

Peace and Reconciliation for the Korean Peninsula: in the light of Jürgen Moltmann's Theology

Jong Hwa Kim
Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA

1. Nevertheless: Peace and Reconciliation

Throughout history, the phenomena of war and peace have always been regarded as prompting some of the most important ethical dilemmas. War-related violence intensified especially in the 20th century, which Hannah Arendt called “the century of violence”¹ and, according to Eric Hobsbawm, was “the age of extremes.”² Addressing the topic, Walter Wink asserted that the violence of war has never been more severe than during the modern era, when more people were killed during wars in the 20th century than in the entire previous 5,000 years.³ Even in the 21st century, regional military conflicts and war have not disappeared.

The year 2022, in particular, has shown us that the history of war continues into the 21st century. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war has lasted longer and been far more severe, defying the expectations of pundits and publics. Certain tensions are also escalating in East Asia, where political and military conflicts between China and Taiwan as well as North and South Korea are on the rise. Just a few years ago, when former US President Trump and South Korean President Moon held several summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, there was significant hope for a peace process through the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. However, such expectations have now been replaced by renewed military clashes.

Nevertheless, in regard to war, I still believe that the hope of reconciliation and peace should be high on the agenda for religious leaders and theologians, for Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). Given that reconciliation is a Christian practice, Jürgen Moltmann theologically and ethically contributes to its understanding: As Miroslav Volf pointed out, “a major thrust of Moltmann’s thinking about the cross can be summed up in the notion of solidarity.”⁴ Moltmann’s theology vividly evokes images of hope, reconciliation, and solidarity in the midst of the horrors of war. Therefore, this paper intends to examine three concepts for peace—restoration, reconciliation, and solidarity in hope—especially through Moltmann’s three major books—*The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*⁵, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*⁶, and *Ethics of Hope*⁷. To this end, this paper attempts to explore how Moltmann’s concepts of these books can envision the image of hope for peace on the Korean Peninsula today.

2. Jürgen Moltmann’s Three Ideas of Peace and Reconciliation

¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 3.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 11.

³ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 137.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 1st ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 22.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2004)

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012)

1) Restoration

Moltmann's eschatological theology and ecumenical initiatives have influenced many theologians and pastors worldwide. The key idea of Moltmann's eschatological Christology can be highlighted in the following statement:

If we follow the method of providing Christological answers of eschatological questions, then in trying to measure the breadth of the Christian hope we must not off into far-off realms, but must submerge ourselves in the depths of Christ's death on the cross as Golgotha. It is only there that we find the certainty of reconciliation without limits, and the true ground for the hope for 'the restoration of all things', for universal salvation, and for the world newly created to become the eternal kingdom.⁸

In other words, for Moltmann, Christ's descent into hell is the divine foundation for the reconciliation of the world. For this reason, he goes on to argue that:

In the crucified Christ we recognize the Judge of the final Judgment, who himself has become the one condemned, for the accused, in their stead and for their benefit . . . What we call the Last Judgment is nothing other than the universal revelation of Jesus Christ, and the consummation of his redemptive work.⁹

In this, the final judgment of Christ on the cross is not the end at all but the beginning for God's eternal kingdom in which all things will be restored. Moltmann understands that God's final judgment, therefore, must be considered not the great reckoning, with reward and punishment, but rather the victory of the creative divine righteousness and justice over everything godless in Heaven, on Earth, and beneath Earth.

Other traditional theologians would criticize such an understanding of Moltmann's Christology since he has transformed the meaning of atonement on the cross into transformative eschatology. Nonetheless, Moltmann's notions of Christ's cross, descent into hell, and the final judgment for the restoration of all things, more importantly, would be based on the ethic of reconciliation. As he maintains:

The Last Judgment is not a terror, but is a source of endlessly consoling joy to know, not just that the murderers will finally fail to triumph over their victims, but that they cannot in eternity even remain the murderers of their victims. The eschatological doctrine about the restoration of all things has these two sides: God's Judgment, which puts things to rights, and God's Kingdom, which awakens to new life.¹⁰

Given that the goal of reconciliation will make all things right in God's shalom, Moltmann's eschatology coherently provides theological grounds for the practice of reconciliation.

2) Reconciliation

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, 250.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 255.

Moltmann's book, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, is another important work that explains how the ethics of reconciliation can be examined. In it, Moltmann attempts to associate the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, with the Hebrew word *Shekinah*.

It is in the special relationship to God in this Spirit that Jesus experiences himself as the messianic 'child', and experiences Israel's God as 'my beloved God'. In the Spirit, Jesus prays 'Abba, dear Father'. So the Spirit is the real determining subject of this special relationship of Jesus to God, and of God to Jesus. And it is therefore the Spirit who also 'leads' Jesus into the mutual history between himself and God his Father, in which 'through obedience' (Heb. 5:8) he will 'learn' his role as the messianic Son.¹¹

Moltmann is a theologian who emphasizes the role of the Spirit among the persons in the Trinity. Through this theology of surrender, Jesus becomes the determining subject of his suffering and death. In this sense, Moltmann asserts:

Looked at pneumatologically, Christ's death and rebirth belong with a single movement. They are one event. They are not two different acts performed by God in Jesus. Jesus' passion and resurrection are described in pneumatological metaphors as the birth-pangs and birth-joys of the Spirit, and as the sowing and growth of a plant.¹²

Moreover, Moltmann's concept of *pneumatologia crucis* deals with the matter of universal sin, which mystifies the reality of those who suffer from the injustices of others. Here Moltmann clearly refers to the double justification for both victims and perpetrators: "Victims can also be latent perpetrators, and are not necessarily saints just because they are victims."¹³ It is one of the most important shared values between Moltmann's pneumatology and the ethics of reconciliation.

Moltmann first addresses Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed and victims in saying that:

God himself is the justice of the unjustly treated, just as he is the power of the powerless. For God himself is the victim of the violent. God himself suffers the wrong they do . . . God, that is to say, creates justice for the people who have been deprived of it, and for those any rights, and he does so through his solidarity with them.¹⁴

In this regard, God's justice rehumanizes the dehumanized through the Spirit of the cross. Then, Moltmann further addresses that Jesus' atoning sacrifice also makes just the unjust perpetrators. He states, "The divine atonement reveals God's pain. But God's pain reveals God's faithfulness to those he has created and his indestructible love, which endures a world in opposition to him, and overcomes it."¹⁵ According to Moltmann's doctrine of the Spirit, perpetrators and victims are reconciled because the Spirit has accomplished justice for both through one person, Jesus. As divine Judge, God's Spirit has restored human rights and dignity for victims and has spoken in the guilty consciences of those who commit violence. Therefore, the lives of perpetrators and victims may be reconciled for the shared peace that also means true life: *Shalom*. The "Spirit of

¹¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

the cross” makes possible a new fellowship where people accept one another mutually and reciprocally recognize each other’s dignity and rights.

3) Solidarity in Hope

Moltmann’s theological concepts, which emphasize the restoration of all creatures, human rights, and dignity for all, are reaffirmed in his recent book, *Ethics of Hope*. He begins with the transformative eschatology:

An ethics of hope sees the future in the light of Christ’s resurrection. The reasonableness it presupposes and employs is the knowledge of change. This points the way to transforming action so as to anticipate as far as possible, and as far as strength goes, the new creation of all things, which God has promised and which Christ has put into force.¹⁶

Moltmann then associates this concept of the new creation of all things with his ethical orientation mainly toward ecological justice (Part 3) and just peace (Part 4). In particular, in terms of just peace with regard to reconciliation, Moltmann asserts:

Christians see in the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ the revelations of God’s righteousness in an unrighteous and violent world. In his discipleship, they turn to victims and perpetrators and press towards just and non-violent conditions. Let us look first at the victims, then the perpetrators, and finally the systemic powers.¹⁷

The ethics of reconciliation aims at a new relationship beyond conflicts the victim and the offender by considering both conflicts between the victim and the offender in context and more collective power and injustice; therefore, Moltmann’s ethics would have a capacity to forge theological discourse for the practice of reconciliation. In addition, he attempts to develop the notion of reconciliation for his distinctive theme of hope. According to Moltmann,

On the one hand, the Christian hope for the world, since it is at the service of reconciliation, is closer to reality than the idealism of human rights; but on the other hand, it is wider in its vision of the future rise of the divine righteousness. In the service of reconciliation, it takes over its own task in the world of perpetrators and victims; in its passion of hope it already anticipates today the hoped-for future, according to what is possible realizable, while relativizing at the same time all anticipations of the future.¹⁸

In summary, Moltmann begins by exploring the meaning of reconciliation from the cross of Christ, which makes all things right. In this, he offers new perspectives in terms of ecological shalom as well as reconciliation between the victim and perpetrator by the guidance of the Spirit, and then he seeks, finally, to introduce eschatological hope.

3. Peace and Reconciliation for the Korean Peninsula

¹⁶ Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

Moltmann's ethics of peace and reconciliation discussed by this paper thus far is summarized as follows. First, Moltmann highlights the idea of restoration with Jesus' crucifixion in that it is not the final judgment as God's judgment, but rather an event that brought about a new restoration of the whole world. In other words, we hope for the coming of God who will bring a new vision through the cross of Christ. Second, in the relationship of the Triune God that Moltmann examines, the chasm between the self and the other (or the perpetrator and the victim) can be overcome. In this, God's pneumatological characteristic is with the victims in their suffering. Third, Moltmann's ethic of hope aims not only to restore the relationship between such perpetrators and victims but also to create a new relationship, which carries over to the surrounding community, especially ecological shalom. Thus, how can Moltmann's ideas of peace and reconciliation be applied to the context of the Korean Peninsula?

As Moltmann explores God's coming and restoration amid the seemingly tragic event of the cross, people in the Korean Peninsula would bring hope to this region where the tunnel of frustration and despair seems unlikely to end. The matter of peace on the Korean Peninsula has created numerous variables through several influences by both surrounding (superpowers) and internal (two Koreas) forces. Both aspects are surely important, but as it is very important to stress Moltmann's idea that the Jesus of the cross is the same person as that of the resurrection, the matter of reconciliation and peace on the Korean Peninsula must be addressed by their own agents to become bearers of hope.

In this regard, the Korean Peninsula desperately demands solidarity and the unification of people on the peninsula. Scholars and practitioners generally classify reunification for the two Koreas according to three perspectives: the reunification of territory, the reunification of system, and the reunification of people. While international and political parties have paid more attention to the first two, the more critical and urgent problem might be the reunification of people. Unless the people of the two Koreas can reconcile and live together without discrimination, the reunification of the territory and the system cannot realize the value of true reunification. Indeed, this is the area where the Korean church and theology can best contribute to the process of building peace on the peninsula. According to research, 99.1% of respondents in North Korea answered that they wanted reunification, while only 53.7% of respondents in South Korea responded likewise.¹⁹ When asked if reunification was unneeded, 0.9% of North Korean respondents said yes, while 21.3% of South Koreans responded yes.²⁰ This clearly shows that people in South Korea, in contrast to their counterparts in North Korea, are hesitant to assume the responsibility for unification and reconciliation. They believe that such a process of reconciliation would increase citizens' financial burden. Populations who have not experienced the war are now growing, and therefore, they do feel the need for reunification. In this research, respondents of South Korea agreed that the differences between the two nations are vast, including the election format (93.9%), the standard of living (96.6%), the legal system (88.3%), and the worldview (93.6%). Various kinds of gaps between the two nations are continually growing. As such, this sense of difference from both groups of citizens seems too great an obstacle to allow for reconciliation.

In this regard, according to the theological warrants of reconciliation, Christians on the Korean Peninsula could seek the Spirit of the cross, which Moltmann introduces, to make possible a new fellowship for the reunification of people characterized by mutual acceptance.

¹⁹ Philo Kim & Kyung-Hui Choi, "The Comparison Analysis on Unification Consciousness of South and North Korean", *Unification and Peace* 4, no. 1 (2012): 106.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

The work of reconciliation explored in Moltmann's theology offers a new perspective beyond clear-cut segregation between the offender and the victim. In other words, North and South Korean people are asked to carefully consider the large-scale structure of violence that has functioned as a fundamental reason for the division of the country. This mutual solidarity is also rightly connected with Bonhoeffer's idea in his comment:

One human being cannot of its own accord make another into an I, an ethical person conscious of responsibility. God or the Holy Spirit joins the concrete You; only through God's activity does the other become a You to me from whom my I arises. In other words, every human is an image of the divine You.²¹

Such a notion of the I–Thou relationship is now necessary for the conflict in the Korean context. Moreover, as we have discussed above, through Moltmann's theologies we can find that the ministry of reconciliation aims not only at the restoration of people's relationships but also at that of the whole world. Nuclear weapons destroy God's cosmic shalom and represent a disaster for humanity and for ecology. Nuclear war would be a serious deviation from God's initiative of reconciliation, which seeks to make all things right. Moltmann speaks explicitly about the danger of nuclear armaments. He proposes that "only the unity of humanity will guarantee survival, and the premise for the survival of every individual is the unity of humanity."²² In the face of such terrible threats raised by the possibility of nuclear war, global society and especially Asian countries should establish solidarity and unity so that we will not have a tragic history in our future.

Of course, the path toward reconciliation is not an easy one, and the process is likely to be long and arduous. Many countries in East Asia share a long and complicated history of wars, conflicts, and disputes. Movement toward reconciliation between North and South Korea would have the highest priority for the sake of Asian peace. If conflicts and division between North and South Korea were to come to an end, this would lead to peaceful circumstances in East Asia by diminishing the motivation to militarize. In this regard, reconciliation and unification of the Korean Peninsula would not only heal the wounds of the Korean people but also help realize God's universal and ecological shalom for Asian and global communities.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Christian Concepts of Person and Concepts of Social Basic-Relation," in *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 55.

²² Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, 64.