

A PROPHETIC CHURCH IN A MCDONALDIZED SOCIETY

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Abstract

Vatican II calls forth the “scrutinizing of the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.” In view of this call, this paper scrutinizes a social phenomenon called the McDonalidized society and asks the pressing question of what it means to be a prophetic church in this society. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part uses the work of the sociologist George Ritzer who analyzes this social phenomenon and its four dimensions of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. The second part critically reflects on how this phenomenon creates a human condition of numbness and inauthenticity and its deleterious effects on persons and communities. And the third part presents how the church can be prophetic church in this McDonalidized society. It draws from the concept of “dangerous memories” of Johann Baptist Metz and the concept of “prophetic pathos” of Walter Bruggemann as theological paradigms in understanding how the church as a prophetic church can confront this pervasive numbness and inauthenticity and offer an alternative way of being human. The significance of this paper is its concrete way of showing how the call of Vatican II can be concretely pursued by the church’s engagement with contemporary society with its prophetic vision and hope.

Keywords: ‘Dangerous Memories’, McDonalidization, Prophetic Church, ‘Prophetic Pathos’

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A central mission of the Post-Vatican II church is its commitment, "to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit" (*Gaudium et Spes* [GS], 3). This work is to be done without 'earthly ambition' (GS, 3) or a sense of judgement, but in the spirit of service to the human community (GS, 3). However, for this task to be accomplished, the church is keenly aware that it has 'the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel' (GS, 4). This paper takes up the question of how the church should respond to what sociologist George Ritzer calls the McDonaldization of society.

Ritzer has coined the term McDonaldization of society to describe one of the dominant trends in our contemporary society. He defines McDonaldization as "the process by which the principles of fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world."¹ This process has four central features which he labels as dimensions — efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Because his argument suggests that this process and its dimensions are now permeating all areas of our lives, we, as a church, must address this dynamic sign of the times.

While the McDonaldization of society may have brought positive outcomes and have made necessary contributions to the world, its very process has created a culture of numbness, shallowness, and disempowerment, which ultimately undermines the dignity of the human person. Because the church is always called to guard the human person, we must actively seek to resist the siren call of this process. The central question which I seek to address in this paper is: how should the church, as a prophetic church, deal with the ubiquitous process of McDonaldization and its deleterious effects on the human person? I argue that the church must apply the concept of "dangerous memories" as articulated by Johann Baptist Metz and the concept of "prophetic pathos" as expressed in the work of Walter Brueggemann, as a way to be in a prophetic opposition to the McDonaldization of society.

The paper is constructed in three sections. In the first section, I present a brief exposition of Ritzer's concept of the McDonaldization of society and its four dimensions of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. In the second section, I demonstrate how these dimensions create a dehumanizing culture of numbness,

¹George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, Los Angeles: Pikes Forge Press, 2011, 1.

shallowness, and disempowerment that is detrimental to human dignity — a culture that must be combatted by the church. In the third and final section, I explain the concepts of Metz’s “dangerous memories” and Bruggemann’s “prophetic pathos” which I argue should be used by the church as its prophetic opposition to the deleterious effects of McDonaldization of society.

George Ritzer on the McDonaldization of Society

In his seminal work, sociologist George Ritzer has identified a powerful trend which he labels the McDonaldization process.² This process which originated in the United States³ is ‘inexorable’⁴ and appears to be ‘sweeping through seemingly impervious institutions and regions of the world.’⁵ He demonstrates how this ubiquitous system of organizing has also become a trend in many areas outside of the fast-food industry.⁶ While Ritzer points out that there are many factors why this process has proved alluring to our contemporary society,⁷ he believes that what lie at the heart of its success⁸ are its four dimensions of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control.⁹ While Ritzer goes to great length to describe each dimension, given the limitation of this paper, I will describe each of them only briefly.

Efficiency is defined as ‘the optimum method for getting from one point to another’¹⁰ Ritzer notes that ‘for consumers, McDonald (it’s

²George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 1.

³George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 1.

⁴George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 1.

⁵George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 1.

⁶“Other types of business are increasingly adapting the principles of the fast-food industry to their needs. Said the Vice Chairman of Toys “R” Us, “We want to be thought of as a sort of McDonald’s of toys.” (Interestingly, Toys “R” US is now in decline because of its inability to compete with the even more McDonaldized Wal-Mart and its toy business.). The founder of Kidsports Fun and Fitness Club echoed this desire: “I want to be the McDonald’s of the kids’ fun and fitness business.” Other chains with similar ambitions include Gap, Jiffy Lube, AAMCO Transmissions, Midas Muffler and Brake Shops, Great Clips, H&R Block, Pearle Vision, Bally’s, Kampgrounds of America (KOA), KinderCare (dubbed “Kentucky Fried Children”), Jenny Craig, Home Depot, Barnes & Noble, and Pet Smart. Curves, the world’s largest chain of women’s fitness centers, was founded in 1995, and by 2009 there were nearly 10,000 of them in 50 states and more than 70 countries. The company touts the fact that “There is approximately 1 Curves for every 2 McDonald’s in the U.S.” and that “Curves opened 6,000 clubs in less than a decade; McDonald’s did it in 25 years and Subway in 26.” Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 3-4.

⁷George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 14.

⁸George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 14.

⁹George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 14.

¹⁰George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 14.

drive-through is a good example) offers the best available way to get from being hungry to being full.¹¹ This direct path from desire to satiation is of great allure in a society which views efficiency in the use of time as a valuable commodity. The inordinate pursuit of efficiency which characterizes all members involved in the process¹² results in a sense of numbness to themselves and to their surroundings.

Calculability “emphasizes the quantitative aspects of products sold (portion, size, cost) and services offered (the time it takes to get the product)” above the qualitative (comfort, enjoyment, pleasure, etc.) element of the experience.¹³ Because calculability is measured from within a narrow spectrum of quantitative experience, it leads to shallowness.

Predictability assures the sameness of all products across time and locales.¹⁴ While offering a degree of comfort, predictability ultimately ‘flattens’ out the unique quality of the dining experience and even all human interactions involved in the process. Like efficiency, the sameness of predictability causes a condition of numbness.

Control is having all elements of the dining experience dictated by ‘what management wishes them [customers] to do — eat quickly and leave.’¹⁵ Extending to all participants in the process and not just the customers,¹⁶ control creates the condition of disempowerment even among the hands of those who exercise power.

When Ritzer seeks to critique this process, by what he calls the ‘irrationality of rationality’¹⁷ he is aware how the critique can be “animated by a romanticization of the past, an impossible desire to return to a world that no longer exists.”¹⁸ This desire to go back to a halcyon past is, for Ritzer, a false critique based on exaggerating the good qualities of society as it existed before McDonaldization.¹⁹ Ritzer, however, believes that one should make a cogent critique of McDonaldization based on the implications of this process going forward in an unrestrained manner.²⁰

¹¹George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 14.

¹²George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 14.

¹³George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 14.

¹⁴George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 15.

¹⁵George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 16.

¹⁶George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 16.

¹⁷George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 16.

¹⁸George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 17.

¹⁹George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 17.

²⁰It is far more valid to critique McDonaldization from the perspective of a conceivable future. Unfettered by the constraints of McDonaldized systems, but

The Effects of McDonaldization of Society

In this section we revisit the four dimensions that constitute the McDonaldization process. More particularly we focus on how humans respond to these dimensions by numbing themselves, falling into shallowness, and allowing themselves to be disempowered. These responses are their defense mechanisms to deal with the effects of living in a McDonaldized society. Recall that efficiency is defined as ‘the optimum method for getting from one point to another.’²¹ This efficiency that is demanded of all people involved in the process is achieved, in part “by following the steps in a *predesigned process*.”²² By following this process all people begin to lose their individuality and spontaneity. They inhabit a world in which all is merely a repetition of that which came before. The Nietzschean notion of the eternal return of the same becomes a reality where all the uniqueness of a person is subsumed under the predesigned process which is indispensable for efficiency. Under this assault of efficiency, one numbs oneself. This allows a degree of desensitization which is necessary to be part of this process. This numbness which helps one get through a working day will, however, progressively seep into all areas of one’s life. A person who becomes numb to survive in a McDonaldized system begins to be also this way in his or her interpersonal life.

In the dimension of calculability Ritzer notes that quantitative measures trump all other categories.²³ This requires that “workers focus on things such as how quickly tasks can be accomplished.”²⁴ This supreme objective to accomplish everything quickly is pursued by everyone in the system, which includes the managers, the workers, and the consumers.²⁵ When quantity is the goal, what is external and superficial seems to be valued over what is interior and essential. This way of experiencing reality begins to impact one’s way of living one’s life. This includes areas in which clearly “quantity should not be given a premium.”²⁶ One of the most detrimental

using the technological advances made possible by them, people could have the potential to be far more thoughtful, skillful, creative, and well-rounded than they are now. In short, if the world was less McDonaldized, people would be better able to live up to their human potential.” Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 17-18.

²¹George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 17-18.

²²George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 14. [Italics added]

²³“Workers in a McDonaldized system also emphasize the quantitative rather than the qualitative aspects of work.” Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 15.

²⁴George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 15.

²⁵George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 15.

²⁶George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 15. See chapter 4 of Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*. The two areas that are particularly troubling in this area

effects that occur within this dimension is not just what is focused on, but what is lost; this includes creativity²⁷ and ultimately authenticity.²⁸ One's experience of life begins to remain on the surface, where it is shallow.

Ritzer defines predictability as 'the assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locales.'²⁹ One of the ways this is accomplished is by the precise choreography of all aspects of the experience.³⁰ It should be noted again that there is something comforting about knowing that no matter where we are or what time it is, we have this sense of familiarity with the world in which we live. However, one can see that this type of existence can also anaesthetize us to the vicissitudes of life. We become numb to the profound mystery of human experience.³¹ This is particularly detrimental to our humanity because being "imago Dei" we are ultimately mysterious to ourselves and to each other. To lose sight of this in ourselves and our neighbour is a profound loss and also, a violation of our deepest source of dignity.

are how television and politics have been deeply impacted by the quantity over quality aspect of the McDonaldization process.

²⁷"Television programming is heavily, if not exclusively, determined by quantitative factors. The rating of a program, not its quality, determine the advertising revenue it is likely to generate and, therefore, its longevity. A Vice President of programming for ABC made this emphasis on calculability quite clear: 'Commercial television programming is designed to attract audiences to the advertisers' messages which surround the programming... Inherent creative aesthetics values [quality] are important but always secondary.' Over the years the commercial networks have dropped many critically acclaimed programs because of poor ratings." Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 88.

²⁸"The political sector offers a number of revealing examples of the emphasis on calculability — for example, the increasing importance of polls in political campaigns. Candidates and incumbents, obsessed with their ratings in political polls, often adjust their positions on issues or the actions they take on the basis of what pollsters say will increase (or at least not lower) their rankings. How a specific political position affects ratings can become more important than whether the politician genuinely believe in it." Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 92.

²⁹George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 15.

³⁰"The workers of McDonaldized systems also behave in predictable ways. They follow corporate rules as well as the dictates of managers. In many cases, what they do, and even what they say, is highly predictable." Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 16.

³¹George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 149. "No characteristic of rationalization is more inimical to enchantment than predictability. Magical, fantastic, dreamlike experiences are almost by definition unpredictable. Nothing will destroy an enchanted experience more easily than having it become predictable or having it recur in the same way time after time." (the footnote of this quote)

The final dimension is that of control. This dimension is particularly insidious because of how much it takes precedence over the human qualities of interpersonal interactions.³² People who are involved in a system of control either ‘give orders’ or ‘follow orders’. Our value becomes reduced to our capacity to either be obedient (controlled) or be dominant (controller). In order for the relationship of controlled/controller to exist, much of our humanity is ultimately compromised. The power differential between the controller and controlled creates a situation of disempowerment.

As church we are called to guard the dignity of the human person.³³ We have seen that the McDonaldization of society pose deleterious obstacles to the full flourishing of our humanity, in the culture of numbness, shallowness, and disempowerment it creates. We are called to combat any and all things that are a threat to human dignity. In the midst of the phenomenon of McDonaldization of society, we must stand as a prophetic church. I propose that we draw from the work of Johann B. Metz and Walter Brueggemann in seeking what it means to be a prophetic church. It is to the work of these two thinkers which we now turn.

The Prophetic Church and the McDonaldization of Society

This section unfolds in two parts: the first explicates the concepts of “dangerous memories” and “prophetic pathos” as particularly defined by Metz and Brueggemann. The second demonstrates how the meanings of these two concepts may open a way for understanding what it means to be a prophetic church in the midst of the McDonaldization of society.

The category of memory is central to the political theology of Metz. The importance given to this category by Metz grew out of his disillusionment with what he perceived as the hollow or shallow understanding of history in much of contemporary theology.³⁴ For

³²“The people who work at McDonaldized organizations are also controlled to a high degree, usually more blatantly and directly than customers. They are trained in a limited number of tasks in precisely the way they are told to do them. This control is reinforced by the technologies used and the way the organization is set up to bolster this control. Managers and inspectors make that workers toe the line.” Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, 16.

³³The literature which echo this sentiment are too numerous to mention but *Gaudium et Spes* is particularly lucid in this assertion.

³⁴Johann B. Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, Trans. J. Matthew Ashley, New York: Paulist Press, 39. “Because of the way Auschwitz showed up — or did not show up — in theology, it became (slowly) clear

Metz, while there was much talk of the human person as a 'historical subject,' and of the historicity of the church and its theology, this never seemed to translate into a theology that immerses itself into concrete historical events. This is what he spoke of as the need to do theology 'after Auschwitz.'³⁵ For Metz, the forgetfulness that was part of all theological discourse in the church was actually a 'covering over' of the horrors of history and of the church's falsified innocence of injustices that were perpetuated. He spoke of the misreading of the Resurrection that lets the church 'off the hook' for the suffering of the world, in the past and in the present.³⁶ For Metz the preservation of the memories of suffering is dangerous to a history that is so often written by the 'victors' of the world.³⁷ It is important to note that these memories of suffering are not merely a generic narrative of the human experience of suffering but they are memories of the "victims of history" which have political and ethical implications for those in power.³⁸

to me how high the apathy content in theological idealism is, how incapable it is of taking on historical experiences — despite, or even because of, all its talk about history and historicity." Johann B. Metz, *A Passion for God*, 39.

³⁵Johann B. Metz, *A Passion for God*, 25. "Late (too late?) the new political theology became conscious of the fact that it is a theology after Auschwitz, that this catastrophe belongs to the inner situation of Christian discourse about God. In no way does this mean that Auschwitz should be stylized as a negative myth. Just the opposite! To be true to the situation, *after Auschwitz* means nothing other than this: finally to accept the fact that concrete history, and the theological experience of nonidentity connected with it, have broken into theology's logos." Metz, *A Passion for God*, 25.

³⁶"The fact that Christians believe that the pain of death and guilt have been overcome in Christ in no way absolves them from the commitment to overcome the pain of oppression and injustice, in solidarity with those who are not yet able, or no longer able, to be subjects." Metz, *A Passion for God*, 40.

³⁷"In addition, a kind of Darwinism rules the domain of history. Thus, it would be of great importance to narrate a kind of anti-history based on the memory of suffering." Johann B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, Trans. J. Matthew Ashley, New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2007, 107.

³⁸Johann B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 107. "A second explanatory point has to do with a more precise determination of what is understood here in the concrete under the title of "suffering." Is it not very dangerous to talk about "suffering in general"? Does not thereby the "memory of suffering" lose its critical, above all also its social-critical and political power? Is not suffering then completely privatized and internalized? Does not everyone suffer in one way or another? Where can we find the criteria, the starting points for a critical consciousness, especially in the interest of the oppressed and their suffering? Without them does not social and political engagement end up in that boring, indeterminate gray on gray that for the most part is the image that Christianity and the church present to the world today?

Before we can speak of Walter Brueggemann's understanding of prophetic pathos we must first grasp what he labels as royal consciousness.³⁹ For Brueggemann much of biblical history can be understood as a conflict between what he terms royal consciousness as embodied in such characters as Solomon and David and the counter-consciousness of the prophets embodied by Moses. This royal consciousness finds its counterpart in all current systems which seek hegemonic control.⁴⁰ This royal consciousness is comprised of many aspects. Brueggemann highlights three — material affluence, oppressive social policies, and static religion. These elements create a sort of torpor that leads to inaction, despair, and ultimately spiritual death.⁴¹ A central feature of the power of royal consciousness is its capacity to maintain the illusion of a 'natural' and 'eternal' state of being. Therefore the first intervention necessary to break this hypnotic effect is an awakening to the profound fragility of life and an unconditional acceptance of death. Paradoxically, it is in engaging actively the reality of death that we can begin the journey away from the pseudo-life offered by the royal consciousness towards a more authentic life offered by God. This, however, is difficult for anyone to accept. It forces us to confront what Brueggemann calls the 'dread of endings.'⁴² Yet it is precisely this sense of pathos that the prophetic community or individual must seek to elicit within the community. This pathos, introduced by the prophet (or a prophetic community) is a profound recognition of the temporality and contingent quality of all existence.⁴³ The awakening to this deeper reality shatters the hypnotic effect of all royal consciousness.

And is it not true that this all boils down to a consolation that finally consoles *no one*, since it supposedly consoles *everyone* in the same way? It becomes apparent in the light of Christian memory of suffering, however, that social power and political dominion ought not simply to be accepted, but rather they have to continually justify themselves anew in the face of concrete suffering." Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 110.

³⁹Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, Chapter 2.

⁴⁰Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

⁴¹"What I propose is this: The royal consciousness leads people to numbness, especially numbness about death. It is the task of prophetic ministry and imagination to bring people to engage their experiences of suffering to death." Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 41.

⁴²Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 46.

⁴³"The prophet does not scold or reprimand. The prophet brings to public expression the dread of endings, the collapse of our self-madness, the barriers and

How will the surfacing of the dangerous memories and the awakening of prophetic pathos counteract the culture of numbness, shallowness, and disempowerment in a McDonaldized society? The church to be a prophetic church must be the bearer of the dangerous memories of the suffering of the victims of history — the innocent, poor, and marginalized. Such memories are dangerous to the forces of the McDonaldization of society, for any remembering of suffering cuts deep into the heart, breaking the condition of numbness and shallowness. It is also a remembering that empowers the powerless, for it gives voice to them, they who have been rendered voiceless.

Metz's "dangerous memories" meets with a strong resistance by the dominant forces of McDonaldization, because they represent two diametrically opposed worldviews. As church, we have a rich tradition of the power of remembrance. This is most evident in our liturgical practices. When we live the Eucharistic words of Jesus, "do this in remembrance of me" we live the memory of our redemption. And redemption means living the fullness of life that Jesus has promised us. "I came so that they may have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn10:10). The Gospel's call to full life is a countersign to the diminishment of our humanity in a McDonaldized society.

The way of understanding the meaning of Bruggeman's "prophetic pathos" is to see it as a call to a life of dependence on God. As church, with peace and hope, we embrace the fragility and vulnerability of human life because we are a people of the Resurrection.⁴⁴ We must risk demonstrating to the larger world how the supposed virtues of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control can, when given a distorted status, rob us of our humanity and faith. When we awaken the "prophetic pathos" in ourselves and in others, we show that we do not rely ultimately on our created systems but rather in that which is larger and more mysterious than our selves.⁴⁵

pecking orders that secure us at each other's expense, and the fearful practice of eating off the table of a hungry brother or sister." Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 46.

⁴⁴"There is a hint of something unreconciled in Christianity. To banish it would be an expression not of faith, but of smallness of faith." Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, 56.

⁴⁵"Do we believe in God? or do we believe in our beliefs about God and, in so doing, perhaps really believe only in ourselves or in what we would like to think about ourselves? Consider, however, a faith that does not believe only in itself, but really believes in God...Finally this is true even for a Christian's faith: Whoever hears the message of the resurrection of Christ in such a way that the cry of the crucified

Bruggemann's "prophetic pathos" shatters the illusion of control and exposes the human inability to fully predict and calculate outcomes. It also brings back the spark of life against numbness, as one treasures its giftedness even in its brevity and fragility. The McDonaldized culture of shallowness is challenged by the depth of "prophetic pathos" for when one faces what Bruggemann calls the "dread of endings," one asks the deepest of human questions of identity, meaning, and destiny. Only when we surrender ourselves to the way of Christian faith and love, do we become authentically human against the counter forces that take us away from us who we truly are.

Concluding Statement

We have been called to scrutinize the signs of the times in light of the Gospel, and to respond with faith and love. The inordinate valuation of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control in a McDonaldized society robs us of our humanity. To be a prophetic church in the midst of this society means to resist its deleterious assault on human worth and dignity. This resistance can only come from our becoming true disciple of one who understood the depth of suffering and call us to 'do this in remembrance of me.'⁴⁶ Metz's "dangerous memories" and Bruggemann's "prophetic pathos" offer us a way of life that counters the culture of numbness, shallowness, and disempowerment created by the McDonaldization of society. They give us our true "bread" that nourishes our hearts and souls. To prefer this "bread" than a Big Mac is our daily challenge and calling.

had become inaudible in it, hears not the Gospel but rather a myth." Metz, *A Passion for God*, 56.

⁴⁶Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*, Trans. Peter Mann, New York: Crossroads Press, 1981, 15. "It is possible that what love demands of us here may look like treason — a betrayal of affluence, of the family, and of our customary way of life. But it is also possible that this is the very place where the discernment of spirits is needed in the churches of the rich and powerful countries of this earth.sma. Certainly Christianity is never just for the brave. Yet it is not we who define the demands of love, nor is it we who fix the conditions under which it is tested. So, for example, Christian love in periods of nationalistic thinking may well have to incur the suspicion of harming national honor. In situations of racism it will incur the suspicion of race treason. And in periods when social contradictions in the world cry out to heaven it will incur the suspicion of class treason for betraying the allegedly necessary interests of the propertied."