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The scandal of a crucified world: perspectives on the cross and suffering

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Christian commonplace, here enunciated by Thomas. Certainly the reader would then at the least be required to consider the depth of the 'real' differences between Mechthild, Porete, and Eckhart and the reasons which led to one of that number being declared a heretic *ad sonam* and another to be executed. Whatever one might think of such actions in any era or society, they are indicators of the seriousness with which their contemporaries viewed any "deprivation of grace and consequently of the vision of God", a seriousness directing us to think more fully about the significance of such deprivation than it does about contemporary moralizing over general liberal freedoms.

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The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering

Yacob Tesfai, editor
Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994
155 pp. \$24.50 Cdn.

In May of 1992, Yacob Tesfai, an Eritrean Lutheran researcher at the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg, invited theologians from around the world to reflect on the meaning of suffering and the significance of the theology of the cross. The theological concern underlying this study was the human divisions caused by suffering, especially those divisions imposed by the expansion of the global capitalist economy. Each scholar was asked to reflect on the cross as a symbol of suffering and as the means of overcoming the divisions caused by suffering.

While a diversity of views was sought, the one unifying theme that continues to recur in each piece is that the theology of the cross cannot be restricted to comforting the troubles of individual consciences, but must also be a means of critique of the social consequences of global economic activity. Above all, the cross must address the suffering of those most dispossessed by the expansion of capitalism. From the conquest of the Americans, through the slave trade, down to our own day, the cross has been a tool of domination, robbery, and economic imperialism. If it is to retain its power as a symbol of new hope and new life in Christ, the cross must also symbolize Christ's (and consequently Christ's church's) identification with those who are forced to suffer.

Although typically uneven, this slim volume has some gems that should not be overlooked. The best of the collection is the feminist treatise by Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel who seeks to restrain some of the excesses

of the feminist perspective in the interests of preserving the depth and integrity of the theological task. Instead, she proposes some alternative reflections of the cross that focus upon how the men and the women in Scripture reacted differently to Jesus' death and resurrection. Of particular interest is her note that the men fled out of fear at the crucifixion, but the women fled out of fear at the resurrection.

Theo Sundermeier proposes that, wherever Christians gather in faith in the midst of suffering, a theology of the cross will be articulated out of necessity. This theology will not be a direct translation of Luther's *theologia crucis*, but it will contextualize the same elements that were expressed by Luther in the Heidelberg disputations of 1518. In fact as Sundermeier points out, Matthias Grünewald had brought to expression this very same theology in his altarpiece at Isenheim in the years 1512–1515, several years before Luther would articulate it in words. Sundermeier goes on to suggest that theologians, including pastors, should keep their eyes on the art world, because artistic impression often foreshadows theological articulation.

Winston Persaud attempts to deliver some cautions against liberation theology by pointing out that the desired aims of some liberationists are not shared by all struggling for a new order of peace and justice. In particular, Persaud resents attempts to universalize the liberation approach beyond the confines of Latin America. In his view, liberation theology's value lies in its critique of Iberian imperial and ecclesiastical structures. Beyond this context, however, liberation methods start to be imperialistic themselves. For example, liberation theology has difficulty addressing in a coherent way the differing social structures and religious plurality right next door in the nations of the Caribbean region. In consequence, liberation theology is very limited in its ability to overcome the divisions in humanity caused by suffering.

Simon S. Maimela proposes in his essay that Christianity became a racist and imperialist religion once it lost its Oriental character to Islam and was restricted to the Teutonic races of Western Europe. The effects of this distortion has been one of continuing suffering for Africans who are still looking on the cross from the perspective of a continuing Good Friday. In the view of Jean-Marc Éla, Africa still awaits its Easter resurrection event. Overriding hope and triumphant empty crosses have little meaning in a continent that continues to suffer almost unbearable destruction and disruption. The cross has no significance outside of a continuing identification with the crucified Jesus.

Needless to say, the feminist and liberation perspectives on the cross come across as the most fully developed parts of this book. The Asians, who seem to be not as well versed in these expressions, seem rather incoherent and lacking focus. They are on alien ground here. This book is good for a quick overview of some various perspectives on the cross and suffering from

around the world, but if you are looking for depth and insight beyond the familiar you will need to look elsewhere.

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Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year A

Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa,
James D. Newsome
Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995
589 pp.

This volume completes the trilogy. *Texts for Preaching Year B* was published in 1993, *Year C* in 1994, by the same authors (although J. Clinton McCann replaced Walter Brueggemann in *Year C*). Among the plethora of lectionary resources, this set is certainly superior, and perhaps even the best.

This third volume continues the pattern of offering exegetical-expositional and thematic resources for preaching and teaching the lectionary texts. Each of the four readings—the Old Testament, the Psalm, the Epistle and Gospel—for each Sunday and important festival, including Ash Wednesday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and All Saints, is treated.

A valuable feature is the introduction to each set of readings. It sets out thematic thrusts of the lessons in terms of their interrelationships and, when applicable, the context of that moment in the church year. On occasion these thematic thrusts suggest possible sermonic movements, e.g., Easter Day: "The readings from Ps. 118 and from John 20 honestly face *the reality of death*...Prominent in the texts is the announcement of *God's deliverance from death*...[T]he Easter texts enumerate *several responses to God's deliverance*." These introductions are a great help in unifying the often disparate readings, and open the possibility for occasional homilies which take up three or even four of the lessons. This can be done by way of a common theme, or by allowing each lection to be a phase in a developing theme, or by discovering how each lection is a movement in a narrative-like plot.

The danger of such ambitious sermons, of course, is a thinning of biblical and theological substance. Here the excellent exegetical-expositional treatments of each individual lection are indispensable. The authors are recognized biblical scholars (Brueggemann and Newsome of the OT, Cousar and Gaventa of the NT) and always cognizant of the ultimate homiletical goal of their work.