

A passionate theology: Jürgen Moltmann for today

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

Everything that Jürgen Moltmann writes is worth reading and thinking about, beginning with his *Theology of Hope* (1964) and its compelling message that Christianity is deeply and essentially about hope—not optimism, but hope based on trust in God’s redeeming activity even in the midst of dreadful circumstances.

Moltmann has written in various places of the personal experience out of which his theology and faith grew. He was a 17-year-old conscript in the German army in 1943, stationed in his hometown of Hamburg, when he witnessed the Allies’ firebombing of the city; it killed 40,000 civilians. Later he was a prisoner of war. Those searing experiences lie behind *Theology of Hope* and another important book, *The Crucified God* (1972).

Recently I picked up Moltmann’s *A Passion for God’s Reign*. I confess that I purchased the book when it was published eight years ago, but took it down from the shelf only when I was looking for slender paperbacks to take along on a trip. The book consists of three essays based on lectures Moltmann delivered at Fuller Theological Seminary, with responses by Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor of philosophical theology at Yale, and Ellen T. Charry, a theologian at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Moltmann delivers a thorough and strong critique of modernity, beginning with the way Western culture remembers its own history. He notes that we still use the word *discover* to describe the encounter of European explorers with the New World. Europe didn’t discover the Americas. Europe *conquered*. When Luther was nailing his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Hernán Cortés was sailing toward Mexico. And when Luther took his stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Cortés was conquering the Aztecs.

Moltmann also stresses ecological concern. He traces the complicity of Western culture and churches in the destruction not only of indigenous cultures and

economies but of the environment. "Can we change the industrial society into an ecological society?" he wonders.

Moltmann critiques the culture of secular individualism and argues that Western culture needs more theology, not less. He also maintains that Christian theology should be taught at public universities because it can assimilate other religions into the discussion.

Wolterstorff takes issue on that point, reminding Moltmann that religious freedom and the equal treatment of all religions is very near the heart of constitutional democracy. Charry's response is one of the finest accounts of modernity's "hyper-individualism" I've ever read.

I found this conversation enormously helpful, and it correlated nicely with another book I've been reading, Jon Meacham's *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers and the Making of a Nation*. Meacham, managing editor of *Newsweek*, surveys the role religion has played in American culture. The topic could not be more timely given the religious right's effort to create a "Christian America," and the left's seeming lack of interest in religion.