian faith but one of the forms which faith must take in action; and political theology is no substitute for dogmatic theology, but theology’s critical reflection on its own political function.”³

With the transformations in social and political life since the 1960s, the theological and ethical response to the modern world has undergone significant shifts as well. Moltmann’s theology, rooted as it is in a strategy of critical engagement with modernity and social theory, has been challenged by theological perspectives that seek to deny the legitimacy of such attempts at mediation. Approaches such as those of John Milbank and Arne Rasmussen argue that political theologies such as Moltmann’s are ultimately contradictory and self-destructive. They argue instead for a Christian theology that self-consciously divorces itself from such correlational projects.

In light of such critiques, it is worthwhile to consider what continuing contemporary relevance Moltmann’s theology may have. In particular, I am interested in how Moltmann’s theology has entered into the realm of “public” theology.⁴ Moltmann’s active writing career continues, yet I intend to argue that his contemporary relevance actually lies in the recovery of an idea from his earlier work—the idea of the Exodus Church. By critically recovering this idea, and considering its implications in light of the theory of civil society, Moltmann’s theology may still speak to the question of authentic Christian identity in the midst of the modern world.

2. The Idea of Political Theology

The approach that governed the development of Moltmann’s political theology, particularly in its early form, was a political hermeneutic grounded in Christian hope, expectation, and praxis.⁵ This interpretative strategy emerges

3. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 99.

4. See, for example, Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 1.

5. The political dimension of Moltmann’s thought so permeates his theology that there is no doctrine or concept in theology that Moltmann does not consider in its light. Because of this, there are many areas in the development of Moltmann’s thought that I simply do not have the time to address in a relatively short article. A fuller treatment of the issues would have to give a fuller account of the implications of this political hermeneutic for the entirety of Moltmann’s project. Among the important dimensions of Moltmann’s approach that I do not have the time to develop fully here is his discussion of the doctrine of the trinity in light of political theology, and the implications of his social doctrine of the Trinity for his

from Moltmann's conviction that Christian faith is rooted in the history of God's involvement with the world, and that this involvement requires concrete responsibilities of Christians. This responsibility derives from a consideration of the Bible, not only as a book of faith, but as a public document that speaks relevantly to contemporary social needs. "The Church needs the Bible as its foundation and the public discussion as a check," writes Moltmann.⁶ Such an interpretation leads to the recognition of the cross as the key hermeneutical symbol for understanding the Christian faith.⁷ Yet, the cross does not stand by itself. If "God is the power of the future"⁸ as Moltmann has it, then the community of Christ's followers needs to understand its mission as oriented toward the coming of Christ's Kingdom.

This expectation of the Kingdom is itself rooted in a trust in the promissory history of God as displayed in the resurrection of Christ. In the resurrection, the implications of the eschaton become concrete and personal. For it is not simply Jesus' reality as the reaffirmation of the promise of redemption that is significant, but precisely Jesus' *future* as the one who will come again to establish God's reign throughout the cosmos. But in order for this to be so, we need to have a proper understanding of a future eschatology, in the sense of the actual expectation of the definitive in-breaking of God in history. Such an eschatology must be a horizontal, and not only a vertical, expectation of communion with God. If it is to be in continuity with the fulfillment expectation of Israel, then both the promise and its fulfillment need to be rooted in the historical reality of those to whom the promise is made. To remove them from history is not to fulfill the promise, but rather to substitute a heavenly state for the embodied presence of God's Kingdom on earth, and it is this trend in the history of theology that Moltmann vigorously rejects.⁹

An important element to note is how Moltmann's understanding of the political implications of a theology of the cross does not simply begin and end with Christ's death, but reflects the dialectical relationship that Moltmann has

understanding of Christian public responsibility. Suffice it to say that the Trinity is a central concept for understanding the ideas of sociality that Moltmann develops particularly in his later theology.

6. Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 102.

7. Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, 102.

8. Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 106. Italics in original.

9. Thus Moltmann writes: "God is not somewhere in the Beyond, but he is coming and as the coming One he is present. He promises a new world of all-embracing life, of righteousness and truth, and with this promise, he constantly calls this new world in question—not because to the eye of hope it is as nothing, but because to the eye of hope it is not yet what it has the prospect of being." Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 164.

frequently referred to: the idea that the resurrection of the crucified One is the mirror image of the crucifixion of the resurrected One, and that neither moment of the dialectic can be understood without the other. To paraphrase Immanuel Kant, hope in the resurrection without the cross is empty, and reflection on the cross of Christ without an acknowledgment of the resurrection is blind.¹⁰ Both are needed for a full understanding of the political hermeneutic of the cross that Moltmann is proposing, and thus the confirmation of Christ's mission in his resurrection is a central element to an understanding of the event that takes place on the cross.

The question then becomes how these principles are to be applied to the particularities of a modern, pluralist society. As Moltmann describes it, it must involve a struggle against what he calls the "vicious circles of death" in modern society.¹¹ Moltmann's theology may be appropriately termed a version of "liberation theology." However, Moltmann insists that there are myriad elements within fallen society from which Christians must be liberated: vicious circles of *poverty*, of *force* of racial and cultural *alienation*, of the industrial *pollution* of nature, and of an atmosphere of *senselessness* and *godforsakenness*.¹²

This provides a platform for concrete social action. Liberation from the vicious circle of poverty must be met by a commitment to "the satisfaction of the material needs of men for health, nourishment, clothing, and somewhere to live. A further part of this is a social justice which can give all members of society a satisfying and just share of the products they produce."¹³ This also means that political oppression must be met by a commitment to democracy and human rights. He notes: "If and to the degree that the democratic movement means the abolition of privilege and the establishment of political human rights, *democracy is the symbol for the liberation of men from the vicious circle of force*."¹⁴ Moltmann also refers to liberation in the cultural dimension of life, which he sees embodied in a growing regard of human beings for one another, and a growing respect reflected in their behavior. This is rooted in human fellowship and the overcoming of alienation.¹⁵ And finally with regard to nature, Moltmann views liberation in the ending of human exploitation and pollution of the natural world. He notes that: "the relationship of working man to nature

10. As Richard Bauckham notes: "The political importance of Moltmann's *dialectical* Christology and eschatology derives from the full recognition it gives to the negative, unredeemed character of objective present reality and therefore to the *difference*, even contradiction between what reality is presently like and what the hoped-for divine transformation of reality can become." *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 102. Italics in original.

11. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 329.

12. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 330–31.

13. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 332.

14. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 333. Italics in original.

15. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 333.

is not a master-servant relationship but a relationship of intercommunication which pays respect to the circumstances. Nature is not an object of man's environment, and in this has its own rights and equilibria."¹⁶

Moltmann's understanding of the theology of the cross thus leads him from the person of Jesus Christ to the social and political implications of this. Coupled with a focus on the expectation of the coming Kingdom of God, as promised and sealed in the event of Christ's resurrection, this sets Moltmann a dialectical structure for his political theology. In particular, it leads him to a concern for the role of Christians in a pluralistic and technological modern society, and to a focus on the importance and priority of human dignity in the midst of a potentially dehumanizing world. How this is done can be seen in the relationship of the resurrection of Christ and the nature of God's promises. Christians must thus live their lives in anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God.

What Moltmann is seeking to establish in elaborating this approach to political theology is the principle that Christianity has the potential to speak meaningfully in the midst of a public discourse often dominated by considerations of power and domination. A political theology is a theology motivated by a concern for the good of society. The very nature of Christ's salvation requires it. As Moltmann insists: "The Messiah is a public person"¹⁷ and thus Christian ethics must have a public character that reflects who Jesus Christ is. In contrast to the earlier political theology of Carl Schmitt, Moltmann's theology is an attempt to understand public responsibility not in terms of the inevitability of violence and destruction, but in terms of ideas of reconciliation and restoration.¹⁸

3. The Cultural Captivity of Political Theology

All of this having been said, though, it is not clear that Moltmann's theology is capable of achieving everything that it sets out to achieve. Given the scope and ambition of Moltmann's project, it should not be surprising that his reach often exceeds his grasp. But one serious issue that Moltmann's theology must address is the capacity of Christian theology to respond to its cultural milieu in a way that can both offer a meaningful critique of its failings and offer an authentically Christian possibility of transformation. Moltmann has custom-

16. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 334.

17. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 117.

18. See Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Dunker and Humbolt, 1963); *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes* (Koln: Hoenheim, 1982) [English ed.: Geore Schwab, trans., *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996)]; and *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (München and Leipzig: Verlag von Dunker & Humbolt, 1934).

arily engaged in dialogue with contemporary social theory in order to creatively appropriate and modify those theories for his own purposes. But as a result his theology, and political theology in general, has been subject to critique by those who see this as an unwarranted capitulation to cultural standards contrary to the Christian gospel.

John Milbank, in *Theology and Social Theory*, states as one of his objectives to “‘end’ the dialogue between theology and sociology.”¹⁹ His thesis is that Christianity, by allowing itself to be co-opted by the narrative presented by modern political science and social theory, has become captive to an essentially pagan cultural formula based on a narrative of foundational violence. Christianity, on the contrary, begins with a narrative of foundational peace, which stands as the basis for the entire gospel.

Milbank argues that Christianity needs to free itself from a dependence on the categories used in modern social science in order to create a Christian social theory rooted in the biblical story of peace, thereby beginning the process of re-appropriating the social realm to a value-scheme rooted in the gospel. He understands this as a project of recovering an Augustinian approach to Christian social theory. “For,” he writes, “within Augustine’s text we discover the *original* possibility of critique that marks the western tradition, of which later Enlightenment versions are, in certain respects, abridgements and foundationalist parodies.”²⁰

At first, this approach might seem hospitable to Moltmann’s political theology, but in fact it cuts in exactly the opposite direction. Whereas Milbank’s project rejects the idea that Christian theology may learn something from modern social theory, Moltmann’s theology is suffused with it. Moltmann has drunk deeply from the well of critical theory, and particularly of the works of Ernst Bloch, Max Horkheimer, and other members of the Frankfurt School.

Ernst Bloch is a key figure in understanding how Moltmann’s theology is conceived. Bloch, in his *Principle of Hope*, begins from the human experience of “longing,” the sense that our lives are consumed in the *noch nicht*, the “not yet” accomplished consummation of our deepest desires and hopes.²¹ Thus, we push these expectations into the realm of the future, the area of that which has not yet come to pass, or as Bloch has it, the realm of the “Not-Yet-Conscious.”²² All human beings yearn for the coming of that future time. This

19. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 4.

20. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 389; italics in original.

21. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986). See also *idem*, *Atheismus in Christentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp Verlag, 1968) and *Experimentum Mundi: Frage, Kategorien des Herabbringens, Praxis* (Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp Verlag, 1975).

22. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 11.

requires that we seek to detect what he calls the “tendencies” and “latencies” in modern society that lend themselves to the expansion of human freedom and liberation.²³

These themes are echoed and adapted within Moltmann theology, and particularly in *Theology of Hope*, which is deeply indebted to Bloch's *Principle of Hope*. A similar process of appropriation and adaptation can be seen in Moltmann's use of Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Crucified God*. The negative appraisal of modernity diagnosed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and other texts of the Frankfurt School dims, but does not eclipse, the blochean optimism of *Theology of Hope*.²⁴ In all of these cases, Moltmann attempts both to use and to critique the theoretical categories presented by these authors. He is not simply attempting to import their ideas into a Christian theological framework, but rather is trying to use them to illuminate corners of the Christian theological project as well as provide a Christian answer to the challenges they pose.²⁵

While Milbank does not directly address Moltmann in *Theology and Social Theory* he does take the measure of political theology as a movement, as well as liberation theology, and finds them wanting:

Political and liberation theology are right to this degree: if one wishes to have a strongly ecclesiological perspective—and to claim that salvation is *at once* both “religious” and public—then one must also be committed to the thesis that salvation is tied to the ultimacy of a particular historical practice, which is ceaselessly *constituted* as a certain “gaze” upon history and society. This gaze would have to regard itself as primary, if it were not to fall victim to total incoherence. Boff asks the question, could there be a theology of the political without mediation by the social sciences? But the question is much more fundamentally, can there be *theology, tout court*, without mediation by the social sciences? Because, only if the answer is yes (as I hold) can one go on upholding the fundamentally historical character of salvation: in other words, orthodoxy.²⁶

Although Milbank himself doesn't apply this critique directly to Moltmann, another author, Arne Rasmusson, does attempt a “milbankian” treatment of

23. See Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 18. See also Richard Roberts' discussion in *Hope and Its Hieroglyph* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 208ff.

24. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972). See also Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1974) and *The Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1974), as well as Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973).

25. As Moltmann writes: “I found important categories for the pattern of this tapestry in the messianic philosophy of the neo-Marxist Ernst Bloch... I did not imitate Bloch's philosophy of hope. Nor did I ‘baptize’ it, as Karl Barth suspiciously conjectured. I simply built a theology of hope on the foundation of what I saw as the presupposition of the theology of Christianity and Judaism.” *Theology of Hope*, 9.

26. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 246. Italics in original.

Moltmann in his *The Church as Polis*, attempting to show that a “mediating” project such as Moltmann’s is bound to fail.²⁷

Rasmusson points to a number of “tensions” inherent to Moltmann’s contextual theological method.²⁸ But at the heart of his critique is Moltmann’s continuing entanglement with enlightenment era philosophical and political categories. Seeing Moltmann’s theology as a “positive Christian reception of modernity,” Rasmusson subjects it to criticism on the grounds that these enlightenment categories—such as “freedom,” “self-realization,” and “rights”—are contrary to the Christian conception of society and the nature of the good and beholden to individualistic conceptions of autonomy.²⁹ As a result, Moltmann’s attempts to turn these concepts in the direction of Christian concerns regarding the nature of community and the Kingdom of God are finally doomed to incoherence. In order for Moltmann’s theology to regain its underlying coherence, it would be necessary for him to let go of his remaining ties to modernity and turn, as he has already partly done, to a theology of the Radical Reformation reminiscent of Stanley Hauerwas.

What should we make of this critique, of political theology generally and of Moltmann in particular? The Milbankian critique of modernity as enslaved to categories of fundamental violence, in which the politics is merely the realm where power is seized and held, is supported by a great deal of sociological and political literature, much of which Milbank skillfully interprets in order to make his argument. He concludes his volume with the contention that Christians need to create an alternative community of interpretation, with a counter-ethics of peace to combat the foundational violence of the modern state. Rasmusson also offers a very skillful critique of Moltmann’s theology in order to coax it over to a more Hauerwasian point of view.

And indeed it would seem as though Moltmann’s theology should be quite adaptable to these suggestions, given his own descriptions of the Church as a “contrast society.”³⁰ In fact, the very nature of Moltmann’s understanding of this “contrast society” is precisely as one that “through its existence...calls into question the systems of violence and injustice.”³¹ In light of this it is worthwhile to ask whether the critique offered by Moltmann would be better off abandoning enlightenment and modern categories and throwing in with the kind of “radical orthodox” or “radical reformation” approaches suggested by Milbank and Rasmusson.

27. Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

28. Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis*, 42.

29. Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis*, 89ff.

30. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 122.

31. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 122.

Moltmann's theology can also certainly be considered "radical," and in much the same way as Milbank and Rasmussen seem to mean the term. But the *intention* behind Moltmann's understanding of the Church as an "Exodus community," and indeed his understanding of the very nature of the Church, stands at odds with what Milbank and Rasmussen seem to mean. For them, the Church is an alternative to the modern world that stands opposed to everything modernity stands for, seeing the whole project as a wrong turn. Moltmann, on the contrary, recognizes within modernity the seeds of the development of a society that more and more fully anticipates the coming Kingdom of God. The tendencies and latencies of modernity are not, for Moltmann, beyond redemption. The categories of modern social theory that Moltmann adapts for his project, far from obscuring the genuinely theological dimensions of his project, in fact give him tools to express more clearly how modernity may be redeemed from itself. The Church, for Moltmann, is truly a contrast society. But it contrasts with modernity not only by standing opposed to it, but also by revealing to it the unrealized possibilities that are inherent in its own structure.

Moltmann argues that the Church is an Exodus community that dwells as homeless within the world. It is this idea that is the key to understanding how Moltmann's theology may continue to be relevant in contemporary society. In order to make this clearer, it will be necessary to view it in conversation with the theory of civil society.

4. Exodus Church and Society

Key to understanding the continuing relevance of Moltmann's theology is his identification of the role of the Church in the world as that of an "Exodus Church." The Church is important, not specifically in light of its institutional character, but rather in its calling as witness to the promises of God, embodied in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and in the expectation of the Kingdom. As a called community, the Church has its identity in its faith in Jesus Christ. The Church is *ekklesia*, a community of those "called out" for a specific task in, to and for the world.

The Missionary Church

Moltmann sees the identity of the Church primarily as a *missionary* identity. What the Church does is determined by its commission to spread the gospel. Furthermore, the Church is not simply a static entity but is a Church "on the move." It is, as Moltmann terms it, an "Exodus Church." By this, he means that it is a Church that may never rest content with either its own position in the social structure, nor with the world in which it finds itself. The Church is the ever-expectant community. Its gaze is always directed forward to its

coming future, and thus its object is never the comfort of things as they are, but the anticipation of things as they are yet to be. Thus, it is a community that embodies what Bloch referred to as the “not-yet-conscious” world of hope.³²

One characteristic of modernity that is crucial to Moltmann’s analysis is the change in the status of religion—from a *cultus publicus* to a *cultus privitus*.³³ From its status as a public voice, religion has fallen into the status of subjective opinion, useful for motivating one in one’s public dealings, but in itself irrelevant to the system of social needs. “‘Religion’ ceases to be a public social duty and becomes a voluntary private activity.”³⁴

Coinciding with this is the “disenchantment” of the natural world and the rationalization of all human activities. Modern society claims to be governed not by superstition or fantasy, but by a calculus of efficiency and instrumental reason, which by definition must exclude religious concerns from its purview. As religion has become a purely internal state, the external world has become more and more secularized: “The world is surrendered to the reason of man.”³⁵ In this context, modern society expects religion to fulfill certain functions—to meet human beings’ subject needs for religion, their associative needs for community, and their institutional needs for an official embodiment of faith.

Moltmann doesn’t deny that these are important social roles, but points out that they do not exhaust the Church’s mission, but rather become constraints out of which the Church must break:

If Christianity, according to the will of him in whom it believes and in whom it hopes, is to be different and to serve a different purpose, then it must address itself to no less a task than that of breaking out of these its socially fixed roles. It must then display a kind of conduct which is not in accordance with these. That is the conflict which is imposed on every Christian and every Christian minister. If the God who called them to life should expect of them something other than what modern industrial society expects and requires of them, then Christians must venture an Exodus and regard their social roles as a new Babylonian exile. Only where they appear in society as a group which is not wholly adaptable and in the case of which the modern integration of everything with everything else fails to succeed, do they enter into a conflict-laden, but fruitful partnership with this society.³⁶

As can be seen from this passage, Moltmann views the Church’s critical role in society, not as a separation from society’s fallenness, but as a partnership, in which the Church calls the society to a recognition of what it is destined to be in the fullness of time. Just as the Church in its life and proclamation strives to

32. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 114.

33. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 310.

34. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 310.

35. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 312.

36. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 324.

anticipate the coming Kingdom and live into its reality, so too does the Church work within society to bring it to a greater realization of its own tasks in this regard.

However, this is only possible because the Church at the same time does not seek to identify itself with society, but seeks to be in some sense an indigestible lump, a reminder to its society that the gospel cannot be assimilated to a context that is something less than the Kingdom of God, and that instead of the whole of society has to be seen as toward, in, and under the larger picture of God's reign. In this regard, the Church is to be an "Exodus Church," always on the way to the destination toward which it is called. It is a pilgrim Church, which has its journey as part of its fundamental character. When it takes part in society, its participation is always *both* an affirmation and a critique of that society: an affirmation of its identity as called by God to a vocation of justice and peacemaking, and a critique of its insufficiency on precisely these points. The risk that faces a Church that allows itself to become too comfortable is stultification. Moltmann writes: "Here the task of Christianity today is not so much to oppose the ideological glorification of things, but rather to resist the institutional stabilizing of things, and by 'raising the question of meaning' to make things uncertain and keep them moving and elastic in the process of history."³⁷

Thus, the Church is called into solidarity with those who are kept on the outside of structures of power and authority in society—the poor, weak, sick and marginalized, whoever they may be. In solidarity with the "least" in society, the Church witnesses to those yet-unfulfilled promises that stand at the center of its mission. It witnesses to the reality of the Kingdom which is yet to come, and declares specifically that it is for these outcast and marginalized in particular and that the Kingdom is coming. Thus, it proclaims the continuing hope for the poor for justice, the weak for a protector, the sick for healing, and the victims of war for peace. It declares through its solidarity with these that the Kingdom is on the way, and has already been realized in the resurrection of Christ: "Hope alone keeps life—including public, social life—flowing free," declares Moltmann.³⁸

The Critical Task of the Church

In articulating the relationship of the Exodus Church to modern society, Moltmann hastens to distinguish his own understanding of political theology from civil religion. Whereas his own approach is rooted in the Church's status as a critical and transformative force in society, with an independent norm from society, the Church's role in society has commonly been that of the justification of, and in some cases the glorification of, the society.

37. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 324.

38. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 324.

The chief exemplar of the kind of civil religion that Moltmann is criticizing is Carl Schmitt. It is instructive to view the way that Moltmann criticizes Schmitt's understanding of "political religion" and distinguishes his own view from it. Schmitt's political theology was oriented towards a justification of the state and categorizing of the entirety of human rights under the sphere of the political. It was not, however, a Christian theology in any meaningful sense. Schmitt's political theology was, according to Moltmann, "nothing more than the theory of a political religion necessary for the support of the state."³⁹ The diabolical elements of Schmitt's political theology lie behind any civil religion, which is based upon the schema of friend versus enemy and insider against outsider. In determination of particular national or cultural symbols as carrying a divine import, civil religions reinforce the identification of individuals with the narrow horizons of particular interest groups. Christian theology, however, must have a universal horizon. Moltmann notes that "the ecumenical solidarity of the Christian Church is for me higher than national loyalty or cultural, class or racial associations."⁴⁰

Civil religion in this sense is not compatible with the Church's mission in society as an Exodus Church, because it is first and foremost the theological justification of the *civitas terrana* rather than the Kingdom of God. However, Christians do have concrete public responsibilities that they are given within a complex civil society.

Christian Vocation and Society

In order to further develop what this means for the relationship of the Church to modern society, we may look again at *Theology of Hope*. In his final chapter of that book, Moltmann spends a good deal of time looking at the relationship of the "Exodus Church" to its social context through an examination of the structure of civil society in light of the doctrine of vocation. Moltmann recognizes that the world in which we live is "a society of mobile jobs. It lays open to [persons] a multitude of chances and demands of [them] elasticity, adaptability and imaginativeness."⁴¹ Our call as Christians can and must be realized in the context of the many "callings" available to us in society. Wherever we find ourselves, Moltmann says, we must determine to work for the transformation of that social sphere to more and more closely reflect the Kingdom of God. As he puts it:

The callings, roles, conditions and claims which society lays upon [us] are...not to be examined in regard to whether and how they fully occupy [our] own [selves] or estrange [us] from [ourselves], but in regard to whether and how

39. Jürgen Moltmann *et al.*, *Religion and Political Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 43.

40. Moltmann, "Christian Theology and Political Religion," 41.

41. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 333.

far they afford possibilities for the incarnation of faith, for the concretion of hope, and for the earthly, historic correspondence with the hoped-for and promised Kingdom of God and freedom.⁴²

In every aspect of our lives, from our careers to our hobbies, we are called to have in view our mission as Christians to live in correspondence to God's Kingdom.

Moltmann finally grounds his understanding of the social responsibility of this "Church on the move" in a doctrine of vocation borne of Christian expectation. As Christian theology is inescapably a missionary theology, it is called to go out into the world in proclamation of the coming Kingdom. In attesting to Jesus Christ and his future in the world, the Church calls the world to acknowledge the latencies and tendencies existing in the world that lead it toward the anticipation of the Kingdom. "The risen Christ calls, sends, justifies, and sanctifies men, and in so doing gathers, calls, and sends them into his eschatological future for the world. The risen Lord is always the Lord expected by the Church—the Lord, moreover, expected by the Church for the world and not merely for itself."⁴³

It is important to note that the gathering of Christians *into* the Church is, for Moltmann, the precondition for the *sending* of Christians *into* the world. Both aspects of this are necessary. The Church as the community of the called provides the critical and expectant center of the Christian life, from which Christians are nourished for their being in the world and in service for others.⁴⁴ That service that Christians are called upon to render to the world is rooted in its eschatological expectation. "The Christian Church," Moltmann writes, "has not to serve mankind in order that this world may remain what it is, or may be preserved in that state which it is, but in order that it may transform itself and become what it is promised to be."⁴⁵

This commitment to service is finally a vocation to serve God in the world in the various social roles we are to play. It means that we must be involved in the institutional life of civil society, and not merely stand aloof as "resident aliens." Although it may be, as Moltmann quotes, that "To Christians every home is foreign," it is also true, as the quote continues, that "every foreign place is home."⁴⁶

Yet Christian vocation is not intended to be understood as a static category in Moltmann's view. He recognizes that society is complex, and that the social relations that are formed therein are multiplicitous and dynamic.⁴⁷ Yet the

42. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 334.

43. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 325.

44. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 327.

45. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 327.

46. Moltmann, "Christian Theology and Political Religion," 41.

47. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 333.

vocation of Christians within civil society is to engage in the transformation of society from within these various social roles. "The Reformers' identification of call and 'calling' was never intended to dissolve the call into the calling, but *vice versa* to integrate and transform the 'callings' in the call."⁴⁸ This requires, according to Moltmann, a "creative discipleship" that is oriented toward the creation of community and restoring relations of justice within the world, as well as a critical and transformative hope that Moltmann speaks of as "creative expectation."⁴⁹

But the character of this creative expectation needs to be understood in the context of a proper understanding of the variety of social roles inhabited by the Christian within society. Moltmann's understanding of the missionary character of the Church, while crucial for an understanding of how Christians can be formed to embody anticipatory consciousness within society, is not well developed in the context of the theory of the civil society proper. It is necessary to consider more closely how institutions in general, and the Church in particular, operate within society to form values and create particular visions of integrity out of which people may act in complex moral situations. Moltmann offers no such analysis in his work, and thus his understanding of the Exodus Church remains somewhat abstract.

5. The Exodus Church and Civil Society

By focusing on the idea of the Exodus Church, I want to call attention to the importance of a theological understanding of civil society for the construction of a truly *public* theology. Moltmann's tendency to write in abstract terms about concrete social circumstances makes it difficult to see what role the Exodus Church would in fact play in the midst of the society in which it dwells. On the one hand, Moltmann is not advocating sectarian withdrawal or an "ending" of the dialogue with social theory, although his use of the term "contrast society" to describe the Church might lead one to that conclusion. On the other hand, however, he clearly envisions the Church as in some sense socially inassimilable. What this might mean for Christian public responsibility involves a fuller conception of civil society. I want to turn now to consider what that might mean for Christian public involvement.

The theory of civil society has re-emerged in recent years as an important dimension of reflection on the nature of public life. Certainly the work of sociologists such as Robert Bellah and Robert Putnam have drawn attention to the conflicts between the growth of radical individualism in western society and the decline of a sense of civic virtue or responsibility.⁵⁰ But the question

48. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 333.

49. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 330.

50. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*

of the way in which participation in institutions forms us as moral and social beings is implicit in the discourse about the nature of democracy in western society.⁵¹ As social creatures, we exist in and among a wide variety of social institutions. These institutions serve an important function in making us into creatures who can navigate the moral and psychological barriers placed before us in a pluralistic society.

Civil society provides the mediating sphere in modern life between the individual and society. It gives us a context for belonging to a group without crushing us under the weight of the social whole. It provides a realm for participation and association, where individuals are able to form relationships and develop a strong sense of communal responsibility. It serves to integrate individuals into a larger social system by giving them a sense of meaning and purpose that would otherwise dissipate in individualistic *anomie* or be crushed within the apparatus of a heteronomous state. The existence of such a sphere of association provides a basis for a plurality of voluntary societies to emerge that respond to the varied interests and motives of the members of society. As such, civil society serves a vital function in social cohesion.⁵²

The Church, with other religious institutions, exists within the framework of contemporary civil society as one among many such voluntary organizations. From the vantage point of the theory of civil society, then, the Church would seem to be a servant of society. It is difficult to discern how it is possible under such circumstances for the Church to offer the kind of contrast Moltmann seeks. However, civil society does not only serve society, it also has the capacity to offer a critique of society rooted in its own priorities and ideals. Gary Simpson, in his book *Critical Social Theory*, looks at the theory of civil

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). It should be noted that Putnam followed up his exploration in *Bowling Alone* with a subsequent study of the way in which local communities are being renewed in American life. See Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein, *Better Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

51. The term itself can be traced back to Aristotle's idea of the *politike koinonia*, although the evolution of the concept has taken it far from those roots. Classic texts examining the nature of civil society include Johannes Althusius, *Politica*. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995); John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980) and *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983); Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (New York: Hafner, 1949); George Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972); Emil Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1984). The list could go on at some length. Two excellent recent studies of the theory of civil society are Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) and Daniel Elazar, *Covenant and Civil Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998).

52. I discuss these issues at length in "From the Church to the World," 206ff.

society in light of the Christian tradition of prophetic reason and the work of Jürgen Habermas. Arguing that civil society provides a space for the development of a critical “prophetic reason,” he writes:

Civil Society, by communicatively generating, sustaining, strengthening, testing and revising moral wisdom, action, and argumentation, helps prevent the colonizing tendencies of the economy and state, both controlled by money and administrative power, which helps bring the economy and state under the normative accounting of communicative rationality and action. The central role of a communicative civil society can help us imagine how and where prophetic reasoning can influence contemporary Western contexts. We can also imagine how communicative prophetic imaginations might emerge again in Christian congregations.⁵³

For Simpson, congregations become “public companions” insofar as they share the burdens of other institutions and involve themselves in the questions of the overall good for society. One can see in Simpson’s analysis some echoes of the same kinds of issues that concern Jürgen Moltmann in his consideration of the Exodus Church. In both cases, the Church as an institution of civil society brings its own counter-identity and values into the heart of public conversation.

According to the vision of the Exodus Church that Moltmann elaborates in *Theology of Hope*, the community dwells within society, yet is not at home. Its members are transformed by the message of hope embodied in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and spurred to act in solidarity with the outcast through Christ’s own identification with society’s outcasts. As Christians pursue their vocations within society they live in anticipation of the Kingdom of God, acting according to the law of self-giving love exemplified in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. This, then, is the public task of the Church. It is a contrast society, not in its separation from the rest of society, but precisely in its *participation* in every dimension of society. It represents the possibility of a transformation of society in its very being from one plagued by what Moltmann calls the “global marketing of everything”⁵⁴ to one in which we are freed from our servitude to structures of injustice and death. It is in publicly living in anticipation of Christ’s Kingdom that the “messianic world mission” of the Exodus Church takes place:

The gospel makes the coming rule of God a present reality in the Word and through the Word. With this it seeks to open the world, sealed up within itself as it is, for the coming of God. Where the Kingdom is at hand, the people gather together for the Kingdom and free themselves from the power of slavery. Where the future of God in Christ is at hand, men are converted and move towards

53. Gary Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 134.

54. Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 68.

him. The Church of Christ is hence simultaneously the people of the Kingdom. It is not "the not-world"; it is the world which is now already turning anew to the future of God because it follows the call of freedom... This does not mean the "emigration of the Church" from society into the ghetto; it means the exact opposite: the departure from exile and ghetto into freedom.⁵⁵

What this means in terms of the concrete role of the institutions of civil society in the midst of the broader culture is that the role of the Church as a social institution is coopted by another reality—the reality of the Church as the body of Christ, as the community called into participation in a transformed reality. It is through their willingness to be transformed by the gospel that Christians may involve themselves in every dimension of public life in such a way as to bring that transforming potential to every sphere of society. The public vision of Moltmann's theology is one in which the Church functions as a herald, a forerunner of a new reality, in which all of society participates. The Church's missionary identity is therefore also its public identity and its political identity. Its relevance to contemporary society is found in the alternative it presents to an instrumentalizing and reductive social order.

6. Conclusion: A Public Theology?

Given the critique of political theology offered by Milbank and Rasmusson, the interpretation I have offered here may seem to raise more new problems than it solves, for far from accommodating their critiques I am suggesting that the answer to the kinds of tensions pointed out by Rasmusson, and the risks of paganism identified by Milbank, is not found by separating Moltmann's project from the categories of social theory, but by delving more deeply into it. Yet this seems to me to be more honest to what Moltmann intends his theology to be than would be an attempt to foreclose further dialogue with modernity. There is a Manichean dimension to the analyses of Milbank and Rasmusson insofar as, for them, modernity is not a legitimate evolution of our conception of society but a fundamental aberration and heresy. Modernity for them is rotten to the core. Moltmann, on the other hand, recognizes in classically Christian fashion that modernity suffers the same fate as all human artifacts: it is good, but fallen, and requires redemption. In this regard, far from being radically orthodox, Milbank's approach to modernity is radically heterodox. For all of his insistence on the need to recover the legacy of Saint Augustine, Milbank's approach is more redolent of the Donatist insistence on religious purity than of Augustine's plundering of the gold of the Egyptians.

By moving more deeply into the realm of social theory, and in particular by understanding the role of the Church as a social institution in civil society,

55. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 83.

we have a clearer framework in which to understand both the continuity and the discontinuity of Christian moral claims with its broader cultural setting. What Rasmussen sees as “tensions” within Moltmann’s theology that doom it ultimately to incoherence are rather dimensions of the dialectic through which Moltmann’s theology ultimately hangs together. The Church is *both* an institution of civil society *and* the body of Christ. It can thus be meaningfully understood and analyzed using both categories. Yet it is the Church’s identity as the body of Christ that requires that it become an Exodus community, for it upholds values that stand in contradiction to where a modern instrumentalizing society wishes to go. It exists in anticipation of the Kingdom of God, but rather than therefore divorcing itself from social realities that fall short of that ideal, it seeks that within its society with which it may more closely approximate that ideal. The Exodus Church thus exemplifies the meaning of *public* theology precisely by requiring of Christians that they seek those tendencies and latencies throughout their public lives.

When Moltmann defines his theology as “public theology,” he specifies that he means by this “Kingdom of God theology.” He then writes: “Kingdom-of-God theology intervenes critically and prophetically in the public affairs of a given society, and draws public attention, not to the Church’s own interests, but to ‘God’s Kingdom, God’s commandment and his righteousness,’ as Thesis 5 of the Barmen Theological Declaration says.”⁵⁶ Public theology, as Moltmann understands it, is thus not simply a description of the social function of the Church in a pluralist democracy, but a call to action, to Christians to embody Christ’s rule in their lives. It is public because it recognizes the sovereignty of God over every human venue and activity, and knows of no corner of human affairs where God is not active in bringing about his reign. And it is this understanding of the intersection of “public” with “theology” that can give good grounds for a social ethic which is a true “theology of hope.”

Scott Paeth is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at DePaul University. He holds a B. A. from Central Connecticut State University, an M.Div. from Andover Newton Theological School, and a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. His work focuses on the intersection of religion and public life, including politics, economics, and civil society. He is the co-editor (with Max L. Stackhouse and Tim Dearborn) of “The Local Church in a Global Future: Reflections for a New Century” (Eerdmans, 2000).

56. Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, xx.

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