

# **Enjoying Life in Christianity**

(BY SIMON LASZLO MOLNAR)

*"There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."*<sup>1</sup>

## **Contemporary images of the Kingdom of God**

The atheist slogan could show us the contemporary thinking about the Kingdom of God. But what kind of God image is hidden behind the slogan? God is a police of whom we have to be afraid. God punishes us. God's will is something different from the way of the world, who doesn't respect human nature or who is an autocrat, tyrant and oppressor. God and the enjoyment of life are not compatible. Is this God the Father of Jesus? Is this God really the God of Christians?

## **Introduction to the Kingdom of God<sup>2</sup>**

The Kingdom promised by the prophets is something 'new'. 'I am going to do a new thing'.<sup>3</sup> New covenant, new exodus, new heart.

The 'kingdom' or 'reign' is an archaic phrase; therefore, it is not easy to say what the term, 'Kingdom of God' really means. It has to be retranslated to have it correctly understood. What makes it more difficult is that Jesus himself never defined the Kingdom in concrete terms and concepts. He presented the reign in parables. "The central message of Jesus, the Kingdom of God, did mean the transformation of all human structures in favour of justice and the rights of poor."<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary theologians rather define the phrase 'Kingdom of God' as a symbol than a concept. The best definition is given in Paul, "After all, the Kingdom of God is not a matter of whether you get what you like to eat or drink, rather the Kingdom of God is a matter of justice, peace and joy. For the Kingdom does not exist in talk but in power."<sup>5</sup> The Kingdom is not just near in the immediate future. It is already here breaking into the present, as a present reality. "It is a time of God's gracious offer of salvation and not judgement."<sup>6</sup> However, we also have to see that Matthew's gospel supports the 'not yet' or the apocalyptic

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<sup>1</sup> Marsde, F., *Atheist slogans can get people discussing God*, in *The Catholic Times*, No 796 (6077) – Sunday January 18 2009, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> See Fuellenbach, J., SVD, *The Kingdom of God*, (Manila: Devine Word Publication, 1989) 1-96.

<sup>3</sup> Is 43:19

<sup>4</sup> Fuellenbach, J., SVD, op. cit., 30.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 49.

view while Luke seems to support the ‘already’ position which means the Kingdom is here and now. Therefore, theologians maintain both the ‘already and the not yet’ of the Kingdom as a biblical reality. The origin of the message of Jesus’ Kingdom was his ‘Abba experience’ – God is one who was coming as unconditional love.

## **The Reign of God by Metz**

### *Bourgeois religion*

Metz writes about the problem between God and comfort. As for him, Europeans would like to have a God who fills into their middle classes, into their bourgeois society. He asks a question: “Are we living as disciples, or do we just believe in discipleship and, under the cloak of this belief in discipleship, continue in our old ways, the same unchanging ways? Do we show real love, or do we just believe in love and under the cloak of belief in love remain the same egoists and conformists we have always been? Do we share the sufferings of others, or do we just believe in this sharing, remaining under the cloak of a belief in ‘sympathy’ as apathetic as ever?”<sup>7</sup>

We are members of the first world, living in a market economy shaped by the bourgeois values of competition, exchange and efficiency. It means that the messianic religion of the Bible has largely been changed into bourgeois religion. This hermeneutic circle is a reinforcement for those with secure possessions, who already have abundant prospects and rich future. Bourgeois attitude, the attitude of having, possession – which characterizes our western culture and the Christianity as well - is against the gospel. “Those who possess their life will lose it, and those who despise it will win it.”<sup>8</sup>

Metz’s view about comparing a bourgeois religion to the gospel is radical: "Nevertheless, Christianity as bourgeois religion is not the religion of the gospel; it is rather the creation of the bourgeoisie and of bourgeois unapproachability in regard to religion. The bourgeois no longer allows religion to get at him, but he uses religion when he needs it. Thus he himself has created that 'services church' which no longer offers people real consolation, and which for that very reason we have to fight every means in our power."<sup>9</sup>

Metz not only criticizes bourgeoisie – from the view of Auschwitz, but against Adorno he says, “We can pray after Auschwitz because even in Auschwitz there were prayers

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<sup>7</sup> Metz, J. B., *The Emergent Church*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1981) 3. I will note this book with the letters *EC* in the footnotes ahead.

<sup>8</sup> See Matthew 16:25

<sup>9</sup> Metz, J. B., *EC*, 83.

– in the songs and in the cries of the Jewish victims.”<sup>10</sup> - but also has a clear way out to find authenticity. This is the anthropological revolution which manifests in *memoria passionis*.

*Anthropological revolution*<sup>11</sup> and *memoria passionis*<sup>12</sup>

The anthropological revolution is our Christian answer to the question of the survival of crisis. It's an attempt to find a none exploiting and non-ruling way to ourselves, to our common world and to our nature. This is a contemporary attitude to ecology what is growing from the middle of an eucharistical community. The anthropological revolution is not only a revolution against our exploiting and consuming behaviour but solidarity with the poor as well. Their poverty is our richness. Their impotence is our power. The way to solve the problem of ecology must be the way of solidarity, in other words, our escape cannot be repressing of poor.<sup>13</sup>

Metz wants to realize what solidarity means. “Solidarity is a category of assistance, of supporting and encouraging the subject in the face of that which threatens him or her most acutely and in the face of his or her suffering.”<sup>14</sup> How can we, privileged and white people, sit in our comfortable homes - equipped with cars, multiple televisions and telephones, CD players, and basic running water - and be in solidarity with one who has no home, no food, no water? The solution is to realize and remember that I am a selfish, privileged, idealistic person; our situation would allow us to live in poverty, in the same context in which the suffering live. Instead, we should try to uplift the people who are oppressed, suffering, and subjugated. For most of us, to leave our comfortable lives is not possible. “But one thing must be seen clearly regarding this conversion of bourgeois hearts, this anthropological revolution in which the bourgeois of the first world are to be freed, not from powerlessness but from their excess of power; not from their poverty but from their wealth; not from what they lack but from their apathy.”<sup>15</sup> The anthropological revolution seeks to bring power, precisely the non-dominating virtues.

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<sup>10</sup> Metz, J. B., *A Passion for God*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 123. I will note this book with the letters *PG* in the footnotes ahead.

<sup>11</sup> See Metz, J. B., *EC*, 34-47.

<sup>12</sup> See Metz, J. B., *PG*.

<sup>13</sup> See Metz, J. B., *EC*, 98-102.

<sup>14</sup> Metz, J. B., *Faith in History and Society*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007) 208. I will note this book with the letters *FHS* in the footnotes ahead.

<sup>15</sup> Metz, J. B., *EC*, 72.

To be out of the events, to be in the perspective of observer is not reconcilable with religion and morality. Just the active participation, the helping love, the sensitivity about others' suffering can improve and renew the world.

The German theologian reminds us that the sensitivity about foreigners' suffering is one of the foundations of Jesus' new lifestyle. This sensitivity of life form is the strongest evidence of love which was left for us to challenge by Christ. To love God and to love human beings must form one unit – that is following the Jewish tradition. “Only if Christianity can join the birth of global society can it show the value in and for that society of its understanding of a solidarity that is free of hatred and violence. Yet loving one's enemy and resisting hatred and violence do not dispense Christianity from the struggle for all persons to be subjected. Otherwise it will fall short of its mission: to be a place where hope is at home, that hope in the God of the living and the dead, who calls all men and women to be subjects in God's presence.”<sup>16</sup>

The contemplation of the others' suffering is in balance with the own passion. This authentic *memoria passionis* sets us the front of the political, social, and cultural conflicts appearing in present days. The solidarity towards the suffering of an alien is an essential condition of every coming peace policy, battle of classes, and cultural struggle. Christianity only has apocalyptic conscience, if the remembrance of God is in balance with the remembrance with passion of human beings. Those remembrances have to be in equipoise. “The history of suffering and the social history of oppression are certainly not simply identical in this memory of suffering, but neither can they be separated in the concrete.”<sup>17</sup>

All societal and economical revolutions, even if their struggle is against the exploiting and for helping poor, at the end, become subjugation and absence of rights as well if there is no courage to realize the anthropological revolution. Metz continues: “My starting assumption is that this kind of peace will only be possible when, in the predominantly rich countries of this earth, in the so-called first world, we arrive at a decisive revision of our priorities in life. This means that the objective fear and despair that are spreading throughout this first world of ours must become at last a living, personal experience. In other words, we ourselves have to search for and attain – in both a theological and political sense – a ‘conversion of hearts’.”<sup>18</sup> In this way, no wonder that this anthropological revolution has no mass support. It manifests dispersedly, it is difficult to find its followers who have an

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<sup>16</sup> Metz, J. B., *FHS*, 214.

<sup>17</sup> Metz, J. B., *EC*, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Metz, J. B., *EC*, 71.

unstructured political grouping yet. The difficulty of this revolution is that “the individual on his own can do very little in this area; conversion, in the sense indicated here, can only be achieved together with others.”<sup>19</sup>

Metz’s conclusion about *memoria passionis* is the following, “What memory of suffering brings into political life (...) is a new moral imagination with regard to others’ suffering, which should bear fruit in an excessive, uncalculated partiality for the weak and the voiceless. But this is the way that the Christian *memoria passionis* can become a ferment for that new political life for which we are searching, so that we might have a human future.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Life of Nazareth – The Kingdom of God by Charles de Foucauld**

A systematic summary of de Foucauld’s theology cannot be found anywhere. I will try to represent the lifestyle of de Foucauld’s disciples through their stories. We can find two dominant keys in their life: ‘Nazareth’ and the ‘universal brother’.

The hidden life of ‘*Nazareth*’ suddenly became a key word for de Foucauld’s disciples. For them it means sharing the life of men and, like the Son of God, leading an ordinary, everyday human life. Here, we do not find a desire for incarnation which would suggest that the Christian and his Church are separated from the world, external to the Lord; but instead, we contemplate Jesus who lived an ordinary human life in Nazareth. From de Foucauld and his followers concluded that the *fuga mundi* is not their destiny, that this world where the Son of God lived is good, and that it is good for us to live in it too, profoundly, to the point of dying in it so as to transfigure it like “the grain of wheat [that] falls into the earth and dies”, the Gospel phrase constantly repeated by de Foucauld and taken up by his followers.

In solidarity with the poor, fraternity members try to live a simple life, which is an alternative to the consumer society; to share their sorrows, their hopes and their conflicts in the search for true freedom; Recognise in all people, particularly our neighbours, a brother and a sister to love, and especially the most abandoned who are in need of material, spiritual or moral support.<sup>21</sup>

The best definition for Nazareth was given by de Foucauld: “I no longer want a monastery which is too secure. I want a small monastery, like the house of a poor work-man who is not sure if tomorrow he will find work and bread, who with all his being shares the

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<sup>19</sup> Metz, J. B., *EC*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> Metz, J. B., *EC*, 113.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.jesuscarritas.info/jcd/system/files/A+WAY+OF+UNITY+colour2008.pdf> at 15.04.2009

suffering of the world.”<sup>22</sup> This standpoint was based on of his experience when he was once sent on a pastoral errand to the hovel of an Arab Christian who was dying of cholera. Charles was appalled to acknowledge the contrast between the dignified simplicity of the monastery and the actual poverty of a common peasant.<sup>23</sup>

(Jesus speaks:) ”The example of poverty, lowliness, recollection, withdrawal: the obscurity of a life hidden in God, a life of prayer, penance, and withdrawal, completely lost in God, buried deep in him. I was teaching you to live by the labour of your own hands, so as to be a burden on no one and to have something to give to the poor.”<sup>24</sup> This is the idea of the hidden life of Nazareth that excludes potency and efficiency.

‘*Universal brother*’ means that they want to demonstrate the universality of the love of Christ's Heart.

Carlo Carretto is one of the most known members of Little Brothers of Jesus. His story can typify little brother’s attitude and de Foucauld’s dream as well: Carretto arrived to a village of ex-slaves called Taifet. He felt asleep in the shade of a few bushes. He awoke surrounded by locals and was invited to eat with them and see the work they were doing. They were digging a subterranean canal (fogara) with the purpose of collecting water from the sand and conduct it to the nearby fields. An unpredictable sandstorm had destroyed the old fogara and they were trying now to make a new one with primitive tools. The man working in the tunnel had the advantage of suffering less from the heat, but it was nevertheless an uncomfortable position to work in – working outside one suffered backache less, but the heat was suffocating. Carlo was helping them for a week, working and living with them. One night while he gazed the sky was thinking about the following thoughts: “What would it cost to write a letter to my friends in Italy? They might immediately have sent me a bulldozer to dig out the trench in a few days. At least they could send me great cement tubes to make the trench stable and secure, and stop it caving in when water first ran into it. And there I was, just sitting motionless and looking at the stars! Was I justified, just lying there and reflecting in this way? What use could my poor hands possibly be with so much work to be done? Wouldn’t it be better to look elsewhere for help? This is a question I have often asked myself: so often, in fact, that it has even forced me to question the basis of my vocation. And yet, faith must be the guide and not common sense. (...) My own common sense which made me try to convince myself that I would be more use to the people of Taifet

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<sup>22</sup> de Foucauld, Ch., *Writings Selected* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999) 9.

<sup>23</sup> See *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

if I went away in search of materials for their trench; the common sense of men who believe that one can solve everything with money and that to share people's suffering is simply a waste."<sup>25</sup> But is the Gospel common sense? Or is it mystery? This is why, for him who suffers, theology is not enough. Something more is necessary. René Voillaume expresses that experience and attitude with the following words: "The compassion of God, along with his holiness, is perhaps one of the attributes of his divinity that we find most difficult to understand. For it is difficult to know God."<sup>26</sup>

Carretto understood that the Lord had asked him "to be a poor man among poor men, a worker among workers"<sup>27</sup>.

### **Conclusion – Metz's similarity to de Foucauld**

Charles de Foucauld's life was uncommon in his time. His interpretation of following Christ was ahead of his age – sometimes in our times as well. He presented Jesus as a non-political Messiah. We needed 49 years after his death, when the Church put into words in *Dignitatis Humanae*: "He refused to be a political messiah, ruling by force: He preferred to call Himself the Son of Man, who came 'to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many' (Mark 10:45)"<sup>28</sup>. Metz's concepts of political theology are not different as de Foucauld's experience just systematized in the language of theology. De Foucauld didn't speak directly about bourgeois religion or anthropological revolution as Metz does, but compassion was his clear ideal. In de Foucauld's compassion we can indirectly discover all the ideas Metz speaks about.

The only critic against Metz writings can be just that his teaching requires updating. What is his standpoint? Would he revise his teaching today in the face of economic - and ecological as well - crisis? What does anthropological revolution mean in that situation? The question is, what does it mean to build a more human world, to be in solidarity or to 'enjoy your life'? What is our concept of a human world? Is it the western welfare society, where carbon footprints are 9.4 in USA, 6,3 in Ireland, 5,7 in Spain, 4,9 in France, 4,2 in Germany, 3,5 in Hungary and 2,7 in the rest of the World<sup>29</sup>? We have to recognize that instead of compassion we are afraid because of our 3-10 times exploiting communities are in (an economical) crisis. It's not a simple crisis, but a crisis of an exploiting community. And the

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<sup>25</sup> Carretto, C., *Letters from the Desert* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972) 115.

<sup>26</sup> Voillaume, R., *Christian Vocation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974) 52.

<sup>27</sup> Carretto, C., op. cit., 119.

<sup>28</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae* 11.

<sup>29</sup> See *Living Planet Report 2008* by WWF, [http://assets.wwf.ca/downloads/lpr\\_2008.pdf](http://assets.wwf.ca/downloads/lpr_2008.pdf) at 09.03.2009

people's anxiety is about losing their own position in this huge exploitation. De Foucauld would say for our efforts about solidarity that "We are poor in the eyes of the rich, but not so poor as Our Lord was."<sup>30</sup>

We can change the atheist slogan '*There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.*' for '*There IS probably God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.*' God and enjoying the life are compatible but it has borders, at least to consume no more than one footprint.

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<sup>30</sup> de Foucauld, Ch., op. cit., 9.