Jürgen Moltmann has marked the history of theology after the Second World War in Europe and North America like no other. He is the most widely read, quoted, and translated theologian of our time. Now, after Moltmann has celebrated his eightieth birthday, he looks back on a life engaged in forging a Christian response to the tumult and opportunities of our time.

In this autobiography Moltmann tells his life story, from his Hamburg youth in an alternative parental home to the incomplete completion of the present moment, and he reflects on the journey of his own theological development and creativity. A wide-ranging document alert to the deeper currents of his time and ours, Moltmann’s work is at the same time an entertaining reconsideration of a life full of intense experience and new beginnings.

This autobiography will be widely read in the churches and the academy and will shed light on the intellectual development of this enormously influential theologian. Includes previously unpublished black and white photos.

My Personal Review:
Most clergy have a favorite theologian or two, theologians whose work has influenced their own understandings of the ways of God. For me, one of those theologians, is Jürgen Moltmann, who is now in his 80s. Moltmann, who was for many years, Professor of Theology on the Protestant Faculty at Tübingen University, is nearing the end of his own life journey. From that place, Moltmann has laid down his own account of his life, and the title - A Broad Place - is an apt one, for his story is a broad one, full of experiences and responses to those experiences that have formed him as a person, as a Christian, and as a theologian.

For a theologian such as Moltmann, an autobiography may be the proper place to explore a theology, for his theology is not so much the working out of a theological system as it is a series of theological reflections on a life journey. His journey begins in the context of a secular German family. It is
liberal but also nationalistic. His is a family of teachers, and there is nothing in that early biography that would suggest that he, a person without God or a church, would become one of the leading theologians of the second half of the 20th century and early decades of the 21st century. Yet, a war and time as a prisoner of war would provide an opportunity for an encounter with God in Jesus Christ that would transform his life and that of many others.

World War II raised important questions in his mind - including why he survived, when friends did not, and where God was in the midst of the terrors of war. As he was trying to put his life back together in a POW camp in Scotland, he was handed a Bible, and that Bible provided a starting point for seeking the answers to those questions. The texts that spoke most clearly to him were Psalm 39, which offers a cry of lamentation, and Jesus' cry on the cross found in Mark's Gospel - "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me."

In this early reflection on the Scriptures you see the seeds of a theology of hope and a theology of the crucified God, the fellow sufferer who reveals God's love to you. But more was to come, as the life of a Christian, a pastor, and a theologian began in earnest.

A Broad Place is a first person account of a life lived in the theological and ecclesial world. It alternates summations of his best-known works and projects with accounts of family, travels, conferences, debates, feuds, and academic politics. If one has never read Moltmann, this may be a good place to start, even if it is rather long. But by reading this, one better understands the nature of Moltmann's theology and even his theological method. What one must do is not get bogged down in the names and dates and places. Moltmann does drop a lot of names, many of whom most American readers will likely not know. But even here there is a richness, because the reader realizes that his theological reflections have emerged out of real life conversations and experiences. His was not a life spent in the study, but was lived in public.

In the course of a long and distinguished career, in which Moltmann has reached the pinnacle of greatness, he has touched upon most of the major doctrinal issues, but he has not left us, and doesn't plan to leave us, with a system. That isn't his way, which may be a good thing. Although hope and eschatology are key concepts in his theology, it would be wrong to try to force his theology into a box called a "theology of hope." His is Trinitarian, Christ-centered, Spirit-centered. It is a political theology and a public one. It's influenced by Barth, but has gone beyond Barth. It is rooted in the Reformed tradition, but especially his view of the Trinity has been influenced by the Eastern church. It has engaged liberation theology, but isn't liberationist per se - he recognizes his white male, first person context out of which he writes. It is distinctly Christian, but not in a triumphalist way. He was influenced by his encounters with the Marxism of his late Tübingen University colleague Ernst Bloch, but he's not a Marxist. He has
been touched by and influenced by, perhaps more than by any other person, the thoughts and work of his wife, a theologian of note in her own right, Elisabeth Moltmann Wendell. Just a note on his wife, she was a doctoral student at Gottingen, working under Otto Weber, even before he was.

Reading the book, especially in preparation for attending a conference in which the author was the featured presenter, gives a good sense of the person. Having read widely in his corpus of works over the years, incorporating many ideas as a result, the book provides context for these works - including ones I've not read or at least not read deeply enough. Perhaps it goes with the genre, but the book reveals a man of deep faith, but also a bit of vanity. He can be hurt and offended by critics, and he can offer some criticisms of his own. There is a bit of the name dropper as well. But again, that's to be expected. He has traveled widely - and the book has a bit of the travel-log in it as well - and knows or knew many important people. He has received many honors, some of which he shares.

Although written in the golden years of life, the story is not yet complete. There are chapters still to be written, but the life lived so far has been influential on the lives of many of us, even if we have only known him through his many published works. If you have interest in Moltmann, then this is a book that needs to be read.

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