

# **“WE WILL NEVER FORGET”: METZ, MEMORY, AND THE DANGEROUS SPIRITUALITY OF POST-9/11 AMERICA**

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*“The shortest definition of religion: interruption.”*

- Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*

*“Historical memory is hijacked by those who carry out war.”*

- Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*

*“One of the delightful things about Americans is that they have absolutely no historical memory.”*

- Former Chinese Premier Chou En-lai

In the mystical-political spirituality of German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, the gospel is nothing other than the “dangerous memory” of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which has “interrupted” history, revealing the patterns of violence and injustice at work in the systems of our world and inspiring solidarity with the victims through the memory of their suffering toward a future of hope. Memory is also central to the national spirituality of the United States, which has in recent years focused its historical narrative on the memorial event of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Rather than “interrupting” the profoundly violent history of the United States, the memory of 9/11 has been used to encourage feelings of fear, anger, and revenge within the population of the US, which has, in turn, been used to support further violence and imperial ambition. September 11, as a central memorial event of recent American spirituality, continues to serve as a “dangerous memory” in the literal sense, especially for people around the world who are on the receiving end of the U.S.-led War on Terror. Metz’s vision for a renewed Christian spirituality that is deeply aware of the sufferings of others offers a profound critique of American spirituality and challenges the Church to bear witness to the injustice of human suffering in anticipation of the coming of God’s Kingdom.

The notion of an “American spirituality” may still strike some as a strange concept, especially in light of the pride many Americans take in the separation of Church and state. Like so many aspects of life, the Enlightenment’s creation of the secular sphere has effected our definitions of spirituality, relegating the “spiritual” to the internal, private, and individual realm. Sandra Schneiders, among others, has sought to recover a holistic and anthropological understanding of spirituality that, more broadly, includes the entire life lived experience of the human person, including the bodily, psychological, social and

political dimensions of life.<sup>1</sup> Spirituality, in this sense, is a fundamental activity of human beings and of human communities, in which persons strive to integrate their lives according to a particular ultimate value, with an awareness of some historical tradition and a system of symbols.<sup>2</sup> Schneider's "anthropologically inclusive" understanding of spirituality recognizes the inter-religious, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary nature of spiritual experience, and so spirituality, then, includes more than what we typically think of as "religious."<sup>3</sup> Schneider's view makes room for spirituality to include what many have called "civil religion," the way in which the experience, culture, myths, and symbols of the nation shape the consciousness of that nation.<sup>4</sup> The myths and symbols of the United States have shaped what we might call "American spirituality," and the attacks of 9/11 have given this spirituality a new, central memorial symbol.

Insofar as spirituality remains privatized, as it does especially in the U.S., the significance of national symbols and myths is perceived to be anything *but* spiritual. This paper assumes Schneiders' definition of spirituality, and will attempt to show how the role of memory in American spirituality bears similarities to the role of memory in Christian spirituality.<sup>5</sup> In light of the mystical-political theology of Johann Baptist Metz, we will offer a critique of the way in which American spirituality has distorted the memory of human suffering in order to justify further violence against human life.

### *Metz's Understanding of the Dangerous Memory of Christian Spirituality*

Like Schneiders, the German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz has articulated an approach to Christian spirituality that attempted to resist the tendency toward privatization by refocusing it as the narration of the "dangerous memory" of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Metz's theology emphasizes the centrality of memory in human experience, and therefore in spirituality. All human experience, all spiritualities, are grounded in the narration of memories. As he states in *Faith in History and Society*, memory is indeed what gives human beings, both as individuals and as communities, their

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies* 50, No. 4 (1989), 679.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 684.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 693.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bellah, in his classic study, describes civil religion in America as the "apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people. Like all religions, it has suffered various deformations and demonic distortions" (Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96, No. 1 [Winter 1967], available at [http://www.robertbellah.com/articles\\_5.htm](http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm)).

<sup>5</sup> One might even say that the "spirituality" of the state "parodies" the spirituality of the Church, as William T. Cavanaugh argues in his writings, especially *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London: T & T Clark, 2002).

historical identity: "Identity is formed when memories are aroused."<sup>6</sup> Metz demonstrates this negatively, noting how the identity of slaves was formed precisely by uprooting them from their historical communities and deforming their memories.<sup>7</sup>

Metz says that memories can take different forms, generally falling into two categories. In the first category, memory is simply the recollection of the past as the "good old days," a memory that "does not take the past seriously enough," and in which "the past becomes a paradise without danger, a refuge from our present disappointments."<sup>8</sup> This is the primary form memory has taken since the Enlightenment and the development of what Metz calls the "evolutionary logic" of our post-narrative age in which history has no beginning and no end. Because of the lack of a narrative sense, the horizons of reality are fixed as "the way things are," and the status quo goes unquestioned. In this post-narrative, evolutionary worldview, salvation is merely the result of increased control over nature and history through the domination of science, technology, and political control, and so we "define history as the history of what has prevailed, as the history of the successful and the established. There is hardly any reference in history as we know it to the conquered and defeated or to the forgotten or suppressed hopes of our historical existence."<sup>9</sup> In this paradigm, memory is central to the formation of our consciousness and collective imagination, but it is a *selective* memory that remembers only the triumph of the powerful and "screens out" the victims, thus creating a "false consciousness of our past and an opiate for our present."<sup>10</sup> When memory functions in this way, history -- "reality" -- goes on as it always has.

But Metz says there is another kind of memory, a memory that shocks us out of the familiar by radically acknowledging the reality of human suffering. Metz calls these memories of human suffering "dangerous memories" because they "interrupt"<sup>11</sup> the evolutionary narrative-less logic of "the way things are" and "reveal new and dangerous insights for the present." The revelation of these dangerous insights is subversive because they "illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh and steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with."<sup>12</sup> For Christians, the memory of suffering is particularly dangerous in that these memories are not simply a matter of looking backward "archeologically," but future-oriented "forward memories" in which we also remember the promises made by God and the "hopes that are

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<sup>6</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Fundamental Practical Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 66 (hereafter referenced as *FHS*).

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

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

experienced as a result of those promises.”<sup>13</sup> Memories of human suffering “make demands on us”<sup>14</sup> and “make the present unsafe” by “break[ing] through the grip of the prevailing consciousness” of the present in light of unfulfilled hopes.<sup>15</sup> They radically challenge the present in light of the future promised by God. Metz has described two such “interruptions” in his own life, events that shocked him into questioning his own assumed horizons. The first event occurred during his military service during World War II at age 16 when he discovered the bodies of his fellow young soldiers who had been killed in the middle of the night.<sup>16</sup> The second was the horror of Auschwitz.<sup>17</sup>

In Metz’s description, Christian faith is the narration of a particular memory of this latter kind, the dangerous memory of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which has broken through the world’s assumptions about political power and violence, and opens our eyes to the sufferings of others, particularly the innocent. The Church is the public witness and bearer of the dangerous memory of the victims of history. Particularly in the liturgy, Christians allow themselves to be “interrupted” by the memory of human suffering which challenges the status quo and widens the horizons of our imagination, drawing us into deeper consciousness of and compassion for the victims of suffering.<sup>18</sup> Metz’s vision for Christian spirituality, then, is radically eschatological, “intend[ing] the anticipation of a particular future of man [*sic*] as a future for the suffering, the hopeless, the oppressed, the injured, and the useless of this earth.”<sup>19</sup>

A Christian spirituality that places the dangerous memory of human suffering at its center will obviously have radical personal and political consequences. The “praxis” of memory takes shape when Christians commit, in solidarity with victims of violence, to overcoming the suffering caused by oppression and injustice in light of the promises of God.<sup>20</sup> The solidarity Metz calls for is not to be confused with mere sympathy,<sup>21</sup> nor is it the false solidarity of our “exchange society” that is “based on an alliance between equal partners” and whose purpose is “mutual success and progress,” or looking after each

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>16</sup> Metz, “Communicating a Dangerous Memory,” in *Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz*, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999), 137.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 138-43. Cf. Metz, “Christians and Jews after Auschwitz: Being a Mediation Also On the End of Bourgeois Religion,” in *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 17-33.

<sup>18</sup> For the relationship between Metz’s political theology and Alexander Schmemmann’s liturgical theology, see Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Metz, *FHS*, 115.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 230.

other's interests as long as there is "something in it for me."<sup>22</sup> Authentic Christian solidarity is radically universal. "It extends to those who have been overcome and left behind in the march of progress. It includes the dead. Indeed, the theological category of solidarity reveals its mystical and universal aspect above all in its memory of solidarity with the dead."<sup>23</sup> Only with a "world-wide perspective" can "solidarity acquire its full dimensions."<sup>24</sup>

On a personal level, this radical solidarity requires a constant openness to personal transformation and a "willingness to suffer the sufferings of others," the literal meaning of *compassion*.<sup>25</sup> It also means that, in resistance to the narrow solidarity of the "society of exchange" that treats persons outside of our horizon of concern as "an anonymous mass," Christians will come to "have a conscience not only about what they do or do not do to others, but also about what they let happen to others."<sup>26</sup> On a political level, solidarity with those who suffer means a radical questioning of the structures of socio-political power that are usually taken for granted. "[I]n light of the Christian memory of suffering, it is clear that social power and political domination . . . continually have to justify themselves in view of actual suffering. The social and political power of the rich and the rulers must be open to the question of the extent to which it causes suffering."<sup>27</sup>

An authentic Christian spirituality so renewed, creates an ever-deepening solidarity with victims of suffering in all times and places, widening our personal and political horizons that limit reality and possibility, letting our imaginations be animated by an eschatological hope in the promises of God who has said that the deaths of victims will be vindicated in the Resurrection.

### *A Critique of Post-9/11 American Spirituality in Light of Metz's Political Theology*

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 quickly became part of the national mythology and symbolism of the United States, and a central memory of what we have called American spirituality. This is only natural, for as we have seen in Metz's theology, our memories of suffering shape individual and collective identities and character. The symbolic power of the memory of 9/11, however, rather than functioning as a "dangerous memory" as Metz describes it, has been manipulated and its power used for violent, self-serving ends, perhaps predictably so. The concepts central to Metz's understanding of dangerous memories can be used to evaluate the way in which the memory of the victims of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 230-1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 115.

9/11 functions in American spirituality. Using the five-year anniversary speech of President George W. Bush as an example and starting point, this second part of the paper will examine the rhetoric and symbolism of 9/11 with reference to four concepts central of Metz's political Christian spirituality: interruption, memory, solidarity, and hope. We will then briefly situate this powerful, but very recent symbol, within the larger history of memories that make up the narrative of American spirituality and suggest a particular role for the Church in light of this spirituality.

### *Interruption / Non-interruption*

There is perhaps no need to spend much time reviewing the way in which 9/11 is described as having "changed history." This language is common in both official U.S. government pronouncements and the general view expressed by many Americans and by American culture. In a speech on the five-year anniversary of 9/11, for example, President George W. Bush began by noting that five years before, the date "September the 11<sup>th</sup> -- was seared into America's memory. Nineteen men attacked us with a barbarity unequalled in our history." He continued, saying, "For America, 9/11 was more than a tragedy -- it changed the way we look at the world." On that day America "saw the face of evil," and has been given a "test" which is now being played out in a war that will "set the course for this new century."<sup>28</sup> For neoconservative commentators, 9/11 was an interruption that revealed the need to embrace a more aggressive foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> Even more measured commentators, says Corey Robin, expressed the view that the interruption of 9/11 "promised to deliver the United States from its tedium and selfishness, its individualism and despair" and "offered a dead or dying culture a chance to live again."<sup>30</sup>

It also seems beyond dispute that 9/11 was in some sense a large-scale interruption for many people throughout the world. Although Noam Chomsky is quick to point out that a significant portion of the world shrugged its shoulders as if to say, "We experience violence on similar scales on a routine basis," he also admits that even from these parts of the world, a significant

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<sup>28</sup> President George W. Bush, "President's Address to the Nation," (11 September 2006), available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060911-3.html>

<sup>29</sup> "Many have suggested that the September 11 attack on America was payback for U.S. imperialism. If only we had not gone around sticking our noses where they did not belong, perhaps we would not now be contemplating a crater in lower Manhattan. The solution is obvious: The United States must become a kinder, gentler nation, must eschew quixotic missions abroad, must become, in Pat Buchanan's phrase, "a republic, not an empire." In fact this analysis is exactly backward: The September 11 attack was a result of insufficient American involvement and ambition; the solution is to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in their implementation" (Max Boot, "The Case for American Empire," *The Weekly Standard* 7, No. 5 [Oct. 15, 2001], available at [http://www.weeklystandard.com/Utilities/printer\\_preview.asp?idArticle=318](http://www.weeklystandard.com/Utilities/printer_preview.asp?idArticle=318)).

<sup>30</sup> Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 157.

change did occur: for the first time, a major terrorist attack on a rich and powerful country had succeeded.<sup>31</sup> 9/11 interrupted history and revealed that rich and powerful states no longer have a monopoly on extreme, technologically advanced acts of violence.<sup>32</sup>

The “interruption” of 9/11 was described by some in apocalyptic terms that echo Metz’s understanding of human suffering’s dangerous ability to call our present assumptions into question and to force them to justify themselves. In a controversial speech given on December 6, 2001 Cardinal Maria Martini, former archbishop of Milan, described the 9/11 attacks as an “apocalypse in the etymological sense of ‘lifting a veil’” a “revelation of the evil in which we are immersed, of the absurdity of a society whose god is money, whose law is success, and whose rhythm is tapped out by the opening hours of the world stock exchanges.”<sup>33</sup> In their article on the imagery and symbolism of 9/11, Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe recall the similar, if undoubtedly more extreme, statements of German electronic music composer Karlheinz Stockhausen who shocked people all over the world when he referred to 9/11 as “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos”<sup>34</sup> and an act of spiritual significance, causing “a jump out of security, the self-evident, out of everyday life.”<sup>35</sup> All great art causes such an experience, he said, “or it is worthless.”<sup>36</sup> In Stockhausen’s defense, Lentricchia and McAuliffe attempt to hear the wisdom in his description, saying that if “aesthetic value is the destruction which enables consciousness,”<sup>37</sup> and which causes “a deep cleansing of perception and prelude to the establishment of new consciousness,”<sup>38</sup> then the terrorists achieved this kind of “art” by intentionally “seizing” and “transforming” consciousness and calling into question the “American view of the world.”<sup>39</sup>

In their descriptions of the transformative interruption of the 9/11 attacks, both Martini and Stockhausen reveal the power of the memory of human suffering as Metz understands it. The revelatory and potentially transformative

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<sup>31</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 191.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>33</sup> Cardinal Maria Martini, “Terrorism, Retaliation, Legitimate Defense, War, and Peace,” (December 6, 2001). English excerpts available at <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/printDettaglio.jsp?id=6907&eng=y>, full text in Italian available at [http://www.chiesadimilano.it/or4/or?uid=ADMIESY.main.index&oid=58500&uidx\\_42=ADMIIappl.docvescovo.DVdettaglio&titolo=&idautore=3&anno\\_publicazione=2001&soggetto=3&NPAG=5&NRIG=10&offset=0&ID=307](http://www.chiesadimilano.it/or4/or?uid=ADMIESY.main.index&oid=58500&uidx_42=ADMIIappl.docvescovo.DVdettaglio&titolo=&idautore=3&anno_publicazione=2001&soggetto=3&NPAG=5&NRIG=10&offset=0&ID=307)

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, “Groundzeroland,” in *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 96.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

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

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

power of 9/11 was subverted in two significant ways, however. Lentricchia and McAuliffe describe the dissipation of the power of this memory through the nearly immediate commodification of the event. The terrorists' intention with this aesthetic act, they say, was to take away America's security, to "cause us to join the rest of the world," to "change us."<sup>40</sup> That 9/11 was merely a temporary "interruption," or none at all, is shown in "the sublime power of American culture to absorb and commodify even such a devastating blow as this transgressive act of destruction and murder,"<sup>41</sup> in the memorial-as-tourist-attraction that "Ground Zero" quickly became. The commodification of 9/11, they say, shows that "the long American holiday from history is far from over,"<sup>42</sup> and provides "final proof of [American] culture's fundamental indestructibility."<sup>43</sup> Nothing, they suggest, can interrupt the American "way of life," not even act of violence on such an extreme scale.

The temporary nature of the "interruption" of 9/11 is further evidenced by repeated statements by President Bush in which he encouraged the American people to continue on with their lives as if nothing had happened. Although he famously pondered the question of "why they hate us," this period of reflection was all too brief, and soon enough Americans were assured that this unpleasant event should not make them reconsider their way of life. Countless examples could be cited; only a few are necessary. On the day of the attacks Bush assured Americans that "the functions of our government continue *without interruption*.... Our financial institutions remain strong, and the American economy will be open for business, as well" (*emphasis added*).<sup>44</sup> Eleven days after the attack, Bush acknowledged the symbolism of the terrorists' target, saying, "The terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11th targeted our economy, as well as our people. They brought down a symbol of American prosperity, but they could not touch its source."<sup>45</sup> Two days later, he stated that the attacks would not affect the people of the United States: "See, these terrorists thought they could affect the United States.... They thought somehow they could affect the psyche of our country. They're wrong."<sup>46</sup> Less than a month after the 9/11 attacks, Bush famously advised Americans to recover by going shopping, and by taking vacations:

I think the average American must not be afraid to travel.... They ought to take

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>44</sup> Bush, "Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation" (11 September 2001), available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Bush, "President's Radio Address" (22 September 2001), available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010922.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Bush, "President Freezes Terrorists' Assets" (24 September 2001), available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010924-4.html>.

their kids on vacations. They ought to go to ball games... But people ought to -- listen, we ought to be aware in America -- we are aware; how can you not be aware that we've entered into a new era. The imagery is vivid in people's minds. But nevertheless, Americans must know that their government is doing everything we can to track down every rumor, every hint, every possible evildoer. And, therefore, Americans ought to go about their business.<sup>47</sup>

On the five-year anniversary of 9/11, Bush reiterated the inability of this act of violence to have an affect on the "American way of life," saying, "Dangerous enemies have declared their intention to destroy our way of life. They're not the first to try, and their fate will be the same as those who tried before."<sup>48</sup>

On the one hand, the rhetoric concerning September 11 proclaims that on that date life was interrupted, and history changed. At the same time, much of this same rhetoric denies that 9/11 was truly an interruption in any significant sense. In this way, the interruptive/non-interruptive memory of 9/11 has, for Americans, served the human need for memory as a source of identity without allowing this memory to fulfill its potential to be fully transformative.

### *Memory / Selective Memory*

When understood as "the" singular event that has "changed history," 9/11 has, in the minds of many Americans, been isolated from its context and from its relationship to other memories of human suffering. In this way, 9/11 stands in the symbolic center of a "sanitized" history produced by a selective memory.

In his five-year anniversary speech, President Bush narrates the memory of 9/11, sprinkling in adjective-filled details that bring to mind the images that replayed on our televisions, and in our minds, for months after the attacks, and which were brought to life again on the nation's movie screens this past year. Burning skyscrapers, passengers heroically charging the cockpit, box-cutters, plane tickets, firefighters, the grassy Pennsylvania field, many of the details are present in Bush's memorial speech. This memory is placed within the narrative alongside other, well-selected, memories: "America has confronted evil before, and we have defeated it -- sometimes at the cost of thousands of men in a single battle."<sup>49</sup> And later, "Throughout our history, America has seen liberty challenged, and every time, we have seen liberty triumph with sacrifice and determination."<sup>50</sup>

We have already heard Metz's description of this sort of historical

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<sup>47</sup> Bush, "President Discusses Economic Recovery in New York City" (3 October 2001), available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011003-4.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Bush, "President's Address to the Nation" (11 September 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

memory, a history written by the victors which forces the memory of the defeated, as well as their hopes, to be forgotten. American writers such as Howard Zinn,<sup>51</sup> Noam Chomsky and William Blum have all catalogued various accounts of alternative histories that resist the intentionally “sanitized history”<sup>52</sup> of the victors in order to take the suffering of history’s victims into account. Chomsky, for example, in his analysis of the U.S.-led War in Terror points out the active involvement of the United States in funding and promotion of terror in Latin American civil wars of the 1980s and ‘90s through such institutions as the U.S. Army School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia.<sup>53</sup> The victims of this U.S.-sponsored terrorism included Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador in 1980, the 900 members of the Salvadoran village of El Mozote in 1981<sup>54</sup>, and six Salvadoran Jesuit priests and their housekeeper and her daughter in 1989, in addition to thousands of others throughout Latin America. Chomsky notes that the Jesuits, like so many other victims of U.S.-sponsored violence, were “doubly assassinated: murdered and forgotten.”<sup>55</sup>

U.S. involvement in Latin America is but one long and bloody episode in a series of military interventions since World War II.<sup>56</sup> Despite the sheer amount of violence inflicted by the United States upon many parts of the world, William Blum notes the general historical amnesia for which Americans are notorious. Like Chomsky, Blum points to the lack of media coverage of the majority of U.S. military interventions, which ensures that these actions remain non-events for most Americans.<sup>57</sup> When the media perpetuates nothing but sanitized memories and the United States is targeted in a case of “blowback” -- the retaliation of the victims of covert operations<sup>58</sup> -- most Americans have no historical memory, and no context in which to make sense of such attacks. Events such as 9/11 seem to “come out of nowhere” as if unprovoked, and the memory of such events is distorted through an inability to connect it to other historical memories. Even in the case of 9/11, a case of extreme violence with the potential to “interrupt” American consciousness, the media’s tendency toward the sanitization is not interrupted, with even more extreme degrees of self-censorship exhibited by

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<sup>51</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*, Revised and Updated Edition (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995).

<sup>52</sup> Chomsky, 91.

<sup>53</sup> For more information on the School of the Americas, and the movement to close its successor institution, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), see <http://www.soaw.org>

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

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

<sup>56</sup> William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, Updated Edition (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> William Blum, 14-15.

<sup>58</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan, 2004), 8-9.

major news outlets.<sup>59</sup>

Although there have been hints of a collective desire to know the “truth” behind the attacks of September 11 in the form of the 9/11 Truth Commission and the still marginalized “9/11 Truth Movement,” even the very basic, easily verifiable facts about U.S. involvement around the globe remain largely excluded from mainstream media, and therefore from the general consciousness of Americans. Thus, the memory of 9/11 has proven to be exactly this kind of sanitized, or selective memory; an isolated memory without the context of other memories. As we have seen, this sanitized history of selective memories has no place in the “dangerous memories” that Metz describes. The memory of Christians, Metz says, must be radically confronted by the victims of human suffering, and must take their suffering fully into account. By filtering the past “through a harmless cliché” in which “everything dangerous, oppressive and demanding has vanished”<sup>60</sup> -- particularly the sufferings of others that we ourselves have caused -- memories like 9/11 become isolated from other memories of human suffering and their realities become distorted, enabling them to be manipulated to serve the interests of those who benefit from keeping the myths of the status quo unchallenged.

### *Solidarity / False Solidarity*

When memories simply recall a selective and sanitized past, screening out the dangerous acknowledgement of the sufferings of victims, authentic solidarity, as Metz describes it, becomes impossible. Indeed, as Metz says, “It is in...solidarity that memory and narrative (of salvation) acquire their mystical and political praxis. Without solidarity, memory and narrative cannot become practical categories of theology.”<sup>61</sup> As we have seen, the solidarity of our exchange society is frequently a false solidarity that lacks the universalism that Metz says is essential in a Christian spirituality. This false solidarity can take the form of a narrow solidarity that is only extended to those who are close to us. Matthew Ashley, in discussing Metz’s understanding of solidarity, says “Solidarity can become the narrow ‘us’ of the lifestyle enclave, of the party, of our particular class, race, or creed, within which we barricade ourselves against the fearful, often hated ‘them.’”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Metz points to the case in the former Yugoslavia where

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<sup>59</sup> A study conducted by the Pew Charitable Trust from September-December 2001 reported that 74 percent of television coverage about the 9/11 attacks and the U.S.’s subsequent response was “all pro-U.S.” or “mostly pro-U.S.,” while only 7 percent was “mostly dissenting” or “all dissenting” (Robin, 169).

<sup>60</sup> Metz, *FHS*, 109.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 229-30.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew J. Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 153.

the memory of suffering became a shroud for the whole nation and a stranglehold on any attempt at interethnic rapprochement. Here a particular people have remembered only their own suffering, and so this purely self-regarding *memoria passionis* became not an organ of understanding and peace, but a source of hostility, hatred, and violence.<sup>63</sup>

This false solidarity is occasionally expanded to include alliances with others, the solidarity of the exchange society, in which individuals and communities operate under the principle of "I will look after your interests if you look after mine."<sup>64</sup> This, too, Metz says is a narrow solidarity, but a solidarity not uncommon in our societies.

Although much of the world felt a sense of solidarity with the United States in the human suffering of 9/11<sup>65</sup> and wanted the U.S. to feel that same solidarity with the rest of the world in its sufferings, the terrorist attacks seem to have produced only the narrow solidarities that Metz warns us about. Despite Bush's statement on the fifth anniversary that the terrorists "murdered people of all colors, creeds, and nationalities," and in doing so "made war upon the entire free world,"<sup>66</sup> the solidarity generated has proven not to be so universal. With the exception of this slight nod toward non-Americans, the speech largely references past events of the suffering of the American people without any connection to the suffering that the United States has caused throughout the world, a selective memory that, as we have already seen, is problematic. That 9/11 produced inward-looking self-concern is shown in increased patriotism throughout the United States. As Bush said, "We must put aside our differences and work together to meet the test that history has given us. We will defeat our enemies. We will protect our people."<sup>67</sup> And again, "The attacks were meant to bring us to our knees, and they did, but not in the way the terrorists intended. Americans united in prayer, came to the aid of neighbors in need, and resolved that our enemies would not have the last word."<sup>68</sup> The false solidarity of the exchange society is revealed in Bush's consistent message that other nations have a choice, "You are with us or you are with the terrorists," and solidarity is extended, not universally to all those who have and who continue to experience violence, but to allies who share the same interests. Coupled with his admission that "*America and her allies have taken the offensive* in a war unlike any we have fought before" (*emphasis added*), it becomes clear that, like Metz's example of Yugoslavia, what had the potential to be an "organ of understanding and peace" has become a "source of hostility, hatred, and violence."

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<sup>63</sup> Metz, "In the Pluralism of Religious and Cultural Worlds: Notes Toward a Theological and Political Program," in *Love's Strategy*, 170.

<sup>64</sup> Metz, *FHS*, 230.

<sup>65</sup> Chomsky, 42.

<sup>66</sup> Bush, "President's Address to the Nation" (11 September 2006).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

As we have seen, Metz insists that an authentic Christian spirituality of solidarity involves an ever-widening horizon of concern for the sufferings of others, including on a political scale. Two decades before 9/11 Metz insisted that

politics can no longer be conducted simply within the framework of national action and exclusively with the interests of national security, which are often ideologically motivated, in mind. On the contrary, politics have now to take place in the universal arena of responsibility for everyone's life and survival.<sup>69</sup>

This widening of political concern has not taken place in the spirituality of many Americans, nor in that of their leaders, since 9/11. Indeed, the memory of 9/11, and the false solidarity it inspired, has been used to justify further violence, whether it be subsequent declaration of the War on Terror -- led by the U.S. in "solidarity" with its allies -- or the justification of torture in the name of national security.

### *Hope / Misplaced Hope*

Finally, we turn to a fourth theme that is really at the heart of Metz's understanding of Christian spirituality, the theme of *hope*. For Metz, an authentic Christian faith is one that is focused intentionally on the memory of human suffering, particularly the dangerous memory of Jesus. But this memory is also a "forward memory," a memory of hope in the promises of God that sees the past and the present in light of this future, a future memory that has been revealed in Christ's resurrection:

Christian faith can be understood as an attitude according to which man [*sic*] remembers promises that have been made and hopes that are experienced as a result of those promises and commits himself [*sic*] to those memories... What is important here is the figure of eschatological memory.<sup>70</sup>

Unlike the evolutionary logic which ultimately hopes for nothing outside of itself, the Christian understanding of history insists that there is an ending to the story, an ending that has been promised by God, and revealed in Christ. It is in this "ending," promised by God, that Christians place their hope.

What is/are the source(s) of hope within American myths and symbols -- its spirituality -- and what are the horizons of those hopes? Again, we might turn to the five year anniversary speech of President Bush in which, in typical form, he speaks of the U.S. being called to lead "the 21<sup>st</sup> century into a shining age of human liberty."<sup>71</sup> To lead this cause, the U.S. and its allies must go on the "offensive" through the War on Terror in order to defeat "evil." In this speech,

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<sup>69</sup> Metz, *FHS*, 103.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>71</sup> Bush, speech.

Bush explicitly points to “the spirit of our people” as “the source of America’s strength. And we go forward with trust in that spirit, confident in our purpose, and faith in a loving God who made us to be free.”<sup>72</sup> The hope here, in Bush’s vision, is in America itself, its people, its “strength,” and its own understanding of “freedom.” Elsewhere, Bush has explicitly expressed his, and the American people’s, faith in military power.<sup>73</sup> Bush’s vision of a “shining age of liberty” gives the illusion of a forward-thinking hope but is not a “forward memory” in the truest sense because the horizons of this hope fall within history, and ultimately rest on the state’s efforts to control history through political means, especially violence. For Metz, our hope is in God, not simply as the fixed *telos* of history, but as “the radically new,” the God who fulfills God’s promises within history, but from beyond history.<sup>74</sup> The hope of Christians, then, is an eschatological hope in the resurrection as the vindication of the victims of violence and death, not the domination of history through force or the avenging of death by further violence.

*The Church and the “Dangerous Memory” of 9/11:  
Narratives of Fear, Narratives of Hope*

The way the memory of 9/11 functions in American spirituality is nothing new. As Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle have shown in painful detail, American civil religion is a living tradition that depends upon the memory of violence as the primary means of identity formation.<sup>75</sup> September 11 is merely one of the most recent of these “interruptive” memories in a long history of selective memories that involve killing and dying for sake of the national community. What is perhaps unique about the memory of 9/11 is the openness with which it has been used to secure the global dominance of the United States by exerting military and economic power in what supporters and critics alike are describing as a “new imperialism,” or “American empire.” 9/11 has bolstered the militaristic tendencies of other nations as well, allowing them to use terrorism as an excuse for oppressive policies.<sup>76</sup> “There’s no telling how many

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> For even more explicit statements of faith in military strength, see the statement of purpose and various publications of the Project for a New American Century, a neoconservative think-tank that provided the rationale for the Bush administration’s *National Security Strategy*. In particular, see the PNAC document “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century (September 2000), available from <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 67-8.

<sup>75</sup> Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>76</sup> Chomsky, 217-8.

wars it will take to secure freedom in the homeland,"<sup>77</sup> Bush has warned the American people, and although the War on Terror has generated a massive protest movement and opposition from Republicans who fault Bush for "botching" the war in Iraq, a significant portion of Americans remain committed to the overall imperial vision, supported by an impoverished American spirituality of selective memory.

These new realities inspire a question and a profound challenge for the Church: who or what shapes our memories? As Chomsky, Robin, and Blum have shown us, the media plays a large role in shaping and selecting which memories influence our imaginations, and thus, our spiritualities. Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh, drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson who defined nations as "imagined political communities," suggests that the nation-state has replaced the Church as the "primary cultural institution that deals with death," giving meaning to the meaninglessness of death, and providing a "new kind of salvation." In a passage that echoes the concerns of Metz's theology, Cavanaugh says "death is not in vain if it is for the nation, which lives on into a limitless future."<sup>78</sup> The nation is in the business of filtering and controlling the memories of its citizens, and giving those memories meaning, which shapes the national community's imagined character and its lived practices. Memories are organized and given meaning through the nation's own "liturgies" which are every bit as "religious" as Christian liturgy: the pledge of allegiance, honoring the flag, remembrance of the sacrifice of dead soldiers, or the various rituals that are used to remember the 9/11 attacks. Frequently, as in the case of the War on Terror, this controlled, narrow sense of historical memory results in a "dangerous spirituality" that forms a social body willing to send its children off to kill and be killed in the name of the nation-state. These controlled memories become "dangerous" in the literal sense, in that they end up creating new victims of violence rather a spirit of solidarity and resistance against the taking of human life.

The Church has an important task in this historical moment, particularly in the American Catholic Church, and must continually reclaim its role as the bearer of collective memory, the "emancipative memory, liberating us from all attempts to idolize cosmic and political powers and make them absolute."<sup>79</sup> "Religion," Metz says, "is essentially resistance to th[e] cultural amnesia" that allows human communities to perpetuate acts of violence.

This is especially so for Christianity. The Church as an institution is above all a collection of recollections, a long-term memory, an 'elephant's memory' in which much, all too much, is stored: liberation and oppression, light and darkness.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Chomsky, 207.

<sup>78</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, "The Liturgies of Church and State," *Liturgy* 20, No. 1, 25-30.

<sup>79</sup> Metz, *FHS*, 91.

<sup>80</sup> Metz, "In The Pluralism," 174.

The Church must be the place where dangerous stories of the memory of violence are kept alive so that they may challenge us to resist violence in the present. Scholars tell us that the death of Jesus of Nazareth would have been just another forgotten crucifixion in the history of the Roman empire had the Church not kept his dangerous memory alive. In the same way, if the official rhetoric of the nation-state glosses over the dangerous portions of its history, neglecting its victimization of others, the Church must witness to the memory of the state's victims. When the media fails to report the killing of a Guatemalan archbishop for investigating human rights violations in his country, rendering his death a "non-event" in the lives of most Americans, then the Church must witness to these dangerous memories. At the same time, the Church must continually be honest about its own memory and the ways in which it has neglected the victims within its own history.<sup>81</sup>

The Church must continually renew within itself the eschatological dimension of Christian life, the forward-looking memory of hope in the promise of God, lest the memories of human suffering that are part of our history become dangerous in another sense:

If the catastrophic and continuous nature of time is not understood, the experience of catastrophe on the part of the individual confronted with death will be even more catastrophic and death will be even more deadly. A society and a church without a Christian apocalyptic vision has, in other words, made death more deadly.<sup>82</sup>

The Church must continue to proclaim "We will never forget," not in reference to the isolated, selective memories that incite vengeful responses, but primarily in reference to the dangerous memory of Christ and to the promise God has made to remember all the victims of history, those celebrated with monuments and parades as well as those forgotten and despised.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Metz, *FHS*, 178.