

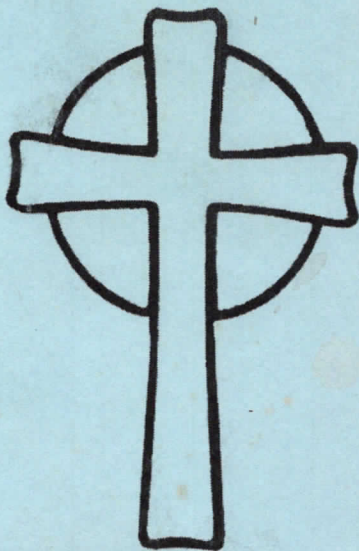
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CIRCULATION MANAGER
Carolyn Thompson

JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD: EVANGELICAL OPTIONS?

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Introduction

"Underdog" may not ever really have occupied a place as one of our favorite cartoon characters. Furthermore, most would acknowledge that it appealed to that element in humanity that holds onto a hope and desire that righteousness will win and oppression will lose. Part of the cartoon's appeal lay also in its ironic "foolishness," one somewhat parallel to that of the gospel:¹ Salvation came through one least likely to be the community's choice for savior. If my invocation of Underdog seems silly, I am in good company: Underdog, decked in his super-hero garb and smashing *HUNGER*, depicted as a granite monolith, was chosen as the official 1997 spokesperson for World Hunger Year.² Human beings called in Christ to love their neighbor usually possess hope and compassion for the underdogs. The popular appeal sustained by legendary heroes of Western civilization such as Robin Hood and Zorro has been fostered by such hope. Jürgen Moltmann's stand for the world's underdogs is one of the reasons his theology has remained popular.

Moltmann is captivating reading. His erudition and clarity of expression notwithstanding, his efforts to give hope to Everyman and to work for the present realization of that hope inspire me most. Since his theological presentation and content have such potential to mesmerize, they have moved me consciously to question the method by which he has arrived at his conclusions.³

Several facts underscore the importance of identifying key aspects of Moltmann's theological method. First, his influence manifests itself in his prolific writing and in the broad theological spectrum represented by those praising him. Second, after thirty-five years of profound theological impact,

¹ 1 Cor 1:18–25.

² <http://www.iglou.com/why/>.

³ 1 John 4:1.

he has not contributed a theological methodology. Third, some have criticized his theology as fraught with inconsistencies, vagaries, and at times, peppered with orthodox terms used with quite unorthodox meanings.⁴ And fourth, with his work often required or supplementary reading in Evangelical institutions, the possibility remains that students may assimilate his method or accept his conclusions largely because of their emotional appeal. Therefore, to answer this question becomes important: "Is Jürgen Moltmann's theological method a reliable option for Evangelicals?"⁵

I argue that the answer to that question is both yes and no. Some aspects of his method qualify as Evangelical and promote better Evangelical methodology. However, some aspects of his method depart from crucial Evangelical commitments. Therefore, Moltmann's method cannot be said to be wholly Evangelical. I proceed, first, by arguing for a general, threefold criterion for Evangelical methodology with regard to the places of Scripture, tradition, and culture against which Moltmann's method may be examined. I compare significant excerpts of Moltmann's work and others' perceptions of his work with that criterion, describing the continuities with Evangelical methodology and noting the discontinuities which lead me to conclude that his method is best identified as Progressive, not Evangelical. The essay concludes with a look at some positive prospects for Evangelicalism which Moltmann's method presents.

General Criterion for an Evangelical Method

I understand the goal of theology, stated simply, to be the equipping of Christians to grow to maturity in the Lord Jesus by means of the purposeful reflection upon and the ordered articulation of what it means to have faith in and live for Christ.⁶ The method employed toward that end primarily

⁴ See, for example, Richard Clutterbuck, "Jürgen Moltmann as a Doctrinal Theologian," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48.4 (1995) 489–505; Don Schweitzer, "The Consistency of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology," *Studies in Religion* 2.22 (1993) 197–208.

⁵ See R. Clutterbuck, "Jürgen Moltmann as a Doctrinal Theologian," 489–90.

⁶ Moltmann views the task of theology as twofold: "On the one hand it must defend the right and significance of the Christian faith against the doubt and criticism of the modern spirit *apologetically*. On the other hand it must show that the Christian faith has therapeutic relevance to the sickness of the modern spirit and the

concerns only two notions, *sources* and *manner*, where the term *sources* represents the realms of information from which a theology obtains its content, and the term *manner* represents the means by which that content is extracted from its sources.⁷ Historically, Evangelical theology has drawn from three sources: divine revelation, history (including tradition), and contemporary culture. Further, Evangelical method has sought to balance these sources appropriately, benefitting from the accurate interpretation of history and culture, while always subjecting those sources and the conclusions drawn from them to the critique of Scripture as the primary source of theology.⁸

An Evangelical approach to these three sources and their relationship to one another may be distinguished further when viewed against the foil of other theological orientations. In contrast to an Evangelical approach, a Liberal, or in its more moderate form, a Progressive, method draws its most significant content from its perceptions of culture. Scripture and tradition are either discarded or reinterpreted, sometimes radically, in terms of contemporary thought.⁹ Confessional method interprets the teachings of Scripture from the perspectives of the parent system (i.e., Lutheran, Reformed, Neo-orthodox).¹⁰ This approach tends to give too much weight to heritage. While attempting to stand faithfully in a doctrinal system or in a church's tradition, Confessionalism often becomes anachronistic, estranged from its own culture as well as insensitive to biblical critique.¹¹ Fundamentalism certainly underscores the importance of faithfulness to the Bible. However, it often demands an unreasonably wooden use of biblical language and categories and is overly suspicious of contemporary culture to the extent that it tends toward separatism. An Evangelical method, in my judgment, offers the best approach for accomplishing an appropriate theological balance of these sources. While devoted members of the movement have often failed to

perplexities of the modern world" (J. Moltmann *Theology Today*, translated by John Bowden [Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989] 54).

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932; repr. 1996) 59.

⁸ Berkhof; so also Craig Blaising, "Scripture, Tradition, and Culture" (lecture outline presented to his Introduction to Christian Theology class, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, August 26, 1998, photocopy in my possession).

⁹ Stanley Grenz, "Theology and Piety among Baptists and Evangelicals," in *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993) 151; Craig Blaising, "Evangelicalism and Liberal Protestantism" (lecture outline presented to his Introduction to Christian Theology class, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, September 8, 1998, photocopy in my possession).

¹⁰ B. A. Demarest, "Systematic Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 1064-66.

¹¹ Grenz; Blaising, "Scripture."

remain consistent in their methodological starting point, Evangelicals as a whole have continued to work toward an ideal relationship of these three sources.¹² An Evangelical method begins by holding the Bible as the first source of theology, accepting or rejecting portions of theology, culture, and tradition as necessary in order to remain true to the Bible. The Bible is the standard for theology, and theology must be applied to life. Therefore, an Evangelical method takes history and tradition seriously as a source of theology. It recognizes the value of twenty centuries of others' attempts to apply theology to life and will not simply reject it. At the same time, this method will attempt to avoid exalting a particular expression of theological heritage to a level of authority equal or superior to Scripture. An Evangelical method, however, will not stop with divine revelation and history, for theology still remains to be applied to contemporary life. Therefore, an Evangelical method also will interact honestly with contemporary culture without becoming captive to it.

While Evangelicals differ about the *best* means by which to obtain theological content from those sources, the differences comprise a small circle of varying opinion within a larger circle of agreement. Foundational to that agreement is that all theological conclusions remain open to critique and subject to Scripture as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.¹³ The Bible not only reveals information for people to interpret as they think fitting within their confessional heritage or contemporary context; it also provides for an accurate interpretation of the facts which people may not set aside at will, but which they must accept as authoritative.¹⁴ While recognizing the necessity of historical-grammatical exegesis of the Bible, an Evangelical method must proceed to a theological level. There it recognizes the canonical context of the whole of Scripture, within which each biblical document is viewed as a contribution to God's revelation. While historical-grammatical exegesis clarifies the variety of viewpoints and emphases contained in the Bible, "theological exegesis presupposes that there is an overall unity in the light of which diversity can be appreciated in its proper perspective."¹⁵ An Evangelical method will respect all confessional and contemporary assertions as hypotheses to be tested by the criteria of logical consistency, coherence, existential viability, and, ultimately, agreement with the facts of revelation. Further, it assumes as its task the responsibility of demonstrating congruence and comprehensiveness (that its formulation of revealed truth fits the facts and is applicable to all the facts with the fewest problems), and of demonstrating that it legitimately satisfies human needs to a greater degree than alternative methods. The benefits of this method are

¹² Grenz, 151–52; Blaising, "Scripture."

¹³ Grenz, 157.

¹⁴ Berkhof.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, "Interpretation of the Bible," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 565–68.

1) a higher degree of openness to, communication between, and balance of the sources of theology and 2) the provision of a rationale for why its theological conclusions should be accepted in the face of competing truth claims.¹⁶

Historically, major theologies often have been syntheses. Though the synthesis may present a danger to the incautious, it may be employed appropriately as long as it reflects a valid movement from the primary senses of the biblical texts—what the authors meant—to the plenary senses—what texts have come to mean, in the context of Christian history. Synthesis can be a helpful tool in developing theological statements in contemporary culture. Theologians must exercise caution, however, to prevent the plenary senses from violating the primary senses. The primary senses of divine revelation must remain the norm by which all theological conclusions are tested.¹⁷ Further, Evangelical theologians must beware of too close an identification with any current mood in culture, and the Bible must remain normative to the basic structure of their theology.¹⁸

Moltmann's Theological Method

Moltmann's contributions clearly involve synthesis. Beyond that, however, other aspects of his method are not as clear. While several factors make discovering and analyzing Moltmann's theological method difficult, the foremost should suffice: Moltmann has displayed a relative lack of interest in methodology. In a postscript on theological method, he confessed that he never had been concerned about it: "I have always been interested," he said, "only in theological content."¹⁹ Another difficulty is that his method is deliberately fluid. Moltmann said, "Always using the same method leads to a rigidity on the part of the author and to weariness in the reader."²⁰ He has been true to his statement. Like many other theologians, including Evangelicals, Moltmann has used a unifying theme to write theology,²¹ but at some point he realized he "would not be able to continue using the method 'the whole of theology in a single focus.'"²² With this realization, he

¹⁶ B. A. Demarest, "Systematic Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 1064–66; Craig Blaising, "Fields of Christian Theology" (lecture outline presented to his Introduction to Christian Theology class, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, September 1, 1998, photocopy in my possession).

¹⁷ F. F. Bruce.

¹⁸ Erickson.

¹⁹ J. Moltmann, *How I Have Changed*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1997) 20.

²⁰ J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, translated by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM; Harper-Collins, 1991; Fortress, 1993) vii.

²¹ Richard Bauckham, "Moltmann's Eschatology of the Cross," *SJT* 30.4 (1977) 301.

²² J. Moltmann, *The Trinity*.

changed his method to one which involved doing theology as a partial contribution to a wider theological community.²³ Therefore, his method appears to involve principles which changed from time to time and from publication to publication. This fact obviously qualifies the aspects of Moltmann's theological method I describe in this paper as features which *have been* aspects of his methodology, but which *may not necessarily be* aspects of his methodology today.

Several methodological principles are integral to Moltmann's theology. In the first place, Moltmann has drawn from the three sources mentioned earlier. For example, in a discussion of the basis of human rights, he notes that "Roman Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran forms of thought converge around the notion that man is created in the image of God."²⁴ Here he is doing theology related to a topic of importance to *contemporary culture* and appealing to *Scripture* and *tradition*. Richard Bauckham saw three methodological principles employed in *The Crucified God*: 1) the eschatological principle of the openness of all events toward the future and the concomitant provisionality of all theological statements, 2) the eschatological method of reading history backwards on the principle that the order of knowing reverses the order of being,²⁵ and 3) the dialectical principle of knowledge.²⁶

²³ J. Moltmann, *The Trinity*.

²⁴ John A. Henley, "Theology and the Basis of Human Rights," *SJT* 39.3 (1986) 373.

²⁵ Bauckham, 303–5, further describes: "The historical account of an event or person proceeds from the beginning to the end, but the understanding of its significance proceeds from the end to the beginning. Thus the early church understood the cross and earthly life of Jesus in the light of Easter."

²⁶ Bauckham. He notes that this idea was "derived from Schelling and Ernst Bloch and also, somewhat quixotically, from Hippocrates (*CG* 27, 31 n. 22). . . . Essentially he contrasts the analogical principle of knowledge ('like is known by like') with the dialectical principle ('like is known by unlike'). Strictly applied, the analogical principle would mean that God is known only by God. But the analogical method of theology proceeds by seeking to know God from the analogies to him in the world, his nature reflected in his works: God is revealed in what is like him. By contrast the dialectical method finds God in his opposite: God is revealed in Christ's abandonment by God on the cross. The motive behind the analogical method is self-deification: man seeks to know God in order to become like God. By contrast the dialectical knowledge of God in the cross of Christ is a 'crucifying form of knowledge' (*CG* 212): only the godless and those who abandon every kind of self-deification or likeness to God can recognize the God who reveals himself in the godlessness of the cross. The analogical principle is not, however, entirely replaced but rather made possible by the dialectical." This dialectical principle, for Moltmann, "is the epistemological corollary of the nature of God's love. God loves what is unlike himself; he loves the godless and the godforsaken." "God is revealed in his opposite because he is love which identifies with what is alien to him. The dialectical principle is therefore not so much a general epistemological principle, as one which corresponds to the nature of God's love and is applicable only to God and

love
essentially, etc.

Moltmann himself, in a recent essay, outlined four general methodological principles which guided his theology:

1. It should be possible to verify theological statements by one's own experiences or by empathy with the experiences of others, whether individual or collective. Experiences include praxis.
2. A person with different theological views should also be able to say to God what he or she says about God. It should also be possible to use his theology for praying, lamenting or praising.
3. For me, from the start theology has been an adventure with an uncertain outcome, a voyage of discovery into an inviting mystery. My theological virtue has not been humility, but only curiosity and imagination for the kingdom of God.
4. In Europe, we have a rich confessional background. But together 'with all Christianity on earth'—as Luther remarked—we have a much richer ecumenical future. Concern with our own tradition must not hinder incorporation into the world-wide ecumenical community.²⁷

implication for
the two-
dimensional
relationship of
CEI & Protestantism
hermeneutic

Elsewhere, he has expanded significantly on this last point, noting that in several of his books he has followed an ecumenical method. He defines this method as drawing on both Catholic and Protestant sources, entering into dialogue with theologians from both traditions "so that what the churches have in common emerges."²⁸ These principles will be discussed further as I compare Moltmann's method and its results with Evangelical method.

*Contemporary Culture as a Source of Theology:
Continuities with Evangelical Method*

Moltmann's continuity with Evangelical method's concern for contemporary culture as a source of theology clearly presents itself in his work. His approach is one which constantly attempts "to make the eschatological revelation of God concrete in relation to the present."²⁹ For him, Christian theological method must ever investigate anew theology's relevance to the world,³⁰ while at the same time exercising caution that theology not lose its Christian identity by striving to adapt itself to the winds of time.³¹ He believed the church must change in order to change the world, but affirmed that "only the crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the

to the love which he arouses in men" (306).

²⁷ J. Moltmann, "Jürgen Moltmann" in *How I Have Changed*, ed. J. Moltmann, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1997) 20–21.

²⁸ J. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, translated by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1985; HarperCollins, 1991) xv.

²⁹ Don Schweitzer, "The Consistency of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology," *SR* 2.22 (1993) 197.

³⁰ J. Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope*, translated by M. Douglas Meeks (London: SCM, 1975; Fortress, 1975) 1.

³¹ J. Moltmann, *The Experiment*, 2.

world."³² Every theology, therefore, must enter into the changing conditions of the culture in which it is pursued, identifying and developing its own concern in these conditions³³ because Christian theology mediates the historical Christian message in such a way that it falls within the understandings of contemporary people.³⁴ In order to carry out its task, theological method must allow for holistic reflection, incorporating data from the broadest range of sub-sources within contemporary culture. Consequently, his ecumenical theological

method is open for the secular *oikumene*, which literally means 'the inhabited globe', and in this case the sciences, technologies and economics which today determine the relationships between human beings, machines and nature. It . . . will work out points of approach for a theological discussion with scientific findings, hypotheses and theories.³⁵

Moltmann's starting point of Christian theology, "the anticipation, the prolepsis, the sending ahead of God's future, or *Zukunft*, in the passion and resurrection of Christ,"³⁶ is seen by Otto as undergirded by a Marxist model, whose "active presence of the future, this anticipation, this project, which is characteristic of man" is the "imaginative or conceptual projection [that] lies at the root of all human activity."³⁷ While the association may exist between Moltmann's theology and Marxism, simple association does not make Moltmann's notion false (misattribution). But what Otto may have overlooked is its relationship to the anticipatory paradigm, or system, of theoretical biologist Robert Rosen. Rosen's advanced scientific speculation about the role of modeling in living systems has made his reputation. He suggests that "a change of state in the present occurs as a function of some predicted future state, and [that] the agency through which the prediction is made must be, in the broadest sense, a model."³⁸ Moltmann's anticipation, while going beyond the concept of microcosmic biological modeling to a universal or macrocosmic modeling, finds support in the microcosmic

³² J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, translated by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM, 1974; Harper & Row, 1974) 1.

³³ Don Schweitzer, "The Consistency of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology," *SR* 2.22 (1993) 197.

³⁴ J. Moltmann, *Theology Today*, translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1988) 53.

³⁵ J. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, xvi.

³⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, translated by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1979) 30.

³⁷ Garaudy, *Marxism*, quoted in Otto, "God and History in Jürgen Moltmann," *JETS* 35.3 (1992) 382.

³⁸ Quoted in David C. Cottingham, "Rosen, Moltmann, and the Anticipatory Paradigm," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 42.4 (1990) 239.

concern of
theology
Moltmann

model³⁹ and demonstrates his own interaction with contemporary scientific theory.

Moltmann's concern for a methodology that provides for holistic theology is also reflected in his concern that theology often does not go far enough, becoming mired in the content of faith and unable or unwilling to translate that content into action.

Our academic theology speaks with the Bible, the Church Fathers and other sciences and ideologies. But it does not speak the language of the people and does not express their experiences and hopes. We research theological concepts of earlier experiences [*sic*], but we seldom conceptualize the contemporary religious experiences of the suffering or struggling people.⁴⁰

The mission of theology, for him,

not only means proclamation, teaching and healing, but also involves eating and drinking. Mission happens through community in eating and drinking. Hope is eaten and drunk. . . . [That Jesus has come] anticipates the overcoming of the people's hunger in the eating and drinking of the poor. The eating and drinking mission anticipates the kingdom among the hungry and thirsty. That is its joy in its poverty.⁴¹

If an Evangelical method must legitimately incorporate contemporary culture as a source of theology, then the preceding discussion should demonstrate that Moltmann's method certainly shares that concern with Evangelicalism. In a critique of Moltmann, Don Schweitzer concluded that Moltmann's method presents a means "of doing theology that enables the church to relate its hope to contemporary needs and concerns without becoming captive to society's self interests and delusions."⁴² He is only partly correct in this statement, for some aspects of Moltmann's method and its relationship to contemporary culture reveal cause for concern.

*Contemporary Culture as a Source of Theology:
Discontinuities with Evangelical Method*

As stated above, one of Moltmann's methodological principles was that theological statements should be verifiable "by one's own experiences or by empathy with the experiences of others, whether individual or collective. Experiences include praxis."⁴³ This statement reflects a deep-seated concern for Moltmann, for his first source of theology was his experience of God as hope while he was a prisoner of war from 1945 to 1948.⁴⁴ While he does say

³⁹ D. Cottingham, 241-42.

⁴⁰ J. Moltmann, "Hope in the Struggle of the People," *Christianity and Crisis* 37.4 (1977) 49.

⁴¹ J. Moltmann, "Hope in the Struggle," 53.

⁴² D. Schweitzer, 208.

⁴³ J. Moltmann, "Jürgen Moltmann," 20.

⁴⁴ Richard Bauckham, "Jürgen Moltmann," in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 209.

he sees a problem with liberation theology's reliance on the modern functional view which posits praxis as the criterion of truth to the neglect of the classical view involving objective verification and falsification, Moltmann's method is ultimately influenced more by the former view; thus he himself may fall captive to contemporary culture. That which cannot be verified by experience, such as miracles, the supernatural, and even the resurrection, finally fall into the category of myth. I will discuss them in more detail in the section on Scripture as a source of theology.

*History as a Source of Theology:
Continuities with Evangelical Method*

Moltmann, however, has continuities with Evangelical method, particularly with regard to history, including tradition, as a source of theology. As noted above in his four principles for theological method, Moltmann demonstrates agreement with Evangelical method in that he warns against a hindering "[c]oncern with our own tradition."⁴⁵ He recognizes the contingency of all confessional theologies as the products of finite human efforts and proceeds with humble caution: "A theologian is a strange creature," said Moltmann. "He is obliged to talk about God who is unconditionally present to all men in all times and in all places, but he himself is only a man who is limited in his capacities and who is conditioned in his views by his own tradition."⁴⁶ Like an Evangelical method, his method values the lessons of history and incorporates the broadest range of developments in Christian thought. His method

does not merely extend to different theologies in a single period. It also reaches out to the different periods of theology. I have . . . tried to enter into discussion with Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin and Newton, and other of our theological and scientific forbears. . . . These do not merely provide illustrative material and offer intellectual models. They are also intended as contributions to theological discussion beyond the frontiers of time."⁴⁷

Moltmann also acknowledges the criticism that a method which promotes confrontations with confessional theology "can shatter a dialogue." But he sees as more important the positive opportunity for such a method to "lead participants out of a superficial friendliness into a deeper community."⁴⁸ For Moltmann it is "possible to acknowledge and with all criticism to appreciate each other mutually."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ J. Moltmann, "Jürgen Moltmann," 20-21.

⁴⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Experiment*, 1.

⁴⁷ J. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, xvi.

⁴⁸ J. Moltmann, "An Open Letter to José Miguez Bonino," *Christianity and Crisis* 36.5 (1976) 57.

⁴⁹ J. Moltmann, "An Open Letter," 62.

Moltmann sees the basic biblical assertion that "God is love" as one which breaks "the spell of the Aristotelian conception of God,"⁵⁰ here intending the traditional understanding of the attributes of immutability and impassibility.⁵¹ Regardless of whether one agrees with his conclusion, his willingness to rethink traditional formulations with a view toward depending more on Scripture for one's conception of God is unquestionably Evangelical.

Schweitzer saw Moltmann's dialectical style of developing theology proceeding on two distinct levels, each of which, on the surface at least, reflects an approach to tradition that corresponds to Evangelical method. The first is "the continual reformulation of selected doctrines in relation to specific new experiences"; the second "proceeds through the first . . . to a coherent reconceptualization of the Christian theological tradition as a whole."⁵² This approach may seem viable if Scripture has an Evangelical role in this dialectic. However, Scripture in Moltmann's method is often subsumed under the rubric of *Christian theological tradition*. The ramifications of this perspective will be addressed in more detail in the section on Scripture as a source of theology.

*History as a Source of Theology:
Discontinuities with Evangelical Method*

While his is not purely a liberation theology, it does have certain affinities with one. Like the liberation theologies, Moltmann's method involves critical reflection on historical praxis and does not result in a system of timeless truths, but what Moltmann calls his partial *contributions* to a vast, diverse, and ever changing theological community.⁵³ Theology is no longer worked out in response to God's self-disclosure in the Bible. The Bible is replaced by the "revelation" of God found in the matrix of human interaction with history. "God and history must be conceived in dialectical relation. In this way the idea of God garnered from history will be devoid of the philosophical prejudice that has ostensibly plagued Christian conceptions of Deity hitherto."⁵⁴ His synthesis of Christianity with attributes of Marxism seeks the wholeness of man by overcoming the alienating political and economic structures of society.⁵⁵ While synthesis is not contrary to Evangelical method in and of itself, Moltmann's formulation of it seems a

⁵⁰ *Crucified God*, 230.

⁵¹ Henry Jansen, "Moltmann's View of God's (Im)mutability: The God of the Philosophers and the God of the Bible," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 36 (1994) 285.

⁵² D. Schweitzer, 205.

⁵³ J. Moltmann, *The Trinity*, vii.

⁵⁴ Randall E. Otto, "God and History" 375.

⁵⁵ D. D. Webster, "Liberation Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 635.

cause of concern. While he criticizes liberation theologies for an imbalanced employment of praxis as the criterion of truth,⁵⁶ Moltmann himself leans more toward the side of such a functional view of truth than toward the classical criteria.

For example, he thinks it unnecessary to believe that the resurrection was an actual event in the history of Christianity. Its importance for the proponents of hope, of whom Moltmann is father, is the appropriation of the *symbol* of the resurrection as a heuristic device to promote world transformation: "The historical facticity of the resurrection is not the essential matter; what matters is the 'inner tendency,' which shapes consciousness and stimulates thinking . . . to the negation of the negative."⁵⁷ According to Moltmann, "We need not *only* to demythologize the Bible, but even more to 'dehistoricize' it in order to free it from the chains of the past . . . [emphasis added]."⁵⁸ In Moltmann's method, history manifests itself in a manner quite distinct from and with a value much different from that of an Evangelical method.

*Scripture as a Source of Theology:
Continuities with Evangelical Method*

At this point, most Evangelicals would raise their brows when reading Moltmann as he says "Christian theology must be biblical theology."⁵⁹ He does, however, say it, further explaining that "Biblical theology . . . must be neither historicist nor fundamentalist,"⁶⁰ a statement seeming to agree with Evangelical method in avoiding Confessionalism and Fundamentalism. Furthermore, in a discussion of the interpretation of the historical theology of Thomas Aquinas and Joachim of Fiore, Moltmann concluded, "In any case, the final court of appeal . . . should not be church doctrine or the experience of history, but rather the gospel testified to in the Old and New

⁵⁶ Moltmann sees the liberation theologies in general as neglecting meditation upon both the mystical and the classical criteria of truth for this: "The modern critique of religion no longer makes any critique of the content of faith, but is a purely functional critique of the psychological, political and social effects of this faith. It no longer asks whether it is true or false, but only whether it has the function of oppression or liberation, alienization or humanization. . . . Under these conditions it is necessary for theology self-critically to accept praxis as the criterion of truth and no longer to stress just the orthodoxy of faith but also the orthopraxy of love," *Theology Today*, 92-93.

⁵⁷ Wolf-Dieter Marsch, "Die Hoffnung des Glaubens," in *Diskussion über die Theologie der Hoffnung von Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Marsch (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1967) 122. So also Randall E. Otto, "The Resurrection in Jürgen Moltmann," *JETS* 35.1 (1992) 86.

⁵⁸ J. Moltmann, *The Experiment*, 7.

⁵⁹ J. Moltmann, *The Experiment*, 6.

⁶⁰ J. Moltmann, *The Experiment*, 6.

Testaments."⁶¹ Here again he sounds clearly Evangelical. The question of his meaning becomes obvious, and the explanation lies in Moltmann's retention of the traditional Protestant terminology for the doctrine of Scripture while redefining its meaning.⁶² His terms certainly have continuity with those of an Evangelical vocabulary, but their meanings may not.

*Scripture as a Source of Theology:
Discontinuities with Evangelical Method*

Moltmann has said that Israel's history, as "characterized by the exodus of the promising God, can lead man today to open himself to the future." For man to open himself to the future, however, would require "a reexamination of the idea of revelation, for traditional views of revelation 'no longer call forth hope into life'. . . . No fulfillment carries a final meaning, for each entails a latency to greater fulfillment."⁶³ The history of which Moltmann speaks, including biblical history, is reduced to the symbolic and mythical. It conveys "in pictorial terms experiences or confessions the factuality of which it is impossible to verify. . . . [and] human epistemology and the interpretation of experience remain anthropocentric . . . for the unity of any mediating hermeneutic is thereby denied in favor of a persisting adherence to the autonomy of reason standing in opposition to the biblical accounts."⁶⁴ For Moltmann, this view seems to be an attempt to salvage what he perceives to be a foundering Christianity. His use of the "*Historie-Geschichte* duality, rooted in Kant's phenomenal-noumenal scheme, is an instrument of practical reason invoked by admirers of critical method to safeguard a remnant of meaningfulness for the biblical documents."⁶⁵ James Barr judged "the

⁶¹ Jürgen Moltmann, "Christian Hope: Messianic or Transcendent? A Theological Discussion with Joachim of Fiore and Thomas Aquinas," *Horizons* 2.2 (1985) 330.

⁶² Jürgen Moltmann, "The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit—Trinitarian Pneumatology," *SJT* 37.3 (1984) 296–300.

⁶³ Jürgen Moltmann, "Die Kategorie *Novum* in der christlichen Theologie," *Perspektiven der Theologie: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1968) 181, quoted in Otto, "God and History," 377.

⁶⁴ Otto, "God and History," 378–79.

⁶⁵ Otto, "God and History," 379. According to P. Ricoeur, one of Moltmann's mentors, "Revelation is contingent upon the 'poetic function' of the text that projects ahead of itself a world in which the reader is invited to dwell and find realization of his ownmost [*sic*] possibilities. Through all the traits it recapitulates and by what it adds, the poetic function incarnates a concept of truth that escapes the definition by adequation as well as the criteria of falsification and verification. Here truth no longer means verification, but manifestation, i.e., letting what shows itself be. What shows itself is in each instance a proposed world, a world I may inhabit and wherein I can project my ownmost [*sic*] possibilities. It is in this sense of manifestation that language in its poetic function is a vehicle of revelation" (P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980] 102), Otto,

distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*" as "an artificiality." "If God really acted in history, and if history is to be so very central, then the history involved must be not the history as the documents confess it but the history as it really happened."⁶⁶ In the view of B. Halpern, the Biblical authors in fact "meant to furnish fair and accurate representations of Israelite antiquity," for "the Israelites did not distinguish myth from history, fact from fictitious convention."⁶⁷

That Moltmann refuses to take the Biblical accounts as intended, but instead feels compelled by the autonomy of reason to reject supernaturalism, leaves him no other option but to use the Bible imaginatively as a collection of myths and symbols that give rise to thought (Ricoeur), the thought of social transformation. Hence Moltmann's proposal to ground his theology in history is fundamentally subverted.⁶⁸

The preceding data support the notion that Moltmann's view of the place of Scripture as a source of theology falls outside the pale of an Evangelical method. It is not that inerrant, authoritative, primary source by which all theological statements can be judged as true or false. The following example supplements that conclusion by demonstrating that his method does not view Scripture as a unity in the same way as does an Evangelical method.

Judaeo-Christian culture has been strongly determined by sexism and patriarchy. According to the Priestly source (Gen. 1), human beings are created in God's image as 'male and female.' God's image has male as well as female characteristics. But this memory of original equality is immediately obscured again by the Yahwist source (Gen. 2-3): the woman is created second and is the first to fall into sin. As punishment the woman is to suffer 'pain in child-bearing,' have 'desire for her husband,' and 'he is to rule over her' (Gen. 3:16). It is thus established on mythical grounds that man is destined to dominate woman in the eyes of God and the world, and the woman is condemned to subjugation and dependence."⁶⁹

While the subject matter of gender roles can be a theological powder keg in Evangelical circles as much as in any other, the purpose of this example is not to focus upon its content but upon the method used by Moltmann to derive his conclusion. Further, while an Evangelical doctrine of inspiration admits a process of redaction in the composition of Scripture, it affirms that such editorial work was superintended by the Holy Spirit and that the unity of the Scriptures is maintained. An Evangelical method may even find

"God and History," 379, n. 19.

⁶⁶ J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* (New York: Harper, 1966) 67-68, quoted in Otto, "God and History," 379.

⁶⁷ Otto, "God and History," 379; B. Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988) 3, 269, quoted in Otto.

⁶⁸ Otto, "God and History," 379.

⁶⁹ J. Moltmann and D. Meeks, "The Liberation of the Oppressors," *Christianity and Crisis* 38.20 (1978) 312.

benefit in the use of the documentary hypothesis as it pertains to source criticism in the study of Scripture.⁷⁰ But here, Moltmann uses it essentially to discard a portion of Scripture that seems to conflict with his contemporary understanding of Christian teaching about gender roles. This argument, in combination with other statements, suggests that Moltmann, for all practical purposes, has reduced the number of theological sources to two, tradition and culture, with Scripture subsumed under the rubric of tradition. Indeed, he mentions only *two* sources of theology in the following statement: "Mediation between the Christian tradition and the culture of the present is the most important task of theology."⁷¹ In all events, Moltmann's method does not possess the Evangelical commitments to the primacy of Scripture as a source of theology or to the principle of the unity of the Scriptures; thus it again falls outside the Evangelical circle.

Conclusion

The positive contribution of Moltmann's method is that it represents a shift in interpretive perspective from one which has generally eschewed eschatology as a cabalistic mystery to the fringes of the theological enterprise to one which recognizes the whole of salvation history as permeated by it. Though his view of the resurrection diverges from an Evangelical view, his method is a resurrection-centered method which affirms Christ's resurrection as the beginning and promise of that which is to come. For some Evangelicals, focus upon the resurrection more than once a year would be a surprising but welcomed change. Moltmann also contends that the time has come to rethink theology, and some Evangelicals should listen to that admonition as well. Jesus is coming and will make all things new. The eschaton, revealed in God's promise, provides hope for the future and motivation for godliness in the present.⁷² The time has come to retrieve eschatology from the fringes of Christian life and from the postscripts of systematic theologies.

Further, Moltmann promotes a method which bears fruit in a holistic theology where belief and praxis coexist. His concern for justice can be affirmed as applicable to our contemporary socio-political milieu as well as to our ecclesiological praxis. Any theological method which does not end in praxis cannot be called an Evangelical method.⁷³ Without a doubt, his stand for the oppressed of the world makes him a sort of "Underdog" for the underdog.

⁷⁰ Ben Weibe, "Interpretation and Historical Criticism: Jürgen Moltmann," *Restoration Quarterly* 24.3 (1981) 155 f.

⁷¹ J. Moltmann, *Theology Today*, 53.

⁷² S. M. Smith, "Hope, Theology of," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 532-34.

⁷³ Cf. Ben Weibe, "Revolution as an Issue in Theology: Jürgen Moltmann," *ResQ* 26.2 (1983) 120.

On the other hand, Moltmann's method remains mysterious.⁷⁴ It is fraught with difficulties and inconsistencies, some of which seem to be of little concern to him.⁷⁵ Rolf Ahlers argues that some of the difficulties with Moltmann's method might even hinder his goal of liberation⁷⁶—a possibility which should cause Moltmann to perk up from his boredom with method⁷⁷ and take notice. In the end, while Moltmann often presents his theology in terms familiar to Evangelicals, it is just as clear that Evangelical theologians must approach Moltmann's thought with great care, for he seems to think little in terms of the traditional definitions of theological vocabulary. At times he replaces the Bible as the primary source of theology with culture or history, judging Scripture against them. And while he speaks highly of and centers his theology on the resurrection of Jesus, it is not the literal, historical sense of the cross and resurrection without which the Christian faith could no longer be called by that name.⁷⁸ Behind the glass, Moltmann's theological and methodological clothes may look like the garb of a super hero, but when he steps out of the phone booth into plain view, his cape is not that of an Evangelical "Underdog."

⁷⁴ D. Schweitzer, 197.

⁷⁵ Richard Clutterbuck, "Jürgen Moltmann as a Doctrinal Theologian," *SJT* 48.4 (1995) 489–505.

⁷⁶ R. Ahlers, "Theory of God and Theological Method," *Dialog* 22 (Summer 1983) 236.

⁷⁷ J. Moltmann, *How I Have Changed*, 20.

⁷⁸ Cf. Ahlers on Hegel, 238.