

# VIOLENCE, TRAUMA, AND RESISTANCE: A FEMINIST APPRAISAL OF METZ'S MYSTICISM OF SUFFERING UNTO GOD

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## ABSTRACT

The trauma that results from violence against women presents a challenge to theological reflection on the meaning of suffering. The mysticism of suffering unto God in the theology of J.B. Metz offers an essential contribution to this reflection. There is a remarkable compatibility between women's experiences of trauma and healing and Metz's understanding of suffering unto God, especially in its refusal to glorify suffering. Further, Metz's understanding presents a much needed mystical-political dimension to theological reflection on violence against women, because of its capacity to nurture on going resistance to the victimization of all women, past and present. Metz's mystical stance, holding together both anguish and radical hope, challenges feminist theology, in its treatment of violence against women, to attend to the relationship between the mystical and political.

## *I. Introduction*

This article examines the mysticism of suffering unto God in the theology of Johann Baptist Metz and argues that this aspect of his work offers an essential contribution to theological reflection on the problem of violence against women. I will discuss Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God and its coherence with the process of healing from trauma that results from battery and rape. I will then review some of the insights about suffering found in feminist theological reflection on the problem of violence against women. This material problematizes any attempt to locate redemptive or positive meaning in radical suffering and argues that such attempts glorify suffering and trivialize its actual concrete negativity. I will argue that Metz's understanding of suffering adds needed clarification and nuance to the consideration of suffering caused by victimization through violence against women. Further, the praxis Metz advocates has the capacity to contribute to women's healing precisely in its refusal to glorify suffering. Finally, Metz's mysti-

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cism of suffering unto God provides a resource not yet available in feminist theological reflection on the problem of violence against women. It challenges theology to keep vigil for those women who are already dead, for whom we can do nothing more—and nothing less—than continue to demand of God even *their* healing. I will argue that such a stance is sorely needed in theological reflection on violence against women, because of its capacity to nurture ongoing resistance to the victimization all of women, past and present.

## *II. Metz's Mysticism of Suffering unto God*

Concern for suffering and the desire to construct a theology which faces concrete human suffering in its full negativity are at the heart of Metz's political theology. In particular, Metz articulates his theology as a theology "after Auschwitz." Here the term Auschwitz signifies for Metz not only the unique and catastrophic extermination of the Jews in the Second World War, but also the failure of modern theology to take seriously the negativity of that event and of other concrete histories of suffering.<sup>1</sup> Two terms, theodicy and eschatology, are key for understanding Metz's approach to suffering. In the face of concrete histories of suffering, theology must be theodicy. But Metz does not mean by this what we commonly associate with theodicy, that is, the justification of God's goodness in the face of suffering or evil. For Metz theodicy is the lived question addressed to God about the suffering of the world, not a tidy answer to it. The question itself is based on faith in God and God's promises for the salvation of all. In this sense, Metz's political theology is an expression of eschatological hope. Metz emphasizes that everything we say about God has a temporal stamp. When we speak of a God of love who brings about radical justice, we speak in faith of a God who will be this for us in time. We are promised God's future, but it is not here yet. Christians live in the radical hope of the final fulfillment of these promises, for a future healing and justice of this world, and this for each person, even those long defeated and dead. Metz's eschatological interpretation of Christian faith does not permit a privatized focus on individual salvation. For Metz, hope is only hope if it is first and foremost a hope for the other: "To dare to hope in God's Kingdom always means entertaining this hope for others and therefore also for oneself."<sup>2</sup> And it is precisely this hope, for the well-being, healing, and

<sup>1</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, "Political Theology: A New Paradigm of Theology?" in *Civil Religion and Political Theology*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 149.

<sup>2</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, "Communicating a Dangerous Memory," in *Communicating a Dangerous Memory: Soundings in Political Theology*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 40.

redemption of all that leads us to live the theodicy question, in fact to suffer it. For if our hope is concrete and radical, it is necessarily frustrated, since attention to our concrete histories of suffering reveals that this hope is not yet fulfilled.

This radical hope, in the face of concrete histories of suffering, has the potential to nurture solidarity and action against suffering in the present. In this regard, it is not suffering itself which preserves this hope, but rather the *memory* of suffering. For Metz certain memories, the memories of injustice and defeat, have the capacity to preserve the identity of the subjects of suffering, especially those long dead. These are “dangerous memories” which call into question the record of the victors in history and which do not allow the stories of the victims to be silenced. Such dangerous memories challenge us to eradicate present suffering, as they disclose the hope of a future without suffering. In Metz’s words,

The essential dynamic of history is . . . the memory of suffering as a negative consciousness of future freedom and as a stimulus (with this freedom in our sights) to act to conquer suffering.<sup>3</sup>

The foundation for the Christian’s solidarity with the suffering of the world lies in the specific dangerous memory of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. This memory carries the eschatological promise of God that death will not triumph in human history. According to Metz, the memory of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection implies that the meaning of the victims of history has not been decided by the victors. This memory holds out hope to all that the meaning, value, and freedom of each human being, even those long dead, is yet to be realized in history, has yet to “make a claim on history.”<sup>4</sup>

Metz does not claim that all suffering can be removed from human life, and indeed, he encourages certain forms of suffering, for example, the sorrow that comes from solidarity with others who suffer. However, for Metz it is necessary to distinguish between solidaristic suffering with others (*Mitleiden*), and the suffering that destroys personhood (what I will term radical suffering). For Metz, radical suffering has no salutary benefit, but rather functions to destroy the very possibility of human subjectivity:

There is, then, this form of the history of suffering and this way in which the people suffer that cannot be made into an instrument . . .

<sup>3</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, “The Future in the Memory of Suffering,” trans. J. Griffiths, in *New Questions on God*, ed. J.B. Metz (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 18.

<sup>4</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1981), 76.

that leads to a rejection and even hatred of oneself and that forces entire peoples to lead lives lacking any form of self-assertion apart from a search for a simulated identity and expressions of frenzy. This form of suffering is certainly not a memory of God, nor does it contain any memory at all or any hope.<sup>5</sup>

This radical suffering may in no way be glorified, aestheticized, spiritualized, or idealistically explained.<sup>6</sup> For Metz this suffering may only be decried. He makes this point most clearly in answer to theologians, including that of his fellow political theologian Jürgen Moltmann, that speak of the suffering of God or suffering within God. These are popular theological moves on the part of political and liberation theologians who wish to take the negativity of suffering seriously, but Metz resists them. In his perspective, such theological expressions stand in danger of glorifying suffering in as much as they may lead to the suspicion that there is something noble about suffering itself. Metz writes,

Suffering, which makes us cry out or finally fall wretchedly silent, knows no majesty. It is nothing great, nothing sublime; at root it is something entirely different from a powerful, solidaristic suffering-with. It is not simply a sign of love; rather, it is much more a horrifying sign of no longer being able to love.<sup>7</sup>

In the face of this radical suffering, we should be crying out to God the cry of theodicy, demanding why. The biblical models Metz finds for this praxis are Job and Mark's portrayal of Jesus on the cross. Metz calls this a questioning back to God, or a requestioning of God (*Rückfragen an Gott*). He terms this persistent questioning of God suffering unto God. Metz's recent English translator, J. Matthew Ashley translates Metz's German phrase, *Leiden an Gott* as "suffering unto God," rather than "suffering from God," as earlier translators have. He argues that his rendering captures more precisely that this is an active and not a passive relationship to God. Further, it refers not to enduring a suffer-

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>6</sup>Metz argues against the theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar, among others, who speak of the suffering of God or of suffering within the Trinitarian God. Metz wishes to distance his own understanding from these. He argues that there is a danger in these perspectives of eternalizing suffering or of a "secret aestheticization of all suffering." Metz warns that these perspectives evidence a Hegelian sublation of the negativity of suffering that reduces suffering once again to its concept. See Johann Baptist Metz, "Suffering unto God," trans. J. Matthew Ashley, *Critical Inquiry* 20/4 (Summer 1994): 619.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* See also Johann Baptist Metz, "Theology as Theodicy?" in *A Passion For God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998), 54-71.

ing sent by God, but rather to an active engagement with God in which we demand an answer for suffering.<sup>8</sup> As such it is a mysticism, a way of encountering God with eyes wide open to histories of suffering. It is not an answer for suffering, nor a theory about it. Rather it is a praxis in relationship to God vis-à-vis suffering. Derek Simon describes Metz's suffering unto God as "an unrelenting enquiry of God concerning the temporal delay of God's restorative justice for the broken and the dead."<sup>9</sup> For Metz, then, the appropriate stance of the disciple with regard to radical suffering is the continual questioning of God, a crying out to God for God. This represents, for him, the greatest measure of faith and eschatological hope, that the promises of God are insisted upon, even demanded, in the face of suffering.<sup>10</sup>

Metz's refusal to find meaning in radical suffering, to excuse it, or to trivialize it with explanation, is essential in working against tendencies in Christian theology to encourage victims passively to accept or to spiritualize their suffering. He refuses to reduce human suffering to a theory or to try to fit it comfortably into a concept of God. His understanding of "suffering unto God," of the need to continue to cry out to God in the language of prayer about the suffering of the vulnerable, respects the negativity of the experience of suffering and refuses to let it be ignored.

### *III. Violence against Women as Radical Suffering—the Turn to Trauma*

The violence of rape and battery produces traumatic suffering, which, in its destructiveness, can be described as radical suffering. I argue that an understanding of the physio-psychological experience of trauma should inform a theological approach to radical suffering. Attention to the experience of trauma is growing in academic discourse. Historian Dominick LaCapra has written about the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the trauma experienced by survivors as a way of understanding what history is and how historical remembering functions. He has labeled this approach to historical work the "turn to trauma," and argues it "poses the dual challenge of not avoiding the disconcerting dimensions of the past and of consistently relating theory to specific problems in historical, social, and political analysis."<sup>11</sup> An example of

<sup>8</sup>See Ashley's translator's note in Metz, "Suffering unto God," 611.

<sup>9</sup>Derek Simon, "'No One, Not Even God, Can Take The Place of the Victim': Metz, Levinas, and Practical Christology after the Shoah," *Horizons* 26/2 (1999): 200.

<sup>10</sup>Metz, "Suffering unto God," 620-21.

<sup>11</sup>Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, and Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994) and *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 23.

this turn to trauma in theological pastoral literature is the book by J. Jeffrey Means and Mary Ann Nelson entitled *Trauma and Evil*.<sup>12</sup> Means and Nelson are therapists who argue, on the basis of their extensive experience in listening to people who have been victims of “human induced trauma,” that trauma is a key to understanding evil and its effects. I argued that trauma is also the key to any theological interpretation of radical suffering, if that interpretation is to be faithful to the concrete experience of victims. Further, attention to trauma keeps the focus on the negativity of radical suffering and does not permit a lapse into spiritual justifications for it. After a description of the magnitude and the effects of violence against women, I will turn to a discussion of trauma and the process of recovery.

Violence against women occurs in epidemic proportions in our culture. Its causes are complex, but not least among them are entrenched patriarchal values that define women as sexual objects and as appropriately owned or controlled by certain men and that disdain women’s physical integrity and well-being. In 1988 the Surgeon General of the United States warned that violence was the number one health risk to adult women in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Instances of intimate violence are more common than automobile accidents, muggings, and cancer deaths combined. The FBI reports that one in ten women will be physically abused by their husbands in marriage. According to the American Medical Association almost one-fourth of all women in the U.S. are battered at sometime in their lives by a current or former partner, and an estimated four million women each year are victims of severe assaults by intimates. Women battered by intimates account for one-third of all women admitted to emergency rooms. Between one in five and one in eight women will be raped in their lifetimes, either by intimates or strangers, which means that at least 12.1 million women in the U.S. today have been victims of rape.

Rape, childhood sexual abuse, and battering all involve the use of force to achieve control over the victim, and they function to deny and override a woman’s or girl’s capacity for control over herself and her body. They deny the victim her body-right. Many rape victims report that while the rape was occurring, they were convinced that they were going to be killed. This fear of death is mixed with an intense feeling of humiliation. For many victims, this initial terror and humiliation is followed by shame and self-blame.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>J. Jeffrey Means, *Trauma and Evil: Healing the Wounded Soul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

<sup>13</sup>National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, *Statistics Packet* (Philadelphia, 1994). All of the following statistics are found in this resource.

<sup>14</sup>Ruth Seifert, “War and Rape: A Preliminary Analysis,” in *Mass Rape: The War*

Ruth Seifert, who works with victims of rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina, summarizes the effects of rape, classifying it as a form of torture and an assault on the very identity of its victims:

A violent invasion into the interior of one's body represents the most severe attack imaginable upon the intimate self and the dignity of a human being; by any measure it is a mark of severe torture. When a woman's inner space is violently invaded, it affects her in the same way torture does. It results in physical pain, loss of dignity, an attack on her identity, and a loss of self-determination over her own body.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of battering, in addition to physical injuries, women also experience fear of death as well as isolation from friends, family, and professional help, economic dependence, inability to find protection from harm, and the immediate debilitating effects of random and unpredictable trauma.

Severe or ongoing abuse through battery or rape or both often result in the condition diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Post-traumatic stress disorder is diagnosed when extreme trauma has deregulated the physiological functions that control stress reactions and, as a result, has generated severe psychological problems.<sup>16</sup> Stressful events trigger changes in neurochemistry and result in changes in thinking and behavior. Normally, when a person is confronted with an extremely stressful situation, these chemical reactions to stress are good; they are what allow the person to cope with the stress in the moment. Most of the time, these chemical changes are temporary, and the body re-adapts to normal conditions a reasonable time after the stress is removed. But when the trauma experienced is particularly extreme, the micro-structural changes that occur may permanently alter a person's neurochemistry. In these cases the experience of trauma pushes people "beyond their adaptive limits."<sup>17</sup>

PTSD often manifests itself in somatic disorders, night terrors, eating disorders, self-mutilation, and the inability to act in the interest of one's own well-being, to experience concern for others, and to trust God, self, and others. Victims often lose part of their memory. The loss of memory is itself a further trauma that exacerbates the lack of control the woman feels over her life. In response to lack of control, especially in cases of repeated trauma such as ongoing childhood sexual abuse,

*Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed. Alexandra Stiglmayer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 56.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Waites, *Trauma and Survival: Post-Traumatic and Dissociative Disorders in Women* (New York: Norton, 1993), 22.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

self-abuse becomes an attempt at self-regulation, encouraged by feelings of self-hatred, and develops into an addiction over time. Masochism has long been considered a psychological problem intrinsic somehow to femininity. Those who study PTSD in women who are victims of violence, have shown that these tendencies are a result of the experience of trauma, and not something biologically intrinsic to women.<sup>18</sup> One researcher describes the effects of PTSD as “psychic death” and “soul murder,” which destroy the very identity of the victim.<sup>19</sup> Women who are victims of such severe trauma require long periods of recovery with explicit attention to regaining the sense of self lost through violence and its aftermath.

The process of recovery from trauma has several overlapping stages, but central to the process as a whole is the ability to remember and to mourn appropriately the suffering associated with the traumatic event. Mourning becomes the key to the way the events are remembered and to the function of memories in the process of healing. Dominick LaCapra argues that there are healthy ways to remember, which are characterized by mourning the event(s), and which are essential to the process of working through the trauma. At the same time, there are unhealthy ways of remembering, ways that elide the negativity of the events, excuse them, cover over them, or sentimentalize them. Because they prevent mourning, these ways of remembering hamper the process of working through.<sup>20</sup> The refusal to face the negativity of suffering and to mourn what has been lost, keeps victims trapped in the effects of trauma.<sup>21</sup> The purpose of the healing process is to allow the victim to face the full negativity of the event and to mourn it in order to be able to heal from the effects of the trauma.

In her book entitled *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman provides a comprehensive treatment of the experience of trauma due to violence against women, the effects of PTSD, and the process of recovery from it.<sup>22</sup> Herman delineates three stages of recovery from post-traumatic stress: the establishment of safety, recovery of memory and mourning, and reconnection with community. The general movement

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 23-49.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>20</sup>LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 23.

<sup>21</sup>It must be noted that victims, during and in the immediate aftermath of the victimization will often minimize what is happening through dissociation and memory loss as part of a survival strategy. Victims should not be criticized for doing this, since it is a coping strategy that functions to protect the victim from the immediacy of the event. Facing the full impact of the suffering and working through the trauma can only take place some time after the traumatic event in a protected environment, once physical safety has been established.

<sup>22</sup>Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

of this process is from a sense of unpredictable danger to a reliable sense of safety, from dissociated memory to acknowledgement of the event, and from stigmatized alienation to reconnection with others and with God. The involvement and support of others is indispensable to the victim in her process of recovery. The public acknowledgement that a crime has taken place and public action to come to the aid of the survivor are necessary conditions for the possibility of the survivor learning to trust again; these assist her in rebuilding a sense of order and justice.

In the first stage, the trauma victim achieves safety. This includes safety from the person who inflicted the trauma, safety from other potential victimizers, and safety from self-injury. The central task of the second stage of recovery is remembering. Because memories of trauma are often lost in the process of dissociation, this second stage may involve the slow and difficult work of memory recovery. While it is painful and sometimes painstaking to recover and face memories of traumatic events, the act of telling the tale, in a coherent narrative, from beginning to end, and with appropriate affect, is essential in empowering the survivor to reclaim her own history and to move on with life. The process of remembering and retelling always also involves mourning. The survivor must be allowed the opportunity to grieve what has happened and what has been lost. Herman notes that the first several times a survivor tells her story in therapy, she lists the events without any apparent emotion. In fact, the coping mechanisms which trauma victims employ in order to live through the traumatic event are meant to alter their capacity for emotion, because the severe psychic pain is too much for them to handle. But after personal safety has been established in the first stage of recovery, the survivor is ready, slowly and in a protective environment, to face the extremes of emotion, of helplessness, anger, etc., that derive from the traumatic event. Herman notes that many patients refuse to enter into this stage of recovery, because they believe that feeling grief over what happened is a way of letting the perpetrator "win." She emphasizes to her patients that, on the contrary, grieving is itself an act of resistance against the perpetrator. The ability to grieve, along with the ability to remember, are aspects of what the perpetrator's act has taken away. Therefore the act of remembering and grieving are part of the process of reclaiming what has been lost.

The final stage of recovery is reconnection with others, or commonality. Noting that a significant minority of survivors become involved in the public struggle against violence against women, Herman maintains that in this final stage survivors are able to be interested in the lives and pains of others and to act on their behalf. Reconnection with community, the experience of commonality, brings with it free-

dom to engage in the wider world, and the will and the ability to act in the best interests of self and of others.

#### *IV. Victim/Survivors and the Theological Meaning of Radical Suffering:*

Feminist pastoral theologians who address the problem of violence against women give considerable attention to the way in which victims come to interpret their suffering and note that victims often seek religious meaning to their victimization. Explanations for victimization and suffering have not been lacking in the Christian tradition, and victims are often encouraged by family, pastors and other caregivers to interpret their suffering in ways which minimize the negativity of their victimization and prevent appropriate mourning and therefore the possibility of recovery from trauma. For instance, victims are sometimes told that there can be positive spiritual results from their suffering. They may be told that it is their duty to endure the abuse for the sake of others, to unite their sufferings with Christ's, or to accept their suffering as part of God's mysterious plan for them. Many women come to view the suffering that results from their victimization in these ways; some indeed believe that they suffer because God is punishing them for past sins. These ways of interpreting suffering avoid facing the full negativity of the suffering and resist naming the victimization as lamentable and as something to be mourned. Such interpretive strategies stand in the way of the necessary grieving that must take place in the healing process and prevent a working through of the trauma, a re-involvement with the world, and the capacity to resist one's own victimization and that of others.

These attitudes have roots in the history of Christian theology. There have been excellent historical studies done on traditional Christian attitudes on violence against women. Two in particular point to voices in the tradition that argue that the experience of rape or battery and the suffering that comes from them may be salutary for women. Mary D. Pellauer does a study of a section of the *City of God* in which Augustine reflects on the rape of consecrated virgins during the sack of Rome and suggests that perhaps God had allowed these rapes to happen in order to root out any pride the nuns may have had in their virginity.<sup>23</sup> Felissa Elizondo, in an article about Luis Vives' *Instruction to Christian Women*, discusses his advice to battered wives to understand their current suffering as corporal punishment designed to teach

<sup>23</sup>Mary Pellauer, "Augustine on Rape: One Chapter in the Theological Tradition," in *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 207-41.

them to be better wives and to reduce their time in purgatory.<sup>24</sup> The voices of victims, as well as surveys of pastoral attitudes and practices, show that such spiritual justifications for the suffering due to violence against women are still common.<sup>25</sup>

Feminist theologians responding to the problem of violence against women tend to denounce any theological move to provide a rationale for radical suffering, to fit it into God's plan, or to glorify it as a path to salvation. In this view, rather than having any formational or redemptive value, radical suffering is seen only as that which defiles or destroys the human being. The inviolability of the human being becomes the criterion by which assertions of the value of suffering are judged.<sup>26</sup> In their article entitled "For God So Loved the World?" Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker survey the various classical interpretations of the atonement and argue that glorifications of radical suffering survive, even in some liberation and feminist theologies, when they attempt to find meaning in suffering or make any causal connection between salvation and suffering.<sup>27</sup> They argue that atonement Christologies convey the message that it is Christ's suffering itself which brings redemption, brings victory, atones for sins, saves the world. Accordingly, suffering on the part of Christians somehow makes us more Christ-like. For Brown and Parker such messages elide the soul-destroying nature of radical suffering:

[t]he reality is that victimization never leads to triumph. It can lead to extended pain if it is not refused or fought. It can lead to destruc-

<sup>24</sup>Felissa Elizondo, "Violence Against Women: Strategies of Resistance and Sources of Healing in Christianity," in *Violence Against Women*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 99-108.

<sup>25</sup>For a collection of the voices of women who have been victims of violence and their struggles to interpret their suffering according to Christian teaching, see Cynthia S.W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 96-97. For surveys about pastoral practices with regard to violence against women, see Mary H. Schertz, "Creating Justice in the Space Around Us: Toward a Biblical Theology of Peace Between Men and Women," in *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, ed. Elizabeth Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute for Mennonite Studies, 1992), 14; and John M. Johnson and Denise M. Bondurant, "Revisiting the 1982 Church Response Survey," in *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, 425-26.

<sup>26</sup>See Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990); Rita Nakashima Brock and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 246-72.

<sup>27</sup>Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved The World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1990), 1-30.

tion of the human spirit through the death of a person's sense of power, worth, dignity, or creativity. It can lead to actual death.<sup>28</sup>

In light of such critique, feminist pastoral theologians Pamela Cooper-White, Marie Fortune, and others work toward theological approaches to suffering which emphasize the destructive nature of radical suffering.<sup>29</sup> From their pastoral work with women who are victims, Cooper-White and Fortune have found that victims mine their religious experience for reasons, rationalizations, and answers for their suffering. For these women, it is impossible to address their abuse without addressing these religious questions about their suffering. Aware of the potential for interpreting suffering in ways that exacerbate victims' trauma, both Cooper-White and Fortune advocate addressing victims' religious concerns in ways that support belief in the injustice of their victimization, in their right to well-being, and in the possibility for healing and transformation. In view of victims' experiences of trauma, they challenge theology to examine the meaning of suffering and to be more precise about the nature of extreme, unjust, dehumanizing suffering. Feminist theologians reflecting on violence against women call for a theological approach that faces the full negativity of radical suffering, and mourns rather than explains or glorifies it.

#### *V. Metz's Mysticism of Suffering unto God and Violence against Women*

Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God presents us with a theological stance toward suffering which allows for mourning and resists the glorification of radical suffering. It counters the tendency in victims themselves, and in well-meaning others who try to assist them, to find a redemptive meaning in their suffering, to see it as a necessary part of discipleship, or to subordinate their need for well-being to the duty to suffer. As Judith Herman's analysis of the process of healing from trauma shows, it is the persistent naming of the destructive suffering caused by violence, and an unwillingness to yield from the position that this suffering is unacceptable, which nurtures and sustains action against the violence and eventual healing. Metz's radical questioning of suffering and the questioning of God about suffering keeps the focus on the unacceptability of victimization and

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>29</sup>See Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 94; and Marie M. Fortune, "The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in *Violence Against Women: A Christian Sourcebook*, 85-91.

guards against resignation to it. Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God asks why—why this suffering?—but it resists giving an answer to that question.

Rather, Metz suggests that the appropriate response to suffering is a non-rational, mystical prayer of suffering unto God. In this response we burn with pain and indignation at the destruction of human beings and their capacity for subjectivity. We cry out to God with that indignation—demanding the fulfillment of God's promises, the redemption of suffering. Women who are victims need to hear that what is happening to them is wrong and in no way willed by God. Further, they need to realize that they are not alone in their suffering. They need the larger community to mourn with them. They need the unambiguous message that what is happening to them is a cause for outrage for their pastors, their friends, their families, and other members of their religious communities. Suffering unto God as Metz describes it acknowledges this need for outrage and for mourning. It provides a way for Christians to respond to victims of violence in true solidarity with their suffering, a way that is appropriate to the gravity of the abuse and that resists easy answers which keep victims trapped in the experience of trauma.

Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God does more than cohere with victims' processes of healing. Although what Metz suggests is indeed an essential element in the process of healing, Metz is not primarily concerned with presenting a therapeutic strategy. Set in the context of Metz's eschatological theology, his mysticism of suffering unto God is a way to nurture and sustain a radical theological hope for all victims of the past whose suffering still makes a claim on us. This eschatological context of his thought offers something distinctive that deserves attention in feminist theological work on the problem of violence against women. It touches not only on individual victims' experience of healing, but also on the need for a communal, trans-temporal solidarity, that demands the healing and well-being of all. Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God holds out hope for those already defeated and long dead women who never experienced healing in their own lifetimes, whose stories are forgotten or distorted by official histories, whose victimization was interpreted as acceptable, beneficial, or otherwise justified. It offers a way for us to keep their dangerous memories alive. Metz's view has the capacity to help victims of today see themselves in solidarity with women throughout history who have been victimized.

Marie Fortune has an article, entitled "Violence Against Women: The Way Things Are Is Not the Way They Have to Be," which holds out

hope that violence against women can be eliminated.<sup>30</sup> In light of Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God set in the eschatological context of his work, an alternate title might be, "The way things have been is not they way they will stay"—even the past is still open to transformation. There is here a much more radical hope, a hope for the redemption of all past radical suffering and trauma. This impractical hope has several practical functions. First, is it an act of solidarity with the dead, a solidarity that keeps hope for their redemption alive. It is an act of unity with those countless women who do not survive to recover and have not throughout history; it is advocacy for them, for *their* sakes. Their memory continues to demand a stance toward their suffering which can both emphasize its tragedy and nurture a radical hope for their future of healing. Second, it is an act of resistance, even of forces that have seemingly already won, thus it nurtures resistance, for our sakes and the sakes of those who come after us, against entrenched social systems which appear inevitable. Our media are saturated with images that glamorize rape and battery of women. Our public discourse is littered with justifications or trivializations of such violence. Patriarchal values and norms appear as common sense in our culture, and it takes immense mental and spiritual resources to fight them. A radical, subversive vision that women's violent victimization will be undone in the past, present, and future has the capacity to act as such a resource, to keep alive a radical questioning of the way things are and the way things have been. Finally, this radical hope nurtures a particular kind of faith in God, a faith rooted in squarely facing women's concrete suffering from victimization. This is not a faith that can be lulled by intermediate experiences of healing into believing that all is well. This is faith in a God who will finally, eschatologically, make all things well that are not now and have not been well. It is a faith that in no way allows us to name acceptable what is unacceptable. Rather it calls us to continue to decry and mourn whatever is and has been that deviates from God's final future justice.

## VI. Conclusion

The process of healing from the trauma of victimization entails some experiences which may be labeled suffering, that is, facing

<sup>30</sup>Marie Fortune, "Violence Against Women: The Way Things Are is Not the Way They Have to Be," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, eds. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 326-34.

memories of victimization in an appropriate and safe environment, taking risks to make changes in one's life, etc. But such forms of suffering are to be distinguished from victimization and its attendant trauma, because these are experiences which themselves degrade or violate the person and her integrity. Torture inflicted by another, the existential crisis of being physically harmed by someone who is supposed to care for you, of having fundamental trust betrayed and losing body right—these bring about a distinct form of radical suffering. This is not an attempt to come up with right or wrong kinds of suffering, much less to call one kind redemptive and the other destructive. Rather it is to distinguish for the sake of clarity, for the sake of being faithful to the concrete, and of not abstracting what we say about suffering from its rootedness in context. Blanket statements about suffering, especially about the possible theological meaning of suffering, do not serve victims well, they do not “fit,” when they do not take the suffering of victimization and in particular the effects of trauma into account. How we speak theologically about suffering must take the suffering of women who have been victims of violence into account and must be articulated in ways that cannot encourage ongoing victimization or thwart the process of healing.

I have argued that Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God, in its clarity about different forms of suffering, in its call to mourn radical suffering, and in its ability to nurture radical hope can be a useful tool for feminist theologians seeking to address the suffering of women who have been victims of traumatic suffering.

Finally, Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God is a necessary but probably not sufficient category in our reflection on the suffering of victims. It may be that something more than this cry of suffering unto God is needed. In many cases there is healing. Women healing from trauma need access to some intermediate hope for themselves as well as Metz's radical hope for all the defeated. In feminist theological reflection on the experiences of violence against women, it is the healing process and the reality of the possibility of healing which take on meaning. There *is* more to this process than decrying suffering, but decrying suffering is indispensable to women's healing from abuse and to feminist theologians seeking to find respectful ways to reflect on the suffering of victims, ways that neither glorify nor trivialize their concrete suffering. A sense of God in the now, a sense of joy in life, of meaning and value in this life and a sense of one's capacity to engage in it as an agent are possible and can be experienced after healing/working through. However, it is not helpful to talk about this possibility without reference to the

experience of trauma. Trauma must be worked through and victimization mourned before this can be experienced. A consideration of Metz's mysticism of suffering unto God suggests that it is possible to face suffering without minimizing its negativity. A further challenge will be to find ways to speak about women's healing which do not circumvent the need for mourning and which do not let go of the need to continue to be dissatisfied with the reality of radical suffering in the past and present.



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