

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.

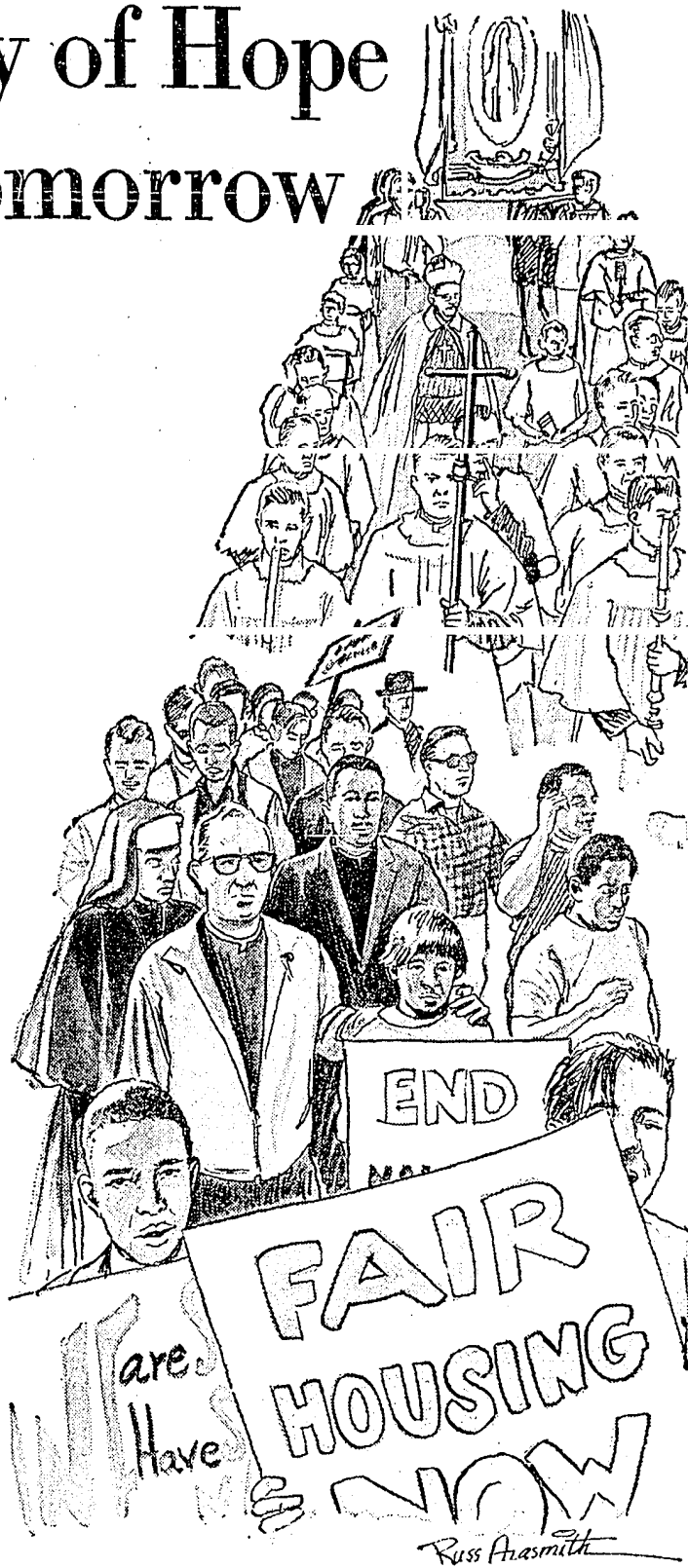
Significantly, the new theology has aroused the interest of both liberal religionists who want to get the church more involved in social action and conservative churchmen who view saving souls as the overriding mission.

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.

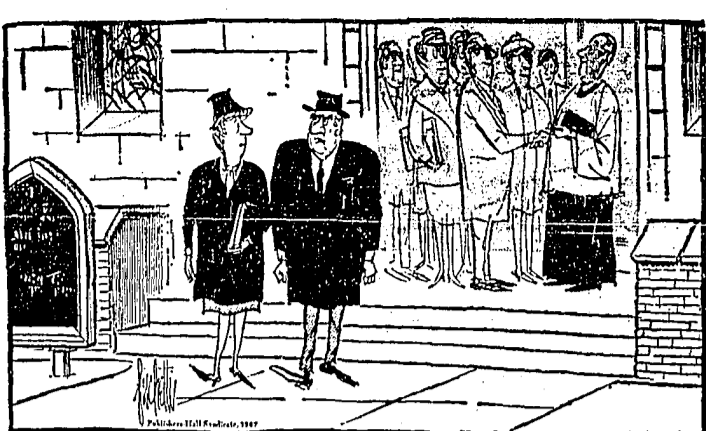
If this were the only major assertion of the theology of hope, the theology probably would be dismissed by many churchmen as simply another rationale for getting involved in socio-political problems. (The conservatives call it "getting into politics." The liberals call it "fighting for moral and social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

But the "hope" theologians, principally Jurgen Moltmann of Germa-

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Times drawing by Russell Arasmita



Fischhoff in Chicago Daily News

"All this open-housing talk burns me up—it's been months since I've been able to sleep through a sermon."

THEOLOGY OF HOPE

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ny, have made biblical events such as Exodus, the flight of Jews out of Egyptian slavery, and the Resurrection, the rising of Jesus from the dead, important symbols in the theology of hope.

Promises of the coming "Kingdom of God," progressively deemphasized by Christianity, are given central prominence.

Christianity Today, the leading conservative evangelical magazine in the nation, has editorialized that Moltmann is "one new star twinkling in the murky sky of contemporary theology." Moltmann's book, "The Theology of Hope," "supplies a fresh orientation for religious discussion," 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 religionists see the opportunity to give their own interpretation and supply their own logic.

Some of the questions and misunderstandings arise because the works of the theology of hope authors are only now being widely read and discussed in U.S. theological circles. The "hope" theologians generally are recognized to be Moltmann, Johannes Metz, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Gerhart Sauter and Wolf-Dieter Marsch—all Germans.

Moltmann is getting the most attention currently because of his book published last fall and his presence at Duke University as a visiting professor.

Still another figure is neo-Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, 83, who now teaches at West Germany's University of Tübingen where Moltmann is also on the faculty.

Bloch, though an atheist, has influenced some of the "hope"

theologians. Two sample quotations from Bloch:

"Where there is hope there can be religion, but where there is religion 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 find it."

According to Dr. Walter Capps of UC Santa Barbara, who has studied the writings of the "hope" theologians for two years, "This Marxist element stands behind the movement and pushes it toward politics."

New Czech Leaders

Moltmann and Metz have participated in the Christian-Marxist dialogs in Europe. In spite of the views of anti-Communists, says Moltmann, there are Marxists and there are Marxists — for example the new leaders in Czechoslovakia.

A sobering discovery for both Marxist and Christian dialog participants, however, was that there is a third, larger force in the world—apathy. The third force is tired of the slogans of Marxists and the doctrines of Christianity.

Every churchman and theologian hopes to make religion meaningful, but the "hope" theologians try to provide compelling reasons why religious groups need to involve themselves in problems of peace and justice—which are so obviously important to non-church people.

"There must be a turn to a theological attempt to define and understand the church as an institution in society creatively criticizing society," said Dr. Metz, dean of the Catholic faculty at the University of Munster.

'Sitting on Front Line'

Moltmann maintains the "second coming" doctrine in Christianity is a frozen one. Believers hope for the Kingdom of God, but do not actively seek it except to try to convert others to Christian ways. Christianity needs to shed this "privatizing" approach, Metz asserts.

"If I receive freedom from sin and guilt I receive a beginning of a free world," says Moltmann. "I'm sitting on the front line of fighting for the liberation of the world."

In this view, happiness, peace and justice for all are legitimate goals for the Christian to pursue on behalf of oppressed people.

Moltmann, however, does not believe man can achieve all his goals by his own doing.

Moltmann apparently feels that reexamining the Bible for its promises 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 U.S. theologians in Chicago last fall about the need to get the church involved in the world, the reaction was: "So, what's new? American religious thinkers have said this since the early 1900s."

Moltmann, on a recent visit to Santa Barbara, said he particularly liked a statement by Walter Rauschenbusch, the forerunner of the social gospel movement in the United States before World War I:

"Aesthetic Christianity called the world bad and left it. The world is waiting for a revolutionary Christianity which will call the world bad and change it."