

University of Oxford
MTh in Applied Theology

'The idols of death and the God of life'

*A critique of the idolatrous God-concepts implicit in individualistic capitalism,
with special reference to Jürgen Moltmann's doctrine of the Trinity.*

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I – Theology and the 'Real' World

§1 'Who Christ really is, for us today'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled with the question of Christ's identity in the non-religious modern world:

What is really bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.¹

Bonhoeffer says that in answering that question, we must address the world in its strength, rather than exploiting its weakness, and that we must speak to it in full, prophetically. 'The world in its strength' means those who have the power to choose how 'they' are defined; those in power and leadership, etc. It is to those men and women we must speak. But in addressing them, we have to be relevant; we can only be that once we have listened to and understood the concerns of that world, both those in power, and those normally ignored.

In the context of this essay, this means addressing the issues raised by all-embracing free-market capitalism, those practising it, and those at its sharper end, in answer to the question of who God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—really is, for us today in economics.

§2 Economics and God-concepts

Meeks states that God-concepts are always at work in (economic) life, and the church needs to identify and reclaim them;² even the economic supposition that God is not necessary within an economic system is a God-concept. In answering our modified version of Bonhoeffer's question we will therefore offer an analysis of two core areas of economic theory, in order to uncover some key (and at the last, idolatrous) God-concepts implicit within it.

For Moltmann, the relationship between secular ideas and God-concepts is not causal. It is only in rare cases, he says, that such a relationship is clear; rather, 'reciprocal influence and conditioning is much more frequent.'³ For example, 'monarchical monotheism' has been used to justify hierarchical government and (ultimately) absolutism:

The notion of a divine monarchy in heaven and on earth, for its part, generally provides the justification for earthly domination.⁴

Neither arises directly out of the other; rather, each encourages the other (although the former is often used as the *justification* for the latter). God-concepts implicit within capitalism are thus those that encourage, and are encouraged by, capitalism.

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 279 in Selby, *Grace*, 11.

² Meeks, *God*, 26.

³ Moltmann, *Trinity*, 193.

⁴ *Ibid*, 191-192.

Indeed, it may not be overstating the case to say that economics actually *needs* God-concepts. Adam Smith, arguably the founder of modern economics, recognised that capitalism cannot operate in a moral vacuum. It requires a 'moral basis' to function sustainably. Originally, capitalism had that moral basis, because in Europe and the USA it inherited the strong religious tradition of Christianity. This tradition acted as a safeguard, preventing 'the pursuit of self-interest in ways which would be damaging.'⁵ The gradual erosion of this tradition, in tandem with the God-concepts implicit within capitalism, has allowed *and encouraged* that damage to occur. Our attention has turned from the God of life to the idols of death, from freedom within and towards the kingdom of God, to selfish material gain, and domination over others.

§3 Western free-market capitalism

In absolute terms, the West is considerably richer than it was 200 years ago, even fifty years ago, arguably as a direct result of our capitalist economies. The standard of living we can expect is much higher, and the standard we believe we can (or should) attain is higher still. One of capitalism's successes has been the creation of the middle class, raising the wealth of much of the old working class. We have seen the failure in Russia and Eastern Europe of the only other real alternative economic system, and its 'corruption' in China by capitalist policies. It might seem that capitalism has been an unbridled success.

However, the UK is the most indebted nation in Europe, with over £1trillion personal debt (£17,000 for every man, woman and child). Even back in 1990 the National Consumer Council opened its report:

As a nation we have thrown away the piggy bank... and now rely on future income to buy what we want today.⁶

Internationally the problem of debt is even worse. Selby writes that debt is a 'serial and multiple killer.'⁷ The reality of crippling and spiralling debt is one example that shows capitalism must be questioned, and at the deepest level.

Another is the way its ideology is spreading to non-monetary areas of life. At the time of writing the commercialisation of Christmas is all too obvious. Sexual relationships—among students especially—are commoditised, picked up and discarded at will. The assumptions of capitalism, which we will now investigate, are being accepted across the board, it seems, uncritically. By adopting the theory almost unilaterally, we make its goals the goals of our society as a whole, directed not towards God, but towards pleasure, wealth and self-service. Such behaviour, as we shall see, can only be idolatry.

⁵ Hay, *Economics*, 158-159.

⁶ Selby, *Grace*, 30.

⁷ *Ibid*, 73-90, quotation 73.

II – The Idols of Death

§4 Individualism and economic reductionism

The rise of economics as a 'science', together with the steady expulsion of religion into the private sphere of life, precipitated the exclusion of God from all areas of economic life. From Adam Smith to the present time, economists have seen their subject as the study of self-regulating phenomena, which obey natural laws and equations, in much the same way as the Newtonian cosmos. God is not needed; the market is governed freely, without coercion or domination, simply by market forces. Its coherence comes from the collective self-interest of the individuals acting within it.⁸ Adam Smith talked of an 'invisible hand', by which there is no personal competition; each exchange is to mutual advantage, so the market 'transmutes' self-seeking actions of mutual benefit into what is effectively 'co-operation for the common good.'⁹ 'Society' is thus precisely the sum of its parts, and no more. As Margaret Thatcher famously said, 'there is no such thing as society,' only individuals and families.¹⁰

The model of human nature in which people are motivated by reasoned self-interest is called 'rational economic man', and it forms,³ the 'basic building block of economic theory.'¹¹ J.S. Mill introduced the concept as a convenient simplification, but it later became *the* model for economic agents. The economic definition of rational choice is this:

given the set of available actions, the agent chooses rationally if there is no other action available to him the consequences of which he prefers to that of his chosen action.¹¹

This has been called the 'first principle' of economics, and was developed directly out of utilitarian theory.¹² Cramp agrees with this analysis:

For all the elaborate sophistication of modern versions, the theory of market economics as we know it is rooted and grounded in the philosophical system known as utilitarianism.¹³

One of the earliest utilitarian thinkers—a political philosopher in the seventeenth-century, Thomas Hobbes—based his ideas on two concepts. First, all 'psychological phenomena' (e.g. emotional responses) are the outcome of bodily conditions and are either desirable (pleasures, benefits etc.) or undesirable (pains, costs etc.). Second, an individual naturally and *rationally* seeks to promote her own interests, increasing her pleasures, while at the same time reducing her pains. Thus, rational, or 'right' behaviour is judged not according to a higher system of values but according to its consequences of pleasure or pain.¹⁴

Not all economists are happy with crude statements about utility, trying to break with the utilitarian roots

⁸ Meeks, *God*, 47-51.

⁹ Cramp, *Notes*, 9.

¹⁰ In an interview on 23 September 1987, published in *Woman's Own* (31 October 1987). The Prime Minister was talking about people requesting government intervention to sort out their social problems.

¹¹ Hay, *Economics*, 104.

¹² *Ibid*, 101-105.

¹³ Cramp, *Notes*, 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 35-36.

of economic theory. Allen and Hicks attempted to do this in the 1930s, with their 'indifference analysis'. This was defined by consumers not comparing the 'amount' of utility, but rather being able to say that 'this combination of A and B' gives more satisfaction than 'that one', while other combinations leave them indifferent. However, the 'rational' model of people desiring to maximise utility (here, 'satisfaction') within given constraints, remained the same.¹⁵ Still other economists have debated whether or not self-interest is the only motivating force behind people's behaviour; despite this the traditional model of 'rational economic man' continues to exert a 'powerful influence' in modern economics.¹⁶

The danger to which economics has fallen prey is the 'reductionist fallacy'. It began with a convenient simplification, which came with all sorts of qualifications, but was then absolutised. Initially this model simply reflected that human behaviour displays, to a greater or lesser degree, a certain amount of utilitarianism. However humanity came to be understood as *nothing but* 'a pleasure-pain calculating machine.'¹⁷ Tanner identifies this reductionism, and also universalism, where the theory of rational economic man, the 'cost/benefit assessment of economic utilities', is 'superimposed on every kind of human enterprise in every time and place.'¹⁸ Whatever the good in whatever field, it is treated as a competitive market. People effectively try to maximise their 'capital', to 'dominate' that particular field, preferably through 'exclusive possession' of the good, over and against whatever competitors one has.¹⁹ A consequence of this reductionist individualism is the need for the exclusive possession and growth of personal property, through which only one has the freedom that comes from dominating the market.

§5 Individualism and private property

For capitalists, private property is 'natural'; John Locke (e.g.) derives the exclusive right to property on a prior common right. For Locke, the world was given by God to all, so all have a right to it. The common right to the world is appropriated by individuals in exclusive property; to make best use of common land and natural resources, it has to be yours in an exclusive sense. However, the common right on which that exclusive right is based limits it: private appropriation of property is only legitimate if it doesn't prevent others from accessing what they need to live. Exclusive property is in fact 'on loan' from God, who always retains full possession of it. Locke extends these ideas to the human person, who is both his own and God's 'property'. Unlike other forms, property in our person is 'inalienable', that is, we cannot sell ourselves into slavery, whether literally or effectively (e.g. through contract) or we give up our humanity.²⁰

However, if we start from the position that we are our own property, whatever we *earn* through our work is exclusively our own, whether or not we need it or even use it.²¹ The common right to property recedes into

¹⁵ Ibid, 47 and Hay, *Economics*, 105.

¹⁶ Hay, *Economics*, 140.

¹⁷ Cramp, *Notes*, 58-59, quotation 59. See also Long, *Divine*, 3-5 and 262.

¹⁸ Tanner, *Economy*, 17.

¹⁹ Ibid, 21.

²⁰ Ibid, 40-43.

²¹ Meeks, *God*, 108 and Hay, *Economics*, 160.

the background, as the right to have what we have *earned* moves into the foreground. Also, the more you earn, the more you can get, and because you have *earned* it, your wealth is legitimated: in fact it's your right. Economic growth is an imperative, no longer for need's sake, but as the exercise of one's *right* and freedom to increase one's wealth.

Private property is usually defined negatively, as necessary to prevent others from seizing what is *mine*, to prevent conflicts over scarce resources, and to give *me* freedom and security from the determination of others, so *I* can do as *I* please.²² Further, private property is not simply about *having*, but also about *disposing*. If something is exclusively my own, I can do whatever I like with it: keep it, use it, or exchange it for something else. There are no obligations placed on me by the capitalist system, simply my own best interests.²³ In the market economy, any external obligations placed on an agent are seen as limiting that agent's freedom, which is realised through exclusive ownership of property, and it consists of freedom of disposal and freedom from domination by an external force.

In market logic, freedom cannot be realised without exclusive ownership. As Meeks says, 'property promises home.' But he goes on: 'it also threatens homelessness.' There is a difference between having enough property to make you independent, and having so much property we make others dependent.²⁴ That deep ambiguity in the concept of exclusive property is actualised in the system itself, which encourages self-interested 'rational' decision-making. As we quoted Tanner in the last section, the best way to maximise our personal capital, or satisfaction, is through domination. The more we have, the easier it is to dominate others, the freer we can be; the less we have, the harder it is to dominate others, and the less free we are. Thus, 'having money or lacking it tends, in short, to become a cumulative condition.'²⁵

The concept of gift is sometimes used as a way of justifying—or at least making best use of—private property. After all, we can only give as a gift what is exclusively ours to give, otherwise it is no gift at all. Giving like this does not challenge the wider framework of market exchanges, it simply makes use of them. Tanner says, rather negatively, 'disinterested giving for the sake of others simply legitimates the wealth amassed thereby.'²⁶ To put it another way, the fact that Western nations have 'forgiven' the debts of many developing nations, or send them humanitarian aid, does not justify the wealth we have generated at the expense of those developing nations.

²² Tanner, *Economy*, 36-37 and Cramp, *Notes*, 43.

²³ Hay, *Economics*, 162.

²⁴ Meeks, *God*, 101.

²⁵ Tanner, *Economy*, 39.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 59-60, quotation 60.

III – The God of Life

§6 Implicit God-concepts

We mention these God-concepts now to help in showing both *why* we have chosen Moltmann, and *what* we have chosen to discuss from his theology. For the sake of brevity, we are assuming that the relationship between these concepts and the previous sections is clear, and that we do not need to spend time demonstrating exactly where they are evidenced.

- (1) God is the ultimate free agent, whose freedom is realised through rational decisions of will, and the power to carry out that will.
- (2) That power is 'lordship' in its most dominating sense: absolute power of disposal over both his own person, and creation itself (as his 'property').
- (3) God uses that power to make choices which are of most benefit to himself, and often seem arbitrary to his creatures.
- (4) God is the 'watch-maker', who creates and sets creation going according to a set of natural laws; once he has done so, he has little or no interest in it. The world, and perhaps the mind of God himself, can therefore be understood in terms of equations.

It is these God-concepts which we will critique with Moltmann. To summarise, they are 'idols of death' because they isolate us from each other and God by focusing us inwards, onto ourselves and our own desires and needs, and close us to God's present and future community of life.

§7 Introduction to Moltmann's thought

The decision to narrow the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity down to one man was not made arbitrarily. Moltmann is at heart a practical theologian:

I am not concerned with correct but more with concrete doctrine; and thus not concerned with pure theory but with practical theory.²⁷

Such a theologian has obvious attractions to a student of 'applied' theology. Further, his theology is almost the antithesis of the God-concepts identified in the previous section. He is known for his 'social' theology, first of God, and then of humanity (in God's image), as opposed to the individualistic and exclusive concepts of capitalism.

We could have used *God in Creation* as the primary text for our critique of capitalism, and looked at theological anthropology instead of trinitarian doctrine. However Moltmann's understanding of the *imago Dei* comes directly out of his understanding of God as Trinity. We are therefore addressing what is prior, focusing on *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (all bracketed page references are from this work). In doing so, and by focusing on God-concepts rather than anthropology, we hope to avoid some of the

²⁷ Moltmann in Conyers, *God*, 204.

potentially problematic ways that Moltmann uses the Trinity as a model for human community.²⁸

First, we will look at the suffering love of God, key to Moltmann's understanding of divine power and freedom. Then we will study Moltmann's presentation of 'the history of God', and his understanding of divine sociality. Next, we will return to Moltmann's understanding of freedom, specifically human freedom, through the eschatological focus on the kingdom of God. After asking some critical questions of Moltmann's theology, we will correlate it with some of the God-concepts implicit in economic theory, specifically in relation to individualism and freedom.

§8 Suffering and the freedom of God

After *The Crucified God* Moltmann became known for his understanding of suffering, through which he wrestles with the question raised by Greek and Idealist philosophy: if God is incapable of suffering, how do we understand the cross? For 1,000 years Christian theology has had as its foundation 'natural theology', with 'the doctrine of God' preceding 'the doctrine of the Trinity'. Moltmann says that with its concept of God thus based on philosophical principles, the tradition created a cold, silent God. This God was forbidden from suffering, both to distinguish him from non-divine creatures—who do suffer—and to offer the hope that God can bring salvation from the world's present sufferings. There are thus two alternatives: a being can have either a 'fateful subjection to suffering', or an 'essential incapacity for suffering'. Neither seems to do justice to Jesus' suffering on the cross, so Moltmann suggests a third alternative for God, that of voluntary and 'active suffering... the suffering of passionate love.' God's *active* suffering is not as we experience it, because it is not out of a 'deficiency of being'; rather, it is out of 'the love which is the superabundance and overflowing of his being.' (21-23, quotations 23) Grenz puts it:

God does not offer hope for the world simply by contradicting its negativity. Rather, his love embraces the world in all its negativity, suffers the contradiction and overcomes it.²⁹

It is here that Moltmann raises the question of God's freedom: 'Is the suffering God free or is he a prisoner of his own history?' (52) In answering this, Moltmann has to correct common misconceptions. What God's freedom is *not*, is 'absolute power of disposal'. (54) And again, true freedom 'is by no means a matter of power and domination over a piece of property.' (55) That concept, Moltmann contends, comes from Roman property law. (54) God's freedom is precisely *not* a choice between 'mutually exclusive possibilities'. God does not have the freedom to deny himself. In Barth's language, neither is his self-determination arbitrary—in the sense that he could have determined himself to be something other than what he is—nor is the overflowing of his goodness a natural event—as if it occurs without his free decree. (54) When God loves the world in a certain way, he is not 'his own prisoner' but is in fact 'entirely free because he is entirely himself.' (55)

²⁸ Bauckham, *Theology*, 175-179.

²⁹ Bauckham, *Moltmann*, 85 in Grenz, *Rediscovering*, 79.

In this way Moltmann interprets freedom not in terms of power, but love. The former belongs to the language of lordship. But there only the master is free; his servants are not. The latter belongs to the language of community and fellowship. In love for one another people are vulnerable, open, kind, and as each suffers, so they all suffer with one another in love. This, for Moltmann, is what freedom means: suffering love, not 'arbitrary choice' (52-56), which is how economic theory understands freedom.

§9 History and the sociality of God

The foundation of Moltmann's doctrine of the trinity could be described, not as 'doctrine', but as 'the telling, or better *the retelling, of God's history*.'³⁰ For Moltmann, if we approach the doctrine from the point of view of salvation-history, God is clearly identified as trinitarian. We are confronted with 'these three indivisible and different subjects and their one, unique collaboration in their history.'³¹ For Moltmann, the problem is therefore not the trinity but the *unity* of God; in this he is at odds with the majority of Christian tradition. His concern for history is also to safeguard the perception he finds in the Bible that 'truth is to be found in event, in history and eschatology.' He demands 'an element of genuine temporality in God'; God is not 'was, is and will be', but 'was, is and *is to come*'.³²

Further, it is only in retelling the history of God that we can do justice to the 'trinitarian principle of uniqueness'. Moltmann is unhappy with the language of 'person' in talk of the Trinity because it gives the impression that the personhood of each is identical; he wants to retain a uniqueness that is lost when we use generic terms. For Moltmann orthodoxy can only be founded on 'narrative differentiation': we can only say who God is by narrating his history.³³ So, we will give examples from the 'history of the Son' of the way Moltmann recognises the 'threefold-ness' of God, before looking at how he conceives God's unity.

Jesus' baptism is marked by his anointing with the Spirit. Moltmann sees this as both 'inspirational' and 'messianic'; one mark of his earthly ministry will be the power of the Spirit, and through him the Spirit will be poured out on all his people. Jesus is in two ways 'the Son'. He is the 'beloved', the only Son of God, both king (Psalm 2.7) and servant (Isaiah 42.1). Second, he is the Son revealing a new relationship with God. Against the backdrop of the Baptist's eschatological proclamation of coming judgement, Jesus reveals God as *Father*, not (only) as Judge. God's fatherhood is the mark of his lordship, not lordship his fatherhood. (65-73)

We have already talked of how the crucifixion is important to Moltmann's understanding of God's suffering. Here he draws out further implications of the cross for the life of the Trinity. At Gethsemane Jesus prays that he might not be separated from his Father, but his prayer is not heard. The Father 'rejects' it, and 'withdraws from the Son, leaving him alone.' (76) And so at the centre of the Christian faith stands

³⁰ Müller-Fahrenholz, *Kingdom*, 142.

³¹ Moltmann, *History*, 83.

³² Bauckham, *Moltmann*, 93.

³³ Moltmann, *History*, 88-89 and 188-190.

Jesus' death-cry: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'³⁴ Jesus was not giving the appearance of weakness to fool Satan, as some have suggested; he really was suffering outward rejection and inward God-forsakenness. In the breakdown of the relationship between Father and Son, 'the innermost life of the Trinity is at stake.' (81) And yet, the will of the Son, surrendered to death through the Spirit, is one with the will of the Father, surrendering his Son to death through the Spirit; they are united even in their separation, *by the Spirit*: 'the cross is at the centre of the Trinity.' (75-83, quotation 83)

Moltmann identifies many other such examples of 'trinity-in-history', e.g. the resurrection and Pentecost, where the Father sends the Spirit of resurrection through the Son. Precisely because of the weight of these examples, Moltmann refuses to understand God as a monad, in any sense:

The unity of the divine tri-unity lies in the *union* of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, not in their numerical unity. It lies in their *fellowship*, not in the identity of a single subject. (95)

This way of understanding the unity of God is also clear in Moltmann's understanding of the relationship between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. He states that there is 'one, single, divine Trinity, and one, single, divine history of salvation.' (153) The one Triune God is the 'transcendent primal ground' of this *trinitarian* history. God's revelation to us is himself, and so if his history *is* that revelation, then in that history we are confronted with God *himself* in three persons, the social Trinity. Moltmann, like Rahner, all but removes any distinction between the Trinity immanent and economic. And so when we talk about God's inner being (i.e. the immanent Trinity) we cannot talk about God in 'psychological' terms, but rather about 'them', in 'social' terms, and their 'unifying at-oneness', because that is how God reveals 'himself' in the one, single, divine history of salvation (i.e. the economic Trinity). (151-161)

In order to talk about the 'unifying at-oneness' of the immanent Trinity, Moltmann uses the doctrine of perichoresis. Traditionally, the 'subjects' or 'persons' of the Trinity have been defined in terms of substance, or relations. Both are attempts to understand at the same time the difference between and unity of the three revealed as God. The early church used the language of *ousia* and *hypostasis* to describe three instances (*hypostasis*) of the one divine substance (*ousia*). Later theology talked about 'relations' (*relationes*) constituting the difference between the persons; the Father is not the Son because he has a relationship of fatherhood, and the Son of sonship.

Moltmann wants to bring person and relation together; a relation cannot constitute a person, and neither can there be a person without relation. So, 'the trinitarian Persons *subsist* in the common divine nature; they *exist* in their relations to one another.' (173) They each receive and give 'the fullness of eternal life' to one another. In this he follows Hegel. Further, there is a third way of defining person: historical. Person and relation come into being at the same time;³⁵ that 'becoming' is historical, *within* the life of God. So the persons do not merely 'exist' in their relations one with another, they also 'realize [*sic*] themselves in one another by virtue of self-surrendering love,' as they receive fullness of life from each other (174); this is God's 'inner history', mirrored in God's 'salvation history'.

³⁴ Matthew 27.46 and Mark 15.34.

³⁵ Moltmann, *History*, 85.

Through this inner history the persons live and dwell in one another 'to such an extent, that they are one.' The distinctions that divide them are thus the very thing that binds them together in perichoretic unity. For Moltmann, in the perichoresis, the threeness is not reduced to unity, not the unity dissolved in the threeness. Further, there is no subordination in the perichoretic unity of the social Trinity. (175) Moltmann does clarify that the Father is the 'origin' *substantially*, but not in any monarchical sense; as the eternal Father, he is perichoretically co-eternal with his Son. In dealing with the equally and perichoretically eternal procession of the Spirit Moltmann discusses the *filioque* clause. His (rather complicated) conclusion can perhaps be summed up as the following: the Spirit proceeds from the Father, but the Son is the logical presupposition of that Fatherhood; in the end, the Spirit proceeds from the Father of the Son, and receives his form from the Father *and* the Son. (162-170, 178-187)

Müller-Fahrenheit makes clear that God's perichoresis is not some eternally-repeating cycle of divine life for Moltmann. It has the goal of unity with the whole of God's creation.³⁶ The mutual indwelling of the Trinity is open to the world eschatologically: 'the perichoretic unity of the triune God is an inviting and uniting unity.'³⁷ For Moltmann, God's being is not that of a closed individual, but an open 'community' of love. The Trinity is open to fellowship, to uniting the whole of creation,

with itself and in itself... the unity of the Trinity is not merely a theological term; at heart it is a soteriological one as well. (96)

§10 Eschatology and the kingdom of God

In his doctrine of the kingdom, Moltmann adopts and modifies the theology of Joachim of Fiore. He is concerned to correct another piece of Western theology, this time the Protestant doctrine of two historical kingdoms, which says that God rules the world in a twofold way. The 'kingdom of nature' is the secular, physical rule of God, to preserve the world's order. The 'kingdom of grace' is the spiritual rule of Christ, to help people grow in righteousness, towards eternal life. A third kingdom is the post-historical new creation. This doctrine, claims Moltmann, is responsible for the antinomy between law and freedom in post-Enlightenment secular (and scientific) thought. Nature became equated with necessity and law, and grace with freedom from necessity and law. (207-208)

Moltmann's concern is to develop a trinitarian doctrine of the kingdom, eschatologically directed. The kingdoms of the Father, Son and Spirit are marked by self-surrender, self-emptying, self-humiliation, and by their direction towards the kingdom of glory, when each kingdom will be fully established and fulfilled. The three kingdoms are not a continuous process from one to another, but rather '*strata in the concept of freedom.*' (221) Human freedom is constituted by the Father's creation and self-limitation, it is restored to people through the suffering of the Son, and it is enabled in us by the powers and energies of the Spirit of new creation.

³⁶ Müller-Fahrenheit, *Kingdom*, 147.

³⁷ Moltmann, *History*, 87.

In the kingdom human freedom is in the image of God's. It is not defined negatively, as freeing ourselves *from* necessity, making ourselves lords instead of slaves. This concept of freedom is tied to slavery, where freedom is mastery, absolute rule over a piece of property, where only a few can be free. Instead, freedom should be seen as the 'free practice of what is good.' (214) It is not simply freedom *from* necessity but freedom *towards* the good, God's eschatological goal of his unity with all creation. Freedom is realised in a *community* of love, oriented creatively towards the future. (212-222) *Then* freedom will be full and complete, and will mean,

the unhindered participation in the eternal life of the triune God himself, and in his inexhaustible fullness and glory. (222)

§11 Questions about Moltmann's theology

One of the main criticisms of Moltmann is that in identifying God so closely with historical process, at worst he dissolves God into history. God's freedom appears to be compromised, and—which is worse—

if the world is the process of God's self-realisation, then evil, the negative which is taken up and overcome in the trinitarian dialectic, becomes a necessary moment in the divine process.³⁸

Either evil is necessary to God's being, or his being is contingent on unnecessary evil.³⁹ It is difficult to rescue Moltmann from this criticism, because he cannot resist making statements to this effect (e.g. 'the pain of the cross determines the inner life of the triune God from eternity to eternity' (161)). He doesn't want to dissolve God into history, but equally he wants to say that God could not have remained self-sufficient in eternity.⁴⁰

Related to this, some have suggested his trinitarian theology is anthropocentric, largely perhaps because of his desire to make God a suffering God. It is certainly the case that the question of suffering, which is a very human problem, is key to Moltmann's theology, coming prior even to his retelling of God's history (although of course it presupposes that history, especially the crucifixion). However, he approaches the issue of God's suffering through the incarnation and the cross, where God made *himself* 'anthropocentric', so to speak. Moltmann's theology of suffering should be seen as a way of wrestling with the meaning of the cross, of Jesus' cry of God-forsakenness, with what it meant for God himself to 'become' human, to suffer and die. So perhaps a stronger argument is that his trinitarian theology is *Christocentric*. He himself would probably agree, given his 'historical' understanding of the Trinity, revealed most clearly in the life of Christ.

Thirdly, it has been questioned whether Moltmann ever really ends up with unity. It is perhaps too far to claim he is tritheistic, but his constant emphasis on the three 'discrete subjects' of the triune history does make it 'difficult to conceive of a principle of unity that is comparable to that of the plurality.'⁴¹ The unity

³⁸ Bauckham, *Moltmann*, 107.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 106-108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 109.

⁴¹ Peters, *God*, 109 in Grenz, *Rediscovering*, 85.

of God for Moltmann is, as we have said, 'union' or 'at-oneness', not numerical. It is the unity of a fellowship rather than a monadic unity. This question simply highlights the difficulty of understanding the sense in which the three 'persons' revealed as God in the Biblical narrative are one. Moltmann's theology marks a significant departure from Christian tradition, but that does not necessarily mean he is wrong.

Fourthly, his use of that tradition is sometimes highly dubious. His treatment of Barth and Augustine in particular is often polemical, and not always justified. For example, he attributes to Barth and Augustine a 'monotheistic anthropology' which is perhaps better attributed to post-Cartesian philosophy.⁴² In the case of Barth especially Moltmann fails to do his nuanced (and dialectical) theology justice.⁴³ However he makes a good point that Western theology has tended towards modalism, and it is alongside that tradition that modern individualism developed.

⁴² McDougall, *Pilgrimage*, 107.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 106.

IV – Idealism and Pragmatism

§12 Implicit God-concepts and idolatry

The reader should not, we hope, be surprised to read that Moltmann's theology does not sit well with the God-concepts we outlined in §6. We will now tie explicitly those implicit God-concepts with Moltmann's theology, to see why we have identified them as the 'idols of death'.

In §4 we saw that, like it or not, capitalism is 'rooted and grounded' in utilitarianism.¹³ Rational choice is understood as making decisions between different options, to maximise one's 'pleasure' or 'pain'; in capitalism, this means maximising one's material wealth. However, in §8 we saw how Moltmann places *suffering* at the centre of the life of the Trinity. For God, 'love' is a higher goal than pleasure or pain, even if it means suffering for love's object. In answer to the question of whether God can love like this and still be free, Moltmann says that God's freedom is not 'absolute power of disposal' (54), but the freedom to be entirely himself, which means loving others.

One of the key critiques of capitalism that Moltmann's theology offers, is even in our title: individualism. That can be seen in the utilitarian basis of capitalism, and also in its understanding of property. In §5 we saw that freedom is realised in capitalism through property, which frees an agent from dependence on others, and from obligation to anyone but oneself. Further, exclusive ownership allows an agent to utilise their property however they wish. (The link between economics and God-concepts is perhaps clearest here. Locke understood God as the 'owner' of the world, who 'loans' the world to us, to do with as we will, within certain—rather loose—parameters.)

These twin aspects of individualism are critiqued strongly by Moltmann's 'social' understanding of God. In §9 we saw how fellowship and community, difference and unity mark the history of the Triune God. Those relations are most perfect between the three 'persons', but are also open to the world. As there is no exclusivity between the divine 'persons', who share all they are with each other, so God shares creation—and himself!—with his creatures, rather than keeping it all exclusively to himself. Freedom is not about the realisation of individual possibility, but about sharing in a community of love, freely suffering for others. Moltmann's emphasis on community is based on more than a crude anthropological appropriation of perichoresis. Fellowship and unity with himself are God's *eschatological* goals for creation.

This leads us to our final concept. We have seen (§4) the way in which the theory of capitalism effectively reduces human agency to the calculation of consequences, pleasurable and painful. This is linked with an understanding of God as a 'watch-maker', creating the world and letting it run according to a set of laws. Understood as a 'science', economics is devoted to the study of these 'natural laws'. However, in both §9 and §10 we saw that there is more to the world, and to God's involvement within it, than this. Creation is ordered in itself, and so can be understood mechanically in part, but it is also ordered towards God. Moltmann's eschatological understanding of the kingdom of God is absolutely key to his theology. God is intimately involved in his creation, and always has been, working so it may participate in his own eternal life. The goal of creation is not contained within itself, as if its own increase were enough, but in God.

So why have we identified these God-concepts as the 'idols of death'? The key is in the last paragraph. Capitalism has exchanged God's goal for us and creation with its own. It has made the increase of wealth and property the goal of human endeavour, instead of community-building (in anticipation of God's kingdom). In doing so, it has idolised property and wealth, causing death and slavery to many (literally and economically), and risking God's judgement. Further, in focusing so strongly on the individual, and in placing its own concerns before God's, it has idolised the self. The increase of wealth is only a wider 'human' endeavour, because it is the sum-total, no more and no less, of the increase of *individual* wealth. Society is no more than individuals, the sphere of their (selfish) activity. This individualism closes us off to each other, and to God's inaugurated-eschatological community-building. By worshipping the 'idols of death', capitalism has closed itself to the history—past, present and future—of the 'God of life'.

§13 The image of God

Great care must be taken when applying principles from the doctrine of the Trinity to humanity. It is certainly not a one-to-one relationship. However, the fact that we are made in the image of God means that some correlation at least has to be attempted. We have touched on Moltmann's attempt at this. He imaginatively locates the *imago Dei* in relationality, rather than in a human capacity for love or reason:

true human personhood, that is, the human being's likeness to God, comes into being only in and through relationships with other persons in the community.⁴⁴

Moltmann correlates principles from perichoresis to humanity loosely, but not so loosely that they lose all concreteness. (Perhaps the word 'inspiration' is better than 'model' for describing the way Moltmann applies those principles to humanity.) At the same time, he uses his understanding of God's eschatological unity with creation to emphasise the importance of community. An example of this is human freedom, in God's image, and in the process of being realised fully:

in their reciprocal participation in life, people *become* free beyond the limitation of their own individuality. (56, italics mine)

Whether or not you accept Moltmann's theology, or his method, there is arguably enough that is uncontroversial to ask serious questions of capitalistic and individualistic ideology. The main points we have drawn out of his theology are to do with freedom and sociality, to question capitalism's focus on exclusivity and individualism. Similar points can be found more widely in Christian theology, for example in Barth's covenantal theology.

§14 The 'realistic second-best'?

We have in this essay been quite critical of capitalism. There has not been the space to give it the full

⁴⁴ Ibid, 116.

treatment it deserves. After all, no other economic system has had such success. Even China has adopted some aspects of capitalism because, largely, it works.

The reason capitalism works is that it is based on a certain amount of empirical truth. People really do act in their own self-interest. And where that self-interest is almost universally the increase of wealth, the 'common good' is served by Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'. However, the 'truth' it is based on is really a lie, for it is the truth of idolatry, which leads to death. In our sinful state humans have,

exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.⁴⁵

The imperfect system of capitalism is implemented imperfectly by imperfect human beings; even capitalism's principle of the free-market is corrupted globally by rich nations to protect their economies against the potential growth of the developing nations. Further, while people do have a tendency to act selfishly, a system based on that tendency, and which recognises no other motivation, only encourages people to behave in that way even more.

We have said that no other economic system has had the success of capitalism. That success is measured in the generation of wealth: no other system has generated as much so quickly. But in §3 we identified some issues which question that success: national and global debt, and the ever-increasing appropriation of capitalistic principles into non-economic areas of life. From our work in this essay, we can see that these issues are largely as a result of economic ideas implicitly related to (and sometimes justified by) idolatrous God-concepts. We have identified and critiqued those God-concepts as the first part of the answer to our question of who God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is for us today.

The second part is to provide the 'moral basis' that Adam Smith knew was necessary to guard capitalism against the excessive greed and exploitation we see today. That basis must recognise and tackle human sinfulness, and begin to transform the practise of capitalism, to hold it to account, even over the implementation of its own principles (e.g. free trade). The church must seek to replace the 'idols of death' at the heart of capitalism with the 'God of life'; the church must encourage the rich capitalist countries to seek not their own ends, nor the increase of their own wealth above all else, but instead to seek God's end of unity with him and one another through suffering love. If the church can do this, capitalism really will be, to use Hay's phrase, a 'realistic second-best' for Christians.⁴⁶

It may often seem like there is no way we can change or affect the system, that our ideas laid down here are idealistic, and will not work in a pragmatic world. We will however let Moltmann's theology have the last word. In eschatological theology, tension between idealism and pragmatism is overcome. We recognise pragmatism's 'not yet', but also the proleptic 'now' of the idealism of God's kingdom of glory. In the Spirit's power the world *is being transformed* towards the eschatological fulfilment of the unity-in-fellowship-with-God for which it was created.

⁴⁵ Romans 1.25.

⁴⁶ Hay, *Economics*, 313.

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