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Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong?

Johannes Baptist Metz on Unity amidst Multicultural Plurality

The thought of Johannes Baptist Metz fascinates me – not least because I recognize common purposes at work, albeit across a certain distance. The fact that similar problems should arise both for the theologian and for someone who adopts the philosophical position of methodological atheism is less surprising than the parallels between the answers. I would like to offer thanks to my theological contemporary by seeking to clarify the nature of these parallels.

Metz once used his own life history to illustrate that simultaneity of the non-contemporaneous which confronts us in today's multicultural, differentiated and decentred world society:

I come from an arch-Catholic small town in Bavaria. To come from such a place is to come from a long way away. It is as though one had been born not some fifty (or sixty-five) years ago, but rather somewhere on the twilit margins of the middle ages. I was forced to learn painfully what others, what 'society', had apparently discovered long ago . . . : for example, democracy as an everyday political fact, coping with a diffuse public realm, rules for the handling of conflict, even in family life, and so on. There was much that seemed strange, and which I still find disturbing.¹

Against this backdrop, Metz has always fought against a merely defensive attitude of the Catholic Church to modernity, and advocated a productive participation in the processes of the bourgeois and

post-bourgeois Enlightenment. If the biblical vision of salvation does not mean simply liberation from individual guilt, but also implies collective liberation from situations of misery and oppression (and thus contains a political as well as a mystical element), then the eschatological drive to save those who suffer unjustly connects up with those impulses towards freedom which have characterized modern European history.

But, of course, a blindness towards the dialectical character of enlightenment is just as fateful as an insensitivity towards the emancipatory potential of this history. The Enlightenment remained ignorant of the barbaric reverse side of its own mirror for too long. Its universal claims made it easy to overlook the particularistic kernel of its European origin. This immobilized, rigidified rationalism has been transformed into the stifling power of a capitalistic world civilization, which assimilates alien cultures and abandons its own traditions to oblivion. Christianity, which thought it could use this civilization as an 'innocent catalyst for the worldwide transmission of its message of hope', the Church which believed it could send out its missionaries in the wake of the European colonizers, participated unwittingly in this dialectic of disenchantment and loss of memory. This explains the diagnosis which Metz puts forward as a theologian, and the practical demand with which he confronts his Church.

The diagnosis runs as follows: A philosophical conception of reason derived from Greece has so alienated a Hellenized Christianity from its own origins in the spirit of Israel that theology has become insensitive to the outcry of suffering and the demand for universal justice (1 and 2). The demand can be formulated thus: A eurocentric Church, which sprang up on the ground of Hellenism, must transcend its monocultural self-conception and, remembering its Jewish origins, unfold into a culturally polycentric global Church.

(1) *Israel versus Athens*. Metz is tireless in defending the heritage of Israel in Christianity. 'Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew' – with this provocative statement Metz not only opposes Christian anti-Semitism, he not only confronts the *ecclesia triumphans* with its deeply problematic posture as victor in the face of a blinded and humiliated synagogue;² above all, he rebels against the apathy of a theology which was seemingly untouched by Auschwitz.³ This critique has an existential-practical thrust. But it also implies that, in pushing aside its Jewish origins, a Hellenized Christianity has cut itself off from the sources of anamnestic reason. It has itself become

one expression of an idealistic form of reason, unburdened by fate and incapable of recollection and historical remembrance. Those who regard Christianity from an 'Augustinian' perspective as a synthesis of intellect and belief, one in which the intellect comes from Athens and the belief from Israel, 'halve' the spirit of Christianity.⁴ In opposition to this division of labour between philosophical reason and religious belief, Metz insists on the rational content of the tradition of Israel; he regards the force of historical remembrance as an element of reason: "This anamnestic reason resists the forgetting, and also the forgetting of forgetting, which lies concealed in every pure historicization of the past."⁵ From this standpoint the philosophy whose roots lie in Greece appears as the guardian of *ratio*, of the powers of understanding which only become reason through their fusion with the *memoria* which dates back to Moses and his prophetic revelation. This is why a theology which returns from its Hellenistic alienation to retrieve its own origins can claim the last word against philosophy: 'it returns to the indissoluble connection between *ratio* and *memoria* (in late modern terms: the grounding of communicative reason in anamnestic reason)'.⁶

When one considers this claim from a philosophical standpoint, it is not just the grounding role of anamnestic reason which appears contestable. The picture of the philosophical tradition is flattened out too. For this tradition cannot be subsumed under the category of Platonism. In the course of its history it has absorbed essential elements of the Judaeo-Christian heritage, it has been shaken to its very roots by the legacy of Israel. Admittedly, from Augustine via Thomas to Hegel, philosophical idealism has produced syntheses which transform the God whom Job encountered into a philosophical concept of God. But the history of philosophy is not just the history of Platonism, but also of the protests against it. These protests have been raised under the sign of nominalism and empiricism, of individualism and existentialism, of negativism or historical materialism. They can be understood as so many attempts to bring the semantic potential of the notion of a history of salvation back into the universe of grounding speech. In this way practical intuitions which are fundamentally alien to ontological thought and its epistemological and linguistic transformations have penetrated into philosophy.

Metz brings these non-Greek motifs together in the *single* focus of remembrance. He understands the force of recollection in Freud's sense as the analytical force of making conscious, but above all in

Benjamin's sense as the mystical force of a retroactive reconciliation. Remembrance preserves from decay things we regard as indispensable, and yet which are now in extreme danger. This religious conception of 'salvation' certainly transcends the horizon of what philosophy can make plausible under the conditions of postmetaphysical thinking. But the concept of a saving remembrance paves the way for the disclosure of a domain of religious motives and experiences which long stood clamouring at the gates of philosophical idealism, before they were finally taken seriously, and disrupted from within a reason oriented towards the cosmos. But disruption was not the end of the story. The Greek *logos* has transformed itself on its path from the intellectual contemplation of the cosmos, via the self-reflection of the knowing subject, to a linguistically embodied reason. It is no longer fixated on our cognitive dealings with the world – on being as being, on the knowing of knowing, or the meaning of propositions which can be true or false. Rather the idea of a covenant which promises justice to the people of God, and to everyone who belongs to this people, a justice which extends through and beyond a history of suffering, has been taken up in the idea of a community tied by a special bond. The thought of such a community, which would entwine freedom and solidarity within the horizon of an undamaged intersubjectivity, has unfolded its explosive force even within philosophy. Argumentative reason has become receptive to the practical experiences of threatened identity suffered by those who exist historically.

Without this subversion of Greek metaphysics by notions of authentically Jewish and Christian origin, we could not have developed that network of specifically modern notions which come together in the thought of a reason which is both communicative and historically situated. I am referring to the concept of subjective freedom and the demand for equal respect for all – and specifically for the stranger in her distinctiveness and otherness. I am referring to the concept of autonomy, of a self-binding of the will based on moral insight, which depends on relations of mutual recognition. I am referring to the concept of socialized subjects, who are individuated by their life histories, and are simultaneously irreplaceable individuals and members of a community; such subjects can only lead a life which is genuinely their own through sharing in a common life with others. I am referring to the concept of liberation – both as an emancipation from degrading conditions and as the utopian project

of a harmonious form of life. Finally, the irruption of historical thought into philosophy has fostered insight into the limited span of human life. It has made us more aware of the narrative structure of the histories in which we are caught up, and the fateful character of the events which confront us. This awareness includes a sense of the fallibility of the human mind, and of the contingent conditions under which even our unconditional claims are raised.

The tension between the spirit of Athens and the legacy of Israel has been worked through with no less an impact in philosophy than in theology. Philosophical thought is not exhausted by the synthetic labours of idealism, an idealism which the ecclesiastically structured, pagan Christianity of the West theologized. And this means that the critique of Hellenized Christianity does not automatically apply to argumentative reason, to the impersonal reason of the philosophers as such. Anamnesis and story-telling can also provide reasons, and so drive philosophical discourse forward, even though they cannot be decisive for it. Although profane reason must remain sceptical about the mystical causality of a recollection inspired by the history of salvation, although it cannot simply accept a general promise of restitution, philosophers need not leave what Metz calls 'anamnesic reason' entirely to the theologians. This I would like to show with reference to two themes which are of particular concern to Metz, one from the perspective of theology, and the other from that of Church politics.

(2) *The Problem of Theodicy*. The question of the salvation of those who have suffered unjustly is perhaps the most powerful moving force behind our continuing talk of God. Metz is decisively opposed to any Platonized softening of this question, which confronts Christians after Auschwitz more radically than ever.⁷ In this case too, it was the conceptual tools of the Greek tradition which made it possible to separate the God of salvation from the Creator God of the Old Testament, freeing Him of responsibility for the barbarity of a sinful humankind. God Himself was not to be drawn into His creation, shot through, as it is, with suffering. Against this idealistic dilution of suffering, Metz invokes a 'culture of loss', a culture of remembrance which could keep open, without false consolation, the existential restlessness of a passionate questioning of God. An eschatologically driven anticipation, a sensitivity towards a suspended future, one which nevertheless already reaches into the present, would thereby be encouraged.⁸ The biblical anticipation of the future

must not, in line with Nietzsche's doctrine of the Eternal Return, be absorbed into a Greek understanding of eternity.⁹

But even this protest, which reaches inward towards the innermost domains of religious experience, finds a parallel in those counter-traditions of philosophical thought which have insisted on the positivity and obstinacy of the negative, as opposed to the Neo-Platonic conception of descending gradations of the good and the true. In a similar way to theologies which culminate in eschatology, this tradition, which stretches from Jakob Böhme and Franz Baader, via Schelling and Hegel, to Bloch and Adorno, transforms the experience of the negativity of the present into the driving force of dialectical reflection. Such reflection is intended to break the power of the past over what is to come. Since philosophy does not begin from the premise of an almighty and just deity, it cannot make use of the question of theodicy in its plea for a culture of loss – for a sense of what has failed and been withheld. But in any case, philosophy today is less concerned with the idealistic transfiguration of a reality in need of salvation than with indifference towards a world flattened out by empiricism, and rendered normatively mute.

The fronts have been reversed. The historicism of paradigms and world-pictures, now rife, is a second-level empiricism which undermines the serious task confronting a subject who takes up a positive or negative stance towards validity-claims. Such claims are always raised here and now, in a local context – but they also transcend all merely provincial yardsticks. When one paradigm or world picture is worth as much as the next, when different discourses encode everything that can be true or false, good or evil, in different ways, then this closes down the normative dimension which enables us to identify the traits of an unhappy and distorted life. We can no longer recognize a life unworthy of human beings, and experience the loss this involves. Philosophy, too, pits the force of anamnesis against a historicist forgetting of forgetting. But now it is argumentative reason itself which reveals, in the deeper layers of its own pragmatic presuppositions, the conditions for laying claim to an unconditional meaning. It thereby holds open the dimension of validity-claims which transcend social space and historical time. In this way it makes a breach in the normality of mundane events, which are devoid of any promissory note. Without this, normality would close itself hermetically against any experience of a solidarity and justice which is *lacking*. However, such a philosophy, which takes up the thought of

community in the notion of a communicative, historically situated reason, cannot offer assurances. It stands under the sign of a transcendence from within, and has to content itself with the reasoned resolve of a sceptical but non-defeatist 'resistance to the idols and demons of a world which holds humanity in contempt'.

The relation between philosophy and theology shifts yet again in connection with the other theme, which crucially concerns Metz in the domain of Church politics and Church history. Here philosophy does not simply strive to appropriate semantic potentials which have been preserved in the religious tradition, as is the case with the question of theodicy. It can even assist a theology which aims to clarify the status of Christianity and the Church in the light of a pluralism of cultures and understandings of the world.¹⁰

(3) *The Polycentric World Church*. Since the second Vatican Council, the Church has been confronted with the double task of opening itself up from within to the multiplicity of cultures in which Catholic Christianity has established itself, and of seeking a bold dialogue with non-Christian religions, rather than lingering in defensive apologetics. The same problem occurs in both domains: how can the Christian Church retain its identity despite its cultural multivocality; and how can Christian doctrine maintain the authenticity of its search for truth in its discursive engagement with competing images of the world? A Church which reflects on the limitations of its eurocentric history, seeking to attune Christian doctrine to the hermeneutic departure points of non-Western cultures, cannot start from the 'idea of an ahistorical, culturally unbiased and ethnically innocent Christianity'. Rather, it must remain aware both of its theological origins and of its institutional entanglement with the history of European colonialism. And a Christianity which takes up a reflexive attitude to its own truth claims in the course of dialogue with other religions cannot rest content with an 'inconsequential or patronizing pluralism'. Rather, it must hold fast to the universal validity of its promise of salvation, whilst avoiding all assimilationist tendencies and entirely renouncing the use of force.¹¹

From this perspective, the polycentric Church even seems to offer a model for dealing with the political problem of multiculturalism. In its internal relations it appears to provide the pattern for a democratic constitutional state, which allows the different life-forms of a multicultural society the right to flourish. And in its external relations such a Church could be a model for a community of nations

which regulates its relations on the basis of mutual recognition. But, on closer inspection, it becomes clear that things are in fact the other way round. The idea of the polycentric Church depends in turn on insights of the European Enlightenment and its political philosophy.

Metz himself affirms the legacy of a rational conception of law which has been hermeneutically sensitized to its eurocentric limitations: Europe is

the cultural and political home of a universalism whose kernel is strictly anti-eurocentric . . . Admittedly, the universalism of the Enlightenment, which sought freedom and justice, was at first only semantically universal, and in its concrete application it has remained particularistic right up to the present day. But this universalism has also founded a new political and hermeneutic culture, one which aims at the recognition of the dignity of all human beings as free subjects. The recognition of cultural otherness must not abandon this universalism of human rights, which has been developed in the European tradition. It is this universalism which ensures that cultural pluralism does not simply collapse into a vague relativism, and that a supposed culture of sensitivity remains sensitive to issues of truth.¹²

However, Christianity cannot expect its ethically saturated conceptions of the history of salvation or of the created order to receive universal recognition *in the same sense* as a procedurally formulated theory of law and morality, which claims to ground human rights and the principles of the constitutional state with the help of a concept of procedural justice.¹³ This is why even Metz understands the universality of the offer of salvation as an 'invitation' to all, which has to be practically tested, and not in terms of the claim to rational acceptability which has characterized the emergence of rational law, for example. Even the polycentric world Church remains *one* of several communities of interpretation, each of which articulates its own conception of salvation, its vision of an unspoiled life. These struggle with one another over the most convincing interpretations of justice, solidarity, and salvation from misery and humiliation. The Church must internalize this outsider perspective, make its own this gaze which is directed upon it. To achieve this it makes use of ideas which were developed by the European Enlightenment, ideas which, today, must be put into effect in democratically constituted multicultural societies, as well as in relations of recognition between the

nations and cultures of this earth which are based on respect for human rights.

In multicultural societies basic rights and the principles of the constitutional state form the points of crystallization for a political culture which unites all citizens. This in turn is the basis for the coexistence of different groups and subcultures, each with its own origin and identity. The *uncoupling of these two levels of integration* is needed to prevent the majority culture from exercising a power of definition over the whole political culture. Indeed, the majority culture must subordinate itself to the political culture, and enter into a non-coercive exchange with the minority cultures. A similar situation obtains within the polycentric world Church. A shared Christian self-understanding must emerge within it, one which no longer coincides with the historically determining traditions of the West, but merely provides the backdrop which enables the Western tradition to become aware of its eurocentric limitations and peculiarities.

Another kind of hermeneutic self-reflection is required of Catholic Christianity as a whole in its relation to other religions. Here the analogy with a Western world which is coming to accept decentred and unprejudiced forms of exchange with non-Western cultures breaks down. For in this case we presuppose a common basis of human rights, which are presumed to enjoy a general and rationally motivated recognition. By contrast, in the case of the dialogical contest between religious and metaphysical world views, a common conception of the good which could play the same role as this shared legal and moral basis is lacking. This means that this contest has to be played out with a reflexive awareness that all concerned move in the same universe of discourse, and respect each other as collaborative participants in the search for ethical-existential truth. To make this possible a culture of recognition is required which takes its principles from the secularized world of moral and rational-legal universalism. In this domain, therefore, it is the philosophical spirit of political enlightenment which lends theology the concepts with which to make sense of moves towards a polycentric world Church. I say this without any intention of scoring points. For the political philosophy which performs this role is just as deeply marked by the thought of a community bound by covenant as it is by the idea of the polis. To this extent, it appeals to a biblical heritage. And it is this heritage to which Metz also appeals, when he reminds the

contemporary Church that, in the name of its mission, it must 'seek freedom and justice for all', and be guided by 'a culture of the recognition of the other in his otherness'.¹⁴

Translated by Peter Dews

Notes

- 1 J. B. Metz, *Unterbrechungen* (Gütersloh: Güterloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1980), p. 13.
- 2 K. J. Kuschel, ed., *Welches Christentum hat Zukunft? Dorothee Sölle und Johann Baptist Metz im Gespräch* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1990), pp. 23ff.
- 3 J. B. Metz, *Jenseits bürgerlicher Religion* (Munich: Kaiser, 1980).
- 4 J. B. Metz, 'Anamnestic Reason', in Axel Honneth et al., eds, *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Process of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 189–94.
- 5 J. B. Metz, 'Die Rede von Gott angesichts der Leidensgeschichte der Welt', in *Stimmen der Zeit*, 5, 1992, p. 24.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 J. B. Metz, 'Im Angesicht der Juden. Christliche Theologie nach Auschwitz', in *Concilium*, 20, 1984, pp. 382–9.
- 8 See 'Die Rede von Gott angesichts der Leidensgeschichte der Welt'. M. Theunissen speaks in this context of a 'proleptic future'. See 'Communicative Freedom and Negative Theology', pp. 110–28 in this volume.
- 9 M. Theunissen, *Negative Theologie der Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 368.
- 10 J. B. Metz, 'Theologie im Angesicht und vor dem Ende der Moderne', in *Concilium*, 20, 1984, pp. 14–18.
- 11 J. B. Metz, 'Im Aufbruch zu einer kulturell polyzentrischen Weltkirche', in F. X. Kaufmann, J. B. Metz, *Zukunftsfähigkeit* (Freiburg: Herder, 1987), pp. 93–115.
- 12 J. B. Metz, 'Perspektiven eines multikulturellen Christentums', MS, Dec. 1992.
- 13 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971). J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).
- 14 Metz, *Zukunftsfähigkeit*, p. 118.