THE UTMOST: ON THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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"But before Jesus *we* become the questioned:
Are we ready to be responsible for our freedom
and its price, and to consent to what God does
—beyond the alternative between immature dependence
and indignant revolt?"

> But God is greater than we think . . . . He knows how to meet the utmost that can happen with another utmost of his own.[1]

The suffering of God is a highly controversial topic in contemporary theology. For some, the idea that God suffers is indispensable for an adequate appreciation of the saving and redeeming power of the Cross. For others, it is a way of prematurely quieting the complaint that rises like a question to God out of the abyss of the world's history of suffering. When theology speaks of God's unconditional engagement of himself in the person and history of Jesus Christ, it *does* in fact

[1]F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt, 1966), 1.

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appear to take some of the edge off of the theodicy question. For if, out of love for man, God has exposed himself to the conditions of history in order to turn it into a history of salvation; if, therefore, the Crucified has taken upon himself the curse of sin in order to open a new perspective for sinners, while at the same time identifying himself with the suffering in order to draw close to them—if all this is true, then, it would seem, there are no grounds for protesting against God on account of suffering. One cannot help suspecting that a theology of accusation [*Anklage*] that insists one-sidedly on sensational experiences of injustice does so because it has *a priori* pushed God's unconditional commitment of himself in Jesus Christ into the background.

On the other hand, there is no getting around the question about how theologians should make sense out of the suffering of history's innumerable victims. If we consider the dumb cries of the tortured and murdered, the real "piety of theology"[2] can seem to lie precisely in complaint [*Klage*]—a long suppressed and suspected form of prayer. Is it enough simply to say that God himself has suffered? Shouldn't we take a critical distance from the various forms of "suffering love theology" and insist on the legitimacy of a "protest against God—before God" (K.-J. Kuschel)? And what about the cry of the dying Jesus himself? Doesn't "this doubting and despairing cry of 'why'"[3] give a theology of accusation just the christological foundation it would need?

There seems to be an antithesis between a trinitarian theology of the Cross, which, with due qualifications, deems the idea of God's suffering indispensable, and a lamentation theology that, sensitive to theodicy, categorically refuses the idea. Given this apparent opposition, one might suppose that grateful recognition of the saving and reconciling power of the Cross tends to silence any complaint, whereas, conversely, the option to revitalize accusation and protest is characterized by a certain forgetfulness of Christology. That in reality a lamentation theology and Christology cannot simply be played off against each other is something we will have to make clear later on.

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[2]J. B. Metz, "Theologie als Theodizee," in *Theodizee—Gott vor Gericht?*, ed. W. Oelmüller (Munich, 1990), 103–118; here, 104f.

[3]K.-J. Kuschel, "Ist Gott verantwortlich für das Übel? Überlegungen zu einer Theologie der Anklage," in *Angesichts des Leids an Gott glauben. Zu einer Theologie der Klage*, ed. G. Fuchs (Frankfurt, 1995), 227–261; here, 229.

In order to illustrate more fully the problem we have just sketched, we will first hear out Johann Baptist Metz's reservations about the idea of a suffering God (1). Whether his critique of the trinitarian theology of the Cross hits the mark, or whether it itself does not require certain correctives, is something we can assess only after we have investigated an example of the trinitarian theology of the Cross in order to assess the limits and possibilities of the idea of a suffering God. We will appeal here to Balthasar's theology of the Cross—and we will be explicitly guided by the attempt to determine the criteria governing talk of the suffering God in his theo-dramatic proposal (2). After a preliminary assessment (3), we will make clear in conclusion that the idea of divine suffering, as an entailment of a theology of the Cross, need not lead to a quieting of man's complaint. The grateful acknowledgment that God in Jesus Christ has already *definitively* shown his "unconditional decision of love for men" (Thomas Pröpper) cannot delude us into ignoring that the eschatological *fulfillment* of history still lies ahead.[4] Now, it is just this temporal tension between the already and the not-yet that characterizes the fundamental structure of the complaint, which, nourished by grateful remembrance of God's saving deeds in the past, calls upon him to intervene powerfully to redeem in the face of acute experiences of suffering and injustice (4).

1. Sublation of suffering in the concept of God? Johann Baptist Metz's reservation

Provoked by the historical catastrophe called "Auschwitz,"[5] Metz has confronted the essays of more recent systematic theology with the following question: Aren't they noticeably unperturbed by the history of suffering? Isn't their reflection marked by too much *apatheia*? In making this fundamental criticism, which flows from a solidarity of memory with history's victims, Metz also calls for more

[4]T. Pröpper, *Evangelium und freie Vernunft. Konturen einer theologischen Hermeneutik* (Freiburg, 2001), 40–56.

[5]Cf. J. B. Metz, "Auschwitz" (II. "Theologisch"), in *LthK*, 3rd ed. (1993), 1260–1261.

"sensitivity to theodicy" among theologians.[6] Unlike Leibniz, however, Metz does not understand "theodicy" as the attempt to justify God rationally in the face of the world's suffering and evil. Rather, it is a way of keeping alive the question about how to speak of God at all in the face of the overwhelming history of the world's suffering: what about the silenced, the vanquished, the victims of history? Will the past always be definitively over—or is there a power that is able to lay a saving hand on the past? Where is God? Why has he kept us waiting so long? The query about where God is that comes to expression in these questions goes along in Metz with a call for a negative theology of complaint that adequately gives voice to the painful experience of God's absence.[7]

From the point of view of this theological solidarity with the victims, talk of a suffering God appears deeply problematic. A trinitarian theology of the Cross, it is suspected, attempts to settle the theodicy question once and for all by claiming that God suffers with man out of love and, in so doing, skates over the suffering *because of* God that finds expression in complaint and protest. Walter Kasper's statement that, "the sym-pathetic God revealed in Jesus Christ is the definitive answer to the question of theodicy. . . . If God himself suffers, then suffering is no longer an objection against God,"[8] seems at first blush to confirm this suspicion. According to Metz there is an additional problem: "contemporary theology, with its trinitarian euphoria, pays a tribute to the polytheistic or polymythic atmosphere of today's world when it all too hastily distances itself from biblical monotheism."[9] It is doubtless problem-

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[6]J. B. Metz, "Plädoyer für mehr Theodizee-Empfindlichkeit in der Theologie," in *Wovon man nicht schweigen kann. Neuere Diskussionen zur Theodizeefrage*, ed. W. Oelmüller (Munich, 1992), 125–137.

[7]J. B. Metz, "Lob der negativen Theologie. Aus einem Interview zur Gottesfrage," in *Und dennoch ist von Gott zu reden. Festschrift für H. Vorgrimler*, ed. M. Lutz-Bachmann (Freiburg, 1994), 304–310.

[8]W. Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (Mainz, 1982), 244. See also W. Pannenberg, "Die christliche Legitimität der Neuzeit," in id., *Gottesgedanke und menschliche Freiheit* (Göttingen, 1972), 120.

[9]Metz, "Plädoyer," 135. Metz is probably echoing Rahner's oft-voiced suspicion that Christian trinitarian theology lapses into a latent tritheism when it interprets language about the three Persons in terms of three self-conscious centers of action. Nevertheless, the distinction between biblical monotheism and the theological doctrine of the Trinity that Metz proposes in this passage would

atic to play off the trinitarian explanation of the Cross against biblical monotheism. Nevertheless, we have to admit that a good many theologies of the Trinity that speak of "suffering between God and God" give the impression at first glance of sacrificing the Jewish inheritance of monotheism, which is a *sine qua non* also for Christian theology, in order to speak tritheistically of three divine subjects. But the real objects of Metz's reservations about the idea of suffering in God are these: 1) a "reconciliation with God behind the history of human suffering that comes close to Gnosticism"; 2) a speculative "sublation" of the history of human suffering in the concept of God; 3) a violation of the "negative mystery of human suffering, which refuses any name for itself"; and 4) an ignoring of the classical doctrine of analogy, whose insistence on the "greater unlikeness" between God and the world enabled it to obviate the danger of projection.[10]

According to Metz, Christology does not legitimate talk of a suffering God, either. "The poor man Jesus of Nazareth's consciousness of being the Son of his eternal Father" cannot be understood in the same sense as "affirmations about an eternal Son begotten within God himself."[11]

These reservations about talk of a suffering God among theologians are substantial. They presume that the essays of a trinitarian theology of the Cross currently proposed, for example, by Eberhard Jüngel, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Jürgen Moltmann only inadequately secure the mediation between a soteriology anchored in the Trinity and the concrete history of suffering. What motivates Metz's rejection of the idea of a "pathic" God here is not only respect for the unjust suffering of the victims. Also in the background is the soteriological poverty of an impotent suffering God who is unable to guarantee the eschatological redemption of the dead. In any case, it is

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have astonished Rahner. It suggests an antithesis that would hold water only if the trinitarian faith were incompatible with the idea of the *one* God and ought to be rejected as a heterodox *mytholegoumenon*. By contrast, Christian belief in the Trinity is anything but a heretical aberration from biblical monotheism. It is, rather, its radicalization, as Rahner himself argues. Cf. K. Rahner, "Einzigkeit und Dreifaltigkeit Gottes im Gespräch mit dem Islam," in id., *Schriften zur Theologie* XIII (1978), 129–143.

[10]All citations are from J. B. Metz, "Theodizee-empfindlich Gottesrede," in *Landschaft aus Schreien. Zur Dramatik der Theodizeefrage*, ed. J. B. Metz (Mainz, 1995), 94f.

[11]Ibid., 96.

striking that Metz's queries show a certain proximity to the classical *apatheia* axiom.[12] The axiom had insisted on God's inability to be affected and to suffer, in order to express God's transcendence and freedom with respect to history. But it had also left open the question of how to think of the Son of God's suffering and death on the Cross together with God's inability to suffer in principle. It is this problem on which the proposals of Jüngel, Moltmann, and Balthasar, which Metz critiques, focus, albeit each in a different way.[13] They all attempt to ascertain how God's eternal life must be conceived *in itself* if he has engaged himself *for us* in the death of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Does God remain in *apatheia*, as philosophical doctrines of God have always understood him to do, even in the face of the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth? Or must we not affirm that, in some way, God is also affected, lest we empty the Cross of its theological significance?

The discussion about whether or not God can suffer explains the background of Metz's questions. In continuing the discussion, we can adopt his concern to keep God free of history's suffering in order to avoid overtheologizing the latter as a criterion for adequate theologizing. In other words: a trinitarian theology of "suffering in God" can be legitimate only if it does justice to the aspect of truth present in the *apatheia* axiom, on the one hand, while refusing to theologize past the dignity of the afflicted and the voiceless, on the other. We must therefore verify whether Balthasar's theology of the Cross, which will serve us as an example here since "one can ignore his rich work only at the price of theological impoverishment,"[14] treats God in such a way that he becomes entangled in history and his suffering merely doubles the suffering of history, or whether Balthasar's account of God's suffering introduces nuances that prevent just such an entanglement of God in history.

2. The Cross as the revelation of the utmost: On Hans Urs von Balthasar's theo-dramatic approach

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[12]Cf. H. Frohnhofen, *APATHEIA TOU THEOU. Über die Affektlosigkeit Gottes in der griechischen Antike und bei den griechsprachigen Kirchenvätern bis zu Gregorios Thaumaturgos* (Frankfurt, 1987).

[13]See on this point J. H. Tück, *Christologie und Theodizee bei Johann Baptist Metz*, 2nd ed. (Paderborn, 2001), 176–200.

[14]T. Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschehen. Eine Skizze zur Soteriologie*, 3rd ed. (Munich, 1991), 15.

Balthasar's consideration of God's relation to suffering is underwritten primarily by his theology of the Cross. In the *Theo-Drama*,[15] Balthasar asks whether a God of love (cf 1 Jn 4:8, 16) can remain in untroubled *apatheia* before the immense spectacle of the world's sin, or whether—if we take into account Jesus' Passion—we must not say that he is somehow affected by it. Having surveyed biblical and patristic affirmations that either attribute affections such as repentance, grief, and anger to God,[16] or else attempt to mediate this attribution with the Hellenistic intellectual horizon, and having critically assessed theological proposals on the topic of the past and the present, Balthasar arrives at the conclusion that a certain capacity to be affected must indeed be predicated of God. Nevertheless, he immediately introduces nuances in order to protect talk of God's *pathos* from misunderstanding. *Pathos in the sense of what happens to one involuntarily or of sin can and must not be predicated of God*. Balthasar, in accord with the Fathers, sees in this prohibition the permanent significance of the *apatheia* axiom. On the other hand, Balthasar regards the theological reception of this axiom as standing in need of supplementation. It remains unsatisfactory so long as it leaves the*apatheia* of the Father (and of the Spirit) juxtaposed to the suffering of the Son of God.[17]

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[15]The following presentation refers above all to Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik III: Die Handlung* (Einsiedeln, 1980) (henceforth *TD* III) [for an English translation, see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4: *The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994)]; *Theodramatik IV: Das Endspiel* (Einsiedeln, 1983) (henceforth *TD* IV) [English translation, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5: *The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998)]; *Theologie der drei Tage* (Einsiedeln-Freiburg, 1990). For a masterful account of Balthasar's position, see T. R. Krenski, *Passio Caritatis. Trinitarische Passiologie im Werk Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Einsiedeln, 1992).

[16]According to Balthasar (*TD* IV, 192ff), it is wrong to dismiss the idea that God can be touched by what is other than himself as contrary to Revelation. The fact of the matter is that Scripture contains manifold evidence to the effect that God allows himself to be affected by what men do (see, for example, Gn 6:6: God's repentance for having created man; Is 63:3: God's grief over Israel's infidelity; other passages cited by Balthasar include Ps 78:41; Is 7:13; Jer 31:20; Hos 4:6f, etc). Rabbinic theology pushes the idea of God's susceptibility to be affected to the point of impotence. See P. Kuhn, *Gottes Trauer in der rabbinischen Überlieferung* (Leiden, 1978). The fact that the New Testament attests that Jesus experienced affections such as anger (the cleansing of the Temple), sadness (his tears over Jerusalem), mercy (to the adulteress), and so forth, gives Balthasar an occasion to ponder the humanity of God.

[17]The Fathers themselves clearly saw this problem. Contrarily to today's

The sort of passiology Balthasar develops thus seeks to avoid reducing suffering to the economic side of God. But how is it possible to say that the Father (and the Spirit) are somehow affected by the Passion of Jesus Christ without falling back into a heterodox patripassianism or entangling God in the history of the anti-divine contradiction that rises up in rebellion against him? We can answer this question only if we get clearer about the relationship between the economic and the immanent Trinity in Balthasar's passiology. Drawing on Thomas Krenski, we will illustrate this relationship by contrasting Balthasar's approach with two alternative models.[18]

Karl Rahner's fundamental axiom of trinitarian theology, which holds that the economic Trinity is the immanent, and vice versa,[19] plays an important role in this context. All the attempted solutions that we will present—and we can do so only briefly and schematically—refer to it, but differ in their interpretation of it. The first model interprets the identity between the economic and the immanent Trinity in the sense of a *tautology*. The claim that the *Logos* himself suffers and dies in the suffering and death of the man Jesus of

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widespread opinion that the Fathers uncritically applied the *apatheia* axiom to the Christian doctrine of God, Balthasar shows, in a masterful conspectus, that patristic discussions of "God and suffering" were governed by a double intention. On the one hand, the Fathers used the *apatheia* axiom in order to ward off the mythological representation of gods who suffered or were even full of human passions. On the other hand, they were also concerned to do justice to the affirmations of the Bible, and they developed methods for connecting the sovereignty of the Father with the Passion of the Son. The well-known adage that God suffers impassibly is an expression of this effort (see, for example, Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* III, 16, 6: *impassibilis passibilis factus* [the impassible became passible]). Origen goes beyond this formula and submits the *apatheia* axiom to a theological critique when, in order to set forth the motive for the Incarnation, he shifts the locus of the *passio* of compassion to the eternal Son himself: *primum passus est, deinde descendit* [first he suffered, then he came down]. Nevertheless, Origen places the Son's *passio* squarely within the context of a greater *actio* and defines this *passio* as a *passio caritatis* (see *TD* IV, 199). Insofar as the Father takes part in this council of love, Origen can say of him *ipse pater non est impassibilis* [the Father himself is not impassible].

[18]See Krenski, *Passio Caritatis*, 343–370.

[19]See K. Rahner, "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendentaler Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte," in *Mysterium Salutis. Grundriß heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, ed. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer, vol. 2 (Einsiedeln, 1967), 317–401; 328. On Rahner see B. J. Hilberath, *Der Personbegriff der Trinitätstheologie in Rückfrage von Karl Rahner zu Tertullians "Adversus Praxeam"* (Innsbruck, 1986), 30–40; 45–54.

Nazareth, the claim, in other words, that there is an *identity* of idioms between Christ's human and divine natures, dissolves the immanent Trinity into the economic and is incapable of preserving God's freedom and transcendence with respect to the world. Hegel's teaching that God's poor, abstract being *had* to be turned inside out to its other and pass through the pain, death, and negativity of history in order to achieve concrete, determinate being is a sort of star witness for this interpretation. Such an approach does not merely import a problematic development into God.[20] It also predicates suffering of God in a direct, *univocal* way that suggests a need for redemption in God himself. Among the systematic proposals currently on offer, Moltmann's idea of "theopathy" shows a certain proximity to Hegel,[21] when, on the one hand, he says that love between equals is in some sense unfulfilled if it does not creatively transcend itself through self-communication to the unequal,[22] but, on the other hand, seems to interpret real history as the event of the constitution of the divine Trinity itself.[23]

A diametrically opposite interpretation of Rahner's fundamental axiom forms the basis of the equivocation model, which is unable to make clear the *correspondence* between God's historical action and his inner being, inasmuch as it asserts a difference in principle between the immanent and the economic Trinity. Reservations about a univocal transposition of Jesus' suffering onto God lead proponents of this

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[20]See P. Koslowski, *Gnosis und Theodizee. Eine Studie über den leidenden Gott im Gnostizismus* (Vienna, 1993), 103f: "Philosophical discussions of God's suffering in German Idealism apply to God's personality the conditions of man's learning through suffering, his process of personalization."

[21]See J. Moltmann, "Also bound up with the redemption of man and the world to freedom and community, then, is always a process of the redemption of God from the sufferings of his love" (*Trinität und Reich Gottes* [Munich, 1980], 75). But if the trinitarian process of history becomes coextensive with the history of the world, then the fulfillment of God is achieved only with the fulfillment of the world. If so, then the danger of a "re-mythologization" of God can hardly be avoided. On this subject, see R. Faber, *Selbsteinsatz Gottes. Grundlegung einer Theologie des Leidens und der Veränderlichkeit* (Würzburg, 1995), 338f; similarly, *TD* III, 300.

[22]See Moltmann's remark about God: "the equal is not enough for the equal" (*Trinität und Reich Gottes*, 76).

[23]For a critique of Moltmann, see W. Kasper, "Revolution in Gottesverständnis?" in *Diskussion über Jürgen Moltmanns Buch "Der gekreuzigte Gott,"* ed. M. Welker (Munich, 1979), 140–148; Pröpper, *Erlösungsgnade und Freiheitsgeschehen*, 160–164; *TD* III, 299f; *TD* IV, 202ff.

model to an irreconcilable tension: on the one hand, they admit suffering in the case of the "man" Jesus; on the other hand, they keep God at a safe distance from any contact with it. As a result, there is a risk of rendering impossible any intelligible account of the Cross as the revelation of God's love. A one-sided emphasis on Christ's human and divine natures, which, although united, remain "unmixed," leaves in place an unmediated juxtaposition between the humanity, which is liable to suffering, and the divinity, which is incapable of it—as if it were not also necessary to take account of the Chalcedonian "undivided." Although Rahner's *Grundaxiom* speaks of an identity between the economic and the immanent Trinity, he shows "no appreciation of the fact that God must be affected in himself, and in his divine dimension, in order truly to redeem us."[24] The idea of God's pain, if it is still even thought to be admissible, is applicable only to the economic dimension. With respect to God himself, his immanent being, it remains off-limits.

The *univocal* model of God's suffering is able to exhibit clearly the connection between God's essence and his action—but at the price of losing God into the world. The *equivocal* model, on the other hand, makes much of God's sovereignty over history, but is not able to show the plausibility of God's real involvement—to the point of taking our godlessness upon himself in substitution. In the end, it remains unexplained how God himself can be involved in what happens at Golgotha. To do justice to the legitimate concerns of both positions, while at the same time overcoming their deficiencies: such is the aim Balthasar pursues with his *analogical* model of divine suffering.

The distinctive characteristic of analogical discourse is that it affirms a likeness (*similitudo*), but, at the same time, notes an even greater unlikeness (*dissimilitudo*).[25] This fundamental principle of

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[24]K. Rahner, *Die Gabe der Weihnacht* (Freiburg, 1980), 29–33; here, 32. See, id., "Jesus Christus—Sinn des Lebens," in id., *Schriften zur Theologie* XV (1983), 206–216; esp. 209–213, where Rahner insists on the unmixed difference of the two natures, and takes his distance from so-called "Neo-Chalcedoniansim." It is worth noting that, just a few years earlier, Rahner had emphasized other aspects: "When it is said that the incarnate Logos died 'only' in his *human* nature, tacitly assuming that this death does not touch God, then only half the truth is said, and the specifically Christian truth is left out of account" ("Jesus Christus," in *Sacramentum mundi* II [1968], 920–957; here, 951).

[25]See the familiar formula of Lateran IV: "*inter creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda*" (however great a

analogical language guides Balthasar's attempt to determine the relationship between immanent and economic Trinity. In other words, he attempts to speak *simultaneously* of a mutual immanence and of a distinction between the two. His theological enterprise revolves around the question of the possibility of working back from the *self*-revelation of God, concentrated in the hour of the Cross, to his intra-divine being. Balthasar is not interested in idle speculation about God's inner life, as Metz and others charge. Nor is he indiscriminately projecting the human experience of suffering onto God. Rather, he is seeking to lay an immanent, theological foundation for God's action in the economy of salvation. If God *can* expose himself in the person and history of Christ to the suffering of this world, inclusive of death on the Cross, without losing his divinity; if he *can* take on himself the godlessness of all men in the substititionary act of his Son, without contradicting his own being, then there must be something like a foundation for this saving action *in himself*.

For Balthasar, the fact that the eternal Logos could renounce his divinity and empty himself (cf. Phil 2:6–11) is anchored in an intra-trinitarian "ur-kenosis" in God himself.[26] The uttermost surrender that becomes visible *historically* on the Cross corresponds to something within God's being itself, which, as love, is uttermost surrender *from all eternity*.[27] Balthasar's discussion of "ur-kenosis," which he develops drawing on Bulgakov,[28] indicates first of all the Father's unreserved giving himself away to the Son in the act of begetting. The Son owes his existence to this paternal self-gift, and he gives himself back to the Father in gratitude, so that the Father, for his part, owes his paternity to the Son's consent to be begotten. The Spirit, in whom Father and Son give themselves to each other, can be understood as the eternal event of this reciprocal self-donation.

Now, according to Balthasar, the Father's self-emptying in the act of begetting—which is not to be understood in a temporal sense—brings about an absolute, infinite

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likeness can be noted between Creator and creature, there remains a greater unlikeness to be noted between them) (*DH*, 806).

[26]*TD* III, 300; *TD* IV, 74, *Theologie der drei Tage*, 27–41; 85–87.

[27]See on this point H. Schürmann, *Jesu ureigener Tod* (Freiburg, 1975), 146f.

[28]See S. N. Bulgakov, *Du Verbe incarné (Agnus Dei)* (Paris, 1943).

> distance, within which all other possible differences that can emerge in the finite world—up to and including sin—are enclasped and embraced. In the Father's love, there is an absolute renunciation of being God by himself, a letting-go of divinity, and, in this sense, a (divine) God-lessness (of love, to be sure). One must not confuse it with the world's godlessness, and yet it does establish the latter's possibility (by overtaking it).[29]

The divine Persons' refusal to cling to themselves is the enabling ground, not only of the creation, but also of the Son's historical kenosis. He can leave his divinity in deposit with the Father and in his mission, which includes the uttermost, can take the world's sin upon himself and reconcile lost mankind with God.[30]

By affirming a likeness between the *historical* kenosis of the Son and the *eternal* event of kenosis in God himself, Balthasar attempts to overcome the deficit of the equivocal model, which is able to speak about God's suffering only in the context of his economic action. At the same time, Balthasar preserves God's freedom with respect to the world, inasmuch as he traces God's action in the economy of salvation back to a *free self-determination* in God. The mission of the Son, culminating in the Passion, can thus be described more specifically as a *passio activa*. Only the qualification of a greater unlikeness marking the difference between the *eternal* kenotic event in God and the *temporal* kenosis of the Son enables us to do justice to the legitimate concern of negative theology, which warns us against applying anthropomorphic conceptions to God.[31] Nevertheless, analogical talk about God has to be distinguished from radical negative theology, which makes indefiniteness the ultimate definition of God, and, therefore, can no longer do justice to God's *self*-definition as love.

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[29]*TD* III, 300f.

[30]In a masterful essay on Balthasar's theology of the Trinity, J. Werbick has wondered whether Balthasar's talk of a "kenotic dramatics" in God might not go too far and has suggested replacing it with the idea of self-communication in love (*communio*). Be that as it may, it seems to me that the concept of love ought to include semantically the idea of self-emptying.

[31]That having been said, we would do well to remember that Kierkegaard said that "people struggle so zealously against anthropomorphisms without realizing that Christ's birth is the greatest and most significant of them all" (*Gesammelte Werke. Die Tagebücher*, I [Düsseldorf—Cologne, 1962], 140).

While emphasizing the inadequacy of human language, analogy nonetheless firmly maintains the real identity between God's economic action and his immanent being. It does this without advocating any *tautological* identity that univocally writes suffering into the concept of God and is unable to conceive any freedom for God vis-à-vis the world:

> If we ask . . . whether there is suffering in God, the answer is this: in God is the initial premise for what can become suffering when the imprudence with which the Father gives himself (and *all* he has) away . . . collides with a freedom that does not answer this imprudence, but transforms it into the prudence of wanting to start with oneself.[32]

The model of the *analogia exinanitionis* enables us to affirm that God is in some sense affected by the world's suffering, but it does not oblige us to entangle him in the world's destiny, à la tragedy or process theology. God's compassion can be defined as a *passio caritatis*, if we presuppose that the *caritas Dei* can be correctly understood only as an eternal event of self-donation.

But why is it so important for Balthasar to speak about suffering in God—even qualified by analogy? Isn't Balthasar really attempting after all to universalize suffering as away of skating over the hardness of real suffering theo-dramatically?

The first point to recall is that Balthasar conceives his passiology entirely in light of God's theo-dramatic self-engagement in the Cross of Jesus Christ. At the same time, he interprets Christ's suffering less in the sense of a *solidary coexistence* with the oppressed and downtrodden of human history than in that of a *substitutionary pro-existence* of the Crucified on behalf of all. For Balthasar, the hermeneutical horizon for the event of Golgotha is the model of expiatory suffering pre-figured in the fourth song of the Suffering Servant (Is 53).[33] Balthasar is thus consistent when he does not place

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[32]*TD* III, 305.

[33]Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Über Stellvertretung," in id., *Pneuma und Institution. Skizzen zur Theologie IV* (Einsiedeln, 1974), 401–409 [for an English translation, see "On Vicarious Representation," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4: *Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995)]. There Balthasar also brings the theological concept of substitution together with the modern understanding of the moral unsubstitutability of the person.

the singularity of Jesus Christ on the level of bodily or physical torture. The decisive point for Balthasar is that Jesus, having lived and acted in unreserved, unbroken closeness to the Father, takes death in uttermost godforsakenness upon himself, and does so for soteriological reasons: *pro nobis*.[34] Jesus' suffering is "not only the deepest possible . . . but it can also expiate for all, because it has the power to *get beneath* all the world's sins, but also all its suffering, and to transform it into a work of supreme love."[35] The particular event of the Cross has universal significance. It embraces the entire history of man's suffering and sin.

This inclusive interpretation of the Cross raises a problem, however. Can those who understand, or have understood, their suffering in a different way be expected to accept it? Or is it not a sort of posthumous co-opting of the victims? Balthasar is keenly aware from beginning to end that he is touching here on the *limits* of what man can say. Nevertheless, he believes that he is warranted in observing that, "Christ has overtaken every human suffering in his Passion. He has done so in substitution. Consequently, no human suffering, however abominable and perverse, can go further than his, but must be included in it."[36] In saying this, Balthasar implies that, in the end, all of the facts of man's history of unsaved lostness and suffering are related to the saving historical fact of Golgotha, which Balthasar interprets as the *peripeteia* of the drama between God and man's history of freedom—and which Balthasar sees as an eminently meaningful event. At the end of the fifth volume of the *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar boldly ventures the idea that the event of the Cross allows us to glimpse something like a meaning even for man's history of suffering:

> And if it is true that the suffering of the Crucified can transform the world's suffering—which is a riddle to itself—into co-redemptive suffering, then the most incomprehensible, the most gruesome tortures, prisons, concentra-

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[34]"Jesus places the point of his life, not in the removal of suffering, but in descent into suffering's uttermost bottom: he drinks the 'chalice' to the dregs, and he does so explicitly 'for us.' Not so that we would no longer have to suffer, but so that our suffering, otherwise deprived of ultimate meaning, would receive a supreme meaning in him: assistance in the task of expiating for the world's sin" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Gott und das Leid* [Freiburg, 1984], 10).

[35]Ibid., 8.

[36]Ibid., 9.

> tion camps, and instruments of horror of whatever sort can be placed in a great proximity to the Cross: to its perfect night, in which there remains room only for the cry of an unfathomable "why."[37]

3. Preliminary assessment of an unsettled controversy

After this brief survey of Balthasar's trinitarian theology of the Cross, we must now return to Metz's queries and draw up a preliminary balance sheet:

The first thing we can affirm is that Balthasar's account of God's suffering in the horizon of the *Theo-Drama* is based on God's free self-communication. If, however, God himself has eternally determined to let himself be determined by man's freedom, then his "suffering" is neither the tragic result of an involuntary accident from the outside nor of an inner conflict in God's being. Balthasar also expressly rejects Hegel's idea that God must pass through the pain and negativity of history in order to come to himself and that suffering is a necessary moment in the process of self-becoming. He shares Metz's reservations about Hegel's philosophy of history, which Hegel explicitly understands as a theodicy,[38] and does not easily escape the suspicion of a

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[37]*TD* IV, 458. See also the following passage: "how could the unspeakably horrible history of mankind—one long trail of blood and tears—mean anything on a 'higher plane' unless all of its victims, who don't understand themselves, were included in an ultimate, conscious, alone-comprehending sacrifice to God—not as a perverse tyrant, but as the one who in himself is self-donation beyond all imaginable forms of imprudence and reveals himself as such at the apex of the world" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilog* [Einsiedeln—Trier: 1987], 80f). And: "Another point that remains impossible for us to ascertain is how much of humanity's immense suffering—the countless Auschwitzes and Gulag Archipelagoes—is directly connected with the Lord's expiatory suffering. If that suffering were not in the background, it would be hard to understand how God could bear the sight of it" (id., *Kennt uns Jesus—Kennen wir ihn?* 3rd ed. [Freiburg, 1995], 4–50; here, 47 [for an English translation, see *Does Jesus Know Us? Do We Know Him*? (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983]).

[38]See G. F. W. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Philosophie der Geschichte* (Frankfurt, 1986), 28: "Our consideration is thus theodicy, a justification of God. . . . Its purpose is the comprehension of the evil in the world, the reconciliation of the thinking spirit with evil. In fact, there is no greater challenge to such reconciling knowledge than world history. This reconciliation can be achieved only through

subterra-nean cynicism. In order for there to be "progress in the consciousness of freedom," we have to calculate "the individual's suffering of injustice" into the equation. "But that does not concern world history in the least. Individuals serve merely as means of its progress."[39]

In contrast to a univocal application of the experience of suffering to God, Balthasar expressly underscores the *analogous* character of a theology of divine suffering. By emphasizing that, along with every likeness, there is a greater unlikeness, Balthasar does justice to the concern of *negative theology*, which aims to protect the mystery of God's incomprehensibility from the clutches of thought. That having been said, it makes a great deal of difference whether one conceives the divine as a transcendental principle that is ultimately incomprehensible and, therefore, ineffable, or whether one understands God in the horizon of Christian faith as the One who has communicated himself in an unfathomable way. In the first case, conceptual thought rebounds off of the incomprehensible. In the second, language is inadequate to express God's self-emptying love. Neo-platonic negative theology and its Christian counterpart must therefore be distinguished. "At the end of negative philosophical theology is 'silence,' because the arrows of concepts and words fall to the ground before hitting the mark. At the end of Christian theology is another silence. The silence of adoration, which is also left speechless—by the immensity of the gift."[40]

That having been said, we must respond to Metz's critical query—does not the trinitarian theology of the Cross, when it speaks of God's suffering, prematurely put to rest the provocative potential of the theodicy question?—in a differentiated manner. First off, we must note yet another point of commonality: like Metz, Balthasar decidedly rejects a *philosophical* solution to the problem of theodicy, even as he accentuates God's unconditional self-engagement in Jesus Christ:

> The suffering of this world is terrifying. . . . *Every theodicy* fails. It seems naive in the face of the fearsome reality of

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the knowledge of the affirmative in which evil, subordinate and overcome, disappears."

[39]For a critical assessment of this, see E. Jüngel, "'Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht' aus theologischer Perspektive," in id., *Ganz werden. Theologische Eröterungen* V (Tübingen, 2003), 323–344; here, 334.

[40]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik* II (Einsiedeln, 1985), 98.

> existence. And the more sensitive mankind becomes to the suffering of the humiliated and offended, the less convincing God's defenders are. There might be, at best, one solution: that God himself should take up his own defense. And that is what he in fact did when he showed his wounds after the Resurrection. These wounds don't just contain a bit of pain that a victim of crucifixion—one among hundreds of thousands of others—had to endure for three hours. No, they contain the sin of the whole world. It was our sin and our infirmities that he bore, because God made him to be sin for us, because he gave his life as a sin offering for all.[41]

Metz seems unable to acknowledge this idea of a substitutionary assumption of the world's sin. He speculates that, in general, suffering is nothing great or sublime:

> In its roots, it is anything but a powerful suffering-with in solidarity. It is not simply a sign of love, but, much more, a frightening token that the ability to love has been lost. It is the suffering that leads to nothing unless it is not a suffering *caused by* [*an*] God.[42]

In Jesus' Passion—and here we can agree unreservedly with Metz—there is a suffering *because of* [*an*] God. The incommensurability of this suffering has rarely been described so forcefully as in the following sentences:

> No one has ever dared . . . to look squarely at the fact that the Logos in whom everything in heaven and on earth is recapitulated and has its truth, himself enters into a darkness, anguish, and desolation of sense and understanding, where his relation to the Father, which sustains all truth, slips away into absence and, therefore, into a hiddenness that is utterly opposed to the disclosure of being in truth. If all this is true, then we should understand Jesus' silence in the Passion as the way in which the Word of God is struck dumb and no longer speaks or answers. . . . The Father has withdrawn. .

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[41]Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Der Mensch und das ewige Leben," in *IKaZ* 20 (1991): 3–19; 7f.

[42]Metz, "Plädoyer," 135; id., "Karl Rahners Ringen um die theologische Ehre des Menschen," in *StdZ* 212 (1994): 383–392; 392; id., *Theodizee-empfindliche Gottesrede,* 96.

> . . The end of the matter is the powerful cry. This cry is the word that is no longer a word, which, therefore, can no longer be understood and explained as a word. It is the immensity that remains when the sound of everything tempered, measured, and fit for human ears has died away. In truth, what now breaks forth naked in this cry should be heard along with every clothed word.[43]

At the same time, however—and we need to insist on this over against Metz—the Passion is also a suffering *for* men. To adduce the dying Jesus' cry of abandonment as legitimation for a theology of complaint without underscoring the saving and redeeming power of the Cross is to diminish the theology of the Cross. Indeed, it is to miss its point entirely.[44] But by dispensing with a soteriological interpretation of Jesus' death, Metz's theology of complaint, while sensitive to theodicy, confirms the suspicion that it purchases this sensitivity at the price of a certain forgetfulness of Christology.

At the same time, it remains a pressing question whether Balthasar's idea that the Trinity somehow "undergirds" creation and history does not, after all, amount to a problematic sublation of

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[43]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Das Ganze im Fragment. Aspekte der Geschichtstheologie*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln, 1990), 302f.

[44]See J. Reikerstorfer, "Über die 'Klage' in der Christologie," in *JBTh* 16 (2001): 269–287. Reikerstorfer exhorts the reader to "compassion" for the other who is threatened and appeals to Jesus' "divine Passion" as grounds for a "God-talk that is more sensitive to theodicy." Reikerstorfer places his exhortation to anamnetic solidarity with others in their suffering in the horizon of a Christology that focuses on following Jesus along his way. The obvious limitation of this Christology is that it is characterized by a curious *amnesia* with respect to the saving and redeeming power of the Cross. Reikerstorfer's omission of any soteriological reflection leads him to a sharp rejection of any *attempt* to think through the question of *hope* for the reconciliation of all on the basis of the universalistic statements of the New Testament (cf. Rom 12:32; 1 Cor 10:33; Phil 2:11; Tim 2:4–6; 4:1–10; Tit 2:11; Heb 9:28; 2 Pt 3:9; Jn 12:32). According to Reikerstorfer, this attempt amounts to so much "speculation designed to save the universal salvific act of God in Jesus Christ." How Reikerstorfer for his part thinks he can do justice to Paul's theology of the Cross, which articulates the idea of substitutionary expiation—relying on an already formed tradition—and is by no means a mere overlay of later ecclesial interpretation (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–5; Rom 4:25 and elsewhere), remains unresolved. On this topic, see K.-H. Menke, *Stellvertretung. Schlüsselbegriff christlichen Lebens und theologische Grundkategorie*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln, 1997).

suffering in the concept of God. If this were the case, the systematic center of the theo-drama, the confrontation between divine and human freedom, would be critically impaired. The drama of history would be over before it began if suffering (otherwise incomprehensible) and the contradiction of sin were *always already* included in God. Some of Balthasar's formulations appear to confirm the suspicion of a theological devaluation of history and have provoked criticism accordingly.[45] On the other hand, we need to keep in mind what function the incriminated statements have in Balthasar's work. They attempt to avoid the disastrous notion that history slips away from God's control and that he is dragged into it, either tragically or as the outworking of some process theology. But how can God, the "author" of the theo-drama, take upon himself responsibility for the success of creation? As it stands, the actual history of human freedom is marked by the refusal of the "actors" to take over the role that God has assigned them. In view of this situation an urgent question arises: can God's intention for creation fail? True, we can imagine that a creature, stubbornly insisting on its own autonomy, would permanently close itself to God's offer of reconciliation. But does this mean that creation necessarily ends in a fiasco, or has God reckoned with the possibility of the creatures' refusal from the outset? It is just here that the seemingly scandalous idea that the Trinity undergirds creation and history has its systematic locus. It is a way of insisting on the fact that God ventured to create only in view of the Cross, while the Cross itself is anchored in the kenotic self-donation of God himself. The idea of a trinitarian undergirding reflects the systematic concern of the *Theo-Drama*, however, only insofar as it does not end up with an undramatic sublation of the history of freedom, but attempts to show that God ventured, and could venture, the "terrifying risk"[46] of creating only in view of the *ever-greater possibilities of his love*.[47]

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[45]See H. Vorgrimler, *Theologische Gotteslehre* (Düsseldorf, 1985), 174; E. Biser, *Die glaubensgeschichtliche Wende. Eine Positionsbestimmung* (Graz—Vienna—Cologne, 1986), 236. See also the statement of the problem in M. Greiner, *Drama der Freiheiten. Eine Denkformanalyse zu Hans Urs von Balthasars trinitarischer Soteriologie* (Münster, 2000), 6–10, who undertakes to prolong Balthasar's theo-dramatic concern using the modern principle of freedom.

[46]*TD* II/1: *Der Mensch in Gott* (Einsiedeln, 1976), 304 [for an English translation, see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3: *Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990)].

[47]Cf. *TD* IV, 465. Balthasar himself suggests that God could venture upon

4. A complaint that forgets Christ? Against a false alternative

Does grateful acknowledgment that, in Jesus Christ, God has taken human suffering upon himself and has exposed himself on the Cross to the contradiction of sin amount to a definitive answer to the theodicy-question? And is a theology of complaint and accusation automatically a sign of an ungrateful forgetfulness or, indeed, of a betrayal? In order to avoid false alternatives in this tricky question, we must look at things from the perspective of faith and say right at the outset that "God's total engagement"[48] at Golgotha has indeed given a first and fundamental answer to suffering. We thus recognize that God has not kept himself distant from the hopelessly broken history of human freedom, but, in the Passion of Jesus Christ, has entered the *interior* situation of the sinner and identified himself with the suffering. That having been said, grateful acknowledgment of this fact does not prevent questioning God, but gives another sort of freedom for it: why is it that, even *post Christum natum*, history continues on with so much suffering? Why does the wreckage of history continue to pile up with no end in sight? Why does God's power to overcome sin and death wait so long to bring history to fulfillment? "Even God's *uttermost* involvement with men, which Christians recognize in the activity, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, does not resolve the theodicy-question, but poses it all the more sharply."[49] For "in Christ's redemptive act, God conquered, expiated, and removed sin—why not suffering as well? Suffering seems to make even less sense in a redeemed world than it would in a purely natural one."[50]

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creating only "to the extent that he threw himself into the venture and, by his own power, opened a way through the risk. . . . This is impossible except by entering into [the Son's] lostness in impotence" (*Klarstellungen*, 4th ed. [Einsiedeln, 1978], 44 [English translation, *Elucidations* (London, 1975)]).

[48]*TD* III, 159.

[49]T. Pröpper, "Wegmarken zu einer Christologie nach Auschwitz," in J. Mannemann—J. B. Metz, *Christologie nach Auschwitz* (Münster, 1999), 136 (emphasis mine). See also T. Pröpper—M. Streit, "Theodizee," in *LThK* 9, 3rd ed. (2000), 1396ff, which says that the definition of God's being as "love" (1 Jn 4:16) "*sharpens* the perception of suffering. It encourages and sustains complaint before God, not suspends it."

[50]P. Henrici, "Das Leiden—eine Aufgabe," in *IKaZ* 17 (1988): 495–499; here, 497.

Given this background, we should avoid leveling any sweeping charge of forgetfulness of Christology against the theology of complaint. Jesus himself cried out to his Father in the uttermost forsakenness, and, if we are to believe the testimony of Scripture, this cry did not fade away unheard: it was, after all, borne by an unshakeable trust in the Father. This encourages Christians, precisely when they find themselves in distress [*Anfechtung*], to enter into the Crucified Jesus' attitude of confidence and to bring the questions that oppress them before God. Complaint makes dumb need eloquent. And yet, the act of complaining is governed by some affirmatives. Only insofar as one remembers God's saving deeds in history can one's experience of besetting misfortune and suffering in the present become an occasion for bringing one's questions before him. Complaint will end up in a refusal of doxology and in monological protest if it does not return again and again in gratitude to God's saving deeds in the past in order to keep hope from suffocating. Instead of confidently trusting that God finally maintains his fidelity to creation even in the face of his creatures' infidelity, certain voices in the contemporary theology of complaint ascribe to God a certain *guilt* for what goes wrong in the world or claim that he has a *dark side*.[51] With this—conscious or unconscious —jettisoning of the goodness of God, the conditions for a coherent theology of complaint fall to pieces. A God who was laden with guilt, who—in whatever way—was directly responsible for the evil [*Unheil*] and negativity of history, would be too unpredictable for suffering man to rely on. When man complains, he cannot be complaining to an almighty God who is embroiled in wicked machinations, whose countenance is distorted into a demonic mask, unless one were to expect—in a downright schizophrenic act—that a dark God who *refuses* to prevent evil should also be the one to remove it.[52] Conversely, however, man's complaint cannot be addressed to a

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[51]This is the tendency of W. Groß—K. J. Kuschel, *Ich schaffe Finsternis ud Unheil! Ist Gott verantworlich für das Übel?* (Mainz, 1992). On this point, see J.-H. Tück, *"Gelobt seiest du Niemand." Paul Celans Dichtung—eine theologische Provokation* (Frankfurt, 2000), 164–166.

[52]See D. E. Blumenthal, "Theodizee: Dissonanz zwischen Theorie und Praxis. Zwischen Annahme und Protest," *Concilium* 34 (1998): 83–95. As M. Striet rightly observes, acceptance of Blumenthal's theology would mean "agreeing to sell moral standards down river and inviting those who would believe to become schizo-phrenics" (*Offenbares Geheimnis. Zur Kritik des negativen Theologie* [Regensburg, 2003], 28).

kindly, but impotent God, either. It makes no sense to await salvation from a God who *cannot* prevent evil—in saying this, we identify the soteriological poverty of all theologies that deem it necessary to abandon the notion of omnipotence.

We can await the eschatological triumph of the good only from a God who is at once good and all-powerful. But hasn't God definitively shown—first in the history of his covenant with Israel, and then in the person and history of Jesus—that he *wills* the good? And hasn't he made it sufficiently clear that he also *can* do what he wills by raising Jesus, who died in torment on the Cross, from death to eternal life? God's self-revelation as love in the preaching, death, and Resurrection of Jesus gives us already now in clear outline a "self-justification" of God vis-à-vis suffering. Unfortunately, not a few variations on the theology of God's absence pass over it all too quickly. As T. Pröpper notes:

> In order to make love possible, God took upon himself the risk that men would turn their backs on him, refuse him, insist on being more than just men, and become inhuman towards one another. But to blame God for doing that is not only to revoke one's own freedom. Perhaps one can talk this way only because one has already averted one's gaze from the God who himself shoulders the bitter consequences of this risk and has paid the price of freedom: from Jesus, who belongs to him and whom these consequences killed. But before Jesus *we* become the questioned: are we ready to be responsible for our freedom and its price, and to consent to what God does—beyond the alternative between immature dependence and indignant revolt?[53]

—Translated by Adrian J. Walker.

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[53]T. Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschehen*, 179. This essay is gratefully dedicated to Thomas Pröpper (Münster), who has decidedly placed the theme of the unconditional decision of God's love for men at the center of his own theology.