

Denison Journal of Religion

Volume 17

Article 3

2018

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Recommended Citation

Curtin, Sarah (2018) ""Chance the Rapper and Moltmann's Theology of Hope," from Chance the Rapper as Chicago's Prophet: An Intersection of Rap, Religion, and Race," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 17 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol17/iss1/3>

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"Chance the Rapper and Moltmann's Theology of Hope," from *Chance the Rapper as Chicago's Prophet: An Intersection of Rap, Religion, and Race*

Sarah Curtin

While it would be a reach to suggest that Chance the Rapper has been exposed to formal theological writings, using a theology to interpret Chance the Rapper's activism and music can be a productive lens. By reading Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* alongside Chance the Rapper's creative projects and social activism, one can identify aspects of Chance that were less clear without the framework or language of the theology. In the effort of analysis, I am examining Chance the Rapper within the theological framework of Moltmann's theology, not postulating that Chance the Rapper's actions are inspired by his exposure to this text. What I understand to be the foundation of Moltmann's theology is a reality in which the future is constantly arriving and takes ontological priority. The idea of ontological priority is an aspect Ernst Bloch's philosophy. Moltmann's own point of departure for his theology comes from his time as a prisoner of war during World War II. Himself a German, he was drafted into military service. He then was a prisoner of war and moved between camps, encompassed by grief (comprehending what the Germans were doing behind closed doors of concentration camps) and boredom. It is here that he is exposed to the Christian message and theology. Moltmann explores the stagnant reality that could be reinforced by a perception of eschatology—the fading optimism that is sourced from a distant hope that the future could be better. This is not the eschatology that he is concerned with, nor does he think that is a legitimate way to read the eschatological event. Moltmann uproots this optimism that keeps one unmoving, in suspension of something better and replaces it with a hope that is implanted into the everyday. He reprioritizes the future to make the future arriving and relevant, not distant and unfathomable. Moltmann discusses the ways in which Christian hope is both present and future: "Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present."¹ In this, Moltmann transforms eschatology from something that sustains tolerance of a presented reality, into something that can transform the present. The present, unaccompanied by the source-less optimism or grounded hope of the future, is painful. It is hope that

¹ Moltmann, Jürgen. 1967. *Theology of hope: On the ground and the implications of a christian eschatology*. 1st U.S. ed. New York: Harper & Row, 16.

allows one to change the perceived reality and enter into an arriving future. He aims to break down the dichotomy between present and future in terms of hope: "Present and future, experience and hope, stand in contradiction to each other in Christian eschatology, with the result that man is not brought into harmony and agreement with the given situation, but is drawn into the conflict between hope and experience."² Moltmann presents this separation between present and future, hope and experience as a detrimental one.

Experience (and all of the pain, grief, and hopelessness attached to it) can exist among hope; hope does not accommodate their experience in a way that makes the distant future a current reality. The darker elements of experience are not erased in hope, but instead overcome:

Death is real death, and decay is putrefying decay. Guilt remains guilt and suffering remains, even for the believer, a cry to which there is no readymade answer. Faith does not overstep these realities into a heavenly utopia, does not dream itself into a reality of a different kind. It can overstep the bounds of life, with their closed wall of suffering, guilt and death, only at the point where they have in actual fact been broken through. It is only in following the Christ who was raised from suffering, from a god-forsaken death and from the grave that it gains an open prospect in which there is no thing more to oppress us.³

Hope, not optimism, has the potential to permeate the seemingly impenetrable dominant consciousness; it is through hope that is derived from the eschatological event that one can make the teachings of the prophet reality—that one can live in the arriving future. Hope is that which moves one to engage in the arriving future, not succumb to the seeming reality. Hope does not accommodate reality: "It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the good of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."⁴ Coming to a place in which one's hope is sourced from Christ means that the reality (and the oppression and pains of it) is not acceptable; instead one seeks after a different reality in which the future is now. To live in the arriving future means that one does not see the change they ache for as a reality for the coming generations, but instead for one's own current reality. To believe in a cross that means hope

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

means to see in the resurrection of Jesus "not the eternity of heaven, but the future of the very earth on which his cross stands."⁵ The goals of Christianity, as Moltmann supposes, is not to rest your hope on frothy dreams of the future, but instead to use that hope as means to alter your own experience; make the future now.

While it very unlikely that Chance has read Moltmann, one can assume that they have read the same texts. Chance the Rapper, a proud Christian, attends church on the South Side of Chicago at Covenant Faith Church of God on S. Halsted. In an interview at University of Chicago moderated by Bakari Kitwana, he describes his church:

Shout out to Covenant Faith Church of God, formerly known as a Emerald Avenue Church of God. Over there, on 106 and Halsted. Your church is cool; my church is very raw though. All of my father's background, starting with his grandmother—my great grandmother—started this church and a movement with young people, who were not necessarily sinners but also weren't the conservative type of church goers and worshipping folks that was the regular type of folk that were in church at the time. There's always a group of young people in the church or in any group that have different values or are more okay with certain taboos that conservative folks aren't used to. So at a certain point they separated from the church they all went to as young folks, including my great grandmother, and started the Emerald Avenue Church of God. My great grandmother started the day camp there called Kids of the Kingdom, my grandmother and great aunt and cousins and my aunts and uncles and best friends all grew up in this church camp. I would spend my Sundays at church and my summers at church and that built some of my longest friendships and a lot of who I am as a person. That's where I learned that I liked music and I feel like the first girl that I liked when to my much. Most of the things I've learned in life were in that building.⁶

While Chance has not had exposure to formal theology, the church and its teachings are integral to his growing up. Intrinsic narratives to any experience-based Christian faith and any theology are both the Exodus story and the resurrection. The second particularly feeds into Moltmann's theology of hope concerning eschatology, but both events shape God into one of promise, hope, and justice. While Chance the Rapper has not read Moltmann, the likelihood of him learning about a hope grounded in the resurrection is high. From the descrip-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ "Chance the Rapper and the Art of Activism." Youtube video. Posted by "UChi Pol." Posted Jun. 1, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG64tEjHwg&t=718s>.

tion of his church, it seems that it is counter-cultural and critical to oppressive church structures from its origin. The church was started out of the need of young people to have a more inclusive and progressive space; even this is living in the arriving future.

The ways in which one can examine Chance the Rapper through the lens of Moltmann's theology is using his language of "arriving future" to analyze some of Chance's actions and music. In what ways is Chance living in the arriving future as opposed to his current reality? Chance's current reality, and point of departure for his work, is the South Side of Chicago. While the reality of that living situation is fraught with nuances of a human life—joy, pain, hope, and despair; the narrative that national and local media tells of the South side is one of senseless violence seemingly without a cause. Even now, Donald Trump has tweeted inflammatory things about Chicago, acknowledging the conundrum of the city. On March 28, 2017, he tweeted: "I ask, 'What's going on in Chicago, right? What is going on?' There's no excuse for it. There's no excuse for it. I'm sure you're asking the same question, 'What's going on Chicago?'"⁷ This tweet is not out of concern or a problem solving effort, but it is a repetitive wondering why is Chicago the way it is? While that may be a difficult problem to solve, it is not a difficult question to answer. The cause is not confusing; the South Side suffers from a history littered with intentional (but subtle) segregationist efforts, which has clumped waves of middle class black people into small neighborhoods. Scare tactics intentionally used on whites by profiteering realtors to encourage white flight worsened the cities race relations. From legislation to money-hungry realtors, Northern racism has enclosed the black community in Chicago into a few square miles South and East of the city. The legacies of these actions nearly 100 years ago have manifested into gang violence for lack of other networks, drug dealing (and other informal and illegal economic efforts) for lack of formal economic opportunities, low upward mobility due to public school closings on the South Side and lack of mentors. The South Side has become a snare to its black residents; the historic intentions to deny the South Side has resulted in a cyclically trapping those who live there with a pervasive lack that extends into violence.

The ways that Chance lives and engages in an arriving future is that he is no longer waiting for a transformed South Side—he is doing that work himself. I believe the effort is twofold: to dispel the nationally-written narrative about the South Side that it is only home to barbaric, senseless violence and to make real, grassroots changes to the lived experience of South Side residents. The importance

⁷ Donald Trump, March 28, 2017. Tweet.

of the re-writing a new narrative about the South Side that includes joy, love, heart-break, and family is that it humanizes the South Side. The South Side of Chicago has a specific type of infamy—the mixing of fear, pity, racism, and over-simplification. Outside of the daily casualty count, the South Side receives no other media coverage. The South Side's successes are not celebrated or even noticed. This is why Chance's insertion of joy is subversive; it undercuts the dominant narrative about the South Side to make it more human. This subversive joy is a gift; it allows space from the absurd (systemic racism, legacies of slavery, ghettoization, police brutality, mass incarceration) but then also the power and energy to engage back. No longer can the South Side operate in this sub-human exceptionalism imposed upon it; due to the national media, one can rationalize a disturbing image of an over-policed grade school or gloss over another dead body because we *all* know how dangerous the South Side is. This perception of the South Side is the most dangerous part of all; it erases the individual human people that are living the experience of the South Side. Chance's activism brings positivity to the South Side that benefits firstly its residents and secondly shows any one else who is watching that there is a real possibility for change. The South Side is not an unsolvable conundrum—helpless, hopeless, and doomed—but instead needs tender care and attention to address the trauma of racism and to then, hopefully, heal.

While the root of Chance's South Side reality comes from a racist, segregationist history, some argue that the source of the present reality is the closing of Chicago Public Schools. Without a network for Chicago Public Schools, children lose a safe place, fodder for creativity and intelligence, mentors, an outlet for emotion, energy, and creativity, among much more. Parents suffer too; it contributes unneeded stress to parents who are already working in a dangerous and impoverished area. When schools close, it is another responsibility imposed upon a parent. The majority of Chance's social activism is geared towards Chicago's children of the South Side. He allocates time, space, and finances for the creative and social successes of children on the South Side. Chance, in an interview on *The View*, expressed one motivation for donating 1 million dollars to Chicago Public Schools (CPS): "That's the biggest topic in the city. I'm a new parent and I want my daughter to be a CPS kid, and if there's no more CPS then how's that gonna happen? I'm trying to play my part."⁸ Since his own donation of one million dollars, the Chicago Bulls have also donated one million dollars to the CPS foundation. Additionally, Social Works, Chance the Rapper's non-profit, will match every 100,000 raised for CPS with 10,000 allocated to specific South Side Chicago public schools. Chance is not waiting for the Illinois

⁸ "Chance the Rapper on *The View*." Youtube video. Posted by "The Spot of Entertainment." Posted and aired Jun. 1, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkM0tIEFyWk>

government to sort out its budget or for the intentional allocation of money for the South Side public schools; he is living in the arriving future.

His other efforts intentionally target the children of the South Side: contributing his own mentorship, funding academic field trips, hosting open mics in Chicago Public Libraries, funding and organizing a South Side summer camp for music production and spiritual expression, the list continues. Chance is not allowing another generation of South Side children to slip through society's or the media's cracks. His is prioritizing the children of the South Side in a way that inserts hope into the painful realities of children growing up in a society that evidently does not prioritize them. In a song on his mixtape, *Coloring Book*, it feels as though he is speaking to each individual child directly. In lyrics from "D.R.A.M Sings Special," Chance reminds each person how special they are: "You are very special/ You're special too/ Everyone is special/ This I know is true/ When I look at you."⁹ These lyrics repeat over the duration of the two-minute long song. It feels like a message straight from the Chance's team to whoever is listening: you are worthwhile; you are important; you are not forgotten. The children of Chicago are quite literally the city's future; in Chance's prioritizing of children, he is also prioritizing the future. While it is impossible for one to assume that children on the South Side feel changed after listening to Chance's music—this is too sweeping and presumptuous—one can say that his activism is making a real change in individual children's lives. Using the example of his OpenMike project, the difference between a creative child, silenced and without a space and a creative child, speaking strongly in front of an enthusiastic crowd of friends, strangers, and mentors is immense. The difference between keeping your own story inside and telling it in a creative and beautiful way is groundbreaking. For Chance's reality, Chicago's South Side and all of the children nestled there are not forgotten, instead prioritized.

Another way in which Chance the Rapper lives in the arriving future is his refusal to accommodate the capitalist machine of the music industry. He insists on making music on his own terms outside of the intricate types of ownership that exists within the music industry. He has remained unsigned and therefore safeguards his creative work as his own. Instead of having optimism that one day, the music industry will respect musicians, he has hope that he can change his immediate experience into the arriving future. In another part of the aforementioned University of Chicago interview with Bakari Kitwana, he talks about his creativity channeled through remaining unsigned: "There were a lot of things getting done without the machine. What's even cooler than not working with the machine, in terms of the

9 Chance the Rapper. *Coloring Book*. 2016.

speed and accuracy that you get stuff done, but also the machine is very old and has sharp rigid cookie cutter technique. We could do uncouth or unorthodox shit in a very cool way, and just do it."¹⁰ What he is referring to as uncouth or unorthodox is represented through interesting collaborations between artists, the freedom to move between projects, and inserting a Christian message and gospel influence into a popular rap music. He refers to the music industry as the machine, which suggests a certain inescapability and coldness. He makes a harsh critique of the music industry, noting how relatively new the idea of owning intellectual property is—and how twisted. When asked what it means to him to be an independent artist he said: "I do understand what my footing means and what it means to be a free artist in music and I do understand the struggles that came before. I can't necessarily say that I devised a plan one night in my secret lab and decided that I'm going to free all the artists. It's something that as I've gone further and further I've found and picked up tools in every room to get past it. I think I'm just lucky to be in the space that I'm in with the tools that I have to function as a free artist."¹¹ While he may not have intended to free all the artists in an Exodus-style attack on the dominant consciousness, his palpable success is promoting the alternate consciousness in a more subtle way.

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10 "Chance the Rapper and the Art of Activism." Youtube video. Posted by "UChi Pol." Posted Jun. 1, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG64tfEjHwg&t=718s>.

11 Ibid.