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Item Type	Article
Authors	Moltmann, Jürgen
Publisher	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College, Shatin, Hong Kong
Rights	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College, Shatin, Hong Kong
Download date	2026-07-13 10:36:23
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4047965

The Chinese Church: Reply to Kwok Wai-luen

JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

Professor Kwok and I have known each other since the 2002 Conference in Taiwan, “Sino-theology and the Thinking of Jürgen Moltmann.”¹ I am very happy to see you again and listen as you, with clarity, describe the Chinese political situation and the state of Chinese Christianity. I thank you for your openness and faithfulness in presenting my attempts at theology. I will limit my response to a few ideas for further dialogue:

1. NATIONAL DREAMS VS. HUMANKIND’S DREAMS

As there was an “American Dream,” there is now a “Chinese Dream.” We can probably expect a “European Dream” and many other national and regional “dreams” in the future. However, I think what is more important is “Humankind’s Dreams”—dreams of a world full of true humanity. One of them is the *democratic* dream of human rights for every person and a political state of *all humankind* developed from the

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¹ Readers may refer to the conference symposium: Jürgen Moltmann and Thomas Tseng, eds., *Sino-Theology and the Thinking of Jürgen Moltmann* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004).—Ed.

United Nations and her institutions. The other is the *socialist* dream of the full participation of every person in the commonwealth. Communism is international or it is not communism; I would remind you of what Karl Marx, my fellow countryman, wrote in his *Communist Manifesto* in 1848: “Proletarians of all nations, unite!” The same goes for that old socialist hymn, *The Internationale*, where the chorus sings “The Internationale is fighting for human rights!” (“Die Internationale erkämpft das Menschenrecht”).² Against these dreams is the dream of the nationalists. It must not take over!

2. THE CHRISTIAN DREAM

There is also the “Christian Dream”: the dream of a Kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven.” The Kingdom of God is life, justice and freedom—the new humankind. The Church is the anticipation of this coming Kingdom of God in the violent and unjust world we have now. Therefore, Christians are passionately interested in humanity and its existential problems. “Control is good—trust is better,”³ to put a twist on that saying. In a state-controlled society, Christian congregations are islands of trust. To give in to control is to spread mistrust and lies—who controls the controllers? It is in communities of trust that truth finds a home. This was the experience of the Christian communities in the dictatorships of the twentieth century.

After the Second World War, the German Protestant Church changed its name from the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche (EKD)—the German Evangelical Church—to the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, or the Evangelical (Protestant) Church in Germany. Thus, it became the *worldwide* Christian Church *in* a particular country. Germany is the place, not the prescript: first comes the Gospel, then the Church, and then finally its geographical location. We can understand this through Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is nei-

² This line is unique to the German version written by Emil Luckhardt. [British version: “The Internationale / Unites the human race”; American version: “The International working class / Shall be the human race”; French version: “L’Internationale / Sera le genre humain.”—Ed.]

³ See Jürgen Moltmann, “Control is Good—Trust is Better: Freedom and Security in a ‘Free World,’” *Theology Today* 62 (2006): 465–75.—Ed.

ther bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Today we continue this by saying there is neither German nor Chinese, neither American nor Japanese; whoever is baptized and believes is one in Christ.

Christianity can never be a tribal religion—a *Stammesreligion*, as we say in German. The Karlowitz Synod of 1856 forbade the epithets “Serbian,” “Rumanian,” or “Bulgarian” for the Orthodox Church, maintaining that there was only one Church shared between these countries. Likewise, the term “Russian Orthodox Church” is a product of the early twentieth century. In 1964, I argued in favor of an “Exodus Church” over a German state church or “people’s church” (*Volkskirche*) and other forms of culturally-adapted Christendom.⁴ Today, I would recommend that instead of a “Chinese Church” we speak of a “Church of Christ in China.”

3. INTERNATIONALISM

What we typically call “world religions”—Buddhism, Islam, Christianity—are already “inter-” or “trans-national.” We should all cooperate in a shared dream of humankind and a dream of a peaceful and healthy Earth. Only an international organization like the United Nations can deal with humanity’s many problems, such as climate change (the 2015 Paris Conference was a good first step), nuclear proliferation, chemical weapons, fair trade, and cybersecurity. However, nationalism—which led to two world wars and millions of dead—should be left behind in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I should know what I am talking about, as I grew up under the Nazi regime and nearly died in the war.

The renewed nationalism of the United States under Donald Trump has diminished that country’s positive influence with the United Nations and its peacekeeping role. Other countries will have to take the reins. China already provides substantial financial, material, and volunteer support—rightly so, I believe.

⁴ See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1967).

4. THE UNITY AND THE CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

Protestantism is famous for its separations, not its unity. Yet we all believe in “the one apostolic and catholic Church” according to the Nicene Creed. In the ecumenical movement we were grateful that after the Cultural Revolution the Church in China overcame all denominational separations. Unity is a gift and the task of every church, reflecting the unity of the Triune God: “That they all may be one” (Jn. 17:21). Since Martin Luther, Protestant theologians have taught the “universal priesthood” of all believers; “what crept out of baptism is consecrated priest, bishop and Pope.”⁵ It is high time, it seems to me, to discover the universal papacy of all believers. The Protestant churches are also “the one, catholic Church.”

Yet while we believe and confess it, we do not act upon it. The Reformation was intended to be the renewal of this one, catholic Church—it was a *catholic* reformation, the ecumenical movement reminds us. We are *evangelical catholics*! We need unity from below, in every Christian family, in every Christian congregation, and in every Christian Church. When we speak of the unity of the Church, it is the internal, spiritual solidarity that we mean. When we speak of the catholicity of the Church, we bring its external, universal horizon into sight:

The word “catholic” comes from the Greek *katholou* and means “all-embracing.” “All-embracing” is in truth a quality of the Kingdom of God, not of the Church of Christ, but the Church understands itself eschatologically as an *anticipation* of the universal Kingdom. The hope and the mission of the Church are universal. Therefore, the unity of the Church is a sign of hope across the boundaries of race, gender, nationality and culture. The unity of the Church is sacramental and holy. As Christians, we believe in *one solidary Church*.

⁵ Martin Luther, “An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation” [To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation], 1520. Translation quoted from Jürgen Moltmann and Steffen Lösel, “The Unfinished Reformation,” *Theology Today* 74, no. 1 (2017): 10–21.