

Johan Baptist Metz's Theology and the Theology of Liberation

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Dear Baptist, a hearty and brotherly embrace, now, as you celebrate a long and full life, ninety years in the service of theology and above all of humanity, of those who have suffered--and who still suffer today. In the following reflections you will see how your way of thinking and being has been a help to me. It is my wish that you continue to lead the way with that strength which God has given you. May God keep you in joy and vitality. For that we from El Salvador recommend to you Monsignor Romero. Here now are my reflections:

I would like to begin with a word of thanks to my friend Baptist for his many years of doing theology with *intelligence* and *compassion*. His theology pushes us towards truthfulness in the face of reality; it pushes us to give those who suffer life and to continue keeping them alive. He puts into words what our journey to God has to be, a journey to the God of Jesus who calls us to discipleship—and whom we do not know at all without discipleship. Tenacious, action-oriented, and without falling into routine, his theology insists upon never ceasing to be humane and Christian.

This is what Metz has given to many of us, especially those of us in the Third World. And he has also received inspiration and ideas from the world of our poor and suffering. For me, I notice an important convergence in method and content between his theology and that which we in Latin America have sought to develop. I would like to illustrate this with a central point.

The Primacy of Reality in Doing Theology

From the time of my first Metz lecture I remember especially an article from the year 1965: "Unbelief as a theological Problem." The sociological analysis of the situation of belief as one of the "signs of the times" had impressed me. But the way in which Metz introduced the reality of belief and unbelief especially impressed me. He described the situation as: "a general and lasting danger to belief which is not a later and external result of some historical accident, but which come from, and belongs to, its very nature."¹ This was meant to honestly introduce the reality of belief.

It might be surprising that I begin with this memory in order to analyze the convergence between Metz and us, between Political Theology and the Theology of Liberation. I remember it because I recognize in retrospect that this article on unbelief helped me to see the absolute seriousness and uncompromising nature of

¹ Johann Baptist Metz, "Unbelief as a Theological Problem," in Johann Baptist Metz, ed., *The Church and the Modern World (Fundamental Theology)*, Concilium vol. 6 (New York: Paulist Press, 1965), 59-77, 62.

his thinking, the way in which he accepts his responsibility as a theologian. It expresses the primacy of reality in his way of seeing the theological task. That seems important because concepts in theology have not only a *content* but also a *weight*. And this weight is measured by the seriousness with which reality comes to expression in the theology. To the extent of this seriousness theology makes a claim on us to take responsibility and promise springs from it. This seriousness is not simply identical with methodological rigor and intellectual integrity. It intends to bear the weight of reality, to accept that reality controls us and won't leave us in peace. And in the end reality will carry us.

The seriousness I perceived in that article from 1965 continues to impress me. It belongs to the deepest core of the theology of Johann Baptist Metz. This core is expressed most clearly in his question: "How can theology be done after Auschwitz?" As is well known this is a theme to which Metz constantly returns. This theme does not arise from a personal preoccupation, but essentially from the gravity of a monstrous reality that imposes itself constantly over and over again without leaving us in peace.

If we proceed from this seriousness about facing reality, I believe, we will better understand the essential themes of this theology. Among the most painful and those that question us most profoundly is *memoria passionis*. This isn't caprice but faithfulness to the real history without which we—in so far as we are historical beings—would cease to be real. Above all it is important to consciously keep the history of suffering alive in order not to fall into inhumanity. Facing reality is not merely a possibility raised by the theodicy questions, but a necessity. We may not stifle the question: "Why, O God, suffering?"

One of the most encouraging themes of Metz's theology is *compassion*. *Compassion* is not one practice among several works of mercy, but a natural reaction to the suffering of the other, without which there is no salvation and no human decency. Especially when the other is a victim. The suffering of others is also the reality that gives the question of hope gravity and won't allow it to be trivialized. In this sense Elie Wiesel and Metz are both saying the same thing: "Hope against hope." And for this reason, I think, theology cannot forget Auschwitz. Auschwitz is a symbol of unbearable reality, of immeasurable horror, of softly mumbled prayers and of the love and humanity of a Maximilian Kolbe.

2. "Putting a Finger in the Wound"

Let us turn now to Liberation Theology. It began without any previous planning and you might even say miraculously in that it took reality seriously. In that respect I see an important convergence with Metz. In the lapidary phrase of Don Luciano Mendes Almeida, the Brazilian bishop and Jesuit: "The Theology of Liberation has put its finger in the wound." And Medellin began to describe "the wound" in 1968.

There are many studies of the Latin American people. All of these studies describe the misery that besets large masses of human beings in all

of our countries. That misery, as a collective fact, expresses itself as injustice that cries to the heavens.²

In these words the truth of reality is expressed. Because they are *words of reality* they leave us no room for escape. They also don't need help even from Scripture, Tradition, or the Magisterium to prevail in the faith of the faithful or in the mission of the church—and in order to prove themselves as the historical and theological place for theology even before having mentioned the church and Christ. They aim unambiguously at the ultimate reality: misery and injustice. And they bring us to the end, to God, to whom they cry out, as in Exodus. And as in Exodus, Medellín's documents make their center clear: "the longing of all people for liberation from slavery."

Drawing attention to the most basic reality is intrinsic to the theology of liberation and absolutely fundamental to it. Theoretical and social mediations come after. The analyses of dependence of this theology on other theologies before it and on Vatican II comes then; and then come also the short-sighted and malevolent commentary: it's naïve, less academic on the one hand; on the other hand it is Marxist, a dead-end after the fall of the Berlin wall. . . This is not the time to analyze these mean-spirited commentaries. I only mention them in order to insist that—who ever speaks in this way has not understood the root of liberation theology: its root is the in-break of reality; concretely, it is the poor breaking through and in them God breaking through. This irruption unmasks obsolete and irrelevant theologies, it shakes up the theologian and empowers him or her to think in a way that is more human and more Christian.

It is also important that the beginning of liberation of theology is not just a "distinction" in existential, pastoral, or academic sense. Rather, it begins with being personally and intellectually touched by the in-break of the poor and being, as it were, carried away. Simply put, the theology of liberation springs from the cries of slaves which rise to heaven, from the despised and nameless campesinos and indigenous peoples. In this particular sense the theology of liberation is overwhelmed by reality. The seriousness with which it does theology is innate.

3. Compassion and Justice

Metz moved compassion into the center. Without Compassion the reality of Auschwitz cannot be fully recognized. And Metz insists on the political dimension of compassion, which may not remain merely a private action. He encouraged us to find an effective and powerful word for that which we consider central in our theological task. "Justice" was his suggestion.

² Medellín, I. Justice, trans. Gerald W. Schlabach
<http://www.geraldschlabach.net/medellin-1968-excerpts/>

As a “master of suspicion” –as well as of Theology and Christianity”-- he puts it this way: “Jesus first looked not to the sins of others, but to the suffering of others.”³ Yet, “very early on Christianity had great difficulties with the fundamental sensitivity to suffering spoken of in its message. The deeply disturbing question for the biblical traditions, the question of justice for the innocent who suffer (suffering innocent), has been all too quickly transformed and altered by the theological development of Christianity into the question of the salvation of the guilty.”⁴

Compassion is fundamental to everything else. In El Salvador, thousands of people have lived compassion in the face of victims. To defend the victims, they fought against the murderers--who then pursued and killed them. These people are martyrs. I call those martyrs who consistently practiced compassion. They have loved until the end. Some, such as Monsignor Romero, were also prophets and shepherds and so have made Jesus present for us. According to Metz it is this compassion and this Jesus, the Jesus of the Synoptics, which we need.

Conclusion

Allow me to close with a brief personal opinion about what it means to stand before this God in this world of theodicy and anthropodicy. Our stance can—or rather must—contain the following elements. The first is outrage in the face of human suffering; this outrage may be directed against that which humans do or against that which God fails to do.

The second element is the utopian moment of hope. It speaks “of God’s power to establish justice; it declares that our longing for justice is not in fact shipwrecked by death, that justice as well as love is strong than death. . . . Is such a message not to be understood as an expression of our hope? As a message which frees us to work for justice in season and out of season. As a spur which helps us to oppose structures of injustice which cry to heaven?”⁵

God has the power to maintain humanity in its hope and in the praxis of justice. God gives humankind the strength to be truthful, which makes us responsible for this terrible reality, responsible to pick it up and to carry it. God gives us the power to do justice and mercy and to walk humbly with God--in darkness and in protest, always.

Translated by John K. Downey

³ “Weltprogramm des Christentums in Pluralismus der Kulturen und Religionen: Compasion,” in J. B. Metz., *Memoria Passionis: Ein provozierendes Gedächtnis in pluralistischer Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 158-178, 163.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵ “Our Hope: A Confession of Faith for this Time,” Joint Synod of Catholic Dioceses of Federal Republic of Germany, 1975, in *Study Encounter* 12, 1 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1976): 65-87, 71. (Metz was the author of these Synod papers.)