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ON GIVING HOPE IN A SUFFERING WORLD: RESPONSE TO MOLTMANN

Stephen N. Williams

Theology and history – the marriage is looking pretty firm these days and few would wish to rend asunder what a generation of theologians have joined together. Most vigorous amongst Western European promoters of this alliance in the heady sixties were Pannenberg and Moltmann. Pannenberg is treated elsewhere in this collection¹ and it would be unfittingly discriminating to eschew some consideration of Moltmann. It is intrinsically his due on account of the fact that he has kept up both the quality and the course of the theological work which attained publicity with *Theology of Hope* in the sixties.² His latest major work, *God in Creation*, provokes discussion that is still largely within the orbit of 'theology and history' and general discussion of his work will presumably receive stimulus from the very recent publication of the first comprehensive treatment of Moltmann's thought up to 1979.³ I select for investigation here 'hope and suffering'; limit it to a few questions; focus on issues that arise, not on exposition of Moltmann's thought. The question of theodicy is not only intrinsically important, it has to do in contemporary theology with the relation of historical experience to the eschatological end of history, *inter alia*. This is certainly the case with Moltmann. So the theme is fitting for us.

A recent article by Richard Bauckham on Theodicy from Ivan Karamazov to Moltmann will launch our discussion nicely.⁴ Bauckham argues that an adequate theological theodicy in the contemporary context requires two things. First, it must avoid any proposal that makes suffering *necessary* to God's purposes or, indeed, to any purposes of human origin. Such necessity would collide with the justified

1. T. Bradshaw, *God's Relationship to History in Pannenberg*.
2. London, 1967.
3. R. Bauckham, *Moltmann: Messianic Theology in the Making*, Basingstoke, 1987. *God in Creation*, appeared in 1985.
4. *Modern Theology*, 4.1, 1987, pp. 83-97.

sense of moral outrage at suffering. Secondly, it 'must contain an initiative for overcoming suffering'⁵ and proceed to embody a counter-movement to combat suffering. Strictly, Bauckham claims that this is *de facto* what modernity requires in theodicy - not that the requirements are justified *tout court* but he clearly sympathizes with them and, more to our present point, Moltmann takes on board such proposals.

How does Moltmann respond? In the first phase of his work, by holding forth Christian eschatological hope. This is not to justify suffering but it promises that suffering will be overcome. By setting divine promise in contradiction to present worldly reality, it created in those who hope an energy to fight what is eschatologically doomed and to establish at least anticipations of what is eschatologically destined - cosmic righteousness. We have, then, a mobilizing eschatological theodicy. In the second phase (represented by the second major work, *The Crucified God*) the claim is made that God is himself identified with the suffering in suffering and he takes up the suffering of humanity into his own. This is what the cross tells a suffering world. In this incarnational identification with Jesus, God does not just assist the liberation of the suffering by comfort but by siding with them he protests against the suffering of the world and thus will not remain at rest in it. He is 'the protesting God'.⁶ That is it in outline, though Bauckham sets forth in some detail the force of the modern requirement for theodicy and Moltmann's response.

A difficulty with an otherwise helpful account is that the nature of necessity is unclear. Bauckham makes much of those theodicies that must be rejected that make suffering *necessary* to the fulfilment of the divine purposes. He includes under this heading the famous freewill defence sponsored most prominently today by Alvin Plantinga to whose work he does not (and probably need not) refer. A key proposition in the freewill defence is that freedom to actualize a possibility, the possibility of moral evil, is constitutive of human being; strictly, what is often argued is that this enables (along with some other proposition, perhaps relating to

5. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

6. *The Crucified God*, London, 1974, p. 226.

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natural evil) *logically* some defence of theism – whether it is *theologically* warranted is a matter of theology, not of logical coherence.⁷ Now any *necessity* of suffering to the divine purpose take on a different guise in the context of *freedom* and *possibility*. It may be held *necessary* to the divine purpose to create a world where moral evil is *possible* but then it may be said that suffering is a *contingency* that has come about by the human actualization of a divinely given possibility, so that the necessity of suffering cannot be ascribed directly to the divine purpose as such. But even if Bauckham's point requires significant reformulation here it may leave intact the gravamen of the response to the theodicy issue which is positively set forth by, *e.g.*, Moltmann. And that is really our present concern.

Moltmann gives hope in a suffering world from a perspective of eschaton and cross; in short, we have *eschatologia crucis*.⁸ The promise of the plerosis of divine presence in the future and the event of the kenosis of divine being in the past not only buoy up the heart but stimulate praxis. There are many welcome features of Moltmann's proposal, including the governing aspiration to order theological reflection to the missionary task without tumbling into shallow pragmatism. The proposal is also far wider ranging than indicated above, embracing the ambition of reworking Christian theology as a trinitarian *eschatologia salutis*, as the work developed.⁹ I waive here consideration of these things. Rather, we focus on certain critical questions that emerge from Moltmann's discussion. As we do so, we bear in mind that giving hope in a suffering world entails exchanging the studies of the academies for the sobrieties of the actualities; those who emphasize both the historical location and historical responsibility of theology definitely have some purchase on the truth of the matter here.

The plain man, or at any rate the plain theologian, will want to ask: what is hope? And a plain reply from the least plain of

7. See the brief account by K. Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford, 1986.

8. A phrase used in the very first major work, *A Theology of Hope*, III.4.

9. Especially in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, London, 1981.

thinkers, Soren Kierkegaard, is: hope is 'the passion for the possible'. Leaving aside Kierkegaard's rich intricacies it is good to take seriously both the passion and the possibility in hope. It is plentifully passionate: it clings, even against hope and, as with faith, its object is *pinned*. To trifle with people's hopes is no trifling thing. 'Hope deferred makes the heart sick' says the author of Proverbs (13:12) who was not prone to emotive exaggeration in any matters, including matters of the heart. And to defer is not to abolish; it is to stretch out but not infinitely surrender.¹⁰ Disappointment is more bitter than deferring for it may entail realistic abandonment of the object. Paul was no trifler either when in a tranquillising understatement he tells us that hope does not disappoint us (Romans 5:15).¹¹ Disappointments only matter much when passion is around.

The category of 'possibility' too is stably allied with the concept 'hope'. Hope is oriented to the future; the future is not certain; enter possibility, whether or not of Kierkegaardian brand. In its sober moments, hope admits that its certainties are spurious but passion and sobriety take time to be bedfellows in the heart. If hope ought to be sustained it ought not to be sustained by implicating assurance. Hope is ordered to the possible, a possibility it establishes by extrapolation or imagination without knowing whether it will break the surface of actuality.¹²

That is one facet of hope, but is it one facet of *Christian* hope? Christian hope is a passion too but a passion, as Moltmann indeed reminds us, for what is *promised*. Indeed, it is kindled specifically by this, according to Moltmann's first attempts to dwell on it.¹³ Since the promise is, or is believed to be, divine, it should not lead to a dangerous hope or a hope

10. See commentaries on Proverbs here *ad loc.*, e.g., D. Kidner, *Proverbs*, Leicester, 1964.

11. Despite the occasional proposal to the contrary, it is surely wrong to expand the reference of this verse to human hopes in general. See C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans I-VIII*, Edinburgh, 1975, *ad loc.*

12. The terms and metaphor here are borrowed from Bloch and Moltmann; see Bauckham, *Moltmann*, ch. 1.

13. For an important comment on the difficulties of this, see R. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, New York, 1969, pp. 56-68.

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which is an admixture of curse and blessing.¹⁴ It cannot be disappointed and thus is not stayed on the possible if by *possible* we mean that which is not objectively assured. It is true that this requires defence in theological, let alone other, circles these days but *Moltmann* will not charge us with any significant error here. His promise is the promise which, *qua* divine, is eschatologically infallible and he insists that it creates possibilities for proximate, anticipatory actualization in the world.¹⁵ But what is obscured in his analysis when giving hope to *others*¹⁶ is that some difference attaches to the passions kindled by promise and those kindled by possibility respectively. Self-knowledge of potential disappointment ought usually to qualify passionate hope for the *promised* would be ignorance, not knowledge. Hope for the possible may arise *from* hope for the promise and arise *instead of* despair but it is not that passion which Paul joined with faith and charity.

So what? This: unless one sustains the distinction in relation to the passions of the human spirit, one may give false hope to the suffering.¹⁷ To impart hope is sometimes to impart a blessing; to want to impart it is usually a well-meaning instinct. But lest it turn into a curse it must sometimes be checked. People are often encouraged to hope for recovery from illness and to identify their hope with faith, the substance of things hoped for. Then they decline and add bewilderment to burden; they die and thus is added despair to the grief of those who shared the hope. Assuredly, all this implies a perspective on God and physical healing which I am simply assuming and not defending here. But the assumption is for the purposes of illustration. At least for *Moltmann* and

14. Contrast the legend of Pandora's box, of which there is more than one version. Useful references are given in H. U. von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic*, 1987, pp. 171-173.

15. So while the end of history is not an open question, for God has given a promise, history is open to its end.

16. Note how he distinguishes between the immediate and the profounder hope when recording his own war-time experience. See M. D. Meeks, *Origins of the Theology of Hope*, Philadelphia, 1979, pp. xf.

17. Peter's 'living hope' (I Peter 1:3) is implicitly the antithesis of false hope as well as of living hopelessness.

doubtless the majority of theologians in his broad circle the assumption is valid.

But if our question is now whether in giving hope to a suffering world we may at times be accentuating, not attenuating, suffering, is the *illustration* valid? *Prima facie* it falters on the failure to distinguish between diseases of the body physical and diseases of the body politic. After all, the battle with physical ill is the battle with *nature* in the cases I have implicitly in mind; whatever the humanly controllable element in disease that gives the battle its distinctive shape. But that is not the case with social ill and here we have in mind the far too generalized but nevertheless identifiable situation of poverty and oppression which Moltmann so often has in mind. Here, our strife is with *systems* managed by *persons* in the cases explicitly in his mind. Indeed, it may be pressed that it is precisely the ascription to social order of a similar kind of inevitability as we ascribe to the natural order that has cruelly hampered social reform.

The distinction here is certainly valid, but its validity does not dispel the validity of the illustration. If we *pin* our hopes on social change, adopting a passion generated precisely by the pinning, we can experience the setbacks, frustration and despair of the physically afflicted by bodily malfunction. So when theologians laud the merits of a hopeful disposition and hopeful activity it is the distinction between the promised and the possible, not the social and the impersonal, that must be in mind. Yet the relevant distinction is tacit to the point of obscurity in much contemporary theological writing on hope.¹⁸ Why? There may be a number of reasons. But one may surmise that a governing one is the fear that the end of this road is the restriction of any profound hope to a transcendent beyond or qualitatively new (and perhaps remotely distant) future ... and once that happens social concern will die a quiet death.

18. One may be challenged to plough through the immense amount of literature on hope in our generation to see how often the distinction is cleanly or prominently made. Yet, of course, awareness of the distinction is present and often crops up, as it could hardly fail to do in a theological generation that knows the neo-orthodoxy of Barth *et al.*

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This fear is understandable but it should be allayed. One should be willing to take the consequences of the distinction between hopes as they lodge themselves in the human heart, but the consequences are not quietistic indifference. This is so for two reasons. First, there may be compelling reasons for the activity often assigned to hope that are untouched by the distinction of hopes. I think there are, the foundational command to love God and neighbour being supreme.¹⁹ Secondly, the 'possible' should stand contrasted with the 'impossible', not just with the 'assured'. Whatever the ramifications of Moltmann's early metaphysical commitments²⁰ or even the precise connection between resurrection and promise in his theology²¹ the proposition that the world is open to divine transforming activity in its temporal course is surely secure and in fact one might wish to specify divine *ordinations* for such transformations.²² Banally truistic as this may sound in some theological ears, it opens the way for the removal of fears of indifference; further, if the driving passion of the Christian is the accomplishment of the will of God, one must establish a *unity*, not just a *distinction* within the passion for the *possible* and for the *promised*, for in both cases we press on to strive and obey in accordance with God's beckoning whatever the relation may be between temporal and eschatological fulfilments.²³ If we keep these

19. The point cannot be argued here but for a useful survey of the pertinent biblical material see S. C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, Oxford, 1982.

20. One thinks here of the influence of Bloch, less overt in the later writing.

21. In *Theology of Hope, passim*, Moltmann envisages some sort of 'process', never given extended treatment, between resurrection and eschaton.

22. The accent, of course, is heavily on freedom not on divine ordination in contemporary theology and even allowing for concepts of freedom not greatly connected with the traditional freedom / foreordination discussion, the underlying rivalries persist.

23. The passion to do the will of God, intelligent as it undoubtedly must be, arguably suffices without knowledge of how the temporal and eschatological are related, for purposes of vigorously prosecuting a course of action. For a somewhat different slant, however, which must command considerable sympathy, see the third part of Oliver

two reasons in mind we may share with all, including all the suffering, the great hope of eschatological salvation²⁴ and give more particular hopes strictly as particular situations are presented to us where people suffer and God bids us strive on their behalf.

But let us turn now to Moltmann's theology of the cross. It is, as the phrase suggests, the deliberate adoption of an insight of Luther's though how far it is consistent with Luther's own *theologia crucis* another matter.²⁵ *The Crucified God* remains the most compelling and comprehensive exposition of the way in which the cross gives hope to the suffering where the *theologia crucis* is developed intentionally as social criticism. The Christ of this cross is the blasphemer who proclaimed grace and not law, the agitator who communicated an alternative politics.²⁶ These roles suffice to make their impression on those who suffer, particularly when the unity of life and death is taken into account. Here there may be fellowship. But what *disunites* life and gives rise to the most puzzling feature of the cross for Moltmann's Saviour is especially the one who proclaimed God's nearness in his life but experienced forsakenness in death. 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). Moltmann thinks that the answer to this cry enables us to give hope from the cross to a suffering world. Two things can be said here, both of which achieve that revolution in the

O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Leicester, 1986, in relation to the argument of the whole work.

24. The present writer would wish to understand this as a commitment to belief in continued personal existence beyond the grave but not to belief in universal salvation.
25. As surely as Luther could cite Isaiah 45.15 (*Vere tu es deus absconditus*) he could emphasise the prophetic diagnosis (. . . *Iniquitates vestrae . . . et peccata vestra absconderunt faciem eius a vobis*, Isaiah 59.2). Despite his extremely complimentary references to Moltmann, Alister McGrath's own work raises the obvious question to ask on the basis of Luther's thought, namely, to what extent Moltmann does or can detach a Lutheran *theologia crucis* from a Lutheran *iustitia Dei* in its material content? See McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 159, 180.
26. Moltmann expounds this, whether felicitously or not, in *The Crucified God*, ch. 4.

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concept of God which a contemporary theodicy is bound to propose.²⁷

First, God is passible. The axiom of impassibility, which has fuelled the fires of protest atheism, must be dropped. This is a break with classical theism which, while allowing for mitigating circumstances in this matter, is an albatross, as several contemporaries have felt. Theopaschitism does not reduce to Patripassianism: in the case of 'the crucified God',²⁸ while the Son suffers unto death, the Father suffers unto the death of the Son. It is thus better to speak of death in God than the death of God. If the Son suffered godforsakenness and death, then the suffering know that God has experienced their condition. This does not only put an important perspective on suffering; it means that the atheist protest against a God of omnipotent impassibility is justified from the cross.

Secondly, this is soteriologically decisive. Father and Son are united in their deep separation and from the event of the cross flows the life-giving Spirit. Moltmann thus interprets, in one of the most distinctive of his theological moves, the cross of Christ in trinitarian terms. The Spirit which flowed out of the event of the death of the Son in God gives life to a needy world so that the entire history of the world is now taken up with its hopes and its sufferings into the history of God. This Spirit is, indeed, suspiciously Hegelian if one finds Hegel suspicious.²⁹ But the point in any event is to blot

27. As Moltmann argues especially in the central chapter of his work, itself named *The 'Crucified God'*.

28. Jüngel is certainly right to note Tertullian's use of the phrase here, if Moltmann really did hold the phrase as such to be original to the late Middle Ages; see E. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, Edinburgh, 1983, p. 65. See, too, Bauckham, *Moltmann*, p. 157 (10). Yet, clearly something great is going on here with Luther's use of the term; see McGrath, *op. cit.* pp. 1, 146.

29. I am in substantial agreement here with Bauckham's cautious allowance that an Hegelian reading of *The Crucified God* is 'perhaps the most obvious' at this point (Bauckham, *Moltmann*, p. 107). It is, I think, less the kind of economic trinitarianism we have here that suggests this than Moltmann's failure, in any criticisms of Hegel, to distance himself from Hegel's understanding of the relation of divine mind to matter, though Moltmann clearly eschews a Marxian

out the picture of the Trinity as an eternal, self-contained fellowship, a circle that hovers like a halo over the world. The Trinity is the dynamic relationship of Father, Son and Spirit unfolding in time, through history, and so doing not apart from human history but by taking up that history into the life of God, the history of God. Our suffering unto death happens 'in God'.³⁰ And as for hope? God's destiny is to be at home in his own world where he will one day be all in all in the kingdom of freedom and righteousness. Suffering will be transformed into eschatological victory. So God is *with* us when we suffer and *before* us as One pledged to bring the world to its eschatological transformation.

Both these things imply a criticism of society. God in the cross sides with the poor, the oppressed, the rejected, the godforsaken as we see largely in the life of Jesus too. A social and political order which took that seriously would be challenged to its foundations. We must openly charge society with forgetfulness of the crucified God; further, we must labour to change it by exposing its false values and actively participating in the history of God who will eschatologically overcome all ills in his kingdom of righteousness.

So we do not just suffer, we challenge; we do not just challenge, we work; we do not just work, we hope. We are back where we started earlier in this essay.

There is certainly room for the claim that God is passible and for Moltmann's attempt to tackle theodicy not by arguing in justification of God but by describing his ways, past, present and future. As with much else in his work I here pass over features of it which seem to me to be fundamentally plausible. But there are other features that require critical comment. And the one here selected is the fate of the doctrine of the atonement.

materialism. Cf. W. Panneberg, 'What is Truth?', in *Basic Questions in Theology*, II, London, 1971, pp. 1-27. Here, despite Panneberg's claim that dubbing Hegel pantheist is mistaken, it says much for his view of the Hegelian concept of God that the really serious defect in Hegel is 'that the horizon of the future is lost'. (p. 22)

30. Moltmann refers to his theology as 'dynamic panentheism'; Bauckham, *Moltmann* has a helpful exposition of related points in ch. 4.

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Quite what that fate is may be open for legitimate discussion. It has been bluntly suggested that Moltmann lacks such a doctrine.³¹ The basis of this charge, as Alan Lewis makes it, is the opposition to expiation which Moltmann evinces in his discussion in *The Crucified God*.³² The matter is not quite so secure, however, for a number of reasons, amongst them Moltmann's habit of apparently denying in one place what he apparently partially allows elsewhere³³ (the word 'not' slides uneasily into 'not only' occasionally in his literature) and his undoubted emphasis on justification with its connection with guilt and necessary connection with the cross.³⁴ What is the case is that little positive attention is paid by Moltmann to that aspect of atonement theology that has shaped the distinctive tradition stemming in the West from Anselm and the magisterial Reformers.³⁵ Now it may be

31. Most recently in a striking essay by Professor Alan Lewis, 'The Burial of God: Rupture and Resumption as the Story of Salvation', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 40.3, 1987, pp. 335-362, p. 352 n. 33.
32. Pp. 181ff.
33. See the statement: 'Christ did not die *only* as that expiatory offering in which the law was restored . . .' (p. 186). This is a somewhat unexpected statement (italics are mine) not only in relation to what has just been said about expiation but, indeed, the law, in this work.
34. See the essay, 'Justification and the New Creation, in The Future of Creation', ch. x, London, 1979. Here, justification, guilt and cross are connected but the accent is on the end of the works of God which has to do with the triumph of the new creation over nothingness. The important issue that arises here really comes under the heading: incarnation as the fulfilment of creation, not just for the sake of redemption. Very broadly, Moltmann wishes to follow the Scotist-Barthian tradition in affirming this over against the Anselmian one. Anselm enters *The Crucified God* only in this connection (pp. 260, 288). For some related criticisms which take up some of the themes in *Future of Creation* see Douglas Schuurmann, 'Creation, Eschaton and Ethics: an Analysis of Theology and Ethics' in Jurgen Moltmann in *Calvin Theological Journal* 22.1, 1987, pp. 42-67. Note, in the essay I have cited from *The Future of Creation*, the negative reference to expiation, p. 163.
35. One should not flatten this out, of course. But I include Luther in this tradition: see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia, 1966, pp. 218-223, persuasively *pace* Aulen.

argued that Moltmann does not need to give this area much positive consideration as his avowed aim is to develop a *theologia crucis* not completely comprehensively but as social criticism.³⁶ This is a possible, though I think doubtful defence.³⁷ But let us ask positively: what would a *theologia crucis* which highlighted the traditional concern to connect guilt and suffering³⁸ at the cross contribute, if anything, to the gift of hope in a suffering world?

First one must, parallel with hope, stress that in the cross which meets the universal conditions of humankind. It is paradoxically the case that when we stress our theological and practical concern for the *suffering*, the sufferers themselves may get lost in the crowd.³⁹ This is so for two reasons. First, the 'poor and oppressed' are lumped together as a homogeneous group in some ways⁴⁰ whereas starvation, poverty and lack of democratic freedom are not the same thing and variation in the causes and circumstances of poverty, for instance, means corresponding social variety. Secondly, in the revolt against false individualism it may be easily forgotten that serious concern for the suffering is grounded in the capacity to enter into the circumstances of the individual,⁴¹ whose suffering is not proportionately increased or decreased by his membership of a mathematically calculable company who may be similarly suffering. Indeed, this latter point is important for the way the theodicy issue takes shape, for the

36. See the preface to *The Crucified God*.

37. The reason is partly indicated by what has been said about expiation. The omissions of chapter 2 of *The Crucified God* appear significant in this respect.

38. See Lewis, *op. cit.* p. 352. Lewis acquits Jüngel of the charge he brings against Moltmann by referring to law and substitution in Jüngel. For Moltmann's comments on substitution, see *The Crucified God*, p. 263. Cf. the reference here to 'alienation' in the context of Soelle's work with my comments below.

39. Though he does not develop it along the same lines, this instinct broadly informs Surin's whole treatment, too, *op. cit.*

40. As with 'hope', Moltmann does offer distinctions but they are not always prominent at all.

41. One recalls the epistolary counsel of Che Guevara to one of his family or intimates, to have always the capacity to feel deeply for any afflicted by injustice.

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way that statistics are given can give the impression that there is a *quantum* of suffering related to the *number* of those who suffered as though the earthquake that kills a hundred has caused *correspondingly* more suffering than the one which kills ten.⁴² While I shall not pursue it here, it seems to me that this provokes serious thought on the question of God's suffering: is it not he who has the capacity to suffer *with each individual*, and is it not God, therefore, who truly suffers on account of the sheer *accumulation* of suffering in the world?

To return, however, to the connection between guilt and suffering, let us remember that those who suffer social deprivation in some form also frequently feel the weight of guilt. An act of cruelty to father or son; a rash word that plunged another into needless trouble; the cowardice that increased another's distress; the piece of bread stolen from one's fellow-prisoner⁴³ – these incur guilt. All this can plague the conscience of one already suffering physical or social deprivation. Here it is the word of the cross, the word of forgiveness, the word that tells of an atoning sacrifice for sin that deals with the suffering of the guilty. To speak of such things is to affirm, not to denigrate, their humanity – it is to treat them as persons in a world cruelly treating them as non-persons.⁴⁴ Because the sufferer is also God's creature, not just man's victim, the cross speaks of guilt in the midst of suffering too.

Are we now guilty of showing a callous interest in people's guilt when their bodies are racked with pain and minds permanently clouded by deep anxiety? Such callousness would indeed be without excuse. Thomas Hanks has

42. Cf. on this in particular C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, London, 1940, ch. vii, proposition 5.

43. On father and son, see Wiesel's oft-quoted story (e.g., in Surin, *op. cit.* 121, and Bauckham, *Theodicy*, p. 88); on bread, see R. Wurmbrand, *Sermons in Solitary Confinement*, 1969, p. 17, and see A. Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Hammersmith, 1963, pp. 110-143.

44. See C. S. Lewis again for what will strike some as a counter-intuitive argument with a family resemblance to mine, that only a retributive understanding of punishment truly establishes human dignity and advances human rights *in the case of the individual concerned* in *Undeceptions*, London, 1971, 111.4.

remarked that 'the Reformers . . . could proclaim bluntly "all have sinned" and never ask themselves how incoherent, absurd or irrelevant that might sound to beings that view themselves as one more pig in the trough. . . .'⁴⁵ Hanks is criticising neither the Reformers nor their theology. What he is saying he is saying to those of us who wish to share and apply the Reformers' and Bible's Gospel in circumstances such as obtain in Latin America, where he works.⁴⁶ It appears to me that we must take his words to heart and develop them by considering the different kinds of suffering in today's world. So the implication of the reference to guilt and suffering is no more that we dismiss other kinds of suffering than the implication of delimiting and defining hope was that we become socially indifferent.

If this is understood, a further point may be made. Our implicit understanding of the atonement involves, of course, belief in the *uniquely* redemptive sufferings of Jesus Christ. It has been argued that such belief, particularly in the context of the question of suffering, is fatally alienating. The word 'alienating' in modern theology is rich in connotation not only of atonement theologies but also of social philosophies and in particular it brings to mind Marx's critical deployment of Hegelian concepts and constructive development of his own *Weltanschauung*. In the present context, the charge is that uniquely redemptive suffering severs the world of God's transactions from the world of human misery by dissociating the sufferers of the Son from those of the created family.⁴⁷ What are we to make of this charge?

We read of Jesus that he underwent some of the things that other sufferers have had to undergo – betrayal, misrepresentation, mockery, violence. Those who suffer know better than those who do not how important for them that is. One must, however, ask the question: is it the case that the one who most effectively imparts strength, comfort,

45. 'The Evangelical Witness to the Poor and Oppressed' in *TSF Bulletin* (September-October, 1986), quotation from p. 13.

46. Hanks is classed by D. W. Ferm as a liberation theologian: *Third World Liberation Theologies: an Introductory Survey*, 1986, p. 51f.

47. See Dorothee Soelle's bitter work, *Suffering*, London, 1975, though I do not mean to deliver a purely negative judgment on this work.

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hope and love to those who suffer is someone who has similarly suffered and on the basis of that can impart blessing? The answer is often: 'yes'. But not always. When a person loves deeply, sorrows with our sorrows, rejoices in our joy, *that* person has the ability to communicate strength. But sheer reflection on experience, particularly of pastoral experience, will show that the contingent fact that the comforter has not suffered in the particular ways involved has not in the least put him or her at a relative disadvantage, not, that is, *necessarily*. No-one loved or sorrowed as did Jesus, nor so laid down his life in sorrow and love. Grasped properly, awareness of the depth of love involved in the atoning sacrifice gives more succour to the sufferer than do even those sufferings common to Jesus and his fellow-men.

However, I have shifted from 'giving hope' to 'giving strength' and this may appear to confirm suspicions that the spectre of quietism (or some such thing – spectres are not easily named) hovers over the discussion. We have, after all, not affirmed Moltmann's contention that the cross is protest, active protest, against suffering. It is certain that we should interpret the concept of 'protest' here in the precise form and with the precise connotations given by Moltmann for it is associated with some pretty debased jangle some of the time for some of us who observe the public face of contemporary Western democracy. By and large, as Moltmann applies his theology in, e.g., the closing chapters of *The Crucified God*, there is probably not anything fundamentally objectionable about its ramifications as he pits the way of the cross in the public arena against lords many who certainly do not care to make their world cruciform. The initial point must be remembered, that our purpose in this essay is not to stress points of agreement. Having said this, we will allow the spectre one more brief sortie before reaffirming our desire to banish him (or her?) perpetually.

If cross, hope and suffering come together to impose their mark on any one canonical writing, it is undoubtedly in Peter's first letter. It is not surprising to find that this piece, along with the letter to the Hebrews, is the most problematic

for theologians of liberation.⁴⁸ It is noteworthy that despite the clearly distinctive place 'hope' has in I Peter (it 'shows more compellingly than almost any other New Testament writing what strong moral stimulus hope gives'⁴⁹) its author has not made much of a hit with Moltmann, either. Without entering exegetical or theological detail⁵⁰ – the suffering are called to endure and this is the light both of the cross that stood on the earth and the inheritance that awaits in heaven. Indeed, it would be irresponsible to assume too much what this has to say to our theme without specifying what kind of suffering is involved here and what may be inferred from it. Further, the hermeneutical task accomplishes a vital mediation between the text and its contemporary application here which further disposes us to treat its *prima facie* witness circumspectly.⁵¹ Having said that, the letter simply stamps indelibly on our minds what the rest of the New Testament also testifies: that in particular cases the greatest thing and worthiest that the cross and the hope can do for the suffering is to enable endurance and even submission.⁵² If we do not say this as we try to give hope in a suffering world, we will too often discover by experience what we did not receive in faith, that the exorcism of one heartless and soulless social demon just leads to a regrouping of demons and a return invasion.

At this point we note afresh what has been evident from the outset, that theological reflection is badly cramped in such questions as we have treated by addressing these questions at

48. I owe confirmation of this to a remark once made in a public meeting by Thomas Hanks.

49. R. Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, London, 1965, p. 368.

50. In particular one should not assume that suffering is a homogeneous experience in this epistle nor that Petrine eschatology is a pure spiritualisation of Old Testament promises (see commentaries *ad loc.*).

51. See on this generally L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids, 1982, pp. 161ff, and brief closing remarks by E. Cothenat, *Le Realisme de l'Esperance Chretienne selon 1 Pierre* in *New Testament Studies* 27.4), July 1981, pp. 564-571, despite the rather bland tone of the article.

52. Note the comment here by Goppelt, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

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a level of relative abstraction. If abstraction is not to turn into speculative luxury it must not only be slow to speak, but swift to stop speaking. Then it will hear the cries of those to whom God would make himself known as Father. And more eloquent than reflection will be the haste with which it moves to give hope in a suffering world.