

Foreword

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I once visited Jürgen Moltmann at his home in Tübingen. We were in his study, and I was sitting in the chair in which I had sat many times as his doctoral student and while working on a post-doctoral thesis under his supervision. I had just been appointed as a professor at Yale, but I was still trying to puzzle out his theology. By this time, I wasn't so much trying to figure out how its different pieces fit together or how as a whole it fits into the trajectory of modern theology; I was after something less tangible: the source of its energy and power, of its ability to capture hearts as well as minds, and to do so in Asia and South America no less than in North America and his native Europe. I know of no theologian from the second half of the twentieth century who has had as powerful a global resonance as Moltmann has.

I started the part of our conversation about his theology with a deceptively simple question: "Which of your books do

you like the best?” He paused for a brief moment, just long enough for me to wonder whether I had transgressed against some taboo, akin to the one I would have broken had I asked which of his four daughters he liked the best. Books aren’t children, of course, persons whom we can harm when we prefer one to the other. Still, in some ways we are our books, and revealing preferences for these public presentations of ourselves might feel uncomfortable. Not for Moltmann, I was relieved to learn. “I think my best book is *The Crucified God*,” he said slowly but without hesitation.

As I had walked up the Biesingerstrasse to his house, I had been thinking that he might opt for *Theology of Hope*. After all, that was the book that spelled out the eschatological orientation of his entire theology, an orientation that, with some shifts, remained constant all the way through *The Coming of God*, the last substantive volume—the one before the methodological finale—in the series of his “theological contributions.” *Theology of Hope* was also the book that brought him international fame, and not just among theologians, as a report about the English translation of the book on the cover of the *New York Times* attested. “Why *The Crucified God*?” I asked him.

The Crucified God, Moltmann replied, was seminal to the next twenty years of his theological work. *Theology of Hope* had provided some key formal categories that he continued to employ in an altered form—the “promise” acquired increasingly a dimension of “presence,” for instance. But *The Crucified God* laid the Trinitarian and soteriological

foundation for subsequent books, starting with *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. It introduced the notion of a God who suffers in solidarity with afflicted creatures and redeems them through that suffering. This simple and profound thought lies at the heart of the book—difficult and unacceptable to many, especially among trained theologians committed to God’s impassibility, and hopeful and comforting to many more, especially among the afflicted, whether they live in fear for life in war torn cities, eke out a miserable existence in shantytowns, wait for death in the belly of cruel prisons, or struggle against an illness eating away their body or soul.

The Crucified God was published in German in 1972, when Moltmann was a forty-six-year-old professor of theology at the University of Tübingen. In a sense, though, he started writing it immediately after World War II, as a barely twenty-year-old prisoner of war. Raised as a secularist, in an English prisoner of war camp he read the New Testament and the psalms for the first time and was taken by words of Jesus on the cross, a quotation from the twenty-second psalm: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Young Moltmann, afflicted both by captivity and by crushing guilt, thought, “Here is someone who understands me.” Moltmann described this as an experience of being found by God rather than of finding God. God spoke to him with bloodied and parched lips in cries of pain and abandonment, bitter fruits of seemingly misplaced trust.

The Crucified God is theology at its best. I know some experts will complain about the inadequacies of the book’s account of the mystery of the holy Trinity. Moltmann

addressed some of them in subsequent work. Many of his colleagues remain unpersuaded, of course, but facing contestations is in the job description of an academic theologian. Whatever one decides about the merits and demerits of Moltmann's doctrine of the Trinity in this text, the fact remains: *The Crucified God* is a truly great book. It is existential and academic, pastoral and political, innovative and traditional, readable and demanding, contextual and universal, deeply Christian and equally deeply human—and all of this in explicating the bearing of the central Christian theme (the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth) on a fundamental human experience (suffering).

Academic theology is in crisis today. Theological schools are closing, theological books are not being read, and the discipline itself has lost much of its reputation—among academics working in other fields, among ministers and their flock, and among the general population. There are many reasons for the present crisis of theology, but one of them is certainly that academic theologians have been trained out of doing theology the way Moltmann has done it in many of his writings, and especially in *The Crucified God*. As many theologians struggle to find their bearings, this book is one shining exemplar of a theology that is alive and powerful.