The chapter titled “The Church and the World in the Light of a ‘Political Theology’” from Johannes B. Metz’s seminal book *Theology of the World* is a dense one that demands careful reading and analysis. At the outset, Metz makes his tasks clear: to reflect on the meaning and task of what he calls “political theology,” and to examine in a critical way the relationship that the Church has with the world (or should have with the world) in light of his reflections. Before diving into an analytical look at the text to mine it for the richness and depth of meaning it contains, it is important to take a look at it for what it is, rather than what I interpret it to be.

As I mentioned, this text demands careful reading: it is not something one would read casually! The language of this chapter is definitely for an audience at home with “speaking theology,” as it were. He opens the chapter by explaining the major tasks of political theology: “to be a critical correction of present-day theology inasmuch as this theology shows an extreme privatizing tendency (a tendency, that is, to center upon the private person rather than ‘public,’ ‘political’ theology)”1 as well as “to be a positive attempt to formulate the eschatological message under the conditions of our present society.”2 In other words, Metz’s tasks are to critique those elements of theology that reduce love of God and love of neighbor to a devotional task that stays comfortably in the four walls of a church building and at the same time make the message of the kingdom of God, which is both here and not here yet, present and relevant to his audience. It is a daunting task, one that was made possible by the advances of the Second Vatican Council, but before we get too ahead of ourselves, it is important to take a look at how Metz develops his arguments.

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2 *ibid*, 109.
Metz begins with a look at how religion became privatized as a critique of Enlightenment and Marxist thought. He laments that the “societal dimension of the Christian message was not given its proper importance but, implicitly or explicitly, treated as a secondary matter.” Rather than grapple with the ideas of the Enlightenment, Metz argues that it skipped over it completely and relegated the task of theology to the private person, and as a result, charity, the pinnacle of virtues, was reduced to “only a private virtue with no political relevance”. This brand of theology, persistent even to today, demands a particular kind of critique. It requires a reaching back to the original sources of the Scriptures to reclaim the social dimension of charity, but also a reclaiming of the eschatological message of Jesus, which is the second task of political theology.

Metz begins this second task by directly confronting the problem presented by Kant (and in doing so also addressing the Enlightenment thought that was avoided earlier and led to the privatization of theology) and arguing that the fundamental interpretive problem of theology is not structural, but relational: the fundamental problem is how theory and practice are related. He turns to the Scriptures to make the connection, and makes a powerful statement on Jesus’ cross as the center that holds theory and practice together: “His cross is now found in the intimacy of the individual, personal heart, not in the sanctuary of a purely religious devotion. It is erected beyond (emphasis mine) these protected and separated precincts, ‘outside,’ as the theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us.” He goes on to talk about how the eschatological promises of the biblical tradition, which he lists as “liberty, peace, justice, [and] reconciliation” are impossible to

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4 *ibid*, 109.
5 *ibid*, 113.
privatize, which leads to the core of his argument about political theology: salvation is socially mediated.

From there Metz moves on to examine the role of the Church in the world in light of the demands and tasks of political theology. In order for the Church to deliver on its crucial role in the context of political theology, it must be an instrument of social liberation, engaging with the world as a critical dialectical partner. In order to do that, it needs to divest itself of what Metz calls the “accoutrements of power”⁶, ground itself in the revolutionary power of love, and stand as a critique of institutions while itself remaining an institution. It is a tall task, to be sure, but in order to do this successfully, Metz argues that a new way of speaking in the Church is required. The Church would need to be a place that is constantly looking critically both *ad intra* and *ad extra*, reading the signs of the times, and calling society to continual renewal and conversion so that the eschatological promises of liberty, peace, justice, and reconciliation can come about. If this sounds a lot like the foundational ideas for the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, that’s because in many ways, they are!

Fr. Johann Baptist Metz (1928-2019) was, like so many theologians present at the Second Vatican Council, shaped not only by the events of the council, but also by the events of the Second World War. He was forced into service for Germany during the war, and was captured and spent seven months as a prisoner of war of the United States⁷. Once he returned to Germany, he entered the seminary and requested to be sent to a Jesuit theological school, where he was introduced to Karl Rahner, someone who would have a profound impact on Metz, to the point

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that Metz considered Rahner his “father in faith”. This experience of World War II must have had a deep effect on Metz, and it shows in his writing: it makes sense for someone who experienced an entire country privatizing their beliefs and not critiquing the institution which was carrying out such destruction to write forcefully about how the Church must be a source of prophetic criticism and dialogue with the world. It is from this locus of experience that his own writing and life “launched a whole epoch of theologians and ecclesiastical leaders,” as Fr. Joachim Schmied wrote upon his death in 2019.

In order to better understand Metz and in particular his chapter on political theology, it is also important to look at some of the sources that influenced and informed his writing. Given that the book Theology of the World was published in 1969, it would not be a stretch of the imagination to say that he was influenced by the writings and discussions of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, he served as a peritus, or theological expert and adviser to Cardinal Franz Konig, one of the driving forces behind the documents of Vatican II, in particular Gaudium et Spes, which speaks to the role of the Church in the modern world. For example, when we read in Gaudium et Spes that the “council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for, the entire human family with which it is bound up than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems,” we can also see the inspiration for Metz and his ideas that the Church must be a critical partner in dialogue with the world. We


must also not discount the power of the Scriptural text on Metz and his writing, in particular the first letter of Peter. In an article from *America Magazine* on the occasion of Metz’s death, Matthew Ashley writes that Metz took his definition of theology from the first letter of Peter: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15).” It is this hope that comes through in Metz’s writing- if it were not present, there would be no reason to invite the Church and the world into a dialogue rooted in the ideals of political theology.

For my own part, I can see how I am a direct beneficiary of Metz’s theology in my own studies and experiences in the Church. I see how contemporary theologians like Daniel Horan use Metz’s ideas of “dangerous memories” to interpret the 2020 election when he writes that Metz “strongly critiqued brushing over difficult truths and the tendency many people have to erase challenging memories in order to replace them with ‘false consciousness of the past.’” I see it in Pope Francis when he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “I dream of a ‘missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.” We are the beneficiaries of Metz’s political theology whenever we see Pope Francis divesting himself, and by extension the Church, of the “accoutrements of power”. The idea may have been written sixty

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12 Daniel P. Horan, “We can only move forward if we acknowledge ‘dangerous memories,” *National Catholic Reporter*, November 4, 2020, https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/faith-seeking-understanding/we-can-only-move-forward-if-we-acknowledge-dangerous

years ago, but I would suggest that its moment has truly arrived in the contemporary Church—people from all walks of life are demanding that the Church engage in dialogue with the world and divest itself of those symbols of power so that we can reclaim the social dimension of faith and salvation—it is now left to us to do the slow work of ensuring that the momentum continues.
Bibliography


