

Presidential Address POLITICAL THEOLOGY AS INTERRUPTIVE

To the centennial memory of my teacher and yours,
Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan of the Society of Jesus,
who, drawn on by love of the Word Incarnate,
did all that he could to incarnate the meaning of that Word
in theology for church and society.
ad majorem gloriam Dei

In the highly acclaimed novel *Songs of Enchantment*, Nigerian-born writer Ben Okri draws us into the suffocating nightmare of a young boy, Azaro, a spirit-child or, in Yoruba lore, an *abiku*.¹ The boy recognizes that he has hurled himself quite accidentally into a dreadful and sinister dream world. Azaro is caught in a mad nightmare of violence, famine, hunger, corruption, and brutality. Like the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, the young *abiku* reports his vision, no matter how terrible: "I saw history as a madman with a machine gun, a madman eating up the twisting flesh of the innocent and the silent."²

This sentence may well serve as an emblem for our time: We too wake each morning to find ourselves in a nightmare of violence transmitted by radio, cable, Internet, and television network news—BBC, CNN, Fox, MSNBC. We feel disease as we listen to correspondents and embedded journalists compete to narrate video clips of the previous day's carnage in Afghanistan, Rwanda, Indonesia, Haiti, Iraq, Congo, India, Pakistan, Chechnya, Spain, Nigeria, Sudan, Bosnia, Uganda. Who among us can set aside the shocking images of decaying bodies and bleached bones in Rwanda? Who among us can forget the Pentagon released videotapes of ordinances, so-called smart bombs, demolishing cities and villages? Who can erase the incredulous and mesmerizing sight of commercial airliners slicing the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City? Who does not yearn to close his or her ears to the raw and howling grief of Palestinians and Israelis? Who does not shudder at drive-by shootings in Roxbury or Cincinnati or Detroit or New Orleans? Who does not long to erase from memory the sight of the mutilated body of a U. S. soldier in Somalia? Who will forget the photographs of men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States sexually humiliating and torturing Iraqis in Abu Ghraib prison?

¹According to Yoruba cultural lore, an *abiku* is a child destined to die in infancy and to be reborn to the same mother over and over again.

²Ben Okri, *Songs of Enchantment* (1993; New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1994) 89.

But, violence can never merely be observed; it must be judged. Such a repetitive barrage of images threatens to anesthetize our senses, dull our minds, blunt our moral sensibilities. Writing about the gravity of our condition, essayist Susan Sontag concludes that we have grown not only indifferent, but also afraid.³ We have become, at once, inured to and incited by violence and brutality; the social expressions of our cultural meanings and values soak in coarseness and vulgarity, our public institutions collapse under the selfish economic self-interest of elites who daily thwart the survival, the hope, the very lives of others. Violence, crude and subtle, daily caricatures solidarity and mocks forgiveness and reconciliation.

To quote Bernard Lonergan, "human activity [has] settle[d] down to a decadent routine, and initiative [has become] the privilege of violence."⁴ How can we theologians writing from within the last remaining superpower of the twenty-first century interrupt this initiative? How are we to meet the intellectual, moral, and religious challenges thrown down by the exigencies of the global situation? How might our exercise of theology uproot this privilege and nurture forms of self-transcending love that both ground forgiveness and promote justice, reconciliation, and peace? How might theology assist religion, so incriminated in violence, once again to embrace its prophetic and redemptive role? How might our theology confront bias and *ressentiment* now turned belligerent, dividing humankind, and menacing peoples and cultures with destruction?⁵ If a function of theology is "to mediate between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix,"⁶ then political theology constitutes a crucial, even necessary, framework for doing theology in our time, in the United States.

I propose to advance my thesis in this way. A first section reviews the recovery of political theology in Germany, its eclipse in the United States, and a statement of its current relevance. Against this background, a *second section* sets out a framework for political theology as interruptive in a threefold manner: (1) interruptive of our nation's spiritual emptiness, profound cultural poverty, and subjugation and commodification of human "others"; (2) interruptive of what

³Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 100-101. See also Morris Berman, *The Twilight of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2000); Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: New Press, 1998); Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2*, trans. Loïc Wacquant (New York: New Press, 2003).

⁴Bernard Lonergan, *Insight, a Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 8.

⁵Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 40.

⁶*Ibid.*, xi.

Benjamin Valentin calls the "enchantment"⁷ of praxis-based theologies with expressive and symbolic culture, identity politics and difference which, given the staggering and rapid geopolitical changes in the world, jeopardizes their critical apparatus; and (3) interruptive of the murky, disturbing connection between religion, terrorism, and violence.⁸

However, if, as many scholars assert, religion is incriminated in violence, how are violence and evil to be overcome? A third section lays out the precepts of the Gospel, that for Christian believers, present the response to this question; and, in light of what the Gospel teaches about forgiveness and reconciliation, a *fourth section* proposes a few duties for us as theologians writing and teaching in this place at these times.

This address brings together several difficult and dense topics. The constraints of the occasion do not allow for the level of nuance that the gravity of our cultural and social situation requires. Nonetheless, I am moved to risk to speak, for not to speak betrays my commitment to the crucified Jesus, my love of theology, our Church, and our Society. Not to speak betrays the trust of colleagues and companions; not to speak betrays my accountability to the poor. From around the world, social critics, religious and political leaders, theologians, and philosophers, women and men, young and old from every walk of life condemn the new imperialism rising from our nation to impose itself on others. Their cries place a claim on our theological, moral, and religious *praxis*. We ignore these voices to our peril. We must listen and respond, above all, to the cries of those dark, despised, excluded, poor children, women, and men, who are crushed beneath the weight of a distorted peace cobbled together from greed, calculation, and ignorance. Their protest demands that our theology become not only public, but also political.

⁷Benjamin Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond, Culture, Identity, and Difference* (New York: Trinity Press International, 2002) xix, 39-80. See also Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World: A Postmodern Theology after Postmodernism* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004) 3.

⁸Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., *Facing Terrorism: Responding as Christians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004) 36-37. See also Paul Gilbert, *New Terror, New Wars* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003).

POLITICAL THEOLOGY AS INTERRUPTIVE

When Jürgen Moltmann, Dorothee Soelle, and Johann Baptist Metz⁹ retrieved both theology's transcendent and eschatological stance in society and history and its critical *praxial* impulse, they reclaimed for theology not only a public role, but also an authentically political one.¹⁰ In so doing, these theologians not only contested theology's service to ideology during the Third Reich but also recovered the ancient notion of political life as a virtuous, good, and just life lived in realization of a common good. The existential and moral provocation for their reinterpretation of political theology stemmed from tolerance in the face of the "Final Solution," a Christianity grown privatized and domesticated for the consumption of the propertied bourgeoisie, and the relativization of suffering, poverty, and freedom in confrontation with the peoples of the so-called "third world."

Moltmann, Soelle, and Metz initiated a thoroughgoing investigation of the relation of theology to faith in society. They grounded their formulations in the priceless memory of the passion and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. His dangerous exercise of freedom served as the most fundamental criteria for their theology. Particularly for Metz and Soelle, political theology extended to a theology of the subject, insisting that individual or personal moral *praxis* can never be neutral or innocent or apolitical. Private behaviors not only carry moral consequences, but cultural, public, and social (i.e., political, economic, and technological) ones as well. Compactly, political theology may be expressed as following the crucified Jesus, that is, making the memory of Jesus of Nazareth public through a Christian *praxis* in society that acts in compassion-

⁹Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). Dorothee Soelle, *Political Theology*, trans. John Shelley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974); *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kain (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheid (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. David Smith (1977; New York: Seabury Press, 1980); *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1999); *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York/Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1998).

¹⁰In the first quarter of 1933, Adolf Hitler took up the post of chancellor of Germany, gained control of the Reichstag, and solidified his rule through manipulation of legislation. The following year, Carl Schmitt published a revised edition of his *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (1st ed., 1922; rev. ed., 1934; repr., Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985). Schmitt bent natural law teaching to the ideological service of National Socialism and fascism.

ate solidarity with the dead and past victims of injustice in history. Active compassionate solidarity evokes conversion of heart as well as concrete, practical conversion of living; it calls for the disruption of every attempt to disregard the history of human suffering or to deface suffering human subjects. Thus, Metz directed political theology toward "the question of God in the face of the history of suffering in the world, in [God's] world." Thus, he rooted that theology in a "speaking about God within the *conversio ad passionem*. Whoever talks about God in Jesus' sense will always take into account the way one's own preformulated certainties are wounded by the misfortune of others."¹¹

My thesis, as it stands, is quite straightforward; yet it admits just a whiff of controversy. Despite the formidable presentations of Moltmann, Soelle, and Metz, political theology, arguably, never gained firm footing in the United States. German political theology arrived on our shores as the work of theologians shaken by humanity's descent into violence and evil. It bristled with biting challenges. Political theology's commitment to history and the memory of suffering dared us to wrestle with the diremption of history and dangerous memories in a nation, which many consider conceived in violence. Its critical self-examen reminded us that the formal conditions for any theology of social transformation could be constituted only by regard for the very existence and human flourishing of the dispossessed, enslaved, raped, mutilated, and murdered—the Indians, *mestizos*, and Africans. Its protest against the ruin of human lives and the spoiling of human spirits called into question our tolerance of the artificial construction of racial categories and the historical and social processes by which these categories were created, transmitted, and inhabited. Political theology urged us to stand up for the humanness of all human persons, especially despised, excluded, and poor children, women, and men as they endured marginalization and containment, economic exploitation and powerlessness, cultural degradation and physical assault, systemic and random violence.

My contention is this: Rather than wrestle with these issues, most of us turned away and focused, at least, a portion of our attention on *academic* study of theologies of liberation from Central and Latin America and South Africa—theologies attentive to contexts and questions at a distance. Yet, this claim in no way implies that theologies of liberation enjoyed critical appreciative reception. Certainly, throughout most of the 1970s and early 1980s, they did not; and, most recently, some of us, unwisely, have begun to predict their demise. At the same time, the work of Gregory Baum, Marie Augusta Neal, John Coleman, the early Matthew Lamb, and Dennis McCann, among others, represents conspicuous

¹¹Metz, *A Passion for God*, 2.

exceptions to this charge.¹² Still, most of us turned our gaze elsewhere, permitting the eclipse of political theology in the United States.

But the situation now generated by the ambiguities of globalization,¹³ the intensity and scope of violence and terrorism around the world, the reckless war against Iraq, the pressures that neoliberal policies exert on vulnerable peoples and nations, the worldwide spread of HIV/AIDS, the careless commercialization of human life, the implosion of religious authority, particularly in our regional Church, and the power of market values to "blur the lines between democracy, majoritarianism and fascism"¹⁴ requires an interruption that radically will disclose the transcendent origin and end of the whole of life. This new global situation begs for interruption—for political theology.

A THREEFOLD INTERRUPTION

What follows are three interruptions that implicate the logos of theology in the task of clarifying transcendence.

(1) *Interruption of Spiritual and Cultural Deformation.* Scholars, novelists, poets, and thoughtful intellectuals, including Gloria Anzaldúa, Morris Berman, Jonathan Schell, Cornel West, Patricia Williams, and Iris Marion Young, have chronicled the collapse of our culture into escalating social and economic inequality, the decline of literacy, impoverishment of critical intelligence, increased apathy with regard to civic and citizen responsibilities; the enervating drain of sexual exploitation and pornography—especially child pornography—on our moral meanings and values, the abuse of drugs; the homogenization, trivialization, and reduction of the content and creativity of culture through mass advertising and profit-driven marketing, the desocialization of economic life. And, as Jean Bethke Elshtain observes, "Nothing is holy, sacred, or off-limits in

¹²See Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975); Marie Augusta Neal, *A Sociotheology of Letting Go: The Rule of a First World Church Facing Third World Peoples*, An Exploration Book (New York: Paulist Press, 1977); John A. Coleman, *An American Strategic Theology* (New York/Ramsey NJ: Paulist Press, 1982); Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982); Dennis P. McCann and Charles R. Strain, *Polity and Praxis, A Program for American Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985).

¹³Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). See also Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and the Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999); cf. John Ralston Saul, "The Collapse of Globalism and the Rebirth of Nationalism," *Harper's Magazine* 308/1846 (March 2004): 33-43.

¹⁴Arundhati Roy, "The New American Century," *The Nation* 278/5 (9 February 2004): 12. See also Roy's *Power Politics* (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2001) and *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2004).

a world in which everything is for sale."¹⁵ This deformation challenges us to enact what Soelle names a "hermeneutics of hungers of the rich."¹⁶ Of course, the hungers of the rich can in no way be compared to the material, real, depleting hungers of the poor. However, a political theology will support creating and healing in society by exposing and setting out the ways in which the hungers of the rich—that is, the inability to be empathetic, to question desire, to relinquish control—not only starve the poor but sap strength and vigor from their own spiritual and moral lives.

Political theology will interpret just how our economic decisions are not value-free, not innocent, and never merely individualistic; rather, that theology will uncover the moral, ethical, and cultural consequences of those decisions. Soelle's sharp and well known critique of materialism resonates in the words of John Paul II: "It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards "having" rather than "being," and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself."¹⁷ Political theology will demonstrate that authentic achievement of our humanity lies not in having, but in being; moreover, that achievement can be realized only by *turning-to-others*, thereby, interrupting privatizing, individualistic, destructive behavior.

(2) *An Interruption within Theology*. To call into question the absorption of contemporary praxis-based theologies with popular religious devotion, culture, and cultural meanings; with difference, identity, racial, and gender politics in *no way discredits* the intellectual clarity, vitality, and necessary insights of Asian, black, Latino/a, *minjung*, *mujerista*, Native American, white feminist, and womanist theologies. For more than four decades, these theologies have advocated and defended the humanity, beauty, dignity, and virtue of women and men, who were accorded little, if any, status on the ledger of the United States. At the same time, these theologies have labored to nurture the gifts and potential of their peoples, cultures, and communities to flower within the Church; yet, talents for intellectual work, education, and creative ministry have remained neglected or ignored. In a cultural and social matrix in which people of color and women frequently are the focus of unprovoked hostility, these praxis-based theologies can never refuse to defend the essential humanness of people of color and women. Further, these theologies have an indispensable intellectual and critical contribution to make to the whole of theology—historical, fundamental, systematic, constructive, moral, pastoral, biblical. At the same time urgent social problems disturb their agendas—homelessness, job insecurity, lack of adequate

¹⁵Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Who Are We? Critical Reflections and Hopeful Possibilities* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2000) 47.

¹⁶Soelle, *Silent Cry*, 46-48.

¹⁷John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus, Encyclical Letter on the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* #36, 1 May 1991, as at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/en.html (15 May 2004).

health care and worker protections, steady degradation of wages and poverty, violation of the human rights of migrants and undocumented workers, disproportionate rates of imprisonment for *Latinos* and African American men and women, and the increasing spread of the HIV/AIDS virus among *Latinas* and African American women.

Please do not misinterpret my critique of praxis-based theologies. This critique is coupled with an appeal to these theologies to envision, lead, and work out a larger project that clarifies our relation to one another as social and historical human subjects, who are loved and valued by God in God's world.

Please do not misinterpret my critique of praxis-based theologies. This critique in no way relieves white South African, North American, European, or Australian men of theological responsibility for serious analysis of the matrix of privilege and domination from which they benefit because of colonial circumstance and social contrivance. The state of our national and global condition interrupts all theological agendas and moves to the fore our participation and collaboration in a migration already begun from behind our desks and closed office doors to encounters with working and nonemployable poor, with homeless and hungry children and women and men, with prisoners, with battered women, with victims of sexual abuse, with Latino/Latina and African American youth ripened for suicide by our nation's callousness and disdain.

(3) *Political Theology as Interruptive of Violence.* Basically violence is the coercive attempt to limit or thwart the exercise and realization of the essential and effective freedom of a human person or a social group. It aims to obliterate the fundamental liberty or active, dynamic, determination of self by the human person. Violence seeks to destroy not only the body, but the spirit as well; hence, it breeds despair, hopelessness, and rage.

Deep-seated ambivalence characterizes religious attitudes toward violence. For instance, some scholars contend that sacrifice, an intimate and integral religious ritual that includes some use of violence, manifests "the most fundamental form of religiosity."¹⁸ René Girard says more—asserting that violence is related necessarily to religion; the practice of one requires the practice of the other.¹⁹ In his study *Terror in the Mind of God*, Mark Juergensmeyer spells out how, on the one hand, religious ideas have lent depth and clarity to "real experiences of economic destitution, social oppression, political corruption, and a desperate need for the hope of rising above the limitations of modern life."²⁰ On the other hand, images of divine warfare, of God as a mighty "man of war" (Exodus 15:3), of cosmic battles "provide the script being played out in the violent performances of militant religious activists and [are] linked to notions of

¹⁸Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (2000; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 170.

¹⁹René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

²⁰Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 248.

conquest and failure, martyrdom and sacrifice."²¹ On Juergensmeyer's account, the interplay between religious aspirations and political anger makes "religious violence particularly savage and relentless [as] its perpetrators have placed religious images of divine struggle in the service of worldly political battles."²² Thus, while acts of terrorism serve political purposes, these acts also evoke a much larger spiritual confrontation.

Our political theology recognizes that life is vested with an "apocalyptic goal", which orients the horizon of our expectation toward the coming of the Lord; yet, that orientation never surrenders its cultural and social responsibilities.²³ Hence, political theology will scrutinize from the perspective of the excluded, despised, and poor, the development, promotion, and advance of programs and schemes that propose to resolve violence, injustice, and oppression. Further, political theology will provide a critique of the Church whenever it attempts to evade the dangerous memory of the crucified Jesus by slipping into what Metz names a "fatal banality"²⁴ or an irenic conformity so passive that it glides over the resolute work of authentic peace, thereby, betraying its mystery.

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Forgiveness is neither an abstract concept, nor mere emotion or feeling. For the followers of Jesus, in the interruption of violence, the ground of forgiveness is the ground beneath the cross. The precepts of the Christian Scriptures instruct us to return good for evil, to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us (*Matthew* 5:38-48). These commands set the parameters for our imitation of Jesus of Nazareth, of the "way" that he lived and taught, which not only calls for a new way of being in the world, but also turns us toward the cross. The crucified Jesus reveals the power and wisdom of God, a wisdom that embraces a path, which the pride of the world despises and labels as absurd. Yet, this very divine wisdom counters this conceit and transforms death into life. Christ crucified is the power of God, the wisdom of God (*I Corinthians* 18, 24-25, 27-28). For the followers of Jesus of Nazareth the only appropriate responses to violence and malevolence are forgiveness and reconciliation. For the followers of Jesus of Nazareth the only appropriate response to violence and malevolence is love—the absorption of evil, the overcoming of evil by good or what Lonergan named the "law of the cross."²⁵

²¹Ibid., 141.

²²Ibid.

²³Metz, *Love's Strategy*, 150.

²⁴Ibid., 145.

²⁵Lonergan, *De Verbo Incarnato* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1961) esp. chs. 4 and 5.

NEW DUTIES

If we are to do political theology in the present cultural and social situation of the United States, we theologians must undertake new duties. Let me propose three of these—*witness*, *memory*, and *lament*.

Witness. At the level of common sense, to witness connotes simply to communicate about something apprehended, whether through the senses or through belief. At a technical level, for instance, in legal or juridical settings, to witness or to tell the truth that one knows may disclose not only empirical information, but moral, ethical, even, perhaps, ontological data as well. For truth-telling conforms us in truth, while lying mires us in falsehood, in lies.

Recall that the word witness comes from the Greek term *martyr*. The martyr witnessed for her or his faith even if that witness involved self-sacrifice or death. Indeed, for the martyr, the truth is a matter of life or death; thus the witness is never a spectator, never a dilettante. In order to interrupt the violence that tears at the fabric of our society, in order to do political theology, we theologians must be willing to sacrifice—our comforts, our security, our joys, perhaps, our lives.

Memory. The protection and recovery of memory presents us with a second duty. On the one side, political theology resists the reduction and homogenization of the stories of the despised, excluded, and poor. Yet, *all* stories of *all* cultural and social groups are to be brought to the table—told, held, shared, examined, and understood. If these stories are to offer us any hope of forgiveness and reconciliation, of justice and solidarity, then we must allow them to interrupt, amend, and resonate in the stories of others. We need to tell and learn and cherish the stories of the men and women who rode the coffin ships from Ireland, who sought refuge from oppression and poverty in Eastern Europe, who survived the attempt at genocide in Armenia, who came to North America looking for a future full of justice and peace and love. These stories challenges us to overcome the temptation to selective memory: rather than erase memories, we confront the brokenness and hurt, failures and joys that frighten us as well as the wounds in which we take exquisite comfort. We must lance and cauterize these recollections, for infected memories feed violence. Moreover, if we remember and tell our stories more inclusively, read all our stories against the grain of our own customs and mores, familial cultures and traditions, we will glimpse possibilities of hope and reconciliation.

On the other side, the susceptibility of our nation to an intentionally induced cultural and historical amnesia as well as an all too swift revision of events or persons appalls. We need to retrieve the histories of the massive suffering endured on the "Trail of Tears," in the Middle Passage, in the violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo—and more. We need to recover and expose memories that we have been too fearful and too ashamed to admit and confront. We theologians must take serious the "negativity of history in its interruptive and

catastrophic character," for these histories of suffering from the theological locus of our truth-telling.²⁶

Lament constitutes a third duty. Lament is both a form of prayer and a practice of justice. To pray in lament, Kathleen O'Connor writes is "to pray in a spirit of resistance."²⁷ Lament protests, pushes against that calculus of power by which the weak and the vulnerable suffer oppression and abuse. Lament not only dialogues, but also boxes with God—questions, argues, and rebukes. In this way, lament takes seriously God's compassionate love and care in the midst of suffering and privation even as it "refuses to accept a view of the world where God fixes everything, although God has not done so" in the past.²⁸

As a practice of justice, lament announces aloud and publicly what is unjust in the here-and-now. Lament names and grieves injustice: the collapse of national and global relationships; violence and terrorism; the pernicious sexual abuse of children; the persistent exploitation and degradation of women; discrimination against gay men and lesbians, the warping of ministry and pastoral relationships in our Church. Lament names and grieves social pain: when women and men are deprived of human dignity, of adequate nourishment and shelter, of conditions for the flourishing of body and mind, heart and spirit. Lament makes "spaces of recognition and catharsis" that prepare for justice.²⁹ Prayers of lament summon us beyond ourselves and call us to be friends of God and prophets, "the body of Christ broken together, the sacrament of healing for our world."³⁰

Lament will contribute to political theology's effort to interrupt the cycle of cultural and social decline. It will support our political theology in its witness, in its truth-telling for "without pain brought to the open, seen, and heard, paid attention to and acknowledged,"³¹ genuine healing of culture and spirit, adequate transformative social solutions, and forgiveness reconciliation can be possible.

CONCLUSION

In this address, I have tried to underscore our responsibilities as theologians who live in this floundering and endangered democracy. Of course, speaking about our responsibilities in this part of the North American continent in no way ignores our members, colleagues, and guests from Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Republic of South Africa. Rather precisely because these colleagues and friends expect much of us we must speak up for the dignity of our country. For the actions of our putatively elected government have grown

²⁶Metz, *Love's Strategy*, 150, 139.

²⁷Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2002) 131.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 128.

³⁰Ibid., 132.

³¹Ibid.

shameful in the extreme—not only in outsourcing our defense to mercenaries, not only in holding us in a miasma of deceit, not only in treating our laws, traditions, and customs with contempt, not even in the grievous insult to the Ancients through the militarization of democracy, but above all in the banality of excuses unworthy of elementary school children. The honor of the United States has been sullied, its dignity defiled, and once again, memory and history endangered so as to become an intolerable burden that bends us toward public and historical amnesia. The women and men of our country are caught between a feeling of innocence, but without responsibility and a feeling of guilt, but without compunction or a sense of consequences.

The global situation has reached a most dire point. As highly trained intellectuals, we can no longer cling to a pretense at incompetence in research on politics or economics, no longer accept that there is nothing we can do, no longer sit silent on the sidelines in fear or apathy or cynicism. If no one else will sound an alarm against our nation's excessive pursuit of gratification and its damning "exchange [of] spiritual freedom and moral responsibility for economic psychic security,"³² then we theologians must. For we are not motivated by the desire to protect a style of life, but rather by the renewal of life; we are not motivated by fear of death, but rather by hope—a hope rooted in the dangerous memory of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth.

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³²T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) 300.