

Theology is a Culture of Questions

John K. Downey

Abstract

Die Frage des Leidens in der Welt muss in der Theologie das zentrale Thema bleiben, wenn sie Solidarität und Verantwortung mit ihrer Vernunft vereinigen will; so interpretiert der Autor auch Johan Baptist Metz' Theologie. Die Tragödie der Familientrennung an der Grenze der USA zeigt für ihn die weiterhin zwingende Notwendigkeit dieser Politischen Theologie.

In March 1992 I interviewed Professor Metz in his office at the *Seminar für Fundamental Theologie on Johannisstraße*. I sat facing a large painting of a hare running at full speed. Professor Metz mentioned that all his theology was about God. "But you don't have any articles on God!" I blurted out. He reminded me that questioning God is a relationship to God. At its religious and intellectual core theology remains a culture of questions. And the most basic question for any theology is the question of theodicy, the question to God about human suffering.

Questions are essential. And those questions bring us to the heart of God and the cry of humankind. Human history is a history of suffering. And the person of faith will always miss God in that suffering, will ask where God has gone, or why God is not there. We have to face the reality of suffering and the shallowness of our so-called answers. We must never dissolve the troubles of theodicy through some sort of "justification of God" in face of evil and suffering. We must not allow our need for "reasons" to overcome – or to domesticate the sting of – the screams of our suffering brothers and sisters. Suffering remains something that should not be (Job). When we open our eyes, when we look beyond standard answers and confront the abysmal history of suffering in God's world, we question. How can we speak of God in such a world? Theodicy becomes not a question about God but rather a question to God. We remain in prayerful tension with God.

Sensitivity to suffering, hearing the crying out and lamentation to heaven is the first move in theology. Asking about suffering is transformative. At the same time, we are drawn to connect with others, with strangers: their suffering has a certain authority, and it places a claim on us as fellow human beings under threat. Questioning God about human suffering brings us to question ourselves as well.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan tells the story of a man who acts on his relationship to an "other." It is the story of the least likely man helping his

least favorite person. It is not just remembering one's own suffering that matters but remembering the suffering of others, even the suffering of one's enemies. Our neighbor is not just the one whom we regard as such. The universalism of our compassion is based on the universalism of human suffering. The neighbor for whom we are responsible is whoever is there: not just our kin, not just our church, not just our class or political party, not just those like us. Rather it is to be expanded outward to include any who are suffering; this is the common thread which binds us. This is story of the merciful Samaritan, who saw suffering in a hated religious and political enemy and nevertheless acted with compassion. This tentative practical solidarity is the first step into the future for which we hope and to which we are called.

The cry of the victims must be heard in the logos of theology. Reason in theology is anamnestic, not merely instrumental. This reason has an *a priori* of suffering which remembers the human being in its intellectual calculations. This memory is part of the *logos* of theology. Political theology strives for a new culture of acknowledgement, a cultural frame which recognizes the other is his or her otherness – not merely to the extent he or she mirrors us. Christian theology attends to concrete social settings, faces human suffering, sees difference and refuses to make the other invisible through domination. Here lies our common ground: in waking up and opening our eyes.¹

Theology must transform culture by injecting the face of the human person into every human enterprise. Calling attention to suffering, calling attention to the humanity of others, is the beginning of this cultural shift. It's not an easy task. Consider the recent reaction of President Trump's informal advisor Corey Lewandowski, who recently dismissed an appeal about the suffering of crying children taken from parents at the Mexican border with a sarcastic "womp, womp" to indicate his boredom with the trope of suffering.² The distaste for the different "them" over against our designated "us" is part of our neurobiology. The fight or flight response, the fear and adrenalin to the amygdala, are wired into our brains, and it is not wholly a function of higher reason taking place in the frontal cortex. But it also tells us that the connections in the brain are plastic and are affected by social context: we can rewire this socially.³ We can adjust who is a "we" and who is a "they" and so expand who matters.

We are one before the threat of unjust suffering and evil: we all face this

¹ Johann Baptist Metz, "Compassion. Zu einem Weltprogramm des Christentums im Zeitalter des Pluralismus der Religionen und Kulturen," in Johann Baptist Metz, Lothar Kuld, and Adolf Weisbrod, eds., *Compassion: Weltprogramm des Christentums* (Freiburg: Herder, 2000), pp. 9–18.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/20/business/media/corey-lewandowski-womp-womp-down-syndrome.html>

³ See Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at our Best and Worst* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

prospect. The point of solidarity is not just to remember suffering but to effect the changes needed to end it and claim our hope by joining with others. In communion we attack the erasure of human beings in the imaginary borders projected by racism, xenophobia, nationalism, and other techniques for domination and fear.

Christian hope is a form of public responsibility: We are called to live the promise of the future now. The biblical-eschatological promises are hardly private matters: freedom, peace, justice, reconciliation. Christian hope in the face of suffering is always a hope for *our* future. The point of solidarity is not just to remember suffering but to create the changes needed to end it.

Political theology grounds itself in the question of God, as all theology must. And this question turns out to be a questioning of God rooted in sensitivity to human suffering and a hope for rescue. Being human before God hinges on compassion for suffering of others. It calls for a lament, a crying out to heaven in our pain for God to be God. And in that solidarity, in that community of suffering and hope, we find hope and responsibility for each other. The questions of theodicy lead to the Samaritan's response. "Rightly understood, theological answers are of the sort that the questions and the cry are never forgotten."⁴

⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, in Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimling, eds., *Hope Against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak out on the Holocaust*, (New York, Paulist Press, 1999), p. 44.