

# Reviewing the Trinitarian Theology of Moltmann and Balthasar

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*"Holy Trinity", Botticelli, 1491–1493*

## The Trinitarian Theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar:

### A Discussion & Comparison

Moltmann and Balthasar each set out to provide contributions to Trinitarian theology that specifically grapple with the centrality of the cross. Even so, each yields different implications: Moltmann perceiving the cross as constituting God's triunity, while Balthasar expounds the cross as the manifestation of God's eternal triune nature. Despite each seeking to express a relational metaphysic for the Trinity, their different approaches impact their explication of the nature of the Trinity and God's engagement with the world, resulting in Moltmann collapsing the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity in contrast to Balthasar who maintains the distinction. Comparing these two trinitarian theologies, this essay will discuss the practical implications of each trinitarian theology for understanding God, suffering and salvation.

#### Ontological vs Eschatological Unity

Both Moltmann and Balthasar are concerned with developing trinitarian theologies anchored in the cross, specifically grappling with the problem of suffering. As a result they both consider the abandonment of Jesus on the cross by the Father as key to their trinitarian thought. Moltmann pursues this approach out of a rejection of trinitarian theology that is detached from history, understanding that the Trinity is only known where revealed—the cross<sup>[1]</sup>. Accordingly, he centers on the cross as a trinitarian event to relate God to history so that “the doctrine of the Trinity is no longer an exorbitant speculation about God.”<sup>[2]</sup> However, for Moltmann, this event is not simply a revelation of God as triune, but constitutes “the beginning of trinitarian history.”<sup>[3]</sup> Consequently, Jesus' abandonment by the Father on the cross causes a separation in God's self, though they are united in a deep “communion of will”, entering into a new unity in the Spirit and thus constituting God's being as triune.<sup>[4]</sup> Through this, Moltmann seeks to express the distinction of the triune persons, rejecting any notion of God as one absolute subject, which he argues, “obliges us to think of God without Christ and ... Christ without God.”<sup>[5]</sup>

While Moltmann regards the cross to give rise historically to the Trinity, Balthasar conversely understands the Trinity as the precondition for the cross. Thus, as central to both Moltmann and Balthasar, Jesus' cry of abandonment reveals God's triunity. Nonetheless, Kilby contrasts their approaches to the cross appropriately:

If the cross is conceived as God abandoning God, and if we are not, like Moltmann, to think of it as introducing something new, something previously unexperienced, into the life of the trinity, then we are bound to suppose that there is something eternally present in the life of the trinity which anticipates it, something to which it gives expression.<sup>[6]</sup>

Therefore, while “for Moltmann the cross makes possible the Trinity ... for Balthasar the Trinity makes possible the cross.”<sup>[7]</sup> Balthasar contends: “There is only one way to approach the trinitarian life in God: on the basis of what is manifest in God's kenosis ... in the theology of the cross” through which “we must feel our way back into the mystery of the absolute.”<sup>[8]</sup> Therefore, “the ontic possibility for God's self-emptying in the incarnation ... lies in God's eternal self-emptying in the mutual self-surrender of the persons of the Trinity.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Accordingly, fundamental to Balthasar's trinitarian theology is his notion that Christ's kenosis reveals a primordial kenosis in the Father's surrender of himself to the Son.<sup>[10]</sup> Essentially, the kenosis begins not in the incarnation, but in the generation of the Son through the Father who “strips himself, without remainder, of his Godhead and hands it over to the Son; he imparts to the Son all that is his.”<sup>[11]</sup> Thus, it is a primordial act of love that constitutes the Trinity, rather than the cross in Moltmann.<sup>[12]</sup> Hence, for Balthasar, the cross marks no change to the trinitarian relations.<sup>[13]</sup> Therefore, Balthasar expresses an ontological orientation for the unity of the Trinity in contrast to Moltmann whose triune unity is eschatological.<sup>[14]</sup>

Pivotal to Moltmann's trinitarian theology is his recalibration of the patristic understanding of unity. Moltmann rejects any notion of 'monotheism' and its relating attributes – sovereignty and omnipotence – understanding it to erroneously depict the triune persons as “a homogenous divine substance.”<sup>[15]</sup> Moltmann infers that such a view sets “God over against the world and [implies] a hierarchical, monarchical relation between them”, thus justifying political and ecclesiastical totalitarianism.<sup>[16]</sup> He therefore espouses a relational metaphysic by “beginning with the trinity of the persons” and then “going on to ask about the unity.”<sup>[17]</sup> Unity in the Trinity, therefore, “lies in their fellowship” not in their substance.<sup>[18]</sup> This Moltmann defines as *perichoresis*, the mutual indwelling and “unitedness ... of the three persons.”<sup>[19]</sup> Moltmann's *perichoresis*, contrary to the patristic ontological understanding, presents the divine unity as eschatological; achieved only at the *eschaton* when God is fully united with creation and is all in all.<sup>[20]</sup> God is therefore “dynamic, open, uniting unity, capable of interaction” with his creation.<sup>[21]</sup> However, as Metzler argues, it is hard not to see how this ‘unitedness’ isn't “[inviting] us to embrace some type of personalistic tritheism.”<sup>[22]</sup>

Contrasting Moltmann, Balthasar doesn't reject traditional substantial unity, however he redefines it through his ontology of love, inadvertently undermining God's unity of action. Balthasar argues that in order to avoid modalism there must be genuine ‘distance’ between the persons of the Trinity for their eternal distinction and for Jesus' economic separation from the Father on the cross and his descent into hell to be real.<sup>[23]</sup> Thus Balthasar describes the eternal relations of the Father, Son and Spirit having “infinite distance” between them, understood through the begetting of the Son: “This divine act that brings forth the Son ... involves the positing of an absolute, infinite distance that can contain and embrace all the other distances that are possible within the world of finitude, including the distance of sin.”<sup>[24]</sup> However, they are unified by the Spirit: “as the essence of love, he [the Spirit] maintains the infinite difference between them, seals it and, since he is the one Spirit of them both, bridges it.”<sup>[25]</sup> Nonetheless, there is a shift away from traditional trinitarian theology that emphasises the inseparability of the persons.<sup>[26]</sup> While in patristic thought the self-giving of the Father in begetting the Son is undergirded by their inseparability, Balthasar's interpretation of the same self-giving conversely results in “infinite distances” between the persons. <sup>[27]</sup> Consequently, similar to Moltmann, Balthasar seeks to express unity as communion, likewise giving rise to “something a bit like tritheism.”<sup>[28]</sup>

#### **Divine Freedom vs Divine Necessity**

Nevertheless, Balthasar's ontological orientation preserves divine transcendence in contrast to Moltmann who surrenders it to emphasise God's reciprocal relationship with the world. Consequently, Moltmann takes Rhaner's rule to its extremity, collapsing any distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity.<sup>[29]</sup> He explains:

In order to grasp the death of the Son in its significance for God himself, I found myself bound to surrender the traditional distinction between economic and immanent Trinity, according to which the cross stands only in the economy of salvation ...<sup>[30]</sup>

Essentially, because the cross constitutes God's triune identity, “the dissection between ‘God for us’ and ‘God in himself’ becomes a moot point. The question then becomes: could God have acted otherwise?”<sup>[31]</sup> Answering this, Moltmann refuses any distinction between God's necessity and freedom because God is *love* “and the God who loves the world does not correspond to a God who suffices for himself.”<sup>[32]</sup> Therefore, he argues, while God doesn't ‘need’ the world in the same sense as process theology, his dynamic open love demands his reciprocity with the world for him to be true to himself. However, this concept of divine love, as Vanhoozer outlines, reflects a character more akin to “*Hegel* (metaphysical necessity) than of *hesed* (covenant faithfulness).”<sup>[33]</sup> Consequently, Moltmann's Trinity depicts a God who is bound within a historical process of *becoming* until a future time when “the economic trinity completes and perfects itself to immanent trinity.”<sup>[34]</sup> Thus while Moltmann's perichoretic relation between God and the world seeks to illustrate a God who invites his creation into communion with himself rather than ruling over it, it negates God's *freedom* as Creator. Accordingly, the Creator/creature distinction is reduced and God becomes contingent on his creation.<sup>[35]</sup>

Consequently, Balthasar seeks a way “to see the immanent Trinity as the ground of the world process (including the crucifixion) in such a way that it is ... [not] entangled in the world process, as in Moltmann.”<sup>[36]</sup> Thus, while both Moltmann and Balthasar view the cross as the epistemological basis for the Trinity, for Balthasar “the immanent trinity remains the ontological source of the economic trinity”<sup>[37]</sup> so that the immanent doesn't necessitate the economic. Essentially, as a Trinity

God is complete in himself as a community of love[38]. He adduces,

The immanent trinity must be understood to be that eternal, absolute self-surrender whereby God is seen to be, in himself, absolute love; this in turn explains his free self-giving to the world as love, without suggesting that God 'needed' the world process and the Cross in order to become himself.[39]

Thus, in contrast to Moltmann, Balthasar highlights the divine freedom in creation and redemption, while also providing a basis for the economic Trinity to reveal the immanent. Balthasar pivotally demonstrates that the economic mission of the three provides a concrete understanding of their eternal relations.[40] Essentially, the Son's mission as the sent one reflects his eternal procession from the Father so that only the Son could have accomplished his mission of obedience, and only the Spirit could proceed from them. Therefore, God's triune acts in history truly reflect his eternal relations. However, this aspect of Balthasar's theology is not without critics due to his highly detailed and speculative descriptions of the immanent Trinity, incurring Kirby's indictment of him as a novelist rather than theologian.[41]

#### **Solidarity in Suffering vs Salvation from Sin**

Furthermore, as a result of their different approaches toward the economic and immanent Trinity, Moltmann and Balthasar deduce from Jesus' suffering on the cross different implications for the life of the Trinity. For Moltmann the constitution of the Trinity through the cross is pivotal to transforming what he perceives as a static inert monotheism.[42] Thus he rejects the doctrines of divine impassibility and immutability[43] asking: "How can Christian faith understand Christ's passion as being the revelation of God, if the deity cannot suffer?"[44] Thus for Moltmann, without any distinction between 'God in himself' and 'God for us', the cross reveals the suffering of the Father and Son, disclosing a deity who changes and suffers with the world. Therefore, through Christ, God "accepted and adopts [suffering] in himself, making it part of his own eternal life." [45] This is crucial for Moltmann's conception that "love involves suffering;" [46] essentially "the one who cannot suffer cannot love either." [47] This, however, raises serious questions about the nature of love. If divine love is equated with suffering then suffering is not something to be overcome. Thus the problem with collapsing "the distinction between God's nature and world history" is that there is no certainty that God can "overcome the elements of evil within the world and even within Godself." [48] Additionally, if God's love is not unchanging and unalterable, there is no certainty that it won't diminish toward humankind rather than continuing to suffer in solidarity. The problem, therefore, as Howsare asserts, is that "it is hard to see how if God is subject to the world he can be its solution." [49]

Balthasar recognizes Moltmann's dilemma of a suffering deity providing no sure salvific solution. He therefore avoids Moltmann's panentheistic framework by attempting to exclude "from God all intra-mundane experience and suffering, while at the same time presupposing that the possibility of such experience and suffering ... is grounded in God." [50] Thus while Balthasar refrains from ascribing mutability to God, his fundamental premise of kenosis, not simply as economic, but essential to the Trinity, contains within God the distance for sin, thus providing a basis for "something in God ... that can develop into suffering..." [51] The extrapolation of this, however, like Moltmann, is a loss of distinction between love and suffering. Thus Kirby accurately argues that by positing suffering "not only in regard to God's economy of salvation, but internally in God ... it is hard to escape the conclusion that suffering and loss are given intrinsically positive valuation: [as] ultimately ... good." [52]

Nevertheless, despite the similarity between Moltmann and Balthasar blurring the distinction between love and suffering, each of their trinitarian approaches has different implications for an understanding of salvation. Moltmann's burden to relate the relational nature of the Trinity to the practical Christian life and society is pertinent. However, while he explicates the mutuality and relationality of the Trinity as a model for human relations, as a result of his perception of Christian monotheism as 'monarchical' [53], "[he] is so concerned to avoid all talk of God as sovereign and humanity as subordinate" that he sacrifices God's transcendence, placing "humanity on such an equal par with God that ... the distance between the two is barely recognizable." [54] Additionally, Moltmann's Trinity enters into humanity's process of becoming, taking suffering into his divine nature resulting in salvation being perceived as *solidarity* in suffering rather than overcoming the root cause of suffering — *sin*. Consequently, Moltmann's confusion of the inner life of the Trinity with the world's experience undermines the trinitarian work on the cross conquering sin as the objective legal basis for humanity's experiential communion with the Triune God. Therefore, while Moltmann highlights the essential solidarity that the Triune God enters into with his creation

through the Son, he obscures the true glory of the Triune God's revelation on the cross as both transcendent and immanent; able "to alleviate the cause of human suffering—sin"<sup>[55]</sup> so that we may participate in his life.

Consequently, Balthasar criticizes Moltmann's understanding of the Trinity resulting in "salvation ... not defined as ... expiation of sin."<sup>[56]</sup> Thus, while both understand Christ's death as the abandonment of the Son from the Father, rather than directly inferring suffering to the Father, Balthasar understands that "this event must tell us ... that God hates sin."<sup>[57]</sup> Therefore, for Balthasar, "Christ takes the existential measure of everything that is contrary to God," entering into the depths of hell in order to transform the prison of sin and death into eternal life.<sup>[58]</sup> Hence, the Triune God's revelation in Jesus' death, descent and resurrection, is that He remains transcendent in order to deliver humankind from sin and suffering. Nonetheless, Balthasar moves questionably from Jesus' economic separation from the Father to suppose that it is only possible if the eternal trinitarian relations have infinite distance between them. This, Kilby argues, is mere speculation: "moving from the cross to the eternal conditions of its possibility."<sup>[59]</sup> Furthermore, while Christ's kenosis has its 'ontic possibility in the imminent Trinity', it appears beyond biblical warrant to impose Christ's economic kenosis into the immanent Trinity as an event, rather than simply it deriving its ontic possibility from God's absolute nature being self-giving love.<sup>[60]</sup> Nevertheless, in contrast to Moltmann, Balthasar highlights that God's nature and being eternally provides the basis for his free act of redemption. Thus while Balthasar should be esteemed for his ontological priority on immanent Trinity, he mistakenly makes "the economy ... constitutive rather than communicative of Gods triune nature."<sup>[61]</sup>

### Conclusion

Both Moltmann and Balthasar develop trinitarian theologies anchored in the cross in order to specifically grapple with the problem of suffering. As a result they both consider the abandonment of Jesus on the cross by the Father as key to their trinitarian thought. However, while Moltmann understands this event to constitute God's triunity; over-emphasizing God's immanence, Balthasar understands the cross as the manifestation of God's eternal triunity; giving priority to God's transcendence. As a result, Moltmann's unity for the Trinity is eschatological while Balthasar's is ontological, though both seek to express unity as communion in order to maintain the distinct persons, each at risk of tritheistic tendencies. Furthermore, Moltmann's distinct theology of the cross leads him to collapse the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity, thereby compromising God's freedom as Creator. Additionally, his notion of a suffering deity conveys salvation as solidarity in suffering rather than eradication of its cause – sin – ultimately providing no real hope of overcoming it. This stands in contrast to Balthasar who maintains the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity, highlighting divine freedom while also showing how God's acts in history truly reflect his distinct eternal relations. However, despite Balthasar's ontological priority for the Trinity, his fundamental premise of a primordial kenosis and infinite distances; allowing for the distance of sin in God, ultimately corresponds to Moltmann's advocacy of divine suffering. Both blur the distinction between love and suffering, giving suffering not simply redemptive value but an intrinsically positive valuation as part of the eternal triune nature. Even so, in contrast to Moltmann, Balthasar highlights that the triune work of salvation pivotally effects atonement for sin as an answer to human suffering and the basis for humanity's communion with the Triune God.

Print-friendly pdf: [Moltman & Balthasar Trinitarian Theology](#)

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### Footnotes

[1] Anne Hunt, *The Trinity and the paschal mystery: a development in recent catholic theology* (Minnesota: The Liturgical press, 1997), p. 165.

[2] Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 246.

[3] Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p. 246.

[4] Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: the Trinity in contemporary theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 78.

[5] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: the doctrine of God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 131.

[6] Karen Kilby, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 217.

- [7] Jacob H. Friesenhahn, *The Trinity and Theodicy: The Trinitarian Theology of Von Balthasar and the problem of evil* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), p. 136.
- [8] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 324
- [9] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: theological dramatic theory, V: the last act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 243-4.
- [10] Rodney A. Howsare, *Balthasar: A guide for the perplexed* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2009), p. 137.
- [11] Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV*, p. 323.
- [12] Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, p. 190.
- [13] Kilby, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity", p. 211.
- [14] Hunt, *The Trinity and the paschal mystery*, p. 167.
- [15] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 17.
- [16] Norman Metzler, "The Trinity in contemporary society: Questioning the social Trinity." *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67, no. 3/4 (Oct., 2003), p. 227 <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/metzlerquestioningthesocialtrinity.pdf> (accessed 1 October 2013).
- [17] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 19.
- [18] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 95.
- [19] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 150.
- [20] Veli-Matti Karkkainen, "The Trinitarian doctrines of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg in the context of contemporary discussion" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 228.
- [21] Karkkainen, "The Trinitarian doctrines of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg in the context of contemporary discussion", p. 228.
- [22] Metzler, "The Trinity in contemporary society", p. 286.
- [23] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), p. 137.
- [24] Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV*, p. 323.
- [25] Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV*, p. 324.
- [26] Kilby, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity", pp. 323-5.
- [27] Kilby, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity", p. 211.
- [28] See Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and the Trinity" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2004), p. 50. Nevertheless, Williams qualifies that Balthasar succeeds in showing the distinct relations of the Father and Son through the Spirit as our model.
- [29] Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, p. 86.

- [30] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 160.
- [31] VanHoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, p. 111.
- [32] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 151.
- [33] VanHoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, p. 155.
- [34] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 161.
- [35] Kevin J. VanHoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: divine action, passion, and authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 150.
- [36] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: theological dramatic theory, IV: the action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 323-4.
- [37] Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, p. 196.
- [38] Friesenhahn, *The Trinity and Theodicy*, p. 136.
- [39] Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV*, p. 323.
- [40] Hunt, *The Trinity and the paschal mystery*, p. 86.
- [41] Kilby, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity", p. 218.
- [42] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 174.
- [43] However, as Bavinck aptly warns "Immutability should not be confused with monotonous inactivity or immobility. Scripture itself describes God to us in his manifold relations to his creatures. Though unchangeable in himself, God lives the life of his creatures, and is not indifferent to their changing activities." Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), p. 151.
- [44] Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p. 21.
- [45] Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p. 119.
- [46] Denis W. Jowers, "The theology of the cross as theology of the Trinity: a critique of Jürgen Moltmann's staurocentric Trinitarianism." *Tyndale Bulletin* 52, no. 2 (2001), p. 254, [http://tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/TynBull\\_2001\\_52\\_2\\_05\\_Jowers\\_CrossTrinityMoltmann.pdf](http://tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/TynBull_2001_52_2_05_Jowers_CrossTrinityMoltmann.pdf) (accessed 29 September 2013).
- [47] Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p. 222.
- [48] Friesenhahn, *The Trinity and Theodicy*, p. 151.
- [49] Howsare, *Balthasar*, p. 141.
- [50] Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV*, p. 324.
- [51] Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV*, p. 328.
- [52] Kilby, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity", p. 220.
- [53] John Frame, *The doctrine of God: a theology of lordship* (New Jersey: P&R publishing, 2002), p. 630, demonstrates how

Moltmann equates monotheism with the Greek notion of Monarchianism. Thus Moltmann is right to reject the Greek philosophical concept of monarchianism, as it would make Christology impossible, however he wrongly perceives this to be the biblical concept of monotheism; “the bible does not teach that God is one in the sense of having no plurality or complexity” yet it is clear in scripture that God is one supreme ruler and Lord of Creation. However, this notion gives no basis for human dictatorship, rather Gods rule over the rebellion of the human heart opposes it!

[54] Robinson, *Understanding the 'Imago Dei'*, p. 35.

[55] Thomas G. Weinandy, “Does God suffer?” *First Things*. <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/does-god-suffer-6> (accessed October 1, 2013), para. 10.

[56] Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV*, p. 323.

[57] Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, p. 138.

[58] Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, p. 174-5.

[59] Kilby, “Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity”, p. 215.

[60] Guy Davies, “Remythologizing Theology by Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Review Part 2)” [http://exiledpreacher.blogspot.com.au/2010/09/remythologizing-theology-by-kevin-j\\_14.html](http://exiledpreacher.blogspot.com.au/2010/09/remythologizing-theology-by-kevin-j_14.html) (accessed October 4, 2013), para. 3.

[61] Stephen M. Garrett, “The Dazzling Darkness of God’s Triune Love: Introducing Evangelicals to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.” *The Gospel Coalition*. [http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the\\_dazzling\\_darkness\\_of\\_gods\\_triune\\_love\\_introducing\\_evangelicals\\_to\\_the\\_t](http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the_dazzling_darkness_of_gods_triune_love_introducing_evangelicals_to_the_t) (accessed October 1, 2013), para. 3.3.

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