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God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross

Douglas John Hall

Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986

\$24.95

Dr. Carl Braaten has suggested that there are two major crises facing modern civilization: the crisis of misery and the crisis of meaning. Dr. Hall's recent book, *God and Human Suffering*, takes a deeper look at the nature of "suffering" which ensues from these two modern experiences: misery and meaninglessness. This work represents an excellent in-depth reassessment of the theological model of *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) which has long been near and dear to Lutherans.

In the first part of the book, there is an analysis of the reality of suffering. What does our tradition understand the place of suffering to be within the context of human existence? Supporting his case with the "tradition of Jerusalem", Dr. Hall rejects the theological triumphalism that would have us deny suffering, as well as "positive religion" that assumes that once a person has subscribed to a belief system then all suffering is overcome. Instead, God enters into the human condition and shares in human suffering as "Emmanuel". God with us.

Western industrialized society tries to deny that suffering is a reality. Suffering is a part of human existence and to deny its presence is to limit the fullness of human life. In such a denial people lose an emotional reference point, they are less able to enter imaginatively and compassionately into the suffering of others who *are* suffering, and when confounded by the experience of those who are suffering, there is often a desire to find an "enemy" who can be held responsible for the suffering that is not understood. Therefore it is important that we understand that suffering is a reality and one that was taken with the utmost honesty and realism by the tradition of Jerusalem not as an end in itself, but rather as a means for change and for "... the mending of creation".

Not all suffering is the same. One needs to distinguish between suffering that is intended within the created order and seeks the fuller integration of life, and suffering that has its roots in human sin (the fall). Suffering that is rooted in the created order has a positive role, in spite of some negative experiences, since it helps people to *become*, to grow and develop, into the fully human persons that God intended. Such experiences strengthen the human spirit by fostering an appreciation for positive values: such as love which requires an element of separation, or preciousness or value because of limits to availability, freedom since choices must be made between right and wrong, and hope that requires an on-going dialogue with despair. The challenge for people within this framework of creation is to be discerning stewards, choosing those paths that serve to enhance life and restricting

those that detract from life. There is always the element of risk due to human freedom which may allow choices that have destructive consequences.

The abuse of human freedom and stewardship points to another form of suffering which is based upon human sin. Dr. Hall has quite appropriately observed that "sin" in the modern context has often been enmeshed with morality and especially sexuality which has made it problematic in understanding human suffering. There is a real need to explore the theological tradition of sin, which can lead to enhancing compassionate and sympathetic communities and a deeper understanding of the experience of the Christians down through the ages.

In response to the plight of the suffering in our world, Dr. Hall suggests that the Christian community needs to consider with renewed seriousness the theology of the cross. The meaning of the cross as an event, an act of redemption, a deed, is essential to our confession of faith. It is a way of responding to suffering because "... the only power that can address suffering humanity is the power of love and that is a power '... made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9)". The event of the cross provides the means by which Christians can enter into the suffering of the world.

This call for renewed attention to the theology of the cross provides a way of hope for individual Christians and for the church in mission. God's willingness to *be with* a suffering humanity is also a declaration that human history is not inevitable or fatalistic but rather has the power to change and be transformed. Those who have been baptised into Christ have been redeemed *from* the world but also *for* the world. This transformative power that is unleashed within history, is based upon those who participate in the sufferings of Christ for God's creation.

This participatory love has clear implications for the mission of the church. While the authenticating marks of the church (i.e., "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church") are vital, the reality of the "holy cross" is the chief distinguishing characteristic of the church. The church needs to be willing to "be with", just as God chose to "be with", suffering humanity. For a modern church which is no longer established as a social institution, the mandate is to seek out those who are suffering to be with them. There is a real danger that the church can become so preoccupied with its own security that it loses its commitment to follow "the Way". The church in the late twentieth century needs to comprehend its mission as being part of God's response to the massive suffering of God's world.

Dr. Hall's book is not a totally new creation. Yet it is a masterful work that raises again the model of the theology of the cross as an effective way for Christians to understand suffering, minister pastorally to those who are victims, and for the community to develop a vision of mission for the church. At the conclusion of the book there is an excellent series of appendices in which Dr. Hall enters into a dialogue with other writers such as Harold Kushner, C.S. Lewis and others on the subject of human suffering. This volume is an excellent resource for those persons involved in social justice and peace work who want to understand human suffering,

for those involved in pastoral work and counselling, and for those who are struggling with the nature of the mission of the church.

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Cries of Victims, Voice of God

Bishop Remi De Roo

Ottawa/Toronto: Novalis and James Lorimer and Company,
1986

pp. 172. \$9.95 paperback

Bishop Remi De Roo of the diocese of Victoria, British Columbia, is most well-known for being the architect of the controversial statement on the Canadian economy (1983) by the Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. His book *Cries of Victims, Voice of God* is a welcome expansion of this earlier manifesto called *Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis*.

Although the book will have a more immediate impact upon the nation's Catholics, it contains vitally important information and insights for all Christians who hear God's voice of priority for the poor and oppressed. Some limitations of his work should be noted at the outset. The book is eclectic and disjointed in places since it represents a collection of the bishop's earlier articles and lectures as well as more recent observations. In addition, he uses frequent references to statements by John Paul II to lend authority to his position. Though the impact of the current pope is wider than the Roman Catholic tradition, his authority is not accepted to the extent that Bishop De Roo uses his words. Further, those of us in the evangelical tradition who have serious misgivings about John Paul's views regarding social justice, women in ministry and church reform may wonder how long the views of the Victoria bishop will be welcomed in his own church.

Nonetheless, in spite of these hesitations *Cries of Victims, Voice of God* is to be received with joy. It is a mandate for all Christians to take seriously the radical gospel of the Nazarene who had "nowhere to lay his head". Unlike so much of liberation theology which dwells on the Third World (however appropriate), this work concentrates on liberation in the midst of our own Canadian life. In response to the oft-repeated question, "What can I do?", Bishop De Roo points all of us in very concrete directions which he himself has walked. An economic system geared to megaprojects and quick profits via technology at the expense of human needs is subjected to a resounding critique in the name of the gospel. Beyond this he offers