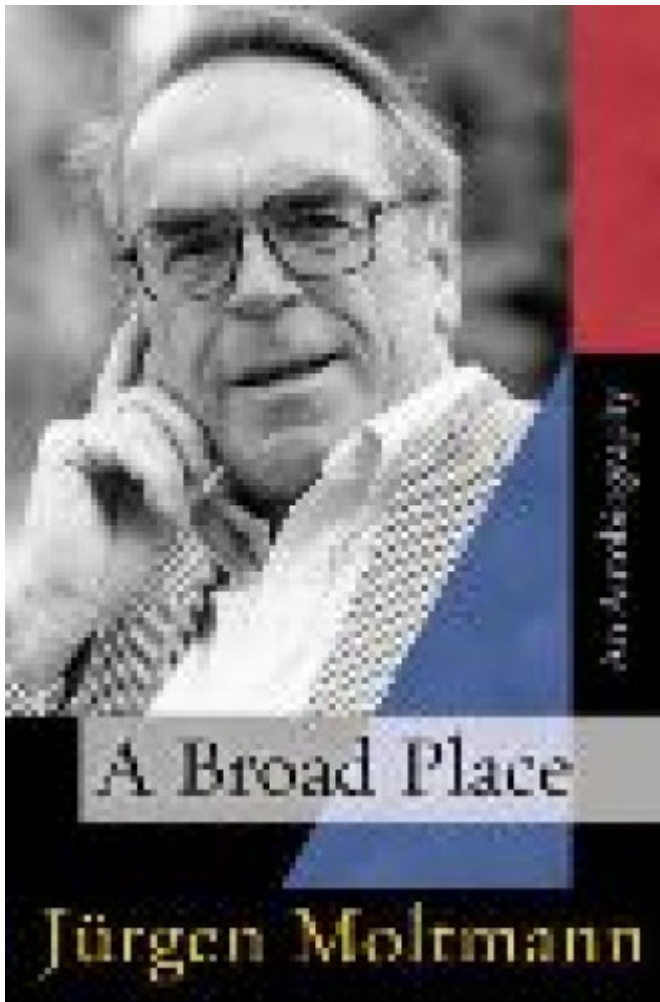


A Broad Place: An Autobiography

reviewed by [D. Lyle Dabney](#) in the [September 9, 2008](#) issue

In Review



A Broad Place: An Autobiography

Jürgen Moltmann
Fortress

Jürgen Moltmann may be the most renowned theologian living today. The voluminous writings he has published and the countless papers he has presented at

theological conferences over the past 40 years have made him a familiar figure to American audiences. But being famous and familiar does not necessarily mean being fully understood. His autobiography offers us the chance to understand him better than ever before.

As a young seminary student, I was assigned to read one of Moltmann's books for a class in systematic theology. Its impact on me was profound, and as soon as I finished that text, I immediately searched out and read another he had written. To that point I had intended to pursue a doctorate in New Testament, but this encounter caused me to turn instead to systematic theology.

Some five years later I met Moltmann in his rooms in the old Theologicum at Eberhard-Karls Universität in Tübingen. He had taken me on as a doctoral student, and for the next six years I attended his lectures and seminars, worked with him on various projects, enjoyed the hospitality of his home and the fellowship of his doctoral students, and wrote a dissertation under his direction. When I read Moltmann's autobiography, all that I had previously come to know and sense about this man who was once my Doktorvater but is now my friend was expanded and deepened, corrected in detail but confirmed in outline.

The book is first of all a recounting of the story of a theological life, one that began in rather narrow circumstances. Following a childhood lived largely in the seclusion of a remote corner of Germany, Moltmann in his teens was abruptly subjected to the horrors of war and the death of friends and companions. He was captured in battle and spent years in Allied prisoner-of-war camps. There he learned fully of the godless crimes that had been committed in the name of the German people and was driven in hopelessness to embrace the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ. After the war he returned to a shattered country and struggled to gain an education and regain a life that seemed irretrievably lost.

In *A Broad Place* Moltmann tells of the successes and failures, pleasures and frustrations of his early career as a student, pastor and fledgling theologian. Initially immersed in the history of the Reformed traditions in Europe, he discovered that perhaps Barth had not said all that needed to be said after all, and he found his own way forward as a systematic theologian. Moltmann recounts his peripatetic years as a theologian in constant movement through expanding circles of theological inquiry and endeavor around the globe and describes the not inconsiderable duties of home and teaching.

As interesting as the depiction of a theological life is, more important is Moltmann's account of the background, genesis and development of his theology. The disastrous aftermath of World War I for German social life drove Moltmann's parents into a kind of internal immigration to the isolation of the settlement in which he was raised. The profoundly evil cultural and political events leading up to and through World War II shattered both German society at large and that isolated settlement in which the Moltmann family had taken refuge, a disruption that culminated with Moltmann's years of internment.

When Moltmann returned to Germany to study theology, he learned not a theology of the left or the right but Karl Barth's theology of crisis. Moltmann received from teachers like Hans Joachim Iwand, Gerhard von Rad, Ernst Käsemann and Otto Weber a thorough grounding in the theological tradition, and he owned and represented that tradition, but never for the sake of traditionalism. He was rooted in study of the Bible, in whose narratives he immersed himself and in whose categories he defined his life and work, but never for the sake of biblicism. And his study immersed him in the political and philosophical and even ecclesiastical concerns of the age, but never leaving him with the delusion that those concerns could be equated with a concern for God or that they exhausted God's concern for humanity.

With Europe lying in rubble, it was Barth who anticipated the way forward for postwar theology with his "turn to the world," which spoke of God not as standing in contradiction to humanity in its sin but as standing with humanity in its estranged condition. More than any other postwar theologian, Moltmann articulated a theology of social and political practice that advanced Barth's agenda. He did so by returning to the point of departure for Barth's own repudiation of the regnant theologies of modernity: the thoroughgoing eschatology of the first edition of the *Römerbrief*.

Moltmann seized on eschatology as he had learned it in the biblical theology of von Rad and Käsemann and interpreted it through Luther's theology of the cross, which he had learned from Iwand and Weber. The result was the profound transmutation of theology from the perspective of eschatology that burst upon the theological world in 1964 as *Theology of Hope*, in which Moltmann reinterpreted the whole of Christian doctrine in terms of the promise of God's future in the resurrected Jesus Christ. In his works Moltmann united "God before us in contradiction and promise" and "God with us in compassionate identification" in a conceptuality that was at once critically faithful to major strands of the theological tradition and immediately relevant to the world in which he and his contemporaries lived.

Central to Moltmann's theology was that the gospel is the alternative to the established cultural, political and theological positions of the day. In the West German context, he undertook this theological program of hope initially to challenge the resurgent German state churches' efforts to resume the prewar status quo. Moltmann called for the church to reject the role being assigned to it in the new Germany and to move beyond the modern political categories then dominant in Europe that pitted Western democratic capitalism against Eastern Stalinist communism, expecting Christians to stand with the liberal humanism of the West. Moltmann urged the West German churches to turn from what he saw as the inhumanity of Western capitalism, to make common cause with those in the East who sought to reject what they experienced as the inhumanity of communist absolutism and to establish "socialism with a human face."

Moltmann's theology was thus not about affirming or underwriting the cultural politics of one side or the other, but about the alternative to both represented by God's word in the resurrected Jesus Christ. After the events in Eastern Europe in 1968, Moltmann turned to the cross as the defining locus of God in the world and developed his account of the church in the Spirit bearing the cross in the hope of the resurrection.

In one way or another, Moltmann's thought has had an impact on virtually every major form of theology that has been pursued in the past 40 years. His autobiography makes clear that he also has something to teach us in the U.S. about the task of theology and not simply its substance.

Moltmann's theology has been championed in the U.S. by thinkers at all points on the theological spectrum—a telling commentary on theological discourse in this country. Their respective accounts of his theology have reflected their own social and intellectual worlds as they understood them. They have emphasized those aspects that they find most immediately serviceable to themselves, usually leaving in shadow as much of Moltmann's work as they have illuminated. Coming face to face with this theologian and a theology we only thought we knew well might help bring us into a "broad place" too.