Quest for the Living God

Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God

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3

The Crucified God of Compassion

CONTEXT: UNSPEAKABLE SUFFERING

Consider the insight into God that emerged on the European continent blasted to shreds by the Second World War. Millions dead, cities in ruins, farming and food distribution disrupted, the economy devastated: the suffering did not end with the armistice but radiated into the subsequent years like shock waves. At the center of the horror, shouted in cries and in whispers, loomed the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews. While there were stunning examples of Christian resisters and rescuers, for the most part those who ran the death camps were baptized. Standing in the ruins, theologians not only had to face the failure of Christianity to motivate people of faith to resist such evil. In the face of the enormity of what had happened, they also had to take the measure of traditional arguments used to explain the ways of God in the face of suffering. Six million people, men, women, and children, uprooted from their homes and neighborhoods, transported like cattle on precision-run trains, separated into those marked for immediate slaughter and those healthy enough to provide slave labor, and all ultimately headed for death by gassing, gunshot, disease, or starvation, their bodies disposed of in the burning crematoria. Hitler's goal was to wipe this people and their heritage off the face of the earth. The suffering, undeserved and inhumane, beggars the imagination.

The enormity of the crime left thinkers stunned. They began to speak of the Holocaust as an "interruption" that invaded Christian theology's view of a rationally ordered world. It was an "earthquake" that cracked open the ground of faith's confidence in God; an unbridgeable "chasm" that split history and its supposed progress into an incommensurable before and after; a "tremendum" that shattered belief not only in God but also in humanity and its secular projects. Taking the measure of the Shoah, one simply could not go on as before crafting interpretations that would allow this magnitude of suffering to make some kind of sense in God's plan for the world.

I remember the day I took a train from Munich to the concentration camp at Dachau. The town of Dachau itself dates from the Middle Ages and lies only a few stops on the suburban line out from the big city. Having read extensively on the Holocaust I felt quasi-prepared for what I would encounter, although the impact of actually being in the presence of the bunkers and ovens was viscerally almost too powerful to bear. There was one unexpected moment, though, that stunned my thought. In the camp museum, amid the tools of torture and other paraphernalia, there hung a striped outfit worn by one inmate named Albert Mainslinger. Next to it were displayed two pieces of paper, documents filled out when he entered and left the camp. In 1939 his admission form listed his weight as 114 kg (250 lbs) and, further down, his religion as Roman Catholic. In 1945 his discharge form, signed by the American administrator of the camp, contained different information. His weight was 41 kg (90 lbs). On the line for religion was written *Das Nichts*, nothing. I stared, struck silent. Who can fathom the suffering—unjust imprisonment; years of slow starvation; morning, noon, and night trying to evade the terror meted out by the guards; unremitting hard labor in the cold and heat; people in agony all around; having no idea when this would ever end or if the next minute would bring his death. As his body withered so too did his soul, any trust in a good and gracious God evaporating away.

Herr Mainslinger was one of the lucky ones, insofar as he survived. Multiply his experience by three million other Gentiles who died in such places. And then focus specifically on the six million Jewish people who were systematically rounded up and barbarically killed in the camps simply because they were Jews. The force of this event's interruption to the religious project of speaking about God becomes clear. Theologians reflected that

such evil is a surd, an irrational force that cannot be made to fit meaningfully into a divine plan for the world. Even to try to make it fit would be to tame the evil, to dilute its terror, to give it, albeit unintentionally, a right to exist. Such attempts at rationalization drown out the voices of the victims. And to allow that this event is part of an overall divine plan for the world would be to make God into a monster, no matter how much one talks about divine goodness and power. The "fissure" in the classical pattern of thought is so great that in questing for the living God some theologians began to change the question about suffering itself. The proper question is not *why* did God permit this to happen, or *how* can this be reconciled with divine governance of the world. Rather, thinking on the far side of the break brought about by this experience, the proper question becomes the anguished query: *where* is God, where is God now?

For good reason, Jewish religious thinkers have taken the lead in pursuing this question amid the shattering of faith's confidence. Taking different avenues of thought, various Jewish scholars have envisioned different answers. We do not know where God was. God was hidden, or silent, or absent, or dead. God's face was turned away. God was there, suffering with the victims, weeping with their pain. Or most radically, the only rational way to think about God after Auschwitz is to admit that God does not exist. Whatever the theology, it leads to an ethical mandate: Never Again.

THE FAILURE OF THEODICY

Both Jewish and Christian thinkers who grappled with this issue did so against the background of a long tradition reaching back to the Bible itself. Why is there so much moral evil and suffering in the world if God is all-powerful and all-good? Could God not stop it? If not, then God must not be all-powerful. Does God not want to stop it? If not, then God must not be all-loving. But if God could stop it and wants to, why does suffering continue?

Traditional theology is virtually unanimous in maintaining that God does not will suffering directly. Rather, having created a world with its own natural laws, a world, moreover, where human beings have free will, God allows or permits disaster to happen. Different schools of thought adduce a

variety of reasons to explain why this is the case. God permits suffering to punish sin, or to test character, or to educate persons in mature virtue, or to refine and purify souls for heaven. Even when suffering is unjustly inflicted on the innocent, God allows it out of respect for human freedom. No matter what happens, God will bring good out of evil in the end. All of these arguments endeavored to reconcile human suffering with divine love and power, making the case that the travail somehow served divine purpose.

At the time of the Enlightenment these attempts to justify God's ways in a painful world were given the name "theodicy." The term was coined as the title of a book by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz in 1710, who sought to make sense of suffering as part of his argument that this is the best of all possible worlds. By then the God of modern theism was in the ascendancy, and it was theism's construal of an omnipotent, omniscient Supreme Being that needed to be defended in the face of terrible things that happened in the world which "he" created. After the Second World War, theologians began to think that measured against the Holocaust, both traditional theology's explanations and the Enlightenment theodicy project had failed. To say that the Jewish people deserved this as a punishment for sin flies in the face of the fact that, apart from sharing in common human sinfulness, most of those murdered were innocent of egregious evildoing; one million were children. To say that such suffering formed souls in virtue belies the fact that it literally destroyed persons and left survivors with a lifetime of physical, psychological, and spiritual struggle. The free will defense raised more questions than it answered, just pushing the question back to human beings and creating the need for an "anthropodicy." Indeed, the Holocaust of the Jews is an incomprehensible scandal that defies rational justification. Trying to reconcile it with a loving, powerful God ends up trivializing the evil.

There have been other genocides since this event. The Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot brought almost one-third of the Cambodian people to the killing fields. In Rwanda the Hutu people with fire and machete wiped out 800,000 of their Tutsi neighbors in several weeks before international intervention made the killing stop. Even as I write, the agony of Darfur, incredibly, continues. It was in mid-century Europe, however, where the issue first rose up sharply in contemporary Christian thought. It was European theologians who had to deal with the question of God in the dark of

the Shoah, which shredded to bits every rational argument that tried to justify divine ways. Their work has affected theology's dealing with massive public suffering ever since.

Three Young Germans

It is no small grace that among the cohort of theologians who began to deal with this issue were three young Germans. All of them grew up under the dark shadow of National Socialism and experienced firsthand the devastation of war during their teenage years. All studied theology at universities just getting reestablished in ravaged postwar Germany. Now it was no longer the atheism of the secular world that challenged faith, but the issue of horrific suffering. When they became theologians, all subsequently refused to look away from the Holocaust but rather took the event with utmost seriousness as a challenge and guide to thinking about God.

Jürgen Moltmann tells of how he witnessed the Allied fire-bombing of Hamburg, which left whole swaths of the city in ashes. Held as a prisoner of war by the British, he looked through the barbed wire of the camp and wondered how to think about God in the midst of such utter breakdown; the ideas of the Reformed Protestant tradition in which he had been schooled seemed so inadequate. Early in his studies he rediscovered the cross of Christ, which became the firm ground beneath the feet of his theology. "Shattered and broken, the survivors of my generation were then returning from camps and hospitals to the lecture room. A theology which did not speak of God in the sight of the one who was abandoned and crucified would have had nothing to say to us then." The theology of the cross became ever more significant as he began to take the measure of the genocide of the Jews. It became imperative for the integrity of theology to connect the cross with Auschwitz.

Dorothee Soelle tells of her young years being "defined by hunger, bombing, coldness, and need. Spiritually, it was a ruined landscape as well." During the war her family hid the Jewish mother of one of her classmates in their attic. One of her older brothers was killed on the Eastern front. As a young theologian she traveled to the death camp in Auschwitz, Poland, an unusual move at the time. There, where so many were brutally murdered, she felt the theological ground silently shift beneath her feet. Her classical

Lutheran training and piety had been founded on the God of classical theism with all the "omni" attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence. After her trip she could no longer understand how theology could talk like that. "In the light of Auschwitz, the assumption of the omnipotence of God seemed a heresy," ethically offensive and impossible to believe. Often citing the poetry, last letters (farewell discourses), and memoirs of Jewish people who were in the camps or of German resisters in Nazi prisons, she considers this crime against humanity the most important event her generation has had to deal with.

Johann Baptist Metz tells of how as a religious youth sixteen years of age he was taken out of school, forced into the German army, and sent to the front. His company numbered well over one hundred teenagers, all young like himself. One evening he was sent to deliver a message to headquarters. During his absence his company was wiped out by Allied tank and bomber assaults. Upon returning, "I found only the dead . . . I could see only dead and empty faces where the day before I had shared 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 crumbled away." A fissure had opened in his Catholic imagination with its impregnable confidence that God is good and the world is orderly. The fissure became unbridgeable when, as a graduate student of Rahner's and then as a young professor, he gradually took into account the boundless horror of the Holocaust. Instead of drowning out the cries, he began to wonder what would happen if one remembered the victims and with them tried to speak about God. Thus the God-question forced itself on him "in its strangest, most ancient, and most controversial form," namely, from the depths of suffering. Theology simply can no longer do its job, he concluded, that is, talk about God, with its back turned to Auschwitz.

As their lives developed in different venues and each rose to international prominence, these three became friendly acquaintances and gave each other collegial and moral support. The impetus to think in new ways about the living God amid suffering broadened out in their thought to include not only the Holocaust but also the barbarous glut of evil in human history as a whole. Their concern was not first of all the suffering of individuals that comes in the ordinary course of earthly life as bodies age, sicken, and die, nor

yet the suffering that results from setbacks and losses in relationships or work. While presenting religious questions of their own, these events are part of the warp and woof of every human life on this earth, which is not paradise. But beyond this personal, existential, relatively private suffering there is a wretched excess of affliction that occurs from injury that people inflict unjustly on each other en masse: grinding poverty and hunger, slavery, domestic abuse, rape, murder, war, genocide. This is harm that destroys persons and their ability to love; it assaults their identity and violently extinguishes their life. Looking back over the history of the human race, such suffering is a red thread that runs through the whole bloody tapestry.

The solution, each of these theologians wrote, does not lie either in ignoring suffering intellectually or in trying to avoid it in practical terms. The latter tendency, characteristic of materialistic culture in first world countries, began to creep into German society as postwar rebuilding started to succeed economically. Middle-class life seems to run on an expectation that life will be comfortable. Attending to material satisfactions in a consumer society, people tend to think that anything painful needs to be expelled. When suffering does arrive at their doorstep, they do not know how to achieve meaning. To forestall this pain and panic, they insulate themselves with banal activities instead of risking a life rich in engagement with its mourning and consolation. As for those who suffer beyond their immediate circle, people wrap themselves in their own world and look right through, around, beyond the torment of others, showing an inability to suffer even in the cause of aiding those being afflicted. The result of this avoidance, especially clear in young people, is boredom, stagnation, inability to experience intense joy—in a word, apathy.

In crafting an approach to theology that would deal with massive public suffering and the middle-class attempt to ignore it, the young Germans began to use the term "political theology," from the Greek word *polis*, meaning city. This is not theology done in direct connection with political parties or movements, lobbies or governments, as the name might suggest. Rather, it is theology that seeks to connect speech about God with the *polis*, the city, the public good of massive numbers of people, living and dead. Political theology as they developed it is wary of a privatized type of religion that focuses on an individual's religious experience and morality alone. Such a narrow view contributed to the failure of the churches to vigorously

oppose Hitler, allowing a complacency that enabled faith to be bound up with an unjust social order. Expressing the intent to give religion a public face, political theology crafts a broader view, attempting to hold belief in God accountable in the public arena. Deeply spiritual in its approach, it also turns practical in making compassion in solidarity with victims an essential part of faith. As Metz described it, this theology emphasizes "the mystical-political element that challenges the privatization of bourgeois religion and locates the experience of God not in peaceful tranquility but in protest to God about evil in the world, a questioning of God, and a suffering unto God."

The God of Pathos

Post-Holocaust political theology rediscovered a God deeply involved with the pain of the world. Moltmann and Soelle, among others such as Eberhard Jüngel, heeded the famous insight of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian theologian hanged by the Nazis, who wrote from prison that in the midst of this disaster: "Only a suffering God can help." They developed the powerful symbol of the suffering God who endures and is defeated with those who suffer. This symbol opens up the idea that God takes the pain of the world into the divine being in order there to redeem it. Taking a different tack, Metz, among others such as Edward Schillebeeckx, envisioned a God of deep compassion who stands in solidarity with those who suffer, although suffering does not enter the divine being as such. Whichever symbol they chose, these political theologians glimpsed a God of overwhelming *pathos* whose presence enables hope even in the midst of brutal death.

In exploring this idea, political theologians found the work of Jewish religious scholar Abraham Heschel to be highly valuable. Heschel, who dedicated his book *The Prophets* "To the martyrs of 1940–45," saw that the biblical prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos were riveted by a glimpse of God's heart, which burned with care. It was this view that gave them the strength to proclaim, in God's name, their biting critique of social evil and hopeful consolation for the afflicted. Heschel characterizes this divine care for the world as "pathos." As a term, pathos signifies a kind of suffering feeling; it is the root of the word "a-pathetic," meaning without feeling, as well as its opposite, "sym-pathetic," meaning with feeling for others in their troubles. In the prophetic texts of the Bible, God is a God of pathos who feels

intensely: loves, cares, is glad, gets angry over injustice, urges, prods, forgives, is disappointed, gets frustrated, suffers righteous indignation, weeps, grieves, promises, pours out mercy, rejoices, consoles, wipes away tears, and loves some more. Pathos, then, is a central symbol of the prophets' understanding of God. It serves as a theological category of God's living care in dynamic relation to Israel, a code for the covenanting God's participation in the life story of the world.

Knowing that this view of God stands in profound contrast to modern theism, Heschel employs a traditional scholarly template to explore the difference. According to this template, Christian thought about God follows one of two routes: Greek or Hebrew. The Greek way is steeped in reason and philosophy, while the Hebrew way traces the historical revelation at the core of biblical religion. There are many nuances that fudge this division, making it less clean than it first appears. Greek Hellenism, for instance, seeped into Jewish consciousness and can be found in the later writings of the Hebrew Bible. Still, to get a broad picture, the template serves to clarify two genuinely different methods that come up with different results. One key difference lies in how they evaluate feeling, especially the emotion that results from being affected by another.

❧ The Greek philosophical pattern has a strong tendency toward dualism, driving a wedge between spirit and matter. What pertains to spirit is higher in value and closer to the divine, while what pertains to matter drags the spirit down to the messiness of earth. Applied to human beings, this pattern of thought privileges the immortal soul and its reasoning power, while the body and its emotions are devalued as closer to the realm of change and, ultimately, to death. In this view, God, being pure Spirit, is totally above the fray, beyond all emotion. Possessing all perfections in an unimaginable way, the divine nature has no possibility for change, cannot be affected by the world, and, of course, cannot suffer. Divine dignity depends on this. The ideal for human beings is likewise a self-conquest that will enable people to control their passions and dwell in the untroubled realm of spirit.

❧ The Hebrew historical pattern, by contrast, entails a nondualistic view of creation. Thus, emotion, although perhaps embarrassing to the stoic temperament, is every bit as spiritually valuable as thought. In this view the overwhelmingly transcendent God freely becomes active in history,

covenants with a people, and through word and deed is encountered as the One who is passionately related to what goes on. Thereby it is revealed that God's own self is caring, loving, involved. The ideal for human beings who are made in this divine image is to be conformed to God's heart by a sympathetic involvement in the joys and turmoil of history. The real opposite to being God-like in this model lies not in being passionate but in being indifferent. To be moved by suffering and to relate to those in need with compassion is to be theomorphic, conformed to God's image.

Far from fitting into the philosophical model, the God of the Bible is a God of pathos. To protect divine freedom, Heschel reflects that pathos is not a *necessary* divine attribute, one that belongs to the eternal God as infinite. But in view of Israel's history it is *in fact* how God freely chooses to respond to the human dilemma, namely, with sympathetic engagement. Pathos has the quality of an ethical category, a stance of living care. To say that God is compassionate, feelingly and concretely concerned, is to say that God cares passionately about human well-being for all, which includes especially those ground down as victims of historic injustice. Hence, to call God a God of pathos is not a psychological claim but a theological one. Like all theological language it is inadequate. But it is not false as a way to illuminate God's compassion.

This Jewish theology of divine pathos provided an inviting way for Christian theology to approach the idea of God in relation to suffering. For at the heart of Christian faith is the belief that in the advent of Jesus Christ God's compassion became ever more intimate, sharing the pain of the world in the flesh. Political theology ventures this interpretation. Focusing intensely on the cross and resurrection of Christ, it finds there the revelation of God's compassion poured out.

Central Vision

Christians remember that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. In the midst of the physical torment of this Roman form of execution, he also endured spiritual agony, conveyed in that unforgettable, anguished cry from the cross, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mark 15:34). In the midst of this hell, where was God?

Christian tradition is constant in insisting that the mystery of God is profoundly connected to this event. The cross signifies that God, who is love, whose will stands in contrast to such misery, nevertheless freely plunges into the midst of the pain and tastes its bitterness to the bitter end in order to save.

Faith pivots on the belief that by the power of the Spirit Jesus died not into nothingness, into annihilation, but into the embrace of the living God. In solidarity with this victim, God encompassed him with loving power that ultimately transformed him into new life. We cannot imagine this, but the heart of faith breaks forth in the exclamation, "Christ is risen. Alleluia!" This is not a new chapter that erases what went before. As Metz declares, "Whoever hears the message of the resurrection of Christ in such a way that the cry of the crucified has become inaudible in it, hears not the Gospel but rather a myth." The resurrection opens up a future for the crucified one. Far from being good news about his personal destiny alone, this event pledges a future of life for all who go down into the darkness of death.

Political theology interprets this event in the framework of hope for the whole world at the end of time, referred to in theology as the "eschaton" and reflected upon in a field called "eschatology." Here it draws on the wisdom of ancient Israel's history with God, which cannot be underestimated as a vital source of wisdom for Christian faith and theology. In trying to annihilate the Jewish people, the Nazis were also destroying their religion, which would have taken the indispensable ground out from under the feet of Christian believers. For not only did the Jewish people encounter the God of pathos in the midst of their turbulent history, always under threat. They also understood God to be the One who will wrap history up, establishing justice and bringing all to fulfillment at the end of time.

This victorious vision flows from the Hebrew scriptures through the New Testament, which ends with the expectant cry *Maranatha,* "Come, Lord," full of desire for the moment when the new dwelling of God among people will wipe away all tears, and death and mourning shall cease, and all things will be made new (Rev 22:20 and 21:1–5). In the face of the mystery of suffering, political theology affirms: time will end. God, to whom time belongs, has set boundaries to it. The future, as with the whole universe, is in God's hands, and those hands are caring, sustaining, consoling, wiping

away tears. We can, then, dare to hope for salvation, not only for ourselves but also for all the defeated and the dead with their unspeakable suffering.

Israel's history with God has given birth to this great promise. But all the evidence is not yet in; the divine response to suffering has not yet fully appeared. It has made a down payment in the resurrection of Jesus, but the fulfillment is up ahead, at the end. Thus, an eschatological proviso must qualify all our assertions, lest triumphalism lead to forgetfulness of the cross. Even in the light of biblical revelation, we walk by faith, not by sight. This faith risks the hope that YHWH is a God of both the living and the dead who does not abandon anyone in their defeat. Without this hope the whole Christian project falls flat. "For discourse about God is either about a vision and promise of universal justice, touching even the sufferings of the past," Metz writes, "or it is empty and void of promise, even for those alive today."

The presence of the living God in the cross and resurrection of Jesus interpreted in this global-historical perspective awakens a daring kind of hope. This in turn has a wholly social significance, stimulating solidarity with all who suffer now in this world and inspiring participation in the divine work of bringing life where degradation and suffering grind people down. Against weariness, discouragement, and the desire to forget, those who follow Jesus are moved to act continuously and responsibly with practical and critical intent. Resisting what damages people, they set about working without violence or hatred for a world of goodness and grace even in the teeth of contrary forces.

Furthering this theological approach, each of the aforementioned trio of Germans contributed a distinctive idea that fleshes out the idea of the God of pathos surfacing in post-Holocaust political theology.

THE CRUCIFIED GOD

Christian reflection has always held that there is a real sense in which the cross reveals a crucified God. Insofar as Jesus who is crucified is the Word incarnate, his suffering is the suffering of God with us. But this same theology also traditionally holds that the Word of God suffered only in his human nature, the divine nature being infinitely beyond such passion. Moltmann pushes beyond this limitation to locate suffering in the very being of

God. Pressing Luther's bold phrase newly into service, he proposes the idea of "the crucified God," which entails that God really suffers with all who suffer in this world. To explain this he composes a midrash, an imaginative gloss, on the event of the crucifixion.

To begin with, he proposes, we need to understand that the being of God is self-giving love. The event where this love most profoundly showed itself is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The kernel of theological significance in this event lies in the riveting, appalling, unforgettable cry of Jesus on the cross, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matt 27:46). How should we think about God from the godforsakenness of the cross? Rather than explaining this away, we should hear it literally. This terrible cry reveals that on the cross something is going on between God and God. Handed over by his Father for the sake of sinners, the Son is rejected and actually abandoned by God. He suffers violence and dies a godforsaken death.

Moltmann dares a further step. While his Son is dying on the cross, God the Father suffers too, but not in the same way. The Father suffers the loss of his Son, experiencing infinite grief. There is total separation between them; they are lost to each other. At the same time, however, they have never been so close. They are united in a deep community of will, each willing to do this for love of the world. As a result, the Holy Spirit who is love, the Spirit of their mutual love, flows out into the broken, sinful world. Their Spirit justifies the godless, rescues the abandoned, befriends the lonely, fills the forsaken with love, brings the dead alive, and guarantees that no one will ever again die godforsaken because Christ is already there in the depths of abandonment.

The cross opens up a great fissure in God's own being, the Father abandoning, the Son being abandoned. In so doing, the cross not only plunges God deep into the suffering of the world. It also opens a reverse pathway on which suffering travels back into God, there to be redeemed. "Only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God's own self, is community with this God eternal salvation," Moltmann writes. The whole uproar of history with all of its dilemmas and its despairs continues to enter into divine being through the pathway of the cross, there to be redeemed into the joyful future which God alone can open up.

A few caveats are needed to make this midrash work. God truly suffers, but this is not the same kind of suffering that humans experience. In our case suffering comes upon us as a result of our finite deficiencies. We are overtaken by suffering as though by an alien force; it descends unasked, and we bear it under constraint. By contrast, suffering does not come upon God by necessity or by chance. The crucified God freely chooses to suffer with us, and does so actively out of the fullness of love. It is this suffering love in the midst of history that bears the world toward the fullness of resurrected life. The cross reveals God's inner nature to be the trinitarian event of self-giving love capable of suffering, thereby releasing the Spirit who fills all creation with life. Every time we make the sign of the cross while reciting the names of the trinitarian persons we testify to this truth.

The Holocaust was never far from Moltmann's mind as he worked out this thesis. Here the theology of the suffering God receives its deepest significance: "there cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon." In no way does this mean that the death camps can be justified. To the contrary, in relationship with the God of pathos we become compassionate resisters to all that desecrates and violates human beings. Far from inducing political passivity, in the end it is only the cross itself that seems able to bear up our active hope, so liable to drown in sorrow. With the resurrection of the gassed, the murdered, and the dead, God will turn this sorrow into eternal joy. Sustained by this hope, our desire to work for a better world flickers on. "God in Auschwitz and Auschwitz in the crucified God—that is the basis for a real hope which both embraces and overcomes the world, and the ground for a love which is stronger than death and can sustain death."

THE SILENT CRY

The relation of God to the mystery of suffering takes on a distinctly different cast in Soelle's work. While supporting the symbol of the suffering God, she is critical of Moltmann's narrative midrash. Yes, as opposed to the tradition of the a-pathic God and the concomitant ideal of a human life without tears, it is right to emphasize that God became poor, suffering, and defense-

less on the cross out of love. But the idea that Jesus was deliberately handed over and abandoned by his Father to the fate of death is intolerable. When you think about it, what kind of Father is this? A sadist. Even Abraham drew back from killing his own son. This construal of the cross blames the Father for what in fact was done to Jesus by the history of human injustice. It schools people in patterns of thought that regard sadistic behavior as legitimate. When translated into spirituality, it encourages them to worship the executioner.

In crafting a way forward, Soelle argues that the suffering of the cross is not a sado-masochistic symbol of the relationship between Father and Son. Still, the antagonistic nature of reality means that suffering in this world is real. Against our cultural apathy we need to face it, articulate it, learn from it, and indict it. In this context, the cross shows that God is always suffering with the one who is suffering. We are called to join God there, to leave sadness and despair behind in serving the cause of life. Then the theodicy question becomes superseded in the mystical-resistance pattern of our lives of love.

Soelle makes a major contribution to the question of suffering with her work on divine power. Her journey through three theological positions offers a unique look at the possibilities: she went from classical theism's omnipotent Father who requires obedience, to the powerless God on the cross who models the impotence of love, to the crucified and risen Christ in whom the divine victory of life over death empowers our own participation in God's power of life.

First, in view of tradition's presentation of the omnipotent God, she queries why it is that the church encourages human beings to love and honor a God whose most important attribute is power, whose prime act is to subjugate, whose greatest fear is independence. This outsized father figure is really no more than a projection of men's fantasy of domination. It is imperialism writ large. Her wartime experience comes into play: "What comes to my mind when I think of male power? Yelling, giving orders, shooting . . . ." Submission and obedience to such a God destroys our potential as human beings to grow, be creative, take initiative. Speaking as a German after Nazism, Soelle maintains that far from being a virtue, obedience itself is a huge problem.

So she next curtailed omnipotence in her idea of God in order to

emphasize the idea of selfless love. The cross stands at the center of this view. The Christian assumption that we recognize God most clearly in the figure of someone tortured to death goes completely against our fixation on power and domination. Shown in the gospels to be the man for others, Jesus has only his love. This leads him to die powerless on the cross, with no armies, no magic tricks to rescue him. His love is a nonviolent, weaponless power, and we are saved by loving in the same powerless way. Soon, however, this understanding of the cross in the language of powerless love raised problems of its own. For one thing, it can lead to a terrible passivity in the face of the world's suffering. For another, it does not tell the whole story. Christians believe in the resurrection too, which if it is anything is an event of God's power.

So Soelle kept thinking. She came finally to the realization that rather than being a dominating force or an ineffective form of love, divine power is a creative, noncompelling, life-giving good. This is power that flows through relationships bringing others to life, power as love. A homely analogy would be the power of the grass pushing up through cracks in the asphalt, a surge of life. In raising Jesus from the dead, God acted creatively and typically with this power. This was not a one-time act that gifted Jesus with a personal privilege for himself alone. It contains within itself hope for all, for everything, even the dead. "In this sense the resurrection of Christ is a tremendous distribution of power. The women who were the first to experience it were given a share in the power of life. It was the tremendous certainty of God that now entered their life," and their witness triggered the flow of this confidence in others. Divine power, then, is the silent cry of life in the midst of suffering.

None of this Christian theologizing is meant to remove the terror of the Holocaust of the Jews: "No heaven can justify Auschwitz." But the God who shared in the suffering and death of the cross and brought the power of life to bear in the resurrection of Jesus Christ was there, suffering in the death camps. Language about the suffering God who raises the dead to life is language about the power of God that seeks justice on behalf of those defrauded of their lives. Loving this God, sharing in the divine power to create life, gives us the possibility of a meaningful life of dedication to justice for others. And here, for Soelle, is the point: we can know God's love only when we become a part of it ourselves. We can know the God of compassion

only in committed resistance to every form of unjust suffering inflicted on others.

PASSION FOR GOD

Metz parts company with Moltmann and Soelle in thinking that the symbol of a suffering God would help. This symbol, he thinks, offers too easy an answer. Among other problems, it eternalizes suffering by placing it in God; it gives suffering a certain splendor, making it secretly beautiful; it sneaks past the radical dissonance between God and suffering, reconciling them too smoothly; soothing our questions, it discharges the tension set up by the cries of the victims. In truth, there is no appropriate symbol, no tidy answer. Instead, theology should protect the radical question of suffering, clear a space for it, shelter it so it might continue to cry out in history and irritate our thought. Toward that end, Metz proposes two intertwined steps: remembering and lamenting unto God.

Remembering

"*Do this in remembrance of me.*" At the center of Christian life is the memory of the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This becomes obvious in every eucharistic liturgy, where the central act recalls Jesus' self-giving the night before he died, a remembering that makes this self-giving present again through sacramental bread and wine. The primacy of the memory of the passion in christology and liturgy indicates that the kind of reasoning theology needs to use on the problem of suffering is not transcendental, the approach Metz learned from his teacher Rahner, but reasoning guided by narrative memory and solidarity. Metz introduces the category of "danger" to explore the dynamism at work here. Given Jesus Christ's solidarity with all of humanity, the pivotal act of remembering his death and resurrection brings in its wake the memory of all who suffer unjustly in history. Crosses keep on being set up in the world; the cry of abandonment echoes down through the centuries. To be faithful, theology remembers the cross of Jesus in solidarity with all the dead and those who suffer now in our world. Given that the crucified one is risen, remembering entails burning hope for their future.

Why is this dangerous? Breaking through our amnesia, remembering the victims has a double effect. First, by keeping alive their story against the inclination of tyrants to bury it, it robs the masters of their victory. History is written by the victors, who strut about as if the dead over whom they climbed did not count. But memory keeps the reality of their lives alive, in protest against their defeat and in commitment to their unfinished agenda. Second, by connecting their story with that of Jesus, memory awakens the realization that each one of them is precious, galvanizing hope that in God's good time they too will be justified. What there is at present, the victory of those who murder and harm, is not the last word. And so is set up a social counterforce to apathy; we do not act as if we were defeated by evil.

It is not accidental that in Metz's theology the practice of dangerous memory bests Marxism. Ascendant in European academic circles at the time, Marxist philosophy was content to forget the dead and leave their sufferings unrequited in the march of progress toward happiness for others. However, "ultimately no prosperity of the descendants can make up for the suffering of ancestors, and no amount of social progress can reconcile the injustice which befell the dead." Only universal justice, which is the final gift of God, can heal and save. Obviously, then, this is not a nostalgic kind of memory, but memory with the seed of the future in it. The dangerous memory of past suffering stimulates a hope for the future for all the defeated and the dead. In fact, Christians can risk looking into this abyss of pain precisely because they believe in God's eschatological promise. On the strength of this promise, dangerous remembering challenges modern society which tries to anesthetize people against the sufferings of others with a culture of consumerism, happy optimism, and breathtaking banality that irons all sympathy flat. In place of this trite form of life, it impels people of faith to a meaningful life through action that resists unjust, domineering actions that are creating a new generation of victims.

Lamenting

Dangerously remembering the dead in solidarity with their suffering and hope of future blessing needs to be accompanied by a mysticism of lamenting unto God. There is no positive meaning in unjust radical suffering that destroys persons. We must take the full measure of its negativity, refuse to

ignore or spiritualize or glorify it. Then this affliction becomes a live question that must be addressed to God. In prayer we cry out, protest, lament, shout indignation, say this should not be. In its own way this prayer is a "suffering unto God," an active engagement with God uttered in anguished hope that there will be an answer. Rather than settle for neat theoretical solutions, it keeps the question open, living with the "not yet" of history while insisting on the promise of God.

Unfortunately this type of prayer has been excised from contemporary liturgical texts. One never laments or cries out in anguish during standard Eucharists. Such lamenting, however, fills the Bible in psalms and prophetic texts, wisdom writings and gospels. Metz finds the story of Job to be one of the best guides. Suffering an avalanche of troubles, his children dead, business ruined, body diseased, Job receives a visit from three friends. They mouth the standard explanation that his affliction is a punishment for sin and urge him to admit it so God will relent. Job refuses. Instead, he protests his innocence unto God. Over and over he presses his question why, insisting that God should answer, all the while clinging to the hope that he would be redeemed. Metz underscores the amazing point that in the end God affirms that it is Job, not his friends, who spoke rightly of God (42:7). It is no accident that Jesus' God-mysticism as heard in his final cry "*Why . . . ?*" is also part of this tradition. So too, suffering of past and present must drive us toward God protesting, complaining, lamenting, grieving, crying out of the depths, insistently questioning "*How long, O Lord?*" Rather than settling for rational explanations, lamenting unto God, unto *God* in spite of everything, keeps hope alive. Such prayer has the capacity to nurture ongoing resistance to the victimization of others, past and present.

Mystical and practical, Christian life then becomes a passion for God that encompasses the suffering, the passion, of others, committing people to resistance against injustice for the living in hope of universal justice even for the dead. The mystery of iniquity is not thereby resolved. Theological reasoning remains unreconciled to the surd of evil. It keeps on judging: this should not be. But God is love and has promised to prove it. The dangerous memory of the crucified and risen Jesus in solidarity with all the dead keeps the question open while laying down a hopeful, compassionate path for mature discipleship. Thus has Metz proposed that we speak of God with our face rather than our back turned to the terrible event of Auschwitz.

MYSTICAL-POLITICAL DISCIPLESHIP

The world is brittle, fragmentary, obscure, discordant, and opaque—in a word, sinful. The Holocaust and all other acts past and present that allow evil full play send the presence of God into eclipse. Peoples' lives become a hell. There is no logical or theological answer to the mystery of this suffering but there is a mystical-political way to live that goes on opening a pathway through the history of suffering. People can decide to oppose these wrongs in the public sphere, to practice justice and kindness, to aim at beauty and a full table of life's good for all. Within the anguished human context this brings a kind of meaning.

Post-Holocaust European political theology blazed a trail in this direction. The massive, unjust suffering of the Shoah broke into Christianity's usual way of thinking, shattering its received tradition and precipitating a religious crisis. The trio of theologians described here, among others, understood that this catastrophe belongs to the inner situation of Christian discourse about God. Starting with Auschwitz in particular and then widening their concern to the whole history of suffering, they formulated the God-question in its most contested form: from the perspective of those vanquished by unjust suffering. Agreed that even religion cannot answer the question, they pioneered a pattern of thinking and acting that honors the mystery of God in memory and hope. Whether one adopts the symbol of the crucified God, or the silent cry of life, or the compassionate God of promise to whom one laments, their work brings divine presence indelibly into the darkness of suffering that cries to heaven.

FOR FURTHER READING

There is no better introduction into the suffering of the Holocaust than the testimony by the young survivor, later Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986; originally 1960). Jewish religious responses to the Holocaust are clearly laid out in Dan Cohn Sherbok, *Holocaust Theology* (London: Lamp Press, 1989). Christian wrestlings with the issue are collected in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy,

eds., *Holocaust as Interruption* (*Concilium* vol. 175; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984); and Steven Jacobs, ed. *Contemporary Christian Religious Responses to the Shoah* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993).

Abraham Heschel's influential discussion of the biblical God of pathos can be found in *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

The trio of German theologians discussed in this chapter have all published many books. The best place to begin reading their theology is with the single works enumerated here, from which the quotations in this chapter are also taken: Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), especially chapter 6; Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); and Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1998); Matthew Ashley's introductory essay "Reading Metz" (pp. 7–21) is especially illuminating.

For the history of Christian teaching on God and suffering, see John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). A strong critique of the Enlightenment theodicy project coupled with theologizing from the perspective of the victims is presented by Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991). For contemporary wrestling with the issues, see John Thiel, *God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 2002); and Jon Sobrino, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004).