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A Passion for God

The Mystical-Political
Dimension of Christianity

Johann Baptist Metz

Edited and translated, with an introduction by
J. Matthew Ashley



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In Place of a Foreword: On the Biographical Itinerary of My Theology

My younger colleague and translator Dr. Matthew Ashley and the publisher at Paulist Press have asked me to write a foreword to this collection of some of my more recent essays. In place of the usual foreword, I would like briefly to show how the itinerary of political theology has been a reflection of my life. I hope these biographical notes will illuminate the background out of which individual contributions to this volume have arisen, and I offer them as an expression of gratitude to the translator.

I

Toward the end of the Second World War, when I was sixteen years old, I was taken out of school and forced into the army. After a brief period of training at a base in Würzburg, I arrived at the front, which by that time had already crossed the Rhine into Germany. There were well over a hundred in my company, all of whom were very young. One evening the company commander sent me with a message to battalion headquarters. I wandered all night long through destroyed, burning villages and farms, and when in the morning I returned to my company I found only the dead, nothing but the dead, overrun by a combined bomber and tank assault. I could see only dead and empty

faces, where the day before I had shared childhood fears and youthful laughter. I remember nothing but a wordless cry. Thus I see myself to this very day, and behind this memory all my childhood dreams crumble away. A fissure had opened in my powerful Bavarian-Catholic socialization, with its impregnable confidence. What would happen if one took this sort of remembrance not to the psychologist but into the Church? and if one did not allow oneself to be talked out of such unreconciled memories even by theology, but rather wanted to have faith with them and, with them, speak about God?

This biographical background shines through all my theological work, even to this day. In it, for example, the category of memory plays a central role; my work does not want to let go of the apocalyptic metaphors of the history of faith, and it mistrusts an idealistically smoothed out eschatology. Above all, the whole of my theological work is attuned by a specific sensitivity for theodicy, the question of God in the face of the history of suffering in the world, in "his" world. What would later come to be called *political theology* has its roots in this speaking about God within the *conversio ad passionem*. Whoever talks about God in Jesus' sense will always take into account the way one's own pre-formulated certainties are wounded by the misfortune of others.

II

So now I must say something about political theology, which I formulated in the mid-sixties and for which consequently I am held answerable. From the start, Dorothee Sölle and Jürgen Moltmann have been particularly supportive of me in this undertaking, and so this theological endeavor was always understood to be an ecumenical project—ecumenical in the sense of an indirect ecumenism, a collaboration in a public contest for the sake of God and the world. Now let me give a few reflections on the path this political theology has followed.

1. My experiences with the so-called Paulus-Gesellschaft, which in the early sixties was dedicated to bringing Christians

and Marxists into dialogue, and particularly with Ernst Bloch and members of the Frankfurt School, "politicized me out of" the existential and transcendental enchantment of theology.¹ I have always understood the debate with Marxism to be really a debate with the social-critical dramatization of the theodicy theme. I did not want politics and political culture to be spared theodicy's perspective, as every kind of pragmatism recommends. Of course, I also wanted to articulate this theme differently from Marxism: as always and absolutely a question about others' suffering as well as one's own, about the suffering even of one's enemies, and about suffering in the past, which not even the most passionate struggle on the part of the living can touch and reconcile. This way of bringing together politics and theodicy had and continues to have a high price, for it is continually made an object of derision by political pragmatists and by political utopians as well, both those outside and inside the Christian world. But how, except through this theodicy-outlook, can one save political life from pure political Darwinism, which cares not if it is implemented by a pragmatic straight path or laden with dialectical hesitations?

2. If I judge correctly, the atmosphere of 1968 (often disparaged today) had one effect above all on me: it drove out the all-too-pliable language of the historicity of faith and confronted my theology more and more clearly with history itself, with history that bears a name as catastrophic as that of Auschwitz. Again and again since then I have asked myself why one sees and hears so little in our theology of such a catastrophe, or of the whole history of human suffering. Could it possibly be that we have used categories for the theological interpretation of history that are too strong, categories that too quickly cover over every historical laceration and allow the sensorium for danger to atrophy? Does theology really heal every wound? At the time, Auschwitz worked like an ultimatum for me. Since then the supposedly weak categories of memory and narrative have played an ever greater role for me, are even able to express the terror of the logos of

theology, and help me focus on the anamnestic culture that has developed in Jewish history.

3. Since the late sixties there have been two impulses of the Second Vatican Council that I have tried above all to defend and strengthen under the banner of political theology. There was the impetus for believers to walk on their own two feet ("Only the one who walks upright can also bend the knee willingly and give thanks cheerfully.") and, seminally present in this, the first indications of a revision of the relationship of my Church to the political Enlightenment. But above all there was in the council the first outline for a movement out of European monocentrism and into a culturally polycentric global church with painful social divisions. Encounters with my friends in the international journal *Concilium* were particularly fruitful in this regard.

During my stays in the United States it became ever clearer to me that there is a growing conflict of cultures or civilizations within Catholicism in the Western, so-called first world, a clear alienation and lack of connection between Roman Catholicism on the one hand and the religious-political traditions of the Anglo-Saxon world on the other. Yet for me the new theological challenge became that of drawing in the non-Western world, the so-called third world. This exposed the logos of theology to social suffering and misery as much as it did to the suffering that comes from being culturally and ethnically different in a world and world church dominated by the West. I will never forget my encounters with my friends in liberation theology in Latin America and my experiences in the base communities of these nations.

Since encountering these and other cultures as well, I have worked to formulate a concept of theology that, while it recognizes the post-modernists' legitimate suspicion of universalistic approaches, does not collapse into a sheer relativization of cultural worlds. I have striven to do this by stressing a respect for and obedience to the authority of those who suffer. For me this authority is the only one in which the authority of the sovereign God is manifested in the world for all men and women.

III

I will stop here. The leitmotif of this biographical path is quite probably the *memoria passionis*, the remembrance of the suffering of others as a basic category of Christian discourse about God. This entails the theodicy question, continually taken up under a temporal signature and dramatized in a social-critical way—a question that for me is never silenced or taken care of by the Christian message of redemption. In every thing there is always a loud, or at times a silent, cry. This is what led me not long ago, for example, to ask Jürgen Habermas in a friendly way whether it has really been settled once and for all that the meaning of human language is rooted in communication and not, perhaps, in that cry. There are for me questions that may be directed back at God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus. Here though are questions for which I have a language, but no answers. And I have made them my own as a prayer: Why, God, suffering? why sin? Why have you made no provision for evil?

One can see how important this is for my theology by the fact that I have interpreted from its perspective my incomparable teacher Karl Rahner, who hardly ever spoke himself of theodicy and negative theology—and I would not want to take up such a way of speaking about God apart from him. In 1984, the year of his death, I wrote that "Karl Rahner has never interpreted Christianity as the happy conscience of an advanced bourgeois condition that has been purged of every endangered hope, every vulnerable and stubborn longing....Through it all there remained in him a longing, which I never felt to be sentimental, nor something that stormed the heavens, but which was much more a hushed sigh of the creature, like a wordless cry for light before the face of God shrouded in darkness."

Johann Baptist Metz

Introduction: Reading Metz

I. THE MYSTICAL POLITICAL ELEMENT IN METZ'S THOUGHT

Some ninety years ago Friedrich von Hügel described religion as a complex interaction of three elements or modalities: the historical, the intellectual and the experimental.² The historical or historical-institutional element is the mode in which religion presents itself as something objectively *there*, factual and unchanging. It includes the person, words and deeds of the founder (insofar as they can be historically secured, elaborated on and passed down), as well as the rites, practices and institutional structures that attempt faithfully to pass on the essence of the founder's activity. The intellectual element, with synthetic and analytic moments, seeks system and coherence, not only within the worldview that the religion presents in its historical-institutional aspect, but with other perspectives on reality as well. Finally, in its experimental or mystical-volitional element, "religion is rather felt than seen or reasoned about, is loved and lived rather than analyzed, is action and power, rather than external fact or intellectual verification."³ From this perspective the vitality of religion as a social phenomenon, as a force undergirding the development and creative activity of mature human subjects, depends upon the creative interplay and integration of these three elements, overcoming again and again (both in individuals and in the broader group) the tendency of each element to dominate or suppress the other two. The history of a religion, as long