

Moltmann the teacher

Studying theology with him offered me new possibilities for justice and abundant life.

by [Nancy Bedford](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue



Theologian Jürgen Moltmann (Basso Cannarsa / Agence Opale / Alamy)

After finishing my master of divinity, I returned to my home province of Córdoba, in Argentina, to live with my parents while figuring out my next steps. I taught in a small Bible institute in Córdoba City and helped out at a local church. I felt called to be a theologian, and one option was to pursue a doctorate in Buenos Aires, at the Protestant Faculty of Theology (ISEDET). But the theology of Jürgen Moltmann would not let me go.

I had first encountered the German theologian, who died in June, in his sermons collected in *The Power of the Powerless*. I found them thrilling. Here was a theology that took the triune God seriously in a way that could be preached and lived. I had devoured his early works, *Theology of Hope* and *The Crucified God*. In them I discovered a hope against hope that was very different from blind optimism: it was hope based in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it opened up new possibilities for justice and abundant life, starting now. At the same time, his attentiveness to the cross functioned—much as the theology of the cross in Martin Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation does—as a way of discerning the structure of reality more clearly, in the midst of many distractions.

I consulted with my former professors: Did they think it was possible for somebody like me to study with Moltmann? They replied that it doesn’t hurt to try. So I found a way to write him a letter.

A few months later, in January 1989, with my heart pumping, I knocked on the door of Moltmann’s house on Biesingerstrasse in Tübingen, Germany. I had received a letter in response to mine, saying he’d be willing to discuss the possibility of working with me as my doctoral advisor. He opened the door, and I saw a pair of twinkly eyes looking at me through his glasses. In an instant, I felt at ease.

He invited me in, and we sat in his living room with the view down toward the Neckar River, drinking his trademark strong black tea. He told me about his expectations of doctoral students, who, he said, were to be independent citizens of academia, charting their own path forward. I later realized that this was a standard part of his speech to new international students, perhaps warning us of the peculiarities of the German university at that time, in which there would be no coddling. He told me that our conversation that day would be the last one we’d conduct in English; from that point forward, we were to speak only in German. He put a copy of the proofs of his book *Der Weg Jesu Christi (The Way of Jesus Christ)* in my hand. “I will take you on as my last doctoral student; I will see you in September,” he said, and he sent me on my way.

By the fall, I was back in Tübingen to begin five very formative years there. Moltmann was at that time the age I am now, in his early sixties, and with retirement in view, he had the intention of limiting the doctoral students he would take on. In fact he would keep on admitting a trickle of students as emeritus professor—all the way into his 90s—so I was one of perhaps a dozen “last doctoral students.”

He had only one other Latin American doctoral student, Reinerio Arce, who became like a brother to me and cued me as to how to go about matters in Tübingen. “Take advantage of all of Moltmann’s lectures and seminars, whether or not he asks you to be there,” he told me, and so I did, taking copious notes.

One of the books Jürgen was writing while I was in Tübingen was *The Spirit of Life*. He gave lectures based on the chapters and organized a seminar on pneumatology, which drew a number of students with roots in Wesleyanism, Pietism, and Pentecostalism who normally did not attend his classes. In some ways, that book marked a turning point in his theology toward a more fully trinitarian development of his thought: the Holy Spirit was now more than just an implicit bond of love between the first and second persons. In a very explicit way, the Spirit of resurrection, life, and hope was working ceaselessly in the triune God’s beloved creation in order to bring God’s good gifts to fruition both in little things and in big ones, at the personal and cosmic levels. The lesson I took from this for my own theology was that the Spirit’s work is never separate from the life and teachings of Jesus, but it helps make them palpable in the here and now—often in surprising or novel ways that can transform ecclesiology, politics, and personal decisions.

We also had an obligatory doctoral seminar, where we presented chapters from our research and examined topics Jürgen wanted to explore, such as “The history of the devil” and “All about angels.” But often, the best moments for learning came when eight or nine of us would go with Jürgen to the Greek restaurant in town or to the *bierkeller* to talk about theology. Once, we got to talking about a certain kind of Swabian sandwich on *seele* bread. I was startled: “*Seele*, like soul?” I touched my heart in illustration, and Jürgen simultaneously touched his forehead. We laughed. Our different sense of where the soul was metaphorically located was an example of how similar and yet how different our reception of the theological tradition could be, given our varying cultural, linguistic and historical contexts.

I often argued with Jürgen about the reception of German philosophical traditions in Latin America. Latin Americans used Marx and Hegel and Bloch in our work, but given the history of European colonization, we read them in a very different way than Jürgen and other Germans did, a way that in my view was no less legitimate. He in turn pushed Reinerio and me repeatedly to deepen our use of Latin American sources of all kinds—philosophical and theological, but also literary and artistic—in our theologies.

One evening Jürgen took Reinerio and me to visit the retired New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann in his home. Käsemann had been one of Jürgen's professors and mentors. Käsemann's daughter Elisabeth was one of the disappeared in Argentina, and we were honored that he would revisit that terrible story in his conversation with us. Jürgen had been in Buenos Aires in 1977 to give the Carnahan Lectures at ISEDET when Elisabeth was kidnapped by the dictatorship, and he had been instrumental in working with the German embassy to try to help Käsemann reclaim her body. Alongside the problem of evil, we also spoke of Christology. Käsemann was skeptical of Jürgen's treatment of the "cosmic Christ" in *The Way of Jesus Christ* and told him so quite forcefully.

For me, the dynamic between these two men was a master class in how to respect an esteemed teacher and also to disagree with him. Jürgen never tried to make Moltmannians out of us but rather helped us—and argued with us—as we brought our own ideas to fruition. He loved theological "disputations" and the possibility of hashing out new insights through conversation. He was exacting and easily lost interest in feeble arguments. But he was also willing to change his mind and quick to think of unexpected connections between concepts.

Augustine was wary of *curiositas* as an unhealthy habit linked to speculation. Jürgen reclaimed curiosity as a theological virtue. He was open to learning new things and revising his perspectives if necessary, which meant that he was especially hospitable to work coming out of the Global South and from nondominant voices in the Global North. He had us read James Cone and examine feminist theologies and theories. He was willing to supervise my dissertation on Jon Sobrino's Christology in dialogue with Anabaptist perspectives. When the time came to evaluate my dissertation, none of his colleagues in the Protestant faculty were interested in being a second reader, so he asked a professor in the Roman Catholic faculty, Bernd Hilberath, to do so. This in itself was a lesson in practical ecumenism for me, as was Jürgen's generous willingness to spend time in conversation with our group of Latin American doctoral students in Tübingen, many of whom were Catholic priests. Jürgen's spouse and fellow theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel also influenced me, almost by osmosis—especially her methodology of "reading" the record of visual art to glean insights for feminist theologies. Jürgen often made reference to her points of view.

The year I finished my doctorate, 1994, was also the year Jürgen retired. He gave a wonderful "last lecture" in the *theologicum* in which he spoke of theology as a

passion for God. That quality of passion for God—for God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s justice, God’s peace—was exactly what I felt Jürgen encouraged in my own life, not only in word but also in deed. He made sure I found fellowships so I could make ends meet while I studied, first from the World Council of Churches and then from the Zimmermann Stiftung. He gave me a gift certificate for books from Gastl, his favorite bookstore, as a graduation gift. After I completed my work in Tübingen, he recommended me for my first position in systematic theology, at ISEDET. To have his recommendation—indeed, to have been his student—was to be well on one’s way.

For the next 30 years, he was a constant presence in our lives. At first he was a bit skeptical of my relationship with my now husband, wondering if it would distract me from theology. But after a time he would ask periodically: “When are you getting married?” He celebrated our marriage, the births of our three daughters, and each of the important moments in our lives. He wrote letters, called regularly, sent copies of his new books, and insisted that it was important to him to know exactly how I was and what I was doing. He prodded me to continue to develop my own theological voice. He came up with invitations to theological events so we could meet up in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, Tübingen, Managua, Havana, and elsewhere. He was never too proud to say, “I miss you! You are important to me!” When the phone rang on a weekday morning at 8 a.m., I knew that it was probably him and I had better get my German in gear. I know for a fact that he was exactly the same with scores of other people. He had the capacity to make each person with whom he interacted feel incredibly special.

This February, I was once again able to knock on his door in the Biesingerstrasse. We sat in the little sitting room, surrounded by books, mementos, and prizes, and drank his strong black tea. He had lost much of his voice, but he wrote down what I could not make out, and we had a delightful time. I was sure that he was going to make it to age 100 and that we would celebrate with a big bash. But I think he probably knew that would not happen. Instead he said, as he had often done in the last few years: “I am not afraid of death. I look forward to the resurrection.” By early June, he was gone.

I attended his memorial service in the Stiftskirche in Tübingen on June 14. In her beautiful sermon, his former assistant Carmen Rivuzumwami said that Jürgen had wanted not a service of mourning but a celebration of resurrection life. We sang words by Paul Gerhardt and heard some of Jürgen’s favorite scriptures (especially

Job 36:16, about the “broad place” God makes for us). Graveside, we held hands in a great circle and recited the Lord’s Prayer. Then each person threw a fistful of dirt and some rose petals onto the grave. I was not able to contain my tears, but I also remembered and was comforted by what Jürgen had taught me: “We die into the resurrection, and eternal life is the life of the world to come.”