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Examining Eschatologies of Glory and the Eschatology of the Cross in A Theology of Hope and A Fire in My Belly

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Jürgen Moltmann's *A Theology of Hope* provides a theological framework that is useful in examining the film, *A Fire in my Belly*, by David Wojnarowicz. While Moltmann's theology develops and explains certain ways of being and ways of understanding God, his work never examines specifically how these function or their relevance to the a person's or group's lived experience in the world. When Moltmann's theology is applied to Wojnarowicz's film, it strengthens the film's critique of society's and church's silence, exclusion, stigmatization, and its maintenance of hierarchal structures. The way in which Wojnarowicz's film challenges specific forms of societal and church oppression, however, also bring Moltmann's theology under the same criticism.

One theological concept that is helpful in analyzing Wojnarowicz's film is an eschatology of glory. Moltmann problematizes an eschatology of glory because it seeks to find God in church and sacrament. This eschatology understands the cross of Christ as "only a transitional stage on his way to heavenly lordship" and therefore separates the coming life or future salvation from the current life (Moltmann 145). This dualism makes human suffering, hope, and history lose their "eschatological direction" (145). In this eschatology of glory, the church controls access to heavenly truths and heavenly salvation; instead of proclaiming eschatological hope in God's promised future, the church functions by merely disclosing and glorifying "what has already happened in heaven" (145). Due to this emphasis of heavenly truth and salvation at the expense of earthly life, everything of this world becomes meaningless and transient.

In order to better understand Wojnarowicz's film, one must understand the context to which his film responded. Wojnarowicz created his film in response to a societal eschatology of glory where moralist pastors, doctors, businesspersons, and politicians often utilized Christian teachings and scriptural prescriptions on sexual purity to justify discrimination against queer persons and persons living with HIV/AIDS, whether by exclusion, silence, or legal prohibitions. The stigmatization, silencing, and fear of persons living with HIV/AIDS, especially due to the conflation of HIV/AIDS with gay sexuality, came in the form of the church's prohibition of AIDS education and condoms usage, limited governmental funding for AIDS research, and discrimination by doctors and employers. In his diary in 1989, Wojnarowicz reflects on the vilification of persons living with AIDS that he saw on a television show about a man on trial for

transmitting HIV to a woman by having unprotected sex and recalls another occasion when the *New York Post* used the phrase “AIDS Monster” in a headline to describe a man who “paid a few dollars periodically to suck off the dicks of some teenagers” (Scholder 232). Wojnarowicz also experienced this rejection and fear in his personal relationships. Wojnarowicz records in his diary about a time when his brother-in-law and sister left him behind while his sister went into labor at the hospital:

I can't go on without knowing if I'm wanted or not. . . . I sometimes think maybe it's because I'm queer. Maybe they are afraid of what I carry, if I have AIDS or not. This fear returns often. . . . I ask myself if it's my imagination or feelings about rejection, if it's all in my head, because then it could be something grown out of nothing—the way I sometimes imagine the worst rejections and project them onto others who I place in power positions (209).

In response to both personal and societal stigmatization, Wojnarowicz writes, “I've been wrestling with the psychological aspects with this as well as some social problems. Sometimes I get involved with groups fighting city and government policies towards people with AIDS” (225). *A Fire in My Belly*, among numerous other works, was part of such a fight in which Wojnarowicz used his art to speak out against the discrimination of and silence around persons living with HIV/AIDS.

A Fire in My Belly shows that Wojnarowicz saw that much of this social stigmatization stemmed from the church and its teachings, teachings that Moltmann would call an eschatology of glory. The paired images of a man sewing his mouth shut and the sewing together of a broken loaf of bread speak to the situation of AIDS, society, and the church during the AIDS crisis. Because Wojnarowicz was an AIDS activist and artist in New York during the 1980s, he must have been familiar with the SILENCE = DEATH and ACT UP campaigns. The sewing shut of the lips with red thread is a dramatic and literal depiction of how the social stigmatization of AIDS silenced people living with HIV/AIDS, making it difficult for them to receive the needed AZT drugs, to hold a job, or to share their status and experiences with friends, family, or sexual partners. Wojnarowicz then pairs this image of the silencing of persons living with HIV/AIDS with the broken loaf of bread. If this of the image broken loaf of bread symbolizes the eucharist—that represents or becomes in some way Jesus' giving of his body to all humanity—then the act of sewing this loaf together with the same red thread depicts the way in which the church participates in the societal stigmatization and silencing of persons living with HIV/AIDS by placing limits and regulations on who can receive the eucharist

or who is welcome at the Lord's Supper. In this way, the church exemplifies Moltmann's eschatology of glory where the church seeks to monopolize control who has access to God's promised future through its sacraments and disclosure of heavenly truths. The church upholds what it sees as heavenly prescriptions of purity and moral uprightness at the expense of the lives of persons living with HIV/AIDS or queer persons. Wajarowicz's art does what Moltmann's work never does—that is, his art criticizes a concrete situation where the church's eschatology of glory abandons the crucified one, crucified by silence, stigma, and exclusion, while seeking heavenly salvation, moral uprightness, and 'godly' purity.

Instead of the eschatology of glory, Moltmann poses the eschatology of the cross which "opposes the ecstasy that abandons the earth on which that cross stands" and lives in the 'not yet' expectation of the fulfillment of God's promise (Moltmann 146). Moltmann further explains this eschatology by examining Paul's description of baptism. In baptism, the believers participate in the suffering and death of Christ, but participation in the resurrection is a future 'not yet' and is only present in hope and God's promise. By this hope the believer "is led . . . into the tensions and antitheses of obedience and suffering in the world" (147). In this eschatology of the cross which leads the believer to expect God's coming kingdom to transform the earth on which the cross stands, everyday life becomes the realm of serving God (147).

Wojnarowicz's film depicts the world and church that have failed to embrace an eschatology of the cross and failed to see this life as the location for serving God. His film does very explicitly depict the reality of this world's 'not yet' through images of poverty, suffering, and silence. Wojnarowicz's film juxtaposes images of power and oppression, suffering and indifference, poverty and wealth. Footage of a woman with open hands or men with amputated legs begging in the streets who are faced with rejection and indifference is juxtaposed with footage of able-bodied police officers patrolling the streets and protecting those with money. This juxtaposition demonstrates the ways in which those with wealth and power maintain privilege and control by ignoring or silencing those they oppress. This systemic oppression is further exemplified by the footage of the named skeleton figures like Eliseo Muñoz, Mario Centeno, Julián Sánchez, and Salvador Cruz Cervantes who were Mexican journalists killed in the 1970s and 80s by state powers because they reported and criticized those with power, money, and control (Rojas). Wojnarowicz's film also placed footage

of impoverished barrios and street vendors alongside footage of machinery and money dropping into blood in order to represent the ways in which greed, capitalism, colonization, militarization, and industrialization maintain hierarchies, power, and privilege. In an undated journal entry Wojnarowicz makes a parallel critique, writing:

Rich people live in there; they see sights the rest of us don't see. The news for them is and will continue to be good. They are proud of their armies halfway around the world and the work they are doing. They are proud of themselves for how they have edited their view, their lives, their neighbors, us down below. They hear very little of our lives, they hear very little of our hollers and screams our hunger our choking. They usually avert their eyes from below. . . . They have faith in god and country and concrete and steel and limited numbers of windows usually high up where no gymnastics or ladders can reach (Scholder 241).

Similarly, Wojnarowicz's film depicts a world that where, as Moltmann describes, God's promised future remains unfulfilled—where hierarchies are systematically maintained between rich and poor, straight and queer, HIV-negative and HIV-positive, able-bodied and differently-abled. While Wojnarowicz depicts the failure of church and society to answer to the needs of the earth on which the cross stands, his film's criticism also can serve to inspire society to break the silence, challenge the stigma, and break down the barriers that exclude persons who are differently-abled, queer, poor, or living with HIV/AIDS and in doing so, begin to “transform itself and become what it is promised to be” in its openness to God's promised future (Moltmann 311).

Dispersed throughout this footage that juxtaposes social positions of privilege and oppression, Wojnarowicz inserts an image of human sacrifice depicted in an ancient, indigenous Mexican painting. This can be understood as a critique of colonization and missionary discourse. While indigenous practices of human sacrifice seemed horrific and barbaric to the conquistadors and colonists, the colonists and conquistadors failed to see the horror of their own actions. Early conquistadors and colonists to places like Mexico, supported by the church and missionary ideals of their time, used their purported civility and their commitment to Christianity as ‘justification’ for the slaughter, captivity, christianization, and oppression of millions of indigenous people. Furthermore, in the centuries that followed, they used the power and privileges gained from this oppression and colonization to maintain the highly-stratified class system that Wojnarowicz's images of poverty and silence critique.

To heighten this critique, Wojnarowicz also inserts images of the suffering Christ in between these images of human sacrifice, poverty, and silence. Placing the image of the suffering Christ beside the silenced person living with HIV/AIDS, the men with amputated legs facing rejection, the begging woman, and the poor barrios depicts God's identification in Christ with contemporary suffering. Pairing this footage of suffering with human sacrifice criticizes the ways in which modern Americans can easily reject and condemn the ways in which some indigenous communities practiced human sacrifice while failing to condemn the ways in which their privilege is maintained through the sacrifice—the exploitation and vilification—of the poor, the queer, the person living with HIV/AIDS, the two-thirds world citizen, etc. While Moltmann does define an eschatology of glory or the cross in ways that are important and useful, he never critiques the specific examples of eschatologies of glory in the society in which he lived; in doing so, he does in some way neglect “the earth on which the cross stands” (146). Wojnarowicz's art, on the other hand, depicts a variety of situations that exemplify an eschatology of glory. By no means does his depiction of the ‘not yet’ fulfillment of the world encompass all forms of oppression, but in its concern for the concrete lives of humans and marginalized groups, it does not abandon the earth on which the cross stands.

Returning to Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, the ‘death of God’ on the cross marks the “eschatological openness” where the fulfillment of God's future and the end of death and suffering remain in expectation of the fulfillment of God's promise (159). God's promise brings all human and created existence into question where they become historic and are brought under the crisis of the promised future (151). The ‘death of God’ on the cross allows humans “to ask, to seek and hope for resurrection, life, kingdom and righteousness;” it allows humans to criticize the world because the world remains unfulfilled but hopeful of God's promised future (159). Moltmann understands Jesus' death as “experienced and proclaimed as god-forsakenness, as judgment, as curse, as exclusion from the promised life, as reprobation and damnation” (196). Resurrection, therefore, is not merely a second life but is the utter destruction of death, god-forsakenness, judgment, curse, and damnation that fulfills God's promised life. Moltmann emphasizes that this god-forsakenness experienced in the cross, this “absolute *nihil*,” also embraces God because of Jesus' full divinity (184). But the resurrection of the crucified, god-forsaken one means also means experiencing God's

closeness and divinity “which annihilates the total *nihil*” (184). The continuity of Jesus’ identity must be understood as constituted by the complete contradictions of cross and resurrection, god-forsakenness and divinity (186).

For Moltmann, the ‘death of God’ allows humans to criticize the world and its suffering because it remains in expectation of God’s promised future. Wojnarowicz’s film provides this strong critique of the world and its suffering, especially of the church’s failure to recognize the god-forsakenness that embraces God in Christ as the crucified and suffering one and to proclaim the crucified one as the one whom God resurrected. As previously discussed, the two images of the mouth sewn shut and the bread that was broken sewn back together provide an example of what Moltmann would call an eschatology of glory.

Wojnarowicz’s film makes clear that Christ who was crucified is the one who is stigmatized, ostracized, rejected, and silenced today. The image of the crucifix lying on the ground under the swarming ants conveys that Christ is experienced as suffering with the most rejected of society—the god-forsaken, judged, cursed, excluded, and damned.

For Wojnarowicz, the gay man is an example of such a god-forsaken, excluded, and damned person. Wojnarowicz’s footage of a man masturbating can be understood to symbolize the situation of gay men living with HIV/AIDS. The significance of this representation can be seen in Wojnarowicz’s journal entry, “So in San Francisco, I went to a porno movie house and jerked off. It felt kind of stupid and human” (Scholder 250). He then describes his encounter with the Asian man next to him: “The kid wanted to suck my dick but I wouldn’t let him. He kept trying in the most ridiculous ways, but I kept refusing him silently. . . .He finally said, why not? I said, It’s not a good thing to do. It makes me nervous. I couldn’t talk about AIDS. I just wouldn’t let him do it” (250). Hence, the footage of the masturbating man as a symbol for gay men living with HIV/AIDS demonstrates both the way in which HIV/AIDS stigma prevented gay men from revealing their HIV/AIDS status and how the virus limited, sexually and otherwise, the lives of persons living with HIV/AIDS. Wojnarowicz’s pairing of the footage of a man masturbating with images from a meat factory could reference the association of gay sexuality with impurity coming from Leviticus prescriptions about the

uncleanliness of sex, masturbation, and certain meats. It is this stigma and prohibition of touching such impurities that made it impossible for Wojnarowicz to reveal his AIDS status to the Asian man.

The film then continued with footage that flashed between hands being washed clean and dead corpses. This shows the way that those who opposed AIDS research and the protection of persons living with HIV/AIDS sought to rid themselves of the guilt incurred by inhibiting AIDS research, medications, and education. But while such opponents sought to ignore and silence the AIDS crisis and tried to wash their hands of the guilt by clinging to moralism, purity codes, and biblical prescriptions, thousands of people were dying from AIDS, as the flashing images of corpses represent. As Moltmann describes, Jesus' identity comes from both cross and resurrection, from being the crucified one being the one whom God resurrects; therefore, when church and society excluded, silenced, damned, or judged gay men or persons living with HIV/AIDS, they failed to recognize Jesus' identity, not only as the divine one whom God resurrects but as the god-forsaken one.

For Moltmann, the church exists by obediently serving the world as the body of Christ, a body existing through the contradictory dialect of cross and resurrection. Moltmann explains, "For this reason it is nothing in itself, but all that it is, it is in existing for others. It is the Church of God where it is a Church for the world" (311). The church's mission and work is not limited to the social roles and functions that society grants it or expects from it, nor does it seek to preserve the state of the world or humanity as is. Instead, the church serves the world in such a way that seeks to transform it into what God promises it will become. In light of God's self-identification with the crucified one and God's promised future in the resurrection of Christ, "the Church takes up the society in which it lives—into its own horizon of expectation of the eschatological fulfillment of justice, life, humanity and social ability, and communicates its own decisions in history its openness and readiness for this future and its elasticity towards it" (Moltmann 311). The church is called, therefore, to proclaim the gospel of God's promised future to all the world, but Moltmann clarifies that this proclamation "has nothing whatever to do with an extension of the claim to sovereignty on the part of the Church and its officials, or with an attempt to regain the old privileges accruing from the cult of the

Absolute” or the “churchifying’ of the world” (312). Instead this proclamation refers to the spreading of hope that “serves as the coming salvation of the world” and points to God’s promised future (312).

Wojnarowicz’s film shows clearly that during the AIDS crisis the church failed to be the church of God because it failed to be the church for the world—the church for people living with HIV/AIDS, for queer persons, for the people who begged in the streets of Mexico. Instead of bringing society into God’s horizon of expectation, the church often let its horizon be controlled by the societal fears and stigma of persons living with HIV/AIDS, and the church’s teachings on HIV/AIDS, or lack thereof, often perpetuated this stigma or maintained silence. The church that Wojnarowicz’s film critiques is the church that sought to purify, “churchify,” and colonize the world instead of spreading the hope of God’s promised future. In Wojnarowicz’s film, God’s promise and God’s self-identification are not found with the church that sought to silence and exclude people living with HIV/AIDS or to maintain the hierarchal power structures between rich and poor, able-bodied and differently-abled, HIV-negative and HIV-positive, clean and unclean, straight and queer. Instead, God identifies with the crucified ones who cry out for resurrection and the end of their suffering.

In his diary, Wojnarowicz writes of a time when he was visiting a friend who was dying of AIDS and recalls how the “nun rushed into the room flinging open to door with one knock and chattering away about how you/he accepted the church or god or something in his final days” (Scholder 201). Wojnarowicz reflects, “I think of the guy lying on the bed with outstretched arms, I think how he’s so much further there than this woman and her text, he’s more there than the spoken forms, the words of spirituality (201). Likewise, Wojnarowicz’s film calls the viewer to recognize that God cannot be confined to the church and the sacraments, especially in their exclusion and silencing of others, but the Christ who was crucified and rejected is the one whom God resurrected. The church has failed in being the church of God; through its exclusion and silence it has failed to be a church for the world. Wojnarowicz’s film critiques Moltmann’s theology because his film demonstrates how silence, in and of itself, can be a form of exclusion and a rejection of the crucified one. Moltmann’s theology, while developing useful ways of speaking about God,

maintained such silence because it did not answer to any specific situations of oppression in the society in which Moltmann lived.

In *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann's understanding of theological concepts such as an eschatology of glory, an eschatology of the cross, the 'death of God,' and the church provide a theological framework to examine the world. His theology, however, fails to speak in direct ways to any specific manifestations of the concepts he develops. When paired with Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly*, one can utilize Moltmann's theology to analyze Wojnarowicz's criticisms of church and societal stigmatization and silence. Because Wojnarowicz's film speaks to numerous concrete situations of oppression—of persons living with HIV/AIDS, the poor, queer persons, persons from the two-thirds world, and differently-abled persons—it makes a stronger and more precise critique of the ways in which Moltmann's descriptions of theological realities operate than Moltmann makes himself. *A Fire in My Belly* criticizes the eschatologies of glory in which church and society operate and demonstrates how the silenced, excluded, stigmatized, damned, judged, and god-forsaken, in their criticism of the world and church as they are, often have the most to share about God who identifies Godself with the crucified one.

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