Theology of Hope Faces Tomorrow

JOHN DART

Christian churches, by and large, dwell in the past, viewing today's "sin-filled" world from a biblical-age perspective. If they speak of the future, they usually speak of one after death.

Now theologians are telling the churches they should focus on the future, especially man's future on this earth.

*God is ahead of us, not above us.*

*God's presence today consists of his promise to come again.*

The biblical word of God has a "provisional character" rather than a final revelation, and was intended to keep men on the move.

These are messages of the "theology of hope," which has replaced the "God is dead" theologies as the most-discussed concept in religion circles.

Like the death of God debate the theology of hope is being discussed on a scholarly level—and probably will soon reach a popular level, without getting too far from the main theses.

Unlike the death of God theories,

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the "hope" theology might have a real impact on attitudes in the church.

Significantly, the new theology has aroused the interest of both liberal religious thinkers who want to get the church more involved in social action and conservative churchmen who view saving souls as the overriding mission.

The "hope" theologians assert, however, that salvation cannot be a purely private experience. It is incomplete unless there is salvation and freedom for all the world.

If this were the only major assertion of the theology of hope, the theology probably would be dismissed by many churchmen as simply another rationale for getting involved in socio-political problems. (The conservatives call it "getting into politics." The liberals call it "fighting for moral and social justice.")

But the "hope" theologians, principally Jurgen Moltmann of Germa-
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ny, have made biblical events such as Exodus, the flight of Jews out of Egyptian slavery, and the Resurrec-
tion, the rising of Jesus from the dead, important symbols in the theology of hope.

Promises of the coming "Kingdom of God," progressively de-empha-
sised by Christianity, are given central prominence.

Christianity Today, the leading conservative evangelical magazine in the nation, has editorialized that Moltmann is "one new star twirl-
ing in the murky sky of contem-
porary theology." A. Jollom's book, "The Theology of Hope," "imparts a fresh orientation for religious dis-
cussion," the magazine said.

The magazine raised a lot of questions, but liberal theologians also find gaps.

Source of Weakness

In one sense, this is a weakness: "Theologians are usually right in what they affirm, but wrong in what they neglect or deny," one scholar has observed.

In another sense, it is a strength: Other religions see the opportu-
nity to give their own interpretation and sup-
porting devotions because the words of the works of the theology of hope are read and discussed in U.S. theologi-
cal circles. In Germany generally are recognized to be Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Gerhard Sauter, and Werner Marck-Algerman. Moltmann is putting the most attention currently because of his book published last year, and his presence at Duke University as a visiting professor.

Still another figure is New- Marxist philosopher Karl Bruck, 58, who now teaches at West Germany's University of Tübingen where Molt-
mann also on the faculty. Bruck, though an atheist, has induced some of the "hope" theologians. Two sample quotations from Bruck:

"Where there is hope there can be religion. Where there is no hope there is not always hope." The new is never totally new. It is always preceded by a dream, a promise, an anticipation. He who does not expect the unexpected does not expect anything.

According to Dr. Walter Cupps of UC Santa Barbara, who has studied the writings of "hope" theologians for two years, "This Marxist element stands behind the move-
ment to push its toward politics."

New Czech Leaders

Moltmann and Metz have partici-
pated in the Christian-Marxist dis-
course in Europe. In spite of the views of some rightists, Marxists say, Moltmann, theologian to the Christian Marxists — for example the new leaders in Czechoslovakia.

Discrepant discourse for both Marxist and Christian dialogue partici-
pants, however, was that there is a need for a dialogue on the world-
appetly. The third force is tired of being on the sidelines and the dog-
trines of Christianity.

Moltmann and Marxists hope to make religion meaningful, "We are trying to provide compelling reasons why religious men and women are not involved in the problems of peace and justice," said the new leader of the Christian-Marxist of the University of Münster.

Sitting on Front Line

Moltmann, like the others, is a "second coming" doctrine in Christianity is a known one. Believers hope for the end of all world wars. They do not seek it except to try to convert their Christian ways, Christianity-

Told to this "privatizing" statement, Metz replied: "This is of a free world," says Moltmann. "I'm sitting on the front line of fighting for the liberties of the world.

In this view, happiness, peace and justice for all are legitimate goals for the Christian to pursue on behalf of "Other." Moltmann, however, does not place as great weight on these goals by his own doing. "Moltmann apparently feels that remaining the Bible for its promis-
ements and forward thrust will provide the impetus needed to make churches involve themselves in the world's problems.

That certainly is the goal of many American theologians.

When Moltmann spoke to a group of theologians in a Berlin church, he fell short about the need to get the church involved in the world, the reaction was: "So, so new American religious thinkers have said this about the early Church.

Moltmann, on a recent visit to West Germany, outlined what he calls a "new" society, the social gospel movement, in the United States before World War II: "Aesthetic Christian of the world bed and lost it. The world is waiting for a revolutionary Chris-
tianity which will call the world back to values once lost."