

Retrieving Memory, Narrative and Solidarity as Significant Categories for Practical Theology and Christian Engagement

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Abstract: Memory, narrative and solidarity are key categories in the practical-political theologies of Johann Baptist Metz, Edward Schillebeeckx and Jürgen Moltmann. We will examine the significance of these categories for contemporary Christian praxis and the call to dialogue, especially with reference to the Church's outreach to those on the margins. Whether or not those on the margins need the Church may be a moot question. The argument here, however, is that the Church and its theology need to engage with those on the margins if they are to be authentically Christian.

The crisis in Christianity today is not primarily a crisis of the content of faith and its promises, but a crisis of subjects and institutions which do not measure up to the demands made by faith.²

Religion has been made guilty by its attempt to purchase its political innocence by not participating in the historical struggles for all people and their status as subjects.³

Introduction

What resources does Practical Theology have to bring to our topic of “Being Christian in a World with the Marginalized?” Reflecting on this question reminded me of the Political Theologies of Johann Baptist Metz, Edward Schillebeeckx and Jürgen Moltmann,⁴ in particular the manner in which their theologies focus on the

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² Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: toward a practical fundamental theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 76.

³ Metz, *Faith in History*, 71.

⁴ See, for example: J. B. Metz, *A Passion for God: the mystical-political dimension of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998); *The Emergent Church* (New York:

reality of human suffering. Learning from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School,⁵ notably Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and Theodore Adorno, political theology critiques the bourgeois subject of the European Enlightenment and develops memory, narrative and solidarity as important categories for theological engagement. The overriding questions which political theology addresses are the following: (1) Who is the human subject made in God's image and now too often debased by inhuman forces? (2) Where is God in a history flowing in the blood and silent tears of its victims?

Admittedly, the Frankfurt School and Political Theology arose in direct response to the particular failure of European 'Christian' society to raise its prophetic voices in the face of the Nazi death-camps. In the Australian situation, we may want to speak of the treatment of our Indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees and others on the margins of society. With particular focus on Christianity, Metz asks: "Has not Christianity interpreted itself . . . as a theological 'religion of conquerors' with an excess of answers and a corresponding lack of agonizing questions"?⁶ Or, again, "is there not manifest within the history of Christianity a drastic deficit in regard to political resistance and a corresponding excess of political conformity"?⁷ So, for Political Theology, we need to address the question of the nature of Christianity focusing on the categories of memory, narrative and solidarity in order to develop a theology that inspires authentic, redemptive praxis. This paper will concentrate on the practical political theology of Johann Baptist Metz.

Christianity: A Messianic or Bourgeois Religion?

Political theology recognizes that, sociologically speaking, the Christian churches in societies such as ours are predominantly middle-class enclaves. This is what Metz calls "bourgeois religion"⁸ in which the messianic future of God's reign on earth is practically eradicated and/or interpreted as confirming middle-class values and

Crossroad, 1981); *Faith in history and society: toward a practical fundamental theology*. London: Burns and Oates, 1980; Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: essays on theology, solidarity and modernity* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Edward Schillebeeckx, *The language of faith: essays on Jesus, theology and the church* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995); *Jesus in our Western Culture: mysticism, ethics and politics*. London: SCM Press, 1987; Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise! God's Future for Humanity and the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); David McLellan, ed., *Political Christianity: A reader* (London: SPCK, 1997). Schillebeeckx, Edward. *Jesus in our Western Culture: mysticism, ethics and politics*. London: SCM Press, 1987; Robert Schreier, ed. *The Schillebeeckx Reader*. New York : Crossroad, 1984.

⁵ See, for example: George Friedman, *The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1981); Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1996); Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

⁶ Metz, *Emergent Church*, 23.

⁷ Metz, *Emergent Church*, 25.

⁸ See his essay, "Messianic or Bourgeois Religion" in *Emergent Church*, 1-16.

capitalistic forces by people who already have abundant prospects and a secured future. His desire is for the Church to transform itself from a ‘bourgeois’ to a ‘messianic’ religion which is capable of hearing and responding to the *disruptive* call of the Gospel without which the disruptive call of the marginalized victims of history and society will be similarly ignored.

The messianic future proper to Christian faith does not just confirm and reinforce our preconceived bourgeois future. It does not prolong it, elevate it, or transfigure it. It *disrupts* it. ‘The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.’ The meaning of love cuts across the meaning of having. ‘Those who possess their life will lose it, and those who despise it will win it.’ This form of disruption, which breaks in from above to shatter the self-complacency of our time, has a more familiar biblical name: ‘conversion’, change of heart, *metanoia*. The direction of the turning, the path it takes, is also marked out in advance for Christians. Its name is *discipleship*. We have to remember this if the future to which faith empowers us is not to be interpreted in advance under the spell of bourgeois religion—or, in other words, if we do not want simply to substitute for the messianic future our own future, the one in which we have long since been in control.⁹

In this view, Christianity’s relative success in the Western world has come at the price of silencing the “dangerous memory of Jesus Christ” contained in the prophetic and apocalyptic voices of the Scriptures.¹⁰ As a result Christian faith has become identified with beliefs and doctrines (orthodoxy) rather than discipleship and truthful action (orthopraxis).

Christianity as a community of those who believe in Jesus Christ has, from the very beginning, not been primarily a community interpreting and arguing, but a community remembering and narrating with a practical intention—a narrative and evocative memory of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The logos of the cross and resurrection has a narrative structure.¹¹

Christian theology too tends to worship at the shrine of intellectual debate and transcendental precepts which presuppose the well-fed bourgeois subject with its liberal-humanist belief in the evolutionary history of progress. But what about those who are deprived of a fair share of our worldly resources, those for whom history is more regress than progress, more devolution than evolution? Christian theology is called to engage, above all, with those human stories of pain, negativity and suffering in light of the prophetic call of the Gospel and its apocalyptic symbols of danger and rescue. In this way, Christian theology can be a catalyst for the “messianic praxis of discipleship” that is at once “mystical and political” leading us into responsibility, “not only for what we do or fail to do, but also for what we

⁹ Metz, *Emergent Church*, 2.

¹⁰ Metz, *Faith in History*, 88ff.

¹¹ Metz, *Faith in History*, 212.

allow to happen to others in our presence, before our eyes.”¹² This call to Christian solidarity with those on the margins is not an optional extra for the Christian churches nor their theologies. Contrariwise, without this, Christian faith and theology will continue to ignore their messianic identities. They may well serve the middle classes in the promotion of bourgeois values; but their deep rootedness in the dangerous and subversive story of Jesus of Nazareth is severed.

The Bourgeois Subject and the Task of Theology

The Enlightenment seeks to relieve humanity from the burden of tradition and authority so that: the past becomes a mere object of historical enquiry, and; authority is reduced to theoretical and technical knowledge. Whereas, Marxist materialism abolished religion altogether (as part of a ‘dead past’ and ‘obsolete authority’), bourgeois capitalism controls religion by ‘privatising’ it in the interests of the market economy and a vague “evolutionary consciousness that ultimately silences history, the subject and liberation.”¹³ In this “new culture of apathy and lack of feeling,”¹⁴ traditional social values of friendliness, thankfulness, attention to the dead and mourning¹⁵ are also effectively privatised or even eradicated. The destruction of tradition and memory, far from increasing freedom and autonomy as the Enlightenment had hoped, actually results in the abstract and violent negation of human beings and the promotion of the praxis of exploitation (versus praxis of liberation).

Metz grounds his theology in the three-fold challenge of: Marxism (end of cognitive innocence); Auschwitz (end of idealist systems); Third-world (end of Eurocentrism).¹⁶ He also states that theology is to be done under the "eschatological proviso," recognizing the great distance between the world as it is and the world as God calls it to be in the name of Jesus Christ. Consequently, theology is not about elaborate systems of meaning, but methods of critique and liberation. Such theology is "dialectical," stressing identity and non-identity between God and world, present and future, liberation and salvation. Metz believes less in theory than in the power of story, symbol and metaphor to "break open" the present unsatisfactory nature of reality and to reclaim it in the promise of God and the call to Christian discipleship.

Metz calls his theology a practical-political theology of the subject. Its task is to promote the Church as the prophetic voice of Christian freedom thereby standing up for human subjects against the technocratic megamachine of society. This critical function must also be self-directed seeking to transform the present "Church of dependants" into a "Church of subjects."¹⁷ Theology needs to develop a "new

¹² Metz, *Emergent Church*, 27. This is also a major theme of his work, *A Passion for God*.

¹³ Metz, *Faith in History*, 7.

¹⁴ Metz, *Faith in History*, 6.

¹⁵ For Metz, the Eucharistic “bread of life” is intended to counter society’s forgetfulness of these values. See *Emergent Church*, 36-41.

¹⁶ See his “On the Way to a Postidealist Theology” in *A Passion for God*, 30-53.

¹⁷ See, for example, his essay, “Transforming a Dependent People” in *Emergent Church*, 82-94.

language" to enable the Church to enter into dialogue with the world of our time (though dialogue does not mean capitulation). Among the other things that theology is called upon to confront is the current failure of Christian praxis to transform the world.

Retrieving Memory, Narrative and Solidarity

This is the use of memory:
For liberation—not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

(T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* III)

The category of memory connects the Judao-Christian story to the practical idea of God reflected in biblical stories such as the Exodus-event or Jesus' call to repentance and discipleship. Such memory is not the same as reflection, reminiscence or recollection (Eliot's evening with the photograph album). Rather, the critical, liberating truth-power of memory in these biblical stories subverts our ordinary way of seeing the world and challenges us to more authentic praxis.

One thinks here, for example, of Mary's Magnificat that sings of "collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world,"¹⁸ about God protecting the weak, raising the lowly and scattering the proud-of-heart. Mary, speaking in the long tradition of Israel's women prophets (Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Judith), proclaims God's liberation for oppressed peoples everywhere. There are political overtones: God's justice includes a new social order in which the poor are empowered, the lowly uplifted, the hungry fed. Equally, its spirituality is clear: God is Saviour; God is faithful; God is merciful. In a world where cruelty and violence all too often reign, the Magnificat proclaims that God's mercy and justice will be finally victorious.

Critical and creative remembrance of who God is and calls us to be enables us to connect our Christian faith to the real misery and oppression of human lives—what Metz calls the "pathic structure of human life."¹⁹ This subversive power of memory challenges the bourgeois notion of a privatized Christian faith or religion of "inner feeling."²⁰ Christianity is primarily about social praxis and values—sorrow, melancholy, friendliness, thankfulness, joy and solidarity in suffering with others (past and present)—that transcend the narrow confines of the principle of exchange.

¹⁸ These are the words of another German theologian who was killed by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, cit. Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Your Sister* (New York & London: Continuum, 2003), 267.

¹⁹ See his essay, "The Future in the Memory of Suffering" in *Faith in History*, 100-118.

²⁰ *Faith in History*, 45.

a. Memory of Suffering

Christianity's task is to keep alive the memory of the crucified Lord as a counterpart to the deceptively weak middle-class hope which is devoid of a social and political conscience in the interests of others' sufferings. Metz's outrage against human suffering is centred on the *memoria passionis* and the symbol of Auschwitz. We must stay with the agonizing questions: can we even pray or write poetry or do theology after Auschwitz? Christian 'memoria' is linked with the imagination of a future freedom that is "nourished from the memory of suffering." There is no Easter Sunday without Good Friday. This does not deny the resurrection, but underlines the truth that the Resurrection can only be "mediated by way of the memory of suffering"²¹ including the dead and the forgotten victims of history.

b. Memory of Guilt

How do we deal with human guilt? For Metz, only Christianity can cope with the reality of guilt and human responsibility for suffering.²² Other systems (such as Marxist or humanist) seek liberation from historical forces and worldly evils through self-emancipation. Having removed God from the stage of human history, humans seek liberation through self-justification and the repression of guilt. The burden of failure and guilt is handed over to vague historical forces or a particular social class. Guilt is thereby exonerated through the art of the alibi. There are parallels here with Girard's mimetic theory, especially his notion of the 'scapegoat'.²³ For both Metz & Girard, redemption—or true liberation through Jesus Christ—becomes possible because Christ himself has taken on the totality of human sinfulness and guilt. In the praxis of following Christ in true discipleship, which requires solidarity with the sufferings of others, sin and guilt can be acknowledged in the context of divine forgiveness. Metz opines that forgiveness is only really possible for those who are capable of admitting their guilt.

Moreover, even the admission of guilt and the reality of divine forgiveness do not achieve some automatic redemption. A political theology of redemption does not walk over the victims of history with some magic whitewash that says it doesn't matter now since all are redeemed. On the contrary, it is only by entering into the sufferings of others, confronting our guilt, and hearing the voices of the dead and vanquished, that the "dangerous insights" of "past terrors and unfilled hopes" point to the possibility of redemption in the Cross of Jesus. We live, and do our theology, as Holy Saturday people ... walking toward the resurrection, yes, but with the excruciating sounds of Good Friday still ringing in our ears!

²¹ "The Future in the Memory of Suffering," 113.

²² Metz deals with this under the title: "The history of suffering as a history of guilt and the exonerating mechanism of an abstract-total emancipation" in *Faith in History*, 124-128.

²³ See, for example, René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

c. God's Remembrance

Metz is always guarding against two fallacies as he sees them: 1) collapsing redemption (God is Saviour) into emancipation (humans save themselves), and 2) taking God's promised victory over guilt and death as an already achieved reality.²⁴ Memory in God is not only the memory of the Exodus liberation but also of Israel's slavery; it is not only the memory of Jesus' resurrection, but also of his crucifixion; it is not only the memory of freedom and rescue, but also of danger and suffering. He emphasises how the memory of all past suffering is contained in the memory of God.²⁵ However, this does not excuse a retreat into mystical consolation. Rather, Christian faith contains an "apocalyptic sting," challenging new forms of social praxis lest "the God of this dangerous memory" is reduced to a utopian, escapist dream.²⁶ It is true that "God is a God of the living and dead, a God of universal justice and the resurrection of the dead."²⁷ But far from pointing to a one-dimensional process of evolutionary emancipation, the memory of God—as the memory of suffering and danger—calls Christians to enter into solidarity with the living and the dead.

d. Narrative

In brief, salvation in Jesus Christ cannot be reduced to a theological treatise. Recalling that Christians are primarily a remembering and story-telling community, the primary task of theology is to highlight the Christian narrative of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.²⁸ Theology's task is to create a new language in which the Christian story is kept alive in order to break through the stultifying non-identity of the bourgeois subject. While reason and argument have their place, we do well to recall these were not the original forms of theological expression. Rather, the Patristic theologians consciously used rhetoric and allegory to break open the Word and call their contemporaries to Christian praxis and discipleship. In this regard, Metz reminds us that salvation does not come about in as a result of some universal theology of grace, but through the praxis of discipleship. Moreover, only praxis is capable of saving the historical identity of Christianity. In this regard he states:

The crisis in Christianity today is not primarily a crisis of the content of faith and its promises, but a crisis of subjects and institutions which do not measure up to the demands made by faith.²⁹

In other language, Christian tradition and identity are not already established as it were above the heads of the actual stories of human suffering and non-identity.

²⁴ See, for example, "Redemption and Emancipation" in *Faith in History*, 119-135.

²⁵ Metz, following Moltmann, speaks of the memory of "suffering between God and God." *Faith in History*, 131f.

²⁶ See "The dangerous memory of the freedom of Jesus Christ" in *Faith in History*, 88-99.

²⁷ *Faith in History*, 74.

²⁸ See "Narrative" in *Faith in History*, 205-218.

²⁹ Metz, *Faith in History*, 76.

Metz reminds us that human consciousness is “entwined in stories” and that stories of life and suffering, as well as poetry and drama, ritual and sacrament, are capable of transforming consciousness. Whereas argumentative theology seeks to “enlarge the brain,” narrative theology is concerned with this transformation of consciousness issuing forth in practical action.

e. Solidarity

The notion of solidarity with the historical victims of violence and oppression has become an important notion in recent theology:³⁰

Solidarity is above all a category of help, support, togetherness, by which the subject, suffering acutely and threatened, can be raised up. Like memory and narrative, it is one of the fundamental definitions of a theology and a Church which aims to express its redeeming and liberating force in the history of human suffering, not above their heads and ignoring the problem of their painful non-identity.³¹

To be human is to share in the weight of suffering and guilt in which we all share and for which we have an ethical obligation to respond. This sense of human co-responsibility—what Metz calls “world-wide solidarity”³²—must take into account the totality of human history, past, present and future. The memory of suffering is not confined to the present, nor to individual consciousness. There is also collective consciousness and unconsciousness (Jung!) which includes the memory of all who have been defeated, overcome and forgotten in history. Metz links the memory of the dead with Christ’s descent into hell which, he says, is by no means mythological since “this descent, this being together with the dead on the part of the crucified Lord, points to the original liberating movement of the history of redemption.”

This “solidarity backwards” ignites a “solidarity forwards” versus a kind of exonerating mechanism by which Christians excuse themselves from liberating social praxis on the basis that Christ has already overcome sin and death. In fact, it is only through a praxis of solidarity with the defeated that one can be a disciple of Christ. The formation of Christian identity through solidarity with the poor, suffering and oppressed people of our world is both mystical and political. Metz gives the example of Ernesto Cardenal—Nicaraguan priest, poet and ‘revolutionary’:

He is no longer just the poet with compassionate thoughts and meditations; instead, he takes on Socrates’ maieutic role of guiding, helping, listening and undergoing a painful learning process himself as he speaks with the oppressed a language of suffering and hope.³³

³⁰ See “Solidarity” in *Faith in History*, 229ff.

³¹ *Faith in History*, 208.

³² See *Faith in History*, 234-236.

³³ *Emergent Church*, 100.

For Metz, Christian solidarity opposes bourgeois individualism. For this, an “anthropological revolution”³⁴ is required in which human community is discovered anew and which challenges bourgeois society and capitalist individualism. For this reason he supports the formation of base-communities and house Churches in which Christian identity is no longer formed ‘against’ others (weaker classes and countries) but ‘together’ with them. He sees such communities as catalysts for a new connection between salvation and liberation, grace and freedom, mysticism and politics.

Conclusion: To be a Christian or to do theology actually requires solidarity with those on the margins of our society and world. Here the memory and stories of suffering break through to new expressions of Christian liberating praxis without which Christian faith and theology are but empty shells. Admitting that theology needs to be mystical as well as political, any practical theology of Christian engagement will be enhanced by the resources and insights which political theology provides.

³⁴ *Emergent Church*, 42-47.