

## Theology and Biography: a Woman Political Theologian in El Salvador

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In 1999 I set out for El Salvador for the first time. I was to spend a year there as teacher and student at the José Simeón Cañas University of Central America (UCA). That is the university where the military murdered six Jesuits and two women on 16 November 1989 because of their commitment to justice and peace. Ignacio Ellacuría, one of those killed, and Jon Sobrino belonged to the founding generation and were and remain among the internationally celebrated exponents of UCA. Over the years my experience of a one-year guest professorship in El Salvador developed to the point of a productive partnership and friendship. It led to a fruitful encounter between the new political theology and the Latin American theology of liberation.

As I look back now over a relationship of almost ten years with the country, two major questions come to mind. First, what did I learn from political theology, or rather the particular form of political theology that I acquired from Johann Baptist Metz, which helped me begin to understand El Salvador? Or, to put it more precisely, how did it help me to get involved in, and open myself up to, what was really happening in El Salvador? Second, to what extent has El Salvador become a hermeneutically productive location for me: one where I discovered how to understand the basic options of political theology more proficiently? How far was my encounter with El Salvador the beginning of a process in the course of which the capacity of political theology to disclose truth and reality became ever more profoundly evident and effective?

El Salvador also represented a radical clarification process for me. Afterwards a lot of things that had been important to me, even theologically, were no longer so. They did not bear the brunt of experience and became meaningless. The very opposite happened in the case of political theology. In fact my experiences in El Salvador convinced me that its options were indisputable and imprinted its formulations indelibly on my identity as a theologian.

During my 1999 visit I introduced a sizeable group of theology students, especially young Central American members of men's religious Orders, to the work of Johann Baptist Metz. Although I was inexperienced as far as the real nature of conditions in Latin America was concerned, and my linguistic competence was still very inadequate, it was not long before the students asked me: 'How is it that you understand us and our situation so well even though you are a European, and a woman?' I was faced with this question on several occasions, and tried to get to the bottom of it myself. I came to the conclusion that there was no reason to think that this capacity was attributable to an unusual gift of empathy on my part. I realized that it was actually the basic hermeneutical principles of Metz's theology that made understanding and a meeting of minds possible.

'Recognizing the traces of God in the very otherness of other people in spite of any hermeneutics of comprehension or adaptation' was certainly the primary and most important aim that made me include Johann Baptist Metz in my intellectual baggage for the visit to El Salvador. When I got there I began to see that if I tried to come to terms with other people, with people of other countries, only on the basis of what I knew already or from other sources, my conception of them would be null and void, and I would do no more than bring myself and my preconceptions to the encounter.

But really opening myself up to the unknown, to what was alien and outlandish, definitely called for a fundamental shock and convulsion. It had to be ‘dangerous’ in Metz’s sense. The image that has never left me since that moment of realization is based on geologists’ explanation of the origin of earthquakes. It is not at all imaginative but relies on a very real environment. El Salvador is a volcanic region constantly menaced by earthquakes. It was there that I found out for the first time what it feels like when the ground under your feet really starts to quiver threateningly. Experts tell us that the ground is convulsed to this extent when the continental plates collide in the depths of the ocean. That was exactly what happened to me, and I shall never forget it. The result is an immensely powerful and shattering collision of totally different worlds in the depths of one’s consciousness, to such a degree that a lot of things collapse that beforehand seemed to guarantee shelter and security. Yet precisely when the first crack appeared in my superficial convictions and assurance, and I realized how vulnerable I was, my experience of authentic encounter began. It is in such moments, I would say, that I begin to sense something of the mystery of God and encounter the ‘totally Other’ who so affects me in my meeting with those others who are my fellow humans, and in my discovery of another world that is so different from the one I knew before.

The second key proposition of Johann Baptist Metz that I carried with me to Latin America was: ‘Whoever talks of God as Jesus intended runs the risk of, and must come to terms with the outrageous horrors of, other people’s lives destroying their preconceived religious certainties.’ My encounter with El Salvador meant a very specific experience of encounter with fellow humans of a very different kind. When I went there for the first time, in 1999, I was well-prepared for the visit, considering that I was the product of a European academic education. After all, I was acquainted with the political and economic situation of these countries. But in reality I hadn’t the faintest idea of what life there was like. I remember my first few hours in San Salvador. A woman colleague of mine, who became a friend later on, took me to the city centre. I was overwhelmed by the flood of impressions that I met with in only a few hours. Everything seemed overlaid with a flurry of street children, and then there were all the deeply alcoholic men crippled by years of civil war, and the women with their babies working in the market, all in the midst of smog, noise and heat. Intellectually, of course, and as transmitted by the media, I had ‘known’ all this for a long time. I was also aware that the situation was many times more life-threatening and deadly in the civil-war regions of Africa and in many other places around the world. Yet in those first few hours I spent in San Salvador I certainly experienced what Metz refers to as the shattering of our normal composure. Those few hours removed my childish assurance that, yes, by and large, at the end of the day our world is all right. I was shocked into the sudden realization that, on the contrary, this is actually a world of vile and cruel insanity. It is divided between the few who can rely on the satisfaction of their basic needs for food, clean water, health and education – and the many for whom life consists of an everlasting struggle to survive, or have apparently been born only to perish. Moreover my naïve and infantile ‘faith’ in ‘western civilization’ as the defender of human rights and humane progress deserted me abruptly. Finally, this experience ruined my trust in pious or theological concepts that try to ignore or resist the interrogation of all the victims, whether they are prey to the armaments industry, a cruel economic system, or simply greedy profit-hunters.

During the week when, finally, I was in bed with a fever, to some extent I certainly experienced that ‘silent outcry’ which for Metz is how one first comes to know God. He reminds us that theology recognizes not only the beating of the soul’s wings as it makes its prayerful ascent to God, but a descent to God, a form of transcendence downwards, to that region where all that remains is despair, unless a cry comes from those depths, and God’s own space and his presence open up in the silent lament of prayer (*Memoria Passionis*, 2006). Theology, as it makes sense for me, must summon up all its intellectual resources to deal with this plaint, to articulate it in reflective and analytical language, and to ensure that it is heard. Yet theologians must never try to circumvent such cries by engaging in speculation, or try to deprive those who emit them of their form of expression by telling them what their suffering means – by ‘explaining’ it. As soon as it does that, theology denies its very nature, betrays God, and becomes worthless – garbage, in fact.

Finally, the third insight that I gleaned from Metz and took with me to El Salvador, where I first began to see its point, is: ‘Surely, during the history of our Church and Christianity, we have been far too inclined to separate its grief, and the message of hope which it bears, from the history of human suffering. Surely, by associating the idea of Christ’s suffering exclusively with the cross and with ourselves, his followers, we have set off areas of unprotected suffering for others in our world... as if this misfortune had no expiatory power, and as if we too did not live with the burden of this suffering.’ I remember the via crucis, the way of the cross on Good Friday in ‘Maria de los pobres’, a parish where civil-war refugees were stranded on the periphery of the city in the nineteen-eighties. For three hours in the throbbing heat we stumbled rather than walked through this area. The ‘main highway’ there is a railway line where a goods train thunders directly past people’s living quarters twice a day, and regularly claims its victims. If you don’t live right by the railway you will be housed where the ‘river’ descends, and by that I mean the ‘agua negra’, the sewage of the entire city, which stinks so unspeakably as it flows by.

That night there were more than three hundred there, many of them children and young people, praying and singing together, not to forget the dogs who accompanied us loyally all the way to the closing devotions in the church. As those hot and sweaty hours of prayer continued I recalled earlier occasions when I had made the stations of the Cross or meditated on the Passion during spiritual exercises under others’ or my own direction. But what I remembered was an experience of profound individual meditation in an aesthetic environment and peaceful ambiance where I could listen to Bach and contemplate a painting by Grünewald. The contrast between those times and what I was living through in El Salvador could not have been more acute. The stench and noise around me, and all that dust and heat – the more they affected me the more I became aware that if I did not realize under these conditions that Jesus’ Cross and these people’s crosses were related, I was lost. If I couldn’t recognize Jesus’ Cross in the crosses these people had to bear, then its redemptive power was lost on me.

Before I went to El Salvador, the fact that the memoria passionis, the ‘memory of suffering’, affords redemption was a theological concept and pious belief. But the reality of El Salvador changed my attitude, at the latest when during the vigilia, the night vigil celebrated in la Chakra on 24 March, the anniversary of the assassination of Oscar Romero, one family after the other described how their relatives and friends had disappeared and had been tortured and murdered during the civil war period. That was a night of great sorrow and distress, yet it also brought us into the ‘real presence’ of radiant humanity and vouchsafed the experience that this death was a source of life for us. The martyrs were present to testify to resurrection and as witnesses not only to God, who does not allow these victims to vanish totally in death, but to a life that takes the risk of ‘making a stand against death’ here and now.

When I was a young woman, Johann Baptist Metz’s little book on the religious life led me to enter the Order to which I still belong. It awakened my desire to take the risk of engaging in an evangelically radical way of life, and to commit myself to the ‘mystico-political’ duality of the Gospel’s recommendations. Again and again, throughout the following decades, I had to contend with the disappointment of finding that I had reverted to a somewhat ‘bourgeois’ form of religious life. I am indebted to El Salvador for the conversion to my ‘first love’ and to what has become my identity as a woman religious and theologian today. I owe this especially to my encounter with people who live their lives as Jesus’ followers not ‘metaphorically’ but in an absolutely real way that then promotes reality. However paradoxical it may seem, the martyrs have taught me that following in those footsteps is not primarily some kind of moral and ascetic performance that we have to acquit ourselves of, but something that enables us to become more human and vital. ‘Whoever loses his or her life . . . will gain it.’