

Imagination, Hope, and Reconciliation in Ricoeur and Moltmann

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This article explores how Paul Ricoeur's interpretation theory of a hermeneutic of imagination makes possible the healing and reconciling modes of being in the world that Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope proposes. It describes how Moltmann's theology calls the Christian to embrace the kingdom of God neither as "opium from beyond" nor as a "utopia of the status quo." Instead, he argues that Christians are to anticipate the coming kingdom by meeting it in the present through healing and hopeful acts of discipleship in community with Christ. The article then argues that applying Ricoeur's interpretive theory to this "already but not yet" position of healing hope can help the Christian navigate its dialogical tensions. It describes Ricoeur's theory that it is through a hermeneutic of imagination which struggles with the constant extremes of ideology and utopia that the community can interact with and interpret the event of the incarnation. It concludes that this imaginative act of ever interpreting the ongoing event of the Word being made flesh allows one to embrace the eschatological hope of the kingdom of God that offers reconciliation and healing.

In a world caught up in pain and suffering, full of broken relationships that yearn for reconciliation, people expect their belief system to speak into the reality of their experiences. For Christians especially, to talk about a God who created the world requires that one address not only the pain present in that world, but how one can have transformative hope in response to it. Yet despite this felt need for present hope, various theological systems call people to alternately

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work for simply a humanistic hope in the present or to bracket-off hope into the nostalgic past or dreamed of future. Subsequently, some look to science and progress to save humankind. Some assign a perfect understanding of God to those writing in the first, third, or sixteenth (or seventeenth) centuries and consequently attempt to confine the church to those eras. Some consign hope to an idealized version of the church and therefore refrain from disturbing the world with the transforming power of hope. Others, like Reinhold Niebuhr, wistfully refer to the realized hope of the kingdom of God as “an impossibility in history and always beyond every historical achievement” even as they endeavor to cling to that very hope.¹ Consequently, although it is popular to talk about hope, it can be rare to find transcendent hope embraced in Christian theology today.

Jürgen Moltmann therefore offered a revolutionary perspective in his *Theology of Hope*. In it he sought to embrace the mystery of a God who is both transcendent and immanent and whose solidarity with the suffering as demonstrated on the cross offers the promise of a future hope that makes possible transformative hope in the present. Yet paradoxical mysteries and the absurd logic of hope are difficult for those trained in the positivism of the post-Enlightenment world to embrace. Thus Moltmann’s theology is often read as supporting traditional categories that restrict hope of redemption and reconciliation into the extremes of “already” or “not yet.” To rescue Moltmann’s offerings regarding hope from those extremes requires an approach to faith that allows one to live with such paradoxes without constantly feeling the need to tame them into manageable forms. In short, one must shift away from rationalistic conceptions of knowledge that impose arbitrary categories on truth and embrace the potential of poetic truths to imagine transcendent possibilities. Given that Paul Ricoeur’s work serves to suggest how such an epistemological shift is possible, this article explores how an application of Paul Ricoeur’s interpretation theory of a hermeneutic of imagination provides the philosophical framework for embracing Moltmann’s theology. In Ricoeur’s system, if one interprets one’s faith by imaginatively living into its ongoing narrative and accepting the modes of being in the world that it proposes to the faithful, one is then able to navigate the tensions of its paradoxical extremes. This article suggests that embracing imaginative faith

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1935), 31.

as Ricoeur conceives of it makes possible the healing and reconciling modes of being in the world that Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope proposes.

In the early 1970s, if one were to believe the narrative provided by Jacob Bronowski in the widely popular and groundbreaking BBC series *The Ascent of Man*, the advance of scientific rationalism was pushing humanity to progress beyond the need for religious belief systems. Pride in the sheer "uniqueness of man" and his ability to rationally understand both himself and the world seemed to have brought the world to the pinnacle of humanism.² While some streams of Christianity attempted to adopt this trust in the human ability to forge a better world, others saw this triumph of secularism as evidence that the utopian dream of the kingdom of God ruling the earth was ultimately unattainable. After two world wars, the crumbling of the colonial project, and the worldwide movement toward liberation and equality, even this narrative of scientific achievement and progress was found lacking. The resulting uncertainty and cultural turmoil led to some (most prominently those in evangelical churches) promoting apocalyptic theologies that placed their hope in escaping the world while secular society gets left behind. Some in the mainline traditions merged Christianity and democracy, finding hope in the structures of civil religion. Society was in turmoil as it sought to make sense of what it meant to be a person of faith after this so-called death of God. The impulse of the Enlightenment had unfolded to the point where Kant's third question, "What may I hope?" served as the collective cry of the culture. In their own ways both Moltmann and Ricoeur, writing at this time of cultural crisis, sought to formulate responses to what it means not only to have hope but for that hope to mean something in this present age. Their wrestling with these questions of tangible and transforming hope considered in dialogue provide helpful perspectives on these tensions for a church struggling with those issues yet today.

Moltmann's theology of hope originated in part from this established observation that the world in turmoil as it is cannot be deemed "very good." Like many intellectuals of his era, Moltmann's understanding of the brokenness and suffering in the world was not merely theoretical. From his personal "experiences of imprisonment,

² Jacob Bronowski, *The Ascent of Man* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown & Co., 1973), 432.

humiliation, and exploitation” as a POW during the Second World War, he developed a sense of solidarity with the oppressed and the suffering that shared their hope for freedom.³ Alongside the worldwide cries for liberation he asserted that one can hope because God creates justice for those suffering oppression. Although Moltmann was in conversation with many of the politically revolutionary movements of his day and later with the emerging liberationist theologies, his work should not be confused with the limited utopianisms of those political movements. For Moltmann’s hope was not confined to simply the revolutionary present or the nostalgic past, or even just the coming future. Hope both transcends and indwells all times and therefore cannot be co-opted for the sole benefit of anyone in particular. Moltmann’s commitment to hope therefore led him to reenvision all of theology past and present in the light of eschatology—but eschatology understood as referring not to last things, but to future things. For Moltmann this is the future of the world where Christ’s past and future promised resurrection and reconciliation finds its fulfillment in the kingdom of God which therefore serves to transform the present.

Eschatology then became the very doctrine of Christian hope “which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it.”⁴ In this way, Moltmann grounded hope for Christians completely in God’s act in Jesus. The incarnation was not simply the eternal made present in an epiphantic way; it was the hope of the future breaking into the present reality as both the fulfillment and reaffirmation of the promise. With hope for the future so connected to the incarnation of Jesus, Moltmann argued that eschatology offers a “hope which is both this-worldly and transcendent.”⁵ Hope is not simply an “opium of the beyond” that placates Christians as they set their eyes solely on escaping this world or the future realization of promised reconciliation.⁶ Instead the anticipation of the future advent of Jesus is possible because Christ has already broken into this

³ Jürgen Moltmann, “Response,” in *Hope for the Church: Moltmann in Dialogue with Practical Theology*, ed. and trans. Theodore Runyon (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1979), 134.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: SCM Press Ltd., 1967), 16.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), 218.

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, “Love, Death, Eternal Life: Theology of Hope—The Personal Side,” in *Love: The Foundation of Hope*, ed. Frederic B. Burnham, Charles S. McCoy, and M. Douglas Meeks (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1988), 4.

world. Through community in Christ, believers therefore can affirm that hope is not something merely for the epilogue of the faith, but is at work “revolutionizing and transforming the present.”⁷

In this theology of hope, Christian proclamation therefore becomes, as Moltmann suggested, “the announcing, revealing and publishing of an eschatological event.”⁸ Rooted in the act of Christ’s resurrection and future advent, the Christian always looks to the future for the realization of hope which therefore transforms how one lives in the present. Christians are to live in hopeful expectation of Christ’s coming while always remembering that “to wait is not to adjust to unjust conditions of the present.”⁹ In knowing that the injustices of the world can and one day will be changed, Christians are to actively anticipate an earth where righteousness will dwell. To wait therefore means to resist injustice as every bit of righteousness done in the present anticipates the future reconciliation of all things.

To live in this mode of active anticipation that looks in hope to the future while embracing it in the present moment as well is, for many, a difficult path to accept. The tension of “the ‘already’ of Christ’s resurrection is juxtaposed with the ‘not yet’ of ours and of the total redemption of creation” which presents a constant call to witness to an alternate reality.¹⁰ This embodiment of hope consequently “subverts the status quo as it declares the reign of God in a world which rages against it.”¹¹ The option of living in a reality infused with hope comes with the price of always finding oneself at odds with the world and the traditional ways of understanding the purpose of faith. In light of this difficult call, one can begin to understand Barth’s critique that *Theology of Hope*, “though much can be said in its favour, is almost too good to be true.”¹²

Despite its liberating aspects, the difficult way of hope, instead of being embraced by believers, often gets dismissed or subverted by those who try to subsume it into traditional understandings of faith

⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.

⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 299.

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, “Session 3,” Emergent Village Theological Conversation, Libertyville, Ill., September 10, 2009.

¹⁰ Devin Singh, “Resurrection as Surplus and Possibility: Moltmann and Ricoeur,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 3 (2008): 254.

¹¹ Singh, “Resurrection,” 261.

¹² Quoted in Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2009), 109.

and knowledge. Although Moltmann attempted to address this tendency in *Theology of Hope*, many Christians still assume that realized hope belongs solely in the future as it is an impossibility in the present. As mentioned above, hope in this view becomes solely the promise of someday—a dreamed of escape from the realities of this world that offers comfort to those suffering in the present moment. One can see this theology in the hymns that emerged out of slavery. When faced with the horrific oppression of slavery, the songs revealed hopes of “when I die, hallelujah by and by, I’ll fly away,” of “no more crying there, we are going to see the King,” and of sweet chariots “coming for to carry me home.” While from within the midst of inescapable slavery this theology of escapism makes sense, it seeped into the broader theologies of the developing evangelical church and became the dominate voice in many of those churches. Even if the theologies of evangelicalism and dispensationalism would not assert their position of hope in such ways, it has become the practical interpretation of many of their followers. The popularity of books like the *Left Behind* series illustrate this hope of escaping the evils of the world which will one day get its due as Christ returns to vengefully mete out suffering upon evildoers who were left behind. Hope in this sense serves as a type of drug, numbing the pain of having to live in the broken world without making any difficult demands that one do anything to work toward healing that brokenness in the present. By exchanging the possibility of liberating hope in the present for simply an other-worldly future reward, Christians relieve themselves of the expectation that they must work to subvert the injustices of the present no matter how painful they might be.

While some push hope into the future as they dream of escaping this world, others support the idea of a future hope so as to preserve the status quo of the present. In this view, the injustice, oppression, and suffering that currently plague the world are accepted as givens that will one day be overcome, but for now cannot be challenged. This stance implies that the present world represents the best of all possible worlds available which creates a “utopia of the status quo.”¹³ Those who have much to gain from preserving the status quo often encourage this acceptance of present reality. Those who “enrich themselves at others’ expense” would often rather extend their present into the future than have future hope transform the reality

¹³ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 23.

of their privileged present.¹⁴ So, for instance, *Theology of Hope* was placed on East Germany's index of prohibited books and Moltmann denounced as a "convergence theorist, an anarchist and a CIA agent" for his dangerously subversive call to resist the status quo through Christian witness.¹⁵ A pastor there later showed Moltmann his copy of *Theology of Hope*, which he had rebound after friends had painstakingly mailed him the entire book a single page at a time. For those who benefit from the status quo, letting future hope infuse and transform the present is too dangerous and revolutionary to be permitted. This aversion to transforming the present is also demonstrated in the critiques of Moltmann which accuse him of rejecting Luther's bifurcated kingdom in favor of a kingdom of God without distinctions. This Lutheran view assumes that a kingdom of grace is at work in the present over and against the kingdoms of this world, but it is only in the future when God's kingdom of power and glory arrive that the everyday secular aspects of this world will be swept up into God's kingdom. That Moltmann would assert that the hope of the kingdom of God is at work transforming the sufferings of the present world (both sacred and secular realms) led to his theology being declared as "at fault" and problematic.¹⁶ While perhaps less extreme than banning his work and declaring him to be a CIA agent, this sort of critique similarly rejects the message that hope is at work transforming the present as a threat to the status quo (in this case traditional theology).

Given that Moltmann was influenced by the conversations of Marxism and the philosophy of Hegel, some have assumed Moltmann's theology similarly to be a mere humanism that seeks to bring about the kingdom of God through human endeavor alone.¹⁷ While criticism of Moltmann's influences is certainly valid, this conflation of a theology of hope with similar systems that speak of present liberation can simply mask an assumption of a static conception of God

¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, "Peace, the Fruit of Justice," in Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 151.

¹⁵ Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, 111–112.

¹⁶ David P. Scaer, "Jürgen Moltmann and His Theology of Hope," *The Springfielder* 34, no. 1 (1970): 20.

¹⁷ See Noel B. Woodbridge, "Revisiting Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* in the Light of its Renewed Impact on Emergent Theology," *Conspectus* 9 (2010): 106–113 and Randall E. Otto, "God and History in Jürgen Moltmann," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35, no. 3 (1992): 375–388.

that restricts God to brief epiphanic appearances in the past and the future, but which assumes God to be too transcendent to be at work infusing hope in the present. When God is cast in such a static or impotent role, it becomes easy to dismiss the empowered work of God's followers as being disconnected from the ways of God. To address this form of dismissal, Moltmann alternately proposes belief in a God who cannot be contained in either the "already" or the "not yet" and for whom "neither transcendence nor immanence is wholly adequate to express the understanding of God as the God of hope for the future."¹⁸ He continually calls for Christians to embrace this God and to therefore avoid the extreme positions regarding hope, reminding them that in speaking of the kingdom of God "we are not looking at our own works and successes . . . neither are we looking in faith to an invisible world in the beyond."¹⁹

To be in fellowship with this God is for Moltmann to accept hope without attempting to avoid either its difficult or liberating aspects. Hope in future reconciliation means that "those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it" in the here and now.²⁰ The power both to have hope and to resist current realities comes fully and only from God, but also negates the option for Christians to pursue quietistic reconciliation with the world as it is. Spiritual rituals or theological systems should therefore never become excuses for allowing injustice to flourish in the present moment. In Moltmann's theology there should never be a "religious sanctioning of the present, but a break-away from the present towards the future."²¹ Nevertheless, as shown, the dangerous stances of hope as an "opium from beyond" or as affirmation of a "utopia of the status quo" to which he offered his theology of hope as an alternative continue to subvert the lived realization of this very hope. Instead of transforming the present, hope continues to be co-opted by those who insist that it must only inhabit the "already" or the "not yet."

This dialogical tension of navigating hope within the extremes of the already and the not yet parallels the language Ricoeur uses to

¹⁸ David Stewart, "In Quest of Hope: Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Moltmann," *Restoration Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1970): 48.

¹⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, "The Diaconal Church in the Context of the Kingdom of God," in Runyon, *Hope for the Church*, 21–22.

²⁰ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 21.

²¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 100.

describe the basic hermeneutical struggle of people of faith in general. Therefore, an examination of the solution Ricoeur offers for how one can live into a non-polarized space in faith can serve to elucidate possible modes of being in the world where a theology of hope can be similarly rescued from such extremes.

In response to the rationalism and positivism of the post-Enlightenment world which had been offered by the likes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, “a panoply of iconoclastic devices for smashing the idols of belief,” Ricoeur proposed a hermeneutical manner for retaining the transcendent possibilities of faith.²² While many religious groups were responding to the cultural attacks on faith by either clinging to tradition or creating elaborate scenarios for how they would escape this evil world, Ricoeur turned to poetic manifestations of truth to define the Christian as a person of faith who is constantly witnessing to her tradition in the ongoing narrative at play in the contemporary moment. Interpreting one’s tradition to discern how one has a current and active place and voice within it is, he asserted, the ongoing task of the faithful. Faith must therefore not be restricted to merely what is empirical or rational, but can poetically and imaginatively write the narrative in such ways that affirm such irrational tropes as hope. Instead of responding to the attacks on faith of the nineteenth and twentieth century by retreating to the extremes of traditionalism or escapism, Ricoeur embraces iconoclasm for its ability to allow one to see the more poetic and symbolic elements in the narrative.

Ricoeur is quick to assert that the narrative of one’s faith is already in process and will continue on, requiring that the interpreter orient herself (and her interpretation) properly within the middle of the story. Ricoeur observes that this process of proper orientation is a constant struggle to navigate between the extremes of past and future which he describes as ideology and utopia. As shown above, interpreting the texts of the faith holds the potential for some to simply reiterate the past by restating ideologies, promoting static conceptions of what it means to be faithful in response to tradition. Others err on the side of always looking to the future and creating disconnected utopian novelties out of the faith. Acknowledging the importance of

²² Mark I. Wallace, “Introduction,” in Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 7.

both ideology and utopia (the past and the future) is necessary for any form of interpretation, especially in understanding one's relation to the ongoing narrative of faith. The function of tradition to "preserve and conserve" and of utopian visions to rupture the status quo by projecting alternatives serve to create a dynamic narrative of faith.²³ Yet, in their extreme forms both can turn pathological, as ideology can fail to accept the living aspect of faith while utopia can ignore the testimony of the faithful.

Ricoeur argues that true faith therefore demonstrates a deeper "commitment to the word of the text" that avoids being subsumed into or reduced to such extremes.²⁴ He proposes that an interpretive witness to the faith exhibiting such commitment and avoiding extremes is a hermeneutic of imagination. For Ricoeur it is the "poetic imagination that liberates the reader into a free space of possibility . . . disclosing new ways of being in the world."²⁵ These proposed modes of being in the world are not disconnected from the tradition of the faith, but are simply the shape of the witness in the contemporary moment. For tradition, according to Ricoeur, is "not the inert transmission of some already dead deposit of material but the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity."²⁶ Ricoeur argues that it is when the Christian imaginatively embraces these creative moments of innovation that the faith becomes capable of dynamically responding to tradition even as new forms of witness emerge in the present moment.

This interpretive play of the imagination allows Christians to respond to the what-is of the text and the tradition not by repeating the past or living in a dream world of unrealized utopia, but by always finding creative yet faithful ways of being in the world now. One places oneself into this ongoing narrative of the Christian story in ways that are both faithful to that narrative and at the same time allow

²³ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 7.

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics: Ideology, Utopia, and Faith," *The Seventeenth Colloquy of The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, The Graduate Theological Union & The University of California, Berkeley, Calif., November 4, 1975*, 55–56.

²⁵ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagination: Modern to Postmodern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 149.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 68.

the story to unfold. For Ricoeur it is “the narrative mediation of the dialectic of the past, present and future, through the literary works of the imagination, which has a covert ability to interpret our situation and to project new ways of being in the world.”²⁷ These imaginative ways of being in the world subsequently create dissonance “between the reality of the text and the reality of the reader” which opens up the possibility for the subversion of the status quo as one lives out the proposed reality of the text.²⁸ Faith consequently becomes about living the narrative of the Christian story in a way that shapes present reality by faithfully responding to tradition and permits elements of the dreams of utopia to break into the status quo.

Ricoeur suggests that this process of imaginative play that interprets faith in ways that do not subsume it into extremes can be employed as the hermeneutical method that the community of faith uses to interpret the ultimate text—the “word event” of Jesus being the Word made flesh.²⁹ The Christian therefore enters into the imaginative act of having one’s life become an active part of the continuing chain of witnesses ever interpreting the ongoing event of the Word being made flesh in order to discover ways of being in the world that are neither reiterations of ideology (Moltmann’s “utopias of the status quo”) or projections of utopia (Moltmann’s “opium of the beyond”). Placing themselves imaginatively into an ongoing narrative of witnessing to the Word made flesh brings the text of Christ into the present in light of the past and the future instead of banishing Christ to those extremes. Dwelling only at those extremes would force the person of faith to lose vital aspects of the Christ narrative. As Richard Kearney has commented on Ricoeur’s warning against being subsumed into the extremes, “without the backward look a culture is deprived of its *memory*, without the forward look it is deprived of its *dreams*.”³⁰ Past and future, memory and dreams, are required for a culture or faith to flourish.

Living into these modes of being in the world that witnessing to Christ demands in the narrative forces the Christian to respond to the text as if it were “a musical score, which to be interpreted must be

²⁷ Jeanne Evans, *Paul Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics of the Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995), 15–16.

²⁸ Singh, “Resurrection,” 259.

²⁹ Ricoeur, “Philosophical Hermeneutics,” 6.

³⁰ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 87.

activated, played, and the world projected by the work is the outcome of the performance.”³¹ It can be easy to project oneself into the text, interpreting it in one’s own image instead of allowing the text (for Christians the very witness of the Word made flesh) to shape one’s very self, but it is this dialogue done with humility through imagination that pushes through the tension to the interpretation. Responding to the text as if it were a musical score requires that the interpretation be creative and yet still faithful to the original. As with any good musical performance, these possibilities carry the potential not just for beauty, but for hope, healing, and reconciliation as well. Reality is reconfigured as new possibilities and alternate worlds that subvert the status quo are presented through the act of imaginative interpretation.

In Ricoeur’s interpretive system these alternate ways of being in the world are only possible because the process of ongoing imaginative interpretation of the text never arrives at a final or static interpretation, but instead through play discovers a surplus of meaning in the text. The story is never co-opted by the extremes of ideology or utopia, but allowed to unfold and continually reveal ways of being in the world. In entering into the story “the reader does not submit the meaning of the text to his finite capacity of understanding,” but avoids limitations by humbly and faithfully accepting the abundance of meaning the story itself offers.³² This requires of the reader a “renunciation of the self-righteousness of certainty,” but it is through that letting go of the certainty of a static interpretation that the hope-filled possibilities of the text can be made known.³³ This in-breaking of meaning that occurs as the reader relinquishes the attempt to capture or control the text is what Ricoeur even referred to as “a hermeneutics of God’s coming” or “the approach of the kingdom.”³⁴

It is this inherent abundance or surplus of meaning contained in the text that allows it to open up its possibilities for informing the present for the faithful. In other words, this is how the living hope of the kingdom is known. As Ricoeur writes, there is an “absurd logic” of superabundance to hope that defies both traditional and iconoclastic approaches to understanding faith.³⁵ So, for instance, according to

³¹ Evans, *Paul Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics*, 158.

³² Ricoeur, “Philosophical Hermeneutics,” 17.

³³ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 29.

³⁴ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 29.

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Hope and Structure of Philosophical Systems,” in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 205.

Ricoeur the resurrection can therefore be interpreted not as “an event which closes, by fulfilling the promise, but an event which opens, because it adds to the promise by confirming it. . . . The ‘already’ of his Resurrection orients the ‘not yet’ of the final recapitulation”³⁶ It would limit the resurrection to assert that all of God’s work was fulfilled in that moment with Jesus or to say that God will simply then reappear one day to resurrect and redeem all. It is for this affirmation of the abundant possibility that the resurrection offers that Ricoeur admits to being “very much taken with” Moltmann’s perspectives in *Theology of Hope*.³⁷ Ricoeur appeals to Moltmann in his essay “Freedom in the Light of Hope” to assert with him that the Christian God is not like the pagan gods with their brief epiphanies and manifestations of the sacred, so therefore the resurrection can never be just an event of the past. As Moltmann argued, God, “who never exhausts himself in any historic reality but comes ‘to rest’ only in a reality that wholly corresponds to him,” constantly overflows grace into history with the fulfillment of any promise.³⁸ A promise already fulfilled, like the resurrection, breaks into the present by confirming that God’s uncontainable presence permeates there as well. So in the God who abounds in grace at all times, the resurrection testifies to a surplus of meaning by being “an event that opens a new future and reinstates the promise by confirming it.”³⁹

Those who affirm this dynamic understanding of the resurrection live therefore with a passion for the possible and are pulled, as Moltmann suggested, toward mission. To move toward this mission requires shifting one’s view of the past from a static one that works to “annihilate history” as it dismisses the crises of the past, to one that embraces the dynamic unfolding of history.⁴⁰ In this view events of the past, such as the resurrection, are both preserved as history and yet always keep the possibilities of the future open. Responding to the past with the belief that it points toward the future creates a space in what Moltmann refers to as “the frontline of the present” for

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Freedom in the Light of Hope,” trans. Robert Sweeney, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 406.

³⁷ Ricoeur, “Freedom in the Light of Hope,” 406.

³⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 106.

³⁹ Ricoeur, “Hope and Structure,” 205.

⁴⁰ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 261.

the engagement in mission that transforms the world.⁴¹ Ricoeur, in embracing Moltmann's mission emphasis, understood it to describe the ethics of hope which results from the surplus of meaning the resurrection provides. This engagement in mission "proceeds from the promise, opens the future" through the process of living into the surplus of meaning provided by such a dialectic of the hermeneutic of imagination.⁴² Moltmann in return embraces Ricoeur's language in his 2012 volume *Ethics of Hope*, when he comments upon such hope that "in the imaginations of hope there is always a superabundance of what is hoped for."⁴³

Christians practically experience this abundance of grace in the resurrection as they accept their place in the ongoing narrative and engage in mission that transforms the present moment in light of both the past and the future. As James Fowler commented on this process, imaginatively inhabiting the narrative "awakens our capacity to imagine the coming kingdom of God. It awakens our ability to taste and feel the powerful truth of God's futurity for us and all people. It gives us images and heart to compose a transcendent reality."⁴⁴ It would be a limiting denial of this abounding grace to turn the hope-filled resurrection into an ideology of the past or a utopia of the future. Christians need their capacity to imagine awakened in order to embrace the surplus present in the story they inhabit and hence to see how God is at work in the present reality. It is to accept a way of being in the world that affirms with Moltmann that "theology is not a church dogmatics, not a doctrine of faith. It is the imagination for the kingdom of God in the world, and for the world in God's kingdom."⁴⁵ Applying Ricoeur's interpretive method releases understanding of faith from the confines of traditionalism and iconoclasm and allows it to offer a surplus of grace that "permeates our existence in the present, opening up future possibilities in expectation," henceforth enabling the Christian to imagine alternate realities such as the kingdom of God in the world.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 261.

⁴² Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," 408.

⁴³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2012), 3.

⁴⁴ James W. Fowler, "Future Christians and Church Education," in Runyon, *Hope for the Church*, 101.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996), xiv.

⁴⁶ Singh, "Resurrection," 256.

Hope, understood through Ricoeur's hermeneutical lens, in this way avoids being bracketed off in the future or past, but instead can dwell in the midst of the present as a transforming presence. The event of Jesus' incarnation and resurrection then becomes an ongoing witness to the future hope of reconciliation that transforms how Christians live in the present, just as Moltmann suggested. Evidence of the promise fulfilled in the past in Christ reveals that there is much more to come in the unfolding story. The text, interpreted in such a way, therefore transforms the reality of the reader, calling her to challenge the status quo by living into the performed interpretation of the text as an acknowledgment that the hope of Christ can never be contained. When that text is performed in hope, redeeming and reconciling grace becomes not just a moment in the past or something ultimately to come in the future, but that which abounds in the present as well. Accepting the modes of being in the world that a hermeneutic of imagination allows the text to propose in one's life provides then the option for hope to transform even the present moment.

One is able to then live into the hope of future redemption and reconciliation by performing the text of the incarnation/resurrection through acts of hope in the present. This imaginative interpretive act enables Moltmann's vision that "here and now, already, Christians live by virtue of the peace of the kingdom which is to come, and wherever possible introduce that peace into this violent world."⁴⁷ The promise that all will one day be reconciled not only enables acts of reconciliation in the present, but demands such acts in the unfolding story. In a world where grace abounds and there is a surplus of hope not just in the future but in the present, systems that deny that surplus are therefore called into question. Poverty, injustice, and oppression are all based on assumptions of scarcity and therefore must be protested by those that live the story that calls Christians to witness to that very surplus. The gift of hope, when allowed to inhabit the present, cannot help but change those who accept it. As Moltmann describes it, "When unjust men and women are justified, the consequence is that they are sent out to work for more social justice. When peaceless men and women are reconciled, the consequence is that they are sent out to make peace in the conflicts of this society. There can be no other response for Christians to their experience of God."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Moltmann, "Peace, the Fruit of Justice," 152.

⁴⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, "Has Modern Society Any Future?" in Metz and Moltmann, *Faith and the Future*, 170.

Imaginatively placing oneself into a dynamic story that does not simply reiterate tradition or dream of the beyond is the mode by which hope enters into and transforms the world. As Moltmann reminds in his *Ethics of Hope*, one lives out this hope not by violently imposing one's tradition upon others, or retreating from the tensions of the present into an idealized space, but by doing the hard work of "mak[ing] ploughshares out of swords."⁴⁹ Christians accept their active role in the narrative despite the difficult work it entails and the ways it promises to shatter the status quo. Ricoeur describes this approach to ethics as Christians finally waking up to what it means to be the salt of the earth, which he describes as knowing "that the salt is made for salting, the light for illuminating, and that the Church exists for the sake of those outside itself."⁵⁰ Christians do not exist for the sake of themselves or for the structures of the church they have created, but to be that very salt and light in tangible and meaningful ways in the world. Hope permeates the past, present, and future of the Christian narrative and those who accept that narrative therefore must perform that very hope and bring healing to the world. At the same time, this healing does not just happen by or for individuals. Faith and healing all take place in community. As Ricoeur points out, "There is always a culture which produces a text and a culture which reads it. Reading and writing always occur in a culture."⁵¹ To perform hope is to always enter into dialogue with these cultures, critiquing their ideologies and utopias while at the same time being formed by what they offer. The proposed ways of being in the world emerge from these culturally situated texts and take shape within culture. They are communal acts that create the ongoing unfolding movement of the kingdom of God.

Ricoeur's hermeneutic of imagination avoids the extremes of ideology and utopia that have been used to subvert and oppose Moltmann's theology of hope by poetically accepting the texts' proposed modes of being in the world. Interpreting the event of the advent of Christ—that of the future and the past which therefore informs the present—means performing through acts of hope in the present the anticipated reconciling hope of the future. As Moltmann notes, this is not "self-redemption" or human imposition of the kingdom, but the

⁴⁹ Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, xiii.

⁵⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Ye Are the Salt of the Earth," *Ecumenical Review* 10, no. 3 (April 1958): 264.

⁵¹ Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics," 45.

only possible response Christians can have to the promise of the future abounding already in the here and now.⁵² It is to accept the abundant story God provided by faithfully witnessing to what God has done, is doing, and will do in the future. One draws near to God by accepting one's role in that story. For as Moltmann commented, "The certainty of Christian hope is based on the belief that God's future has approached man through and in Jesus: in his resurrection from death on the cross, that future of God's kingdom entered into history. . . . When the future comes to meet us this way, there is reason for us similarly to go out to meet it."⁵³

⁵² Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 338.

⁵³ Jürgen Moltmann, "The Future as Threat and as Opportunity," in *The Religious Situation: 1969*, ed. Donald R. Cutler (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1969), 940.

