

contributing to the dismantling of the structures of racism in the church and in society for the sake of Gospel.

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THEOLOGY AND SUFFERING

Topic: Reading Texts of Terror: Narrative Redemptions of Suffering
 Convener: Bruce T. Morrill, Boston College
 Presenter: Bruce T. Morrill
 Respondent: Terry Veling, St. Thomas University

Morrill presented a lengthy study of how the solidarity envisioned by Christian tradition, as advanced by the Second Vatican Council and the ongoing renewal of the Church's liturgy, takes practical shape today through one particular activity, namely reading the written text. Morrill's concern is with how the contemporary, well-educated, socially secure North Atlantic believer is able to read texts that testify to horrific human suffering—specifically, the Guatemalan narrative, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and, more briefly, the Passion Narratives—so as not to be immobilized by their terror but, rather, to be moved with a desire to encounter God in the suffering humanity therein. The Nobel laureate Menchú's story and the Passion Narratives each bear both mystical and political dimensions, even though the former might be thought of more in political terms and the latter, the mystical. A further similarity between these texts, Morrill has come to recognize, is the way in which the modern academy has scrutinized their veracity. Menchú's testimonial and the accounts of Jesus' abduction and execution are both stories in which the words and events occurring to an individual "speak" for a much larger body of people, compressing multiple characters and events into singular accounts that are held together by an array of traditional images.

In 1998 a North American anthropologist, as well as investigative reporters from the *New York Times*, published studies concluding that Menchú's narration of the hardship of the Mayan people could not be the eyewitness account she claimed it to be. The issues raised at that time and since by literary scholars, anthropologists and historians are not unlike those of the contemporary scholarly, ecclesial, and pastoral debates concerning biblical scholarship: questions of historical fact, narrative integrity, collective identity, the literary nature of realism, representation, symbol and myth. Pervading all these issues, whether concerning the Bible or contemporary Latin American testimonials, is the question of truth itself, a problem that can only be entertained and discussed by differing parties if they recognize that the very notion of truth bears with it some

form of commitment. The contextual reality of truth-as-commitment animates current Catholic biblical scholars' disagreements over the direction they think their discipline should take. This is no less the case in reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. The debate over the veracity of the text sheds as much light on the readers, on the world in front of the text, on the political world of North American scholarship, as it does on Menchú's motives and narrative strategies.

Morrill proposes that the reader of the text must always ask: What do I want to hear in this story? Why do I want to hear this story? What am I listening for? Such questions always need Latin Americanist Doris Sommer's insistence (drawing from but going beyond postmodern methodology) that difference genuinely be respected, that in reading the Other we not seek a self-serving intimacy, resulting in the failure to "distinguish doing good from feeling good." To seek honestly some measure of truth in the reading of the text—whether Menchú's or the gospels' narratives of terror—requires a conscious articulation of the reader's desires so that both positive and negative intentions can be acknowledged, so that ethical imperatives not be distorted, let alone avoided.

Morrill concludes that what we need today are readings, liturgical and otherwise, that bespeak the sheer incomprehensibility of the scope and depth of human suffering and the ongoing desire for God to meet us therein. This is a religion much more of questions than ready answers, but one not lost or without direction. We question and search in a world revealed by baptismal faith, caught in the ongoing tension of the already/not-yet revelation of salvation in Christ. Far from aimless and lacking direction, we have Scripture as the primary resource for forging the always needed prophetic vision for the given age. But that is just another way of saying that we are responsible for tradition's being a *living* tradition, a tradition for the life of the world. The mystical-political reading of the texts of terror turns Johann Baptist Metz's apocalyptic cry, "What is God waiting for?" back on us: What are we waiting for? Why would we not seek the Christ who promises to meet us now in the suffering humanity catalogued in Matthew 25? We must admit that, as the sole or even primary motive, the fear of final judgment has proven largely ineffective. We go to meet him, rather, in the suffering of our world so that we might go to meet him, the Bridegroom, who comes to us each Sunday in the Eucharistic celebration. We live a mystical-political praxis in anticipation of celebrating with him and all victims of history at the heavenly wedding banquet.

Terry Veling responded appreciatively to Morrill's paper by drawing on a number of philosophers, political and literary theorists (Adorno, Levinas, Adrienne Rich) whose insights complement and build upon the key issues Morrill raised. Notable was Veling's ability to relate the performativity of textual reading to questions about liturgical participation.

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