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## Hope in Contradiction to the Status Quo: *The Political Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay seeks to first develop the political theology of Jürgen Moltmann followed by layering a Moltmannian hermeneutic onto Glen Stassen and Walter Wink's respective readings of Jesus' teaching on nonviolence in Matthew 5. The first section of the article lays out two elements of Moltmann's political theology: the theological foundation of eschatological Christology and the political hermeneutic of the Gospel. Moltmann's Christology hinges on a dialectical understanding of the cross and resurrection bent toward eschatological hope. This, in turn, informs his political hermeneutic. For Moltmann, all hermeneutics is two-fold: theory and praxis. The spiral of theory informing praxis and praxis informing theory animates the church toward perpetual action and resistance to an apathetic posture toward the world. The second section of the article grounds Moltmann's political theology in ecclesiology by arguing the church exists as a hope-centered contrasting community, what Moltmann calls the "Exodus Church." The final section seeks to employ Moltmann's political theology in real time by offering a Moltmannian reading of Jesus' teaching on nonviolence in Matthew 5. To do so, I layer the exegetical work of Glen Stassen with the ethical reflection of Walter Wink while holding both together by way of Moltmann's political theology. The result is a demonstration of Moltmann's political theology as hope in contradiction to the status quo.

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All theology has consequences. It shapes the internal and external experience of the theologian and those in the path of its effects. There is, then, an obligation of the theologian to be conscious of the situation in

which theology is performed and its corresponding consequences. Theology is fixed in the tension between text and context, theory and practice. The theologian lives in that tension, ensuring their work is consistently aware of and connected to the ethical demands of their given social situation. This intersection, between theological reflection and political circumstance, is the space from which political theology emerges. It is, therefore, a method of approaching the theological task as a whole and never an end unto itself. It resists both the theologizing of the political and the politicizing of the theological; seeking to bring cultural resonance to the theological task through reuniting the public and private nature of theology. At the forefront of this modern theological enterprise is German theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Of this task he writes, Political theology is therefore not simply political ethics but reaches further by asking about the political consciousness of theology itself. It does not want to make political questions the central theme of theology or to give political systems and movements religious support. Rather, political theology designates the field, the milieu, the environment, and the medium in which Christian theology should be articulated today.<sup>1</sup>

The political theologian finds their task in the continual mediation of theological hope to the contemporary social situation. Thus, making the story of God relevant and active to the world. In the liminal space between the political and the theological lies the struggle for justice; consequently, theology resists privatization. Any retreat into the privatization of religious piety is a reduction of the Gospel itself, barring God from the imminent to a mere other-worldly reality. In that case, the Marxian critique of religion as the “opium of the people” proves true. The religious become apathetic and theology irrelevant. Political theology repudiates this move. Rather, it insists a responsible theology that stands between the hope it professes and the failure of the status quo to live up to that reality. In this way, political theology becomes, not the opium of the people, but hope in contradiction to the status quo.

The purpose of this essay is to outline the constructive contributions of Jürgen Moltmann’s political theology and demonstrate its enduring

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, “Political Theology,” *Theology Today* 28, no. 1 (April 1971): 8.

influence for our modern world, by way of employing Moltmann's political theology in dialogue with Glen Stassen and Walter Wink's respective readings of Jesus' teaching on nonviolence in Matthew 5. I will begin by outlining two foundational elements Moltmann employs to construct his political theology. First, the theological foundation of eschatological Christology. Here, Moltmann centers hope through the elucidation of the dialectical relationship between the cross and resurrection. Having laid the theological groundwork, Moltmann offers the second foundational element of his political theology, the construction of a political hermeneutic. This hermeneutic insists on the unification of theory and practice to understanding the Bible in its modern context. Lastly, I will demonstrate the importance and practicality of Moltmann's political theology by analyzing Jesus' teaching on nonviolence in Matthew 5:38-39. To do so, I will bring my reading of Moltmann's political theology in dialogue with the exegetical work of Glen Stassen and the ethical work of Walter Wink, providing a case study in the relevance of political theology for the church's task today.

## **The Political Theology of Jürgen Moltmann**

For Moltmann, political theology is an attempt to remain culturally resonant while holding firmly to scripture and tradition. In this tension there is a centrality of God's immanence to the current moment, and Moltmann's efforts highlight this importance. As God is attentive to the present moment, so too the political theologian must be attentive to the moment. Moltmann writes,

God is not somewhere in the Beyond, but he is coming and as the coming One he is present. He promises a new world of all-embracing life, of righteousness and truth, and with this promise he constantly calls this world in question—not because to the eye of hope it is as nothing, but because to the eye of hope it is not yet what it has the prospect of being...Where the new begins, the old becomes manifest. Where the new is promised, the old becomes transient and surpassable. Where



the new is hoped for and expected, the old can be left behind.<sup>2</sup>

Latent within hope is the failure of the present to be that which it could be; therefore, political theology built on hope is inherently built on the contradiction to the status quo. Tending to this critical posture toward culture is its unique task. Political theology does not seek to replace Christian faith, but views theology through the lens of its political effects. As Richard Bauckham notes of Moltmann's work, "political theology is no substitute for dogmatic theology, but theology's critical reflection on its own political functions."<sup>3</sup> But how does Moltmann construct his political theology? It is built on two distinct foundations: first, eschatological Christology and second, a political hermeneutic of the gospel.

### The Theological Foundation: Eschatological Christology

The first foundation is eschatological Christology. For Moltmann, to speak of Christology is to speak of messiology and messiology is that which pertains to liberation and salvation. Messiology is not uniquely a Christian category, but merely centers around the anticipation or hope for any system or redeemer that will usher in liberation. All ideologies—religious, political, or otherwise—offer versions of messiological hope. "The modern age also has developed its political messianisms," writes Moltmann, "Nationalism declared the nation to be the messiah; Italian fascism spoke to the Duce of the end time; German National Socialism worshiped the Führer of a Third, or Thousand Year, Reich...Everywhere in the modern age the primacy of the future was recognized and people themselves organized the end of history."<sup>4</sup> What distinguishes Christology from other forms of messiology is its subject, Christ. Additionally, Christology's distinctive character is not its orientation toward the future, all versions of messiology locate their hope in progress toward the future, the difference lies in Jesus as the eschatological hope of the story of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 164.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 99.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 100–101.

Moltmann, therefore, interprets Jesus as the Christ who is anticipated in the long historical culmination of the Old Testament promissory hope. As Bauckham describes, “The heart of Moltmann’s...political theology...is not simply eschatology but eschatological Christology. It is an interpretation of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus as the dialectical event of eschatological promise.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, for the eschatological implications of Jesus to surface, he must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament’s history. This culmination was the promised kingdom of God returning which Jesus explicitly announces at the beginning of his public ministry, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17). This takes overt political form in light of a dialectical understanding of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. This dialectic, of the cross and resurrection, represents contradictory realities, death and life. What holds these polarities together, however, is that the continuity of the crucified Jesus as the same resurrected Jesus. By maintaining this unity amongst disunity, God establishes a clear pattern of the continuity and discontinuity between this creation and the new creation that is coming at the full arrival of the kingdom of God.

The primary means through which God revealed himself is by revelation and promise exemplified throughout the Old Testament. For Moltmann, the Christ-event is in line with this standing tradition; the resurrection serves as the promise for the future coming of the kingdom of God in the new creation. “Jesus is understood historically,” writes Moltmann, “only if his story is read in light of the remembered hope of the Old Testament and the awakened hope of the kingdom of God.”<sup>6</sup> The resurrection is the decisive event of God’s promise, and is the eschatological foundation from which the world’s future is built.

The practicality of Moltmann’s assertion is the alignment of the death of Jesus with all of the present negatives. Death, sin, brokenness, injustice, *et cetera*, all that is evil and negative is negated by the death of Jesus on the cross. In identifying the negative as such, the cross reveals the fate of the world were it not for the contradiction of the resurrection. The resurrection is the promise of a new, the anticipation of a “qualitatively

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<sup>5</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 101.

*new* future, which negates all the negatives of present experience.”<sup>7</sup> This dialectical event opens the future and exists in contradiction to the present reality, life opposed to death, freedom opposed to slavery, healing opposed to sickness. In the same manner the resurrected Jesus was the same Jesus who was crucified, so too the new world breaking into this reality is the renewal of this material world.

Moltmann leans into the Gospel narratives to demonstrate the coming of Jesus as the culmination of the long promissory history of the Old Testament. Note this interaction in the Gospel of Matthew when the disciples of John the Baptist were sent to examine Jesus asking, “are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Matthew 11:3) To which Jesus replies, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matthew 11:4) Jesus chooses to reveal himself to be the coming one through the work of healing the sick, raising the dead, proclaiming good news to the poor. By doing so, Jesus is manifesting that which became universal in the resurrection.

In this manner, Moltmann sees Jesus as the “anticipator of the kingdom of God.”<sup>8</sup> By nature, anticipation assumes the lack of something in the present that is hoped for in the future. Consequently, the future and the present lie in contradiction to one another. For example, the announcement of the kingdom of God to the poor is inherently in conflict with the rich, the resurrection of Jesus is in contradiction to death. Jesus, as the “anticipator of the kingdom of God,” therefore, becomes a living resistance to the status quo, for the status quo is counter to the coming Kingdom of God. It is here that Moltmann’s eschatological Christology takes its political form. In contradiction to the present reality, the manifestation of the Kingdom of God establishes resistance to historical reality. This contradictory relationship between the status quo and the future is Moltmann’s response to the Marxist critique of religion’s propensity toward other-worldly apathy in the present. If our eschatological conceptions are for a future escape from this earth, then the

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<sup>7</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 102.

critique is fitting. For a disembodied, other-worldly hope, has nothing to offer in mitigating the suffering of the present world. Bauckham summarizes Moltmann's thoughts here well,

The political importance of Moltmann's *dialectical* Christology and eschatology derives from the full recognition it gives to the negative, unredeemed character of objective present reality and therefore to the *difference*, even contradiction, between what reality is presently like and what in the hoped-for divine transformation of reality it can become.<sup>9</sup>

The political effect is the exposure of the negative realities of this world and the resistance to the accommodation of these powers in the present.

Moltmann's proposal insists on holding the resurrection of the identical crucified Jesus as the inauguration of the future into the present; thereby, demanding action in the present through a thoroughly this-worldly eschatological hope. "God raised him from the dead. This means that the universal 'resurrection of the dead' has already begun in this one. The end time has already broken in. The future of the new creation has already begun. Because people have faith in and recognize the risen Messiah, God's people of the end time assemble in expectation of the coming kingdom of God."<sup>10</sup> To wait in expectation of this coming new world, is to be animated by eschatological hope in working for this world opposed to the apathetic and passive waiting for escape to another world. This gives shape to Christian political ethics, working for the good in light of the coming future. "The ability to wait," writes Moltmann, "also means not conforming to the conditions of this world of injustice and violence. People who expect God's justice and righteousness no longer accept the so-called normative force of what is fact, because they know that a better world is possible and that changes in the present are necessary."<sup>11</sup> Moltmann's eschatological Christology—a Christology "from ahead"<sup>12</sup> —compels

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<sup>9</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 103.

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 1st Fortress Press ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 104.

political reflection and action through the critique of modern social life against the coming kingdom of God.

### A Political Hermeneutic of the Gospel

The work of hermeneutics concerns the interpretation of given texts; therefore, it primarily focuses on the interpretive work of words, sentences, and paragraphs. However, for Moltmann the task of hermeneutics is always two-fold. He asserts that every interpretation contains two interpretive moves, the historical and the prophetic. The work of historical interpretation is concerned with understanding meaning of the written text in relation to its past. This historical hermeneutical task is one of *theory*. The work of prophetic interpretation is the translation of this historical theory into the present. The prophetic hermeneutical task is one of moving from theory to *praxis*. The uniting of theory and praxis into a mutually constitutive relationship is the foundation of Moltmann's political hermeneutic. Both pure theory and pure praxis fails the hermeneutical task for each by themselves cannot bring transformation of their present reality. "[T]heological hermeneutics is abstract as long as it does not become the theory of practice, and sterile as long as it does not make 'the entrance of future truth' possible."<sup>13</sup> The marriage of theory and praxis roots itself in the construction of the world as a human project, constituting itself as inherently political in nature. As Arne Rasmusson notes, "society [for Moltmann] is seen as a human and historical project of realizing the future kingdom of freedom."<sup>14</sup> The modern world—specifically its projects of secularization and critiques of traditional institutions by its natural orientation toward progress—is, for Moltmann, a positive endeavor because of its work toward greater levels of freedom through the political action stemming from eschatological hope.

The unique posture of Christianity is its orientation to the past in relation to the future. "History is hope in the mode of remembrance,"<sup>15</sup> writes Moltmann. God is spoken about historically, but shape is given to

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<sup>13</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 98.

<sup>14</sup> Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 45.

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 105.

history eschatologically. The task of hermeneutics, then, begins with the particular history of the Bible's witness to the story of God. Thus, the first step of Moltmann's political hermeneutic is "the Messianic Hermeneutic of History."<sup>16</sup> The point of remembering is to enliven those elements of the past that point beyond themselves toward the future. There is no shortage of these elements as each history—both God and humanity's—is rich in liberative stories. By taking up these liberative narratives, such as the Exodus or Jesus' defeat of death, the messianic hermeneutic manifests a liberating power to the powerless that proves a dangerous threat to the powerful. If liberation from the constraints of freedom is the eschatological trajectory of God, then our memory of the biblical history is the remembrance of a liberative God. Those historical moments of liberation provide anticipations of the coming future. "To grasp this in hope means to become free...What we call *the past* are anticipations of the future which have preceded us. When we orient the present towards this future, it becomes a new front-line of this future. Then history is no longer the history of death and decay; it is rather the history of the future."<sup>17</sup> The future history will be a history of human liberation, in the same way that our current history is one of liberation, as demonstrated through the bible's witness to God's story, this is Moltmann's messianic hermeneutic of history.

A second step in Moltmann's political hermeneutic now arises, "knowing history by participating in history."<sup>18</sup> As demonstrated above, this hermeneutic is one of a promissory history of God, and therefore these historical promises seek fulfillment. Moltmann writes,

When hermeneutics, however, involves a history of promise, then the way of translation goes from promise to fulfillment. When it involves a history of hope, then the way goes from exposition of the hope to realization. When it involves the hope of liberation, then the way goes from oppression to freedom: i.e., hermeneutics does not remain on the level of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Politics of Discipleship and Discipleship in Politics: Jürgen Moltmann Lectures in Dialogue with Mennonite Scholars*, ed. Willard M Swartley (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006), 43.

<sup>18</sup> Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 106.

intellectual history nor on the theoretical level, but wants to lead, by way of the experience of understanding hope, to a new *praxis* of hope.<sup>19</sup>

Theory and praxis must be united in Moltmann's hermeneutical construction. Historical reflection is bound up in action and action is bound up in reflection. For theory alone results in stagnate theology and activism alone results in ethics; but political theology unites these two, insisting on the importance of both theory and praxis working in tandem. Participation in remembrance propels forward praxis and participation in praxis forces progress. Put differently, theory and praxis "constantly overlap so that theory must incorporate practice and practice must incorporate theory."<sup>20</sup> Theory and praxis do not belong in different arenas but overlap one another. Learned theory animates the individual toward altered practices, while those altered practices re-shape our understanding of the previous theory, and on goes the spiral of political hermeneutics. The implication of the spiral is a perpetually active church, never settling, always in contradiction to the status quo, always in motion toward the coming future, or what Moltmann calls the "Exodus church."

### **Exodus Church: Moltmann's Political Theology Embodied**

The unity of theory and praxis in Moltmann's political hermeneutic finds its clearest embodiment in the life of the church. The church, in Moltmann's view, is a mission-focused entity actively engaged in the world and must resist any reduction to a static community. The very identity of the church as an eschatologically hopeful community whose orientation to the present is fixed on a coming future, implies the inability of complacent acquiescence to the status quo. Rather, the church exists in the contradiction of the present to the anticipated reality of the kingdom of God coming. What prevents the church from taking this posture? Moltmann's concern with the 19<sup>th</sup> Century's effect on religion is that it has moved religion from a "*cultus publicus*," to a "*cultus privatus*."<sup>21</sup> This is a

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<sup>19</sup> Moltmann, *Politics of Discipleship*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 310.

foreign shift to the New Testament; yet it pervades modern society. Modernity's disenchantment of the world relegated all human endeavors to the realm of reason. Consequently, the organizing principle of modern societal community is human reason in opposition to claims of the supernatural. This move categorically excludes religion from public importance by rendering religious experience to that of the private world. "[T]he gods of cosmological metaphysics are dead. Rationalization has 'disenchanted' the world, and secularization has stripped it of gods...The world is surrendered to the reason of man."<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, culture views the church in a reductionist manner, assuming its purpose is purely for the internal world of the subject. Religion is cheapened to a community for the individual practice of faith removed of its social context and implications. Moltmann patently rejects this reductionist view, refusing to allow the mission of the church to be constrained to a dis-embodied spirituality. This is not a kingdom of God theology that takes seriously the coming kingdom. The church, therefore, must reject separation from culture and instead reorient itself in partnership with culture to work toward the manifestation of the kingdom of God reality here-and-now. Scott Paeth describes this move in Moltmannian political theology, "Moltmann views the Church's critical role in society, not as a separation from society's fallenness, but as a partnership, in which the church calls the society to a recognition of what it is destined to be in the fullness of time."<sup>23</sup> The internal and external task of the church is, therefore, the same task, to proclaim and live in light of the coming reality of the Kingdom of God.

In order to hold true to the hope-centric identity of the church, the church functions as an agitator of culture and the status quo, unsettling any forms of stagnation for the purpose of stimulating all things toward their future reality. Moltmann, thus, identifies the church as an "Exodus Church,"<sup>24</sup> a church on the move toward a future destination. A two-fold mission now emerges; first, the church affirms any cultural activity or institutional structure bent toward justice and that which adheres to the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>23</sup> Scott R. Paeth, "Jürgen Moltmann's Public Theology," *Political Theology* 6, no. 2 (April 2005): 224.

<sup>24</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 304–38.



coming reality of the Kingdom of God. Second, it critiques any structural institution that regresses from the coming reality or any manifestation of injustice. The central locus of the church's mission becomes solidarity with the marginalized who suffer on the underside of power. By joining in solidarity with the cause of the poor and marginalized, the Church gives voice to the unfulfilled promises of God's history of a time when justice is fully established. "In solidarity with the 'least' in society," writes Paeth, "the Church witnesses to those yet-unfulfilled promises that stand at the center of its mission. It witnesses to the reality of the Kingdom which is yet to come, and declares specifically that it is for these outcast and marginalized in particular and that the Kingdom is coming."<sup>25</sup> This is the work of the hope-centric Exodus church, proclaiming the coming kingdom of God through solidarity to the marginalized.

Along with its work of solidarity, the Exodus church has another function, namely, the work of continually propelling society forward. Every stage of human societal progress can never become the ends unto itself. Rather, it is merely a transitional phase on the way to the arrival of the Kingdom of God. This is what John Metz calls the "eschatological proviso."<sup>26</sup> The result of this eschatological proviso "does not bring about a negative but a critical and dialectical attitude to the societal present. The promises to which this 'eschatological proviso' refers are not an empty horizon of religions expectation; neither are they only a regulative idea. They are, rather, a critical liberating imperative for our present times."<sup>27</sup> The Exodus church proclaims the eschatological proviso and persistently drives society on a trajectory toward the kingdom of God.

In sum, Moltmann's political theology is built on two elements; one, the theological foundation of eschatological Christology and two, a political hermeneutic. Moltmann's eschatological Christology focuses on the messianic understanding of Jesus that holds a dialectical view of the cross and resurrection. The cross is associated with all that is negative in this world, and the crucifixion of Jesus is, therefore, the negation of the

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<sup>25</sup> Paeth, "Jürgen Moltmann's Public Theology," 225.

<sup>26</sup> John B. Metz, "Religion and Society in the Light of a Political Theology," *The Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 4 (1968): 513.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 513–14.

negative. The resurrection of the same crucified Jesus, in eschatological understanding, is an event that anticipates the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus is then the great “anticipator of the kingdom of God,” beckoning the church to live in light of the arrival of the Kingdom. The second element of Moltmann’s political theology is the development of a political hermeneutic. For Moltmann, all hermeneutical activity has two sides: the historical and the prophetic, theory and praxis. Consequently, this hermeneutic demands an “Exodus church” in constant movement, theorizing and practicing the reality of the coming Kingdom of God. But what does this political theology look like on the ground? To close this essay, I want to demonstrate the implications and use of Moltmann’s political theology through the examination of Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount. To do so, I will overlay Moltmann’s political theology, as just defined, on to the work of Glen Stassen and Walter Wink’s respective readings of Matthew 5:38-39.

## **Employing Moltmann’s Political Theology: A Reading of Matthew 5:38-39**

### Eschatological Foundation

To best understand the text at hand, attention must be paid to the larger context of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 4:17 Jesus announces, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” and consequently inaugurates the arrival of the Kingdom of heaven in the present.<sup>28</sup> This announcement frames Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5-7 and must be held in the back of one’s mind as they interpret the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon then reads as a manifesto of life in the kingdom of God. The eschatological future had arrived in the present and centered the hope of the kingdom of God in contradiction to the present reality.

When we arrive at our text in Matthew 5:38-39, the availability of the kingdom of God saturates Jesus’ teaching. Thus, he is constantly

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<sup>28</sup> Certainly, much scholarly debate has and will continue to be had around the meaning of this particular phrase. For the purposes of this essay I am unable to entertain such a debate. Therefore, I am functioning from the assumption that Jesus’ announcement of the arrival of the kingdom in Matthew 4:17 is an inaugurated eschatology, the kingdom of God is both now and not-yet.

reframing the past in light of the coming future, “you have heard it said...but I say to you,” is his continuous refrain. With each subject addressed in light of the kingdom, Jesus is shaping the ethic of his listeners toward embodiment of the kingdom of God. Therefore, descriptions of the kingdom of God color the eschatological reality of Jesus’ teachings; visions of swords being beat into ploughshares (Isaiah 2), of justice and righteousness flowing like a river (Amos 5), and tears being wiped away, death, mourning, crying, and pain all being extinguished (Revelation 21). The prophetic understanding of the coming kingdom, of which Jesus is the culmination, hovers beneath the surface of Jesus’ teaching and ministry. This kingdom defined by life, justice, redemption, and shalom fills the imagination and eschatological hope of Jesus and his listeners.

Therefore, reading the text again in light of this eschatological reality, Jesus is functioning as the “anticipator of the kingdom of God” as Moltmann suggests. Jesus is also prophetically contrasting himself with the status quo by reshaping prior teachings— “you have heard that is was said” —to give a new command—“but I say to you.” Thus, he seeks a lived ethic built on hope in contradiction to the status quo. Moltmann’s eschatological Christology proves instructive in reading Jesus’ teaching, as Jesus ushers in the ethic of the coming kingdom of God.

### Political Hermeneutic

As noted earlier, the ethical demands outlined by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount have long been the source of debate that has most commonly resulted in the reduction of his teachings to high ideals beyond the ability of obedience. Ethicists David Gushee and Glen Stassen comment on this traditional interpretation writing,

a tradition has developed that the pattern of the Sermon is antitheses, in which Jesus prohibits anger, lust, divorce, oaths, and resistance to evil and commands that we renounce all rights. Then people realize that they can not avoid ever being angry and so on. So they say these are hard teachings, high ideals, and impossible demands. They praise them for being so idealistic and then conclude that they cannot follow them in

practice and adopt another ethic that comes from somewhere else.<sup>29</sup>

In short, readers have internalized the texts, consigning them to mere teaching to shape our internal dispositions; consequently, these teachings never instruct one's external public lives. This internalization divorced from public participation is precisely Moltmann's critique. "This hermeneutic must bind reflection and action together, thus requiring reflection in the action as well as action in the reflection...To say it differently: without personal participation in the apostolic mission and without cooperation with the kingdom of God, one cannot understand the Bible."<sup>30</sup> Moltmann's political hermeneutic demands the union of theory and praxis and refuses the traditional reading as noted by Gushee above. What, then, does Moltmann's political hermeneutic offer in the way of a more constructive interpretation? Moltmann's political hermeneutic offers a clear understanding of Jesus' teaching, not as unattainable utopian ideals, but rather, a clear way forward for the powerless to confront the powerful through nonviolent direct action, what Walter Wink entitles "Jesus' Third Way."<sup>31</sup>

To demonstrate Moltmann's political hermeneutic I will layer the exegetical work of Glen Stassen<sup>32</sup> onto Wink's ethical reading of Matthew 5:38-39. The thesis of Stassen's work on the sermon on the mount, focuses on the fourteen pericopes that comprise Jesus' teaching. Stassen challenges traditional interpretation of these pericopes as dyadic in form, "you have heard it said...but I say to you." Rather, for Stassen, Jesus employs a triadic structure; he writes, "My thesis is that...each pericope in the central section, 5:21-7:12, has a carefully crafted triadic structure...The internal triadic structure of each unit has been missed largely because

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<sup>29</sup> David P. Gushee and Glen Harold Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 93.

<sup>30</sup> Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 107.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), chap. 9.

<sup>32</sup> Glen H. Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-7:12)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (2003): 267–308.

scholars have been thinking of a dyadic structure—antitheses.”<sup>33</sup> Stassen’s triadic structure consists of three elements: the traditional righteousness, the vicious cycle, and the transforming initiative. In *Table 1* below, each element of Matthew 5:38-39 is organized to demonstrate Stassen’s framework.<sup>34</sup> When Moltmann’s political hermeneutic is folded into Stassen’s triadic structure a clear teaching on the necessity of unifying theory and praxis to overcome the vicious cycles of the status quo emerges.

**Table 1.** Triadic Structure of Matthew 5:38-39

| <b>Traditional Righteousness (Theory)</b>                                                             | <b>Vicious Cycle (Acquiescence to status quo)</b>                                         | <b>Transforming Initiative (Praxis)</b>                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>“The Traditional Righteousness is presented as coming from Jewish tradition.”</i>                  | <i>“The Vicious Cycle plus judgment is presented as Jesus’ teaching, with authority.”</i> | <i>“The Transforming Initiative is also presented as Jesus’ teaching, with authority.”</i>    |
| <p>“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’”<br/>– Mt. 5:38</p> | <p>“But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.”<br/>– Mt. 5:39a<sup>35</sup></p>        | <p>“But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...”<br/>– Mt. 5:39b</p> |

Jesus’ opening teaching in this pericope, the “traditional righteousness” in Stassen’s framework, is a direct quote from an Old Testament teaching.<sup>36</sup> In Moltmannian terms, the quote by itself is pure

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 267–68.

<sup>34</sup> For full definitions of each triadic piece, see Table 1 in Stassen, “Fourteen Triads,” 275. Note: have layered Stassen’s work with Moltmannian language to demonstrate the political hermeneutic in action. Moltmann’s language appears in parentheses.

<sup>35</sup> Gushee and Stassen translate this verse “But I say to you, do not retaliate revengefully by evil means.” For a fuller discussion as to why they choose to translate this text, in what I deem the more appropriate way, see Stassen, “Fourteen Triads,” 279-282.

<sup>36</sup> Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21

theory. At its most basic core, it teaches one to respond to evil adequately, “eye for an eye.” However, if this teaching remains in the realm of pure theory, interpretations become damaging. Here we must begin to layer in Wink’s ethical reading of this text. He proves helpful as he cautions against legalistic interpretations, “Nothing is deadlier to the spirit of Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence than regarding it legalistically. Women beaten by their husbands are told to ‘turn the other cheek’ and let the man continue to brutalize them, with no reference to Jesus’ actual intention.”<sup>37</sup> So what is Jesus’ actual intention? To understand this Moltmann’s hermeneutic must be followed further through Stassen’s triadic structure.

Next comes Stassen’s second element of the triad, the “vicious cycle” or what could be equated to the acquiescence to the status quo in Moltmannian terms; “But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer” (Matthew 5:39a). The Greek word “ἀντιστῆναι,”—traditionally translated “to resist”—is the source of much scholarly debate. Wink argues this translation is ill-fitting to the text. “[On] purely logical grounds, ‘resist not’ does not fit the aggressive nonviolent actions described in the three following examples. Since in these three instances Jesus provides strategies for resisting oppression, it is altogether inconsistent for him to counsel people in almost the same breath not to resist it.”<sup>38</sup> Wink goes on to point out the frequent use of “ἀντιστῆναι” as a military term, implying the resistance as an explicitly violent act. Consequently, suggesting the translation should not be, “do not resist the evildoer” but rather, “do not resist violently the evildoer.” Stassen offers this helpful translation, “But I say to you, do not retaliate revengefully by evil means.”<sup>39</sup> Here again, Moltmann’s political hermeneutic shines through, the inherent unity of theory and praxis repudiates any complicity to mere status quo. If the interpretation is reduced to mere passivity in the face of injustice, then eschatological hope isn’t present. But eschatological hope insists on the transformation of the present; therefore, to counter violence with violence merely perpetuates the same. Holding Jesus’ eschatological aim of the Sermon on the Mount in view, violence cannot be tolerated as that does not fit the future which is

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<sup>37</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 189.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>39</sup> Gushee and Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics*, 98.

to come. Put in dialectical terms of the cross and resurrection, Jesus' death by violent means is negated with all other negatives by way of the crucifixion, so that in the resurrection the kingdom, void of violence, is birthed. This resistance is Moltmannian in its upshot, "the first political effect of Christian hope is to expose the real evils of the *status quo*, to liberate the Christian from accommodation to it, and to set him or her critically against it."<sup>40</sup> If the vicious cycle of the status quo is to be overthrown, theory must be brought back into intimate relationship with praxis, and to this point I now turn.

Stassen and Moltmann's contributions bring needed clarity to a long troubling text, "But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..." Building from the translation of the previous phrase to indicate not passivity but a constructive way forward, Stassen suggests Jesus is providing a transforming initiative (Stassen's third element in his triadic structure) as a means to break the vicious cycle. By interpreting "turning the other cheek" as an act of nonviolent direct action against the oppressor, the weight of the pericope shifts to this end.<sup>41</sup> Returning to Wink, one must understand the cultural forces at play here to grasp the radical teaching Jesus is offering. Jesus specifically notes the initial strike of the cheek is the "right cheek." Why the specificity? Wink argues,

a blow by the right fist in that right-handed world would land on the *left* cheek. An open-handed slap would also strike the left cheek. To hit the right cheek with a fist would require using the left hand, but in that society the left hand was used only for unclean tasks...The only way one could naturally strike the right cheek with the right hand would be with the back of the hand. We are dealing here with insult, not a fistfight.<sup>42</sup>

Wink illuminates an important understanding of Jesus' example; Jesus is not speaking about a situation of equals fighting, but of a dehumanizing

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<sup>40</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, 102.

<sup>41</sup> "Turning the other cheek" is but one of four imperatives Jesus lays out in this pericope, which only strengthens the case that the transforming initiative is the primary focus of each of the fourteen triads in the Sermon on the Mount. For the sake of brevity, I have chosen to only illustrate my point through this first imperative.

<sup>42</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 176.

slap delivered by one in a position of power toward an inferior. Consequently, Jesus is addressing what an individual is to do when faced with the dehumanizing practices of the powerful against the weak. Jesus' response, "turn the other cheek," but why? Wink again explains, "Such a response would create enormous difficulties for the striker. Purely logistically, how would he hit the other cheek now turned to him? He cannot backhand it with his right hand (one only need try this to see the problem). If he hits with a fist, he makes the other his equal, acknowledging him as a peer."<sup>43</sup> Jesus point is made, by turning the other cheek the victim is moving him or herself into a position of power that exposes and confronts the perpetrator through nonviolent means.

Theory and praxis united. The theory of "eye for an eye"—or responding to evil accordingly—is reinterpreted through the praxis of "turning the other cheek"—or nonviolent direct action—which fundamentally is in contradiction the status quo by refusing to perpetuate evil and anticipates the eschatological hope of the coming kingdom of God. This is Moltmann's political hermeneutic at work, enlivening the teachings of Jesus to animate the church in the present because of the impending future.

## Conclusion

All theology has consequences. Moltmann's deep commitment to a hope-centric theology continues to inspire a generation of students by returning eschatology, "from first to last, and not merely in the epilogue"<sup>44</sup> to the center of the Christian endeavor. In doing so, he has infused political theology with an eschatological focus. Moltmann's hope is a revolutionary hope that opposes stagnation and is repulsed by any accusation of its effect being that of an opium. This revolutionary hope stands in stark contradiction to the status quo and animates the church toward living in light of its new-found future orientation. Moltmann's aim is the mediation of eschatological hope to the world, and in so doing, his political theology seeks to energize the church toward the reorganization of our present life

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.



in light of the coming kingdom of God. Eschatological Christology and the construction and implementation of a political hermeneutic fuels these efforts. As demonstrated through the preceding example of Jesus' teaching on nonviolence, Moltmann's political theology is a compelling contribution to political theology, hermeneutics, and ecclesial life. In light of Moltmann's tremendous contribution, political theology must be understood as the bringing together of the political and the theological, the cross and the resurrection, theory and praxis. And what manifests from this unity is hope that points forward to the coming consummation of hope in the coming future.

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