

AUTHOR INSTRUCTIONS

Take into account



FINAL PROOF CORRECTIONS

This is your final proof of the typeset pages provided in Portable document format (PDF). We direct your attention to the instructions accompanying the proof, especially the requirement that all corrections, revisions, and additions be entered on the proof with comments and not on the word version of the manuscript. You are being asked to correct errors, not to revise the paper. Avoid moving blocks of text or making extensive content-related revision(s). Extensive alteration may require Editorial Board approval, possibly delaying publication. How to: <https://tinyurl.com/5n7795k5>



MAKE YOUR CORRECTIONS AND ANSWER QUERIES

Indicate your corrections on the PDF directly on the proofs with the *Comment* tool in Acrobat Adobe Reader. Add PDF annotations to your file. You can add text boxes and sticky notes, underline text, strikethrough content, highlight text, and more. Make sure to answer all enquiries so that your corrections are noticeable and easy to understand.



ARTICLE TITLE, AUTHORSHIP AND AFFILIATIONS

Check the title, the author names, and affiliations. Refrain from submitting without co-authors' approval. Authorship should ideally remain intact and unchanged; all author's contributions statements must acknowledge all authors' roles and participation.



TABLES

Check the table data against that in your original tables. Make sure that the data mentioned in the manuscript results match those in the tables. All columns in the table need a descriptive header to guide readers.



EQUATIONS AND UNITS OF MEASUREMENT

Check any equations and units of measurement against those in your original manuscript. Make sure special characters have not dropped out.



FIGURES AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Check to be sure that figures are entirely legible, including any small-print text. Make sure that the data mentioned in the manuscript results match that referred to in the figures. The vertical and horizontal axis needs descriptors to guide readers. Photographs need the correct source to acknowledge the place, time, and photographer - check these credentials.



ERRORS

If you find an error, look again at the lines around the error. Mistakes tend to cluster; especially redacted information will need to be reintroduced when it was removed for anonymity during peer review.



TIMEFRAME


Keep to the timeframe of the Production Coordinator. Ensuring a timely, productive proofreading process aids in shaping the credibility and reputation of our journal.



SATISFACTION

You must be completely SATISFIED with the final proof and inform the Editorial Office about your satisfaction via email or the online submission system. Upon receiving your final satisfied opinion and corrections, the Editorial Office will implement the changes and send your article for final publication.

Six decades of Moltmann's Theology of Hope and tangible hope in South Africa today

**Author:**Jacobus M. Vorster¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Unit of Reformational Theology and the Development of the SA Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Jacobus Vorster,
koos.vorster@nwu.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 15 May 2023

Accepted: 12 July 2023

Published: 26 Sept. 2023

How to cite this article:

Vorster, J.M., 2023, 'Six decades of Moltmann's Theology of Hope and tangible hope in South Africa today', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a8988. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8988>

Copyright:

© 2023. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Moltmann's Theology of Hope still resonates in theological discourses 60 years after the publication of his epoch-making book containing this concept. At a time of fading hope among South Africans, a revisitation of Moltmann's pattern of reasoning holds the promise of reward. This article focuses on the quest for raising tangible hope in South Africa and the possible contribution of the Theology of Hope in this regard. The central theoretical argument here will be that the failure of hope in South Africa is caused by the fact that hope continues to be viewed in terms of the event of liberation (1994), and not in terms of a liberating process as the Theology of Hope proposes. To unpack this hypothesis and provide preliminary responses to the matters raised here and others, the study revisits Moltmann's Theology of Hope as centred on the recurrent interpretations and applications that it has received in political theologies. The aim is to translate the core idea of the Theology of Hope into tangible hope for desponding South Africans today.

Contribution: This research proposes that hope founded in the sign of the reign of the moving God, such as instances of love, goodness, truth-telling, fair jurisprudence and caring for the poor, which are discernible in South Africa today, are valuable and plausible building blocks for the creation of continuous tangible hope. The hope that rests in the actions of the moving God is of greater value than that residing in a single historic event. The 1994 liberation event, lauded by many as the great cause of perennial hope, has faded away in recent years and turned into a pervasive despondency within the South African community.

Keywords: Moltmann's Theology; Theology of Hope; hope in South Africa; moving God; political theology; political ethics; liberating process; liberation theology.

Introduction

Moltmann's influential book entitled *Theology of Hope* was published 60 years ago, in 1964, and became a theological sensation, especially in the Western and developing world. The book inspired scholars in the field of political theology and political ethics at a time of the world-wide struggle for liberation from oppressive economic and political systems. His application of the Christian eschatology on the need for people to find hope in a troubled world caught the attention of the ecumenical theology of the World Council of Churches. Numerous theological seminaries in one-dimensional societies as well as Christians involved in the struggle for liberation and tangible hope were guided by the materials in this book. Since the inception of the 'Theology of Hope' a considerable number of scholars have furthered the concept of hope within a moral paradigm and a political idiom (see e.g., Cone 1975:75; Gutierrez 1985:155–157). Subsequent work done by Moltmann (1972:268–292 & 1975) links eschatological hope more directly with political liberation and, in this way, provided a strong foundation for the emergent liberation theology of the 1960s.

Moltmann maintains that the crucified God and the promise of the coming God bring hope for people living in the shackles of political oppression. When the shackles are removed, hope replaces the despair of the oppressed. This view of hope that depends on political liberation was echoed in the decisions of the World Council of Churches and provided a conjunction for Theology of Revolution espoused by Shaull (1968:23–28 & 1969:190ff.). The latter underpinned the Ecumenical Body Programme to Combat Racism, including its unfortunate romanticisation of so-called 'liberative violence' performed by liberation armies in Southern Africa (see World Council of Churches 1975:277).

Note: Special Collection: Wim Dreyer Dedication, sub-edited by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

The Theology of Hope became a popular framework for the moral agency of Christians who supported the quest for liberation in Apartheid South Africa because, according to influential theologians engaged in 'the struggle', liberation would be the only way towards hope for the country's people. The history of the theology of 'the struggle' has been described and discussed sufficiently by De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2005); their work can be regarded as highly informative, as reflected in the numerous imprints of this publication.

The Christian Institute founded by Beyers Naude, a leader of the struggle as well as the South African Council of Churches under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in addition to the publications of the documents of the Institute of Contextual Theology, all infused the struggle with theological insights from different paradigmatic perspectives. These moral agents translated the ecumenical theology of those days into a South African context and, in this way, the concept of hope became an important moral directive for the struggle. Through the thoughts and actions of these leaders and leading organisations, Moltmann became instrumental in terms of his theological concept of hope within the South African context; this development was boosted by his encounters with many South African theologians in the seventies (see Moltmann 2008:233–235; Resane 2021).

The Theology of Hope was thus a dynamo generating a Christian perspective of hope in South Africa during the time of the struggle for liberation and the destruction of Apartheid as the last remnant of colonialism in South Africa. South Africans longed for tangible hope after a long period of despair caused by an oppressive system. The miraculous emergence of the new democracy in 1994 inspired such hope. When many people expected a racial and civil war, South Africans negotiated a peaceful transition and instituted a Constitutional Democracy with a bill of fundamental rights and the rule of law. This development amazed the world and was lauded by many as proof of what could be achieved by way of negotiation between seemingly irreconcilable parties. Tutu (1994:60) praised the emergence of a rainbow nation and Mandela (2006:744) reminded this nation that 'it is time to heal the wounds and build a new South Africa'. The first years of the new democracy under the visionary and reconciliatory leadership of Mandela was a time at which tangible hope seemed to be in the grasp of South Africans.

After 60 years of the Theology of Hope and nearly 30 years after the dismantling of Apartheid and the concomitant liberation event, one is inclined to ask: Did the event of liberation install tangible and ongoing hope in the collective South African psyche? Did the removal of the shackles of oppression open the floodgates of hope and peace to herald a bright future for a community oppressed by the long history of British colonialism and its recent branch of Apartheid, both with their harrowing indignities and injustices? Did liberation theology, carried out to the point of the promise that political liberation by means of liberative violence, set the stage for hope?

Today, the hope of 1994 has mostly dwindled in South Africa despite the promising new constitution, the dismantling of Apartheid, the end of traditional colonialism, and free elections and other rights enshrined by the rule of law. South Africans are ranked 101 on the recent happiness report, well below some countries where highly unstable politics and economic instabilities reign (World Happiness Report 2023). The notion of tangible hope has faltered after nearly three decades of African National Congress (ANC) rule. Large scale joblessness, corruption, poor service delivery and crime shattered the hope created by the liberation of 1994–1996. After 28 years, we are compelled to ask: What happened to the ideals held high by Mandela, Tutu, De Klerk, and the leaders who campaigned for many decades with huge sacrifices to inspire our people? Where are we at this moment in time? Can tangible hope be revived? Could we, amid all the distrust in political leadership and economic planning, find hope again – the positive hope that could lead and inspire us to an honest, responsible and humane society where the plight of the poor and the marginalised are successfully and sustainably addressed and where we can bring to bear high moral standards in all spheres of life? Today, we are in dire need of a new vision of tangible hope that could lead us to mutual trust, respect for each other, a flourishing life and a bright future for our children and the next generations. Can the Theology of Hope assist us anew in this respect?

The present article will focus on the quest to raise tangible hope in South Africa, and the potential contribution of the Theology of Hope to this end. The central theoretical argument is that the failure of hope in South Africa is that it was and still is based on liberation thought in an event of liberation (1994) and not in a liberating process as the Theology of Hope proposes. To provide preliminary answers to the questions, and with a view to unfolding a hypothesis, a short revisiting of Moltmann's Theology of Hope and recurrent interpretations and applications thereof in political theologies will be necessary.

The Theology of Hope revisited

Historical eschatology

From the perspective of a revelation theology, where revelation is not regarded as mere formalism but as deeply embedded in the promises of God, and drawing on the Philosophy of Hope of Bloch (1959:285), Moltmann (1967:15, 43) questions the classic notion in Christian dogmatics that eschatology has to do with the doctrine of the end of history when reality will be consumed in a bright new future with the second coming of Christ. He asserts that such a futuristic eschatology, which serves as an appendix to history, abandons the richness and fullness of the reign of God and the triumphant resurrection of Christ as well as the relevance of God's promises for humankind in this world of injustice. Such a view also restricts the church to remain an exodus church in a world fossilised by evil and longing for a new exodus. He laments the fact that eschatology was thus robbed

from its relevance for the present, and maintains that eschatology means:

[T]he doctrine of Christian hope, which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it. From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffices everything here in the dawn of an expected new day. (Moltmann 1967:16)

However, he does not find solace in the idea of a complete realised eschatology as proposed by the liberal theology by exponents such as Weiss (1892:49), Schweitzer (1905:322) and Robinson (1964). Following in the footsteps of Barth (1922:298), Moltmann (1967:39) asserts that eschatology is not completely realised in the immanent, while it is an immanent force that builds on the resurrection of Christ to the bright transcendental future of God, infusing transformation and renewal of present realities along the way (Moltmann 1967:45–69, 86). The future is bound up with the present and *vice versa*, for both are founded on the cross and resurrection of Christ. Faith and hope are the two sides of the same coin. 'Faith binds man to Christ. Hope sets the faith open to the comprehensive future of Christ' (Moltmann 1967:20). Faith and hope can therefore not be reduced to fleeing from the world but, instead, embodies a realistic fixed opposition to the forces of injustices and evil that drive humankind into despair. Hope makes the Christian church an active moral agent, 'a constant disturbance in human society because it testifies about the future of Christ which contradicts the forces of evil and despair'. Despair is therefore sin, because it remonstrates against the attributes and the endowments of the risen Lord (Moltmann 1967:22; 2012:39).

Revelation and promise

Underlying the reality of hope and its transformative power in history is a view of revelation by way of promise. God reveals Godself as the God of promises who, since the proto gospel in the creation narrative, promises a better future for humankind. Therefore, the religion of Israel is a religion of expectation fed by the constant promise of the 'guide-God'. The promise entails a declaration of a new reality that does not exist yet in the present. Furthermore, the promise binds humans to the future and furnishes them with a new understanding and experience of history. Here it is important to see that the 'history which is initiated and determined by promise does not consist in cyclic recurrence but has a definite trend towards the promised and outstanding fulfilment' (Moltmann 1967:103). The promises in other words have a direction and point to the meaning of the past and the meaning of the future flowing from God's faithfulness and his focused work of the guidance of his people. The promise has not found a 'reality congruous to it', but:

[S]tands on the contrary in contradiction to the reality open to experience now and heretofore. Future is here a designation of

that reality in which the word of promise finds its counterpart, its answer and its fulfilment. (p. 104)

The word of promise also creates an interval of tension between its proclamation and its fulfilment. In this interval, humans have the freedom of accepting or rejecting the promise and to be hopeful or fatalistic. Moreover, when a promise is entrusted directly to God and his faithfulness, the fulfilments can contain elements of surprise that are contrary to its initial wording. Moltmann (1967) explains that this is why:

[T]he promise also does not fall to pieces along with the historical circumstances or the historical thought forms in which it was received but can transform itself – by interpretation – without losing its character of certainty, of expectation and of movement. If they are God's promises, then God must also be regarded as the subject of their fulfilment. (p. 104)

Lastly, God's promises are not liquidated by the history of Israel but have a constant overflow of something bigger to come. The fulfilment of the promise cannot be likened to a cheque to be cashed on which the promise becomes obsolete. In the history of Israel, fulfilments are always taken as expositions, confirmations *and expansions* of the promise (p. 105). That is why Israel did not resort to the gods of the nations but, despite sporadic disobedience, remained faithful to God. The promises constantly overflowed history and this phenomenon can only be ascribed to the 'inexhaustibility of God'. Promises are fulfilled in an event and a post-event process that even exceeds the contents of the event by way of generous spin-offs. The event constitutes momentous hope, but the process delivers an abundance of hope. Where the event may be overshadowed by negative historic forces, the process outlives the effect of such forces. The process is thus more beneficial than the event when it comes to the generation of lasting hope.

Movement and hope

The post-event process finds its momentum in history, and it is not a movement towards a horizon that acts as a rigid boundary. In this respect, Moltmann affirms the view of Gadamer (1960:231, 286) that history is moving and the horizons are moving with it. Movement bears hope. In his theological explanation of the relations among history, movement and tangible hope for people in situations of despair and despondence, he appealed to the works of Freud (Moltmann 1972:268). This he centred exclusively on his critique of rigidified religion. Also, he drew on the 'Philosopher of Hope', Bloch, particularly with a view to the notion that 'hope is where religion is' (Bloch 1970:8) and his conviction that that which *is* cannot be true: in other words, a historic entity or belief that denies the reality of the constant pattern of change cannot be plausible and cannot instil tangible hope for a community who is captive in the historic reality or belief (see Bloch 1961; see also Georghegan 1996:79).

These authors offer Moltmann views on history as a movement, revelation as a constant historical reality and

change as truth-creating and hope-generating. These insights of Bloch, Habermas and Freud assisted him to translate movement, change and hope into a plausible Theology of Hope. Barth raised the question as to whether the Theology of Hope is anything but Bloch's principle of hope baptised. However, Müller-Farenholz (2000:42) indicates convincingly that, although Bloch's principle of hope inspired Moltmann, Moltmann efficaciously reclaimed hope from atheism and set it on a plausible course in the heart of Christian faith. Viewed from within the ambit of ongoing biblical revelation and the force of history, he defines tangible hope which, in the end, flows from the 'God of liberation and perennial new beginnings' – the God of the cross and resurrection.

Moltmann (1967:120) elaborates on the various manifestations of the promise such as revelation, law, the eschatology of the prophets and the apocalyptic promise. The eschatology of the prophets is immanent in the history of Israel and oscillates between judgement and liberation driven by promise. Israel is sometimes confronted with 'gathering storms of destruction' (p. 127). The prophets proclaim the collapse of Israel in terms of God's judgement on their apostasy on the one hand and the ungodliness of their conduct such as the oppression of the poor and the needy.

But a deeper dimension of the judging acts of God should be discerned. The judgement of the Lord on the disobedience of Israel points also to a judgement of the nations, when they disregard God's quest for justice and righteousness. Amos says that 'God judges all wrong, including that among the people who do not know his law' (p. 129). But the promise is also a promise of blessing, and this blessing entails new acts of God that will manifest in the 'day of the Lord' and will filter through Israel to the whole of humankind [*pars pro toto*]. Moltmann (1967:132) speaks here of the universalising of the promise. But the universal fulfilment of the promise has a boundary, namely death. Because God is a God of the living, this boundary must also be overcome. Therefore, the universalising must be complemented by intensification which is the negation of death (see also Moltmann 2016:31–33). This is the content of the promise in New Testament eschatology.

Central to the promise is the death and resurrection of Christ. Moltmann (1967) accentuates this as follows:

Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead by God. In the New Testament there is no faith that does not start a priori with the resurrection of Jesus. (p. 165)

He debates the Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean thesis of the death of God in 20th century philosophy and critical theology at length and contends that the belief and proclamation of the risen Lord open up the immediate future for humankind. The crucifixion and resurrection point to something new, and that is the expectation of the kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ, which is not only so-called 'future music', but involves instead the immanent change of the course of things – a deviation from humanity's road to

destruction due to evil. The kingdom is a kingdom of justice and peace that evolves in history and finds its completion in the final judgement of God over evil and its detrimental effects on humankind. These happenings are possible because Christ is the living Lord, the lively Lord of life and the force behind justice, peace and freedom, which are not only attributes of future life but possibilities of life here and now in predicaments of despair and anguish. To this future of Christ and the world scripture testifies.

The activity of the risen Lord by way of his omnipresent moving, disturbing and renewing spirit releases hope for people. Evil and evil structures cannot resist the power of the spirit of the risen Lord and kingdom of God. It always must give way under the power of the spirit. History is a history of movement and change due to the transformative eschatology (see Moltmann 2012:chapter 4). The transformative movement of the spirit of the risen Lord is the source of real hope. Hope is in the grasp of humankind in the present age, because we experience eschatology now. Hope is real because of history's forward movement within the orbit of transformative eschatology. There is hope for people struggling amid war, living in the shackles of oppression, facing perennial injustice or those who are the poorest of the poor. Their conditions are never cast in stone because of the reality of the transformative eschatology, the love of the risen Lord and the relentless onslaught of his moving and transformative spirit.

Christianity and the exodus church

In this scenario, Christianity and the church find their reason for existence and the foundation of their testimony in the world (Moltmann 1967:304). Following the Reformation in particular Luther, Moltmann (1967:304) contends that we could speak of Christianity as represented in 'church' and 'congregation' and among Christians in their worldly callings. In this respect, he refers to the Schmalkald articles of 1537.

Christianity is nowadays inhibited by modern society because the latter is dominated by technocracy. This society 'has the peculiar characteristic of considering itself to be neutral to matters of religion and questions of value and consequently emancipating itself from the control of history and tradition' (Moltmann 1967:305). As a consequence of the emergence of apparent neutrality and the idea of the secular state, Christianity 'withdraws itself from the influence of religions and religious bodies' (Moltmann 1967:305). This tendency, which Moltmann discerned and described in the sixties of the previous century, is much more alive and dominant in contemporary society than in those days.

Modern liberal democracies opt moreover for an active neutral option regarding the implementation of the fundamental right of religious freedom. This option entails that all religion belongs in the sphere of the private, while the public sphere is devoid of religion and morality as derived from religious perspectives. But is neutrality a realistic notion? Can a society claim real neutrality? I question the thesis of

absolute neutrality, because no worldview underlying the formation of a society is devoid of a paradigmatic foundation (see Vorster 2014:24–29). Postmodernism rightly critiques absoluteness both in science and in the arrangement of social spheres. It rightly insists that all these matters are thought up on the basis of philosophical presuppositions. What one sees depends on where one stands. It is therefore valid and plausible to claim that secularism itself serves as a philosophical presupposition (paradigm) when it comes to the interpretation of constitutional values, the rule of law and the arrangements of social spheres.

Moltmann's concern about the phasing out of Christianity as a component of society in the sixties is thus even more valid today. Christianity as defined by Moltmann (1967:304) has difficulties to be an agent of hope in modern societies driven by the paradigm of secularity founded on an erroneous adage of neutrality or even impartiality. Nevertheless, Moltmann (1967:329) is adamant that Christians have a calling in society to set the stamp of hope 'on life, action and suffering in the history of society' (p. 330). How could this calling be fulfilled in the despairing current South African society? One or two answers to this pressing question are proposed in the section 'Conclusion'.

To define the role of the church in society, Moltmann (1967:304) uses the exodus motif, which is a prominent metaphor in Scripture for explaining the constant liberating acts of God and the movement of his people out of slavery, oppression, exile and occurrences of despair. Over the centuries, Reformed theology has argued that the exodus motif, as found in the narrative of Exodus 14, and the many Old Testament references to this history in historical, prophetic and wisdom literature represent the messianic promise of God's judgement on evil, the deliverance of God's people, the cleansing of sins and the renewal of creation under the constant reign of God's spirit. The notion that the Israelites 'went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left' (Ex 14:22) becomes indicative of deliverance and cleansing through the sacrificial blood of Christ. To move 'through the water' becomes, in the Reformed tradition, a metaphor for redemption in Christ and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the metaphor offers a key to the reformed understanding of the sacrament of baptism in the New Testament.

Clifford (2002:345) explains that the exodus motif occurs in mainly three 'cluster moments', namely the exodus as found in the book of Exodus, which is interpreted and applied in certain pre-exilic and prophetic passages, the 6th century exodus from exile as interpreted by Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah, and the work of Jesus, where the motif serves as an indicator of the salvation work of Christ. To these 'cluster moments' we can add the way in which the motif features in our understanding of the consummation and the final judgement of God on evil, as Song and Du Rand (2009:96) posit in their study on the exodus theme in Revelation 12–13.

In recent times, the exodus motif received renewed attention from liberation theologies. They focus on the liberation of the enslaved people by way of socio-political liberation and freedom in a new promised land (see Fierro 1977:222; Gutierrez 1985:155–157; Shaull & Oglesby 1969:202–203). But Moltmann's concept of the exodus church also fits well into the Reformed tradition and has been exerting a potent influence on the ecclesiology of modern liberation theologies.

Exodus reflects movement, and this characteristic is evident in all the echoes of the exodus in biblical revelation. The people of God in the Old Testament were a people on the move who was responsible to God alone. Where they became trapped in new forms of captivity, they were delivered and reformed as the people of God – a holy nation among the nations. Deliverance and continuous reformation characterise also the work of God with the *ecclesia* of the New Testament. It is also a striking feature of the history of the Church. Christ – the 'Red Sea' – offers deliverance, opens the route to a new life, forms and reforms the community of believers and indicates the way to a life of dignity, peace and joy. Through this 'water of deliverance', humans can enter the kingdom of God and become servants in the renewal of creation. The church must be an exodus church by testifying to the movement of God with humanity from despair to hope, and this process entails a stance against all obstacles of the movement towards new life as a historical eschatology.

In his *Ethic of hope*, Moltmann (2012:31) critiques the notion of the separation of 'church' and 'the world' which emerged with modern liberal democracy and which is theologically justified by the ecclesiologies of Barth, Bonhoeffer and Hauerwas. Moltmann (2012:31) argues that the church should not only be an alternative exemplary community (Barth) or a peaceable kingdom (Hauerwas), but an active force of movement from despair to hope. 'The church is not a peaceable kingdom, but a peace-making kingdom' (Moltmann 2012:33). And in the process of peace-making in the footsteps of Jesus and guided by the spirit of transformation (movement), the church should cooperate with other non-violent peacemakers. It does not float beside the 'world' but is a moving energy in the world of social despair and, by addressing the roots of the despair, it should raise and maintain hope.

South Africa today¹

A brief survey of the colonial history of South Africa, including the history of apartheid as a branch of colonialism, highlights burning moral problems. These are caused by a long process of moral decay, to such an extent that the country is in urgent need of finding a moral compass that can invigorate our nation to search for a future healthy society built on moral excellence and spaces of human development

1.The information in this section draws on this author's recent manuscript, *Finding a moral compass for South Africa. Where are we? Where could we go?* This book publication will be published by AOSIS Scholarly Publications (Open Access) in the course of 2023. The section in this article draws on the research results reported in Chapter 3 and summarised in Chapter 10.1 of the forthcoming book. References to research supporting the information in this part of the article will be found in Chapter 3 of the book.

and growth. The following problems could be identified as the main sources and carriers of this moral decay and the subsequent despair.

The dispossession of the land of indigenous peoples in South Africa is a core ingredient of the persistent moral decay in the country. Loss of land resulted in the uprooting of long-established stabilised and peaceful societies. For the original inhabitants of South Africa such as the Khoi, the San and black tribes, land undergirded their human personhood and sustained their sense of human dignity of being somebody and their enjoyment, peace and hope. Losing land fuelled a destructive process of dehumanisation. Furthermore, the colonial history left South Africa with a tremendous burden of racism. Racism in South Africa had to do with power and racially delineated spaces for superior and privileged white people and inferior and underprivileged black people. Due to systemic exclusion from birth to death, black people had no effective political means to improve their circumstances and living conditions. The colonial history and everything accompanying this process, such as deprivation, social stratification and exploitation of the indigenous Africans, as described above, gave birth and sustained a deeply divided and unequal country – a division running between black people and white people. The division also coincided with privilege and poverty. The inequality between black and white South Africans also played out in other areas of human life. Due to a long history of inequality, deprivation and exploitation, a culture of perennial violence developed: the violence of the colonial system and the violence of resistance. The democratisation of the country in 1994 inspired hope that a ‘rainbow nation’ would emerge and that a new dawn of a peaceful, non-racial, equal and developing society was at hand.

The post-1994 emergence of hope after a past of despair was caused by undertakings and accomplishments centred on the quest to address the heritage of colonialism. Impressive achievements were engendered by this with gratitude and a sense of inspiration and hope. These included the end of the long process of social stratification in the laws and the statutes of the country. The new constitution was built on the foundation of the values of human dignity, equality and freedom and laid the foundation for a united, non-racial and non-sexist society. An independent judiciary, the rule of law, freedom of the press and especially the control of political power by a constitutional court ensured the rights and liberties of all citizens.

The constitution recognised the values of the traditional Western individual rights, the socio-economic rights proposed by socialism and communal rights and ubuntu of African traditions. Also, the constitution of 1996 and the Bill of Rights abolished institutionalised violence and made systemic violence illegal. Restoration programmes intending to redress the injustices of the past were introduced. Racial relations improved and, despite isolated pockets of racially motivated strife occurring from time to time, all indications were that social relations were healthier than in the colonial era.

But the hope soon faded because, unfortunately, the new dispensation also had a negative countenance and failures in leadership cast a shadow over the ideal of hope and peace. Mandela’s reconciliation project came to a standstill 15 years into the democratic South Africa. The model of his visionary and inspiring leadership was replaced by incompetent and corrupt political management over the past 12 years. Corrupt leaders used the restitution agenda to enrich themselves and their cohorts at the expense of the poor. Incompetence in leadership, nepotism, bad management and theft of public funds plunged the nation into the swamp of poor service delivery, corruption and criminality. We are faced with a huge challenge of all-encompassing immorality trickling down from wicked political leadership.

Furthermore, South Africans realised soon that contemporary South Africa still has some way to go to rehumanise people and to give them a sense of dignity. Despite the positive trend in racial relations in the public sphere, it must be kept in mind that the racism of the colonial era and apartheid involved considerably more than mere relationships and social contact. Notwithstanding the reign of cordial relationships, the self-definition and identification of the dehumanised groups continued to be driven by the values of ‘westernism’. It was soon found that decolonisation has limitations when used to rehumanise and change the psychopathology of racism and the resulting inferiority complex. Moreover, although the new dispensation eradicated all forms of structural and systemic violence by implementing a sound Bill of Rights and by avoiding the formation of new forms of institutionalised violence, the culture of violence reminiscent of colonial history has been continuing. Violent crime, violent xenophobic attacks on foreigners and high levels of femicide and domestic violence prove that violence is still acutely implanted in the South African ethos and this is destroying social cohesion. The violence spreads fear and suspicion and inhibits people’s willingness to foster togetherness.

Irrespective of the heinous heritage of colonisation and the perpetual moral decay and atrocious predicament of contemporary South Africa, positives remain that can be useful in the search for a moral compass. This is where we are now. With a positive attitude and resolve to find the right way forward, we can use the tools to design a new moral compass to direct us to a morally sound country where a happy citizenry can enjoy hope and a flourishing life (see Vorster 2023:9–32).

Can the insights of Moltmann’s Theology of Hope raise new expectations and joy in the despondent and hopeless contemporary South African society? And how? And can the quietist churches find new inspiration from the concept of hope as explained by Moltmann and his followers? Without being presumptuous, I take the liberty to offer one or two preliminary answers to these questions in the conclusion to follow.

Conclusion

Event and hope

The event of democratisation with the epoch-making general elections of 1994 raised hope for most South Africans. For the first time in the history of the country, all citizens could exercise the right to vote for a political and concurrent ideology of their choice in free and fair elections. The long queues at polling stations, the peaceful conduct of the voters and the absence of violence bode well for a new future. The inauguration of the first democratic president, President Nelson Mandela, was greeted with enthusiasm and expectation, and his philosophy of reconciliation was embraced among by far the majority of South Africans.

The event of change was indeed a source of hope. The Theology of Liberation which became the general denominator of the political theologies that developed after World War II and turned the focus of theology to the quest for political liberation of colonised, oppressed and marginalised societies, lauded such an event as the turning point from oppression to liberation (see Vorster 2022:4). The event should be perceived as the fixed point of liberation and as a kind of historical eschatology under the guidance of the liberating message of the historic Jesus. For a time, the event of 1994 was indeed the source of hope and the inspiration of South Africans to build a new nation. However, the hope faded soon afterwards and was replaced by despondency due to government corruption, increasing poverty, new pockets of violence, racism and xenophobia and many other social ills. The hope inspired by the event of liberation did not last.

What can we learn from the Theology of Hope in this era of hopelessness and despondency?

Movement and hope

Moltmann's thesis is that the biblical message of hope as founded in revelation, promise and historical eschatology under the reign of the living God is that hope does not lie primarily in historic events, but in the movements brought about by the spirit of the living God founded on the crucified and resurrected Christ. There were many events of liberation in the history of Israel such as the exodus and returns from exile. But hope rooted in historic events soon faded also in their case.

Consistent hope is to be found in the movement brought about by the reign of God in the history of humankind flowing from the resurrection of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit. This movement cannot be caught up in a single event but manifests in signs where good is victorious over evil, peace over enmity and love over hatred. Due to God's movement in history, these signs are there to be seen and appreciated and are the real foundations of hope that would not fade away.

How can we apply this concept to South Africa today and what would be the calling of the church in this regard?

Foremost, identify the signs of goodness that flow from the reign of the living, moving God. These signs become visible when a constitutional court makes a good judgement, when leaders promote peace, when moral agents resist racism, xenophobia and all other forms of discrimination and bias, when the poor are fed and nurtured, when the flames of violence are extinguished, when hate speech succumbs before the language of love and when the truth is spoken and respected. The church should be on the forefront of revealing and promoting these signs by way of testimony by means of preaching and the administration of the sacraments. The church must always remind people of the reality of the moving God who erects these signs, irrespective of human failures, as the constant impulses of the hope that never fade away. Furthermore, Christian moral agents could invite all role players irrespective of religious conviction, creed or belief as well as non-believers to seek the common good and enter the struggle against all forms of evil and hopelessness, by potent moral agency.

To find hope in South Africa is to see and testify about the moving God who continuously grinds out of the hard rocks of evil the visible and touchable signs of goodness that can serve as the solid foundation of hope. The Theology of Hope strikes a chord with this truth that can be a guide in our quest for hope in South Africa today.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

J.M.V. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Barth, K., 1922, *Der Römerbrief*, EVZ-Verlag, Zürich.
- Bloch, E., 1959, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* [translate German into English in square brackets; I've done one or two], Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.
- Bloch, E., 1961, *Theologische Grundfragen I, Zur Ontologie des Noch-Niet* [Fundamental theological questions I: Towards an ontology of the not-yet], Seins, Frankfurt am Main.
- Bloch, E., 1970, *A Philosophy of the future*, Herder und Herder, New York, NY.
- Clifford, R.J., 2002, 'The exodus in the Christian bible: The case for "figural" reading', *Theological Studies* 63(2002), 345–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390206300206>
- Cone, J.H., 1975, 'Zwarte theologie en zwarte bevrijding' [Black theology and black liberation] in B. Moore (ed.), *Zwarte theologie in Suid Afrika*, pp. 1–25, Baarn, Ten Have.
- De Gruchy, J. & De Gruchy, S., 2005, *The Church struggle in South Africa*, Fortress, Minneapolis, MI.
- Fierro, A., 1977, *The militant gospel*, transl. J Drury, SCM Press, London.
- Gadamer, H.G., 1960, *Wahrheit und Mehtode: Grundzuge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Mohr, Tübingen.
- Georghagan, V., 1996, *Ernst Bloch*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Gutierrez, G., 1985, *A theology of liberation*, transl. C. Inda & J. Eaglestone, SCM Press, London.
- Mandela, N., 2006, *Long walk to freedom*, Abacus, London.
- Moltmann, J., 1967, *Theology of Hope. On the ground and implications of a Christian eschatology*, SCM Press, London.
- Moltmann, J., 1972, *Der gekreuzigte Gott, das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik Christlicher Theologie* [The crucified God, the Cross of Christ as ground and critique of Christian theology], Kaiser Verlag, München.
- Moltmann, J., 1975, *Gott kommt und der Mensch wird frei!*, Kaiser Verlag, München.
- Moltmann, J., 2008, *A broad place*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MI.
- Moltmann, J., 2012, *Ethics of hope*, SCM Press, London.
- Moltmann, J., 2016, *The living God and the fullness of life*, WCC Publications, Geneva.
- Müller-Farenholz, G., 2000, *The kingdom and the power; the theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, transl. by J. Bowden, SCM Press, London.
- Resane, K.T., 2021, 'Moltmann's theology in dialogue with liberation theologians revives the role of Black Theology in democratic South Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a7127. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.7127>
- Robinson, J.A.T., 1964, *Honest to God*, SCM Press, London.
- Schweitzer, A., 1905, *The quest of the historical Jesus*, Dover, New York, NY.
- Shaul, R., 1968, "'Revolutionaire verandering in theologisch perspectief" [Revolutionary change in theological perspective] in Wereldraad van Kerken (ed.), *Kerk en Revolutie, een bloemlezing uit de voorstudies voor het congress van de WRK oor Kerk en maatschappij*, pp. 23–28, Bosch & Keuning, Baarn.
- Shaul, R., 1969, *Uitdaging aan kerk en maatschappij* [A challenge to church and society], Het Wereldvenster, Alkmaar.
- Shaul, R. & Oglesby, C., 1969, *Containment and change: Two dissenting views of American foreign policy*, The Macmillan Company, London.
- Song, Y.M. & Du Rand, J.A., 2009, 'The story of the Red Sea as a theological framework of interpretation', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 30(2), 337. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v30i2.33>
- Tutu, D., 1994, *The rainbow people of God: A spiritual journey from Apartheid to freedom*, Double Storey Books, Cape Town.
- Vorster, J.M., 2014, *Christelike etiek in 'n sekulariserende samelewing* [Christian ethics in a secularising society], AOSIS Scholarly Books, Cape Town.
- Vorster, J.M., 2022, 'Publieke teologie of koninkryksteologie? Gedagtes oor die sosiale relevansie van Gereformeerde Teologie' [Public theology or kingdom theology? Thoughts on the social relevance of Reformed Theology], *In die Skriflig/ In Luce Verbi* 56(1), a2868. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2868>
- Vorster, J.M. 2023, *Finding a moral compass in South Africa: Where are we? Where could we go?* AOSIS Scholarly Books, Cape Town.
- Weiss, J., 1892, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, Kessinger Publishing House, Whitefish, MA.
- World Council of Churches, 1975, *The World Council of Churches and human rights*, World Council of Churches, Geneva.
- World Happiness Report, 2023, *The happiest countries in the world*, viewed 03 April 2023, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/happiest-countries-in-the-world>.