

Johann Baptist Metz: A Tribute

David Tracy

Abstract

Johann Baptist Metz' Politische Theologie hat das jüdische Verständnis von Apokalyptik in ihrem Zentrum und unterbricht damit nach Ansicht des Autors jede christliche systematische Theologie. Vielleicht gerade aufgrund der Fragmentarität der Theologie, die dieses fordert, ist Johann Baptist Metz' Theologie eine derartiger paradigmatische Veränderung, hinter der keiner zurückgehen kann.

Johann Baptist Metz has produced one of the most powerful and influential theologies of our period. Metz unites a brilliantly intuitive intelligence to a passionate ethical-political commitment. The result of this singular union is the major political theology in our time.

Metz's thought, like that of Walter Benjamin, takes several distinct forms, especially the form of the fragment. As a preferred form for thought, the anti-systematic fragment was developed by the German Romantics, especially Friedrich Schlegel, as the form needed for contemporary thought. Johann Baptist Metz is singular even unique among theologians by his frequent use of a fragmentary form for theology as practical fundamental theology.

Moreover, Metz has recovered too often forgotten fragments of theological memory, above all the memories of the victims of history – the poor, the defeated, the marginalized, the vanquished. These memories have been largely untold in the modern period by the historicist theological accounts written for and by the victors of history including the intellectual, philosophical and theological elites. Johann Baptist Metz, as a distinguished member of the theological academic elite, has not hesitated, in his daring words at times, to betray his own elite status on behalf of the marginalized victims of history – both the living and the dead. More than any other contemporary theologian Metz has retrieved the largely forgotten or, at best misremembered, histories of the victims of our history by his fidelity to the central Christian memory of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the quintessential victim of the powerful.

Some fragments of our history are highly particular fragments seen from the perspective of an individual or a group. Some of those particular perspectival fragments, once interpreted by exceptional spirits like Walter Benjamin or Johann

events (perhaps best named by the neologism frag-event) perform a twofold function. First, such fragments as events negate all totalities especially those whose closure has eliminated or, at best, marginalized the victims of history. Second, some particular fragments as events of revelation, through that act of dialectical negation open to the Infinite. Moreover, as Metz has demonstrated in the Jewish and Christian cases, the Infinite disclosed is not teleological but eschatological. Furthermore, Metz's eschatology is not the domesticated apocalyptic eschatology of so much Christian theology but the shattering apocalyptic of the Gospel of Mark. Indeed, Mark is clearly Metz's preferred biblical canonical text narrating the message, life, passion, death and resurrection of Mark's apocalyptic Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed by Christians as Jesus the Christ.

Rather than appealing to the most famous New Testament apocalyptic text, the totalizing vision of the Book of Revelation (the apocalyptic text preferred by Hans Urs von Balthasar), Johann Baptist Metz strongly prefers the more modest, more everyday apocalyptic text of Mark. Mark, after all, is the interruptive gospel text best illustrating Metz's daring thesis that religion is interruption.

The Jesus portrayed in Mark's gospel is not the sage of the gospel of John nor the more benign prophet of the gospels of Luke and Matthew. Alone among the gospels Mark is apocalyptic from beginning to end: the end is not ever entirely clear; the middle of the gospel (Mark 13) is a fierce apocalyptic interruption of the whole text; the disciples, unlike the marginalized poor in Mark's gospel, seem constantly to misunderstand the apocalyptic words, actions and passions of the eschatological Jesus. In fact, Mark's apocalyptic gospel does not present any ultimately systematic consoling vision as the apocalyptic Book of Revelation does. On the contrary Mark's gospel, like Metz's theology, hurls the reader into a demanding, unsettling interruptive portrait of the Christian apocalyptic way of life and thought grounded in the life, message, passion, death and resurrection of the unsubstitutable Jesus of Nazareth.

Metz's political theology – with its recovery of a central role for Jewish apocalyptic in Christian theology has profoundly interrupted all systematic theologies (i.e., most Christian systematic theology, even that of Metz's beloved mentor, Karl Rahner as well as Metz's own earlier systematic exercises in transcendental Thomism in *Christliche Anthropozentrik*).

Metz's ethical-political theological strength aided by the richest intuitive intelligence in contemporary theology has retrieved many forgotten or misremembered fragments of Christian history: apocalyptic, narrative, solidarity, lament towards God, modernity's temptation to amnesia and apathy, the need for all theology to be mystical-political theology.

By his unique and properly disturbing political theology Metz has challenged and enriched all theology. Johann Baptist Metz is one of these very rare theologians of whom it can be justly said: after this theology nothing can ever be the same again. May Metz's influence continue to increase as the years and theological generations continue to move forward with memory and hope.