3. The future in the memory of suffering

Christianity does not introduce God subsequently as a kind of 'stop-gap' into this conflict about the future; instead, it tries to keep alive the memory of the crucified Lord, this specific memoria passionis, as a dangerous memory of freedom in the social systems of our technological civilization. This assertion, which is central to any practical fundamental theology and which is to some extent implicit in all that is said in this book, must be developed and explained in far greater detail.

a. 'Memory' would seem to be a middle-class counterpart to hope, leading us deceptively away from the risks of the future. In what sense can it be practical and critical and even dangerously liberating?

There are some very different kinds of memories. There are those in which we just do not take the past seriously enough: memories in which the past becomes a paradise without danger, a refuge from our present disappointments—the memory of the 'good old days'. There are memories which bathe everything from the past in a soft, conciliatory light. 'Memory transfigures', we say, and at times we experience this in a rather drastic form, for example when old soldiers exchange war yarns at a regimental dinner. War as an inferno is obliterated from such memories: what seems to remain is only the adventure experienced long ago. Here the past is filtered through a harmless cliché: everything dangerous, oppressive and demanding has vanished from it: it seems deprived of all future. In this way, memory can easily become a 'false consciousness' of our past and an opiate for our present.

But there is another form of memory: there are dangerous memories, memories which make demands on us. There are memories in which earlier experiences break through to the centre-point of our lives and reveal new and dangerous insights for the present. They illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms
with, and show up the banality of our supposed 'realism'. They break through the canon of the prevailing structures of plausibility and have certain subversive features. Such memories are like dangerous and incalculable visitations from the past. They are memories that we have to take into account, memories, as it were, with a future content.  

It is not by chance that the destruction of memory is a typical measure of totalitarian rule. The enslavement of men begins when their memories of the past are taken away. All forms of colonialization are based on this principle. Every rebellion against suffering is fed by the subversive power of remembered suffering. The memory of suffering continues to resist the cynics of modern political power.

There is an obvious danger today that everything in our consciousness that is determined by memory, everything outside the calculations of our technico-pragmatic reason, will be equated with superstition and left to the private whim of the individual. But this does not necessarily mean that we are freer and more enlightened. We merely fall prey to the dominant illusions all the more easily and are deceived in another way. There are many examples. In this sense the remembrance of suffering contradicts the contemporary prophets of the disappearance of history. This memory prevents us from understanding history either as a mere background for an occasional festive interpretation of our existence, or merely as distant material for historical criticism. As the remembered history of suffering, history retains the form of 'dangerous tradition'. This subversive tradition resists any attempt to do away with it by means of a purely affirmative attitude to the past (as, for example, in hermeneutical theories) and by means of a wholly critical attitude to the past (as, for instance, in ideology criticism). The 'mediation' of the memory of suffering is always practical. It is never purely argumentative, but always narrative in form, in other words, it takes the form of dangerous and liberating stories.

b. Bearing in mind what I have said so far, it should be clear that this memory is a memory of suffering. In our social life, there is a kind of prohibition, a structure aimed at deluding, which either disturbs or completely blocks our vision of the original cognitive and practical function of suffering.

Modern scientific knowledge is marked by the model of a dominative knowledge of nature, and in this view man understands himself anthropologically above all as the subject exercising control over nature. Scientia et potentia in idem coincidunt: Bacon's proposition characterizes the modern conception of science as knowledge of control. Accordingly, in a society universally determined by this kind of scientific knowledge, other forms of human behaviour and knowledge (such as suffering, pain, mourning, joy, play and so on) enjoy only a functional and derived validity and are largely underestimated in their cognitive and critical meaning. Hence it is significant that there should be a kind of anti-knowledge ex memoria passionis forming in our society, in which the existing identification of 'praxis' with 'control of nature' is banished.

Our idea of history is also unilaterally affected by a screening out of the importance of suffering. We tend, consciously or unconsciously, to 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. In history, a kind of Darwinism in the sense of the principle of selection (Vae victis!) tends to prevail. Again it is of decisive importance that a kind of anti-history should develop out of the memory of suffering—an understanding of history in which the vanquished and destroyed alternatives would also be taken into account: an understanding of history ex memoria passionis as a history of the vanquished. I shall discuss this question in greater detail in another context.

c. Christian faith declares itself as the memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi. At the midpoint of this faith is a specific memoria passionis, on which is grounded the promise of future freedom for all. We remember the future of our freedom in the memory of his suffering—this is an eschatological statement that cannot be made more plausible through any subsequent accommodation, and cannot be generally verified. This statement remains controversial and controvertible: the power to scandalize is part of its communicable content. For the truth of the passion of Jesus and the history of human suffering as we remember it in the word 'God' is a truth whose recollection always painfully contradicts the expectations of the individual who tries to conceive it. The eschatological truth of the memoria passionis cannot be derived from our histori-
cal, social and psychological compulsions. This is what makes it a
liberating truth in the first place. But that also is at the root of its
nature and constitutionally alien to our cognitive systems.

What is required is theology as a form of hermeneutics of eschatol-
ological change that does justice to man, the object and time. This
theology has the task of mediating an eschatological concept of
change by means of a technologically rational form of change that
will to a very great extent determine the pattern not only of tech-
nical developments, but also of social mutation. An eschatological
criticism of the existing situation cannot make direct critical use of
the category of change, because the existing situation has, in the ra-
tional sense, become a situation that is constantly changing. The
new element in the eschatological kingdom of God has to be ex-
pressed with a justified and purposeful change in mind if it is not to
shoot past the real target, which is a reduction in the difference be-
tween an existing lack of humanity and a humanity that is really
possible. When it takes part in debate with the humanities, technol-
ogy and political science, theology must look for categories that
can be accepted as validly constituting a dialogue. Suffering on the
one hand and an essentially human way of life on the other would
be a suitable pair of categories. Their theological counterpart
would, of course, be Good Friday and Easter or the memoria pas-
sionis et resurrectionis.

This memory of the suffering and resurrection of Jesus reveals its
dynamic power in the question about the direction and aim of
change. It is not a complete leap into the eschatological existence
of the ‘new man’, but rather a reflection about concrete human suf-
ferring which is the point at which the proclamation of the new
and essentially human way of life that is announced in the resurrec-
tion of Jesus can begin. What emerges from the memory of suffering is
a knowledge of the future that does not point to an empty anticipa-
tion, but looks actively for more human ways of life in the light
of our experience of the new creation of man in Christ.

In this sense, the Christian memoria insists that the history of
human suffering is not merely part of the pre-history of freedom but
remains an inner aspect of the history of freedom. The imagination
of future freedom is nourished from the memory of suffering, and
freedom degenerates wherever those who suffer are treated more or

less as a cliché and degraded to a faceless mass. Hence the Chris-
tian memoria becomes a memory which shocks us out of ever
becoming prematurely reconciled to the facts and trends of our
technological society. It becomes a dangerous and liberating mem-
ory over against the controls and mechanisms of the dominant con-
sciousness and its abstract ideal of emancipation.

A society which suppresses these and similar dimensions in the
history of freedom, and in the understanding of freedom, pays the
price of an increasing loss of all visible freedom. It is incapable of
developing goals and priorities which prevent the creeping adapta-
tion of our freedom to a society that is becoming increasingly an-
ymous and more and more completely divorced from the subject.

I should like to make two explanatory additions to the foregoing
interpretation.

It might well be objected that in this approach Christian memory
is unilaterally reduced to the status of remembrance of suffering,
and that the memory of the resurrection of Jesus is put into the
background, if not altogether obscured. Obviously it is impossible
to make a simple distinction between the memoria passionis and
memoria resurrectionis. There is no understanding of the resurrec-
tion that does not have to be developed by way of and beyond the
memory of suffering. There is no understanding of the glory of re-
surrection that is free of the shadows and threats of the human his-
tory of suffering. A memoria resurrectionis that is not comprehen-
sible as memoria passionis would be mythology pure and simple.

But what of a memoria passionis which understands itself in faith
as memoria resurrectionis? What does it mean to make ‘resurrec-
tion’ accessible by way of the memory of suffering? Can such a
resurrection faith also be expressed in socially communicable sym-
ols which possess some critically liberating force for us? I believe
that such a resurrection faith is expressed in such a way that acts
‘contra-factual’ in making us free to bear in mind the sufferings
and hopes of the past and the challenge of the dead. It allows not
only a revolution that will change the things of tomorrow for future
generations, but a revolution that will decide anew the meaning of
our dead and their hopes. Resurrection mediated by way of the
memory of suffering means: The dead, those already vanquished
and forgotten, have a meaning which is as yet unrealized. The po...
potential meaning of our history does not depend only on the survivors, the successful and those who make it. Meaning is not a category that is only reserved for the conquerors!

This must be taken into account by a church and a theology where the 'memory of suffering' occupies a central position. Only then will they be able to prevent themselves degenerating to the level of a church or a theology of the victors, and therefore of political religion (in something like the Constantinian sense). On the other hand, faith in the resurrection of the dead has a wholly social and social-critical significance. It enables us to insist firmly on the memory of the suffering that has accumulated in history, in order thereby to determine our behaviour and our hopes.

Such an understanding of the unity of the memoria passionis and memoria resurrectionis is also opposed to the attempt to make the conventional distinction between a worldly history of suffering and a history of glory transcending this world, in fact between secular history and salvation-history in the usual sense of the words. Secular history and salvation-history are not two factors that can be equated by means of theological speculation, nor can they (nor ought they to) be merely paradoxically contrasted. Salvation-history is, instead, secular history in which a meaning is conceded to obscured and suppressed hopes and sufferings. Salvation-history is that secular history in which the vanquished and forgotten possibilities of human existence that we call 'death' are allowed a meaning which is not recalled or cancelled by the future course of history.

We must also determine more precisely what is actually understood as 'suffering' in this context. Which 'suffering', then, is intended in the memoria passionis? Is it not very dangerous to talk about 'suffering in general'? Does the 'memory of suffering' not lose then all its critical, and above all its social-critical and political force? Does that not mean that suffering is wholly privatized and internalized? Does everyone not suffer, in a certain sense, in this view? Does a rich playboy in his luxury bungalow not suffer? Where are the requisite differentiations, the bases of a critical awareness in the interest precisely of those who suffer and are oppressed unjustly? Does this not lead to the entry of political commitment into the boring, non-specific vagueness which is for the most part the today of the social and political countenance of the world Church? Surely everything tends then towards that kind of consolation that ultimately consoles no one, since it intends exactly the same consolation for all. In the light of the Christian memory of suffering, it is clear that social power and political domination are not simply to be taken for granted but that they 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. It cannot escape this reckoning by invoking the specific suffering of the rich and powerful. And this critical interrogation of domination and riches is part precisely of that consolation which the Gospel would bestow upon the rich and the rulers.

The memory of suffering in the Christian sense does not, therefore, merge with the darkness of social and political arbitrariness, but creates a social and political conscience in the interest of others' suffering. It prevents the privatization and internalization of suffering, and the reduction of its social and political dimension. In this memory of suffering, the history of suffering and the history of social oppression are not identical, but they are also not separable.