

Letter to Johann Baptist Metz on his 90th Birthday

Jürgen Habermas

Dear much esteemed Johann Baptist Metz,

Goethe said that the burden of the years follows the years of the burden—and the affirming sense of these words of wisdom the poet wanted to give us along the way, also applies to you. You had, however, tireless, often exhausting teaching commitments in Münster and around the world, you had formative academic conversations with students and colleagues that have shaped many generations, you had passionate disputations over the correct theological understanding of dogma, contentious public discussions of the ongoing meaning of the Second Vatican Council, and also about the future of a pluralistic world church that overcomes its Eurocentrism, in short, you extended these “years of burden” far beyond the date of your Emeritus status. You also feel the burden of the years in the literal sense of physical aging as we all do—but you have made the moral sensibility for the burden of the years into your life’s theme in a completely different sense. That is, in the sense of a time-sensitive responsibility for the resulting burden of a history shared with others. The moral sensitivity to the failure to compensate for the past suffering of the innocent, a failure that cannot be put right by human strength alone, is created by words in the resonating space of the inter-subjective common ground of a divided past. You have found memorable formulae for the weak, for the restoration of the disabled power of memory. You have given generations of students first of all a language which sensitizes them to the evocative element in the remembrance of past injustice—a language which sharpens the ear for the hollow sound of a false bottom, of a false normality of forgetfulness and suppression. In this respect, our generation was able to draw on the undeserved “privilege” of a terrible contemporaneity: Auschwitz was for us in the Summer of 1945 still an overwhelming, indeed inconceivable, but palpable, recent reality from next door. Auschwitz wasn’t a cipher yet.

If you will allow me, I will take this opportunity to look from my perspective at a relationship that has a lasting meaning for me beyond the intellectual realm. It was in the early 1970’s that I first became more aware of the name Johann Baptist Metz when Helmut Peukert visited me in Starnberg and with the help of the relevant letters between Benjamin and Horkheimer constructed for me a trustworthy bridge to your thought. Peukert, one of your most senior and most important students, was at that time preparing his doctoral dissertation which would soon find international reception and great influence. This was the beginning of an interesting exchange over many years with a circle of your younger theologians, quickly reaching to

North and South America, among whom I would just mention Edmund Arens who at that time lived nearby.

Our personal contact began, if I remember correctly, with your generous commitment to Volume 1000 of *Edition Suhrkamp** and your fine contribution on “Productive Non-Contemporaneity.” At that time I understood the text as a theological variation on Bloch's theme of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, without recognizing the deeper roots in your own original thinking inspired by *Being and Time*. This changed when I followed your publications, which appeared in rapid succession in the 1980's and 1990s-- starting with *Jenseits bürgerlicher Religion. Reden über die Zukunft des Christentums*** and *Unterbrechungen: Theologisch-politische Perspektiven und Profile*-- about various stronger political interventions--up to *Zum Begriff der Neuen Politischen Theologie*. The theme of this essay collection among other things interested me—not without some worry—in a joint seminar with Eduardo Mendieta at Stoney Brook. But only the mature *Summa* of 2006 has---for me—gathered all your central motifs through the focal point of *memoria passionis*.

Over these decades there were also friendly encounters which time and again affected my wife and me, perhaps because of the differences in our denominational, regional, and social backgrounds. Even though the intellectual element had a greater weight in our relationship than the personal, something essential would have been missed: in your case the person behind the author who gives authenticity to the Old Testament tone of your writings. The personal encounters were also always instructive. I remember a visit to Litzldorf, a small community in Upper Bavaria. Periodically, during the holidays of the professor from Münster, this community came to enjoy their own priest who provided it with a Sunday church service in the small baroque church of St. Michael. When we visited you there, you, dear Dr. Metz, seemed strangely nervous; finally you revealed to us that you were about to take off for Rome. There, to you--the single theologian in the circle of intellectuals handpicked by the pope himself from around the world--would fall the honor of celebrating a Mass with the Pope. As if the theological reservations and the political differences of opinion with the Polish Pope were brushed away, what mattered was only that the aura of the office of the bishop of Rome would fall upon the joint exercise of the sacred ritual. It was then I got an idea of what “church” could mean. Since then I have come to understand, through a study of early church history during the Roman Empire, the connotations of this term, which are unfamiliar to someone raised as a Protestant.

Dear Dr. Metz, you will be more gratified by the story of a strange experience I had during the preparation of these lines. You perhaps remember that on the

*ET: *Observations on the Spiritual Situation of the Age: Contemporary German Perspectives*.

**ET: *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*.

****Memoria Passionis: Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft*.

occasion of your 70th birthday I presented a few thoughts about your provocative calling of the church back to the existential experience of early Christianity under the title “Israel or Athens: To Whom Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?”* You lamented the mistaken Hellenistic direction of theology, which translated the living faith into the sterile concepts and definitions of Greek metaphysics and thereby alienated it from its original sensitivity to suffering. I could and can understand the prophetic motive for this lament about the transformation of faith into the abstractions of theology. But our relationship is also determined by the academic division of labor between our subjects. That's why I then formulated a counter-check from the philosopher's point of view, whose point is well hidden by the dumb, polarizing title “Israel or Athens”: Today, secular thinking after Kant and Hegel owes the key fundamental concepts of practical philosophy to more than a thousand years of semantic osmosis, which took place in the course of the uninterrupted discourse about faith and knowledge. While Greek metaphysics has been uprooted as a result of this philosophical translation, essential semantic contents of biblical origin have been transformed into concepts of post-metaphysical thinking. I have been dealing with this topic for the past ten years.

When on this occasion I came across our little controversy from twenty years ago, I was surprised to realize that it was the productive challenges of your theology that pushed my thoughts in this direction.

For this, too, I would like to thank you today,

yours

Jürgen Habermas

Translated by John K. Downey

* Reprinted along with Metz's “Productive Noncontemporaneity” in Eduardo Mendieta, ed., *The Frankfurt School on Religion*.