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Luther's Theology of the Cross

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Introduction: A Life at the Intersection of Gospel & World

I must begin with a straightforward confession: I am not a Luther scholar. I am not even a Lutheran! I can boast of no Germanic or Scandinavian blood whatsoever—I am almost wholly a W.A.S.P. . . . with a saving modicum of Mohawk. I discovered Martin Luther, almost by accident, when I was about twenty-one. Something someone said to me made me think that Luther (of whom I had of course heard “with the hearing of the ears”) might present a face of Christianity different from the one I had seen until then, the one I found less and less convincing. So I obtained from our local library three biographies of the Reformer (I don't even know what they were now), and I read them in rapid succession. I knew at once that I was in the presence of something like a kindred spirit.

Later on I studied Luther at greater depth, of course—under Wilhelm Pauck, Paul Tillich, Paul Scherer, and others. But this does not make me a Luther scholar! In these days when Luther scholars are showing up behind every burning bush, one has to be quite clear about a thing like that! For me, Luther is perhaps more important as a *symbol* of something than as an historical figure about whom I can claim any expertise.

What does he symbolize? I could answer in this way: he is a living example of the possibility of existing, as a Christian, beyond both cynicism and credulity. That is, he represents an alternative on the one hand to the kind of “realism” which ends in disillusionment or despair, and on the other hand the

sort of naive "belief-fulness" which sustains itself by repressing everything that would call it in question.

There are, sadly, very few historical figures in Christianity who represent such a delicate alternative. Most Christians, at least in their *public* professions, have erred, it seems to me, on the side of too much belief-fulness. They sound as if they had already arrived in heaven and had cast aside all their doubts, along with their more conspicuous sins. But as Hebrews 11:1 insists, *faith is not sight*. Doubt is an essential aspect of faith. And when Christians behave as if they entertained no doubts but believed totally and without reserve, it is hard for them to play the role (which I believe *is* the role of the church) of an *ambassadorial* community in this world (see 2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 6:20). For the world cannot recognize in them enough of its own despair to be curious about their brand of hope; it cannot see in them enough of its own disbelief to be curious about their belief. *The church can only be a salt, yeast and light in the world if it is sufficiently like the world to arouse the world's curiosity about the ways in which it is not like the world.*

Martin Luther, who throughout his lifetime suffered fits of "utter abandonment" (*Anfechtungen*), was not a man who believed easily. Faith, for him, was always a matter of struggle and decision—and of being grasped by something that, with a good part of himself, he would have been glad enough to avoid!¹ Although he was in many respects a medieval man, in this he was a very modern human being. That is, he lived within an ongoing dialogue between despair and hope.

Just this, I think, is fundamentally what we ought to mean when we say that Luther's theology is a theology of the cross. It is *theologia crucis* because it emerges at the intersection between gospel and world. In Luther there is a meeting between the typical anxiety of his age (which Tillich identifies as "the anxiety of guilt and condemnation"²) and the good news of the gospel (forgiveness, justification by grace through faith). His is a theology of the cross, not first of all because the cross of Golgotha plays such an important part in it (though of course it does) but because the person who is doing this theology lives in a situation of spiritual crucifixion. He is torn between two accounts of reality, one negating and the other affirming.

And what so few commentators of Luther seem to me to take seriously is that he was never allowed to reach the end of this struggle—not, at any rate, so far as his earthly sojourn is concerned. He never moves from this position of an excruciating dialogue between Yes and No, No and Yes. There are moments when this dialogue is more, and other moments when it is less, intense. But there is no ultimate resolution, no point at which the Yes finally triumphs and the No is reduced to mere memory, no rolling back of the mists of earth in favour of the bright morn of heaven where all the promises are fulfilled, no “beatific vision”, no end of the road, no synthesis beyond the struggle of thesis and antithesis. Think of his very last written words: *Wir sind Bettler, dass ist Wahr*. [We are beggars, that's for sure!]

Of course, Luther *points to* a consummation beyond our beggarly estate. But it is not an ending which he personally experiences—except proleptically, eschatologically, as a matter of faith and hope. Or, to put it otherwise, he was never granted the dubious benefits of what is called in our age “total belief”. And therefore he is one of the most fascinating of all historically notable Christians. For it is possible for sinful, unfinished, doubting and frustrated human beings (that is to say, in one way or another, the whole lot of us!) to recognize ourselves and our own story in the mirror of this strange, passionate man. We are made curious about his struggle precisely because he did not stop struggling, right up to the end. The glory that he was struggling with, and for, he was never able to pin down and possess—and just for that reason it is a believable glory! Like the man Jacob wrestling with the angel of God, Luther *was* blest by the divine Spirit; but the blessing expressed itself in an unpredictable way: he had to limp afterwards.

I have used the term *theologia crucis*, and now I want to try and explain in a more systematic way what I think this means for Luther. But it was necessary first to speak about the man himself, to attempt to characterize him briefly; because the “theology of the cross” is not first of all a theology, a system of ideas; it is a way of being. Luther's own life is the best exegesis of what he means when he uses this term which is so unfamiliar to the ears of Anglo-Saxons. For the sake of our more structured minds, however, we may ask about the ideas contained in the term, “theology of the cross”. I shall discuss four of them.³

1. Luther's Realism

The first point I think one should make in this regard is that the theology of the cross means Luther's entire realism about the world. In the Heidelberg Disputation, where the term *theologia crucis* as such first appears in his extant writings, Luther contrasted this theology with what he thought of as the *false* theology, which he named *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory). The theology of glory, he says (Proposition 21) "calls evil good and good evil", whereas the theology of the cross "calls the thing what it actually is".

Something very important is being asserted in this 21st proposition of the Disputation. It is not said only there, of course; it comes up again and again in Luther's work. It is that belief, faith, whatever else it means, must *never* mean that I have to lie about what "actually is". I should not have to become a constitutional optimist in order to hope, Christianly. I should be free to call a spade a spade. If it is dark, I should be able without qualms to declare that it is dark. I should not have to go about smiling all the time, like poor deluded Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, or after the manner of some contemporary Christians who feel, apparently, that they must always wear "happy faces". In fact, Christian faith should make me *more honest* about the world as I find it, not less. I do not have to don rose-coloured glasses any more. And why? Because the source of hope for me is not some positive evidence that I expect poor Mother Earth to cough up regularly, but it is God: God who is able to bring something out of nothing, righteousness out of unrighteousness and human wrath, life out of death. The Christian is free to be honest about the world—to call the thing what it really is. It belongs to this Way to have a strong "orientation towards truth" (*Wahrheitsorientierung*).

Now this is extremely important for the Christian ethic. For if anyone is constitutionally incapable of such honesty; if anyone has to repress the knowledge of evil and call it "good" because he or she can't abide the prospect of great evil, then how can such a one exercise anything like a prophetic ministry in our kind of world? How could such a one think it her or his business to "change the world" if the world is already, basically, "good"?

Not only Liberal Christianity, but many other forms of Christianity throughout history have been so committed to theological theories in which everything has already been "put to rights" that they could not even allow themselves to *see* what had obviously *not* been put to rights! Especially they could not entertain the prospect that there was *radical* evil, some of it consequent upon their own need to repress and suppress any knowledge of such evil.

And here one could reflect for a very long time upon the fate of our sister-faith, Judaism, as it paralleled the history of Christendom. Antijudaic sentiment has its roots precisely in what Luther called Christianity's "theology of glory". Christian *triumphalism*, which is another term for that same theology of glory, presented and presents such a completed and victorious account of salvation that the Jews, who could never accept such "pretention to finality" (Reinhold Niebuhr), could and can exist for the triumphing Christians of this mentality only as an embarrassment—an unconquered, unconvinced minority. The theology of the cross is at one with Judaic faith at least in this, that it does not need to entertain such an exaggerated account of God's redemptive handiwork that it must lie about the real world in order to make its religious theory appear true. Or else try to rid the world of all contradictory evidence—and *the witnesses to the same!*

Liberation theology, as it is expounded by many Latin American, feminist, and other theologians and movements today, is also insistent upon this kind of "orientation towards truth". It begins with the recognition that there is something abysmally wrong with the world, i.e. the *status quo*. And it despises all "theory" that confounds or camouflages this wrongness. For the kind of "conscientization" that is required for all who hope to bring light to the darkness must begin with a frank recognition of the darkness itself. And, as a great American Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, once remarked: "Darkness *realized* is already light".

2. God Lives—And Loves

Of a piece with this kind of rootedness in the real world, the second aspect of Luther's theology of the cross to which I would draw attention concerns his Theology, that is, his conception

of God. The theology of the cross presupposes, and is at the same time grounded in, a picture of the Deity in which the usual, all-too-typical attributes of God have been drastically redefined. This applies in particular to the *favoured* attributes of imperial Christianity, omnipotence and transcendence (the latter interpreted virtually as *impassivity*).

For Luther's God is informed from first to last by his picture of the Christ. And his picture of the Christ is informed by his deep and compassionate knowledge of the human condition. He was, I think, one of the few historically important theologians who took seriously the *real humanity* of Jesus as the Christ. Think of his famous Christmas sermon:

Let us, then, meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, the majesty of Christ, but rather his flesh. Look upon the Baby Jesus. Divinity may terrify man. Inexpressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify us but rather with love and favor he should console and confirm.⁴

This is very different from what one hears, mostly, throughout the long history of Christian preaching and teaching. So pre-committed has most Christianity been to the power and utter transcendence of the Divine Being, that it could not—it simply *could not!*—take earnestly the newer Testament's fundamental claim that what is revealed in "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23) is *the very mind and heart of God*. *Cruz sola nostra theologia*. Most forms of Christianity have had to adopt docetic or quasi-docetic forms of Christology, and substitute divinization or apotheosis for incarnation, because the religion of Empire (*whatever* empire!) could not and still cannot stand having at its centre a poor, suffering human being as its primary symbol and metaphor for Deity. Luther dared to stand theology on its head by looking for God in the weak, oppressed, rejected, dying and dead Jesus—instead of the "divinity principle" behind what so many were pleased to consider the *mask* (!) of his humanity.

In other words, Luther understood Paul's puzzling claim that the real power of the gospel is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), that faith is not-knowing, and hope not-having. Consider for example this remarkable statement:

Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend—it must transcend all comprehension....Bewilderment is true comprehen-

sion. *Not to know where you are going* is the true knowledge...Behold, that is the way of the cross. You cannot find it yourself, so you must let me lead you as though you were a blind man. Wherefore it is not you, no man, no living creature, but I myself [he speaks as though in the Lord's behalf], who instruct you by my Word and Spirit in the way you should go. Not the work which *you choose*, not the suffering *you devise*, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire—that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple. If you do that, there is the acceptable time and there your master is come.⁵

To put all this in another way: God for Luther is a living, loving Presence. God is not a static principle, not an Absolute above the flux. God is the creator and lover of the human creation and creature. Therefore God cannot resort to coercion—even when God leads us in ways that we do not want to go (John 21:18). If God loves and wills to redeem what is loved without destroying it, then God *has* to become weak. God “must” work mysteriously and patiently and hiddenly from *within* the sphere of history; God “must” become involved in the human enterprise—even to the point of utter forsakenness. (And those who know the Scriptures will realize that I have put “must” into quotation marks here because what it stands for is the same necessity that is repeatedly alluded to in the so-called “predictions of the passion” of the Synoptic tradition: *not*, that is to say, some Fate to whose unfolding even God is bound, but the *agape* by which God is *Self*-bound.)

We are dealing with a theology that is *of the cross*, in other words, because the cross speaks not only of the real condition of the human creature and the creation itself (“Reality itself... is cruciform”⁶) but also of the heart of the Creator. The point of Jesus' cross is that it is not just the cross of the man Jesus: it is the symbolic cross of both humanity and humanity's Creator. It is “where it's at” with both *Theos* and *Anthropos*. As someone has put it, “There was a cross in the heart of God long before one appeared on Calvary”.

And here once more we are brought back into the sphere of our parental faith, the religion of the Jews. If anyone asks what is the *source* of Luther's *theologia crucis*, most of the Luther experts answer that it was St. Paul—especially that *locus classicus* of the theology of the cross, to which allusion has already been made in the foregoing: 1 Corinthians 1 and 2.

But what has seldom been duly recognized (and one wonders why!) is that St. Paul himself had some sources—he was not a Jew for nothing! He did not come to the contemplation of the cross of Jesus without any hermeneutic preparation! He knew the God who suffers—how could he not have known that God!

Abraham Heschel, in his exhaustive and seminal study, *The Prophets*, claims that the very essence of prophetic religion was the prophets' sense of "the divine pathos".

To the prophet... God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions arouse in Him joy and sorrow, pleasure or wrath. He is not conceived as judging the world in detachment. He reacts in an intimate and subjective manner, and thus determines the values of events....

Pathos, then, is not an attitude taken arbitrarily. Its inner law is the moral law; ethos is inherent in pathos. *God is concerned about the world and shares its fate. Indeed, this is the essence of God's moral nature: His willingness to be intimately involved in the history of man.*⁷

It should not be forgotten that the professor of Wittenberg was reading and teaching the Scriptures of Israel, notably the Psalms, and not only the epistles of St. Paul when he prepared his defence for the Augustinians at Heidelberg. In a real sense—in a sense which has been too little realized—Luther's Theology marks a decisive, if intuitive, return to the God of Israel, who unlike "the god of the philosophers" (Pascal), is vitally concerned about "the fate of the earth" (Jonathan Schell). One does not have to skip over the absurd and unworthy things that Luther, unfortunately, said about the Jews to appreciate the fact that his Theology is thoroughly Jewish. It is from first to last a protest against the impassive and "a-pathetic" God of high Greek and speculative medieval philosophy. Aristotle's God, he quipped, "rules the world as a sleepy maid rocks a child".⁸ For Luther, God is the "Abba" of the child; and between the "pathos of God" and the *passio Christi* [passion of Christ] there is an absolute and indissoluble continuity.

3. A Statement About Theology as a Discipline

Thirdly, I would say that for Luther the theology of the cross implies a way of thinking about the nature of theology

itself—about this strange discipline, this “modest science”.⁹ Being a disciple community at the level of “understanding what we believe” (Augustine), just as being such a community at the level of *acting* out of belief, means finding ourselves thinking in the shadow of the cross, in the “environs of Golgotha” (Barth). To say the same thing in non-metaphoric terms, theological thought is thought-in-struggle, dialogical thought, never-ending contemplation, never-completed work.

It is, moreover, the antithesis of linear, self-confident, or as some may want to say “systematic”, thought. Sometimes Luther is excused from being a really “systematic” thinker because he had to think “in the heat of battle”. This is of course true; but I doubt that he would have been a systematic thinker (after the manner of Calvin or Aquinas, say) even if he had had the leisure to be such. He was much too aware of the “flowingness” (*fluxus*) of reality, the livingness of God, the contradictions of the human spirit, the “ambiguities of history” (Reinhold Niebuhr); in short, too much aware of *change* to write a book of theology in which everything was present and accounted for in neat and permanently valid categories, chapters, paragraphs and propositions. Calvin, who also of course did some of his thinking in the heat of the battle, was of an entirely different temperament. I would say (though it probably reflects a prejudice!) that Calvin was too much tempted by absolutes and too much drawn to rationalistic argumentation. It is not accidental that the Geneva Reformer worked for twenty-six years polishing and perfecting his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; nor is it accidental that subsequent generations of Calvinists could find in that work a kind of second Bible with all the consistency that the first one lacked!

Well, there have been “Lutherans”, too, who wanted Luther to have done something like that for them; and with the help of some of Luther's associates, Master Philip Melancthon amongst them, Lutherans sometimes *got* such a Luther! But that transformation always involved some sleight-of-hand, surely, and I doubt Luther would have been very amused by it. Because in the process the life went out of it. You can't take a theology as engaged with its *Zeitgeist* as is Martin Luther's and turn it into *theologia eterna* (eternal theology). Those who really hear Luther will not want always to go about “saying what

Luther said". Rather, they will want to *do what Luther did*: that is, become sufficiently involved in their own spiritual and cultural and personal crises to be found at the place "where the battle rages". For, as Luther said (and it is my favourite quotation in all the myriad volumes of Christian theology!)—

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Truth of God except that little point where the world and the devil are in that moment contending, then I may be professing the faith but I shall not be confessing it. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is tested, and to be faithful on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.¹⁰

The groundedness of the theology of the incarnation and humiliation of the Word of God means that those who take up this task must live in and respond to what is actually going on in their social contexts. Theology is not the game of getting everything down in advance and in a fine, ordered way. It is being immersed in the ongoing *fluxus* of existence and trusting that at the moment the right words will be given one. Therefore Luther could say that it is not by reading and speculating, but by living, dying, and being damned that one becomes a theologian [*vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando.*]¹¹ The first year student of theology should not, of course, read this as if it were a license to indulge intellectual sloth! Luther did not despise the mind; he was not the crude fideist that he is sometimes made out to be. But he knew that a "science" which begins with the reality called Golgotha cannot remain a spectator and "researcher" in the world!¹²

4. A Theology of Hope!

The theology of the cross, as distinct from every type of triumphalism [*theologia gloriae*] means that the Christian lives *towards* the fulfilment of the divine promises, not as though it were already completed. Luther's eschatology—if we may use these later and somewhat ambiguous terms—is more futuristic than realized. He approves of the statement of Hebrews: "We do not see everything put beneath his feet, but we see Jesus..." (2:8–9). We do not see the obvious victory of the good, we only see sometimes, as through a glass darkly, intimations of the triumph of the crucified one, "hidden beneath its opposite".

In other words, Luther is very guarded in his use of the language of triumph, even if he is not altogether consistent (again, so much depends on the context!). As Ernst Käsemann has put it, the question is not whether there *is* triumph in the gospel story, but *what triumph means*.¹³ Certainly for the characteristic exegesis of Luther the triumph of God in Christ does not mean something obvious, immediate, clearcut. The resurrection is for him tied to the cross; it means that spiritual victory in us and for us which enables us to see in the cross—precisely in this symbol of failure and humiliation that seems the very opposite of what is usually called victorious—a decisive triumph of God's suffering love. The triumph of *love* must not be transmuted into a triumph of *power*. With love, the only appropriate power is the power of true humility, *ergo* abstinence from power as power is usually conceived. Love is only powerful when it is powerless.

The *theologia crucis* expresses itself quite naturally in an *ecclesia crucis*—the theology of the cross begets a “people of the cross”. Having been permitted to see, with the eyes of faith, the strange victory of divine love behind the humiliation and failure of Golgotha, this people is itself made courageous to walk “the Way of the Cross”. In Luther, as in much of the medieval mysticism on which he draws, the most important mark of the church is not its unity, apostolicity, catholicity, or holiness but rather its suffering. If “the mark of the Holy Cross” is missing in the life of the church, then all the other traditional marks named by Nicaea mean nothing. The church must (“must”!) be a community of suffering—*not* because suffering is good or to be sought out, masochistically, but because God's liberating work carries all who are caught up in it into the midst of the suffering world. The struggle for justice against oppression, peace against violence, and the life of creation against its degradation and death cannot be participated in from the sidelines of history!

We cannot *know* that this struggle will lead in the last analysis to victory. We cannot know this, because faith is faith (*fiducia* = trust) and not sight. But we can *trust*. And the best evidence, in Luther's view, that our trust is well-placed is our ongoing immersion in the life of the crucified one. This is our “continuing baptism”. As we participate in the suffering

of the one who suffered for and with all sufferers, we have confidence that the way we are on, the *Via Dolorosa*, is the right way.

Christian living does not mean to *be* good but to become good; not to be well, but to get well; not being but becoming; not rest but training. We are not yet, but we shall be. It has not yet happened, but it is the way. Not everything shines and sparkles as yet, but everything is getting better.¹⁴

Dorothee Sölle called a chapter in her book, *The Arms Race Kills: Even Without War*,¹⁵ "It is Not Yet Finished". Many did not like this, but I think Luther would have. Yes, in a certain way of speaking we may and must say that Jesus' words from the cross—that "It is finished"—have a profound significance for us. It means that we are not left high and dry with a task before us that we can't possibly achieve. We are brought into a work that is somehow "already" done.

But it is a work that *we are brought into!* It is under way, in progress. And we cannot and must not turn the "It is finished" of the dying Christ into a kind of ideology which waxes eloquent over a theoretical victory and shuts its eyes to the failure and defeat that are all about us—poverty, injustice, war, the degradation of the good earth, and all that. The theology of the cross will not be understood by us until it expresses itself in an *ethic* of the cross: that is to say, in a profound moral commitment to the world in which the cross of Jesus the Christ was planted. For at bottom the theology of the cross means nothing more nor less than this: *God's own abiding commitment to this world.*

Notes

- ¹ For instance, in his discussion of the suffering that is necessary to the life of Christian discipleship, Luther writes (in a way that is seldom found in the annals of the martyrs!), "It should be the kind of suffering which, if it were possible, we would gladly be rid of, suffering visited upon us by the devil or the world. . . . If I want to be a Christian, I must also wear the colors of the court; the dear Christ issues no others in his court; suffering there must be". "Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering," 1530, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, ed. and trans. by John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959) 198-199.
- ² See *The Courage To Be* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1952) 51 ff.
- ³ For a scholarly discussion of the *theologia crucis* see Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. by Herbert J.A.

Bouman (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1976). See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. by R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1974); and Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

⁴ *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, trans. by Roland Bainton (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948) 19-21.

⁵ Quoted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1959) 82-83.

⁶ Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1946) 166.

⁷ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962) 223-224 [emphasis added].

⁸ *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, ed. and with introduction by Thomas S. Kepler of Oberlin College (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1952) 345.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. by Groveroy Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1963) 7.

¹⁰ WA, BR., III: 81ff.

¹¹ WA 5, 163.28.

¹² For a more complete discussion of my understanding of Luther's theological method, see my essay "The Diversity of Christian Witnessing in the Tension Between Subjection to the Word and Relation to the Context," in Peter Manns and Harding Meyer in collaboration with Carter Lindberg and Harry McSorley, eds., *Luther's Ecumenical Significance: An Interconfessional Consultation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 247 ff.

¹³ "The Pauline Theology of the Cross," *Interpretation*, XXIV/No. 2, April 1970, 151 ff.

¹⁴ WA 7, 336.

¹⁵ Philadelphia; Fortress Press, 1982.