

Jürgen Moltmann

The great German theologian of hope, Jürgen Moltmann, died on June 3, 2024. As one of the greatest theologians of our time, Moltmann is known for many things. His biography is like something of the hagiography of the saint. As a German prisoner of war following World War II, he discovered hope in reading the Psalms and the New Testament while held in Scotland. His lived experiences of suffering and hope led him to become a world-class systematic theologian. He authored dozens of books that inspired readers and doctoral students across the globe. [Famously](#), one such book—*The Crucified God*—was found, blood-stained, next to Juan Ramon Moreno, S.J., one of the Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador following their murder by Salvadoran paramilitaries.

Moltmann traveled extensively in support of liberation movements. He provided theological rationale and extended conversation to nascent coalitions inspired by the hope of the Kingdom of God. Moltmann understood the crucified God was invested in the transformation of the here and now, critiquing the “by and by” version of individualist piety of Western Protestantism.

An unlikely friendship

Despite his extensive network and the profound demand for his attention, Moltmann humbly found time to write letters and correspond with people from all over the world. One such connection hits close to home here in Georgia—Kelly Gissendaner. From her conviction to her execution in 2015, Gissendaner was the only woman on death row in Georgia. While she was on death row, Gissendaner underwent theological training housed at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology. There she read Moltmann’s work and decided to write him.

You can read much more eloquent words about this unlikely friendship in [the writings of Jenny McBride](#).^[1] Jenny McBride highlights how friendship is “an essential theological category for Moltmann.” Borrowing from a more ancient concept of friendship—open friendship—Moltmann described how the modern understanding of friendship fails to capture the passion and public nature of what is being expressed in Jesus’ words in John 15:15.

Private vs. Public Friendship

In his book, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Moltmann writes:

This modern intimacy and transference of friendship to the private sphere is quite foreign to Jesus’ friendship with his disciples and with people who were publicly known as tax-collectors and sinners. In order to live in his friendship today, Christians must acquire the character of public protection and public respect.

The friendship of Jesus cannot be lived and its friendliness cannot be disseminated when friendship is limited to people who are like ourselves and when it is narrowed down to private life. The messianic feast which Jesus celebrates with his own and with the despised and unregarded is not merely ‘the marriage of the soul with God’; it is also ‘the festival of the earth’... When we compare the ancient and the modern concept of friendship it becomes clear that Christians must show the friendship of Jesus in openness for others, and totally. In his Spirit they will become the friends of others.

Open friendship

Affection and respect describe the open friendship to which Christ calls us. And it is perhaps this lack of mutuality and support, this lack of a sense of being equals with those in our criminal justice system, this lack of the public expression of friendship, that allows for the continued practice of state execution.

I join the many across the globe who mourn the loss of a theological giant. He reminded us that God looks at us even in our suffering. And I mourn the loss of those to our practices of execution—those whom God beholds and calls “friends.” May such a theological vision give us the courage to see and name people within our criminal justice system as friends.

[1] See also Jennifer M. McBride, *You Shall Not Condemn: A Story of Faith and Advocacy on Death Row* (Cascade Books, 2022).



The Rev. Trey B. Phillips (he/him) is a past member of the ECF Board of Directors and is the curate and Director of Youth Ministries at St. Catherine’s Episcopal Church (Marietta). There his work focuses upon the Christian formation of the youth and wider parish. Trey’s passion is to reinvigorate the local parish as a center for deep theological learning by employing the rich intersection of human learning sciences and religious education.

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