

Passionate Theology. Desire, Passion and Politics in the Theology of J B Metz* - Part II

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ABSTRACT

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The author argues that a theory of concupiscence (desire), the subject of much of Metz's early work (during his "transcendental phase") implicitly plays a decisive role in his Political Theology. The implied concept of concupiscence is explicated with the aid of the major categories of a theory of reification as developed by Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno. The main categories of Metz's Political Theology (notably asceticism, theodicy, negative theology and praxis) are linked to the (implied) central concept of concupiscence, eventually described as the might of what is. As this might seems to be absolute, the problem of the praxis of the believer becomes acute. Metz calls for a theology that integrates into its concepts, societal, historical and cultural contexts. His notion of praxis as privation is interpreted in terms of longing and resistance.

1 ASCETICISM AS POLITICAL-THEOLOGICAL CATEGORY

1.1 The three aspects of non-identity

According to Metz the concept of God is practical. This means that theology is situated. For Metz, as a European theologian, his context is characterised by the experience of non-identity. He resolutely proposes correctives to theological designs that he suspects of too much identity. The non-identity in terms of which Metz describes his context has three aspects: the unresolved project of Enlightenment; the catastrophe of Auschwitz; and the problem of the relationship of the First and Third Worlds (Metz 1992b:10). These "interruptions" of identity are inseparable. The problems confronting theology in them can all be traced to the central problem of the inability of Western "spirit" to perceive the other. This goes hand in hand with the inability to live with non-identity.

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The problem of the unresolved Enlightenment is a problem of the subject. The crisis of the subject exists in that which is presupposed as Metz's definition of concupiscence: the might of the "system", of the sedimentation/reification of the historical-social world. This renders powerless the usual theological strategy of "witnessing", of establishing a new truth (see Jaspers 1948:9-11). The praxis of interruption, which Metz (1981:31-32) implicitly places within the context of Pneumatology, is primarily the praxis of remembrance. Metz (1977a) formulated his original memoria-thesis before his exposure to Benjamin, but his later characterisation of theological reason, as having a memory-structure, is especially the latter's influence. The Jewish thinker Benjamin helped Metz to rediscover the Jewish roots of Christian theology. He discovered the eclipse by Hellenism of the Jewish legacy in Christian theology (Metz 1989). This discovery results in the revision of the original secularisation thesis. He still maintains that Modernity is the result of the "spirit" of Christianity, but now explains the "dialectic of Enlightenment" in terms of the Greek "spirit" suppressing the Jewish "spirit". The result is a lack of time consciousness in Western reason. A rediscovery and appropriation of the Jewish roots of Modernity will lead to insight into the memory structure of reason. Memory is dangerous, as it refuses to forget those in history who have been silenced. Dangerous memory implies "thinking the other" in the mode of remembrance, remembering the other that has been invalidated by a reason incapable of enduring non-identity.

"Thinking the other" in this sense, in the mode of remembrance, commemorates in the first place the experience of suffering of the victims of the violence of identification. And this goes hand in hand with "thinking God". The concept of God, as a practical thought, has the structure of memory, of thinking in the mode of remembrance. The experience of the other that happens in suffering negatively mediates knowledge of God. Adorno (1970:103) has called it "inverse theology", describing his and Benjamin's theology. Benjamin and Adorno investigate that which has remained behind, has been cast aside, in the journey of reason towards identity. Memory for Metz (1991a) means the remembrance of that which has been forgotten in every successful objectification that has resulted in the present life world. Inverse theology does not speak positively of God in terms of wholeness and salvation. It speaks about life on earth with its painful contradictions. In doing so it speaks inversely about God in the mode of longing, while it resists every meaning system, any memory-less metaphysics of salvation, which can proclaim salvation only if those are

forgotten who have been squashed by the violence needed to produce such “wholeness”.

What praxis could change the world? One of the variations of this question is: what praxis would be able to break Eurocentrism?

1.2 The two polycentrism-theses

Metz’s (1983) first polycentrism-thesis registers the fact that the church was in a process of transition from a mono-centric European church to a polycentric world church (see Kaufmann & Metz 1987). The experience of non-identity is here the loss of ethnic-cultural innocence. This experience concerns the very essence of the church, as the perception of the other as other relied on the church in the Third World, and its vision of the unity of liberation and salvation, to give back to the European church that which it originally understood, but lost, the “specifically Christian”.

The important change that occurred in Metz’s thinking between his first and his second polycentrism theses, is that he ceased to expect the Third World church to spearhead the change and to inspire the European church to reform. He came to see that Europe would have to change, for the sake of the Third World. He follows Hans Enzensberger who formulated the thesis: “Eurocentrism against our will” (quoted in Kaufmann & Metz 1987:116 note 2). Metz (1992b:15) reformulates this as: “Eurocentrism for the sake of the other”.

The second polycentrism-thesis (formulated in 1987) argues that, firstly, a pure or naked Christianity does not exist, one that can be clothed with either European or Asian or African clothes. European culture belongs fundamentally to Christianity as it has been assimilated from Jewish and Greek-Hellenistic traditions. This thesis begs the question: how is a polycentric world church possible on this basis? Metz answers by referring to two basic tenets of the Biblical legacy in European culture: freedom and justice for all, and acknowledging the other in their otherness. The second leg of the second thesis is the observation that “the one world” coming into existence is indeed dominated by Europe, or Western capitalism. Second generation colonialism is proceeding at lightning speed, and the colonised apparently do not have the wish to resist, as it is presented as progress, and nobody wants to be left behind. The problem is thus thrown back on the Europeans, and Metz asks: “Wie aber sieht es bei uns aus?” (Kaufmann & Metz 1987:130).

1.3 The culture of the West

What does it look like in the West, in civil society? The political culture is one that ought to be characterised by freedom and justice for all. But freedom is threatened by an economic system based on consumption and exchange, and technological progress. The principle of exchange has colonised the soul of Western society, and has come to regulate interpersonal relationships. Justice for all is threatened by a new kind of privatisation. Although more information about poverty and disease is available than ever before, the step from knowledge to action has become greater than ever.

The church cannot continue to believe the myth of innocence because it does not merely have a Third World church, but is this church. Concrete history has been taken up in the confession of the church (“suffered under Pontius Pilate”). It is a history of guilt. No myth can restore innocence lost through history. The church is not a moral institution, but a proclaimer of hope. Even in situations of extreme powerlessness, the church must retain her standards of responsibility and solidarity (Metz 1991c:208).

And yet, the church has been compromised by participating in the anthropology of domination. The conditions of this participation is ultimately what is addressed in the concept concupiscence, if my hypothesis holds that Metz is still speaking about the same after dropping the term. For Metz an identity based on the anthropology of domination becomes second nature, and how do you jump over your own shadow? It should be possible, for “second” nature is not the first, although it presents itself as such. Its “normality”, its permanence, is pretence, a fiction. It should be possible, but how? The veiling of the history of becoming of the present results from the cunning of reason. Edward Said speaks of the air of normality pervading all the places of colonisation. This normality, according to Said (1980:77-78), is grounded on an “idea, which dignifies pure force with arguments drawn from science, morality, ethics, and a general philosophy”. What basis does Metz propose for a new culture of acknowledging the other as other, for that is what a jump over the Western shadow boils down to?

Metz remains committed to reason. But he advocates a restoration to reason of its original Hebrew half, according to which “to think” means “to remember”. Note: not memory of eternal ideas as in Plato, but memory that confronts progressive consciousness with the systematically forgotten laments and accusations of history. To lament, to cry, as Israel had done in Egypt, and subsequently again and again in the songs of lament, presupposes the imagining of something different. The charge is against God whose work

the present form of existence is. The charge expresses the refusal to except that there is any necessity in the way things are, that God is either powerless or cruel. Both, lament and charge, refuse the divinity of what is (see Metz 1994a, 1994b, 1976b).

1.4 The praxis of the God concept

How is the other linked to God as the absolute other? Metz's concept of God can be studied in the document "Unsere Hoffnung" (1976b), a confession of faith accepted by the Synod of the Bishops of the German Catholic Church in 1975. Metz must be presupposed as the author of much of the confession. In this document a distinction is made between longing and need. Christian hope resists a system that operates according to satisfaction of needs. Hope gives expression to a longing that cannot be stilled by need satisfaction. God is the "Woraufhin", that which is anticipated in longing, and the other of society as the "Woraufhin" of the needs of its members, according to the regulating principle of trade, which is based in the ongoing creation of needs. The name of God addressed in prayer, represents the attitude of enduring the contradiction of life and resisting their idealistic reconciliation. Hope in God gives the courage to break with civil religion that is completely adapted to the mechanisms of need satisfaction of civil society. Metz (1991b) describes the longing for God as the absolute other (of the dominating system) with the term "Gottespassion": passion for God, *and* God's passion. In this term passion as longing crosses passion as suffering.

Metz describes the history of suffering as a history of prayer. Both are universal. A passionate question is directed to God. Longing becomes prayer. God is invoked in the midst of the experience of godlessness. Such prayers accuse God. The intensity of the accusation against God for apparently having no interest in the fate of the sufferer, equals the intensity of a holding to God. One may use Westermann's (1978:151) expression to interpret Metz: in prayer one holds to God against God. Metz says the inverse relation between desire and suffering is also to be found in the faith of Jesus, who radicalises the tradition. Jesus calls to the Father in the midst of total godforsakenness (Metz & Rahner 1977:21). The intensity of his suffering points inversely to the intensity of his appropriation of God as Father. That which Metz, in his transcendental phase, has said about the integrity of Jesus, can be applied to the Christology of his Political Theology: Jesus transforms his total surrender to the other, the alien, into an expression of his total surrender to God as the absolute other.

The opposite of integrity, described in the term concupiscence, exists within the framework of civil society in participating in the logic of the

market with its totalising tendency, according to which the principle of trade becomes the basis of all relationships. The market promises wholeness without freedom, by enslaving people to needs. Integrity within the context of civil society would entail enduring the contradictions in resistance to the adaptation of peoples' longing to their needs. The affirmation of difference, of another God intended in longing, affirms another self and another world (society). Metz views Jesus' passion as his access to God. He speaks of Jesus' "Leiden an Gott" (suffering *unto* God - in the translation favoured by Ashley (1998:122) that expresses one of the dimensions of Metz's concept; the other dimension can best be rendered by "suffering from" as in "suffering from a disease") as opposed to the theories of "suffering in God". These theories describe the omnipotence of God as the power of his love. To Metz this means that the love of God, always linked to his omnipotence, is never exposed to failure. Metz is constantly on guard against the cunning of reason that can change theology in the supplest of ways into an ideology of triumph. "Suffering unto/from God" means affirming God in the midst of godforsakenness. The God affirmed is different still from our most intense wishes, more than the answer to all our questions. God is anthropologically irreducible (Metz 1990:103-118; 1981:26; 1987:18).

1.5 Theodicy

The third aspect of the experience of non-identity characterising Metz's context, has to do with theodicy, which, according to Metz (1990:118), is the adequate form of theology. This view is based in his discovery of the qualification "after Auschwitz" as the most important characterisation of his theological enterprise (Metz 1990:103). The new Political Theology wants to make the cries of the victims of the holocaust unforgettable in German theology (1992b:11-13). Auschwitz confronts theology with the question how there can be any talk of God at all in the face of the history of suffering. Political Theology as theodicy does not want to answer this question, but wants to keep on asking it – as a question directed to God (Metz 1990:104-105). At the same time it simultaneously works out a concept of expectation that reckons with the end of time. God is expected to justify himself in his own time – any time now. This concept of expectation goes hand in hand with a hermeneutics of danger (Metz 1984:17-19; see Benjamin 1965:82). Only those who expose themselves to the danger of following Christ – who follow Jesus as he goes into the world, to all the places where God is not, according to the dominant logic, will also long intensely for the coming of the Kingdom. To follow Jesus is not possible without an apocalyptic concept of time – time as having an end (Metz 1984:20-23). Following Jesus implies

exposure to the suffering that intensifies the longing for the coming, for Christians the second coming. It implies an urgent prayer: “Come!” In Metz (1994b:307) the “second coming” belongs in the centre of Christology. He puts the question about God as an apocalyptic “what take you so long, God?” (Metz 1990:106-107).

Metz’s formulation of theology as a question posed to God, an appeal lodged (“Come!”), confronts one with the problem of the relationship between sin and suffering. Salvation is more than forgiveness of sins, and the “peace” that Christians often have with the world (in the midst of raging conflicts and contradictions) can be traced back to Paul’s identification of sin and suffering that resulted in the substitution of the Old Testament lament in the liturgy with the Christian confession of sins (Westermann 1978:150-15). The forgiveness given to those who confess their sins equals the reestablishment of peace with God, and nobody complains any further about the condition of the world. Metz’s (1990:107-110) culprit is not Paul, but Augustine. He fought so hard against Marcion that his justification of God in the face of the suffering in the world culminates in a concept of freedom that ascribes total autonomy to human beings. The most terrible suffering is ultimately linked to human sin. It becomes possible to reconcile with God behind the backs of anonymous innocent sufferers. That is why theodicy leads to modern atheism. Augustine’s doctrine of sin that over-taxes human beings is also responsible for the reaction of presumed innocence that characterises the modern history of emancipation. This renders true freedom impossible. The lament as accusation of God, in which God’s justice is demanded, comes to naught in both Christian theology and the progress thinking of Modernity. The latter shuns guilt and suffering.

Against the background of this loss one begins to understand what Metz (1990:112) means with his concept of an ascetic form of knowledge and a culture of enduring loss.

In Benjamin (1965:72) the power exerted by society over the people that live in it is a power like fate. People can in no way remain innocent in this situation. One is as it were first condemned before you become guilty. Metz’s fairly recent discovery of Augustine’s theodicy must be linked to this insight of Benjamin. For Political Theology, all theological concepts are to be concretised by contextualising them in history and society. This also applies to the concepts sin, guilt, salvation and conversion. Metz originally understood concupiscence in terms of a person’s (as a body-spirit unity) being always already guilty, because of his or her participation in the world that has been negatively stamped by Adam’s deed. He understood Adam’s

negative existential in terms of the power of the past over the present. In Political Theology the past becomes history and the present becomes society. The power of the negative existential is the power of the present, of what is. By criticising Augustine's theodicy, Metz accounts for the power of society over the individual. A super-human power is implied in the inexpressible suffering in the world. The memory of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, concentrated in the cross, feeds resistance against accepting the super-human power as the power of what is. Consequently God is persistently confronted with the suffering, in the faith, the faith as hope. That what is, is not all. The other of what is, is being missed in this faithful hope and presupposed as such.

1.6 A culture of privation

Metz (1990:113) describes Israel's as an ascetic culture, based in "missing" as a mode of knowledge. Israel is capable of God because of its incapability to find solace in myths and ideas. Its "poverty of spirit" is the vulnerability in the face of the terrors and disasters of reality. Israel's "ability for God" is its ability to miss God. Israel misses God, while persevering passionately in longing for God. Metz (1994b:305) himself, since his experiences in the Second World War when he was sixteen, has always missed God: "I have in my life to a certain extent always missed God, that I must concede. He was never so clearly before my eyes as the language of theology mostly insinuates" (my translation). Metz poses his experience of the eclipse of God (that he later linked with Auschwitz) against the whole of the Western metaphysical tradition of onto-theology, in which the being of God (as pure actuality) is thought in terms of permanent presence. The praxis of longing is the praxis of the absent God.

Privation as a form of knowledge is at home in the traditions of negative theology. Metz, as can be expected, does not take over negative theology in its classical neo-Platonic guise. His negative theology is also rooted in mysticism, but with him it is political mysticism. His concept of negative theology correlates with his concept of concupiscence, and is the consequence of a negative anthropology (Machovec, Metz & Rahner 1968). The experience of the *Deus absconditus* goes hand in hand with the experience of the *homo absconditus* (Metz & Rendtorff 1971:14). Negative theology offers radical, sustained and, as far as Metz is concerned, the only realistic acceptance of the perpetual self-alienation of human beings (Machovec, Metz & Rahner 1968:299). Each effort to fit and completely integrate a human person into a system is self-manipulation. The cunning of reason in the service of human self-realisation at the cost of being humane

compromises all positive theology and anthropology. The basis of Metz's (1976c) concept of negative theology is negative dialectics. On the basis of negative dialectics Metz links negative theology with the Modern history of emancipation. This history becomes second nature as a result of its prevailing concept of time – time without end. Metz (1977a:150-155) associates God with time that has been limited, the interruption of the continuity, the end of what is, and as such with the absolute other.

The proleptic illumination of the totally other in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus does have a place in Metz's theology, but the negative is not abolished by it. Metz manages to uphold both the proleptic structure of eschatology and theology as negative through his concept of experience. He refers to Mary, who cried because they took her Lord away (Jn 20:13). The resurrection and the experience thereof do not happen simultaneously. Metz asks: who experiences Easter? There is a condition: poverty of spirit. Life soon returned to normal after Jesus' death. Nobody, so it seems, has lost anything through his death. Only Mary has become utterly poor. She has lost her footing, her ground. According to Metz, such poverty forces Jesus to show. He appears to those who want to see him, who have nothing left if he should be gone. God shows himself to those who miss him (Kamphaus, Metz & Zenger 1976:19-24).

Luke 17:33 is quoted by Metz in support of his argument that "poverty of spirit" was a positive characteristic of Christian identity (Kamphaus, Metz & Zenger 1976:19-24; Metz 1976b:92). He refers to an old tradition according to which the very poverty of Jesus allows him to deceive death. Easter, resurrection, goes hand in hand with sharing in Jesus' poverty. Metz links privation as a form of knowing, and the culture that should result from it, with the central concept poverty of spirit. The dynamics of Western civil society, however, is geared towards protecting the "spirit" like private property against disappointments and injury. Middle class Christians are afraid to stand up for the lowly, as this would entail exposure to non-identity. How must the relationship between salvation history and the genesis of society then be understood against this background?

One way of understanding this relationship would be to connect Metz's (1976a:46-47) faith in the resurrection and the concept "poverty of spirit" with the "logic of decay" as described by Benjamin (1965:95-96) and Adorno (see Rabinbach 1985:118). Resurrection is the – impossible – result of decay. The demise of existing structures must be thought together with concupiscence, here seen as absolutising self-preservation and self-

sufficiency. Messianic religion as an alternative to civil religion has to do with giving up the self. Metz describes this as transcendence and *metanoia*, conversion (Metz 1976a:52,56).

Metz's interpretation of the story of the resurrection is his theology in a nutshell. It also clarifies his view of the divinity of Jesus. Jesus endures godforsakenness. By resolutely missing God, he becomes complete expectation and therefore God comes in him. In Jesus God has come into the world, but the world, specifically in the form of civil society, did not know him, because the world is armoured against privation.

That God has become unthinkable has something to do with the fact that conversion constitutionally belongs to thinking God (Metz 1977b:123). Conversion, the "coming of God", would lead to an anthropological revolution, without analogy in the history of revolutions. This revolution, anticipated in Holy Communion, will not bring liberation from poverty and misery, but from wealth and limitless affluence; not from need, but from our consumption, through which we eventually consume ourselves; not from powerlessness, but from power; not from domination, but from being rulers; not from suffering, but from apathy; not from sin and guilt, but from our pretended innocence (Metz 1980:61). This sounds highly unlikely. It sounds impossible, as impossible as the resurrection from the dead. Messianic religion is seemingly a pact with the impossible (see Caputo 1997). This pact is reminded and celebrated in Holy Communion where suffering, love, fear, sorrow, and death are rendered visible – in the midst of a form of life based on domination and oppression.

The new Political Theology has always proceeded from the assumption that change in history is driven by the non-obvious, the "impossible", the object of our hope (Metz 1966b:313). Faith for Metz has always been the victory over that which is taken for granted, the obvious, things running their course (Becket). This victory is not the result of reconciling with things running their course (insight into necessity), but of struggling against it.

2 CONCLUSIONS

The political tendency of a Political Theology is, according to Metz, only valid if its theological tendency is in order. For Metz the difference between civil religion and messianic religion has the status of a new confessional struggle. He often uses the term "Second Reformation", something with the potential to bring about an anthropological revolution. This revolution does not concern the theological justification of a specific form of the world, and

thus relations of power, but the negation of the absoluteness of what is, and thus the ongoing demand that justice should be – for all.

Metz's unique contribution is his particular sensitivity to the spirit of the times and his ability to place theological concepts in new constellations with each other and with experience, rescuing them from the "imperial structure" (Sölle in Kuschel 1990:30) of also theological thinking. The concepts rescued by him at first appear lost cases within the discourse of Modernity: concupiscence, apocalyptic, asceticism, (original) sin, guilt, grace, conversion, God. These are the concepts that have been discarded along the way of the history of emancipation. And now that history is experienced as fate, Metz picks up these bits and pieces and transforms them by letting them speak originally to reality as experienced. In the process these concepts acquire an unheard of meaning. And yet, it might be that it is a promise in the concept itself that is activated, something that has been forgotten or repressed when the concept became meaningless as part of an authoritarian system. Metz does not always call these concepts by their names. He does not say "asceticism", but speaks in such a way of the culture of privation that the word is rescued, and what is more, becomes a saving word, a word that can contribute to rescuing human beings as subjects.

Metz has long ceased to use the word concupiscence, but describes the power of what is in such a way that it is possible to presuppose this concept. In the process the power of the existing structures is interrupted, and the concept regains the relevance that it has lost as dogma. The status quo is interrupted by a concept from an earlier time, which brings memories and energies with it that had been lost when the concept became frozen into the dominating pattern. By being rescued and placed in a constellation with other concepts, it regains meaning and potency. "Concupiscence" means the same as "Verblendungszusammenhang" (Adorno) or "continuity of the victor's history" (Benjamin), but brings with it associations and connections with other concepts (prayer, lament, sin, grace, promise, Exodus, future, Messiah) that are not part of the semantic field of the other concepts. The energy resources of humankind are limited, says Metz. He refers to the energy needed to fire the imagination. Religion comes from afar and carries in its concepts a wealth of dreams and longings. Without these concepts and the energy stored in them, it is so much easier for human beings to adapt to inhumane conditions. Metz gives an ear and a voice to the depreciated and the unfitting, as for instance the apocalyptic tradition. The imagination stored in it feeds resistance against the post-Modern myth of the eternal present. It also resists any concept of "salvation history" that has been

adapted to the time concept of eternal presence. The status quo is negated through the memory of God that has a different content than the eternally present God of the dominant order and its wish for eternity. The dangerous memory of specifically the anti-image of the cross confronts the poverty of imagination characterising our image-satiated times.

The theological tendency of Metz's theology is valid, because his passion for God is a passion for the other. The negation of what is, and the negative method that goes with it, are not goals in themselves. Negation, although it finds expression in a sigh or groan, is the point of departure for something and somebody else (Metz 1994a:392). "The other – that is me" is, in Metz's interpretation, what Jesus says in Matthew 25. Metz (1987:15) claims – correctly as I hope to have shown – that Political Theology is not politically relevant on account of selling theology out to a foreign ideology, but of trying to formulate within Christianity the memory of a messianic God.

Metz persists in telling his own story and that of his Western tradition. He does not tell this story for the sake of self-assertion, or as "great narrative" of Modernity, but for the sake of rescuing the other (Metz 1992a:311). Richard Kearney (1988:395) has pointed out, within a similar context, that responsibility is impossible without identity. Ethics presupposes a narrative identity. Metz relates the story of Western domination, of the discoveries of Columbus and Colonialism, the war and the Holocaust, of secondary Colonialism and of the one-dimensionality of the culture of consumption that destroys imaginations, as an anti-story. It is a story of non-identity, but is told for the sake of identity - a new identity that is based in the memory of what we still owe others. Kearney (1988:395) speaks of a "perpetually self-rectifying identity". This is a good description of the Christian identity of suffering that Metz (1992c:5) intends: "Whoever says 'God' reckons with the interruption of the own certainties by the fate of others". This implies the negation of the present shape of the world. The present form of society has a past, and therefore a future, too. It has become what it is, and can become something else again. The crisis of non-identity and loss of meaning as a result of the tyranny of sameness, accompanies the decay of but one possible form, albeit a very powerful one, taken on by the relationship between image and reality. The crisis is simultaneously a new opportunity for the advent of the other.

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