

The Transformation of Death in the Thought of Dōgen and Moltmann

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Although separated by many centuries and representing two very different religious traditions, Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253) and Jürgen Moltmann (1926-) express a common concern in their attempts to find meaning in a world where such a quest is challenged by the reality of death. The approach of Dōgen as a Zen master was, of course, from a nontheistic perspective. Moltmann, on the other hand, is a Christian theologian for whom theism is indispensable in responding to the problems of existence. Yet, in spite of these significant differences, the manner in which these men found meaning in the face of death provides those who are involved in the contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue with some interesting points for consideration. In this paper, I shall confine myself to the way in which Dōgen and Moltmann found death to be transformed from a cruel absurdity to a meaningful event by means of the identification of ultimate Reality with this transitory world.

I. Dōgen

Ultimate Reality suggests to some a transcendent dimension which is completely uninvolved with and untouched by this world of impermanence and death. Indeed, for some it is a source of consolation to believe that religion provides a way whereby one may escape from this world and enter a state of perfect bliss from which change and death are eternally excluded. Dōgen was aware of those in his day who followed such an "other-wordly" interpretation of Buddhism. However, he would have none of it. Having suffered the loss of his parents in his youth, Dōgen might have found comfort in denying the reality of death. Instead he chose to affirm mortality with the same conviction that he affirmed life. For Dōgen, ultimate Reality is not an immutable state of Being. Rather, it is

the way things actually are in this world of change. The Zen master found support for this position in the *Mahāparinirvāna sūtra*. There is a passage in the Chinese version of this text which is normally read: "All sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature without exception." But Dōgen chose an alternate reading: "All existences are the Buddha-nature."¹⁾ By identifying all existences with the Buddha nature (*bushō*), Dōgen claimed that both sentient beings and all the insentient entities of the universe are manifestations of ultimate Reality. Thus he writes: "Therefore, these mountains, rivers, and the earth.....all constitute the sea of the Buddha-nature."²⁾

If this statement is read out of context, it is possible to misinterpret Dōgen's teaching along the lines of that monistic idealism which reduces birth, death, and all aspects of this transitory world to an illusion which veils an immutable Reality. It is clear, however, that this is not Dōgen's frame of reference. According to the Zen master, there is no immutable Reality. The Buddha-nature is impermanent; therefore, this world is a true expression of that nature. It does not hide nor distort it. Even birth and death, two events which accentuate the transitory nature of our lives, are expression of the Buddha-nature. There is great freedom for the one who realizes this. If it is seen that birth and death as well as nirvana are expressions of the same reality, then it follows that "we neither loathe birth-and-death nor long for nirvana. Then.....we are free in birth-and-death."³⁾

Dōgen does not offer his disciples an escape from impermanence and death. Rather, he shows them a way to find deliverance from the suffering that awaits those who in ignorance strive for an immutable state of being which does not exist. It is the prospect of such deliverance which leads him to say, "When youplunge into the abode of the Buddha.....you become Buddha-liberated from the suffering of birth and death, without effort and anxiety."⁴⁾

II. Moltmann

Whereas Dōgen found death transformed by its identification with the Buddha-nature, Moltmann finds death to be transformed by its identification with God. Together with a growing number of twentieth century theologians,

Moltmann rejects a long-standing tendency among certain Christian thinkers to divorce God from the experience of suffering and death. This deeply ingrained tendency is largely due to the profound influence that Greek philosophy exercised upon early Christian thinkers. In this regard, Stoicism, with its doctrine of *apatheia* (emotionlessness), played a major role in shaping the early Christian idea of the "impassibility" of God.⁵ The consequences of this influence are clearly seen in Athanasius (c. 296-373), a theologian who was fully committed to the belief that Jesus Christ was God in human flesh. In his discussion of the death of Christ, Athanasius was so influenced by the Stoic concept of *apatheia* that he felt it was necessary to say that the suffering of Christ was "according to the flesh".⁶ In other words, the divine nature of Christ, like the Stoic *Logos* (divine reason), was untouched by suffering or death.

Moltmann fully agrees with Athanasius that Christ was none other than God incarnate. However, it is clear that the modern theologian has totally rejected the Stoic idea of the impassibility of God. According to Moltmann, God participated in the human experience of suffering and death through the crucifixion of Jesus. The death of Jesus, Moltmann says, was not the cheerful and dignified death of a man like Socrates.⁷ As the one who died for the sins of the world, Jesus identified himself so intimately with sinners that he experienced their sense of abandonment by God. Moltmann expresses this in forceful terms in the following manner: "When God becomes man in Jesus of Nazareth, he not only enters into the finitude of man, but in his death on the cross he also enters into the situation of man's godforsakenness."⁸ Because God in Christ has experienced death in its most agonizing form, Moltmann reasons, "all the godless and the godforsaken can experience communion with him (God)."⁹

III. Conclusion

Even though Dōgen and Moltmann approach death from very different metaphysical positions, they both find the fact of mortality to be transformed by rejecting a strict separation of this transitory world from what they believe to be ultimate reality. In this sense, both men are "this-worldly" thinkers.

Dōgen's "this-worldly" approach led him to affirm that death is now and al-

ways has been an essential part of the Buddha-nature. This insight enabled him to accept life and mortality with a sense of equanimity, for he believed that both are expressions of the same reality.

Moltmann's "this-worldliness" leads him to say that through the man Jesus, God has taken death into his own being. Death, as understood by Moltmann, is not an essential part of the being of God. But by the incarnation of God in Christ, it has become a part of the divine nature. Moltmann does not accept life and death with the same sense of equanimity that we find in Dōgen. However, his faith in the unity of God with man through Christ enables him to reject nihilism as the only alternative for one who faces the reality of death.

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- 1) *Shōbōgenzō*, Busshō, cited in Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen Kigen.....Mystical Realist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), p. 161.
 - 2) *Ibid.*, p. 162.
 - 3) *Shōbōgenzō*, Shōji, cited by Kim, p. 214.
 - 4) *Ibid.*, p. 219.
 - 5) The influence of this aspect of Greek philosophy on Christian thought is discussed by T. E. Pollard in his article "The Impassibility of God" in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, viii, 1955, pp. 353-364.
 - 6) Athanasius, *Orat.* III. c. *Arianos*, 34.
 - 7) Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 145.
 - 8) *Ibid.*, p. 276.
 - 9) *Ibid.*

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