

Not optimistic: A theology of hope

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

Give yourself a treat and put Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* under your Christmas tree. Moltmann published the book in German 40 years ago. After it was translated into English three years later (1967), he became an instant theological celebrity in the U.S. The book even made it to the front page of the *New York Times*. One of *Theology of Hope's* main themes is Advent, God's coming to the world to redeem it. In the Advent season, it may be good to remind ourselves of this extraordinarily important book.

The book's immense original popularity owes much to the fact that "hope" was in the air. It was the "Kennedy era" in the U.S. and the time of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. The Western world was about to experience the power of radical student movements. "Prague spring" would soon come to Czechoslovakia, a fruit of the increased democratization of socialist societies of the now defunct Second World. And in the Third World of the late '60s, intellectuals toyed with Marx's ideas. *Theology of Hope* was riding a global wave of social hope. As Moltmann said, the book had its own *kairos*.

But *kairos* is an ambivalent blessing for a book. On the positive side, it propels the book to the forefront of public attention. On the negative side, it squeezes interpretations of the book into pre-given molds. Everybody talks about the book, but hardly anybody understands and appreciates it properly.

With some important exceptions (notably the civil rights movement), what was in the air when *Theology of Hope* came off the press actually was not hope but optimism. The two are easily confused. Both optimism and hope entail positive expectations with regard to the future. But, as Moltmann has argued persuasively, they are radically different stances toward reality.

Optimism is based on "extrapolative cause and effect thinking." We draw conclusions about the future on the basis of the experience with the past and present, guided by the belief that events can be explained as effects of previous causes. Since "this" has happened, we conclude that "that" is likely to happen. If an

extrapolation is correct, optimism is grounded. Since my son Nathanael could pick up *Little Bear* and read it when he was in kindergarten, I could legitimately be optimistic that he would do reasonably well in the first grade. If extrapolation is incorrect, optimism is misplaced, illusory. Aaron, my two-year-old, is very good at throwing a ball. But it would be foolish for me to bet that he is likely to land a multimillion-dollar contract with a pro ball team and take care of my retirement.

Our positive expectations of the future are based mostly on such extrapolative thinking. We see the orange glow on the horizon, and we expect that morning will be bathed in sunshine. Such informed, grounded optimism is important in our private and professional lives, for the functioning of families, economy and politics. But optimism is not hope.

One of Moltmann's lasting contributions in *Theology of Hope* was to insist that hope, unlike optimism, is independent of people's circumstances. Hope is not based on the possibilities of the situation and on correct extrapolation about the future. Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God and therefore on the effectiveness of God's promise. And this brings me to the theme of Advent.

Moltmann distinguished between two ways in which the future is related to us. The Latin word *futurum* expresses one way. "Future in the sense of *futurum* develops out of the past and present, inasmuch as these hold within themselves the potentiality of becoming and are 'pregnant with future.'" The Latin word *adventus* expresses the other way in which the future is related to us. Future in the sense of *adventus* is the future that comes not from the realm of what is or what was, but from the realm of what is not yet, "from outside," from God.

Optimism is based on the possibilities of things as they have come to be; hope is based on the possibilities of God irrespective of how things are. Hope can spring up even in the valley of the shadow of death; indeed, it is there that it becomes truly manifest. The figure of hope in the New Testament is Abraham, who hoped against all hope because he believed in the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17-18). Hope thrives even in situations which, for extrapolative cause-and-effect thinking, can elicit only utter hopelessness. Why? Because hope is based on God's coming into the darkness to dispel it with divine light.

Every year in the Advent season we read the prophet Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (Isa. 9:2). This is what Christmas is all about—something radically new that cannot be generated out of the conditions of this world. It does not emerge. It comes. We do not extrapolate it. God promises it.

If darkness has descended upon you and your world, you need not try to persuade yourself that things are not as bad as they seem or to search desperately for reasons to be optimistic. Remind yourself instead of a very simple fact: the light of the One who was in the beginning with God shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. If you need a sustained argument to support this invitation, unwrap that Moltmann book from under your Christmas tree, get yourself a warm drink and enter the world of Advent, of promise, of hope.