

Conference Review

43d Annual Ministers' Week, Candler School of Theology

Emory University's 43rd Annual Ministers' Week, January 23-25, 1978, on the theme, "A Theology of Hope and Parish Practice," featured Tübingen theologian, Jürgen Moltmann in dialogue with the concerns of practical theology.

Moltmann told the audience of some 1600 ministers and lay persons that the Kingdom of God which Jesus announced is to be found there where Jesus is, with the poor, the sick, the sorrowing and the guilty, accepting them as brothers and sisters. "But to find the kingdom in this way," he added, "inevitably means at the same time a critique of the rich and healthy, the self-satisfied and self-righteous. And this critique means alienation from the present order of things."

In his second lecture, Moltmann touched on themes developed in more detail in his third volume of his dogmatics, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. The future of the church lies with renewal of the local church and that such renewal is closely linked with renewal of forms and practices.

He advocated replacing the baptism of infants with "baptism as a free response to the call of discipleship." He also called for open communion, explaining that the Lord's Supper is Christ's meal. "To this meal the Lord invites his own. No church has the right to restrict his invitation or set conditions."

Moltmann's partners in the dialogue were M. Douglas Meeks, Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Eden Theological Seminary; Rodney J. Hunter, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology; James W. Fowler, Associate Professor of Theology and Human Development; Noel L. Erskine, Assistant Professor of Theology and Ethics, and Earl G. Hunt, Bishop of the Nashville Area of the United Methodist Church. Speaking on "God's History of Liberation and the Charismatic Congregation," Meeks claimed that Moltmann's trinitarian view of the Church has overcome the tendencies in Barth, Hiltner and Tillich, to understand the church from one perspective, and has provided a more holistic approach which should enable lay persons to take up their ministries in a community in which all share the gifts of the Spirit.

Hunter used Moltmann's critical method to raise questions about the dominant unquestioned presuppositions of most American pastoral care, which he identified as middle-class and culture-bound. He asked what the impact on pastoral care would be if we took Moltmann's theology of the Crucified God seriously, and proceeded to illustrate this with a case study.

Fowler spelled out the implications of taking the dimension of the future more seriously in Religious Education. With his message of the coming Kingdom Jesus awakened the imagination of those who previously had had no future—the oppressed, poor and afflicted—so that their existence was decisively altered. Christian education which takes its biblical context seriously must excite the imagination in a similar way

today, cracking open the future and introducing new possibilities of transformation, both individual and social.

Erskine asked the question whether hope really liberates. He warned that Moltmann's emphasis on the future could be misinterpreted in an escapist direction, or it could be debated as an academic interpretation of biblical eschatology, which would mean that it would not be near enough at hand to address concretely the crises of the present. Christians must test their hopes to see that they have direct practical applicability. The Black churches model what it means to experience hope as genuine liberation which is both spiritual and concretely practical.

Hunt applied the insights of Moltmann's theology to the task of preaching. Good theology and sound biblical research are of no avail if they are not put to the service of transmitting the Gospel. The Resurrection hope takes effect only as it is communicated.

Cassette tapes of the addresses are available from the Protestant Radio and Television Center, 1727 Clifton Road, Atlanta, Georgia 30329. It is anticipated that a book version of the lectures will appear in 1979.

Theodore Runyon
Professor of Theology
Candler School of Theology