THE CHURCH IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL THEOLOGY:  
The ecclesiology of Johann Baptist Metz  

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In his book *Theology of the World*¹ Johann Baptist Metz attempts to provide a theological interpretation of the secularity of the world. For Metz, secularization represents a shift from a numinized to a hominized world. Humans no longer regard the world as simply "given," but as something which can be examined, manipulated and transformed. This increasing secularization, Metz claims, is not opposed to, but in fact originates from the dynamics of the Christian faith. This he argues by citing the Christian belief in creation, in human freedom, and above all, in the Incarnation. Creation implies that the world is not divine. The Incarnation reveals that God is a God of history; that He is not above or beside but in front of history; that the world becomes the world of humans because God's action in and for the world is always concerned with them. Hence the world has to be understood anthropocentrically, not as an external forum where history happens, but as history itself which humans shape and transform through the exercise of their freedom.

However, secularization is not without its problems. Hominization of the world has not resulted in the humanization of the world. Hence,

Metz argues that a theology of the world necessitates a political theology which serves the hermeneutical function of interpreting the role of the Christian faith vis-à-vis the world. He exposes the individualistic bias of certain forms of contemporary theology, asserting that the role of political theology is to emphasize the central importance of the social meaning of the divine promises. Only when this essentially social character of the Christian message is recovered can Christianity make use of its critical function in society and cease to be a legitimating component of the status quo.

The aim then of the present essay is to present the ecclesiological presuppositions and implications that arise from Metz’s political theology. From the standpoint of political theology, how does Metz see the relationship of the Church and the world and what is the function of the Church within this relationship? Within the paradigm of political theology, what specific areas in the understanding of Church does Metz highlight?

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHURCH 
AND THE WORLD

Metz claims that by accepting the world with eschatological definitiveness, God has accepted the world as different from Himself. By virtue of this acceptance the world has not become divinized or assumed into God’s divinity. Rather, the world now appears as the material for human creativity and no longer a vestibule of divinity. The world is not to be regarded as a pre-established cosmos. Rather, it is a societal reality in a continuous “becoming” in history in which human beings are active and creative participants, and for which they are responsible.

In its relationship to the world, Metz maintains that the Church should not be seen as “different” from it, in the sense that the Church is not a non-world. The Church is not world-less; it properly belongs to the world. It is not an “other,” apart from the world. As Metz expresses it:
The Church is of the world: in a certain sense the Church is the world. The Church is not Non-World (Die Kirche ist nicht Nicht-Welt). For it is that world which attempts to live from the promised future of God, and to call that world in question which understands itself only in terms of itself and its possibilities. The decisive relationship between the Church and the world is not spatial but temporal.²

This is why, in a sense, the statement “the Church turns itself toward the world” is theologically imprecise. It somehow implies that the Church is an “other” world. Similarly, the phrase “The Church and the World” can imply some kind of dualism, i.e., a Church whose history runs parallel to that of the history of the world. Both cases lead to a concept of the Church as not part of this world.

For Metz, the Church, as “the historically tangible sign and the institution of this grace within the world is not the opponent but the guarantor of the world.” The Church exists to serve the universal will of God for the world. This means that God is primarily concerned with the world and its salvation and not with the Church alone understood as other than the world. In fact, Metz argues that the Church came into existence precisely because “the loving acceptance of the world by God was rejected and protested by the world.” The Church stands as a “sign and guarantee of the ultimate victory of God in relation to the world, which resisted him and, falling victim to itself in sin, missed finding its own being.”³

Hence the Church exists for the world and not the world for the Church. This means that any definition or understanding of the Church has to be formulated with reference to its relationship to the world. Only in relationship to the world can the Church know its identity.⁴

²Ibid., 93-94. Emphasis added.
³Ibid., 49-50. This idea is already present in one of Metz’s earliest works. See J.B. METZ, “Die ‘Stunde’ Christi,” Wort und Wahrheit 12 (1957): 14f.
That is why Metz criticizes — without undermining its obvious achievements — the Second Vatican Council, in speaking "too exclusively of herself, in a narcissistic way, looking into a mirror, rather than through an open window into the world" and views the separation of Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et Spes as dubious. According to Metz, the world is the Verantwortungshorizont of the Church. The Church realizes its universal mission in the universality of its service to the world: "as a service of hope for the world." It exists not primarily as a "Dasein-für-sich-selbst" but as a "Dasein-für-sich-selbst" concretized in its "Dasein-für-andere." 

The Church exists to witness to the fact that the world has been accepted by God and to help it realize its own worldliness. This process, in which the world becomes worldly in its fullness, remains however eschatological hope and cannot be completely accomplished within history. Its full realization remains solely within God's power. The fact that the Church exists for the world implies, for Metz, that it holds a provisional status. Its existence is relative to the Kingdom of God.

The Church is the eschatological community and the exodus community. Its institutional and sacramental life is based on this eschatological character. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the Exodus; it is the commemoration of the death of Christ as promise — donec dominus veniat. The Church is not the goal of her striving; this goal is the Kingdom of God. The Church always lives in a certain sense from the proclamation of her provisional character and from her historically pro-


7METZ, “Kirche für die Ungläubigen?” 318. For Metz, even the issue of Christian unity (ecumenism) cannot be based primarily on purely inter-church dialogue. Ecumenical dialogue can succeed only if the churches take into account a "third element": the world, its problems and conflicts.

8TW, 49-50.

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gressive surrender to the coming kingdom of God. The Church has a hope and witness to a hope, but its hope is not in itself. It is rather a hope in the Kingdom of God as the future of the world. *Ecclesia est universale sacramentum spei pro totius mundi salute.*

**THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD**

Because the Church is not “above” or “other” than the world, it cannot be indifferent to social realities; rather it has a special responsibility for the world. Metz’s theology of the world has already indicated how the world cannot be defined in cosmological terms separate from existence and person but as a societal reality within its historical becoming. In this understanding, Metz puts forward three primary “models” to describe the functions of the Church in its relationship to the world, namely: the Church as an institution of socio-critical freedom within society; the Church as public bearer of the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ; and the Church as a *Basiskirche*, which he sees as the concrete realization of the shift from a Church for people to a Church of people.

**The Church as an Institution of Socio-Critical Freedom**

Metz’s understanding of the Church as an institution of social critical freedom is the consequence of his reflection on the role of the Church in the light of a political theology. If political theology aims at redefining the relationship between Christian faith and society and between the Church and the public sphere, then Metz views the function of the Church as the bearer of its unique mission of freedom. This mission is rooted in the identity of the Church as the Body of Christ and is expressed through its witness to the Kingdom of God, which is not yet but is coming.

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9TW, 93-94. Rahner also maintains the “relativity” of the Church: “The Church, if only she be rightly understood, is living always on the proclamation of her own provisional status and of her historically advancing elimination in the coming Kingdom of God.” See K. RAHNER, “The Church and the Parousia,” in *Theological Investigations* 6 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 298. For an opposing view, see A. DULLES, *Models of the Church*, Expanded Edition (New York: Double Day/Image, 1987), esp. c. 7, 103-122, where Dulles says that the Church will not be eliminated but will “come to its own at the end of time.” He argues that the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament understanding is an eschatological term.
of the Church in relation to society as an institution of social criticism.10

The Tasks of the Church as an Institution of Social Criticism

The Church’s orientation toward the eschatological future and its promises forces it to a critical attitude toward the social environment. Because it lives by eschatological hope, the Church is able to criticize society’s attempt to absolutize human progress. Metz agrees with Rahner in claiming that the function of social criticism “consists in opening up ever anew a perspective which transcends the concrete social reality such that within this perspective the social reality concerned appears in its relative value, and so as capable of alteration.”11

Metz enumerates the features of the Church as an institution of socio-critical freedom.12 First, the task of the Church as an institution of socio-critical freedom involves the defense of the individual. Because the world lives under the eschatological proviso of God, the Church rejects any utilitarian concept of the individual which treats persons as a means and material for the realization of a purely technological future. The Church is tasked with protecting the individual against any societal planning which measures the individual’s value relative to what he or she can contribute to technological development and progress and which marginalizes all others, especially the poor, who are not seen as useful to human progress.

Second, the Church can utilize its liberating task of criticism against all political systems which enthrone themselves as unquestionable bearers of human emancipation. Against this absolutizing tendency, the

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Church stresses that history is subject to the eschatological proviso of God. The eschatological salvation promised by God cannot be identified with or reduced to any particular political system or ideology or any phase of human development. God remains the universal subject and meaning of history. Any class, group or ideology which seeks to identify itself as the subject of all history leads inevitably to totalitarianism.

Third, the Church must be able to utilize the socio-critical potentiality of Christian love. This love should not be reduced to the confines of interpersonal encounters but must be expanded to its social dimension and concretized in the unconditional and selfless commitment to justice, freedom and peace for others. If love is understood in this sense, Metz argues, then it can be mobilized as a power of social criticism in two ways. Firstly, it criticizes the use of mere power, and the antagonistic understanding of society in a friend-enemy scheme. Secondly, the socio-critical potentiality of Christian love, understood as the unconditional commitment to justice and freedom, may allow in special circumstances the use of revolutionary force. If the social situation is sufficiently unjust and oppressive "that it might equal that created by a revolutionary movement then a revolution for the justice and freedom of 'least of the brethren' cannot be ruled out in the name of love." Love must be understood as an unconditional will to create just relationships and structures.15

Criticisms related to Metz's Understanding of the Church as an Institution of Social Criticism.

One of the objections to Metz's proposal of a political theology concerns the feasibility of institutionalizing social criticism. Maier for instance — while he fundamentally agrees with Metz on the role of the church in defending the human person against technology's tendency to use him or her as a means in building an absolutely rational-

ized future — doubts whether the church’s role as a social critic could be institutionalized. The fact that Metz offers no further clarification on how this works in the concrete complicates the issue even more. Moreover, Maier finds that Metz’s definition of the church as an institution of social criticism inevitably leads to an assumption of the Church “as a rival power among other powers in the political struggle.” Such a posture, for Maier, does not only violate the separation of Church and State; it also results to the Church’s loss of its spiritual claims.¹⁴

Objection has also been made with regard to the restriction of the Church’s function to one of social criticism. Again, Maier claims that limiting the Church’s role to that of social critic severely disables the Church from realizing its other equally important functions.¹⁵ Mueller and O’Grady have said something similar. Mueller thinks that such an understanding “would be an utterly impossible constriction of the concept and actual function of the Church, incompatible with her historical dynamics which enables her to meet different situations with different pastoral means.”¹⁶ O’Grady inquires about the practical correctness of ascribing a purely negative, and not primarily a positive, role to the Church.¹⁷

Remarks on Objections

By choosing to understand the Church as an institution of social criticism, Metz does not imply a neo-politicization of the Church, if by neo-politicization is meant a new kind of integralism. Metz has frequently asserted that the separation of Church and state is an essential presupposition and it is this existing separation which allows the Church to carry out its role as social critic more efficaciously. It is also to be noted that the excessive stress placed on avoiding the politicization of the Church obscures the fact that the Church is de facto a political force. Thus, the appeal to ecclesiastical apoliticism is at best naive. Metz


¹⁵Ibid., 13.


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believes that the Church's function as social critic derives from the gospel it is mandated to proclaim. The function of the Church as an institution of social criticism originates from its fidelity to the gospel message, and because this message has a social dimension, it cannot avoid confronting socio-political realities.

To the second objection, it can be stated that Metz's emphasis on the role of the Church as an institution of social criticism does not mean that he denies or downplays the other equally important dimensions. His emphasis on the role of the Church as social critic proceeds precisely from what he perceives to be a forgotten aspect of the Church, namely, its critical function.

The Compatibility of Institution and Criticism

Metz's definition of the Church as an institution of socio-critical freedom within society also raises the problem of the reconcilability between institution and criticism. Are not institutions characteristically anti-critical and conservative?

The Enlightenment, in fact, was to a great extent a reaction against institutions (and the corresponding authority of their traditions) which it regarded as oppressive. Institutions were looked upon as obstacles to mature freedom since they inhibited the free exercise of reason. However as Metz observes, citing certain instances from science and philosophy, the issue at present seems to have shifted from the opposition between institution and freedom to the possibility of ensuring and expanding freedom through institutionalization. Institutions are now understood differently: "institutions [are regarded] not only as antithesis to the critical freedom of the individual, not only as a constant object of critical attention and protest by the freedom of the mature man, but as the desired bearer of critically responsible social action."18 Thus the question now is not whether or how critical freedom can be institutionalized; but whether or how critical freedom can ever be ensured and safeguarded without being institutionalized.19

18TW, 133; METZ, "'Politische Theologie' in der Diskussion," 296.

19Metz reverses the title of H. Schelsky's article "Ist die Dauerreflexion institutionalisierbar?" in H. SCHELSKY, Auf der Suche nach Wirklichkeit (Düsseldorf, 1965), 250-275.
While Metz concedes that institutions tend toward conservatism, he still argues that the task of social criticism can never be left to individual initiative alone if it is to be truly effective. It has to be institutionalized. Can the Church authentically fulfill the task of "an institution of a second order," that is, an institution of socio-critical freedom? Metz claims that this is possible because the Church, as a provisional institution, lives under the eschatological promises of the Christian faith. Metz holds that the provisionality of the Church, and the fact that it lives under the "eschatological proviso" can be translated concretely when the Church continues the function of "an institution of social criticism with regard to life in society with its absolutist and exclusive tendencies." But even before it can credibly and effectively function as an institution of societal criticism, it should be able to create within itself an atmosphere where criticism is encouraged, accepted and listened to.

Metz admits that the definition of the Church as an institution of social criticism lacks a historical and social precedent. In fact, throughout its history, the Church has more frequently appeared as a counter revolutionary force, often identifying itself with existing structures. Consequently, according to Metz, we cannot find a solid historical foundation in the definition of Church as an institution of socio-critical freedom. The only way for the Church to attain this is to embody a new praxis and a new attitude within the Church itself.

**A Call for a New Self-Understanding**

Thus, for Metz, the function of the Church as an institution of socio-critical freedom must, as a result, lead to "a new self-understanding of the Church and at a transformation of its institutional relationship with modern society." Metz believes that it can be an institution of social criticism only if it fulfills certain conditions. The first of these conditions is that the Church must assimilate and change its attitude toward non-theological information. The critical statements of the Church cannot come from purely theological reflection uninformed by other disciplines or

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fields of research. Acceptance of non-theological data necessarily demands that the Church discover a new way of speaking. Since non-theological information cannot be expressed dogmatically, the Church should take the risk of making contingent statements, subject to revision when needed.

What is required is an indication, which is neither lacking in force and sense of direction nor doctrinal and dogmatic. The present need of the Church to have to speak in a concrete critical way must therefore bring with it a kind of demythologization and deritualizing of the Church’s language and attitudes. The institutional Church now finds out that it must let itself be critically contradicted, that it cannot avoid a certain one-sidedness and must therefore run the risk of saying something provisional. When it learns to speak in this way, it will also avoid burdening the social initiative of individual Christians with doctrinal rigidity while removing a certain arbitrariness from such initiatives.  

Another necessary condition is the Church’s openness to public criticism and its openness to reforms. The credibility and effectiveness of the Church as an institution of social criticism rests on the supposition that the Church itself is willing to accept criticism from within and without. For Metz, criticism of the Church from within and the call for constant reform do not only derive from sociological considerations but are constitutive of the Church’s understanding of its true nature.

The Church’s need for continual reform is ultimately anchored on

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22Ibid., 10; TW, 134f.

the acknowledgement of its sinfulness. That the Church is a Church of sinners finds support in the documents of the recent Council.24 The Council speaks of the Church as "at once holy and always in need of purification" (LG 8). The Church is described as a pilgrim which will "receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven" (LG 48). It acknowledges the "deficiencies in moral conduct or in Church discipline" and that it demands that "these should be set right at the opportune moment and in the proper way" (UR 6).25 Only when the Church realizes this sinfulness can criticism be welcomed and encouraged so that reform and conversion are then made possible.

The Church must incorporate this task of social criticism. Social criticism should simultaneously be a constant invitation to self-criticism. This public criticism within the Church takes a certain form:

critical opposition to every kind of ideological self-authorization assumed by ecclesiastical institutions, ...breaking down the uncontrolled domination within the Church of a prevalent social milieu — usually that of the small bourgeoisie — to the exclusion of others that are considered not to be normative or worthy of sharing in the public image of the Church, ...opposing the Church when it is fighting on false battlefronts; [and struggling] against racism, individualistic nationalism and contempt of other human beings in whatever form.26

The Church and the Exercise of Authority

Closely related to the issue of the possibility of criticism being institutionalized is the issue of Church authority. The Church as an

24K. RAHNER, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," in Theological Investigations 6 (London: DLT, 1969), 279-293. As Rahner mentions in passing, the issue behind the statements of the Council about the sinfulness of the Church is whether sinfulness can be ascribed to the Church itself or just to its individual members. That both statements have to be accepted is evident in the Council documents. Rahner comments: "[The Church] would not be the really existing people of God but a purely ideal entity, possessing an almost mythological character, if one were to think that the sinfulness of her members did not also determine herself" (191).

25See also LG 9 and UR 4, 7.

institution of critical freedom can only be credible and effective if it can exercise authority in a creative way. Socio-critical freedom can only be safeguarded if it is implemented and translated into practice in the exercise of authority.

Church Authority in Relation to the Modern History of Freedom

One of the principal issues which the Church confronts today is the crisis of authority. Ecclesiastical authority is questioned and criticised if not totally ignored. Metz does not see the root of this crisis, as some have argued, in the renewal brought about by the Second Vatican Council, though it may have been exacerbated by this event. The confusion which the recent Council engendered was merely symptomatic of the failure of the Church, either by neglect or by refusal, to squarely and critically face the challenge posed by the Enlightenment and its modern history of freedom.

Metz maintains that the Church has continually isolated itself. In the main, it has simply reacted negatively to the Enlightenment's history of freedom. In Metz's view, the Church has acted very much as a power structure and exercised authority "too absolutistically, with the result that 'Church history' could be understood and described more or less as pure "papal history." Not only does this kind of response lead to the isolation or loss of relevance on the part of the Church, it also results in a certain inability to see (and at times even premature disapproval of) the valuable insights that such movements offer.

Metz argues that now is the time for the Church to confront the challenges posed by the Enlightenment and the modern history of freedom with its emancipation project. This does not mean an indiscriminate accommodation of project of the Enlightenment. Therefore "it does not mean that the modern history of freedom in its scientific-technical, social, and political dimensions should be understood as the realization of the biblical message of freedom." The Church

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28Ibid., 186.
should critically come to terms with the modern history of freedom, assimilate its positive achievements and re-define its concept of authority within the horizon of concrete authoritative witness. What is really at stake here is the Church’s fidelity to its historical identity and mission.29

**Toward a New Understanding of Church Authority**

In view of the crisis of authority which the Church faces, Metz offers no new model or system which the Church must follow if it wants to positively confront the present crisis. While changing the system is important, he understands the change in the operative mentality or attitude of the Church toward the exercise of authority as more fundamental. Indeed, radical structural changes can help generate the formation of a new mentality but new systems and models, without the necessary changes in attitude which underlies the system, would be ineffective.30

One of the attitudes which Metz perceives as deserving of serious scrutiny is the paternalistic exercise of authority. Christianity’s image of God as “father” can never be used to justify paternalism. Rather, it should be understood in the way Jesus did.

The use of the term “father’ in the message of Jesus is always connected with the eschatological notion of the coming reign of God. But Jesus certainly does not understand the term

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29It is true that Metz would later on admit that the Church’s painstakingly slow and reluctant acceptance of modernity might seem to be a blessing in disguise considering the pathologies that has developed within the Enlightenment project itself. It should be noted however that the enduring response was one of rejection, the outcome of which was almost an impenetrable fortress mentality.

30That structural change is as equally important as personal conversion should be strongly maintained. As Moltmann notes: “Thus both must be done at the same time. Personal, inner change without a change in circumstances and structures is an idealist illusion, as though man were only a soul and not a body as well. But a change in external circumstances without inner renewal is a materialist illusion, as though man were only a product of his social circumstances and nothing else.” J. MOLTMANN, *The Crucified God. The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974), 23.
“father” as a religious sanction of previous authoritarian social and political orders, or as a sanction of a patriarchal structure. Rather, Jesus understands it as the advent of the power of an unconditional love that shatters every human analogy.\(^{31}\)

For Metz, the identification of God’s lordship with patriarchal authority is at the root of the problem, especially when this authority is exercised in a society where a patriarchal image is no longer pervasive. The image which Jesus gave us of God actually disallows an identification. The experience of God is always an experience of freedom:

It is a freedom that can never rid itself of the painful tension between emancipation and reconciliation. It is a freedom which recognizes that in its most important task it is dependent on forbearance. Here the possibility of experiencing a comforting and accessible God exists. Here we do not simply resign ourselves to the existing injustices and sufferings which ultimately become burdens for others. Rather we try to change injustice and suffering in order to experience them as not being everything there is to life.\(^{32}\)

A patriarchal understanding leads to superficial obedience, and develops a kind of dependency among Church members. Moreover, it lends itself to ideological suspicion. What is demanded of the Church at present is that it “should develop and again lend dignity to that dimension of its understanding of authority that is also central in its biblical foundation: namely the authority of witness.”\(^{33}\)

The image of authoritative witness, in place of the paternalistic or patriarchal model, does not, for Metz, necessarily exclude the institu-

\(^{31}\)METZ, “Prophetic Authority,” 192.

\(^{32}\)Ibid., 193.

\(^{33}\)Ibid., 194. Elsewhere, Metz refers to this as “religious competence,” an authority understood as being authority than having authority. See J.B. METZ, Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology, trans. D. Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980), 41. Henceforth, FHS.
tional-representative element. It invites the Church, however, to personify martyrdom and witness as the regulative images for understanding authority. In other words, Church authority cannot be reduced to purely juridical and administrative competence. What is needed today is religious competence based on the authority of witness, that is, a Church which does not only have authority "but also is authority in its total existence and praxis, an authority of witness with a radiant power to permeate ecclesial and societal life."

The Church and the Risk of Sectarianism

In Metz's view, if the Church fails to confront the crisis of authority posed by the modern history of freedom, it is in danger of falling into traditionalism and sectarianism. The foundation of the Church is marked by embracing what is "strange and foreign," that is, by embracing the historical world. If the Church forgets this, it is in danger of being reduced to a sect.

Metz argues that there are already visible symptoms of this sectarian mentality. One of these is the Church's tendency to confuse the

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34 The distinction made between Church and Christianity or between ecclesial and Christian tradition must not be interpreted, Metz maintains, "in such a way that Christianity could be summarily disassociated from the institution and authority of the Church; for in this way Christianity would lose its identity and finally be reduced to a superfluous religious reflection of the actual social, political, and cultural developments of modern times. A Christian theology that would attempt such a disassociation of Christianity from the institutional Church would, in my opinion, become merely an ideological theology, resembling the theology of those who oppose all renewal." METZ, "Prophetic Authority," 179.


Metz does not advocate an arbitrary or a complete openness to the world. Such uncritical openness could lead to a loss of identity and the disappearance of Church traditions and beliefs through a process of accommodation. For Metz however, a sectarian or ghetto mentality poses a far greater problem and threat than an attitude of openness to the world. The refusal of a religion or a church to engage with secular reality runs the risk of losing the very identity it wishes to protect in the first place, and this happens not by confrontation but by default. This is, in Metz's words, a case of self-annihilation through accommodation and legitimation.
“non-contemporaneity” (Ungleichzeitigkeit) of the Church’s forms of life and structures with the “timelessness” (Unzeitgemäβheit) of the Christian message. Metz points to the important difference between these two ideas. That the message of salvation is timeless (that it cannot be limited to or identified with a certain phase in history, that it is not merely addressed to a certain people at a certain time) is not the same as claiming that the gospel is non-contemporaneous (that it has nothing to relate to the modern world). It is untimely, but it is neither irrelevant or out-of-touch with reality. A false appeal to “noncontemporaneity” to justify the Church’s non-involvement in matters social and political not only emasculates the transformative, emancipative and liberating power of the gospel but it also legitimates existing structures and the prevailing consciousness.

Another indication of a sectarian mentality, consequent to the Church’s refusal to be non-contemporaneous, is “a growing inability or unwillingness to undergo new experience and then to consider and critically assimilate them into the self-understanding of faith, Church and theology.”37 This attitude according to Metz is foreign to the spirit with which Jesus proclaimed the good news. The gospel has to be continually contextualized in order to awaken the challenge it poses to every culture, situation and experience. Otherwise the gospel remains pristine and intact but also meaningless.

Yet another symptom is the maintenance of ecclesiastical structures without the presence and cultivation of mature freedom. This tendency manifests itself in the trivialization of the exercise of critical freedom by attributing it to mere psychological and sociological factors. Pleas for the democratization of the Church’s structures are often greeted with sarcastic disapproval by the insistence that Church membership is entirely voluntary and not obligatory. Such an attitude suggests that the Church is a counter-ideology to democracy.

37METZ, “Prophetic Authority,” 199. With reference to theology, Metz comments on how this tendency is reflected in the concept of “pure theology,” which believes that theology can be done without reference to praxis and hints at the presumption that contact with reality endangers theology of losing its scientific character.
In summary, the function of the Church as an institution of socio-
critical freedom involves a critical renewal of the Church’s self-under-
standing. Criticism of society cannot be left to individual Christian
alone but should be institutionalized in order to assure the freedom of
all. However, this institutionalization implies a redefinition of the
Church’s concept of authority, an authority which encourages inde-
pendence and responsible freedom. In other words, as the bearer of
socio-critical freedom, the Church must be ready to cope construc-
tively with conflicts engendered by socio-critical freedom itself.

The Church as a Public Form of the Dangerous Memory of Christ

Metz has memorably described Christian faith in terms of the
critical-liberating memory of Jesus Christ. Against a technologically
rationalized society which is becoming more “history-less” and “tradi-
tion-less,” Metz proposes an interpretation of Christian faith as a dan-
gerous memory which breaks through the prevailing consciousness
and undermines its complacency.

The Church “must bear witness and understand herself as the public sign
and bearer of a dangerous memory of freedom within the ‘systems’ of our so-called
emancipatory society.”38 The Church lives from the memory of its Lord
and is the visible form of the memoria vitae, passionis, mortis, et resurrectionis
Jesu Christi.

This dangerous memory is embodied in the Christian concept of
love which is exemplified in the selfless and unconditional life-offering
of Christ on the cross. This love is essentially freedom from the domi-
nation of humans over fellow humans. This is what motivated Christ
to identify himself with the poor and oppressed and to vigorously
proclaim the promised justice, peace, and freedom for all. Metz views
the Church as the public form of this dangerous memory which Chris-
tian faith represents. The content of faith and doctrinal formulas which
the Church proclaims and lives by are the expression and elaboration

in Gesellschaft (Freiburg: Herder, 1971), 7f.
of this memory.

The understanding of faith as a dangerous and liberating memory of freedom of Jesus Christ, and the definition of the Church as the public form of this memory, does not absolve us from sharing in humankind’s struggle within history and society. Rather, it empowers because it anticipates a promised future for the victims of injustice and oppression. Hence it not only questions our “forms of consciousness” and “life-praxis” but it drives us to build a more just and humane future. The Church, as bearer of this dangerous memory, has the function of criticism vis-à-vis the absolutization of political power. Since the Church lives under the eschatological proviso, it has the task of criticizing all totalitarian systems and social utopias which promote one-dimensional progress. In fidelity to the memory of Jesus Christ, it is responsible for reminding society that any phase of development achieved, any human progress attained, can never be fully identified with the eschatological history of freedom which only God can bring about. The fullness of freedom remains an eschatological hope. God is the subject of all history. No person or institution can be designated as the subject of this history without falling into absolutism. The history of freedom without the memory of the eschatological proviso leads to an “undialectical and abstract history of emancipation” in which conflict and suffering are glossed over and the call to maturity dismissed as mere superstition.39

While Metz sees the Church, the bearer of the memory of Christ, as responsible for, and critical of, society, he also maintains that this memory serves as a critique against the Church itself. The doctrines and faith formulas of the Church are useless if they lose their emancipative power.

Dead and not to say empty are such confession and dogmatic formulas if these remembered contents of the faith show nothing more of their danger - for society and the Church! - if

39Ibid., 7-8.
this dangerousness is extinguished by the mechanisms of institutional mediation, and if the formulas therefore only serve the self-preservation of traditional religion and the self-reproduction of an authoritarian Church institution which, as the public bearer of the Christian memory, no longer subjects itself under the dangerous claim of this memory.40

Thus, the criterion which measures the Church’s faithfulness to its role both as an institution of social criticism and the bearer of the memory of Christ is whether the memory from which it lives retains its quality of dangerousness and subversiveness, its transformative value, and capacity for liberation both within the Church and within society.

Confronted by this enormous challenge and responsibility, Metz thinks that reforms within the Church are imperative. The Church has been criticized by social theories as “an organization of non-contemporary consciousness,” as an “anti-emancipatory institution,” as a “narcotic” for unjust relationships and for the oppressive social status quo. Modern men and women have been increasingly suspicious of a Church which seems to align itself with the ruling powers and appears interested only in preserving itself. For Metz, these criticisms dare the Church to self-scrutiny and hopefully, to a liberating, if painful, process of self-renewal.41

The Basiiskirche as a Paradigm for a Church of People

A further role for the Church in relation to the world is the formation of a Church of people who are not merely clients but subjects. A Church of people belongs in fact to the vision of the Second Vatican Council and finds concrete expression in the basic ecclesial communities of Latin America.

A Church of Subjects: The Ecclesial Vision of Vatican Council II

Metz observes an increasing exodus of people from the Church and their rather strong refusal to be identified with the Church estab-

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lishment. Again this is not due to the confusion or to the "shaking of foundations" brought about, directly or indirectly, by the recent Council; what the Council did was only to bring them to sharper focus. The real cause seems to be what he thinks is a growing schism between Church and people. The stark gap that separates people from the institutional establishment is a direct consequence of the Church's failure to develop its members as independent, free, and responsible subjects. The Church has been too protective and paternalistic in its relationship with its people, often refusing to listen to the voices of their history and lives. The Church has become the "Church for the people" rather than the "Church of the people."

The Second Vatican Council itself aimed at the transformation from a Church of dependents to a Church of subjects (from a Kirche für das Volk to a Kirche des Volkes or from a Betreuungskirche to a Subjektskirche, eine Kirche mit einer subjekthaften Basis). To be sure, the paradigms of Pauline "mystical Body of Christ" and the patristic "universal sacrament of salvation" were retained in the Council's treatise on the Church and they still remain valid theological images of the Church; but the more biblical "people of God" indubitably stands out as the more dominant paradigm for the conciliar understanding of the Church. The second chapter of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium) bears this title, after subsuming it under the more general context of mystery in the first chapter. In

42FHS, 137.

43J.B. METZ, "Theology Today. New Crises and New Visions," Catholic Theological Society of America - Proceedings 40 (1985): 5. We note here some difficulties in terminologies. For the Germans, the term "Volk," due to its association with German National Socialism, has a pejorative meaning. It connotes a narrow, unreasonable provincialism. Metz employs the term, not in this narrow sense, but in the way the term "people" is used and understood for instance in Vatican II documents. Similar nuances also apply for the German "Subjekt" when translated into English as "subject." The German "Subjekt" means a free, responsible person and while the English "subject" fully reflects the definition of the German term, "subject" in English can also mean a subordinate or a dependent. This latter meaning is in complete opposition to Metz's understanding of "Subjekt."

44 Although Dulles claims that the principal paradigm in Vatican II ecclesiology is the "people of God," he categorizes this, along with "Body of Christ" image, under the (to his view) more encompassing paradigm of "mystical communion." See DULLES, Models of the Church, 53.
addition, by placing its treatment on the hierarchy in the third chapter, the Council brings to the fore the fact that the teaching office of the Church is at the service of the whole people of God.\textsuperscript{45} The Council's choice of this model is not without significance if we consider its implications with regard to the much needed shift to a Church of subjects. The Church as people of God recalls the wandering of the Israelites in the desert on their way to the promised land, and in identifying itself as the New Israel,\textsuperscript{46} the Church necessarily takes upon itself the challenge and the obligation to wander in the desert of history on the way to its messianic future. A Church that understands itself as a pilgrim not only becomes a subject-oriented Church in that it takes into serious consideration the concrete historical reality in which people struggle in the face of suffering; it also becomes a Church which challenges and demands that people be subjects.

Moreover, the Council has also underscored "the active role of the faithful in articulating and developing the authentic witness to the gospel." And in so doing, it sees its relation to "the faithful not as merely passive recipients of ecclesial teaching but as active subjects in the Church insofar as the teaching of the Church is based on the witness of the whole of the people of God."\textsuperscript{47} The Constitution on the Church for example acknowledges the participation of the faithful in the pro-

\textsuperscript{45}See LG chapters 1 and 2.

\textsuperscript{46}LG 9. The question of whether it is theologically and ecumenically appropriate to refer to the Church as the New Israel, if this implies that the Old Israel as people of God has been superseded by the Church, has been raised by Metz. Such a perception according to him runs contrary to one of the basic principles of ecumenism, which is to recognize the other in its otherness. Also, Israel bears a lasting meaning for authentic Christian understanding of salvation. See J.B. METZ, "Theologie im Kontext von Kulturen und gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen," in \textit{Dein Reich kommst. 89. Deutscher Katholikentag Aachen 1986} (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1987), 177-178, esp. fn. 4. See also his earlier TEC, 23, 28. Since such an interpretation is possible due to the vagueness of meaning of the term "New Israel" and which therefore warrants Metz's reservation, the Council's Decree on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate 4) clearly speaks positively about the Church's relationship with Judaism. See B. KLOPPENBURG'S comment on this in his \textit{Ecclesiology of Vatican II}, trans. M.J. O'Connell (Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald, 1974), 41-44.

prophetic office of Christ and that the faithful possess an active role through their “sensus fidei” (LG 12). The same document also encourages, even obliges, the faithful to share their knowledge and expertise on matters that concern the good of the whole Church, and that pastors “should respect and promote the[ir] dignity and responsibility,” “willingly use their prudent advice,” and “give them the courage to undertake works on their own initiative” (LG 37).

Elsewhere in the conciliar documents, it is stated that nobody in the Church “plays a purely passive part,” that the faithful have a particular and indispensable role in the realization of the Church’s mission (AA 2), and that “they are called to participate actively in the life of the Church,” to be witnesses of God’s salvific plan for the world (LG 43). The Council’s Decree on Religious Freedom is a concrete proof of an epistemological transition from a previous understanding of truth that is eternal, abstract and subject-less to a subject-oriented truth. Any truth, religious or otherwise, is supposed to have the human person as its constant referent. Last but not least, the Council stressed a reality about the Church, the disregard of which has often resulted in an ecclesial hierarchism, namely: that the whole Church, hierarchy and faithful, is “at once a learning and a teaching Church (eine lebende und lernende Kirche).” In other words, the “teaching authority” belongs to the entire Church and is not to be solely identified with the magisterium (understood in the limited sense of pope and bishops). This implies that the believers are not passive addressees of the hierarchy; it is an acknowledgement of the ‘teaching’ authority of the faithful.49

The recognition of the authority of the faithful has also found expression in several post-conciliar documents of Bishops’ synods and conferences. The Latin Bishops in Puebla (1968) for example spoke about their documents as representing the “voice of the voiceless,” whose voice has to be attentively listened to and recognized. The German Synod (1977) admitted the need for a shift from a paternalistic

49Ibid.
church to a church of people in which the faithful play an essential role. The broad consultation that marked the process by which the United States Bishops’ pastoral letters on peace (1983) and the economy (1986) were composed represents a method in which the faithful were responsibly and creatively involved. Because of these positive developments, Metz is suspicious about the way the recent Extraordinary Synod in Rome (1985) which with emphasis spoke of the Church as “mystery” and not primarily as “people of God.”\textsuperscript{50} Without denying the validity of speaking about the Church as mystery, Metz asks whether this is not an attempt to return to the immediate pre-conciliar Church where this image dominated; whether this is an attempt to immunize the Church from intra-ecclesial reforms; whether this does not endanger the Church’s eschatological provisionality; and whether this is not an attempt to curb the growing authority of the faithful in the Church.\textsuperscript{51}

All these point to the challenge of realizing the ecclesial vision of the Second Vatican Council, namely, a church of subjects, a church in which everybody is a subject. It is unfortunate however, as Metz observes, that the original impulses of the Council toward a “Church of subjects” has yet to be fully realized in practice especially in the Church

\textsuperscript{50}Metz’s observation is shared by other authors who commented on the ecclesiology of the 1985 Synod. See in particular the following articles in Concilium 188 (1985): J. KOMONCHAK, “The Theological Debate,” 55-56, 61-62; J.M. TILLARD, “Final Report of the Last Synod,” 67-68; A. LORSCHEIDER, “The Extraordinary Synod in the Light of Vatican II Twenty Years Later,” 81. Although corollary terms like “messianic people on a pilgrimage” appear in the synodal document, the notion “People of God” is mentioned only once, and only in juxtaposition with the other models employed by Vatican II. It seems that the Synod, as Komonchak comments, forgot that “People of God’ had been the title of a whole chapter of Lumen Gentium, that it had served as one of the architectonic themes of the Church’s ecclesiology, and that it had been introduced precisely as an articulation of the very mystery of the Church in the time between Ascension and Parousia.”

\textsuperscript{51}METZ, Zukunftsfähigkeit, 151-153. Although Metz mentions only “mystery” model, the two primary ecclesiological paradigms in the Synodal text are the Church as mystery and Church as communion. While its invocation of the Church as mystery follows and quotes the Vatican II documents, the situational analysis underlying the Synod’s usage of the term is different from that of the Council. See H. POTTMeyer, “The Church as Mysterium and as Institution,” Concilium 188 (1986): 99-108. According to Pottmeyer, the description of the Church as mystery was upon the insistence of the German bishops, particularly Bishop Hößner of Köln, who were reacting against too much importance accorded to structural changes in the Church.

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itself. Metz sees that much in the Church still supports a paradigm of a church of dependents. Theology perpetuates the division of labor that presently exists within the Church, namely, "the bishops teach, the priests serve, theologians clarify and defend the teaching and train those who serve" and the people are, to a great extent, the passive recipients of this teaching and serving Church.\(^{52}\)

What is ironic here is that the Christian faith itself calls people to be subjects of history.

The Church is not an original, natural people, but a people "called out," a new people that has become subject of a new and unsuspected history of God with men and has its identity in its narration of this history of salvation and its attempt to live by it. It is not possible to be the Church or the "people of God" without bearing this new history. Being the Church is a movement. It is being "called out," exodus, a "lifting up of the head," a "change of heart," "imitation," and an acceptance of life and the history of suffering in the light of a great promise. There is no Church without this movement in which a people becomes the subject of a new history.\(^{53}\)

This implies that the Church's task is to enable and challenge people to become subjects and not simply "consumers of religion" or the "object of care and attention." Moreover, it calls upon the Church to work towards the transformation of unjust and oppressive structures that hinder people from becoming subjects. It is true that freedom from all suffering remains an eschatological hope, and social utopias which promote the illusion that suffering can be completely eliminated

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\(^{52}\)METZ, "Theology Today," 6. Cf. C. DUQUOC, "An Active Role for the People of God in Defining the Church's Faith," Concilium 180 (1985): 73-81. Although Metz and Duquoc agree on that the laity has not been accorded sufficient hearing in matters of doctrine, Metz does not fully subscribe to the importance that Duquoc renders to the role of "public opinion" in the Church.

\(^{53}\)FHS, 139. The word *subjekt* bears a specific meaning for Metz. It does not primarily refer to the isolated individual or person, but the individual or person taken in his or her social and historical subjectivity.
must be dismissed as ideological. However, there is a form of suffering, brought about by oppression and injustice, that destroys the capacity of people to become subjects. It is the prophetic task of the Church to combat such kind of suffering.  

The Basiskirche: A Model for a Church of People

Metz is of the conviction that the transformation or the shift from a traditional Church for the people to a radical Church of the people can come about when a new paradigm of being Church is adapted: the paradigm of a Basiskirche. In an address he gave at the annual Katholikentag in 1980, he argued that most Catholics seem to have internalized a paternalistic concept of Church. In fact the criticisms levelled at the Church and at the ecclesiastical authorities themselves seem to reinforce than disprove this imbibed paternalism. The claim for example that changes in the personalities who occupy ecclesiastical offices at present would automatically bring about changes in people’s mentality is for Metz both an illusion and a glaring illustration of this internalization. Genuine renewal in the Church’s structures can only come about when people cease to be dependents and begin to regard themselves as subjects. Though changes “from above” may help, renewal cannot be attained without corresponding radical changes effected “from below.”

Metz sees three competing models of the Church at present: a pre-bourgeois paternalistic church, a bourgeois supply or service church, and a post-bourgeois initiative-taking church. These three dominant models correspond to the prevailing trends in theology: neo-scholasticism, which sees the Church as an institution protecting the people; liberal theology, which supports bourgeois freedom; and political theologies which “bring into organic unity a productive critique of both Church and society, aiming toward a basic-community church as ‘church of the people.’”

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54FHS, 141f.
55Published as one of the articles in TEC, 82-94.
56Ibid., 86.

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Metz believes that the *Basiskirche*, a model which finds concrete expression especially in the Latin American churches, is a paradigm for a Church of people which the Third World offers to the First World churches. In reference to Latin America, Metz says:

In the last ten years (since Medellín), an upheaval has been going on there that could be described as a revolutionary changeover from a “paternalistic Church looking after people” to a “Church of the people themselves.” The suffering and oppressed people are thereby becoming the subject of their own history — not in opposition to the Church nor by ignoring the Church but through the Church and in the power of its messianic hope.\(^{57}\)

Metz argues that the formation of a base-church represents a radically new way of being Church. Instead of dismissing these basic community churches as mere “fads,” they should be regarded as a challenge, as “inspirational power” for the churches of the First World.

This is only possible if the First World churches avoid what Metz calls a “tactical provincialism” (which shields First World churches from the suffering and oppressed condition of the Third World) and if the First World churches allow the irruption of the Third World churches into its consciousness. This means that

Central Europe, comprising our bourgeoisie and Christianity, can no longer afford a world plan which it would construct via the model of smooth progressive development. To do this would simply unmask the arrogance of our Central European logic of development, which allows us to designate ourselves as the unquestioned summit of world evolution in society.\(^{58}\)

Precisely because of the entry of the Third World into Western


\(^{58}\)TEC, 90.
consciousness, the First World is forced to look at Third World as their victims whose misery and suffering put bourgeois and Christian identity into question.

Metz asserts that only through admitting the Third World into the consciousness of the First World churches can the "catholic" character of the Church be realized. In other words, the churches of the First World can never continue living their own lives without taking into account the challenges and inspiration which can be drawn from the churches of the Third World. The plight of the poor Churches must become a constitutive part of the First World churches' consciousness. Indifference toward this would be to invite schism between these churches:

If my view is correct, then the only dangerous "schism" threatening us today is the "separation" that would occur were we Christians of the first world to break apart the eucharistic table we share because we are unable to stand by the poor churches in their misery and oppression through a fundamental conversion, and because we refuse to listen to the prophecy of a common awakening which forces its way to us out of these poor churches.\(^{59}\)

Metz details the prophetic services or impulses which the Third World churches offer to the First World churches.\(^{60}\) Firstly, they provide an example of what is means to "be a person in solidarity" today. This orientation is in direct contrast to bourgeois individualistic and consumerist mentality where anything that has no market value (e.g., friendship, gratitude, solidarity, love, etc.) is negligible and the only kind of justice that is accepted is the justice of the market.\(^{61}\)

Secondly, Metz mentions the renewed and reinvigorated relationship with Scripture and tradition. This involves a re-reading of the

\(^{59}\)TEC, 92.

\(^{60}\)Ibid., 3-4; METZ, Zukunftsfähigkeit, 103f.

\(^{61}\)METZ, "For a Renewed Church," 140-141.

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Bible from their situation of oppression and suffering and discover its liberating power. Although such immediacy has been criticized as reductionistic and simplistic, these criticisms only manifest a distrust for an otherwise valid theological hermeneutic. This hermeneutic, which Metz refers to as the *Hermeneutik der Gefahr*, properly belongs to the life of Jesus himself as evidenced in the biblical story and proclamation. Thus the hermeneutic of danger brings to focus once more the foundational praxis-orientation of faith. The real test of faith comes in unconditional and committed discipleship.

Thirdly, they offer a new perspective on the relation between and the unity of salvation and liberation, grace and freedom, and mysticism and politics against the common tendency to view these as irreconcilable polarities. This is the real structure of Christian discipleship, namely, that it has a mystical and political component. The mystical dimension of discipleship does not take place in a vacuum, in isolation from the antagonisms and sufferings present in society. It is important to emphasize the importance of both dimensions. Stressing one or the other results, according to Metz, in a "bisected discipleship": on the one side, pure interiority, and on the other, purely humanistic, social action. In this style of discipleship, Jesus' — and supposedly our — act of standing up for God's glory in the midst of individual and social contradictions of life disappears.\(^{62}\) When this *Doppelstruktur* is neglected, Metz concludes:

> then an understanding of discipleship finally gains acceptance as an act of pure inwardness, on the one hand, and as an exclusively regulative idea, as a purely humanistic-political concept, on the other hand. What results is either a reduction of discipleship to a purely social-political dimension of action or a reduction to a private-religious spirituality. The discipleship that continues Jesus' engagement for the honor of God within the individual and societal contradictions of our life remains excluded.\(^{63}\)


\(^{63}\) METZ, "For a Renewed Church," 139.
Finally, the churches of the Third World provide the other churches not only an invigorating and challenging model of being church but a concrete example of that model, namely, the basic Christian communities.

CONCLUSION

Metz sees political theology as a theological hermeneutic which takes society and history as constitutive dimensions of faith reflection. This essay has presented Metz’s reflections on the Church’s responsibility in the world, in the public sphere, in the construction of a more fully human future from the lenses of a political theology. Metz’s defines the church as: (1) an institution of social criticism whose task is to defend the individual and criticize the absolutization of social progress and the abuse of political power; (2) the bearer of dangerous memory of Jesus Christ that serves as “conscience” against society’s tendency toward one-dimensional progress, against the neglect of the poor and the oppressed, against systems that undermine the human freedom (3) a communion of base-communities. Metz’s appropriation of the model of the Church as basic community merits special attention because it points to an important change of emphasis in his treatment of the Church as an institution of socio-critical faith from an emphasis on the institution to an emphasis on the base.

In conclusion, one can fairly say that the relevance and challenge of Metz’ thought on the Church and her responsibilities vis-à-vis the world extend beyond the churches of Central Europe. One can venture to say that Metz’s threefold identification of the Church’s role provides a continuing agenda for the Church in Asia in the new millennium. To a continent which remains largely unaware of Jesus Christ, she must carry his dangerous, vital, and eschatological memory. And because Asia is a continent of massive poverty, oppression and the denial of fundamental human rights, she must bear this dangerous memory, not only as an institution calling for freedom in society, but primarily by herself becoming an alternative community of participative freedom: a community of subjects, a Church not just for people, but truly, of Asian peoples.

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