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“You Shall Worship God on This Mountain”: A Theological Reading of Discrimination & Dehumanization at Denison

Emily Toler

In October 2007, latent currents of discrimination and hatred resurfaced at Denison when the Hilltoppers, the all-male a cappella group, used a flyer depicting nooses to promote their annual Halloween concert. After an emergency meeting with the Black Student Union, the Hilltoppers cancelled the event to sponsor a forum, where students recounted their personal experiences with racism, homophobia, and sexism. In response to these accounts, a campus-wide forum to address issues of diversity was scheduled for 7 November.

The following day, a Resident Assistant in Shorney Hall – a black student – reported finding a poster with a Swastika and the words “Stop Causing Trouble” on his door. In a display of solidarity, many members of the Denison community gathered again outside Slayter Student Union to protest these – and all – acts of hatred.

Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’

Exodus 3. 7-12 (NRSV)

If theology ever seemed irrelevant, if God ever seemed distant, if history ever seemed to be progressing of its own accord, the events of two weeks in fall 2007 on Denison's campus have demonstrated the awesome tenuousness of the word "if." For the first time in my four years here, this community was shaken out of its relative complacency. What we accepted as 'normal' has been abruptly called into question, if not fundamentally undermined. What we thought we knew, and who we thought we were, have been recast in a new, shocking, sometimes painfully bright light. This light is the revelation of the Triune God of the promises; it is God's radical historical intervention.

This metaphor for God is necessarily inadequate, but it is at least a relatively useful way to consider these recent events in the theological frameworks articulated by M. Douglas Meeks and Jürgen Moltmann. Light can never be captured. Light radically transforms our perceptions. Light is a 'ray' that cuts through darkness to re-orient us, giving us a re-cognition. Light is 'guiding' in that it shows us our path. The light of a sunset marks the end of one day, but the light of a sunrise promises the beginning of a new one. Perhaps most importantly, light has the incredible power to illuminate--to show what is--and to alter--to let us imagine what will be. In this essay, I will use Meeks' and Moltmann's respective metaphors for God to interpret the recent events on Denison's campus. First, I will consider how we might understand the work of God the economist in these events, emphasizing the importance of livelihood, community, and God concepts to combat dehumanization. Next, I will consider how we might understand the work of God as the power of the future, emphasizing radically transformative power, historicity, and liberation. Finally, I will place these two interpretations in conversation, offering the theological possibilities for imagining Denison as God's household of the promise.

To apply Meeks' metaphor of God the economist to recent events, I propose a subtle reinterpretation of his language. Instead of defining 'livelihood' exclusively in terms of material necessities (and Meeks does not explicitly make this limitation), we should expand this concept to include spiritual necessities. Meeks' analysis of livelihood [my emphasis] is grounded in human life, which is more than mere physical existence. Thus, livelihood entails both access to productive resources and freedom from dehumanizing economic practices. It is crucial to remember that Meeks' analysis of 'economy' and 'economic practices' is not an analysis of mechanisms of exchange; it is an analysis of human life in God's household and the "institutional relationships aimed at the survival of human beings in society" (33). These "living relationships" of the *oikos* are incredibly important. They

shape how we are in the world and in community. When the black, homosexual, and other minority students protested their subjection to bigotry, they protested being denied access to spiritual livelihood. They have correctly identified this denial as it has been expressed through domination.

I am somewhat uncomfortable using the term 'minority' to describe other human beings, because such a designation seems to risk perpetuating this dehumanizing practice of domination. The existence of a 'minority' implies the existence of a 'majority,' which in turn implies the existence of a 'majority culture' and 'dominant ideology.' This term is surely not coincidental; indeed, the dominant ideology at Denison implicitly legitimates dominion. Before the last two weeks, the (limited) racial and sexual discourses on this campus were marked by a "character of necessity and inevitability" (Meeks 51). This is closely correlated with Meeks' contention that the market "masks" its existence as a human construction and "masquerades" as a system that is governed by "automatic, unconscious, mechanistic, and unintended" laws (51). By believing that the social inequalities on campus are the inevitable results of a system that we are wholly unable to change, the Denison community became complicit in perpetuating those inequalities. By accepting the façade of the market, we became complicit in legitimating its false principles. By acquiescing to the authoritarian concepts implicit in this idea--that something with a power greater than ours is responsible for creating these unjust systems--we began to use an inappropriate God concept.

Meeks contends that our God concepts are directly related to how we imagine ourselves, so when we embraced a concept of God as a dictatorial authoritarian, we embraced its attendant endorsement of domination. (Moreover, imagining a dictatorial God might lead us to believe that, because we are only 'subjects,' we are not individually accountable for fighting institutional injustices; therefore, we might delegate that responsibility to others. The unconstructive attacks on the administration illustrate the danger of this tendency.) To combat domination and reshape our household, we must use a new God concept: the model of the Triune God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to understanding how God is at work in the household of Denison. The Trinitarian economist is the God concept we should use as a model for our household: "God's economy should ground human economy" (Meeks 23). The Triune God is absolutely at odds with the possessive individualism created by the market and, because the market is (inappropriately) pervasive, at odds with the possessive individualism that characterizes human relationships. Instead of retreating into an individualistic cocoon, we must use the

model of the Trinity to understand how we should relate to one another. Meeks offers a description of how to apply this new God concept, and although his plan specifically addresses work, its principles are readily applicable to all aspects of life in God's household.

First, Meeks emphasizes the distinctiveness of each person of the Trinity (and, therefore, of the household). "Each has a name, a reputation, a dignity, a place within the community" (133). Calling any person a 'faggot' or a 'nigger' is to deny that person's name and strip that person of his or her dignity--an affront to the household and to the Triune God. This distinctiveness does not preclude community, however; instead, each member of the household cooperates. "The whole community is involved in each work, event, or process of God" (133). This idea is particularly important for two reasons: first, it emphasizes the significance and value of every member of the household; and second, it emphasizes the mutual responsibility that each member has for the management of the household. We must recognize that every person at Denison is a member of the household, and we must further recognize that every person at Denison is accountable for any action that threatens to undermine it. When we recognize our responsibility, we realize that we must not expect 'someone else' to combat domination, dehumanization, and injustice. There is no 'someone else.'

This idea of cooperation is closely related to the equalitarian nature of the Trinity—an element that is immediately and obviously relevant to the dehumanizing acts of bigotry that have been perpetrated. No member of the Trinity is "elevate[d] higher than the others" (Meeks 133), so no member of God's household should subject another to domination. Indeed, "the Trinity is a criticism of all forms... of domination" (134). When we reject the urge to dominate others, we implicitly reject the possessive individualism that creates the urge. It is then that we can be open to the "self-giving love" (134) that characterizes every aspect of the Triune God. When we replace the dictatorial God concept with the understanding of the Triune God the economist, we no longer conceive of ourselves as "radical individuals," but as members of "a community of diverse persons that finds unity in self-giving love rather than in substantialist or subjectivist principles of identity" (11). Just as the persons of the Trinity are distinct but members of a community unified in love, so should our household acknowledge the distinctiveness of its members while affirming the paramount importance of self-giving love.

Meeks' theological concepts are clearly applicable to the recent dehumanizing events on campus, and the considerable conceptual overlap between his theology and that of Moltmann makes it unsurprising that the latter's work provides a useful

framework for understanding how the God of the promises is at work in the Denison household. Before I begin my consideration of Moltmann's theology, however, I believe it is necessary to mention the connection between one recent occurrence and Moltmann's personal experiences. One morning this week, a black Resident Assistant found a flier taped to his door. This flier depicted a swastika and the words 'STOP CAUSING TROUBLE!' Because Moltmann witnessed firsthand the atrocities of the Holocaust, and because his horror at the church's complicity with and endorsement of Nazi policies informed so much of his subsequent work, it seems fair to conclude that he would be particularly appalled by the unmistakable evocation of such an abominable ideology.

Moltmann's experience of the Holocaust—the most dreadful example of the denial of livelihood and utter dehumanization in history—dramatically affected his theology, which aims to prevent Christianity from being used to legitimate such horrors. His theology is grounded in eschatology, because the God of the promises can never be fixed in the present; God is the power of the future, always ahead. As such, the Christian message is the hope of futurity, which is perpetually in opposition to the present order, because the present is not the fulfillment of God's promises. (God's promises are constantly overflowing; therefore, their fulfillment is an ontological impossibility.) These constantly intervening promises create a necessary dichotomy between present and potentiality, a tension between the way things are and the way things should be. They call us first to recognize that the present order is not in accordance with God's desires, then to 'strike out in hope' as we work toward the realization of promises.

Moltmann's theology has a distinctly sociological overtone, demanding real engagement with the world. He observes that the hope we have in God's promises calls us to be "forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present" (16). Instead of allowing us to try to ignore the very real presence of racism, bigotry, and hatred on campus, the promises of God force us to confront them. The power of the future "does not suppress or skip the unpleasant realities" (17); it involves not escapism, but engagement; it demands that we first acknowledge the shortcomings of the present, then answer God's call to 'strike out in hope' and abolish dehumanization and injustice. As long as Denison's campus is imperfect--and, because God's promises are never fully realized, it will always be imperfect--the God of the promises will not allow us to accept the status quo. Instead, God's radical interventions disrupt the "pleasant harmony" that generally characterizes Denison and drives all the members of the community to be a "constant disturbance in society" (22).

The events of these two weeks exemplify how the God of the promises ‘touches down’ in the present. The courageous students, faculty, and staff who spoke at the forum in the Mitchell Center, who gathered at the flagpole in front of Slayter Student Union, who replaced posters of hatred with posters of love, who refused to be complicit in injustice acted proleptically—in anticipation of God’s promised future. They recognized the paradox illuminated by faith in the God of the promises: the present reality is unreality because it is unjust, exclusive, and hierarchical; it is unreality because it is not in accordance with God’s future. These proleptic actions reject the idea of the “universal and immediate presence of God” (282) by their implicit recognition that the God of the promises, the God of futurity, does not legitimate the unjust present. Acting in accordance with God’s promised future does not ‘make sense’ because that future necessarily contradicts the present, but when members of the community ‘struck out in hope,’ they recognized the present in hopeful anticipation of God’s arriving future.

The community members who have condemned ‘the way things are’ have heard the call of the God of the future; God is ‘bringing them into being.’ The revelation of God’s promises has shown them the “impossibility of [their] own existence[s] in face of the possibilities demanded by the divine mission” (Moltmann 285) and, more importantly, it has given them the strength to meet the challenge. The “discrepancy between the divine mission and [their] own being[s]” did not dishearten these students; instead, they responded to the God of the promises, “learning what [they] are, and what [they are] to be, yet [of themselves] cannot be” (285). God asked impossibilities of these students, but when they trusted in him, understanding that being in the God of the promises reveals not “what [they] were and what [they] really are, but what [they] will be and can be in that history and future to which the mission leads [them]” (285), God made the impossible possible. The revelation of promise enables a transformation of history and of being in history, and as God’s promises were revealed at Denison, the students, faculty, and staff who answered the call rejected what the dehumanizing present told them they were. They were “given the prospect of a new ability to be” (285).

Thus, revelation enables us to ‘come to ourselves’ because it shows us not what we are in this imperfect present but what we will be in God’s promised future. The black students who refused to be called ‘niggers’ or to tolerate the humiliation of blackface embraced God’s futurity. The homosexual, bisexual, and transgender students who refused to be called ‘faggots’ or to be condemned for whom they love embraced God’s futurity. These students realized that their

present dehumanization was in tension with their promised being, and in this revelation, they found hope. They found freedom in the “transcendent and provisional character” of this hope that is “marked by promise and expectation” and “recognizes the open horizon of the future of reality” (92). They emptied themselves, abandoning themselves to and placing their trust absolutely in God’s promises, and refused to accept the present; in doing so, they became agents of God’s arriving future and its radical transformation of history.

The God of the promises is demanding, but Moltmann demonstrates that proleptic living, or living in terms of the arriving future and not in terms of the imperfect present, is a “realistic way of perceiving the scope of our real possibilities” (25). We know that God does not make impossible promises because he has been faithful to his promises in the past. Therefore, when his arriving promises compel us to “constantly call this world into question” (164), we can be sure that our efforts to “create here the best that is possible” (34) are meaningful. When we speak out against dehumanization, when we transcend boundaries to gather in solidarity, when we work toward justice and freedom and equality, we have faith that our work is not in vain. “What is promised is within the bounds of possibility” (34-5).

Perhaps the most immediate connection between Moltmann’s theology and recent events is to be found in his discussion of God’s radical transformations in history. On this point, Meeks and Moltmann converge, grounding their interpretations of God’s liberating actions in Scripture.

Moltmann historicizes the Christian message, emphasizing that Yahweh, the God who delivered the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, is the same God who resurrected Jesus, a Jew. These two identifications are particularly important because they reveal that the God of the promises is a liberator who, through Jesus, identifies with the victims of oppression and ‘touches down’ in history to free his people from that oppression. God demonstrated his faithfulness to his promises when he brought the Israelites out of Egypt; he demonstrated his faithfulness when he resurrected Jesus; and he demonstrates his faithfulness by “calling this world into question” (Moltmann 164) and stirring the Denison community to action. When the black and GLBT students refused to tolerate dehumanizing oppression any longer, we can be certain that God identified with them in their struggle, and we can expect his liberating intervention in Denison’s history. These students realized that the God of the promises never endorses the present when it is “not yet what it has the prospect of being” (164) and because the present is unjust, they knew that God’s overflowing promises would ‘touch down’ to show us all the

possibility of the future.

Meeks' theology also demonstrates that God identifies with the oppressed and must not be used to support the dehumanizing prevailing system. Meeks begins his work with suffering and oppression, because beginning at any other point distorts God's nature as disclosed in Jesus and in Scripture. God is concerned with creating a community in which all of its members have access to livelihood, and the recent events have unequivocally demonstrated that Denison's community does not yet represent God's household. Therefore, we know that God is at work to "transform the world into a household in which all of God's creatures can find abundant life... and to begin with the poor and oppressed, those who are most threatened by death and evil, in order to build a new household for God's creatures" (24).

When black students were confronted with the image of the noose, they were threatened by death and evil. When the black resident assistant saw a swastika on his door, he was threatened by death and evil. When black students were faced with partygoers in blackface or called 'niggers,' they were confronted with the incredible connotative weight of slavery and dehumanizing oppression; they were threatened by death and evil. When GLBT students felt afraid to be with their partners even in their own rooms, they were threatened by death and evil. When GLBT students were called 'faggots' and utterly dehumanized, they were threatened by death and evil. Because God, for Meeks, is primarily concerned with building a household, a community, in which all of its members are afforded the dignity they are guaranteed as God's created human beings, we know that God is at work at Denison.

This household was not a household in the model of the Trinity. This household was not characterized by dignity, cooperation, equality, and self-giving love. This household did not always concern itself with the oppressed. This household did not remember that the God of the promises always contradicts present imperfections. This household did not remember that we will be called into being only in God's futurity. This household became complacent, contented, and complicit; it ignored the oppressed with whom God always identifies.

But the God of the promises does not allow us to be comfortable or cozy in the present that is marked by such injustice; God the economist demands a radical reconstruction of the household until none of its members suffer. We must live proleptically; we must act out of self-giving love. We must question everything about the unreality of the present; we must challenge institutional structures of dehumanization. Moltmann and Meeks show us a God who will not accept

prejudice, inequality, discrimination, or hatred. Moltmann and Meeks show us a God who stands outside at the flagpole, calling us into a transformative future of dignity, equality, and love. Moltmann and Meeks show us a God who identifies with the oppressed in their struggle for freedom, making the impossible possible by bringing them into their future, potential being; they show us a God who builds a new household where cooperation informs action, dignity is preserved, and love is a radical, perpetually-transforming presence.

During our class discussions of Moltmann, we consistently returned to one question: How will we recognize God's promises? In the last two weeks, God has given us an answer. His promised future of equality, justice, and dignity is arriving at Denison. God has made himself known as the liberator, the sufferer, the manager; he has made himself known as the one who will never abandon the oppressed. He is the transformative power of the future, giving suffering students the voices to speak impossible words. He is the manager of the household, refusing to condone dehumanization and denial of livelihood. He is radically historical--and his futurity has touched down. We no longer wonder if and how God, the I AM, the I WILL BE, is at work; we know that his power is here, re-cognizing the present. When we listen to Moltmann and Meeks, we realize that we no longer need to wonder how to recognize God's promises; we should wonder only how to realize them as we begin to build God's household of dignity, cooperation, equality, and self-giving love on this mountain.

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