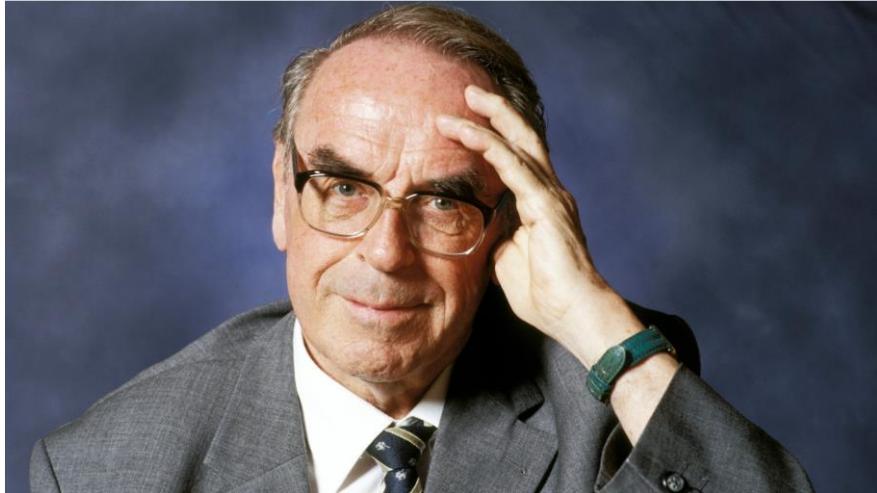


# ‘SAINT’ OF THE WEEK

## Jürgen Moltmann – A theologian who found God in a Prisoner of War Camp in Scotland

*Eminent German writer whose discovery of faith amid the horrors of the Second World War profoundly influenced his work*



*“Where there is danger, salvation also grows,”* was a line from the poet Hölderlin that Jürgen Moltmann liked to quote. And Moltmann, one of the 20th century’s leading theologians, began his own journey towards salvation through faith amid the extreme danger and trauma of Second World War Germany.

He had been deployed as a teenager to an anti-aircraft battery near his home in Hamburg. But all he could do was look on helplessly in July 1943 as the Allies began massive bombing raids over nine consecutive nights, leading to a lethal fire storm. A close friend standing next to him was killed by bomb splinters.

*“As thousands of people died in the firestorm around me,”* Moltmann recalled, *“I cried out to God for the first time in my life and put my life in his hands. My question was not, ‘Why does God allow this to happen?’ but ‘My God, where are you?’ During that night I became a seeker after God.”*

Born in 1926, he had grown up in the northern German plains where “the flatlands are wide and the heavens broad”. His father was a teacher, and it was a largely secular household. Moltmann, who idolised Albert Einstein, had early ambitions to be a scientist. But the Third Reich was tightening its grip, and he was disturbed when the local pastor argued that Jesus Christ had been Aryan and not Jewish.

His father was sent to the eastern front in the war and later confided to his son the appalling massacres of Jews and other he had witnessed. *“This completely put a stop to my willingness to serve,”* Moltmann said, but conscription followed and after a miserable, lice-ridden, hungry period as a soldier trying to evade Allied forces, he became a Prisoner of War in 1945.

At first, he felt only *“cold despair ... the inward imprisonment of the soul which was added to the outward captivity”*. **After transfer to a camp in Kilmarnock, Scotland, however, he was surprised by the humanity of the locals that “made human beings of us once more” as he “experienced forgiveness”.**

At the same time prisoners were confronted with evidence of Nazi atrocities in the death camps. *“For me every patriotic feeling for Germany — ‘Holy Fatherland’ — collapsed and died,”* he said. A feeling of profound shame *“never left me”*.

Moltmann began to find consolation in biblical study, notably the Old Testament psalmist’s laments and the image in St Mark’s Gospel of Christ on the Cross exclaiming: *“My God, why have you forsaken me?”*

When he was repatriated in 1948, he studied theology, religious history and Hebrew amid Germans seeking to rebuild their country and their lives. At one point his fellow Protestant seminarians included a former Stuka pilot and an ex-SS officer.

What Moltmann called “*the long shadow of Auschwitz*” meant, he believed, that “*true theology can never be remote but must always be related to human need*”. That idea was reinforced when he became pastor in a rural community near Bremen, playing cards with farmers and trying to preach sermons they would find accessible and relevant. During that period, he married Elisabeth Wendel, a fellow theological student. “*I admired her political theology, which was radically democratic and pretty far left,*” he recalled. “*Slowly my inward imprisonment dissolved. My soul expanded and I became light-hearted again.*”

They had to endure, however, the stillbirth of their first child, before going on to have four daughters, Anne-Ruth, Susanne, Esther and Friederike.

Moltmann decided to move into academia, with posts in Wuppertal and Bonn, before becoming professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen from 1967 to 1994. The book that made his name was *The Theology of Hope*, published in 1965, seen as a challenge to the idea that, in a despairing world, “*God is dead*”. It emphasised eschatology, not so much its traditional focus on death and “the last things” but rather what Moltmann saw as the messianic “*life-power of hope... to stand up after defeat*”.

Moltmann, who had been influenced by theologians including Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was murdered by the Nazis, was also very drawn to the ideas of the Jewish neo-Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch, who quoted extensively from scripture in his own work on hope.

Moltmann urged an eschatological belief that was “*forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionising and transforming the present*”. It chimed well with the mood of the mid-1960s with its global liberation movements. Widely translated, his works were read by radical Catholic priests in South America, and one found its way into the archives of the East German secret police, the Stasi, which warned that it was unsuitable for local Christians as it was “*too revolutionary*”. Moltmann was banned from preaching there and was also much criticised by conservative theologians in West Germany for his emphasis on political engagement.

Yet the impact of Moltmann’s theological writing remained remarkable. His work featured on the front pages of US publications including *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*, which praised the new “*theology of hope*” with its God who “*acts upon history*”. Moltmann was guest lecturing in the US in 1968 when news came of Martin Luther King’s assassination, which awakened his interest in the civil rights movement.

He realised, he said, that theology could not just be about hope, but also needed to address suffering, violence and injustice. In his next seminal work, *The Crucified God*, he sought to explore the contemporary meaning of the Crucifixion, portraying Christ who was not only meaningful for sinners but also “*suffers in solidarity*” with all kinds of victims. “*God weeps with us,*” was how he once put it, “*so that we may someday laugh with him.*”

Moltmann eventually published more than 40 works. There was a series of volumes on the key questions of Christian doctrine including the Trinity. He also produced shorter works written in a more accessible style, setting out what he saw as the practical applications of his beliefs. He engaged in debate about nuclear weapons and East-West relations and in *God in Creation* addressed the theology of climate change and environmental harm.

He was also strongly influenced by the feminist theology of his wife, Elisabeth, and in 1981 they jointly authored *God — His and Hers*.

In 2006 Moltmann published an autobiography entitled *A Broad Place*, which set out how his theological interests had emerged from the extraordinary suffering of war. While many faced with the horrors of the death camps and the devastation of mass bombing had despaired of faith and come to resent all religion, Moltmann had been drawn to the search for a faith that could respond. There were no easy conclusions. “*From the start,*” he reflected, “*theology has been an adventure with an uncertain outcome, a voyage of discovery into an inviting mystery.*”

But on that voyage, he found hope, and that became his great theme, applied to all the huge challenges the world and its people still faced. Despite such a bleak start in life he remained, said one of his students, “*an unflinching practical optimist*”.

*Jürgen Moltmann, theologian, was born on April 8, 1926. He died on June 3, 2024, aged 98. This obituary was published in The Times last Wednesday.*