

## God's Patience and Our Work (YDS 18-268)

*In April 1986, Frei was invited to speak at a conference honoring Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel.<sup>1</sup> He prepared a two part paper, the first on Moltmann ('To Give and to Receive'), the second on Moltmann-Wendel. At the conference itself, he changed his mind at least about the first, and wrote another paper. Here, I reproduce*

- (1) *some rough notes for 'God's Patience and Our Work', CPH 1986c(i);*
- (2) *the full text of 'God's Patience and Our Work', CPH 1986c(ii);*
- (3) *the completely revised paper, 'Reinhold Niebuhr, Where Are You Now That We Need You?', written at the conference, CPH1986c(iii) 'Comments';*
- (4) *the full text of Frei's paper on Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, CPH 1986c(iv).*

### 1. Rough Notes

- (1) Divine patience (also providence, even impassibility) – allows us time, in fact tells us that 'time' is real and good (in contrast to sheer eschatology).
- (2) Is the Cross – the abandonment of the God who suffers in his abandonment of his Son / the suffering of Christ in all – the focus of all history? And is, therefore, the liberation of all who are suffering, the non-violent violent protest against the crucifixion of Christ in all who are politically and economically oppressed, the focus of all Christian thinking? If so, then 'critical theory', the God who is the permanently revolutionary other, the 'non-identical', is *the* clue to Christian thinking and action (Christian theory and praxis)
  - (a) If so then, indeed, God has no patience, i.e., we can't know that image or motif (and then, Moltmann himself should have no room until after the eschaton for the 'meditative' instead of 'dominating' knowledge of creation of which he writes so well).<sup>2</sup>
  - (b) If so, there is no patience in human situation? Is analogy a principle acknowledged by Moltmann? or only 'non-identity' – a dialectical move from present contradiction in human situation as well as self-contradiction / self-abandonment in God, to a future correspondence between God and us?
  - (c) If so, there is no receptivity, no limited praxis or limit to praxis, only total action. Christian life is only giving, never receiving. And if that is the case, we must always say, 'Eliminate the barriers!' before we can grasp the hands of other Christians in other contexts, other situations. There can be no distinction, e.g. between issues of poverty and the

nuclear threat. Each is total and each equally near-eschatological. There can be no distinction (no Christian guidance for discriminating action in difficult contexts) between ‘equality of sin, inequality of guilt’ in Africa, Latin America, Philippines. One cannot be against Reagan and the Contras and against the Sandinistas.

- (d) In that case, Christians must always choose between radical, revolutionary action and the status quo, and one cannot be a political liberator or social democrat on pragmatic grounds: One must be a liberationist or neo-conservative.
- (3) To be a Christian is to believe, to worship, to practice, to hope – but even the latter only ‘in a glass darkly’ even to the extent of not tying too closely to *one* motif in our belief (the crucified God and action on behalf of abandoned), even as one would not have only patience without action.
- (4) What theological doctrine is the backup for Moltmann’s understanding of the movement of history and creation? A doctrine of a powerless God (a Trinity of his own kind) in answer to the theodicy question of human suffering in all history?
  - (a) If so, God has no power to be patient.
  - (b) Indeed, God seems to be the matching answer to the question of theodicy, the God who can be credible in the light of human suffering for which there can be no justification under heaven or on earth. God, that is, is not the richness of his (her) free grace in creation, redemption and ultimate fulfillment. He is, in that sense ‘too thin’, a God simply the other side of one need and hope.

## 2. To Give and To Receive<sup>3</sup>

### I

Since this is an occasion honoring Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, it is fitting to start off with a text from Professor Jürgen Moltmann:

... the more a life system is capable of bearing strain, the stronger and more capable of survival it shows itself to be. It absorbs hostile impulses and assimilates them productively, without destroying the enemy or itself. In so doing, it itself becomes richer and more flexible. For the more an open life system is able to suffer, the more it is able to learn. We therefore have to see God’s inexhaustible patience and his active capacity for suffering as the root of his creative activity in history.<sup>4</sup>

The delicate balance of this statement is striking. Its elements are in tension, but that tension is internal to a vision of unity and coherence rather than mortal strife. Similar to one of Alexander Calder's mobiles, there are both motion and stability, a kind of dynamic order, in the description of a 'life system'. It avoids both chaos and lifeless rigidity. Above all, there is a kind of aesthetic appropriateness or convincingness (I am talking about the text, not necessarily about the 'reality' written about) in the quick transition from 'life system' to 'God' in this statement. One wants to say: Yes, if one looks at this model or mobile, whether as a *work* of art or as a metaphor fusing different levels of discourse, the invocation or evocation of 'God' rightly brings to mind such living and vital qualities as patience and suffering. One is put in mind of M.H. Abram's famous book title, *The Natural Supernatural*,<sup>5</sup> in contrast to the physical, mechanical, or metaphysical supernatural of the Eighteenth Century, with its implication of a rigidly perfect craftsman who, it turns out, couldn't manage the orderly universe he had had in mind when he started to design, so that his work stands badly in need of a fix.

But of course it is problematic to take a passage out of the context not only of the book in which it appears but, even more, out of the context of the whole of an authorship. The sort of image evoked by the 'suffering' is a much more characteristic way for Moltmann to speak of God than 'patience'. Patience is not simply the willing, self-sacrificing undergoing of stress at the hands of another; it implies constancy, or vital and unbroken reserves of strength and steadiness, not weakness, employed in behalf and for the sake of others in the face of their waywardness. The patient person cannot be herself or himself; that is she cannot deserve the accolade, unless she does so in undisputed self-application out of self-disciplined freedom and strength. The further implication in our passage is that the patient person applies herself to another: She acts in selfless devotion out of an abundance to be shared, not out of craving or need.

My impression is that Professor Moltmann would be hesitant to speak of divine abundance without immediate reference to divine self-negation, to self-emptying or being emptied, while he would be more nearly amenable to speaking of the latter without reference to the former. (Beyond that, of course, I am sure he would also want to talk of a divine *impatience*.) But my point is that in the instance of this text, the two appear together, shaped toward each other; hence the fine, delicate balance or harmony in tension which I have mentioned.

Our obligation as Christians, if not our natural resort, is to the Bible when we ask about the living God. Patience, in the Apostle Paul's words, is a gift to be granted to us by God who is like-minded. But one of the most powerful statements in this respect is the paean of praise in Nehemiah 9:17 to God for his patience from strength: 'But thou art a God ready to forgive, gracious and

merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and didst not forsake them.’ We need to exercise care when reading such a text. It does not mean that there is no other divine perfection to be appealed to, nor that we ought indiscriminately to apply it as an analogy or parable appropriate to the human scene. ‘Patience’ is perhaps good Christian counsel to the developed rather than the third world. Again, to accord patience primacy among virtues is perhaps, as things cultural stand, a habit to be encouraged in men but not in women.

In other words, when treated univocally across the board, moral virtues become distortions, instruments of paralysis or else irrelevant platitudes, which is not to say that they are any of these, only that their application demands the delicacy of imaginative moral artistry, both when we inquire about ourselves and analogously when we inquire about God. Moral and theological virtues have constantly to be plucked from the stony cracks of doctrinaire sloganeering.

Perhaps it is suspicion of the consequences, political as well as theological, that makes Professor Moltmann move on so quickly from our passage. Remember that he is writing of the creative not the redemptive work of God. Yet even under this heading the emphasis quickly becomes one with which we are more familiar from his pen. On the next page he goes on to say:

Through his inexhaustible capacity for suffering and readiness for suffering, God then also creates quite specific chances for liberation from isolation ... It is not through supernatural interventions that God guides creation to its goal, and drives forward evolution; it is through his passion, and the opening of possibilities out of his suffering.

These words carry overtones of the more typical Moltmannian dialectic between the ‘resurrection of the crucified Jesus’ and ‘the cross of the risen Christ’,<sup>6</sup> applied now to the universe in general, and to God the creator.

But for a moment a different note had been struck. The first passage is, in a classic sense, a *beautiful* passage, i.e., a passage of a balance or harmony which is the fruit of life and motion, not of lifeless rigidity. To reverse my previous emphasis: In the context of *this* passage, even the divine ‘suffering’ looks or sounds different. When conjoined with ‘God’s inexhaustible patience’, ‘suffering’ has a richer fabric and complexity, it seems to me, than it does in Moltmann’s more customary, almost automatic and – how shall I put it? – almost *logical* association of God’s suffering with divine self-abandonment and being abandoned. I hope I am not being unfair if I pose at least tentatively the *possibility* that the suffering that goes with patience hints at the richness of a god whose Deity is the perfection of his or her unicity through the amplitude of each of his attributes; whereas *theologically* at least the divine

suffering that goes with abandonment and being abandoned (whatever its status in support of a specific Christian *political ethic*) has much more nearly the status of an explanatory argument: Its cutting edge may not be in the first place a *theologia crucis* but a desire to resolve certain difficulties in Christian belief, especially that of theodicy, by means of a particular concept of the Trinity; the cogency of that concept in turn rests on the persuasiveness of a dialectical understanding not only of the movement of time and history but of God's self-involvement in that dialectical process.

I would like to pursue our text through one more permutation, this time the mood or disposition it evokes in the servant of God. It seems to me that what I called a moment ago the classic beauty of the passage tallies with a certain mood or stance evoked a few times in the book *God in Creation*, which, if I am not mistaken, is, though not without precedent, not a major chord in Moltmann's work up to now. It goes not only beyond the steady, almost haunted pursuit of dialectic characteristic of his writing as he traces the history of suffering human and divine and the prospect or promise of the Kingdom of God that will be both political and eternal. It goes even beyond the stance of 'play' of which he has also written. In the book *God in Creation*, he contrasts the 'dominating' knowledge characteristic of scientific civilization with another kind of knowledge:

... *belief* in creation only arrives at the understanding of creation when it recollects the alternative forms of *meditative* knowledge. 'We know to the extent to which we love,' said Augustine. Through this form of astonished, wondering and loving knowledge, we do not appropriate things. We recognize their independence and participate in their life.<sup>7</sup>

Meditative, participative knowledge, the knowledge of that love which lets things be themselves and loves them for the richness which they are (rather than the universal application of the knowledge of dialectic – self-and-other positing or opposition-and-resolution positing along a diachronic and conceptual axis) is the kind of knowledge most congruent with the richness of the open and dynamic 'life systems' about which Moltmann talked in the passage I chose as a text and the God congruent with them. I am led to raise the question whether the post-metaphysical, Idealist and Historicist application of dialectic as the *single* method appropriate to historical understanding and praxis, and to their theological interpretation, may not be as 'dominating' in its sphere as pure scientism is in the understanding of physical nature. (This is not to say that dialectic may not be one appropriate element in Christian, especially modern Christian thinking.)

How ought Christians to think of God's suffering? Modern theologians of various kinds have rightly insisted that we cannot think rightly of God's love –

the prime Christian affirmation about God – unless we affirm that relatedness is of the very essence of God. And therefore, God’s grace in creation, redemption and eschatological salvation come naturally and not peripherally or awkwardly to God. The Christian way of saying this is to state the doctrine of the Triune God. I believe that a meditative, participative form of affirming the unicity of the divine love as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier in a richness so abundant as to be able to share the suffering of God’s creatures, is as good a route toward the Trinitarian exegesis of God in Scripture as is the dialectic of reversal, in which the crucifixion of Jesus becomes an inner- or inter-Trinitarian event of divine abandonment and being abandoned, and thereby God’s suffering and the history of political suffering of oppressed human beings virtually become one and the same.

I say ‘as good a route’, not ‘a better route’. I do not wish to decide that question. Perhaps the two can supplement each other when we think of the doctrine of the Trinity as a kind of ‘rule’ for reading Christianly about God in Scripture. Whether or not we can put together conceptually God’s eternal and eternally rich constancy and God’s making himself poor for our sakes in the gift of his Son who, though rich, became poor for our sake (that by his poverty we might become rich – 2 Cor 8:9), *both* are to be affirmed. God’s suffering love is to be understood both in the light of the patience of his abiding and undisrupted rulership and grace, and in the light of his willingness in his Son to risk abandonment by undertaking – in a paraphrase of Karl Barth – the risk of a journey into a country far away from home. The doctrine of the Trinity is the rule by which we affirm both these descriptions of God and refer both of them to the same self-identification of the one and only God of love.

## II

God’s patience toward his creatures does not involve as logical consequence that we ought under all circumstances to exercise patience or only patience. That is not how we ought to think in relation to the divine perfections. God’s patience is that aspect of his grace by which he permits and sustains his creatures in being and grants them their own span of time, limited though it be, and their own social location, which is not a universal home. This is one of the conditions of the Christian life, and it is one to which classical Christian thinkers from all traditions have drawn attention. One aspect of Christian life is an acknowledgement of every life including one’s own as a gift of divine grace, and that nobody has the right to deny completely to any other individual or group their time and space. (It is difficult to reconcile the death penalty with a Christian outlook on human life and impossible to justify the consciously or unconsciously organized suppression of any group by another.)

To live christianly is to live life as a gift from God's abundance. Of course life imposes special duties, but it is first of all a gift. We have received freely ('without pay') and so we are told to give 'without pay' (Matthew 10:8). If under some circumstances 'Eucharistia', the primary Christian liturgical celebration, seems like a blasphemy of elegance, there are other conditions under which it is truly the liturgical bond of a living Christian fellowship. (One thinks of Basic Christian Communities!) But no matter under what circumstances it is performed, its institution in our midst remains a gift from and a sign of the same divine abundance that gave us Jesus Christ, in memory and anticipation of whom we celebrate.

If God's grace has in it an element of patience, then Christian life as response to that grace is in part, provisionally (no more, yet no less!) predicated on God's *having been active* in the past, both in preservation and transformation, just as he is active in the promise and anticipation of the future when the barriers, especially the political barriers, on our earth will be overcome – just as the barrier between 'this-worldliness' and the 'beyond' of Christian hope will be overcome. The past remains real in the present, just as the future likewise bears on the present. One capsule way of saying the same thing is that we live in a world both of enduring structure *and* of revolutionary transformation – and not of one without the other. We are limited both in the scope of our thought and our actions; time as well as space are our limits, even as they are our God-given gifts.

We will in that case have to think of the relation of the eternal God to time and creation as at one pre-temporal, co-temporal and post-temporal, a view which Professor Moltmann finds interesting but problematic.<sup>8</sup> One consequence of this view is that even if we regard God's eternity as God's time, rather than his negation of time's reality, the relation between his time and ours remains for us fragmentary, and our understanding of it analogical and parabolic. We deny neither God's gracious foreordination of humanity to salvation, nor the openness and ambiguity of Christian life in regard to the human and political present, nor yet the future reality of a saving Kingdom that remains divine *promise* rather than *program* human or divine. To be reserved about dialectical thinking as the single clue to Christian thinking is to *believe* that God's kingdom holds the human future but not to *know* how it will supersede the present; in fact, to know very little about the future for sure. To be reserved about dialectical thinking as the single procedure of Christian thinking is to be uneasy about thinking that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are the clue to the shape of the political future.

The limits of time and space remain, and yet we have the promise of God. So these limits are real but not ultimate, either conceptually or in our common life. To be Christian is to live in hope that a missionary church, for which the North no longer predominates (its own area perhaps turning into a mission

field) may become a paradigm, a beacon among the nations for the cause of justice, mercy and human equality, without holding out the hope of universal human liberation this side of the Kingdom of God. To live Christianly is to belong to that community which affirms that hands can be extended *across* the barriers, that some of them may in fact be lowered, without any anticipated *knowledge* (in contrast to promise!) of their full removal. The promise of God is a miracle on the anticipation of a miracle rather than the fulfillment of a blueprint.

To live christianly is to live in hope in the community of a church that knows itself to be servant of God on behalf of all humanity; it is also to live realistically – with political pragmatism, if you will – in one's own social location. God in his constancy and abundance governs the world with a patience, whose worldly space this side of the eschaton borders on both the crucifixion and on the resurrection. We believe that just as Christ became poor for our sake, so the church must set forth his pattern for the nations: God's bias is in favor of the poor and the oppressed, a promise for them. Even if the whole church is not now, as it never has been, the church *of* the poor alone, no church is a true church if it is not a church *on behalf of* the poor and the oppressed. No injunction of Jesus, God's self-denying servant, is more urgent or more permanent than the saying of the last judgment, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). This saying is spoken to a public and for public action, and not from or into the division of the world into private and public realms.

Not only the limited character of our historical and political existence (at once as gift and yet as limited gift received at the hands of God's abundant patience) but also its specificity make for what I have called political pragmatism or realism. I believe Karl Barth was right, that the civil community can never be more than an imperfect parable of the Christian community, itself in turn no more than a fallible and partial parable of the Kingdom of God. The greater good in the world's political arena is usually bought at the cost of some other good. Not only the shape of any given civil or political community but the duration of its policies, indeed of its very existence are subject to radical transformation and the contingencies of time, and these forces retain, so far as mortal eye can see, an element of ambiguity. Yet the hidden yeast in all of this vicissitude is the promise of the same God of love who was incarnate in Jesus and who moves the world toward unity despite itself. God's world it remains still in all its deformation. In such a world, the aim of a realism with short and middle-range goals must therefore always be that of support of the demands for a just society, in which the legitimate use of authority is to be balanced with the rights of those who are disenfranchised, and opportunities for peaceful change and redress of grievances remain a live possibility.

All of this is a plea that the church participate in political life in limited and specific ways. There seems to me to be a natural affinity though not an identity between a left-of-centre liberalism or a democratic socialism and Christian commitment – in the present stage of developed or overdeveloped Western society. Tomorrow, the affinity may be different for us in this country, and it may also be different today in other parts of the world, say, the Soviet Union, Poland, Latin America, the West Bank of the Jordan or South Africa. This is a beleaguered position which is enjoying an ever smaller strip of existence. In this country it is chiefly beset by the radical equation of neo-conservatism and super-patriotism with Christianity; in other parts of the world it is opposed by intolerance toward Christian political dissent on the part of those who implicitly or explicitly identify revolutionary political liberation as the only political option for Christians on a global scale. Those of us who hold the very mundane position of a pragmatic politics and a moderate, unscientific socialism in between these two extremes as the sanest stance for Christians to take in the developed world need all the help we can get.

Yet something can surely be said in defense of this position: Even though skeptical about any clear knowledge or program of the way in which the political future will instantiate the eschatological promise of God, those holding this position also believe that love, and justice as love's closest ally are the promise of the undisclosed future. And holding this view, they believe that this world has been, is, and will be God's world, and that God's way is best seen where pressure both toward freedom and structures of justice may be discerned. Because it is the world of the one God who both rules over and yet suffers with his creatures, these people, often politically diverse, are one in resisting the politics of Manichaeism, which believes social, economic and political history to be the arena of the fight of pure evil against pure good. Their political imperative is toward temporary accommodation between the greatest imperfect good and the lesser yet less than total evil, with the least possible bloodshed and cruelty. They will protest and resist imperialist and cruel North American interference in Latin America, and they will tentatively and provisionally support the revolutionary socialists there believing that the latter have a better cause than their reactionary opponents. Yet they will remain skeptical about the ideological pretensions of revolutionaries and the political naiveté of those among their Christian allies who support them with total commitment. They will have great admiration for those East German church people who support the socialist state conditionally, while maintaining their theological freedom with its consequent political skepticism or irony. At the same time, these mundane moderates will hear respectfully the voices of their politically more radical sisters and brothers who know far more than they themselves about suffering under poverty and injustice, and they will not seek to impose their views on them in their different social location. Instead, they

will want to be instructed by their fellow-Christians, in the developing world, for mutual instruction is one of the ways in which ecumenical conversation takes place among Christian individuals and Christian bodies. And when instructed by those who have suffered, they will follow the injunction to stand with them.

There is then a Christian life and ministry of reconciliation across present barriers, even across the political barriers that separate fellow Christians from each other. That unity-in-separation is, like the Christian life itself, given by grace first and therefore received; only in the second place is it the imperative of our own self-giving. We do not have ultimate responsibility for history. Our job is real but limited. As recipients and sharers of God's abundance we are at work without being driven to prepare the way for that ultimate revolution which God signaled in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

We share, in Professor Moltmann's words, in an 'open life system' which is even now a life rather than death system, despite all its evil and deformation. We receive this world, our neighbors and ourselves, at the hands of God's abundance, and our first business is to receive it before we repair it. In that way our giving and even our suffering is done in the image of the God whose very suffering is the fruit of his constancy in and to himself and to his world, who rules now and will rule fully in the miraculous fullness of time.

### 3. Reinhold Niebuhr, Where Are You Now That We Need You?

Ladies and Gentlemen, what I have to say will bear very little resemblance to the pretentious title that I chose ('To Give and to Receive: Christian Life Across the Boundaries'). The fact of the matter is that I did write something out, but something happened on the way to the forum – that is to say, I've rarely been more sobered and fascinated by a powerful set of papers and addresses; they changed my mind. And, were I to give an actual title to what I want to say, which will be rather free-wheeling for the most part, I'm afraid, it would be in the words that my agnostic friend Van Harvey of Stanford University addressed to me over the phone just the other day: 'Reinhold Niebuhr, where are you now that we need you?'

I want to start off just touching on a theme that is present in Professor Moltmann's theology – which remains to me one of the most searching and provocative theological enterprises of the present – something that is set forth nicely in the article by Professor Christopher Morse (I think a very fine article on Professor Moltmann) in the little folder that you were handed out.<sup>9</sup> Professor Moltmann's theology is Trinitarian. It has become increasingly, explicitly

Trinitarian as he has progressed in his thinking. Let me read just a little summary. Professor Morse writes about Professor Moltmann's thought: As scripturally rendered, God the Son suffers being lost through surrender to the Father even to the point of God-forsakenness. God the Father suffers loss of being through surrendering the Son, not a loss of identity, as the ancient concept of patripassionism wrongly implied, but a loss of being God in any way other than by not sparing the Son. The Son, in distinction from the Father, suffers dying. The Father, in distinction from the Son, suffers the death of the Son. The oneness that takes place in this incarnate inseparability of suffering in the cross is therefore to be thought of not as a single mathematical unit, but as a dialectical unity of Spirit. It is this unity of mutual self-surrender proceeding from the relation of the Father and the Son that faith confesses as God the Holy Spirit, who eschatologically transforms the sufferings of the present time and of all history from being surrendered to death into being surrendered to life.

I hope Professor Moltmann will find this recognizable, at least.

The question I want to raise – and I can only do it quite cryptically – is this: What is the relation for Professor Moltmann between historical stages or epochs? – that is to say, What is the character of the motion of history? And what is the relation between the character of the motion of history and the history of the Triune God? I'm wondering if that relation and that motion seem most nearly to be the dialectic of the Spirit. I want to ask Professor Moltmann if the Spirit does not perhaps become the *fons deitatis*, the root of Godhead? I'll put it in a somewhat unfair way: A colleague of mine once said about Paul Tillich's doctrine of the Trinity that it is the only doctrine of the Trinity of which he knew in which the Father and the Son proceeded from the Holy Spirit. I want Professor Moltmann to comment on the question that, in a very different way in his theology also, it is the Spirit that is really the unity and ground of the Godhead and of the motion by which the history of God and his promise will finally be at one with the history of the world in its strange dialectical movement. The only power of God we know is the power of the Spirit, as I gather from Moltmann's book, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. It is the Spirit that is the divine agent bound for the future. And the reason I raise this question is another question: Is the future to be created by the Spirit truly a miracle to us?

Here I want to touch on why I got disturbed in the process of the conference. There was, in this conference, a kind of touching and affecting upbeat sensibility right from the beginning, which I found enormously impressive, but also rather sobering. It was embodied very strongly in Professor Miguez Bonino's paper and also in a paper which I found, like Professor

Miguez Bonino's essay, very elegant. That was Charles McCoy's essay on the Covenant.<sup>10</sup> There was an upbeat quality about the promise of God, the sureness, the unbreakable promise of God, his covenantal loyalty, within which there is reason (which) Tj ET Q 0.0028171 Tf (reason) Tj ET

the startling thing – was exactly equivalent to fate. It is an impersonal relational necessity that pervades the universe and finally emerges in the historical consciousness that created the image of the incarnation and of redemption. The point is that, as Karl Barth said, Hegel's God loves out of necessity: He is not free to love. Here is a God of love who is the equivalent of fate and not greater than fate. And it may well have been the case that this, which is often called the last Christian philosophy, was born out of the desperate sense that it may not be possible to find a divine love that actually triumphs over fate.

Now, I want to go on from there to raise the question, 'Is there such a thing? Is the Gospel, the promise of God, truly powerful?' I was profoundly struck by something in Charles McCoy's paper. The notion of the Covenant, it strikes me, is in all likelihood a promise of finding just that power, that greatness which is a love greater than fate. And I want to appeal here to some elements in our own American history.

The Covenant is the unconditional binding together of God, human beings and human communities, so that when the Covenant is broken the war that results becomes an internal civil war within the Covenant. The striking thing is that Covenant theology in New England, in Puritanism, was always ultimately optimistic about the triumph of divine love, but was exceedingly dark and sober about what might happen until that time. That dark and sober side of Covenant theology, often referred to by critics as the Puritan 'jeremiad' is perhaps best expressed by a little saying that was once very famous, by Professor Richard Niebuhr in *The Kingdom of God and America*<sup>12</sup> in which he articulated the difference between Puritan or Covenant theology, and its later liberal heritage saying of the latter that 'a God without wrath introduced man without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.' Can a theology of liberation take this or something like this tragic and ironic element into account? It has been done, even in American theology! Let me remind you of our second greatest (Jonathan Edwards was our greatest) American theologian, Abraham Lincoln. Go back, read and re-read his second inaugural address, on which I could not put my finger, unhappily, yesterday.<sup>13</sup> Read those soberly optimistic lines go out the undefeatability of the purposes of a just God, and the puzzling, tragic course of events through which it would be achieved. And let me remind you of the fact that this same sensibility is not simply done away with in a secular day. I was reminded of it – many of us were reminded of it in conversation the other night – when we talked about Viet Nam, about that mysterious, almost frightening sense of tragic reconciliation, evoking all kinds of painful images of blood sacrifice and blood reconciliation and blood guilt, images which are unpleasant and yet are there somehow, in which a covenant is resealed by virtue of blood spilled. Nobody wants to push that kind of thing very far, and yet it is perhaps

an inalienable aspect of a theology that is ultimately optimistic but insists very strongly on a tragic element in human history. The Washington Viet Nam war memorial is a concrete reminder of this tradition and its contemporaneity. We need go surely no further than to look at what happened during the last two days. Jefferson once said, ‘When I think about slavery, I fear for my beloved country.’ When I think about Libya, and what we have just done, I fear for my beloved country. The sense of hubris, the sense of macho, the fact that the more powerful an empire becomes the more insecure it becomes – if humankind is to be saved from that kind of round, it surely will take a love that can show itself at least descriptively, not by proof, but at least descriptively, to be a love that really is greater than fate, rather than simply the product of a cheerful liberationist confidence, which I am afraid was the kind of atmosphere that I found pervasive in what we were doing yesterday, despite the fact that – as you can see – I was thoroughly stimulated by all the papers and found them all actually extraordinarily powerful.

Let me mention one little thing that Professor Miguez Bonino said yesterday which I found thoroughly persuasive on the one hand and yet inadequate for my religious needs on the other, when he stressed his uneasiness with the notion of political choices as ‘always the lesser of two evils’. But I do wonder. Political strategy *is* touched by a sense of tragedy; in the human situation it *is* the lesser evil rather than the perfect good that we have to choose. He suggested that this minimalist notion of political good was due to the fact that human good, the goodness of human creation, was simply a residue for those who hold a pervasive doctrine of sin. That’s why some Christians at any rate, especially in the first world, were adopting that notion of politics as always involving the choice of the lesser evil. There is a good deal of truth in that, but on the other hand, what I am suggesting is this: Reinhold Niebuhr was right when he said that it is the irony of history (and specifically American history) that it is the goodness of human nature that makes democracy possible; but it is the evil of human nature that makes democracy necessary.<sup>14</sup> It is precisely the strong remaining sin in the redeemed, the presence still of sin among the people of the Covenant and not simply of the unredeemed, that makes it necessary to say finally that all political choices, all moves toward liberation, this side of the eschaton, remain provisional, remain for the time being, remain pragmatic, yes, remain choices for a greater good, but choices for a greater good that is at the same time a lesser evil. The promise of God remains a miracle which now we see in a glass darkly only.

It does sound terribly negative, I’m afraid. It’s really not what I meant to say. I wrote something else, but I never did like what I wrote. Let me add a word about it. The emphasis in that paper was on something I thought I found expressed in Professor Moltmann’s work as a whole, but especially in his

recent book on *God and Creation* which he was kind enough to send me. I found something there which I did not often find expressed by him before, namely, the notion of the *patience* of God. Perhaps you can see that I have been trying to think about something like that also. We believe, we worship a God who is yet to be, in a certain sense. There is a not-yet of God, and in that there is an impatience of God. But it seems to me that there is also an already of God and a patience of God, and it is a patience of God that allows us human beings a kind of limited time and space, communally and individually, and it is within that space and time that individuals and empires act. And as long as the space and time of all of us are limited, mutually limited, God works through our mutual limitations. As long as that prevails, an ecumenical church is a church that has to do the work of human unity and Christian unity *across the barriers* of all our limitations. (Hence the pretentious title of my original paper, ‘Christian Life Across the Barriers’ – that is all I meant by it.) And as long as that is the case, a Christian political ethic, our overriding imperative in Christian political ethics, must be: ‘For as much as you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me’ (Matthew 25:40). That overriding imperative remains an imperative, but it will have to be pragmatically rather than globally or liberationistically employed. And for reasons of that limitation I will say that in *my* social location I would be an ally rather than an immediate participant of Latin American liberation theology. And that is one example of the sort of thing I would ask us to take seriously. Our thinking, our political thinking is a divine imperative. There is no such thing as a Christian theology that is not a political theology, but I think our political thinking is a divine imperative that we have to follow in the given situation rather than programmatically across the board, as I think liberationist theologies tend to do.

May I leave it at that? I apologize to Professor Moltmann for having given him a paper to comment on, which I then did not read. I’m very sorry, but it’s not my fault. I never disobey the prompting of the Spirit, especially when it arises out of a conference as stimulating as this.

I would like to comment now for a few minutes on the very stimulating paper of Dr. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, because it struck me as being not only extremely imaginative but also, as she read it and I saw the response to what she said, as also expressing something of the spirit of the conference. And I guess what I want to say here too is, ‘Yes, but cool it, folks.’

#### 4. Response to Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel

Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel writes: ‘being good is no moral quality. It means our being, our existence, that is right, justified, legitimate, and full of

quality ... I am good, as I am ... I am created by God, I am loved, I am liberated' and, citing Mary Daly, 'we lack a culture of being.' This basic affirmation, a gift and not a demand, she finds in Christian faith. It is a resource that enables her to resist those tempting myths that offer a more obviously supportive feminist spirituality. Quite apart from the merits of various religions' offerings for the cause, this resistance is probably sound. For, as my colleague George Lindbeck says, religions are languages or cultural codes in which we are nurtured, and these languages enable us to experience rather than (reversely) religions being deep and preconceptual experiences that we then express in discursive or non-discursive symbols. When we invent or deliberately adopt our myths, what is real to us is not they themselves but the reality or experience we were perfectly well acquainted with without them. Religions force us to interpret our experience of the world toward them or in their light, not vice versa. At least at the level of the believer's *interpretation* – though not necessarily at the deeper 'reality' level or the more 'scientific' *explanatory* level, they make 'reality' *claims* on us. Now if you have a religion that does just that and at the same time leaves room for being read liberatingly rather than enslavingly (despite its own history of bad practices) then you have the best of two worlds, where other myths may offer you only one at most. I wonder from time to time if the real religious option for women's liberation may not be either Christianity (at a cost, admittedly) or else good, plain secularity – surely a solid position not to be feared or despised. (The cost of Christianity for feminism may be that its symbols are amenable only up to a point, or else – and it may actually come to the same thing – that feminism may be temporarily an important item on a Christian social agenda but may in the long run be of secondary rather than primary significance in a Christian reading of the world.)

The Christian good of women's liberation is surely just what Ms. Moltmann-Wendel suggested. May I use my own terms? Femaleness, like maleness, is one of the limited goods granted by God's grace to half or better than half of humankind. Only now is it beginning to come into its own, and it has a long way to go. But the priority of 'being' to 'doing', like that of 'receiving' to 'giving', implies the limited character and pragmatic aim of the 'doing' part of the feminist enterprise and that it should have a moderate and worldly rather than sacred status. Women's liberation is a matter of justice. (I am not at all sure of the desirability or the likely success of the endeavor to give it well nigh sacred status by suggesting that feminine and masculine attributes of sharply differing and unmixed character are part of the eternally unvarying structure of human nature. That sort of speculative world view or perspective seems to me to be Romanticism rather than Christianity.) If we say that aggressiveness is a vice in males but a virtue in females, we can surely imply no more by it than that a period of relative and welcome readjustment is

called for, not that we have discovered the secret of primordial good and evil. The richness and power of God's grace that grants the gift of self-acceptance permits, no, it enjoins a limited degree of self-assertiveness upon all of us, no more, no less.

Ms. Moltmann-Wendel is right, I believe, that once we move beyond that limit, given with our being, we are in Pelagian territory, where there are no limits to human self-assertiveness. We are all in trouble if 'I am whole' (the next step in the description of self-acceptance under God) is taken in a Pelagian sense in effect not only embracing but superceding 'I am good'. That fierce and self-assertive drive toward perfectionism leaves no room for the liberty of being justified, or receiving our being and our goodness from God's constant and abundant grace. Instead, we become whole by wholly shaping ourselves.

But in fact it turns out that Ms. Moltmann-Wendel's use of wholeness has nothing to do with Pelagian or super-Pelagian self-assertiveness. 'I am whole' in her description is perfectly compatible with 'I am good' in the sense of 'I am justified by faith'. On the contrary, where the elements of her description (in the mirror of male-imposed codes: I am too spontaneous, hysterical, emotional, etc.; but actually: I am in touch with my full bodily self and my feelings and the whole world about me) are censured in the name of justification by grace through faith, the latter truly contradicts itself. Furthermore, these elements of wholeness are in no sense 'works' of *self-assertiveness*; they are simply elements of *self-expression*, and the difference is vast. The first legitimately limits or illegitimately invades the space of others; the second fills out one's own. The same thing may be said of 'I am beautiful' (the last step in the description of self-acceptance under God) with its triumph over guilt and anxiety – the enemies also of justification by faith or 'I am justified.'

But now a cautionary word. The Apostle Paul tells us that not all things that are permissible are expedient. Compatibility with justification by faith does not necessarily mean, certainly not by itself, social beneficiality. Ms Moltmann-Wendel is clearly uneasy about 'I am beautiful' run riot. No narcissism, please, she insists. It is no accident, however, that the suspicion that is to be set aside immediately arises just in this context. And how does pure self-celebration smoothly turn into non-controlling neighbor love? Can one be sure that things really work so schematically, and in particular that they work harmoniously with this scheme? Narcissism is the underdevelopment or negation of the self. Is it really the female sin, as Valerie Saiving Goldstein says, and pride the male sin, as Judith Plaskow said in her fine analysis of Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr?<sup>15</sup> Do things divide up that neatly? Isn't, in the eyes of many commentators on present-day America, Narcissism the besetting problem of a whole range of women and men alike? And whatever else justification may be, does it really function as the psychological cure for pride?

And is self-celebration - whether individual or in the collective individuality of the 'wrap' session – the psychological cure for narcissism? Or is the 'cure' in each of these two cases perhaps part of the problem rather than its solution, whether we observe it in the individual or the social psyche?

In *Habits of the Heart*,<sup>16</sup> Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote of the tortured limits and the self-defeating pathos not only of aggressively acquisitive individualism but even more of its clone *manqué*, expressive or therapeutic individualism. Are we better off for the phenomenon? Some things may be christianly legitimate without being either christianly or socially expedient, especially when taken all the way. Perhaps 'I am justified, I am good' might best sympathetically govern the other two.

Hence the following modest conclusion. Many years ago Thomas Mann, that bourgeois man and ironist of bourgeois culture who had also taken a long, hard look at human evil, wrote a critical essay with the appropriately bourgeois title 'Dostoevsky in Moderation.'<sup>17</sup> Less exaltedly but similarly, I would like to say: 'Feminist Theology – in Moderation.' Come to think of it, I was saying something like that also in connection with Professor Jürgen Moltmann and the Theology of Hope.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the contributions to the conference were published in *Love, the Foundation of Hope: The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel* ed. Frederic B. Burnham, Charles S. McCoy and M. Douglas Meeks (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (London: SCM, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> [Frei originally gave the title, 'To Give and to Receive: Christian Life Across the Barriers'.]

<sup>4</sup> *God in Creation*, p.210.

<sup>5</sup> M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1977), p.xvi.

<sup>7</sup> *God in Creation*, pp.69ff.

<sup>8</sup> *God in Creation*, p.116.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Morse, 'God's Promise as Presence' Cf. Christopher Morse, *The Logic of Promise in Moltmann's Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> Charles S. McCoy, 'God's faithfulness: Federalism and the Future of Theology' in *Love, the Foundation of Hope*.

<sup>11</sup> Miguez Bonino, 'Authority and Hope in Feminist Theology', in *Love, the Foundation of Hope*.

<sup>12</sup> New York: Harper and Row, 1937, p.137.

<sup>13</sup> Abraham Lincoln, 'Second Inaugural Address March 4 1865' in Don E. Fehrenbacher (ed.), *Abraham Lincoln, Speeches and Writing 1859–1869: Speeches*,

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*Letters and Miscellaneous Writings, Presidential Messages and Proclamations* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1989).

- <sup>14</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1944), p.vi.
- <sup>15</sup> Valerie Saiving, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', *Journal of Religion* 40.2 (April 1960), pp.100–12; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1979).
- <sup>16</sup> Robert N. Bellah et al (eds), *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas Mann, 'Dostojewski – mit Massen (1946)' in *Schriften und Reden zur Literatur, Kunst und Philosophie* III (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1968), pp.7–20.