

# Johann Baptist Metz's *Memoria Passionis* and the Possibility of Political Forgiveness

JOAS ADIPRASETYA 

*Constructive Theology, Jakarta Theological Seminary, Jakarta, Indonesia*

The idea of *memoria passionis* promoted by Johann Baptist Metz provides a strong basis for correlating the Christian creed of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and our political engagement in atrocious situations. However, Metz's idea of memory and remembering is not sufficient as we attempt to construct a just and peaceful society based on the Christian notion of forgiveness. This article attempts to make use of Metz's *memoria passionis*, while at the same time proposing the necessity of political forgiveness as an intrinsic aspect of such a memorative faith. In such a proposal, forgiving and remembering must be two unavoidable and intertwined dimensions of *memoria passionis Jesu Christi*.

KEYWORDS Johann Baptist Metz, *memoria passionis*, forgiveness, remembering, dangerous memory

## The story of a cellist

Sarajevo, May 27, 1992. Vedran Smailović, a cellist of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra, stood at his window and watched a long line of hungry people standing in a breadline. Unexpectedly, a mortar shell screamed down from the sky. Twenty-two men, women, and children were immediately killed. It was the day after that breadline massacre when Smailović started to play Albinoni's melancholy "Adagio in G. Minor." Every day at exactly 4:00 p.m. for a total of twenty-two days — one to honor each of the victims — he played the same music, remembering the innocent victims. Many wonder if he chose this music knowing it was reconstructed from a piece of music found in the ruins of Dresden after the Second World War. Albinoni's music survived the bombing, as if it had waited to be used as a remembrance of Sarajevo's tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paul R. Bartrop, Smailović, Vedran. In: A biographical encyclopedia of contemporary genocide portraits of evil and good (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO; 2012).

The memory of suffering is undoubtedly bitter, but no one can escape it. The only way to deal with that bitter memory is to accept and creatively allow it to become a “dangerous memory.” This term is popularized by Johann Baptist Metz, who constructs his own theology through the memory of his personal story.

Towards the end of the Second World War, at the age of sixteen, I was snatched out of school and conscripted into the army. After a hasty training in the barracks at Wüzburg I arrived at the front, which by that time had already advanced over the Rhine into Bavaria. My company consisted solely of young people, well over a hundred of them. One evening the company commander sent me with a message to battalion headquarters. I wandered during the night through shattered, burning villages and farmsteads, and when next morning I returned to my company I found only the dead: dead bodies, overwhelmed by a combined fighter-bomber and tank attack. I could only look into the still, dead faces of all those with whom on the previous days I had shared the anxieties of childhood and the joys of youth. *I cannot remember anything but a silent cry. I can still see myself there today, and my childhood dreams have collapsed before that memory.*<sup>2</sup>

In this light, I will explore Metz’s *memoria passionis* as a theological starting-point for taking the side of the victims. However, it is evident from the outset that Metz does not provide a sufficient base for “political forgiveness,” as he focuses his theology on the liberating power of *memoria passionis* that simply draws a strict demarcation between the oppressed and the oppressor. Given this fact, I will have to go beyond Metz in discussing the possibility of the political forgiveness for the victimizers.

## Political theology as practical fundamental theology

Johann Baptist Metz began his early work with writing two dissertations (one under Coreth on Heidegger and another under Rahner on Thomas Aquinas).<sup>3</sup> These extensive studies led him to stress “man’s ability to mediate between Being and entities (between God and world) because man shares the characteristics of both [...] He views man’s *a priori* constitution in terms of shared being in a shared world.”<sup>4</sup> These propositions influenced his whole theology later, especially as he coined the term “political theology.”

Metz’s understanding of “a shared world” is central in his book, *Theology of the World* (1971), and characterizes the first stage of his work. Here, he evaluates secularization as a positive manifestation of God’s dominion in history.

The secularity of the world, as it has emerged in the modern process of secularization and as we see it today in a globally heightened form, has fundamentally, though not in its individual historical forms, arisen not against Christianity but through it. It is originally

<sup>2</sup> Johann B. Metz, Johann Baptist Metz. In: Jürgen Moltmann, editor. *How I have changed: reflections on thirty years of theology*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International; 1997), p. 31; emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> Roger D. Johns provides an excellent analysis of the influence of Heidegger, Coreth, Rahner, and Thomas in Metz’s theology. See Roger D. Johns, editor, *Man in the world: the political theology of Johannes Baptist Metz* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press; 1976). pp. 61–8.

<sup>4</sup> Johns, *Man in the world*, p. 80.

a Christian event and hence testifies in our world situation to the power of the 'hour of Christ' at work within history.<sup>5</sup>

The positive appropriation of secularization is buttressed with at least three fundamental concepts. First, the incarnation of God becomes the framework of secularization, as the incarnation appears "wholly as 'flesh,' as earth, as secular world, and God [...] now becomes operative in the economy of the movement of history."<sup>6</sup> Second, he continues his incarnational argument with a correction of the understanding of the world, moving from cosmocentric Greek philosophy to anthropocentric Hebrew and Christian theology.<sup>7</sup> "To see the world not as a cosmos, not as nature interpreting itself, but as history, to see it in its relation to man, as mediated by him, means to interpret the world in its formal *anthropocentricity*."<sup>8</sup> This anthropocentricity leads Metz to comprehend the world as being hominized, meaning both pluralistic and dehumanized.<sup>9</sup> Third, Metz characterizes the secularity of the world, with its orientation towards the future, as based on the biblical belief in the promises of God. Roger D. Johns argues that in order to differentiate his eschatology from Bloch's philosophy of hope, Metz proposes what he calls God's "eschatological proviso," which provides the dialectical tension between the future and present situation, as well as the basis for the existence for the church.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, every present occurrence should be seen as partial until it is fulfilled in the future.

Systematically, these three reflections lead Metz to pronounce his political theology, which he defines as,

[...] 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" society). At the same time, I understand this political theology to be a positive attempt to formulate the eschatological message under the condition of our present society.<sup>11</sup>

However, we cannot find in his *Theology of the World* any further explanation or exploration of what he means by this kind of theology. In other words, this book is only a preliminary introduction to the discussion of political theology, found in his *magnum opus*, *Faith in History and Society* (1980), which also characterizes the second stage of his work.

In this book, Metz broadens his earlier definition of political theology as a practical fundamental theology. Like an ellipse, this practical fundamental theology has two fixed foci: the primary of *praxis*, and the struggle for the *subject*. "It is a

<sup>5</sup> Johann B. Metz, *Theology of the world* (London: Burns & Oates/New York: Herder and Herder; 1971). pp. 19–20.

<sup>6</sup> Metz, *Theology of the world*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> For Metz, Christianity is not the mixture of Hebrew faith and Greek logic. His avoidance of the Greek interpretation of Christian theology is largely an antecedent, not a consequence, of his attention on Auschwitz and Judaism, especially with his *memoria passionis*. See Gaspar Martinez, *Confronting the mystery of god: political, liberation, and public theologies* (New York: Continuum; 2001). p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> Metz, *Theology of the world*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70–7.

<sup>10</sup> Johns, *Man in the world*, 107–08; cf. Rebecca S. Chopp. *The praxis of suffering: an interpretation of liberation and political theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; 1986). p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Metz, *Theology of the world*, p. 107.

theology that operates subject to the primacy of praxis.”<sup>12</sup> The practical focus of this political theology is precisely used to move beyond Rahner’s transcendental theology and even to flesh out Rahner’s thesis with concrete historical and social evidence.<sup>13</sup> Not only does Metz understand praxis as morality, but he also relates it to social engagement. In this light, praxis cannot be “socially neutral and politically innocent.”<sup>14</sup>

These concerns relate to the second focus of his work, the struggle for the subject. As he does in *Theology of the World*, Metz warns against the danger of privatized theologies such as the existential theology of demythologization, personal theology, and transcendental theology. Although those theologies are also considered “theologies of the subject,” they do not place the human person within a social and political context. Human persons, in those theologies, are viewed abstractly as isolated from their community and from history. In contrast, the political theology of the subject locates human persons in human interrelationship — not only co-existence — as well as in God’s presence.<sup>15</sup> Only upon this basis can political theology be a “practical criticism of a culture of hatred and a culture of apathy.”<sup>16</sup> The experience of the Hebrew people through the Exodus, according to Metz, is an example *par excellence* of becoming subjects.

In contrast to the first stage, Metz’s second stage work is now critical of world history. Secularization, which was praised in the first stage of his work, is now seen by Metz as having a “tragic flaw,” the victimization of the weak, which is to be confronted with concrete praxis. His critical stand of secularization to a great extent appears as he discusses the connection between the church and “bourgeois” society. He sees three images of the church, which are in competition with each other: “a prebourgeois paternalistic church, a bourgeois supply — or services — church, and a post-bourgeois initiative-taking church.”<sup>17</sup> The first image of the church, Metz argues, belongs to the past, with its concentration on taking care of the people paternalistically. This model manifests itself in clergy resignation to the danger posed by bourgeois society and its influence on the church. Rather, the clergy reacts to bourgeois society with a legalistic attitude that, ironically, “offers no real help for the grassroots communities at the parish level.”<sup>18</sup>

The second image is the bourgeois church, which to some extent reflects the larger bourgeois society. The bourgeois church is characterized with individualism that is far from Metz’s proposal of the theology of the subject; for “the bourgeois subject [...] is established with his own self-interest and his own future.”<sup>19</sup> In such a church, the messianic character of a true church is weakened and distorted. It proclaims hope without expectation and joy, love without solidarity, and spirituality without discipleship. This happens, according to Metz, simply because “religion

<sup>12</sup> Johann B. Metz, *Faith in history and society: toward a practical fundamental theology* (New York: Seabury Press; 1980), p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> Martinez, *Confronting the mystery of god*, p. 58; cf. Metz, *Faith in history and society*, p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> Metz, *Faith in history and society*, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Johann B. Metz, *The emergent church: the future of Christianity in a postbourgeois world* (New York: Crossroad; 1981), p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> Metz, *Emergent church*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

does not lay claim to the bourgeois; instead, the bourgeois lays claim to religion. Religion does not transform society; rather, bourgeois society does not rest until religion fits in with itself and with what it consider reasonable.”<sup>20</sup>

In order to go beyond the two images of church, Metz proposes the third image, that is, the postbourgeois initiative-taking church, which he find most closely in the Latin American base communities. This new church can only be realized if the church becomes culturally polycentric. This new model, Metz believes, enables the church to recognize her members as subjects through its effort to be a “community of memory.”

### ***Memoria passionis* as a dangerous memory**

As a practical hermeneutic of Christianity, political theology must be a “narrative theology.” In regard to narrative as a theological category, Metz maintains, “the beginning and the end can only be discussed in narrative form.”<sup>21</sup> I assume that Metz employs this category to emphasize the temporal aspect of his theology, as well as to introduce the linkage between *memoria passionis* and the eschatological hope that lies between the *arche* and the *telos*. While he shares with Moltmann the political dimension of Christian hope and eschatology, he develops his own “turning to the past” using a narrative bridge. Here, we find the second category in Metz’s theology, memory.

The relationship between narrative and memory is central in his *Faith in History and Society*. Yet, these categories have to be linked with Christian redemption and emancipation. His thesis is that Christian soteriology is “a fundamentally memorative and narrative soteriology. It tries to keep the Christian memory of redemption alive in narrative form as a dangerous and liberating memory of redeemed freedom and to defend it by argument in the systems of our so-called emancipative world.”<sup>22</sup>

Because of the notion of emancipation, then, political theologians cannot understand Christian redemption as merely an abstract soteriological concept. Here the history of redemption is also a history of freedom from suffering in its most concrete sense.

From this perspective, Metz reinterprets the classic credo of Christian faith: *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*.<sup>23</sup> For him, this *memoria Jesu Christi* is double-sided in terms of its temporality. On the one hand, “it anticipates the future as a future of those who are oppressed, without hope and doomed.”<sup>24</sup> On the other, it introduces the remembered freedom of Jesus into contemporary society. Only by maintaining this double-sidedness of Christian remembrance can the church draw its strength to criticize all oppressive ideologies and

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> Metz, *Faith in history and society*, p. 206.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> There are four phrases that he employs along with the term “dangerous memory”; all of these are almost interchangeable although they have their own specific emphasis: memory of the dead and vanquished; concrete memory of suffering and freedom; memory as eschatological hope; memory of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ or *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*.

<sup>24</sup> Metz, *Faith in history and society*, p. 90.

systems. Therefore, this *memoria passionis* is a dangerous memory, because it unites Jesus' narrative — *mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi* — within the narrative of the victims' suffering in history and draws from it liberating strength. It is also a subversive memory, in that it acknowledges "an active presence in history of God's interruptive act of salvation at the end of history, when God will rescue those whom history has destroyed and forgotten."<sup>25</sup> The Eucharist, which traditionally has had only ritual meaning, now has its socio-political meaning through the memory of the victims in history.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, *passionis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi* must be maintained in balance. Martinez rightly warns the dangers of separating both memorial events.

If *memoria resurrectionis* can become a dangerously victorious ideology without *memoria passionis*, the latter can become completely defeatist and hopeless without the former. Those two belong intrinsically together.<sup>27</sup>

*Memoria passionis* also gives Christian praxis a special pathos, since it is grounded in passion as well as practical action. It is the passion that leads Metz to complete his political theology with his third category, that is, solidarity. He maintains,

It is in this solidarity that memory and narrative (of salvation) acquire their specific mystical and political praxis. Without solidarity, memory and narrative cannot become practical categories of theology. In the same way, without memory and narrative, solidarity cannot express its practical humanizing form. It is only when they co-exist that memory, narrative and solidarity can effectively be categories of a practical fundamental theology.<sup>28</sup>

There is another issue to discuss here, that is, theology as theodicy. If *memoria passionis* expresses God's interruption in history to rescue those who suffer, then why are suffering and injustice so overwhelming? For Metz, this theodicy question, *Theodizeefrage*, is the central problem in Christian theology *after Auschwitz*. Not until 1973 did Metz begin his seriously reflective work on Auschwitz and Holocaust, when he worked on the first draft of the German synodal document, "Our Hope" (*Unsere Hoffnung*).<sup>29</sup> He confesses honestly his hesitation, "Slowly, much too slowly, I became aware — and the realization of how long I had hesitated made me even more uncomfortable! — that the situation in which I am a theologian, that is, try to talk about God, is the situation *after Auschwitz*."<sup>30</sup>

According to Metz, the theodicy problem brings the relationship between Christianity and Judaism into a new form. Auschwitz, in this light, is both an end and a

<sup>25</sup> Martinez, *Confronting the mystery of god*, p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> On one hand, Metz criticizes the sacramentalism and ritualism in the Catholic church that distort the importance of grace as freedom; on the other hand, he argues that the *anamnesis* of Christian Eucharist is to be incorporated within the framework of a narrative action so that we can "relate the sacramental action more closely to stories of life and suffering and [...] reveal it as a saving narrative." See Metz, *Faith in history and society*, p. 208; cf. Metz, *Emergent church*, p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Martinez, *Confronting the mystery of god*, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Metz, *Faith in history and society*, p. 230.

<sup>29</sup> Ekkehard Schuster *et al.*, *Hope against hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel speak out on the holocaust* (New York: Paulist Press; 1999), p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Johann B. Metz, *A passion for god: the mystical-political dimension of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press; 1998), p. 54.

turning point for Christian theology. Metz agrees with Elie Wiesel who says, “The reflective Christian knows that it was not the Jewish people that died in Auschwitz, but Christianity.”<sup>31</sup> Auschwitz was an end for Christianity. In the same time, it can be a turning point for Christian theology, only if Christians after Auschwitz “understand their identity [...] in the face of the Jews” (not in the face of Judaism).<sup>32</sup> This is to say that political theology can no longer be situationless and subjectless. After Auschwitz, every theology that is unrelated to remembering concrete subjects must cease to exist, because Auschwitz does not only present a question of theodicy but also of anthropodicy.<sup>33</sup> Here, again, he denies the ahistorical and subjectless Platonic or Greek model of anamnesis. The remembrance of the victims of Auschwitz should be reconstructed from mystical Hebrew-Christian tradition, that is, “a mysticism of suffering unto — not ‘in’ — God” (*leiden an Gott*), as demonstrated by Job and Jesus.<sup>34</sup> His move to mystical (and negative) radicalizes somewhat his “turn to the subject” into what I would call a “turn deep into the inner core of the subject.” If this is so, his lack of “theologically warranted practical steps,” as criticized by Ashley, is still more serious.<sup>35</sup>

### **Beyond Metz: the limit of *memoria passionis***

Metz’s theology, especially “after Auschwitz,” belongs to the tradition of negative theology, in the sense that it holds that a speculative grasp of God is not possible. Nevertheless, his theology is not completely negative. Rather, its pathos comes from an eschatological hope that God will come and interrupt history, for the living and the dead. My intention in this section is to reveal and explore the crucial omission of Metz’s theology, that is, forgiveness. Rarely does Metz speak about forgiveness as an inherent dimension of Christian faith related to the category of memory. Only once does he speak of the church’s work of reconciliation, when he discusses the ecumenical relationship between “the poor church” and “the rich church.”<sup>36</sup> Despite his invitation to “a radical process of repentance,” his tone in this article is much softer than in writings where he speaks about political atrocities. For instance, he softens the radical disparity between the oppressed and the oppressors by saying that the rich churches can be “oppressed oppressors.”

This lack of forgiveness language is also obvious when Metz speaks about *memoria passionis Jesu Christi*, which traditionally includes the forgiving aspect of God’s grace. I am not suggesting that we spiritualize this theme; nor am I arguing that Metz has over-politicized the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, the true meaning of God’s action in human history

<sup>31</sup> Schuster *et al.*, *Hope against hope*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Johann B. Metz, *Facing the Jews: Christian theology after Auschwitz*. In: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy, editors. *The Holocaust as interruption* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; 1984), p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Metz, *Emergent church*, pp. 22, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Metz, *Passion for god*, p. 66. J. Matthew Ashley provides an extensive and deep analysis on the relationship between Metz’s mystical spirituality and his political theology; James Matthew Ashley. *Interruptions: Mysticism, politics, and theology in the work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ashley, *Interruptions*, p. 195.

<sup>36</sup> Johann B. Metz, *Messianic or “Bourgeois” religion? On the crisis of the church in West Germany*. *Concilium*. 1979;5 (125):68–70.

through Jesus Christ is to be lived out holistically: personally and socially; spiritually and politically; temporally and timelessly. Forgiveness, which was deliberately omitted by Metz, is as important an aspect of God's act in Christ as God's critical judgment towards the oppressor. There is always the possibility of forgiving the oppressor. One of the most beautiful images of this double-sided meaning of *soteria* in the Bible is that offered by the Psalmist:

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.  
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.  
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
(Ps. 5:8–10, NRSV)

We hear *truth* and *righteousness* as central themes in Metz's writings, but we rarely hear him speak of *mercy* and *peace*. Again, in his writing on the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–11), Metz only reflects on select sentences that fit his political agenda.<sup>37</sup>

Metz's selectivity, on the one hand, is reasonable with regard to avoiding the danger of "political amnesia" and impunity; justice should be upheld! Perhaps he felt that the suffering of the Jews at Auschwitz was so overwhelming that mercy and forgiveness for the victimizers were impossible; they were just unforgivable! Nonetheless, he does injustice not only to the oppressors "as subjects" but also to the wholeness of the Christian message. In this sense, *memoria passionis* can be dangerous if it is used selectively. The situation in the modern Balkans provides an example of the danger of selective memory.

In 1989 the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic headed the celebrations commemorating the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of the Kosovo in 1389, when Serbs had fought against the troops of the emerging Ottoman Empire and lost. Their defeat sealed hundreds of the years of subordination to the sultans of Constantinople. Remembering this battle became the interpretative key for the formation of the identity of the Serbian people. They had fought to defend the values of Christian Europe against the Turkish infidels. Yet since this sacrifice had never been appreciated, Serbs came to see themselves as the heroic victims [...] It became the key to reading their history, enabling them not only to create and nurture their own self-image but also to identify their enemies and to generate patterns of suspicion and hatred.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps Metz's most important article discussing the place of the victimizers as subjects in the process of remembering is "In the Pluralism of Religious and Cultural Worlds."<sup>39</sup> Here, he follows Paul F. Knitter, suggesting that the interfaith encounter

<sup>37</sup> Metz, *Passion for god*, pp. 157–63.

<sup>38</sup> Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *The art of forgiveness: theological reflections on healing and reconciliation* (Geneva: WCC Publications; 1997), p. 46. The technique of "chosen trauma" was also employed by Soeharto's regime against the Communists in the 1960s. The oppressed could be more oppressive than their previous oppressors could. In this case, memory is the obstacle for true peace and reconciliation.

<sup>39</sup> Johann B. Metz, *In the pluralism of religious and cultural worlds: notes toward a theological and political program*. *Cross Currents*. 1999;49(2).

TABLE 1  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REMEMBER AND SANCTION.

		Sanction	
		Yes	No
Remember	Yes	Prosecuting	Forgiving
	No	Revenge	Forgetting

has its commonality not in a “subjectless” and “situationless” (Metz’s term) common ground but in common suffering.<sup>40</sup> Related to this issue, Metz also argues that “the struggle for justice can generate a universal horizon only by its ‘negative mediation,’ only by resisting unjust suffering.”<sup>41</sup>

Metz uses the former Yugoslavia as a case to show that their “purely self-regarding *memoria passionis*,” or their selective remembrance, “became not an organ of understanding and peace, but a source of hostility, hatred, and violence.”<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, he praises the encounter between Rabin and Arafat as “they want to look not only at their own suffering, but also to remember the suffering of others, the suffering of their *former enemies*.”<sup>43</sup> What does he mean by “former enemies”? Are they now reconciled? Is reconciliation, therefore, the precondition of treating enemies as subjects? If it is so, then, we still have a problem with Metz’s understanding of forgiveness. Is it possible to forgive the enemies while they still remain our enemies?

The following sections will discuss the possibility of forgiving in relation to remembering. Only by employing both creatively are reconciliation and true peace attainable. More than that, forgiveness also opens the possibility of maintaining our faith in God, who has been *Deus absconditus* (the absent God) during and after Auschwitz. In short, forgiveness in the light of remembrance is the only way to accept God as *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*.

### Forgiving memory and memorative forgiveness

In his “The Philosophy and Practice of Dealing with the Past,” Tuomas Forsberg provides a useful table to show the relationship between remembering and giving political sanction<sup>44</sup> (Table 1).

However, I will revise Forsberg’s table to make it fit the theme of this essay. The issue of reconciliation is not only dealing with the question of whether to give sanction or not, but also, and primarily, with the choice to forgive or not. For this purpose, I suggest forgiveness as the fourth category of a “new” political theology, along with the three other categories Metz provides (memory, narrative, and

<sup>40</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *One earth, many religions: multifaith dialogue and global responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; 1995), pp. 56–7.

<sup>41</sup> Metz, *Pluralism of religious and cultural worlds*, p. 233.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233; emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> Tuomas Forsberg, *The philosophy and practice of dealing with the past: some conceptual and normative issues*. In: Nigel Biggar, editor. *Burying the past: making peace and doing justice after civil conflict*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press; 2001), p. 61.

TABLE 2  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REMEMBER AND FORGIVENESS.

		Forgiveness	
		Yes	No
Remembrance	Yes	Reconciliation	Impunity
	No	Amnesty	Revenge

solidarity).<sup>45</sup> I here use Desmond Tutu's definition of forgiveness as "abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim."<sup>46</sup> Tutu's definition of forgiveness obviously reflects his personal experience and involvement in the reconciliation process in South Africa. It is also very important to emphasize Tutu's distinction between forgiving and forgetting as it will also be used in this paper. Tutu is of the opinion, "In forgiving, people are not being asked to forget. On the contrary, it is important to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again"<sup>47</sup> (Table 2).

The limit of *memoria passionis* we have discussed above does not make it insignificant as a condition for a peaceful reconciliation. On the contrary, it provides the first step of any reconciliatory process. Remembering is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition, of reconciliation. We cannot have reconciliation without remembrance, nor with remembrance alone. The value of remembering is also evident, since it prevents us from any effort to associate reconciliation and political forgiveness with political impunity (*remember-yes/forgive-no*).

We have amnesty (*remember-nolforgive-yes*) insofar as the crimes of the victimizers in the past are forgiven not by the victims, but by the third-party agent (government, for instance). No victims are involved within the process, either because they are dead or because they avoid forgiving their oppressors. Yet, the worst amnesty happens when forgiveness is given without primarily remembering the suffering of the oppressed. In this case, amnesty is the formal expression of amnesia.

Another solution is revenge (*remember-nolforgive-no*), when there is no willingness on the part of the victims either to remember their own suffering or to forgive their victimizers. The only way that makes sense to them is to do to their oppressors what was done to them.<sup>48</sup>

Both amnesty and revenge are forms of forgetting the *memoria passionis*. Forgetting, therefore, is the first opposite of remembering (*ana-mnesis*). Forgetting (*a-mnesia*) is an act of cutting oneself off from one's own history, an erasing of memory. However, forgetting gets its existential emphasis through the second

<sup>45</sup> Metz, in fact, mentions many other categories that are included in his three categories, such as love, interaction, work, suffering, struggle, sorrow, reason, language, time and so on. See Metz, *Faith in history and society*, p. 183. J. Matthew Ashley, one of the most prominent interpreters of Metz's work, in our personal correspondence, expresses his disagreement with my suggestion to make "forgiveness" a fundamental anthropological category in the same way as the other three. However, I would argue that this is possible, because this category has been discussed widely in many disciplines: theologically, psychologically, philosophically as well as anthropologically.

<sup>46</sup> Desmond M. Tutu, *No future without forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday; 1999), p. 272.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Shriver has listed seven forms of revenge that can possibly be chosen, from terror to passivity: terror, vindictiveness, retaliation, punishment, restitution, protest, and passivity. Donald W. Shriver, *An ethic for enemies: forgiveness in politics* (New York: Oxford University Press; 1995), pp. 30–1.

opposite of remembering: dismembering action. Dismembering separates one's identity from one's community, removes one's suffering from that of others, in short, alienates them.

We have discussed three options of how we can deal with remembering and forgiving. None of these options, I believe, is adequate for facilitating reconciliation. A true and peaceful reconciliation happens only if remembering and forgiving come together; they are like two sides of the same coin of reconciliation. In sum, a new political theology, beyond Metz, should be based on a "forgiving memory" and "memorative forgiveness." In this sense, as Paul Ricoeur argues, "forgiveness gives memory a future."<sup>49</sup>

The theme of political forgiveness now is widespread around the world, especially since the late of 1980s, when oppressive regimes in many countries fell. It has drawn attention from thinkers and practitioners from many fields; theology to anthropology, philosophy to psychology.<sup>50</sup> The result is that the discussion of this theme has evolved in very complicated ways. Given this situation, I explore three fundamental issues relevant to Christian ethics of remembering and forgiving. Yet, because of the complexity of each issue, my exploration and reflection will be brief and deserving of further study. For this purpose, I employ Metz's valuable contributions as well as explore possibilities to go beyond him.

### ***Treating the oppressed and the oppressors as subjects***

Metz is correct when he proposes his political theology of the *subject*. Opposed to any subjectless theology, he joins himself with the postmodern spirit of "turning to the subject." Moreover, he also argues that unless we treat enemies as subjects, political theology will tend to be oppressive as well. Although Metz does not speak much of forgiveness, his emphasis on the *subject* is still useful for our discussion. If remembering should be centralized on *the victims and the victimizers as the subjects*, then it is also the case with forgiving. We forgive someone (the doer) instead of something (the deed).<sup>51</sup> The centrality of subjects — both the victims and the victimizers — should also free us from treating each subject as purely innocent or purely evil. In many cases, the victims become the victimizers in another occasion, and vice-versa. Even more, it is only in extremely rare cases that the victims do not contribute in the suffering that they have experienced. In the same time, it would also be problematic, both theologically and morally, to stigmatize the victimizers as the pure evil, without recognizing some moral goodness on their part.<sup>52</sup>

A Jewish political philosopher, Hannah Arendt radicalizes the necessity to view the oppressors as subjects in her narrative report on the trial of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem.<sup>53</sup> Without diminishing Eichmann's responsibility for crimes against humanity (*hostis generis humani*), she locates "the lesson that

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in David M. Kaplan, *Reading Ricoeur* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; 2008), p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> An extensive review of literature on forgiveness from 1901 to 2001 is written by Nigel Biggar. His review includes books from theology, philosophy, political ethics, as well as empirical studies. Nigel Biggar, *Forgiveness in the twentieth century: a review of literature, 1901–2001*. In: Alistair McFadyen and Marcel Sarot, editors, *Forgiveness and truth: explorations in contemporary theology* (Edinburgh/New York: T&T Clark; 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida. *On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness* (London/New York: Routledge; 2002), p. 38.

<sup>52</sup> In this context, Roy Baumeister's rejection of "the myth of pure evil" is of importance here. Cf. Roy F. Baumeister. *Evil: inside human cruelty and violence* (New York: W.H. Freeman; 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil* (New York: Viking Press; 1963).

this long course in human wickedness had taught us” as “the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.”<sup>54</sup> While others depict Eichmann as evil personified, Arendt expresses her surprise that “this man was not a ‘monster,’ but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown.”<sup>55</sup>

The distinction between doer and deed echoes the Christian distinction between the sinner and the sin. This is not to say that the doer is *beyond the reach of justice*, since as a person s/he also has the moral capacity to be responsible for what s/he has done. Rather, this is to say that no perpetrator is *beyond the reach of forgiveness*.<sup>56</sup> Yet, one may argue that the doer and the deed, while fundamentally distinctive, cannot practically be separated. We relate to others only through their exteriority and deeds. If this is true, one may also argue, there could be a condition where the deed and the doer are inexpiable and irreparable; in short: unforgivable!

To this, Jacques Derrida agrees that the presence of the unforgivable (the inexpiable and the irreparable) may be very possible, yet he rejects the notion that that we cannot forgive anyone anymore, since “forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable.”<sup>57</sup>

If one is only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable, what the church call ‘the venial sin’ then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. If there is something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm. From which comes the aporia, which can be described in its dry and implacable formality, without mercy [...] there is only forgiveness if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the impossible.<sup>58</sup>

Derrida’s argument undoubtedly depicts a Christian spirit of forgiveness. We are called to imitate God’s act of forgiving through Jesus Christ. It is the central theme of Christian soteriology that God forgives us even for our “unforgivable” sins. Therefore, despite its awfulness and ugliness, God has demonstrated God’s willingness to get into Jesus’ crucifixion in order to solve the paradox of truth and mercy, justice and forgiveness. Yet, the problem remains: how we as the followers of Christ bridge the gap between justice and political forgiveness in our own moral situations.

### ***Justice and political forgiveness***

Digester maintains that “the idea of political forgiveness will be stillborn if justice and forgiveness stand in opposition to one another and if the demand of justice trumps all other concerns.”<sup>59</sup> He is absolutely right. However, we face a complex problem, since justice is traditionally associated with revenge (retributive justice), or with a neutral distribution of rights or resources (distributive justice). In these cases, justice certainly cannot be reconciled with forgiveness; either because they contradict to one another or because justice depreciates the value of human life. In short, both concepts ignore the importance of the victims.

<sup>54</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 231.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Peter Digester, *Political forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; 2001), p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida, *On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness*, p. 32.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–3.

<sup>59</sup> Digester, *Political forgiveness*, p. 36.

The most promising concept of justice, at least up to now, that can serve for the reconciliatory process is one of restorative justice. By restorative justice, Digeser means a concept that seeks “to remedy these defects by restoring to the victim and to the community the losses that result from crime, by reconciling the transgressor, to the victim and the community, and by achieving these goals through the active participation of all parties involved.”<sup>60</sup> The focus of restorative justice, therefore, is on rehabilitating and healing the dignity of the victim and the victimizer.<sup>61</sup> In this light, the possibilities of reconciliation and the emergence of a new community is opened.

How are we to evaluate Metz’s understanding of the subject from this perspective? Obviously, the centrality of human beings in restorative justice can be reconciled with Metz’s political theology of the subject. However, such a concept of justice is still problematic if we confront it with *memoria passionis* that has been forgotten for a long time. The real victims may have died or the reconciliation process may have involved a third party — the descendants of the victim, government or other parties — on behalf of the victims. In this case, restorative justice can only be employed symbolically.<sup>62</sup>

Is forgiveness a substitute for justice? Only an amnesic forgiveness — I use this oxymoronically — can substitute for justice, as it is not a true forgiveness. As Miroslav Volf puts it,

Forgiveness is no mere discharge of a victim’s angry resentment and no mere assuaging of a perpetrator’s remorseful anguish, one that demands no change of the perpetrator and no righting of wrongs. On the contrary: every act of forgiveness enthrones justice; it draws attention to its violation precisely by offering to forego its claims [...] Only those who are forgiven and who are willing to forgive will be capable of relentlessly pursuing justice without falling into the temptation to pervert it into injustice, we could add.<sup>63</sup>

### ***History and the risk of forgiveness***

Time and history are central in Metz’s understanding of political eschatology. However, we have seen that Auschwitz makes the confidence in God’s action in history more problematic. It depicts the “interruption of evil,” in contrast to God’s interruption in Metz’s earlier theology. In this light, Hannah Arendt’s exploration of forgiveness is useful. She maintains that the consequences as well as the “frustration” of human action are marked by irreversibility, unpredictability, and anonymity.<sup>64</sup> Those three consequences are frustrating predicaments for human life, but they are still remediable through “the potentialities of action itself.” While the only way out of the predicament of irreversibility is the act of forgiving,

<sup>60</sup> Digeser, *Political forgiveness*, *Ibid.*, reconciliation (Geneva: WCC Publications; 2000), p. 44.

<sup>61</sup> Tutu, *No future without forgiveness*, p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> I realize the complex problem of political forgiveness in relation to responsibility of the government to punish criminals that is extremely difficult to solve. However, the issue is not my focus in this paper and I suggest a specific research on this matter in the future.

<sup>63</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press; 1996), p. 123.

<sup>64</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The human condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1958), p. 220.

the possible solution of unpredictability is contained in the human capability to make and keep promises.<sup>65</sup>

Since an action is simply irreversible and immediately belongs to the past, one cannot undo what one has done. What remains is the fact that we are the victims of consequences forever. Forgiveness is an action that interrupts such a recurrence of consequences. In contrast with revenge that is “the natural, automatic reaction to transgression and which [...] can be expected and even calculated,” the act of forgiveness is unexpected and unconditioned “by the act which provoked it.”<sup>66</sup> Believing that forgiveness is rediscovered by Jesus of Nazareth, Arendt maintains that “only *love* can forgive because only love [is] *willing* to forgive him whatever he may have done.”<sup>67</sup> In her *The Life of the Mind: Willing*, Arendt also regards love as the transformation of will; even, “the Will [...] can also be defined as Love.”<sup>68</sup> However, following Augustine, Arendt argues that will cannot be separated from memory and intellect, since they are one mind and mutually refer to each other. “Memory and Intellect are both contemplative and, as such, passive; it is the Will that makes them function.”<sup>69</sup> In short, according to Arendt, love is the activation of will, memory, and intellect; and one of the results of such mental activity is forgiveness. Here we find again the connection between memory and forgiveness. Using Arendt’s perspective, we can say that without the forgiveness that comes from the human will, memory cannot be fruitful and constructive.

As forgiveness is a remedy for irreversibility, the ability to make and keep promises can be a remedy for the unpredictability of the future. Once we forgive someone, there is no certainty that s/he will not repeat the wrong that has been done before. The only reasonable action is to believe the promise of the victimizer. In this light, promise is “isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty,”<sup>70</sup> that can be misused easily by those who have been forgiven. Although promise-making is a risk, the act of making and keeping promises can act to instill a sense of hope of reconciliation for the victims.

## Conclusion

I have discussed at length Metz’s political theology of the subject and his notion of *memoria passionis* as a theological category, through which we can take the side of the victims. I also have demonstrated the limit of such a *memoria passionis* in the light of political forgiveness. In the final sections, I have explored three important themes that arise in Metz but need to be widened if we see peace and reconciliation as our ultimate goals.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 236–7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 241. It is also Miroslav Volf’s main thesis that forgiveness should be unconditional (1996). Ten days after 9/11, Volf says in his interview for *Christianity Today*, “[...] a will to embrace and be reconciled with our enemy [...] is absolutely unconditional. There is no imaginable deed that should take a person outside our will to embrace him, because there is no imaginable deed that can take a person out of God’s will to embrace humanity.” Tony Carnes. To embrace the enemy: is reconciliation possible in the wake of such evil? An interview with miroslav volf, *Christianity today*, September 1, 2001, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/septemberweb-only/9-17-53.o.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt, *Human condition*, pp. 242–3; emphasis mine.

<sup>68</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The life of the mind: vol. II: willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1978), p. 102.

<sup>69</sup> Arendt, *Willing*, p. 99.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

To conclude, Metz has provided a necessary and fundamental basis for long journey towards reconciliation. However, Metz's proposal is not sufficient to be the only answer for our ultimate goal. By transcending Metz's *memoria passionis*, we have proved that his proposal is really valuable. I also have pointed out that without willingness to move forward by employing forgiveness, remembering could be dangerous in its negative sense.

I have tried not to ease or romanticize forgiveness and reconciliation, as if they can be easily reached. On the contrary, it is more painful for the victims to step out from their place and embrace their trespassers. Like memory, I believe, forgiveness is also dangerous. By forgiving, the victims open themselves to a vulnerable, unpredictable, open future. They are invited to walk toward the future, either with or without their forgiven oppressors, however painful it might be to the victims, supplied only with tenuous promise. However, by doing this, the victims become the priests of "civic sacrament,"<sup>71</sup> *presenting* the covenantal God in Christ. In such new sacrament, God interrupts history once more, after he has been *absent* in Auschwitz, Papua, Sarajevo, and many other atrocious places. Reconciliation is not a *utopia*. Rather, it is a *eutopia* after all!<sup>72</sup>

## ORCID

Joas Adiprasetya  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2208-4407>

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<sup>71</sup> W. James Booth, *The unforgotten: memories of justice*. *American Political Science Review*. 2001;95(4):783.

<sup>72</sup> While *utopia* means "no place," *eutopia* means "good place."

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## Notes on contributor

Joas Adiprasetya is the Dean of Public Relation at Jakarta Theological Seminary in Jakarta, Indonesia, where he also teaches constructive theology and theology of religions. His latest book is *An Imaginative Glimpse: The Trinity and Multiple Religious Participations* (2013).

Correspondence to: Joas Adiprasetya, Jakarta Theological Seminary, Indonesia.  
Email: j.adiprasetya@sttjakarta.ac.id

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