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Toward a ‘Conditional Universalism’

Appraising Jürgen Moltmann’s Universalism in Light of Sin and Repentance

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Abstract

Moltmann proposes an ‘open universalism’ that overstresses the goodness of God and hence God’s obligation to redeem all of humanity, irrespective of human reciprocity. This leads to his consequent conception of salvation that seems to underplay the traditional understanding of sin and repentance. The purpose of this article is to explore Moltmann’s version of universalism in the light of sin and repentance and to propose that universalism could be a viable doctrine if it is considered not as an automatic rendering but as ‘conditional universalism’ that demands reciprocal response (even *post mortem*) in terms of human repentance. For this purpose, Gregory of Nyssa’s idea of universalism will be utilized.

Keywords

apokatastasis – conditional universalism – free will – Gregory of Nyssa – Jürgen Moltmann – sin and repentance – universalism

1 Introduction

Jürgen Moltmann wrote in his book, *The Crucified God*,

[T]he theology of the cross is the true Christian universalism. There is no distinction here, and there cannot be any more distinctions. All are sinners without distinction, and all will be made righteous without any merit on their part by his grace, which has come to pass in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).¹

Drawing from his poignant portrayal of the cross as the consummate participation of God in human misery and suffering, Moltmann conceived of salvation as universal.² While his emphasis on the grace of God over against the human effort in our salvation seems to be very orthodox, his interpretation of grace as ‘automatic imputation’ clearly extends his conception of the salvation as ‘universalism’. Moreover, this blurs the traditional distinction between those who respond in faith and those who reject the offer of salvation. In the history of Christian thought, such universalistic notions have been chided as whimsical thinking. Augustine, while commenting on the notion of universalism that was held by some Christians during his time, wrote:

In vain, then, that some, indeed very many, moan over the eternal punishment, and perpetual, uninterrupted torments of the lost, and say that they do not believe it shall be so; not, indeed, that they directly oppose themselves to Holy Scripture, but at the suggestion of their own feelings, they soften down everything that seems hard, and give them a milder turn

1 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 194–95.

2 In an earlier article in this journal, entitled ‘Universalism in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann’, author Nigel G. Wright examines Moltmann’s proposal of universalism carefully and concludes that it is possible to believe in universalism for evangelical reasons. He notes, ‘In scripture, we do indeed find massive grounds for greater hope and are entitled to believe that all manner of things shall be well’ (*Evangelical Quarterly* 84/1 (2012), 33–39). However, Derek Tidball, in his article, ‘Can Evangelicals be Universalists?’, takes a negative stance. He argues ‘it is very hard to find a doctrine of universalism in the New Testament, whether of a general variety or the more specific “re-educative” variety proposed by Robin Parry’ (*Evangelical Quarterly* 84/1 (2012), 19–32). As Wright has already articulated the aspects of Moltmannian universalism, this article will be restricted to the evaluation of Moltmann’s claims in light of the traditional understanding of sin and repentance through a historical theological investigation.

to statements which they think are rather designed to terrify than to be received as literally true. For 'Has God,' they say, 'forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up his tender mercies?'³

Augustine is equating such a notion of salvation-of-all as merely the 'soft' sensibility of some and hence a futile exercise. Also, it is often held that one of the early ecumenical councils has condemned universalism as unbiblical and issued an anathema on those who professed it.⁴ The fifth Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in CE 553 issued an anathema against Origen, the first proponent of universalism along with other 'heretics'.⁵

Some would cite this anathema against Origen as a blanket rejection of universalism and hence argue for its unorthodoxy. However, it should be noted that when Origen was condemned in this council the context was primarily Christology and not *apokatastasis*.⁶ Furthermore, the explicit condemnation against universalism was stated only in the local council called by the emperor Justinian in CE 543, ten years prior to this ecumenical council.⁷ This local council did not have the full validity of an ecumenical authority over the Church catholic. Also, it has to be noted that Gregory of Nyssa, the Greek Patristic theologian—called the 'Father of the Fathers' by the seventh ecumenical council in 787—was known to teach a version of universal salvation *sans* the problematic notion of the preexistence of souls. Gregory of Nyssa's teachings were never condemned as heretical and he is held in high reverence to this day.⁸ Additionally, many would also find exegetical support from the Scripture to uphold universalism, especially passages such as Romans 8:22, 1 Corinthians

3 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 112. For English translation, see *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 111: St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity; Doctrinal Treatises; Moral Treatises*, ed. by Philip Schaff (1887; repr. New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 273.

4 Gregory MacDonald, 'Introduction: Between Heresy and Dogma', in *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann*, ed. by Gregory MacDonald (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011), 4.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 9. The anathema read: 'If anyone does not anathematize Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutyches, and Origen, as well as their impious writings, as also all other heretics already condemned and anathematized by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, [...] let him be anathema.' Cf. *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, ed. by Henry R. Percival, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series*, 14 (New York: Scribners, 1916), 314.

7 MacDonald, 'Introduction', 9. The first of those fifteen anathemas read: 'If anyone asserts the fabulous preexistence of souls, and shall assert the monstrous restoration (*apokatastasis*) which follows from it: let him be anathema.' Percival (ed.), *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 318.

8 MacDonald, 'Introduction', 9.

15:22–28, and Philippians 2:10–11. Hence, coming back to Moltmann, his universalism cannot just be dismissed as unorthodox but needs to be seriously considered for its relevance to the articulation of the Christian faith. However, Moltmann's notion of universalism also raises certain issues.

In Moltmann's conception of universalism, the Kingdom of God plays a vital role. In *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, he conceives of the Kingdom as freedom where humanity as 'friends' of God enjoy intimate communion with the Triune God in the *eschaton*.⁹ This emphasis on the Kingdom invokes specific criteria that are biblically essential to understand the possibility of entry into the Kingdom of God. Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, as the Gospel writer Mark presents: 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news' (Mark 1:15, NIV). The imperatives to 'repent and believe' are an essential requirement for one's acceptance into the Kingdom, which is consistent throughout the New Testament (Matt. 4:17; Luke 10:9, 11; Rom. 16:26). Hence this call to repentance is an essential part of the *kerygma*, which is necessitated by human sin. However, Moltmann's 'open' universalism seems to extend the scope of salvation without any response from 'non-believing' human beings.¹⁰

The purpose of this article is to explore Moltmann's version of universalism in light of the traditional understanding of sin and repentance and to propose that universalism could be a viable doctrine if it is considered not as an automatic rendering but as 'conditional universalism' that demands reciprocal response (even *post mortem*) in terms of human repentance. The plan of study is, to begin with, Moltmann's conception of universalism, followed by his notion of sin and repentance concerning universalism. This evaluation of Moltmann's universalism will be extended to conceive of a 'conditional universalism' that attempts to balance divine determinism with human freedom using Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's Molinist-Pneumatological framework of human freedom and Gregory's Christocentric universalism.

9 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 218–19.

10 Moltmann approvingly calls Karl Barth's universalism 'Open universalism', commenting that it has 'led to a new eschatological prospect'. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 248.

2 Moltmann's Universalism

In *The Trinity and the Kingdom* Moltmann wrote:

The doctrine of universal salvation is the expression of boundless confidence in God: what God wants to do he can do and will do ... He does not depend on human faith responses. God decides for a person and his or her salvation, for otherwise, there is no assurance of salvation at all. 'If God is for us, who can be against us ...' (Rom. 8.31f.). God's decision 'for us', and our decisions for faith or disbelief no more belong on the same level than do eternity and time.¹¹

Moltmann explains that the doctrine of universal salvation derives from God's decision to save everyone and does not depend on individual decisions. He is grounding his exposition on his understanding of eschatology as the 'new creation' where the divine freedom to elect (and not 'not to elect') decides for the whole of humanity. He argues against the double-outcome that differentiates between those who accept the offer of salvation in Christ and those who do not. This type of conception does raise some issues: If all 'must' be saved, do they not have a choice? Moreover, if this 'new creation' is something that God 'must' do, is he still genuinely sovereign?¹² We can approach these questions by exploring how Moltmann attempts to relate God's will and nature (and thus divine freedom and necessity) and then examining the relationship between God's love and God's wrath as Moltmann conceives it.¹³

Moltmann emphasizes the essential goodness of God out of which God's decision to save everyone derives. He says,

It is God's free self-determination, and at the same time, the overflowing of his goodness, which belongs to his essential nature. [...] If God's self-determination is not an essential emanation of his goodness, it is not self-determination at all. [...] God makes nothing out of himself, which he was not already from eternity.¹⁴

11 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 243.

12 Nik Ansell, 'The Annihilation of Hell and the Perfection of Freedom: Universal Salvation in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann', in MacDonald (ed.), *All Shall Be Well*, 417–39 (424).

13 Ibid.

14 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 54 (emphasis original).

God's freedom for self-determination is understood as emanating from God's good nature, and hence, the outcome has to be intrinsically good. Emanating out of God's essential goodness, his self-determination for humanity cannot be considered as arbitrary for it belongs to his eternal nature. Hence, this divine freedom is not out of a compulsive necessity but is 'axiomatic' of his very nature. He further states,

If we lift the concept of necessity out of the context of compulsive necessity and determination by something external, then in God necessity and freedom coincide; they are what is for him axiomatic, self-evident. For God, it is axiomatic to love, for he cannot deny himself. For God, it is axiomatic to love freely, for he is God.¹⁵

Moltmann asserts that for God, not to love is to deny himself. So, as God cannot deny himself, he 'freely' chooses to love everyone irrespective of that person's reciprocity to God. It seems apparent that Moltmann is overemphasizing the goodness of God as emanating from his essential nature of love. God is indeed the source of all goodness, but that cannot be separated from God's essential nature of being just. God's justice and wrath are equally presented in the Scripture alongside God's goodness. God's self-determination cannot be restrictively conceived as always being kind and hence not being wrathful against injustice. However, Moltmann's understanding of God's wrath is also a different one from the traditional notions: 'Love is the source and basis of the possibility of the wrath of God ... As injured love, the wrath of God is not something that is inflicted, but a divine suffering of evil.'¹⁶ He further expands this in *The Spirit of Life*:

God's wrath ... is not the antithesis of his love. It is nothing other than his love itself, repulsed and wounded. It is not that the passionate love for the life of what he has created, and for his human children, is now transformed into deadly anger. On the contrary, this love assumes the form of such anger so that it may remain love.¹⁷

Moltmann attempts to overcome the binary of good and evil—and hence love, and wrath—conceiving of God's wrath as 'suffering in love'. Richard Bauckham

15 Ibid., 108.

16 Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 272.

17 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 280.

notes, 'By recognizing God's presence, as the incarnate Son of God, in the abandonment of the cross, Moltmann brings the dialectic of cross and resurrection within God's own experience.'¹⁸ God is willingly entering into this misery of human sin and suffering on the cross. 'The crucified Jesus in his death is identified with all the negative qualities of present reality, its subjection to sin and suffering and death, its godlessness and godforsakenness and transitoriness.'¹⁹ Hence, God's wrath is not a destructive force that metes out retribution against 'evildoers', but a patient love that anticipates and effects restoration. Moltmann backs up his position with his interpretation of the scriptural passages in Psalm 30:5 and Isaiah 54:8a. However, the problem is how to reconcile them with the passages where God's wrath is presented as very real as in Ezekiel 25:17, Luke 12:5, and John 15:6.

Also, Moltmann argues '[God] says No to sin because he says Yes to the sinner. He says a temporal No because in eternity he has said Yes to human beings, as the beings he has created, and his image.'²⁰ However, Moltmann's argument for 'temporal' wrath of God instead betrays what Augustine criticized as 'soft feeling'. Nik Ansell notes,

In the light of Moltmann's philosophy of time [...], it is significant that wrath and love, [...] are related to the distinction (and relation) between (passing) time and (coming) eternity. God's wrath is, we might say, 'merely' temporal and thus temporary. God's love, however, is eternal and therefore 'Final'.²¹

By conceiving of God's love as eternal in contrast to his 'temporary' wrath, Moltmann's universalism seems to sweep the wrath (justice) of God under the rug to exhibit only his 'final' love. Consequently, Moltmann's conception of God's self-determination and necessity as being derived out of God's essential goodness (i.e. love), allows him to posit a universalism where God redeems everyone irrespective of his/her response to God. However, the question that still stands out is, whether there is human freedom to choose or reject God's offer of salvation? Given the fact that Moltmann's view would not converge with that of process theology's God who is a mere persuader, would Moltmann be propounding a coercive redemptive plan of God? Moltmann is juxtaposing the question of human free will with divine freedom and argues to its logical conclusion and

18 Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (London: T&T Clark, 1995), 12.

19 *Ibid.*, 34.

20 Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 243.

21 Ansell, 'The Annihilation of Hell', 427.

decides that for a loving God to condemn his own creation is to equate him to a malevolent human dictator. Here again, Moltmann by overemphasizing the goodness of God against his justice almost makes it obligatory for God to save all. As Ansell observes, for Moltmann,

[S]alvation is not to be construed as a matter of 'offer and acceptance' as this 'brings divine grace and human decision on to the same level.' 'God decides for a person and for his or her salvation, for otherwise, there is no assurance of salvation at all. If God is for us, who can be against us ...' (Rom. 8:31f.). God is 'for us': that has been decided once and for all in the self-surrender and the raising of Christ.²²

Moltmann is doing away with the notion of salvation as an 'offer' to humanity and hence assumes that human decisions do not play any role in the universal salvation.

It is evident that for Moltmann, the concept of God's self-determination and necessity (divine freedom) overrides human free will in the universal redemptive plan. Also, God's essential goodness and love overshadow his wrath and God is obligated to redeem all human beings out of his faithfulness to his creation without expecting their reciprocal acceptance of the offer. However, this leaves questions about God's judgment against sin and evil and also the necessity of human free will to accept the offer of God's salvation unanswered. To gain greater clarity regarding this, we will examine the notions of sin and repentance in the theology of Moltmann which define his notion of universalism.

2.1 *Sin*

In his book, *God in Creation*, Moltmann offers a glimpse into his understanding of sin. Moltmann, through his relational understanding of the *imago Dei* interprets sin as a disruption of this primary loving relationship to God. He says,

However, within God's relationship to human beings, there is also the human being's relationship to God—the reflecting, responsive existence which is inherent in his nature as an image. Is this forfeited through sin, and is the human being's relationship to God lost at the same time? ... Sin is the perversion of the human being's relationship to God, not its loss.²³

²² Ibid., 430.

²³ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 233.

Within the Creator-creature relationship, Moltmann emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between the divine and the human beings and the disruption in this relationship, he labels as sin. This is in line with the classical Reformation idea of sin. Joy Ann McDougall observes,

Since God first establishes a relationship to humankind in grace, human beings cannot unilaterally abrogate their status as *imago Dei* through their sinful turning away. Despite humankind's faithlessness, God's love toward human beings is utterly steadfast, and, therefore, human beings' status as *imago Dei* remains intact.²⁴

Moltmann's conception of sin thus seems very traditional. However, the point of departure for Moltmann is his soteriology. He uses therapeutic healing as a metaphor for salvation as he emphasizes the integral salvation of a human person. For his further understanding of human salvation, he turns to the Eastern Orthodox tradition. He envisages it as deification. He defines salvation as human being's participation in the dynamic trinitarian communion of loving relations: 'If the misery of creation lies in sin as separation from God, then salvation consists in the gracious acceptance of the creature into communion with God.'²⁵ He further expounds this as the Son's acceptance of human beings into a relationship with the Father and making them children of the Father and the Holy Spirit's acceptance of human beings into a relationship with the Son and the Father by letting them participate in 'God's eternal love and eternal song of praise.'²⁶ Being accepted into this inner trinitarian life of love, human beings become the adopted sons and daughters of God the Father and achieve deification.

Taking into account Moltmann's conception of sin as a breach of the relationship between God and human beings, his notion of salvation as restoration of this relationship by the acceptance and participation of human beings in the inner trinitarian relationship is understandable. Nevertheless, the question that he left unanswered is 'How does this view of salvation address the human predicament of sin?' McDougall notes that Moltmann does not attempt

24 Joy Ann McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love: Moltmann on the Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123.

25 Ibid., 124, citing Jürgen Moltmann, 'The Inviting Unity of the Triune God', in *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 80–90 (86).

26 McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 124, citing Jürgen Moltmann, 'The Inviting Unity of the Triune God', 86.

to address this issue ‘within the framework of his messianic anthropology and the doctrine of sin remains a lacuna in Moltmann’s theology.’²⁷ She observes two critical reasons for the lack of correspondence between Moltmann’s conception of sin and salvation. She notes that Moltmann’s representation of the incarnation of the Son in the trinitarian economy ‘builds squarely on the foundation of his trinitarian analysis of the act of creation. He presents *the incarnation as the fulfilment of God’s outward act of creation rather than treating it as a remedy for sin*.’²⁸ Secondly, Moltmann signifies the transfiguration of creation as the consummation of the Spirit’s work rather than the continuation of the mission of Jesus by prompting individuals toward the forgiveness of sins and justification by faith.²⁹ Thus Moltmann’s eschatological proposal traces the movement from the incomplete, imperfect initial creation toward perfection through the act of incarnation of the Second Person and the transformation of creation by the Spirit. McDougall’s astute observation clarifies this:

Moltmann relates the initial act of creation to its consummation in the incarnation through the notion of the *imago Dei*. As the Logos through whom the world was created, the Son represents the ‘true ikon’ or the ‘primordial image’ of God. In the incarnation, the eternal Son becomes human, thus fulfilling the destiny of creation as the *imago Dei* ... Just as we saw the Spirit as the life-giving presence of God indwelling in the world in creation, so, too, we discover the Spirit now renewing its life-giving presence among creation.³⁰

Moltmann’s preoccupation with depicting the consummation of the incomplete creation through the work of the Triune God in creation takes the focus away from the ‘remission of sins’ and turns it toward the ‘perfection of creation’. McDougall also remarks that for Moltmann the redemptive efficacy of Christ is not in terms of expiation of human sins as traditionally held, but by Christ’s participation in the intense suffering of humanity on the cross, through which God intends to reconcile the world that is contrary to him (‘like is known by unlike’).³¹ The *telos* (end) of the ‘perfection of creation’, as Moltmann conceives of the eschatological purpose, leads him to conceive of the significance of Christ’s suffering as that which abrogates the physical death and suffering

27 McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 124.

28 *Ibid.*, 85 (emphasis mine).

29 *Ibid.*, 86.

30 *Ibid.*, 85–86.

31 *Ibid.*, 127.

of humanity (and creation at large) without using the traditional notions of atonement. Thus salvation is the transfiguration of the whole creation toward its consummation. However, within the Moltmannian theology, as McDougall also observed, a robust doctrine of sin is lacking, and hence his conception of universalism seems to omit the imperatives of 'repentance and belief' as necessary for the entry into the Kingdom of God.

2.2 *Repentance*

In terms of the necessity of human response toward the message of the Kingdom of God, Moltmann seems to have had a fairly traditional view in his earlier writings. In *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, he writes,

The imminence of the kingdom, as it is preached and believed, makes men free to repent [...] The turning away from this world of oppression, death, and evil to the future of life, righteousness, and freedom. It cannot be forgotten that the universal call to the decision of faith, by virtue of this decision, itself brings about the separation between believers and non-believers.³²

He even elicits the categories of believers and non-believers in terms of response or no-response toward the 'the future of life, righteousness, and freedom'. He also rightly accedes the role of human agency in responding to the invitation to enter into the Kingdom of God. However, in his later writing, *The Coming of God*, Moltmann uses the term 'conversion' in an eschatological sense and conceives of a future that relegates the question of human response. He says, 'Conversion and the rebirth to a new life change time and the experience of time, for they make-present the ultimate in the penultimate and the future of time in the midst of time. [...] The future-made-present creates new conditions for possibilities in history.'³³ By contrasting 'interruption' and 'conversion', Moltmann concludes that only conversion is eschatological because it creates new possibilities and transforms human history, and this conversion does not depend on human repentance from sin. He completely discards the categories of believers and non-believers and conceives eschatological new creation as embracing humanity on the whole. The factor of human response hence fades away and eternity as the fulfilment of time toward creation's eternal communion with God comes to the forefront. He concludes that

32 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 80.

33 Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 22.

God's 'messianic future' wins power over the present and irrespective of human response this new future encompasses 'all'.³⁴

Moltmann's universalism, without a robust doctrine of sin and repentance, conceives of salvation as God's freedom to elect (and not to 'un-elect') and completely neglects human agency and free will. Despite his new interpretative approaches to the Scriptures, it does not do justice to the traditional understanding of human sin and the requirement of repentance. Moreover, this would imply that Moltmann's understanding of universalism would make God automatically render salvation to everyone in a coercive manner irre-

34 Moltmann categorically presents the extraneous nature of human response and repentance in his recently published revised version of the essay 'Christianity: A Religion of Joy' as he writes:

In the fifteenth chapter of his Gospel, Luke interprets the astonishing—and, by the Pharisees, denounced—attitude of Jesus, 'This man accepts sinners, and eats with them' (Luke 15:2), with three well-known parables: about the widow's lost and found coin, about the lost and found sheep, which the shepherd carries on his shoulders home, and about the lost son, whom his father folds in his arms. Luke's theological interpretation of the found coin and the found sheep is the following: 'Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.' (Luke 15:7) *This theology is not quite correct*, because first, Jesus accepted 'sinners and tax collectors' without conditions and did not have table communion with only repenting sinners, and second, the lost sheep could do nothing to contribute to its being found, and the lost coin could not repent. The joy is only on the side of the finder. These are parables of God's love for the lost and of God's joy in finding them. Jesus had demonstrated this in accepting sinners without conditions and eating with them. Only the lost son is 'repenting', turning around from the way toward perishing and coming home. Before he can confess his sins, however, his father, seeing from afar, runs toward him and enfolds him in his arms (Luke 15:20). Prevenient grace is the joy of the Father: "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found!" And they began to be merry.' (Luke 15, 24) The activity lies solely in the hands of the seeking and finding and rejoicing God. Repentance means to join in the rejoicing of God. Repentance is not self-afflicted pain or self-punishment; repentance is the joy of God. God seems to take pleasure in finding the lost. It is the lost and forgotten people in whom this joy of God springs up, not the self-satisfied and complacent. (Jürgen Moltmann, 'Christianity: A Religion of Joy', in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*, ed. by Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 1–16 (9–10))

Moltmann, interestingly, disputes Luke's interpretation that emphasizes the individual's decision to repent (*metanoia*) and, on the contrary, argues that repentance is not the criterion for joy in heaven, but it is God as the joy-finder who rejoices in seeking and finding the lost. This seems to be a biased reading that completely ignores the direct sense of the text, and the ensuing inference does not do justice to the individual's (prodigal son's) volition to return home. It is also very true that Jesus did not discriminate between people on any basis, but the onus was always on the individuals to either accept or reject the offer of table-fellowship.

spective of their inclination. Hence, Moltmann's emphasis on divine freedom (which he considers as essential goodness of God) in the absence of a corresponding notion of human free will points toward a deterministic future.

3 Toward a 'Conditional Universalism'

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen observes that if human freedom 'is not something that has to be won from God' but 'is a gracious gift, a hospitable "necessity" (determined by the creator) for creaturely life to exist', then God would not supersede it by his 'coercive' universal salvation plan, but rather would anticipate human reciprocal response to his eternal love manifested in Christ.³⁵ His constructive proposal named Molinist-Pneumatological-Trinitarian framework makes a case for the human freedom that is not supplanted by divine determinism. The general framework of Molinism seeks to reconcile two claims long thought to be incompatible, namely that 'God is the all-knowing governor of the universe and that individual freedom can prevail only in a universe free of absolute determinism'.³⁶ He extends this by the relational trinitarian conception through which he conceives the Spirit's universal presence in the world that 'makes possible, permeates, sustains, and guides the life of creation to which relative independence has been given by the grace of God'.³⁷ While God honours the choices that his creatures make, those choices will never frustrate 'the eternal divine economy of salvation ("salvation" most inclusively understood, encompassing all of creation, cosmos)'.³⁸ God's offer of salvation is laid out to everyone without any bias. However, human free will that is given as a gift by the Creator would anticipate a volitional decision on the part of each individual. Through such a manner of conception, universalism could be construed as a possibility for human beings to respond to God's redemption even beyond death. The prominent Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa points to such a possibility.

Gregory of Nyssa basically upheld a belief on the ultimate restoration (*apokatastasis*) of 'all rational souls to their prelapsarian state of union with God and understood hell as limited in duration and remedial rather than retributive

35 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 368.

36 *Ibid.*, 365. Cf. Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

37 *Ibid.*, 367.

38 *Ibid.*, 367.

in nature'.³⁹ While Moltmann was anticipating a forward-looking restoration—from an incomplete creation to a perfected creation—Gregory is envisioning a retrospective restoration of all human beings to their prelapsarian status. According to Gregory, 1 Corinthians 15:22–28 teaches the salvific subjection of all creatures, including the enemies of God, to whom God extends the possibility of universal salvation.⁴⁰ He understands this as implying 'the ultimate finitude of evil, for when all are subject to God, and God is "all in all", evil can no longer exist, since it has no existence apart from the choice not to be subject to God'.⁴¹ Moltmann also points to this aspect of 'God being all in all' while interpreting it to favour unconditional universal salvation. Gregory is inferring here the finitude of all evil and hence the need for it to be subsumed under the will of God. Gregory also interprets Philippians 2:10–11 in connection with 1 Corinthians 15:22–28 and observes 'if all will worship and confess Christ as Lord, all will be subject to God and therefore will experience God's salvation'.⁴² In addition to these passages, Gregory also mentions Exodus 10:21–23 and 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 as passages in which the universal restoration might be discerned.⁴³ He notes,

However, when God restores [human] nature to the first creation of humanity through the resurrection, it would be fruitless to speak of such things and to suppose the power of God to be thwarted from the goal on account of such obstacles. He has one goal: after all the fullness of our nature has been perfected in each person—some immediately who have been purified from evil in this life, others who have been healed after these things through fire for the appropriate periods of time, and still others who are unaware of the experience of both good and evil equally—to set before all the participation in the good things in him, which the Scripture says 'eye has not seen, nor ear has heard', nor has it become accessible to reasoning.⁴⁴

39 Steve Harmon, 'The Subjection of All Things in Christ: The Christocentric Universalism of Gregory of Nyssa (331/340–c. 395)', in MacDonald (ed.), *All Shall Be Well*, 47–65 (48).

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 49.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 51, citing Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection*; cf. *S. P. N. Gregorii ... Opera Omnia ... Tomus Tertius*, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 46 (Paris: Migne, 1863), cols 149–52.

Based on the efficacy of Christ's resurrection that restores human nature to its original undefiled status, Gregory is contemplating a temporary hell where the evil ones are purified before participating in the goodness of God's communion. In the *Catechetical Oration*, Gregory appeals to the great mystery of the incarnation—Christ being identified with our human nature—and through the power of his resurrection from the dead, the universal salvation of whole humanity is effected. Also, this redeemed humanity is envisioned as erupting in praise of the Triune God. He avers,

For through those things which were mingled with human nature when he came into being through all the properties of the nature—birth, rearing, growth, even to the extent of going through the experience of death—he accomplished all the aforementioned things, both freeing humanity from evil and healing even the originator of evil himself. For the purification of moral disease is the healing of illness, even if it is painful.⁴⁵

Gregory further elaborates the ultimate universality of this union with God through a doxological consummation: '[T]here will be a harmonious thanksgiving from all creation, even from those who have been chastised in the purification, as well as from those who needed no purification in the first place.'⁴⁶

Doxology has been one of the key aspects of Moltmann's eschatology, and here in Gregory's conception, we can see a close affinity with that. Moltmann emphasizes the role of both Christ and the Spirit in the restoration of creation, while Gregory is primarily Christocentric. The point of departure for Gregory is the notion of purification of souls in the temporary hell requiring a decision for God. He envisages this *post mortem* purification requirement as a condition for the eventual restoration of all.⁴⁷ For Moltmann such a process of purification is nonessential as God's goodness will *suo moto* restore everyone to the hope of eternal future. However, given the biblical emphasis on the necessity of human response to receiving the offer of participation in the Kingdom of God, Gregory's conception addresses the twin issues of divine justice against human evil and also human freewill. Perhaps a 'Conditional Universalism' that

45 Ibid., 54, citing Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration* 26; cf. *Oratio Catechetica*, ed. Ekkehardus Mühlberg, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, III.4 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 67.

46 Ibid., 54, citing Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration* 26; cf. Mühlberg (ed.), *Oratio Catechetica*, 67.

47 This purification 'hell' is an inclusive idea and is not the same as Roman Catholic purgatory, which is only for Christian believers.

incorporates Gregory's model along with Moltmann's preoccupation with the inclusivistic redemption of humanity along with all creation and a thoroughly Trinitarian conception of *apokatastasis* can bring an alternative perspective to conceiving of universalism. This manner of a universalistic redemption could concur with the interpretation of some of the key Scriptural passages like 1 Corinthians 15:22–28 and Philippians 2:10–11. God's goodness ultimately conquers over the 'finite' evil, resulting in the complete redemption of God's creation.

4 Conclusion

Moltmann's versatile theological thinking does present a compelling case for universal salvation. Also, the general notions of universalism being unorthodox and unbiblical are seriously challenged as the anathema against universalism was not an explicit ecumenical decision of the Church but rather a byproduct of condemning Origen whose Christology has always remained controversial (subordination of *logos*, the preexistence of souls). As we have seen, there are also explicit biblical references that signify a universal redemption of the creation (especially Rom. 8.22). Gregory of Nyssa, one of the most revered Church Fathers, has also expounded a form of universal salvation.

In Moltmann's understanding of universal salvation, it is derived from God's essential goodness (nature), which he identifies as self-determining love. Time and again he weaves his arguments around this idea of God's essential love in order to establish the point that the notions of God's wrath and human response are nonessential in the dynamics of God's universal redemption. However, as we observed, his hermeneutical preferences to ascertain this position of God's obligation to redeem comes out as a 'soft' sensibility. When evaluated in light of his understanding of sin and repentance, Moltmann's universalism was found to play down these key traditional concepts. While Moltmann understands in a traditional sense that sin is the breach of communion between God and humanity, his notion of salvation as deification leads to his understanding of the incarnation of the Son and the transfiguration of the Spirit as not resulting in the remission of sins but rather in a mystical restoration of creation. This panentheistic conception of salvation undercuts the reality of sin. Also, his conception of repentance evolved from a decision demanded in response to the message of the Kingdom of God (in his earlier writings) to being unnecessary. For he construes human response having no place in the all-embracing scheme of God's redemption. It is apparent that Moltmann's universalism is an automatic rendering of salvation to human-

ity that effectively undermines human free will and divine retributive justice against evil.

Kärkkäinen's constructive proposal that attempts to balance divine determinism and human free will help to understand free will as a gracious gift and a hospitable necessity for creaturely life to exist. It could be construed that God would not subsume creation by his 'coercive' universal salvation plan (as Moltmann envisioned), but instead would anticipate human reciprocal response to his eternal love manifested in the incarnation of Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit. Gregory's model of universalism that contemplates a temporary hell and a 'finite' evil provided a possibility to reconcile the retributive justice of God, purification of evil, and to overcome the binary of good and evil. Such a 'conditional universalism' takes the biblical teachings seriously while envisaging a universal redemption for which creation waits in eager expectation (Rom. 8.19).

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