

THE NEW POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Topic: "The New Political Theology"—Thirty Years Later
 Convener: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame
 Moderator: Kevin F. Burke, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
 Presenter: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame
 Respondent: Mary Doak, University of San Diego

In 1977, Johann Baptist Metz published the pivotal mature statement of his "new political theology," *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft*. A generation (thirty years) later, Matt Ashley's new English translation of this important text appeared, *Faith in History and Society* (Continuum Press.) The beginning of a new generation in the "new political theology" provided an opportune moment to reconsider the impact of Metz's work and to note that, while Metz continues to insist on the importance of core Enlightenment values, he has moved into increasing proximity to modernity's postmodern critiques. Accordingly, a fruitful continuation of his theological system requires an analysis of the attractions and aversions involved in this proximity to such diverse and important figures as Benedict XVI, Jürgen Habermas and, above all, Emmanuel Levinas. Likewise, this conference provided an excellent opportunity to reflect on the relevance of such an analysis for a North American political theology today.

In his title presentation, "*The New Political Theology*"—*Thirty Years Later*, Matt Ashley charted how Metz continued developing his "new political theology" in conversation with these important new strands in continental philosophy. At the same time, Metz deepened his early reflections on memory and remembering as a theological category, and particularly the memory of suffering. In so doing he has continued to critique a growing amnesia both within the Church and within European society, an amnesia that threatens core Enlightenment values, such as the promotion of justice for all persons, and blocks the way to a tolerance for other religions and worldviews that does not decay into an easy *laissez faire* pluralism. He has come to insist more forcefully on a way of exercising reason in general (and, a fortiori, theological reason) that forefronts reason's constitutive relationship to remembering—a form of reason he calls "anamnestic reason." This way of presenting Metz's development allows us to understand the positions he has taken in his dialogue with the contemporary figures mentioned above, Benedict XVI, Jürgen Habermas and Emmanuel Levinas. With his claim that there is a form of "logos" proper to the Hebrew roots of Christianity which cannot be ignored or superseded by attention to the logos of Greek thought, Metz parts ways with Benedict XVI. From a different angle, he criticizes Habermas for not taking anamnestic reason seriously enough. Finally, while asserting an "elective affinity" for Levinas's insistence on the authority of the other, Metz roots that authority in memory and this separates his approach from that of Levinas. Whether this separation is one of opposition or fruitful tension remains to be seen. A future agenda for political theology is to continue working out the ontological and ethical-political commitments involved in these

post- or still-modern confrontations between Metz and his intellectual contemporaries.

The ongoing challenge of Metz's political theology for the North American context was the focus of Mary Doak's response to Ashley's presentation. Doak concurred with Ashley that attention to an anamnestic reason is essential to understanding Metz's theological contribution, perhaps especially in the United States where a market-driven emphasis on momentary consumption renders historical memories irrelevant to contemporary life and to public discourse. Doak welcomed Ashley's focus on Metz's recovery of dangerous memory as a concrete and pluralizing category that inspires solidarity and requires constant openness to the repressed or forgotten other. This approach provides a path for a political theology that would challenge both the ahistorical rootlessness and the triumphalist, idealized history that are the dominant options in church and society in North America. Doak concluded that Metz's anamnestic reason may well be our best hope for a theology able to inspire and inform a Christian witness that compromises neither public relevance nor fidelity to the Christian tradition.

The lively conversation that followed the two presentations focused on a range of crucial theological and ethical issues, including the importance of understanding memory as a praxis (remembering), of remembering suffering in a way that avoids perpetuating cycles of violence (for Metz remembering suffering begins with remembering the suffering of others, including the suffering of one's enemies), and (as a possible corrective to Metz), the importance of including joy and hope among theology's fundamental categories. Above all, attention was paid to the importance of Metz's work to the continuation of the Enlightenment commitment to universal human rights.

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