

THE ENDURING GIFT AND THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE OF
JOHANN BAPTIST METZ – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Johann Baptist Metz: Political Salvation beyond the Soteriological Spell?
 Convener: Kevin F. Burke, S.J., Regis University
 Moderator: Kevin F. Burke, S.J., Regis University
 Presenters: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame
 Julia Prinz, V.D.M.F., Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara
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At the time of his death on December 2, 2019, Johann Baptist Metz stood among the most important post-conciliar theologians in the world. Coming of age as a young man during the Second World War, and mentored by Karl Rahner as a philosopher and theologian, Metz helped forge a “new political theology” after the Second Vatican Council in dialogue with the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School and emerging Latin American liberation theologies. Today his provocative thinking is a productive dialogue partner with, among others, Black, Latine, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, comparative, decolonial, and eco-theologies. His mystical-political hermeneutic and way of doing theology is thus indispensable. The presenters in this inaugural session of the Metz Interest Group chose to focus their reflections on the 2024 Convention theme, “Social Salvation.”

Matthew Ashley entitled his remarks “Do We Miss Johann Baptist Metz? Provocations on the Theme of Social Salvation Today,” alluding to the title of Metz’s 1984 essay, “Do We Miss Karl Rahner?” He addressed three main points around which he structured his remarks. First, he noted how Metz picked up and expanded on Rahner’s “aggressive fidelity to the tradition in and for a church setting off in a new direction,” pleading, like Rahner, for “an aggressive fidelity” to the tradition in the implementation of Vatican II. This in turn required a “second courage for reform” from theologians and church leaders. Metz did not attempt to organize a system so much as develop such categories as narrative, memory, and solidarity in connection with the primacy of praxis and the importance of contextual theology. Second, Ashley turned to Rahner’s critiques of the church from within the church to voice his “‘Pathos for God’ as the source of critical freedom towards the church.” He addressed Metz’s idiosyncratic understanding of the theodicy question under the rubric of “the soteriological enspellment” of soteriology where the church moved away from the primary sensitivity of Jesus to the suffering of others, adopting in its place a primary focus on sin and guilt. Third, Ashley addressed what Metz calls “a mysticism of open eyes,” augmenting the way Rahner addresses the schism between theology and spirituality in biographical terms. Metz addresses the mystical-political schism before which he insisted that theology hold itself accountable to history’s victims. In his concluding remarks, Ashley reflected on Metz’s insistence that theology always be a “corrective theology.” He also deduced several parameters by which Metz measured whether a corrective was needed. He concluded noting that, while Metz never developed a constructive theology of his own, “his provocative, interruptive prose”

moves us, as theologians, “to tarry just a little bit longer than our comfort level allows...with the world’s history of suffering.”

Julia Prinz, in her paper entitled “Lament, Memory, and Healing: Johann Baptist Metz and the Inherent Politicalness of Salvation,” illustrated how Metz’s political theology not only resists the bourgeois privatization of religion, but ideological justifications of the political uses of religion and theology as well. Investigating the German cultural context in which she, like Metz, grew up, Prinz projected images from German artists Franz Marc, Ernst Barlach, Paul Klee, Kaethe Kollwitz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, August Macke, and the Russian, Wasily Kandinsky, works that the Nazis first dubbed “Bolshevik Cultural Art,” and later condemned as “Degenerate Art.” Contrasting these works with fascist art represented by Josef Thorax, Arno Breker, Adolf Wissel, and images used in Nazi propaganda, she then focused on a particular painting by the Jewish artist, Marc Chagall entitled, “Die Prise” [*“The Snuff”*]. It depicts a Hasidic Jew studying Torah on the Sabbath, while enjoying a bit of snuff (which, unlike smoking, did not violate the Sabbath.) The Nazis castigated this humorous image, interpreting it as depicting “the Jew that is thinking about how to destroy the Germans.” Turning to Metz’s celebrated early work, *Poverty of Spirit*, Prinz illustrated Metz’s “anthropological theology” using some of the same works of art. Moving from Metz’s understanding of vulnerability, the need for community, and a view of salvation that is communal, she then addressed how dangerous memory and remembrance (not mere repetition) are needed to create and sustain a living tradition. Prinz asked: “Is it perhaps precisely the Geschichts-boundedness of lament and the timelessness of the cry, ‘Maranatha,’ that calls us forth to continue to do theology in dialogue with Johann Baptist Metz?” She concluded with Chagall’s famous painting of the “White Crucifix” which depicts Jesus the Jew crucified and surrounded by other images of Jewish suffering—victims and witnesses of Russian pogroms, Kristallnacht, and Auschwitz, along with refugees, a widow and an orphan, and Ahasver, the always-on-the-move Jew (a central figure in late Medieval antisemitism)—who together form a rich tableau of social suffering and the need to participate in social salvation.

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