

Trading Hell for Hope: An Interview with Nicholas Ansell

Interview conducted on January 22, 2014

Interviewer: Matthew E. Johnson

*Nicholas Ansell's teaching and research focus on several areas of systematic and biblical theology, notably Christology, eschatology, Old Testament wisdom thinking, and the theology of gender. He has an ongoing interest in the phenomenology of revelation and the spirituality of existence. His new book, *The Annihilation of Hell: Universal Salvation and the Redemption of Time in the Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, was released in North America in October 2013 and exposites the work of Moltmann on the topic of hell and universalism for anyone who is interested in theology, scholar or otherwise. He has also written several articles on the topic including this one in *The Other Journal*.*

About *The Annihilation of Hell*

*For Jürgen Moltmann, Hell is the nemesis of Hope. The "Annihilation of Hell" thus refers both to Hell's annihilative power in history and to the overcoming of that power as envisioned by Moltmann's distinctive theology of the cross in which God becomes "all in all" through Christ's descent into Godforsakenness. The negation of Hell and the fulfillment of history are inseparable. Attentive to the overall contours and dynamics of Moltmann's thinking — especially his *zimzum* doctrine of creation, his eschatologically oriented philosophy of time, and his expanded understanding of the nature-grace relationship — this study asks whether the universal salvation that he proposes can honor human freedom, promise vindication for those who suffer, and do justice to biblical revelation. As well as providing an in-depth exposition of Moltmann's ideas, *The Annihilation of Hell* also explores how a "covenantal universalism" might revitalize our web of beliefs in a way that is attuned to the authorizing of Scripture and the spirituality of existence. If divine and human freedom are to be reconciled, as Moltmann believes, the confrontation between Hell and Hope will entail rethinking issues that are not only at the center of theology but at the heart of life itself*

Ground Motive: Dr. Ansell, thanks so much for making time to talk with me. I'm very excited about your new book *The Annihilation of Hell*, and I'd love to hear some background and a bit of "behind the scenes" about this book. So to start things off, how did this book come about? What motivated you to write on the topic of hell?

Nicholas Ansell: Hell is prominent in the title, and it is a prominent topic in terms of how Moltmann deals with the nature of hell. But there's a lot more than just hell in the book. I'm interested in trying to get at the overall structure and dynamics of Moltmann's thought in general. One way of doing this is to use his understanding of the nature of *time* as a "way in" to understanding what makes him tick, so to speak. This is a way of then getting at the way he understands eschatology as well.

Eschatology has long been treated as a separate topic within systematic theology. Karl Barth is

famous for lamenting the fact that it had become sort of an appendix. What Moltmann did in his most famous work *Theology of Hope*, which was published in the mid 60s, is he actually started to explore theology *as* eschatology from the word “go.” Then, towards the end of his career, he ended up writing about eschatology as a specific area of theology as well. But Moltmann “eschatologized” the whole of theology by looking at it in terms of the dynamics of hope.

Hope is a great focus for theology. Hope is like faith. Hope is something everybody can relate to. We put our hope in God, just as we put our faith in God. Moltmann opened up the possibility of seeing the dynamics of hope as what the Christian life and Christian experience is all about. For Moltmann, this should be reflected in theology, and this gives a certain energy to his work. So he’s always good to read, and there’s also a strong connection between theology and his life as a Christian. You feel that connection when you read his work; it’s very strong and very integral.

GM: Is your intended audience for your book primarily academic theologians and Moltmann scholars, or are you hoping it will also be read on a more popular level?

NA: It is an academic book for sure, but it’s written with a wider audience in mind as well. I felt it was important to write, as it were, to introduce Moltmann and his thought to someone who potentially has never read Moltmann. And yet I wanted to write it in such a way that I was not speaking down to readers with real expertise in his thought. So in a sense this is an introduction to Moltmann, and it’s sort of an in-depth engagement with Moltmann at the same time. I think this book would work for anybody who’s interested in theology but has never read any Moltman. There are certain parts of it that are more accessible than others, and anyone should feel free to ignore the extensive footnotes! But it’s not just for scholars—it’s for anybody who cares about the subject.

GM: What makes Moltmann so compelling on the topic of hell?

NA: What is very compelling in his approach to hell is his understanding of Christ’s descent into hell. The way he understands this is that he would say that creation in the beginning is good, but God is not “all in all” in the beginning. For Moltmann, there is an eschatological fulfillment that is yet to happen and that would need to happen *even if there had been no fall into sin*. He has what I would call an eschatologically “open” view of creation. So in the beginning, God has not yet entered into the reality of death—that’s what happens with Christ’s descent into hell, as Moltmann understands it. He sees Jesus as moving beyond the presence of the Father and taking God the Father with him into hell. In Moltmann’s theology, Jesus is a human being who also incarnates God and leads God the Father into the God-forsakenness of hell. So there is redemption, which for him means not only healing but also eschatological fulfillment.

Theologians who think in terms of the Trinity tend to have everything starting with the Father, then the Son then the Spirit. What happens for Moltmann, however, is that it is as if the Son initiates something, and the Father follows. It’s the Son that leads the Father into the God-forsakenness of hell. To me, this leads to a very profound and very moving understanding of the cross. So the way in which God embraces God-forsakenness and overcomes God-forsakenness, results in a pretty compelling reading I think.

GM: I understand that one of the ways you have been influenced by Jürgen Moltmann is in what you call the “judgment unto salvation” theme that runs throughout the Bible. Can you say a bit about this theme in your work and in Moltmann’s?

NA: The “judgment unto salvation” theme is a point where I really connect with Moltmann. There’s a lot in Moltmann that I really like and there’s also a fair amount that I disagree with but still find thought provoking. But this theme is something that is straightforwardly insightful. It’s the idea that God’s judgment is not about damnation or punishment—it’s not about making a division between those who are in and those who are out. God’s judgment is always about putting things right, and it’s always in the service of life, opening life up again where life has been closed down. We often think of God’s judgment coming as something to be afraid of, but Moltmann argues that in scripture, for those who are the people of God, the idea of God’s judgment coming always creates hope and is something to be celebrated, prayed for, and so forth.

The tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11, which tells of the breaking down of what seems to be the first Babylonian Empire with its attempt to impose a single language or a metanarrative upon its subjects, is a good example of judgment unto salvation. The empire emerges because people are afraid to spread out over the face of the earth, even though the fundamental blessing and calling to humanity is to fill the earth with God’s presence and to fill the earth in a geographic sense. But there’s this fear, and fear is the opposite of faith. So the people congregate, trying to stay put, and an empire of some kind emerges out of this. Then there is the judgment and the scattering, and it’s not simply God saying that there’s something idolatrous about building the tower and that it needs to come to an end or that this is simply a manifestation of God’s wrath. The scattering actually opens up the movement of history again, so that the people end up spreading out over the earth, which is actually rooted in the blessing of Genesis 1:26-28. The purpose of the judgment is to get people back on track with the dynamic of life—it’s giving them something positive. So the judgment is unto salvation. That is, the judgment serves something that is more than judgment; it serves life. I think that if you look at God’s judgment in general in scripture in the light of that pattern, it’s very illuminating.

GM: It seems like this pattern fits quite well with the rhythm of exile and return for Israel throughout the Old Testament narratives in particular.

NA: Yes, that’s right. Exile is not the end of the story. There is return, which is connected to New Creation.

GM: Based on your own research and Moltmann’s thought, what is the biblical basis for rethinking the doctrine of hell?

NA: There are something like 14 “hell texts” that mention hell specifically in the New Testament, depending on which translation you use. Of those, about 11 refer to hell in a way that’s connected to judgment for human beings. They’re all found in the Gospels, and they’re all found on the lips of Jesus himself. In these cases, the word is “Gehenna,” which is translated as hell, but I think it probably should be left as the word “Gehenna.” Of these 11, there are 7 references in Matthew, and then 3 all together in one verse in Mark, and there is one reference in

Luke.

Moltmann says that, in terms of biblical material about final judgment, there are a certain number of texts that do not have a “double outcome” to them (that is, do not imply judgment *or* salvation) and will instead maybe imply universal salvation or something like that. Nevertheless there are a certain number of texts in which there is this division. In these, some will end up in hell, and some will not. Moltmann tends to simply play down the texts that have the division and emphasizes what he thinks is the stronger theme of judgment leading to salvation as being the most biblical approach. The problem is that all the counter examples that he wants to play down are attributed to Jesus, and Moltmann is a Christocentric theologian who always wants to focus in terms of the way Jesus discloses God to us. So this is a real problem for him, and he doesn’t resolve it to my satisfaction.

My book works this out more exegetically and comes up with a different approach. I hope this is a contribution that my book could make, in addition to its interpretation of Moltmann’s thinking. So my argument in a nutshell is that “Gehenna,” the word that is translated as “hell” goes back to the Old Testament, referring to the valley of Ben-Hinnom. It is a geographical territory owned by a certain group of Israelites that includes a valley located just outside of Jerusalem. At a certain point in Israel’s history during the monarchy, it gets associated with idolatry and with passing young children “through the fire” and with certain idolatrous kings. So, in response, the valley of Gehenna becomes the place of God’s judgment.

In Isaiah, we see it as a place of God’s judgment, and here, it is a historical judgment, a judgment *in history*. It is the location of where God’s judgment will occur. Looking at the very last verse of Isaiah in particular, Gehenna is a place where Israel’s enemies will be judged. What happens in Jeremiah, though, is the judgment has been turned back on Israel, on Judah. So the place where some Israelites would be hoping the Gentiles would get judged becomes the place where Judah will be judged.

Jesus stands in the tradition of Jeremiah. Matthew’s Gospel is steeped in all kinds of allusions to the book of Jeremiah. This makes sense of why so many of the references to Gehenna show up in Matthew’s gospel in particular. So in Matthew, Jesus is saying something to his fellow Jews that is very similar to Jeremiah: although many are hoping for judgment to come down on the Romans, actually there is a judgment coming that will impact Jerusalem and the temple. In the Jewish War of 66-70 AD, which involved the generation after Jesus that he prophesied about in Matthew 24, the Romans razed the temple and Jerusalem. During this war, a huge number of dead bodies ended up quite literally in the Gehenna valley.

So “hell” or “Gehenna” is about a judgment *in history*, but it also marks a transition point between the old age and the new age. It’s an apocalyptic transition as well, and the book of Revelation picks up on that. The apocalyptic material in the gospels such as Mark 13 also focus on judgment as a transition point. Hence the “birth pangs” imagery in Mark 13:8 (and Revelation 12 also).

This exegetical approach gives a different understanding of the “hell” texts. It means that you can connect them much better to a judgment unto salvation understanding. The texts that

Moltmann has problems with and has to sideline even though they come from Jesus, can actually be connected in a positive way to the kind of eschatology that he's looking for.

GM: How is the judgment unto salvation theme and the way you reframe the "hell texts" related to universalism?

NA: Well, Moltmann is a universalist. Universalism is the belief that all people will ultimately be saved, which to some people is very controversial.

However, the idea of *hoping* that all people will be saved is often seen by many Christians as a perfectly valid thing to hope for, in fact it's a very Christian thing to hope for. Many people will say that you can really hope for this, but being dogmatic about it such that universal salvation is just what God *has* to do or something like that is another matter. But to be hopeful about it, that's fine.

There's no reason why we should be suspicious if Christians have that kind of hope, far from it. What Moltmann says is that the thing about biblical hope is that it's not just wishful thinking for something you would really like. If you experience real hope, what comes with it is a *confidence* about what God has promised and that God will fulfill his promises. So it's not that you're dogmatic about it, but there is the confidence of faith.

If it's okay for the Christian to hope that all might be saved, even if you don't understand how that might eventually happen, then let's not have that hope as just a kind of wishful thinking. Let's explore it in terms of biblical hope. If God promises to bring this about, and there are biblical texts (such as 1 Corinthians 15:22) that do seem to suggest that, then it can be very deeply Christian position to trust those promises.

We can talk about how it is that God might be able to bring this about, and then there are the theological issues of God's freedom, human freedom, and so forth. But in a sense those are secondary. Yes, we can talk about the mechanics of it, so to speak, but if we think that the promise is there, why not trust it, put one's hope in it, and *then* start to theologize and think out of that conviction. Then it's not a conclusion that you come to at the end; it becomes more of a starting point. This is similar to the idea is that faith leads to understanding or that "I believe in order that I might understand," drawing from Augustine, for example.

Reformational thinkers have long endorsed the conviction that faith leads or guides understanding or guides scholarship, emphasizing faith-directed scholarship. One could do the same thing with hope: hope-directed scholarship. If the hope that you have is grounded in scripture and is awakened by scripture, then to allow that hope to guide the kind of theologizing that you do is itself a Reformational approach. In that sense, Moltmann is doing something really quite Reformational, and that is why I enter into dialogue with him. There are several points of connection between Reformational thinking and the kind of hope-centered theology that Moltmann is all about. So the book grew out of that engagement, and it is an attempt to present a certain kind of conversation that I've had with Moltmann and to open the conversation for other people.

GM: If someone wanted to buy *The Annihilation of Hell*, where would they go?

NA: In North America, one place to go is to the Wipf and Stock website. The book is published by Paternoster in Europe, but Wipf and Stock has done their version, which is an identical book with a different cover. So check out their website. Also you could go to Amazon, both in the US and in Canada. But if you go for the Wipf and Stock version, which is published by Cascade, it is going to be cheaper than the European one, so make sure that's what you find on Amazon.

GM: As just a final question: as a Christian scholar, what role do you see scholarship playing in religious life and faith for the individual and the community?

NA: I think scholarship done by Christians has an important role to play in life in general for the Christian community and for the wider culture as well. I think it has to start by listening. You have to tune in to the deep issues and questions of your own culture, and then see how you can respond. So it starts with listening. It also can't be any kind of pontificating. Nobody is interested in theology that pontificates these days anyway.

One of the concerns that people, not just scholars, have about hell and final judgment and so forth, is about *justice*. There is a hunger for justice. This would be the problem for someone if we dispensed completely with the final judgment. What do you say to the person who has suffered injustice? This is very much part of the book for me, and Moltmann is also very strong on this. He doesn't want to do away with final judgment; he insists that there is a final judgment. But he actually says that the judgment is not final—it's *penultimate*, because it has to serve what comes after the judgment.

So if you write theology, you can connect with the hope in that. I think hope is something that resonates with everybody. Not all of us experience much hope, but I think we would like to. So if you talk in terms of hope, then you avoid the esoteric nature of much theology. I hate to write theology that is only of interest to theologians. I'd like to think that these are the topics that are addressed to all of us as human beings, struggling to find our way right now in history. So theologians and Christian scholars need to see themselves as in the same boat as everyone else. We've experienced this grace and this hope, so we have something we want to say. It is that hope and that faith that also helps us not just say stuff, but also listen and tune in well long before we start writing.

GM: One of the things I appreciate about your writing is that you're able say really insightful and complex things in ways that are interesting to read, and I think that kind of sensitivity is relatively rare in academic scholarship these days.

NA: Thanks very much, Matt!