

TOWARD A GRAMMAR OF THE POSSIBLE: THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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Fig. 1 *sourdre*, Agra, India. Photograph by Julia D.E. Prinz. Courtesy of the artist.

1. It Has Arrived

*It is not approaching.
It has arrived.
We are not circumventing it.*

*It is happening.
It is happening now.
We are not preventing it.
We are within it.¹*

In groups of ten or tens of millions. People on the move. Mothers, fathers, children; men and women without work; people with no recourse against random violence, pervasive hunger, a cold and cruel hopelessness. Refugees, migrants, exiles. Reviled, scorned, reduced to the shadow of a lie, their humanity hidden behind bullying

¹ Denise Levertov, “Two Threnodies and a Psalm,” *A Door in the Hive* (New York: New Directions, 1989), 45.

adjectives and false images. Who will hear their cries? Who will behold their most intimate, their most dangerous memories?

Such myriad human stories are not buried in the past. They are not approaching. They are here now, they are happening now. In God, whom we have come to know as God of the living and the dead, the absent ones are present. They hang beneath writhing ropes of lynching trees. The lie in contorted death on the frozen snow of Wounded Knee. Their muffled, desperate screams leak from the silence of “Crematorium I.” None of these cries lies buried in the past: they are echoing in our present, reverberating now, happening now. We, the people of this age, may not be listening, but the cry does not go away. We are within it.²

The cries of human victims mingle with what Pope Francis calls “the cry of the earth, wounded in a thousand ways by human greed.”³ In the second paragraph of his landmark encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, Francis writes: “The earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she ‘groans in travail.’”⁴ Later in the encyclical he says: “Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”⁵ The poet Denise Levertov, with whom I began this reflection, says of this cry, “It Should Be Visible.”

If from space not only sapphire continents,
swirling oceans, were visible, but the wars–
like bonfires, wildfires, forest conflagrations,
flame and smoky plunder–the earth would seem
a bitter pomander ball bristling with poison cloves.
And each war fueled with weapons: it should be visible
that great sums of money have been exchanged,
great profits made, workers gainfully employed
to construct destruction, national economies distorted
so that these fires, these wars, may burn
and consume the joy of this one planet
which, seen from outside its transparent tender shell,
is so serene, so fortunate, with its water, air
and myriad forms of ‘life that wants to live.’

² Among the scores of important books that detail the atrocities and the heroism hidden in these “living” historical moments, three that have touched me profoundly are James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Henry Holt, 1970, 2007); and Eddy Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996). Many other accounts and interpretations of similar acts of violence could be added to this list.

³ Pope Francis (@Pontifex), “#WorldWildlifeDay,” March 3, 2019, <https://twitter.com/pontifex/status/1102154147019677697?lang=en>.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015), 2, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 49.

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It should be visible that this bluegreen globe
suffers a canker which is devouring it.⁶

Of course, these cries are not new. They did not begin with national socialism or manifest destiny or middle passage or industrial revolution. The cry of lamentation and, even more, the connection between that cry and the reality of human guilt haunts our sacred texts. Recall this terrifying passage from the prophet Jeremiah:

Judah mourns,
her gates are lifeless;
They are bowed to the ground,
and the outcry of Jerusalem goes up.
The nobles send their servants for water,
but when they come to the cisterns
They find no water
and return with empty jars.
Confounded, despairing, they cover their heads
because of the ruined soil;
Because there is no rain in the land
the farmers are confounded, they cover their heads.
Even the doe in the field deserts her young
because there is no grass.
The wild donkeys stand on the bare heights,
gasping for breath like jackals;
Their eyes grow dim;
there is no grass.
Even though our crimes bear witness against us,
act, LORD, for your name's sake—
Even though our rebellions are many,
and we have sinned against you.
Hope of Israel, LORD,
our savior in time of need!
Why should you be a stranger in the land,
like a traveler stopping only for a night?
Why are you like someone bewildered,
a champion who cannot save?
You are in our midst, LORD,
your name we bear:
do not forsake us, O LORD, our God! (Jer 14:2-9 NABRE)

Each of these images and narratives, including the ancient prophetic text I just cited, testifies that the first keyword in our conference subtitle, *violence*, has another face—one that provides a crucial entry point for theological reflection. It is the face of

⁶ Denise Levertov, "Urgent Whisper," in *Breathing the Water* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 38.

suffering. We see it in the faces of indigenous peoples, peoples from marginal cultures all over the world, especially those who are exiles and migrants, undocumented, unwanted, reviled. We perceive this face in the mothers who can barely feed their children. Indeed, we see it in the faces of all women who bear the weight of a vast history of patriarchy and oppression. We see it with painful lucidity in our US context, in the faces of African Americans and Native Americans, whose long history of suffering, slavery, and extermination result from forms of violence that should be named genocide: the American genocide of native peoples; the American genocide of African slavery, Jim Crow, and the scandal of mass incarceration today.⁷ We discover the key to understanding our present “time of crisis,” and the possibility of another way of configuring our world, when we begin to recognize how all these moments from the past configure and occupy our present.

This crucial connection between historical suffering and “the possible” will be explored further in the following section. However, before I turn to that, I begin enumerating what I will call—at the risk of sounding pretentious—“elements in a grammar of the possible.” I begin with an element that otherwise might slip by unnoticed but is, in my view, extremely important. *The possible exists in the present, not the future.* It is here. We are within it.

2. Memory

To sustain the assertion *that the possible exists in the present* we need a second key element: memory. Without memory there is no future. Without memory there can be no effective protest against suffering or resistance to violence. Just as historical violence, the first keyword in our conference subtitle, discloses its “other face” in the reality of historical suffering, so our second keyword, *resistance*, reveals its heart and its source in *memory*. But not just any kind of memory. We need to recover what the great political theologian Johann Baptist Metz calls “dangerous memory.” In a rightly famous passage from his book, *Faith in History and Society*, Metz writes:

There are memories in which one does not take the relationship to the past very seriously, memories in which the past turns into an untroubled paradise, an asylum from the disillusionments of the present—the past as “the good old days.” ... The past passes through a filter of harmlessness; everything dangerous and haunting, everything challenging has vanished from it; it seems robbed of any future. This is how memory easily turns into a “false consciousness” of the past, an opium for the present.

But there is another kind of memory: dangerous memories, memories that challenge. These are memories in which earlier

⁷ The suffering is especially intense when the reviled and enslaved person is a woman: she is the victim of multiple forms of economic, political, social, psychological, physical, and sexual violence; see M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

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experiences flare up and unleash new dangerous insights for the present. For brief moments they illuminate, harshly and piercingly, the problematic character of things we made our peace with a long time ago and the banality of what we take to be “realism.” They break through the canon of the ruling plausibility structures and take on a virtually subversive character. Memories of this sort are like dangerous and incalculable afflictions from the past. They are memories that one has to take into account, memories that have a future content, so to speak.⁸

I call attention to the dangerous memories of suffering that lie at the foundations of our civic union—the systemic marginalization of women, the enslavement and impoverishment of African Americans, the destruction of the First Peoples of this land, and the destruction of the land itself, along with its waters and air⁹—and I do so as a religious and theological act. First, however, I take a moment to notice how, taken together, the keywords in the subtitle of our conference title—violence, resistance, transformation—usher us into the critical and constructive tasks of *theology*, into the heart of our religious faith. Allow me to name some of what is at stake here in a single, long sentence. (Think of this as a tribute to Karl Rahner!) *If we, even in the face of such wanton violence, or as Hegel wrote, “even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized,”¹⁰ while locking arms with Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King, with Dorothy Stang and Dorothy Day, with Oscar Romero and Elie Wiesel, with all prophets of resistance throughout every human era, and still hoping for a genuine transformation, not in vain, not with gnostic dreams or idealizing fantasies, but rather, like a bridge that reaches out to what is possible from the depths of what is real, that is, what we have made of our actual history, then we will have placed ourselves before the bright abyss of God and drawn near the fire: we should remove our shoes and hide our faces.*

⁸ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), 105-106.

⁹ Perhaps no theologian has so passionately urged the churches and civil societies of the United States to take responsibility for and respond to the crisis of *ecocide*, “an ecological disaster of ruinous proportions,” than Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 5; see especially two of her more recent works linking feminist and ecological sensibilities: Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014); and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018); see also her marvelous Biblical interpretation of Mary of Nazareth drawing explicitly on Metz’s “provocative phrase,” Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2004), 29-30.

¹⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1956), 21.



Fig. 2 *Resisting Demolition*, San Francisco, CA. Photograph by Julia D.E. Prinz. Courtesy of the artist.

As theologians, in the words of the Salvadoran martyr Ignacio Ellacuría, we stand at the foot of “the cross of the crucified people.” Ellacuría would have us ask: “What have we done to crucify them? What are we doing to uncrucify them? What will we do so that this people will be raised?”¹¹ As theologians, we stand at a crossroads in history. *It is not approaching. It has arrived. We are not circumventing it. We are not preventing it. We are within it.* And if we who are theologians—who may or may not number ourselves among the victims of historical violence and suffering—are to stand in solidarity with all who suffer, we will acknowledge that their memories of suffering and their courageous resistance provide the essential resources for a possible “other world,” a world characterized by truth, freedom, peace, and justice, a world that provides a foretaste of what Jesus called the Reign of God.

I frame the second foundational element in the grammar of the possible in this way: *the dangerous memory of suffering enables resistance to injustice and thus opens access to the future.* Inverting this sentence underscores the crucial connection between the future (another world that is possible) and memory: our primary access to the future, and thus to the demands that the possible makes on us in the present, are the dangerous memories of suffering, especially the suffering of the forgotten victims of history. Such memory not only empowers resistance to injustice and violence, it sensitizes us to the advent of the living God.

3. Language

In the Introduction to his memorable short book *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, Gustavo Gutiérrez asks a powerful question: “How are we to talk about a God who is revealed as love in a situation characterized by poverty and

¹¹ Ignacio Ellacuría, “Las Iglesias latinoamericanas interpelan a la Iglesia de España,” *Sal Terre* 826 (1982): 230; cited in Kevin F. Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 26.

oppression?”¹² This leading question shapes his approach not only to the Book of Job but to the very nature of theology in its relationship with spirituality.

The themes that run through the Book of Job form a complex whole: the transcendence of God, the problem of evil, human suffering, the question of retribution, friendship, and others. The text contains all of these themes and in consequence has inspired studies that put special emphasis on one or another aspect. The point of view that I myself adopt in this book is important and classic, and, I believe, central to the book itself: the question of *how we are to talk about God*.¹³

One of our giants, Gustavo has given back to theology and to the church—through his integrity, his pastoral witness, and his contributions to the growth and flourishing of Latin American liberation theology—the searing question of Job: How are we to speak rightly about God? Johann Baptist Metz, another of our great ones, developed his entire political theology around the question of theodicy, the question of historical human suffering in the presence of a God who seems all too often to be silent. In a remarkable essay entitled “Theology as Theodicy?” Metz writes about himself as a theologian.

Slowly, much too slowly, I became aware... that the situation in which I am a theologian, that is, I try to talk about God, is the situation *after Auschwitz*. Auschwitz signals for me a horror that is beyond all the familiar theologies, a horror that makes every situationless talk about God show up as empty and blind. Is there, I asked myself, a God whom one can worship with back turned to Auschwitz? And can any theology worthy of the name keep on talking about God and about human beings after such a catastrophe, as if the presumed innocence of our human words would not have to be scrutinized in the face of such a catastrophe?¹⁴

What is so distinctive about Auschwitz is the overwhelming presence of absence. The loss and subsequent absence of a single loved one raises the question of God in perhaps its most anguished form. I learned this pointedly when I was sixteen and my twenty-one-year-old brother, Larry, was killed in a car accident. I experienced life as utterly shot-through with absence. But if that holds with respect to my brother, what can I say to the reality of the six million? An entire people, a whole world, gone. It was only after many, many years that I began to realize that my experience of God—which included a profound and prolonged sense of absence—was what enabled me to connect

¹² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), xiv.

¹³ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, xviii, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, “Theology as Theodicy?,” in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 54.

the suffering of one individual to the suffering of our world. What Metz tellingly names “the nontransferable negative mystery of human suffering”¹⁵ *does not* allow us to offer soothing answers to Job’s passionate question, “How long, O Lord?” At the same time, it *does* open a door to a solidarity—a solidarity in questioning, not in having answers—that connects our pain to that of others. The key to that door lies within us. We find it when we penetrate the depths of our own grief, when we learn the mystical practice of lamentation, and when we take hold of that key to unlock our personal connection to the whole of human history.

My own response to the suffering of others began slowly and almost inchoately. Later, it began to blossom in theological terms as I entered the lives of suffering communities, here and in Latin America and Southeast Asia, and as I encountered the works of liberation, political, and feminist theologians. Somewhere in those years, when I come across this enigmatic sentence by Metz who was referencing the six million, I was reminded of the brother I had lost years before: “Knowing remains at root a form of missing, without which not only faith but even the human him- or herself would disappear.”¹⁶ Metz coined the neologism, *Vermissungswissen* [a knowledge born of missing], to provide “resistance to the contemporary theological tendency to rely on Kant’s ‘pure reason’ as the defining feature of the human being.”¹⁷ This, of course, returns us to the centrality of memory: we remember what is lost. The implications of this are striking. Julia Prinz, professor of biblical hermeneutics and Christian Spirituality, a colleague and close friend of Metz, writes: “More than speculative and theoretical knowledge... it is *memory* that constitutes the human. Since we are always persons-in-relation, memory is the vulnerable category of the depth-history of humanity. It is always endangered by forgetting.”¹⁸ To-know-what-is-missing is what makes memory *dangerous memory*. Without this missing, this vulnerability, memory becomes something else, a superficial or even violent nostalgia. It becomes the recitation of sheer fact in which persons with all their mysterious depth

¹⁵ This is the title Metz gives to the concluding section of another important essay; see Johann Baptist Metz, “Karl Rahner’s Struggle for the Theological Dignity of Humankind,” in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 116-120.

¹⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, “Suffering unto God,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Summer 1994), 615.

¹⁷ Julia D. E. Prinz, “Loss and Memory, Mist, Grief and Grey in Poetry and Photography,” in *‘this need to dance/this need to kneel’: Denise Levertov and the Poetics of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, forthcoming in 2019).

¹⁸ Prinz, “Loss and Memory, Mist, Grief and Grey in Poetry and Photography.” Prinz adds: “Importantly, the ‘knowing-absence’ that Metz introduces as a dialectical counterpart to pure reason is not simply a philosophical shift in his theological and spiritual reflections. Rather, it is rooted in the biblical question and experience of theodicy, the question about God in the face of suffering, or rather the question *to* God *from* the experience of suffering. The absence of God is experienced in the missing of justice, compassion and peace. In that experience, the human being addresses God with questions: how long will this go on? Where are you if you are a good God? What is the meaning of this in the face of God? How can the world be the way it is? Or perhaps the most basic question: Why me? Why the other I love?”

disappear. This is memory as false consciousness and it produces a version of history that celebrates none but the victors.

If, following Metz, I begin with the proposal that a genuine and fruitful approach to “the possible” begins from a consideration of those who are absent, begins from the memory of suffering, then I must add that this requires, among other things, a *language* adequate to that task and a Christian imagination attuned to real possibilities. This is where *transformation* begins: the translation of the cry into poetry or narrative and the concomitant moment of hermeneutical framing, reception, and interpretation. As with the first and the second keywords in our conference subtitle, this third keyword, transformation, sheds light on the vocation and work of the theologian. In a sense this is obvious, though it does underscore the distinctive nature of our work: we find and forge language, words, to speak rightly about God. We also reflect on the nature of those words, that language, and the implications of our theological words for our lives of faith. As I noted above, it is necessary to reflect on the language we use to name and confront the violence with which our current world order is constructed, a critical language tailored to overcome ideology and the violence of nostalgia, as well as an effective critique of those forms of resistance that are poisoned by resentment and the thirst for revenge. Here, I affirm our need for a language of transformation deeply rooted in the biblical lexicons of hope: exodus, promised land, prophecy, repentance, resurrection, and *maranátha*.

To complement the critical and hermeneutical tasks of theology, I also want to draw attention to the creative and constructive aspects of our work. All too often, we find people within our church defaulting—whether wittingly or not—to an understanding that views theology as little more than the catechism with footnotes, that uses dogmatic theology as a set of answers and moral theology as a set of rules. What is missing (but not missed!) in this view of theology is God. A flattened language resulting from forms of dogmatic or magisterial fundamentalism (we find a lot of this among certain theologically illiterate bloggers) supplies the major source of confusion and division in our churches today. Whether confronting violence, offering resistance, or enabling transformation, the task before us demands creativity and imagination.

Here I find it helpful and even necessary to return to the wisdom found in poetry. I draw again from the poet I twice quoted above, a poet who is among my most profound mentors, Denise Levertov. A brilliant, engaged, fierce but loving woman, Levertov jokingly referred to herself as a “do-it-yourself-theologian” later in her life, after she returned to the active practice of Christian faith.¹⁹ For years she had spoken of herself as a skeptic and an agnostic, a condition that resulted largely because of the scandalous silence of God in the face of excruciating human suffering. But Levertov, as honest with her intimations of transcendence as with her doubts, probed the darkness

¹⁹ See the Foreword to Denise Levertov, *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (New York: New Directions, 1997), vii-viii. In addition, Levertov’s journals include numerous examples of what she calls “do-it-yourself-theology” where she speculates on such questions as “Why couldn’t the incarnation have been as Woman not Man? Why was the culture of Israel chosen?” See *Denise Levertov Papers*, Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, “Journal Entry,” April 14, 1986 [Series 3, Box 9, Folio 2].

of God as a poet. We see this in her poem entitled “Freedom” and published late in her “agnostic” period.

Perhaps we humans
have wanted God most as witness
to acts of choice
made in solitude. Acts of mercy,
of sacrifice. Wanted
that great single eye to see us,
steadfast as we flowed by.
Yet there are other acts
not even vanity,
or anxious hope to please, knows of—
bone doings, leaps of nerve, heart-
cries of communion: if there is bliss,
it has
been already
and will be; out-
reaching, utterly.
Blind
to itself, flooded
with otherness.²⁰

Significantly, having found her voice as a marvelously attentive commentator on what Ada María Isasi-Díaz would later name theologically, “lo cotidiano,”²¹ Levertov moved in a decidedly political direction that marked the rest of her life as a poet. As part of her fierce resistance to the War in Vietnam and the obscene military spending that accompanied that war, she wrote a long acrostic poem that provided the title for her 1969 volume, *Relearning the Alphabet*. Here is a small section of that long poem marking the letter “U”.

Relearn the alphabet,
relearn the world, the world
understood anew only in doing, under-
stood only as
looked-up-into out of earth,
the heart an eye looking,
the heart a root
planted in earth.

²⁰ Denise Levertov, “Freedom,” *The Freeing of the Dust* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 112.

²¹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10 (2002): 5-17.

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Transmutation is not
under the will's rule.²²

Our conference theme does not refer, of course, to “transmutation” but *transformation*. But it seems clear that transformation, too, lies not under the will's rule, but under the shadow of the eschatological proviso. The famous, often mis-attributed words of Bishop Kenneth Untener gently remind us of this.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.²³

This is true of our work as theologians, specifically, our work with words and language to enable a kind of sacramental dynamic to unfold when we invite our readers or listeners, our students and colleagues, into the meeting tent of encounter with the divine mystery.²⁴ This is our work: to find language that enables such an encounter. We are not seeking to “explain the divine,” (an enterprise that veers sharply toward the dogmatic fundamentalism that I criticized above), although we work very hard to draw lines of systematic coherence between what we know of our world and what has been revealed to us in our encounters with the God of Jesus.

With respect to finding a language that enables an encounter with the divine, the language we use to do theology, the work of “relearning the alphabet” takes us far. But we need to go even farther. Here again I draw on Metz. He speaks of our need for “a new alphabetization of our religious language.”²⁵ Even prior to the exercise of relearning the alphabet, we need to craft an entirely new set of sounds and letters to correspond to the anguish, the cries, the seemingly insoluble problems our world encounters today. Metz coined this neologism, *Neualphabetisierung*, at a conference in Mainz, Germany, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council just six months before Benedict XVI resigned the papacy. (I wonder if, at that time, Baptist was missing the Council!) He was asked to comment on Pope Benedict's call for a “new evangelization” in Europe and he acknowledged that certainly every age and culture needs to evolve a new evangelization adequate to that situation, but then he added that, in the first place, people today “need a language that

²² Denise Levertov, “Relearning the Alphabet,” *Relearning the Alphabet* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 119.

²³ Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, “The Mystery of the Romero Prayer,” in Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico, *Archbishop Oscar Romero* (January/February, 2005), 5.

²⁴ For a trenchant analysis of this sacramental understanding of revelation, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (New York, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991).

²⁵ Cited in *Bistum Mainz*, “Vatikanisches Konzil, Bistumstagung, Bericht der Pressestelle,” <https://dcms.bistummainz.de/bm/dcms/sites/themen/vaticanum/konzilstagung/pressestelle.html>.

is not pre-formulated to talk about their faith, along with their unbelief and their doubts.”²⁶ For this reason, Metz, like his teacher Karl Rahner,

privileges not only the language of narrative but also that of poetry. Facing the contemporary shift away from ontological-dogmatic categories, he finds in poetry an “archive” for tradition. Today, when the traditions are no longer protected by institutions, poetry steps in as one of the “weak” operations that helps keep tradition from being generated in primarily abstract ways. Thus, for Baptist, poetry functions much more as an initiator of identity than any reflective process. As such, poetry is crucial for tradition.²⁷

Poetry helps us find the new grammar and words we need to connect our spiritual hungers, questions, and experiences to the language a faith community can share in worship, lamentation, and hope.

Corresponding to the importance of language in the transformation for which we hope, a third element in the grammar of the possible appears: *To speak rightly about God we need a new alphabetization of our religious experience, one that is open to our doubts.* As a corollary I might add, it is for this very reason we theologians need the poets, artists, musicians, songwriters, and people who work with their hands to try to speak to the heart. We have always needed them.

4. Imagination

A voice from the dark called out,
“The poets must give us
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar
imagination of disaster.”

The opening lines to one of Denise Levertov’s most famous political poems, “Making Peace.” A few lines later she continues:

But peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,
can’t be imagined before it is made,
can’t be known except
in the words of its making,

²⁶ Cited in *Bistum Mainz*, “Vatikanisches Konzil, Bistumstagung, Bericht der Pressestelle.”

²⁷ Johann Baptist Metz, conversation with the author (Münster: August 24, 2012); cited in Kevin F. Burke, “A New Alphabetization of our Religious Experience,” in *Theologie in gefährdeter Zeit: Stichworte von nahen und fernen Weggefährten für Johann Baptist Metz zum 90. Geburtstag*, ed. Hans-Gerd Janßen, Julia D. E. Prinz, and Michael J. Rainer (Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag, 2018), 65-66.

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grammar of justice,
syntax of mutual aid.²⁸

Since we encounter the possible-as-such in the present and as not-yet-realized, since we must act into its realization and find in each age new language to articulate the depth dimension of our life in time, imagination joins memory as the essential bridge between the possible and its realization in time. To reflect on the role imagination plays, I draw upon the spirituality for public life of a brilliant but virtually forgotten American Jesuit, William F. Lynch.

Between 1959 and 1973 Lynch published seven books; among these are five where the words “images” or “imagination” appear in the title and constitute a crucial theme.²⁹ In *Christ and Prometheus*, Lynch writes: “The imagination is not an aesthetic faculty. It is not a single or special faculty. It is all the resources [that allow a person] to form images of the world, and thus to find it, cope with it, shape it, even make it. The task of the imagination is to imagine the real.”³⁰ In any given moment or situation, precisely as a faculty geared to the real, the imagination allows us to grasp the possible.

Virtually nothing inflicts more damage on the possible than a diseased or abstracted imagination, an imagination that absolutizes the relative and loses touch with reality. In *Images of Hope*, a book written after his own battles with mental illness and dedicated to themes of hope and hopelessness, mental health and mental illness, the human city and inhuman cities, Lynch develops the term “the absolutizing instinct.”

The absolutizing instinct magnifies. In its presence each thing loses its true perspective and its true edges. The good becomes the tremendously good, the evil becomes the absolutely evil, the grey becomes the black and white, the complicated, because it is difficult to handle, becomes, in desperation, the completely simple. The small becomes the big.³¹

²⁸ Denise Levertov, “Making Peace,” *Breathing the Water* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 40.

²⁹ See William F. Lynch, *The Image Industries* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1959); William F. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960); William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Baltimore, Helicon, 1965); William F. Lynch, *Christ and Prometheus: A New Image of the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971); William F. Lynch, *Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973). For a wonderful introduction to and overview of Lynch’s work, see John F. Kane, *Building the Human City: William F. Lynch’s Ignatian Spirituality for Public Life* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

³⁰ Lynch, *Christ and Prometheus*, 23.

³¹ Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 106. In other places Lynch writes of the “gnostic” or “Manichean” imagination (in contrast to an “incarnational” imagination). Likewise, he discusses at length the “univocal” imagination (in contrast to the “analogical” imagination). The symmetries among these tropes are illuminating and profound. They provide important frameworks for analyzing the polarization that afflicts so much of our political and ecclesiastical

It's hard to believe that Lynch wrote this fifty years ago. It's as if he were peeking in on our national political discourse today! This absolutizing instinct destroys conversation, consensus, and reconciliation. It creates absolute polarities in which no possibility of dialogue or compromise can be admitted. It undermines imagination, for as Lynch writes,

the absolutizing instinct is not really an action of the imagination. Rather, it is a creator of fantasy, distortion, magnification; it is invariably in full and violent operation before it ever meets its object and by the time it is finished nothing much is left of the object's boundaries or edges or identity. The object has been elevated to the status of a dream and has lost its own name. This instinct is a maker of dreams and does not give a tinker's dam for objects or people.³²

This has crucial implications for our grammar of the possible. Lynch notes that today, "faced with new magnitudes of possibility and a new freedom," we have "turned instead in fright into the paths of superstitious passions and irrelevant imitations of a true idea of revolution."³³ We live in an age of almost endless possibility and face almost daily the prospect of coping with that "endlessness" through an absolutizing, polarizing, and xenophobic imagination. This has terrible consequences for our prospects of building communities of equity, justice, and inclusion. In *Images of Hope*, Lynch faces us with "programmatically alternatives." We can seek to build a human city, where people of different abilities and capacities, people representing different races, religions, cultural backgrounds, and, we might add today, sexual and gender orientations, are welcome and are at home. "Or we will decide to build various absolute and walled cities, from which various pockets of our humanity will always be excluded."³⁴

To build a truly human city requires the disciplined and inclusive exercise of imagination. The concrete, incarnational imagination that Lynch proposes aligns with Metz's understanding of dangerous memory. And just as a corrosive, nostalgic, unreal exercise of memory leads to perverse forms of false consciousness, Lynch warns that the absolutizing, polarizing imagination produces images of "non-human cities [that] offer an extraordinary fascination for the souls of fearful [people]." He adds that "we are fools if we underestimate how strong and seductive they can be."³⁵ Images, Lynch says, "not only come at us from the world; we also come at the world through them, in love or hate. We can make or destroy the world with an image."³⁶ Here we have a fourth element in a grammar of the possible: *the task of the incarnational imagination is to imagine the real and so educe real possibilities.*

cultures today; see Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, 126-133; see also Kane, *Building the Human City*, 57-62, 105-100, 198-202.

³² Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 106-107.

³³ Lynch, *Images of Faith*, 145.

³⁴ Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 26.

³⁵ Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 26.

³⁶ Lynch, *Christ and Prometheus*, 25.

5. History

Gutiérrez and Metz ask: How do we to talk rightly about God? How do we talk of God's love to those who suffer intolerably? How do we talk about God after Auschwitz? These questions have a logical or structural similarity to the question that bears directly on my theme: how are we to talk rightly about "the possible"? And what will it cost us? In addressing these questions, our conference chooses nothing less than to take up what the Salvadoran theologian and martyr, Ignacio Ellacuría, called "the human task of history."³⁷

Ellacuría, a brilliant philosopher-theologian and an astute analyst of the political situation in El Salvador, served from 1979 until his martyrdom in 1989 as the President of the University of Central America in San Salvador. His major philosophical text, *Filosofía de la realidad histórica*, written during that time but only published after his death, moves us in the direction of a critical, historically conscious understanding of "the possible" and its intrinsic connection to "liberation."³⁸ As Lynch, with a nod to Plato, warned over and over against running "too fast from the many to the one,"³⁹ so Ellacuría cautioned against idealizing images of "revolution" or social change. Where Lynch urged the importance of going through the valley of the human, through the finite and the definite, Ellacuría developed—as much in his philosophical and theological essays as in his social-analytical writings—a keen sensitivity to concrete "historical reality."⁴⁰

In his *Filosofía*, Ellacuría focuses, among other themes, on the paradox of a human freedom at once biologically conditioned and transcendently open, at once personal, social, historical, and moral. Humans do not merely respond to stimuli as animals might, but they choose from among various options. The power to choose enables a person to grant preference to one possibility over another, and on that basis to transform the chosen possibility into an outcome. That outcome doesn't change our nature, it changes our reality, a reality affected in history through the actualization of possibilities.

³⁷ Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross*, 85-92.

³⁸ In an essay on Ellacuría and the struggle for justice, María Pilar Aquino writes perceptively that being martyred in the struggle (as Ellacuría was) "does not reveal the futility of that struggle. Nor does it demonstrate the failure of an entire life dedicated to the anticipation of a new life. Rather, it only exposes the wickedness of the powerful and reveals *the historical possibilities of the vision of a new earth and a new humanity*;" see María Pilar Aquino, "The People of God in the Struggle for Justice," in *Love that Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. Kevin F. Burke and Robert Lassalle Klein (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 208, emphasis mine.

³⁹ Lynch, *Christ and Apollo*, 13, 146; Kane, *Building the Human City*, 11.

⁴⁰ For Ellacuría as well as for Lynch, their roots in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius—with their emphasis on the time-and-context bound following of Jesus—helps to account for their striking similarities in these important areas, a fascinating topic that, alas, exceeds the limitations of this essay; see J. Matthew Ashley, *Ignatius and the Theologians (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming in 2019)*.

When the first primitive human seized the possibility of lighting fire, he did not change his potencies and faculties, he changed his reality. His reality ended up “endowed” in a new way through this incorporated “power.” This power was not transmitted genetically and thus did not constitute a potency or faculty, but it came to be transmitted through tradition, such that now the social body depends on the effective utilization of that possibility.⁴¹

For Ellacuría, history results from the actualization of possibilities through the exercise of choice. *History does not just happen but is made.* History dawns as a creative process. It pertains to freedom, but not a detached, ahistorical, idealistically-conceived freedom for which anything is possible, nor an autonomous freedom proper to isolated individuals. The real problem, of course, is that we humans not only make history, we make a mess of history. We not only shape historical realities, we deform them and then deflect responsibility for them. History is not prefabricated. It has not been programmed in such a way that things always turn out for the better. Woven into our historical reality we discover the actualization and handing on of both dazzling human achievements and terrifying human depravities. Ellacuría maintains that any philosophy of history adequate to its task needs to face squarely this troubling fact, for it bears on the most urgent aspect of our present times of crisis. “It could be said that very recently history entered a new and distinct epoch characterized as much by its universal and real, historically real, unity as by the possibility, also historically real, of having to consider its own ending, an ending that in good measure depends on history itself and on what it is going to do.”⁴²

An abyss looms before our age, the real possibility of committing “historicide,” whether swiftly, as for example through nuclear annihilation, or through the gradual destruction of our environment. Human choices—the actualizations of chosen possibilities—have sown these dangers. The threat to historical reality comes from historical reality. “The problem now is not, therefore, whether history can gradually exercise dominion over nature, but whether history can begin exercising dominion over itself.”⁴³ This new epoch is not only characterized by the possibilities of scientific knowing, but by the radical consciousness of reality as historical reality. Within that historical consciousness, human beings have secured the possibility of destroying historical reality. However, we are not constrained to commit “historicide.” As we confront possibilities for ending history, we encounter possibilities for reconfiguring history, for transforming it. The key lies within every concrete choice to set freedom free.

Freedom must be historically liberated: it must be made possible and then actualized. Both the freedom of individuals and the structures

⁴¹ Ignacio Ellacuría, *Filosofía de la realidad histórica*, ed. Antonio González (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1990), 547; hereafter cited as Ellacuría, *Filosofía*. See also Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross*, 83-84.

⁴² Ellacuría, *Filosofía*, 540.

⁴³ Ellacuría, *Filosofía*, 470.

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of freedom operating in various human societies depend on the concrete historical situations of those individuals and societies. Those situations in turn are constituted by actual, historically real possibilities, or the absence of the same. The realization of human freedom does not end with its natural liberation. It begins there. From there, the liberation of freedom happens through a decision. Creating room for freedom, the liberation of freedom, constitutes the moral challenge and human task of history.⁴⁴

So, then, the fifth and final element that I propose as a start to developing a grammar of the possible. *Historical reality can be transformed in its configuration and direction only by means of the historical dynamisms and conditions of human freedom.*⁴⁵

Conclusion: An Icon of the Possible



Fig. 3 *Still*, Yosemite National Park, CA. Photograph by Julia D.E. Prinz. Courtesy of the artist.

⁴⁴ Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross*, 92.

⁴⁵ The limits of this essay do not allow a full elaboration of this crucial element of the possible (which ties back to the first element), but Ellacuría provides a valuable treatment in *Filosofía*, Chapter 5, especially section 5.1.2 which he entitles, “La historia como actualización de posibilidades.”

As I conclude these reflections on a grammar of the possible, I wish to resist the temptation to further synthesize them. Instead, I want to move in a direction that may seem counterintuitive, but it is deeply in accord with the instincts of Johann Baptist Metz and Denise Levertov, on whose works I have been nourished, and with the example of the Salvadoran Church, who gave us Ignacio Ellacuría, among others, and who are not afraid to see in the life of their great ones, especially their martyrs, icons of faith and of the transformation of our poor world. In this spirit, Jon Sobrino writes: “In this quite trivialized and gray world, without utopias or dreams, it is important to meet persons who communicate light and inspiration by their manner of being. This enables us to be human and Christian. These persons must be sought out like the precious pearl and thanks should be given when they are found.”⁴⁶ For his part, Johann Baptist Metz, concerned with what he called “a profound schism between doctrine and life, between theological system and religious experience, between theology and religion,”⁴⁷ sought “a dogmatic theology that arises out of life’s histories, a kind of theological existential biography.”⁴⁸ He found one in his mentor, Karl Rahner.

I want to do something similar and look briefly at a remarkable theological life, a genuine icon of the integration of spirituality and theology.⁴⁹ This figure is neither a martyr nor a theologian. But he is someone who lived “in the vicinity of the end of the world.” Precisely there, where despair would seem the most rational course, he devoted himself to the minute actualizing of new possibilities toward a new and transformed world.

His name is Nicholas Black Elk. Born in the 1860s on the banks of the Little Powder River in what is now Wyoming, Black Elk belonged to the Oglala Lakota Sioux. As a boy he experienced several mystical visions that shaped his entire life. He also knew his share of historical drama. As a teenager he fought against Custer’s cavalry at the Battle of the Little Bighorn and came away with at least one scalp.⁵⁰ As a revered medicine man of his people, he experienced the moral and human catastrophe of Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890.⁵¹ Nicholas Black Elk achieved literary notoriety and fame with the publication in 1932 of John Neihardt’s famous book, *Black*

⁴⁶ Jon Sobrino, “Ignacio Ellacuría, the Human Being and the Christian: ‘Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross,’” in Burke & Lassalle Klein, eds., *Love that Produces Hope*, 3.

⁴⁷ Metz, “Do We Miss Karl Rahner?” in *A Passion for God*, 101.

⁴⁸ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 199.

⁴⁹ In my earlier sketches of this paper I planned to offer three or even four examples of such icons and many people occurred to me to fit this description, including some whom I have mentioned, however briefly, in this essay. I thought especially of ETTY HILLESUM, but Martin Luther King, Sojourner Truth, Dorothy Stang, Oscar Romero, Denise Levertov, Ignacio Ellacuría, Dorothy Day and many others could be mentioned here. It is hoped that readers will add many more examples to this list.

⁵⁰ Michael F. Steltencamp, *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Missionary, Mystic* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 36-37.

⁵¹ Steltencamp, 65-72.

Elk Speaks.⁵² A poet and writer, Neihardt interviewed Black Elk for a number of weeks at his home on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The book became wildly popular about thirty years later in the 1960s and 1970s. It is like a contemporary religious classic. But oddly, it leaves out the second half of Black Elk's life.

On December 6, 1904, Black Elk was baptized a Catholic and took the name Nicholas. He became friends with the Jesuits of the Holy Rosary Mission and he served with them as a catechist on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Hundreds of Lakota became Christians because of him. He took pride in both his Christian name, Nicholas (and the common diminutive, Nick), and his Lakota name, Black Elk. He usually signed his letters using both names. Both the Lakota and Catholic elements of his identity were of utmost importance to him and both were crucial to his pastoral success among the Lakota people who were a defeated, impoverished and dispirited people during the years of his extensive evangelical, catechetical, and spiritual ministries.

The theological world of late 19th century and early 20th century Catholicism is quite different from our current situation. Neither his Jesuit friends nor Nicholas Black Elk himself had available to them the hermeneutical framework provided by Vatican II for viewing other religions with greater appreciation and for understanding the "intercultural space" into which Nicholas Black Elk and his Lakota friends and relatives moved. He possessed a remarkable spiritual freedom that allowed him to regard the dreams and visions of his youth as genuine. His newfound Christian faith did not cause him to distrust his earlier experiences or label them as "pagan." He developed a Christian catechism based on the Lakota tradition of "the Two Roads Map." He continued to value his previous life and his previous spiritual experiences, and to share them with generations of Lakota children, with John Neihardt and Joseph Epes Brown, with his Jesuit friends, his Lakota relatives, and many others. The integrity with which Nicholas Black Elk lived—faithful both to his Lakota roots and his profound Catholic conversion—was the fruit of real grace. The resources he drew on to live his faith with such freedom appear to be deeply rooted in his own character, his upbringing, and his conversion. It should be mentioned in this context that the cause for his canonization as a saint has been opened and he has been formally designated as "Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk."⁵³

The theological biography of Nicholas Black Elks reveals a great man of faith, a pioneer of living faith in a catastrophic historical moment. What he was able to do had not yet been done. Perhaps there are analogous figures in other dramatic moments in

⁵² John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (New York: William Morrow, 1932). See also the expanded and carefully researched volume by Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John Neihardt* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); see also Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman, OK/ London, England: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

⁵³ Numerous reports of this can be found online; see, for example, Peter Jesser Smith, "Cause Opens for Nicholas Black Elk, Holy Man of the Lakota," *National Catholic Register*, October 23, 2017, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/cause-opens-for-nicholas-black-elk-holy-man-of-the-lakota>; Kirk Peterson, "Vatican Considers Sainthood for Black Elk," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 25, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/vatican-considers-sainthood-lakota-sioux-medicine-man>.

human history, but in this cultural encounter between Roman Catholic faith and the faith culture of the Lakota Sioux people, the road had not yet been built. Nicholas Black Elk built it. In living this way, with such compassion and heartfelt love for his people and with such freedom and integrity in his relationship with God, he gives witness to a genuine faith journey that is utterly relevant today.

A final thought. In the 1970s, shortly after the Jesuit order began to implement the documents of the 32nd General Congregation, with their emphasis on “the struggle for faith and the struggle for justice which that same faith demands,”⁵⁴ the Superior General of the order, Pedro Arrupe, said this to his fellow Jesuits: “Nowadays the world does not need words, but lives which cannot be explained except through faith and love for Christ’s poor.”⁵⁵ To put this another way, our own lives must be our primary words as theologians, our friendships the source of our most profound evangelization, and our hope a source of hope for everyone we meet, for everyone we love. May our theology embody these marks.

⁵⁴ *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977) 401, translation slightly emended; see Burke, *The Ground beneath the Cross*, 38, n. 31.

⁵⁵ Pedro Arrupe, “Final Address of Father General to the Congregation of Procurators,” *The Spiritual Legacy of Pedro Arrupe, S.J.* (Rome: Jesuit Curia, 1985), 38; see also Pedro Arrupe, *Pedro Arrupe: Essential Writings*, ed. Kevin F. Burke (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 76.