Moltmann and the Anti-Monotheism Movement

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Abstract: Building on the discredited work of Erik Peterson, Jürgen Moltmann insists that monotheism is a foreign philosophical influence that corrupted Christianity into validating political domination. Christianity should renounce monotheism in favor of trinitarianism. Moltmann’s trinitarian God, however, can never actually exist, but must always be coming from the future, lest it lose its condition of being in presence. Moltmann’s future orientation serves as a heuristic to induce eschatological human community. The cost of accepting Moltmann’s anti-monotheism undermines Christianity’s moorings in Judaism and the trinitarian relations of an actually existing God, all for the sake of repudiating monotheism’s ambiguous political significance.

Monotheism has become a primary point of contention among proponents of political theology due to its purported legitimation of socio-political domination. Contemporary political theology was reconstructed by Johannes Metz and Jürgen Moltmann in the early 1970s in opposition to the political theology of influential constitutional lawyer Carl Schmitt who, in his Politische Theologie (1922, 1934) validated Nazism by ‘the historical observation that all influential political concepts are in reality secularized theological concepts’.¹ Schmitt’s political theology in the service of the state was rebutted by Erik Peterson in his influential 1935 essay Der Monotheismus als politische Problem, where he contended that early Christian apologists adopted Aristotle’s Metaphysics to portray the biblical God as the one and only omnipotent power. This corrupted Christian theology in favor of imperialism so that, when Christianity became the state religion under Constantine, imperial theologians such as Eusebius permitted pagan philosophy to legitimate political ends. ‘In political theology this monotheistic-monarchistic cosmology corresponds to the imperialism of the one emperor: one emperor, one law, one empire … The legitimation model for the Christian emperors was the

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correspondence to the divine-world monarchy: one God, one Christ, one emperor, one religion, one empire.²

The rejection of monotheism is central to the theology of Jürgen Moltmann. Because he views monotheism as validating political imperialism, human enslavement and male domination, Moltmann urges its abandonment as a theological concept in favor of trinitarianism. ‘It is only when the doctrine of the Trinity vanquishes the monotheistic notion of the great universal monarch in heaven, and his divine patriarchs in the world, that earthly rulers, dictators and tyrants cease to find any justifying archetypes any more.’³

That Moltmann’s rejection of monotheism in favor of a social trinitarianism should have exerted a formative influence on liberation and political theology is hardly surprising, given the interest of both in ‘an interrogation of institutions, words, and symbols’ in order to ‘ascertain whether a religious opium is being mediated to the people or a real ferment of freedom’.⁴ A Left-Hegelian stance in which praxis becomes the criterion of truth will utilize socio-political reinterpretations of theological concepts to enhance human freedom.⁵ Curious, however, is the wider acceptance of this anti-monotheism. Though critical analysis has rendered ‘Peterson’s thesis concerning the demise of monotheism’ ‘untenable, both in its historical specifics as well as in its systematic generalizations’,⁶ Moltmann’s insistence on jettisoning monotheism has eroded confidence among others in the traditional appellation of Christianity as one of the ‘three monotheistic religions’, with Judaism and Islam ‘professing belief in one all-powerful and personal God, and in no other gods’.⁷ Miroslav Volf, drawing on Moltmann, considers it ‘advisable to dispense entirely with the one numerically identical divine nature and instead to conceive the unity of God perichoretically’.⁸ Richard Bauckham, admittedly ‘strongly positive’ in his evaluation of Moltmann, agrees ‘that divine unicity – whether as substance or

⁵ Thomas McCarthy rightly characterizes Moltmann and Metz as ‘closest to the Left-Hegelians’, which ‘brings them back to Kant in one respect: the primacy of practical over theoretical reason’ and the Marxist urge to transform the world rather than merely contemplate it (‘Philosophical Foundations of Political Theology’, Civil Religion and Political Theology, p. 28).
subject – is closely connected with the divine monarchy’, resulting in ‘a purely one-way relationship’ in which ‘God affects the world but cannot be affected by the world’. The British Council of Churches study commission, recognizing the political implications of monotheism suggested by Peterson, said, ‘Much depends upon what is meant by the oneness of God. If it is a purely mathematical oneness, there is a return to impersonal monism, in which personal values are swallowed in the impersonal. By contrast, the Trinity is concerned with relational oneness.’

Relinquishing Christianity as monotheistic is a watershed in the history of theology that seems wholly discordant with its origin in Judaism, confused in its trinitarian implications, and bedeviled by ambiguous political connections. Moltmann’s use of Peterson’s discredited work is only part of the reason for suspicions about his trinitarian alternative. More problematic is Moltmann’s view of God as having ‘future as his essential nature’ (Seinsbeschaffen, ‘condition of being’), as ‘the coming God’ who is present only as open history (Geschichte) is read backwards from the end in the noetic-eschatological reading. On the basis of the ontic-historical reading of history (Historie) forwards toward the end, however, this God can never be fully actualized, since this would close the open possibilities and future which are this God’s ‘essential nature’ and confine him to the static ‘eternal present’ which Moltmann decrues. Thus, Moltmann’s God can only be said to exist phenomenologically, not actually.

The view that monotheism is to be interpreted in the way in which Moltmann and others do must be challenged, since in this debate there is often lack of clarity and different perceptions about the meaning of the terms used. Monotheism can be and often is interpreted as a belief in God as one, or in the primacy of unity over threeness. But monotheism can also be interpreted as specifically Christian since it is in the threeness of God that the unity consists, a point made from the earliest times by Christian theologians. Trinity and monotheism are or should be one.

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10 The Forgotten Trinity: The Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today (London: The British Council of Churches, 1989), p. 16; cited by Parker T. Williamson, Standing Firm: Reclaiming Christian Faith in Times of Controversy (Lenoir: PLC, 1996), p. 135, who agrees: ‘Nicaea showed that while God is one in the sense that there is no other, God is not one in the mathematical sense that the Greeks had assumed and that Arius had affirmed’ (p. 130).
This study will challenge Moltmann’s rejection of monotheism by showing its disharmony with the Old Testament and Judaism, its conceptual confusion within Christian trinitarianism, and its ambiguous political basis and significance.

**Rejecting monotheism is contrary to the Old Testament**

According to Moltmann, the history of Israel, with its linear direction, evinces a God very different from the gods of Israel’s neighbors. The epiphany religions of Israel’s neighbors, with their cyclical view of time, conceptualized deity as eternal presence. The ‘I am’ who eternally ‘is’ provides epiphany religion with a means of escape from the chaos and nothingness of this world, but such a god of eternal presence can have no concern for history, future, or the world, for it is the negation of all that is earthly. The god of Parmenides is removed from all pain and suffering and cannot love. This presence of eternity is an idol to be dispelled.

Moltmann repudiates eternal presence for metaphysical and cosmological reasons, but also for political and ethical reasons. The monotheism of eternal presence is, as Feuerbach said, that which every man desires to be, having the characteristics man has attributed to him via ethico-philosophical abstraction. Moltmann desires to escape this anthropocentricity, from which has ensued the domination of rulers throughout history who have considered themselves God’s representatives on earth, lording it over their subjects as masters over slaves. Moltmann contends that the revolutionary impetus of Israel’s God is lost in the bourgeois domestication of monotheism, which, instead of standing in contradiction to given reality, provides justification for lordly rule.

Moltmann’s alleged connection between cosmology and politics is, however, biblically unjustified. There is no inherent relation between monotheism and monarchy. Contrariwise, that relation was peculiar to Israel amidst the polytheism and monarchical rule predominant in the Mesopotamian region. From the third millennium BC, the Sumerians, Akkadians and Egyptians conjoined a highly developed polytheism with a monarchical political system. Bordered by nations embracing both polytheism and monarchy, it is surprising that the tribal system of judicial government in monotheistic Israel survived as long as it did. The very

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14 The philosophical foil of Greek static being in *Theology of Hope* was Parmenides, presumably because Moltmann had not yet read Peterson (he is not cited there, as he is regularly thereafter, beginning with *The Crucified God*). While Aristotle *is* cited in *Theology of Hope*, it is almost always in connection with the question of revelation and reason. Only once is Aristotle’s ‘Unmoved Mover’ associated with Parmenides’ ‘eternal present of Being’ (p. 141).
16 It is commonly suggested that monotheism does not actually appear until the post-exilic Second Isaiah (40–55). John F.A. Sawyer thinks monotheism was imposed by Josiah’s
idea of monarchy was anathema to true Israelites’.17 Yahweh alone was Israel’s ruler and he governed his people through his charismatic representatives. The monarchical system in Israel began in the eleventh century BC in reaction to the military threat of the imperialistic and polytheistic Philistines. When the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant from Israel, the old judicial order lay in ruins. It was in this situation that Israel elected Saul to be her king. Bright notes this ‘step was taken almost tentatively’ and ‘with great reluctance’, ‘for monarchy was an institution totally foreign to Israel’s tradition’. So foreign to monotheistic Israel was monarchy that 1 Samuel 8:5, 20 denounces it as an imitation of the pagan, polytheistic nations. There is thus no biblical validation for making monotheism the basis of monarchy.

Moltmann espouses Israel’s God of promise, ‘no intra-worldly or extra-worldly God, but the “God of hope” (Rom. 15.13), a God with “future as his essential nature” (as E. Bloch puts it)’, not ‘in us or over us but always only before us, who encounters us in his promises for the future’.19 This God of hope is not above or beyond history, but ahead of it, coming to humanity in the promises of his presence and leading humanity in divine faithfulness towards the lands of promise in unrepeatable events of promise. ‘In the Old Testament Yahweh was experienced, not as heavenly substance but as a divinely historical person, and the promise of his presence was believed in his name: “I am who I am” – “I will be who I will be” – “I will be there” (Ex. 3.14)’.20

The nature of God’s presence in Moltmann’s promissory history is suspect, since ‘promise’ is a ‘language event’ announcing a reality that has not yet arrived. In announcing this not-yet reality, the future becomes a ‘word-presence’. Word-presence, however, is anticipatory, distinct from actual presence.21 God is not actually present in the promise, which is proleptic. God lies ahead. Nonetheless, ‘the word of the promise itself already creates something new’.22 ‘Debar [word] and shem jhwh [name of Yahweh] are not identical. . . . Debar takes effect already in the present, shem and its glorification form the future goal.’23 God is thus absent in person and present only in word. His

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17 Bright, History of Israel, p. 182.
18 Bright, History of Israel, p. 187.
19 Moltmann, Theology of Hope, p. 16.
21 Moltmann, Crucified God, p. 173.
22 Moltmann, Experiment Hope, p. 49.
universal presence is the goal of history. In the terms of Bloch’s Ontology of the Not-Yet, God is not yet (S[bject] is not yet P[redicate]). Moltmann’s God is ‘not-yet’, but only ‘possible’ (Gott-möglich).24

There is no question Judaism has historically viewed itself as monotheistic, the Hebrew Bible portraying the one true God as ‘ever-present’ and omnipresent, immanent and yet transcendent over all that is physical and natural, omnipotent, and everlasting, enthroned as the sole ruler of the universe.25 Monotheism is ‘the corner-stone of Judaism’, ‘the religious doctrine that there is one God and no other, or, if it must be expressed abstractly, the doctrine of the soleness of God, in contradiction to polytheism, the multiplicity of gods’.26 Though Moore maintains ‘there is no assertion or implication of the unity of god in the metaphysical sense such as Philo means when he says, “God is sole, and one (’év), not composite, a simple nature,”’ other Jewish scholars see in the opening words of the Shema (Deut. 6:4) ‘not a practically monotheistic statement, but a theoretically monotheistic one’,27 implying metaphysical oneness.

Abandoning monotheism confuses trinitarian relations

Moltmann’s trinitarian reformulation entails a virulent critique of monotheism as well as the historic trinitarian views following therefrom. Moltmann maintains that trinitarian doctrine since Tertullian has been developed from the priority of the one divine substance. The one, indivisible, homogeneous divine substance is constituted as three individual, divine persons. Moltmann contends that Western theology has operated under the assumption that the one God of monotheism must be conceived philosophically via natural theology before proceeding to the triune God of revelation. ‘Natural theology’s definitions of the nature of the deity [omnipotent, self-sufficient, immutable, e.g.] quite obviously become a prison for the statements made by the theology of revelation’.28 While this may be true of some Western theology, it is overstated. Karl Barth, for example, could speak of trinitarianism as ‘Christian monotheism’ while yet refusing the possibility of natural theology: ‘What is in question is the revealed knowledge of the revealed unity of the revealed God – revealed according to the testimony of the OT and NT.’29

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26 Moore, Judaism, 1:360–61.
28 Moltmann, Trinity and Kingdom of God, p. 17.
Hegel’s attempt to overcome the problem of substance via an absolute subject revealing himself in three modes of being also fails in Moltmann’s eyes, since it renounces the trinitarian concept of person and eventuates in some form of ‘mode of being’. He considers Barth’s trinitarianism to have begun, after Hegel, with God as sovereign subject, only thereafter moving to the Trinity. The modalism which results issues from the stress in Reformed theology from Calvin to Barth on the unity of the lordship and sovereignty of God.

‘In God there is no one-sided relationship of superiority and subordination, command and obedience, master and servant, as Karl Barth maintained in his theological doctrine of sovereignty, making it the starting point for his account of all analogously antithetical relationships: God and the world, heaven and earth, soul and body; and not least, man and woman too.’ 30 Whether it stresses one substance or one subject, a doctrine of the Trinity built upon metaphysical monotheism ascribes to deity all the attributes of lordship that issue from the basest instincts in humanity to dominate another. The God of metaphysical theism cannot care or suffer for his subjects, but is solely concerned with maintaining power. There can be no freedom if there is such a God. If, on the other hand, humanity is free, then there can be no such God. ‘A God who is conceived of in his omnipotence, perfection, and infinity at man’s expense cannot be the God who is love in the cross of Jesus, who makes a human encounter in order to restore their lost humanity to unhappy and proud divinities, who “became poor to make many rich”.’ 31 The liberated believer must therefore dispense with the inhuman God, the God apart from Jesus, for the sake of the cross.

Using the sociological analysis derived from Bonhoeffer, Moltmann seeks to overcome theological ontologism, wherein God is present in eternal non-objectivity, and theological actualism, wherein God is present in repeated acts of encounter:

The argument about act and being in the revelation of God presupposes the ontological concept of God and the epistemological doctrine of transcendence. Only the premise has been changed; only after theology starts by identifying God’s nature with his faithfulness and his revelation with his covenant can this antithesis be overcome. This theology will be transposed into the ‘sociological category,’ which is what Bonhoeffer seeks to achieve. God’s action is God’s being. 32

‘There is no God that “there is”’. 33 God cannot be spoken of in terms of ‘is-ness’, an objective state of a substance, but only as he is for humanity in history and in Christ. ‘There is no being of God for us other than his being-for-us in Christ’. 34

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34 Smith, *Secular Christianity*, p. 192.

What occurred in the event of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ? According to Moltmann, Jesus was, historically speaking, a man with a vision of the future community of free and loving humanity which compelled him to move out from the band of John’s disciples toward an independent mission of liberating and suffering fellowship with those who have no rights. Jesus’ will was attuned to the ideal of the kingdom. He was wholly devoted to eschatological community. Endowed with the Spirit of empowering love at his baptism, Jesus was ‘the provisional representative of the still absent God’,\footnote{Moltmann, \textit{Crucified God}, p. 256.} working for human community in revolutionary activity and sympathetic suffering. His zeal for the kingdom of true humanity was squelched, however, by the political and religious authorities of his day and he was hanged on a cross as a blasphemer and insurrectionary, abandoned and forsaken. When his life ended, so did his hope for the kingdom. This was the death of God for him. Because ‘the question “what is God?” … is the question concerning the kingdom’,\footnote{Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Antwort auf die Kritik der Theologie der Hoffnung’, in Wolf-Dieter Marsch, ed., \textit{Diskussion über die ‘Theologie der Hoffnung’ von Jürgen Moltmann} (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1967), p. 215.} the apparent negation of the kingdom hope entailed the very death of God. God is, therefore, no cold heavenly power; rather, he is known as the human God in the crucified. ‘There is no other God than the incarnate, human God who is one with men and women in suffering and love.’\footnote{Moltmann, \textit{Crucified God}, p. 119.}

‘Jesus’ death cannot be understood as “the death of God”, but only as death \textit{in} God.’\footnote{Moltmann, \textit{Crucified God}, p. 207.} Criticism of Moltmann based on his alleged theopaschitism and patripassianism is beside the point:

We cannot therefore say in patripassian terms that the Father also suffered and died. The suffering and dying of the Son, forsaken by the Father, is a different kind of suffering from the suffering of the Father in the death of the Son. Nor can the death of Jesus be understood in theopaschite terms as the ‘death of God’. To understand what happened between Jesus and his God and Father on the cross, it is necessary to talk in trinitarian terms.\footnote{Moltmann, \textit{Crucified God}, p. 243.}
All criticisms of Moltmann based on a simple ontological concept of God are incorrect, including claims of pantheism and panentheism. Moltmann rejects any idea of essence in God. ‘The word “God” cannot mean a metaphysical form or a moral instance, but the history which unfolds between Father and Son, the happening of the love of the Son and the pain of the Father.’

If the cross is the archetypal event of suffering love for human community, what is the resurrection? The resurrection for Moltmann is an apocalyptic expression for the eschatological and historic (geschichtlich) opening of closed concepts of being (Historie). It is a symbol of the eschaton, the end of the history of unrighteousness, and has nothing to do with revivification or immortality. ‘“Resurrection of the dead” first of all excludes any idea of a revivification of the dead Jesus which might have reversed the process of his death’ as well as ‘any idea of “a life after death”’, for ‘resurrection life is not a further life after death’, but rather ‘the annihilation of death in the victory of the new, eternal life’. ‘Resurrectio is no restoration, but rather a promissio’, involving ‘anticipation’. The disciples’ visions of the resurrected Christ were ‘pre-reflective anticipations’ of the future of God, ‘the foretaste and dawn of his eschatological future for the world’. Seen eschatologically, Jesus is the incarnation of God and new being amidst the ontic non-being of history. In these ‘pre-reflective anticipations’ of God’s future glory, the disciples experienced the call to mission (pro-missio) in hope of universal resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead by God does not speak the “language of facts”, but only the language of faith and hope, that is, the “language of promise”.' For Moltmann, ‘the resurrection’ is a symbol of what occurs in the course of human history as God identifies with the poor and they revolt against oppression. World history is symbolized by the cross and resurrection. ‘The resurrection was not for Jesus an exit from our brutal world into heavenly bliss above … The body of the risen Jesus can be identified by us in the bruised and bleeding body of mankind.’ ‘“The world of the cross” still awaits the resurrection’. The cross discloses the world as godless; it discloses the radical worldliness of the world, in which humanity is destined to live etsi deus non daretur, as if God were not given (Bonhoeffer). Bonhoeffer’s ‘“worldly life” means … a life of discipleship, following Christ and participating in the suffering of God in the world, “sharing in the life” of Christ’. In the way and destiny of Jesus Christ there lay for the believer the anticipation, or better, the model of the

43 Moltmann, Crucified God, p. 170.
45 Moltmann, Theology of Hope, p. 86.
46 Moltmann, Crucified God, p. 173.

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coming kingdom of human man amidst the world kingdoms . . . The crucified embodies the new humanity, which corresponds to God, under the relations of inhumanity, which God opposes.\(^{50}\)

Resurrection is thus an eschatological symbol of human liberation, the negation of suffering. ‘Not the corpse that we can dissect objectively, but the body with which we identify in love, stands in the horizon of the resurrection hope. There is no meaningful hope for the body we have, but only for the body we are.’\(^{51}\) The resurrection of humanity is what Marx called the ‘human emancipation of man’.\(^{52}\) ‘Jesus’ resurrection can be understood as the protest of life against death’, ‘the humanization of the human condition as a whole’.\(^{53}\) The historical person of Jesus thus provides the model of liberating suffering that each is called to emulate in history until, at last, in some non-historical eschaton beyond space and time, new being is achieved and the provisional eschatological titles (e.g. ‘Christ’, ‘Lord’) become ontological realities which all share in community.

Any interpretation of Moltmann which sees ontological reality in God apart from the non-historical eschatological end is misguided. Moltmann’s God is not-yet, but only a ‘possible God’ (Gott-möglich), evinced in the archetypal and symbolic events of the cross and resurrection, sociologically reinterpreted in terms of suffering (cross [negation]) and liberation (resurrection [positive]). Moltmann’s God is the Nothing, the ideal of human community projected for the non-historical end.\(^{54}\) In Hegelian fashion, the eschatological Nothing takes up into itself the nothingness of sin and chaos in suffering love, bringing forth the positive of liberation and true community. This Hegelian dialectic impels all events of liberation throughout history until the hoped-for God of human community is realized, which, in actuality, it can never be, since there can be no end to an open process.

The community of God in the events of the cross and resurrection epitomize what occurs throughout history as all join the cause of suffering liberation. ‘The Tri-une God presents a unique community, which is decisive for all life in God’s name, because all life in that name has been drawn into this eternal divine community’.\(^{55}\) As ‘a dialectical event, indeed as the event of the cross and then as eschatologically open history’, the Trinity ‘means the history of God, which in human terms is the history of love and liberation’.\(^{56}\)

\(^{50}\) Jürgen Moltmann, \textit{Mensch} (Berlin: Kreuz), p. 167.


\(^{52}\) Moltmann, \textit{Experiment Hope}, p. 87.


\(^{54}\) Cf. Geetruida van Asperen’s analysis of Bloch: ‘By transcending us in time, the non-existent goal becomes the tendency of the process, thus exerting its directive influence on the course of the process. That the non-existent goal can exert an enduring attraction is due precisely to its absence. The goal’s failure to appear causes the process to continue’ (\textit{Hope and History: A Critical Inquity into the Philosophy of Ernst Bloch} [Utrecht: Vrije Universiteit, 1973]), p. 41.


\(^{56}\) Moltmann, \textit{Crucified God}, p. 255.
The unity of the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit lies in their personal community rather than in a common divine substance or in the identification of one, absolute, divine subjectivity.\textsuperscript{57} The unity of the trinitarian persons is neither substantial nor numerical, but rather one of communal love. ‘The unity of the divine tri-unity lies in the union of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, not in their numerical unity. It lies in their fellowship, not in the identity of a single subject’.\textsuperscript{58} These symbolic persons do not exist for themselves, but for each other. Hegel, Moltmann avers, went beyond \textit{persona} and \textit{hypostasis} in speaking of ‘personal being’ (\textit{Personensein}), which disposes of oneself for others and comes via others to oneself. This deepening of the concept of relationships in trinitarianism leads to the social character (\textit{Sozialität}) of the human person. Hegel brought the relationality of the trinitarian persons to a new level of community, of \textit{perichoresis}, wherein ‘the three divine Persons have everything in common, except for their personal characteristics’.\textsuperscript{59}

As stated above, there is no actual God in Moltmann’s theology. Thompson rightly sees ‘the Hegelian structure, if not content’, of Moltmann’s doctrine, which ‘involves a “becoming” in God in time, on the cross, in humanity and creation’ in ‘an evolving event between three divine subjects and the world’ wherein ‘the triune God is not complete until the end’.\textsuperscript{60} Despite the ‘serious lack of an ontological dimension in his trinitarian formulations’, Thompson says, ‘This does not mean that Moltmann denies the reality of God’.\textsuperscript{61} This conclusion, however, does not follow. Moltmann’s doctrine is based on Bloch’s Ontology of the Not-Yet; God cannot be until the end, which can never be, lest God become a monotheistic epiphany god. God is simply a ‘possible God’, coming from the future which, as potentiality, ‘must be higher ontologically than reality’.\textsuperscript{62} However, is not speaking of ‘the possible’ as having ‘being’ of any actual kind irrational? ‘The idea of being is the representation, conceptualization, or the adequate though confused conceptual transposition, of the concrete thing. It signifies all the elements of the concrete datum \textit{formally} and \textit{actually}, and not merely virtually and potentially.’\textsuperscript{63} Possibles ‘are objects of metaphysics in the measure in which they are precontained in the real causes which could give them existence’, ‘nothing more than an inept reification of the causal potentialities of existents’.\textsuperscript{64} Moltmann’s ‘coming God’ does not exist, but is instead a regulative idea to spur the transformation of contemporary inhumanity into future community.

‘Moltmann’s polemic against monotheism is closely related to the social and political vision of the future which he thinks is required by trinitarian faith’, a

\textsuperscript{57} Moltmann and Wendel, \textit{Humanity in God}, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{58} Moltmann, \textit{Trinity and Kingdom of God}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{59} Moltmann, \textit{Trinity and Kingdom of God}, p. 198.
\textsuperscript{60} Thompson, \textit{Modern Trinitarian Perspectives}, pp. 34, 51.
\textsuperscript{61} Thompson, \textit{Modern Trinitarian Perspectives}, pp. 62, 51.
\textsuperscript{64} Van Steenberghen, \textit{Ontology}, pp. 64–5.
vision which ‘is nothing if not communitarian, even collectivist’. Thus, while trinitarianism serves as a heuristic device to impel human transformation toward eschatological community, monotheism is a foil against which to attack any ontological conceptualization of the present reality of God and derivative structures of power and authority. Over against any such ontology of present reality Moltmann places Hegel’s processive ontic becoming of humanity towards the noetically-idealized eschatological coming of God in human community.

Moltmann’s trinitarian God is substantiated by nothing except relationality founded in *perichoresis*:

The unity of the trinitarian Persons lies in the circulation of the divine life which they fulfil in their relations to one another. This means that the unity of the triune God cannot and must not be seen in a general concept of divine substance. That would abolish the personal differences. But if the contrary is true – if the very difference of the three Persons lies in their relational, perichoretically consummated life process – then the Persons cannot and must not be reduced to three modes of being of one and the same divine subject. The Persons themselves constitute both their differences and their unity. The use of *perichoresis* without an ontological dimension renders the concept meaningless. *Perichoresis* demands an ontological basis if the relations are to be real and not merely conceptual. Moltmann’s use of *perichoresis* accords with the Hegelian thrust of his thought and is illustrated by his assumption of the word for such notions as ‘a mutual perichoresis between eternity and time’, ‘the perichoretic concept of space’ as ‘the social space of reciprocal self-development’, and the interpenetration of God and world in ‘mutual perichoresis’.

Moltmann’s invocation of ‘John Damascene’s profound doctrine of the eternal περιχώρησις or *circumincessio* of the trinitarian Persons’, which ‘grasps the circulatory character of the eternal divine life’ and ‘exchange of energies’, is vacuous without the requisite ontological dimension. John’s development of *perichoresis* demands what Moltmann denies, the unity of divine nature in the three Persons of the Trinity. John begins his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* by insisting on monotheism. Among his characterizations, God is ‘simple, uncompound,’ and ‘One, that is to say, one essence; and that He is known, and has His being in three subsistences, in Father, I say, and Son and Holy Spirit.’ Thus, John,

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whose ‘Trinitarian theology sums up the doctrine esp. of the Cappadocian Fathers and develops the conception of περιχώρησις (circumincession)’, 71 shows himself not so different from the Western theology of Tertullian and his ‘general concept of the divine substance: una substantia–tres personae’. 72

Perichoresis may not be used to deny the substantial numerical unity of God. Perichoresis presupposes that numerical unity as the ‘necessary being-in-one-another or circumincession of the three divine Persons of the Trinity because of the single divine essence, the eternal procession of the Son from the Father and of the Spirit from the Father and (through) the Son, and the fact that the three Persons are distinguished solely by the relations of opposition between them’. 73 Miroslav Volf demurs, asserting, ‘the unity of the triune God is grounded neither in the numerically identical substance nor in the accidental intentions of the persons, but rather in their mutually interior being’, 74 thereafter citing Moltmann on the unifying power of trinitarian love. Relations and qualities are, however, merely concepts apart from an existing ontological basis. It is an idealist assumption to claim things are mere collections of qualities and some apparently fall into Moltmann’s idealism in criticizing monotheism. It is trifling to say, ‘God’s own being is an open fellowship of love’, 75 or to speak of the ‘mutually interior being’ of the trinitarian persons when these persons have no being yet, but are in a processive ‘becoming unity’ left to human hands. 76

Since Nicaea, orthodox faith has insisted on the one nature (ousia) of God subsisting in three persons (hypostases). Whether substantial numerical identity was the assumed teaching of the Nicene council, ‘there can be no doubt that, as applied to the Godhead, homoousios is susceptible of, and in the last resort requires’ numerical identity of substance. 77 ‘As later theologians perceived, it follows that the Persons of the Godhead Who share it must have, or rather be, one

71 ‘John of Damascus’, in F.L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 748. 72 Moltmann, Trinity and Kingdom of God, p. 16. J.N.D. Kelly observes that, though ‘their angle of approach was somewhat different’, the theology of the Cappadocians ‘may be fairly described as in substance that of Athanasius’ (Early Christian Doctrines [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978], pp. 263–4). Athanasius, Kelly notes, insisted on the numerical identity of being in the Trinity (pp. 245–6), as did the Cappadocians in their oft-ignored ‘belief in the simplicity and indivisibility of the divine essence’ (p. 268). Kelly goes on to observe that the Cappadocians occasionally seemed ‘reluctant to apply the category of number to the Godhead at all, taking up the old Aristotelian doctrine that only what is material is quantitatively divisible’. This was done, however, to accent the non-material, spiritual nature of God.


76 Moltmann, Coming of God, p. 333.

77 Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, p. 234.
identical substance’. This numerically one essence is the presupposition for the consubstantiality of the divine persons (όμοουσία), their equality in the essential attributes of deity (οσότης), and the perichoretic mutual indwelling of one person in the others (περιχώρησις).\(^7\) Monotheism is essential to orthodox trinitarianism:

The classical creeds of Christendom opened with a declaration of belief in one God, maker of heaven and earth. The monotheistic idea, grounded in the religion of Israel, loomed large in the minds of the earliest fathers; though not reflective theologians, they were fully conscious that it marked the dividing line between the Church and paganism.\(^7\)

Monotheism still marks that dividing line.

The ambiguous political basis and significance of monotheism

Peterson’s thesis that the Jewish view of God was blended with an Aristotelian monarchical principle and subsequently taken up by the Constantinian theologians to justify the imposition of unity through political power is unwarranted. ‘Theological “monarchialists” are not often political and political “monarchialists” are not often theological.’\(^8\) ‘The idea of monarchy is an image Philo occasionally uses without drawing any political philosophical conclusions therefrom.’\(^9\) Of the Cappadocians, another says, ‘the sound of all these voices rings differently, however, than Peterson hears: monotheism and its excellent headword μοναρχία co-exist immediately and in the closest way with trinitarian doctrine’.\(^10\) Despite the destruction of Peterson’s thesis, Moltmann has maintained its essential validity. Although Steven W. Sykes thinks Moltmann ‘in his later work recognizes the strength of the criticisms brought against Peterson’s argument’, Moltmann persists in resisting ontological monotheism: ‘It is only when the doctrine of the Trinity vanquishes the monotheistic notion of the great universal monarch in heaven, and his divine patriarchs in the world, that earthly rulers, dictators and tyrants cease to find any justifying archetypes any more.’\(^11\) Despite the criticisms brought against it, Moltmann has continued to cite Peterson’s thesis against monotheism.\(^12\)


\(^{10}\) Ernst L. Fellechner, ‘Die drei Kappadozier (Basilius von Cäsarea, Gregor von Nazianz, Gregor von Nyssa)’, *Monotheismus*, p. 56.


\(^{12}\) He cites as evidence Moltmann’s *Trinity and Kingdom of God*, p. 197, whence the following quote from Moltmann derives!

\(^{7}\) Cf., e.g., Moltmann, ‘Christian Theology and Political Religion’, p. 48; ‘The Inviting Unity of the Triune God’, in Louis J. Hamann and Harry M. Buck, eds.,
Earthly rulers wishing to exert power over others do so whether or not there are ‘any justifying archetypes’. Unjust exertion of power is better attributed to sinful defiance of God than to monotheistic or trinitarian conceptualizations, for either can accommodate a will to power, as Sykes notes.\textsuperscript{85} Volf admits, ‘One should not, however, overestimate the influence of trinitarian thinking on political and ecclesial reality.’\textsuperscript{86} The prophets and apostles did not exhibit any ‘contradiction’ between monotheism and monarchy (cf., e.g., Rom. 13:1-5; 1 Tim. 2:2; 1 Pet. 2:13-17); it was for that reason that the Jewish messiah was to be an heir to the Davidic kingdom (2 Sam. 7). Israel exhibited no such ‘contradiction’ in its initial refusal to have a king in correspondence to its conception of God as monotheistic.

There is no inherent correlation between the conceptualization of divine rule and human political or ecclesiastical rule. It is inappropriate to attribute to the Constantinian revolution a ‘monotheistic turn’ that corrupted Christian faith and practice, either ecclesiastically or politically. Even granting Von Campenhausen’s thesis (which I do not) that there was in the early church a Pauline view of ecclesiastical freedom apart from ‘office’ based on the charismata that existed in tension with a Petrine, Jewish Christian eldership that was political, juridical and authoritarian in nature which was eventually fused in 1 Clement, the epistles of Ignatius, and the Pastoral epistles, \textit{it is a development that occurs in the second century} and continues on until reaching its terminus in Cyprian’s categorical assertions regarding the bishop’s unique spiritual authority and ecclesiastical rule in the third century:

In the fourth century the only advance is a measure of exchange and assimilation between the Greek and the Latin traditions under the outwardly very much altered circumstances of the unity of the Church and Empire. Relations with the Christian emperor and state, and the effort to absorb the monastic revival, present the Church and her officials in many ways with new tasks and problems which inevitably broaden and deepen the ideas hitherto held, \textit{but this does not have the effect of altering the foundations already laid}.\textsuperscript{87}

The political foundations already laid prior to Constantine are more to be considered in the purported corruption of Christian faith toward monotheism than Peterson or Moltmann have granted. Between the second century of Roman prosperity and the ninth century demise of the Islamic empire, there was a conviction that knowledge of the one God justified and made more effective the exercise of imperial power. Antecedents of this idea, however, can be traced back to the polytheist world of ancient Greece and Rome. In his \textit{Empire to

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\textsuperscript{85} Sykes, ‘Dialectic of Community and Structure’, p. 122.

\textsuperscript{86} Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, p. 194.

\textsuperscript{87} Hans Von Campenhausen, \textit{Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries} (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1977), p. 293 (emphasis added).
Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity, Garth Fowden reveals some of these foundations. Under Marcus Aurelius and Diocletian, even polytheist Rome sought heavenly models for earthly rule. The alliance of throne and the Zoroastrian altar in the Iranian Sasanian state is ‘the most obvious precedent for Constantine’s policies’.88 Constantine’s own father, though no Christian, was a strong monotheist. Thus, there were antecedent political and personal foundations having no connection whatsoever to Christianity motivating Constantine’s exercise of imperial power under the guidance of the one God:

Constantine grew up in a world many strands of whose religious life reveal common tendencies: toward the integration of community, the centralization of authority, the formulation of scriptural canons and its corollary, the definition and imposition of orthodoxy. Developments such as these might or might not be associated with universalist aspirations on the part of the religion concerned; but they would have been impossible outside the framework provided by the political universalisms of Rome and Iran ... Also giving ground was the inverse idea that a state might derive a much more substantial part of its identity from a religion than had earlier been the case.89

Indeed, it could be said that trinitarianism influenced Constantine as much as monotheism, since he divided the rule of his empire among his three sons, together with his half-nephew Dalmatius. The argument was periodically made that trinitarianism required the rule of three emperors, though it clearly had little affect on Byzantine political thought.90

Conclusion

Building on the discredited work of Erik Peterson, Jürgen Moltmann has long insisted that Christianity not be viewed as monotheistic, but rather trinitarian. Moltmann’s God, however, does not actually exist, but must always be coming from the future, lest it lose its transcendence. This future orientation is but a heuristic for eschatological human community. The cost of accepting Moltmann’s anti-monotheism undermines Christianity’s moorings in Judaism and the trinitarian relations of God as an actually existent being, all for the sake of repudiating monotheism’s ambiguous political significance.

89 Fowden, Empire to Commonwealth, p. 81.
90 Fowden thinks monotheism may actually have the opposite of its intended uniting effect because of the tension it establishes between orthodoxy and heresy, which inevitably forces confrontation and division. ‘Although universalist by inner logic, it ends up generating pluralism’ (Empire to Commonwealth, p. 156; cf. also p. 107).