

TRAGIC CREATION – HOPE FOR THE FUTURE:
MOLTMANN’S CREATIVE (MIS)READING OF HEGEL’S PHILOSOPHY

Dissertation Abstract – John M. Bechtold

Christian theology, in its many and varied forms, and to the detriment of both the church and the world, is often built upon a shaky epistemological foundation. In this dissertation, I describe this shaky foundation by the term ‘insular universalism’. The oxymoronic nature of the term is both intentional and telling. A theology which strives for, or unwittingly arrives at, a position which is here being called ‘insular universalism’ achieves neither while rejecting or misunderstanding the complexity of both. Though this terminology will be explored in greater depth moving forward, when considered theologically, insular universalism could be simplistically described as the idea that “one cultural expression of the religion is exclusive for expressing the fullness of the gospel.”¹

In order to show the unsure theological footing of ‘insular universalism’, and in order to point to what I believe to be a better way forward, I turn to the theology of Jürgen Moltmann. Although Moltmann’s theology has been influential and therefore carefully dissected and frequently interpreted, there also exists a deeply Hegelian background that has not been carefully examined. Looking at questions of ontology and epistemology, as well as notions of system, the Absolute, and the possibility of beginnings and endings, this dissertation demonstrates a deeply Hegelian line of thought running throughout Moltmann’s theology. Yet, it is not the case that Moltmann is thoroughly and unabashedly ‘Hegelian’, but rather that Moltmann takes particular Hegelian themes, as those noted above, and subtly shifts them, perhaps riffs on them, to further his theological project.

¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact On Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009), 74.

After having described these Hegelian themes, and pointing to the variety of ways in which they are influential on Moltmann's theological journeys, this dissertation turns to its own practice of constructive theology. Just as Moltmann riffs on Hegel, this constructive practice is a riffing on Moltmann – not thoroughly apologetic, but rooted in the tradition. It is argued that from Moltmann can be developed a theory of 'tragic creation', and from this theory Christian theology can balance the quests for both redemption and understanding. In finding this balance, it is argued, 'insular universalism' can be overcome with theological practices which are rooted in both epistemic humility and the need to address explicitly the socio-political realities of the world which cry out for redemption.