

Book review: “Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today”

Colleagues,

[I thought I'd get around to ruminating on last week's wingding Crossings conference for this week's ThTh post. But not yet. Just this a.m. we took the last of our five international guests to the airport—all of them having crashed with us—so now first we can breathe. Tomorrow, perhaps, think. Next Thursday, maybe However while we regenerate at our place, the conference committee—cyber-savvy all of them—is blogging up a storm of follow-up stuff. If they don't tell you directly before next Thursday about that, I'll try to clue you in.] Today's posting is a book review, the work of William L. Yancey, pastor at Bethel Lutheran Church in University City (suburban St. Louis), Missouri. Our family has been part of the Bethel congregation for 36 years. That means that Bill is our pastor. He's a Seminex grad and also did his doctorate in systematic theology at Seminex. He's a wordsmith—both here and in his preaching—and also a thoughtful theologian in both arenas. Read on and see for yourself.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today.

Marit A. Trelstad (Editor).

Minneapolis, Fortress Press.

Paperback. 336 pages.

Online price \$20.00

In Cross Examinations, a collection of articles that explores the meaning of the cross in today's context, Editor Marit Trelstad, Assistant Professor of Religion at the Pacific Lutheran University, describes a pendulum swinging away from an emphasis on atonement for personal sins toward an understanding of "the cross, atonement, and salvation" from a perspective "of live, pressing social issues." The writers make no claim that Christ atones only for the massive social structures of sin, such as racism and sexism, but that socially organized systems of death must not be ignored in a fuller understanding of God's action in Jesus. An exclusive focus on individual sin and salvation permits the social manifestations of evil to work their destruction unchallenged. Without critique, the perpetuation of unjust social systems is encouraged, and the truth of the cross is twisted to support historical systems of oppression.

Writers in this volume critique traditional atonement theories: "ransom" to the devil; Anselm's "satisfaction" for the injured honor of God; Abelard's "moral" example of love; the reformer's "substitution" of Jesus for us for sin; Aulén's Christus Victor (warrior) over sin and death. Because these atonement theories necessarily mirror their historical context, they often prove inadequate for contemporary times. Worse, structures of systemic oppression have co-opted these older theories, coercing victims to accept passively self-denigration and victimization. From this perspective "the cross" can be

used to support systems that perpetuate suffering.

Womanist theologians especially note the tendency of traditional atonement theories to sacralize victimage and suffering. They note that women of color have historically experienced the structural overlay of racism upon gender oppression. Specifically, black women have been made to bear sexual, economic, and racial oppression and endure death itself on behalf of the dominant culture. The technical term used to name the black woman's lived reality of passive suffering is "surrogacy." Womanist writers reject any use of the cross to justify surrogacy and oppression at the hands of abusive individuals or structures. An oft-cited example is the idea that an abused woman should "bear her cross," that is, stay in an abusive situation for the sake of maintaining "the relationship."

Current attention to forms of oppression such as racism and sexism emphasize theoretical understandings, such as liberation, that promote release from victimage and make self-acceptance possible.

Within the theme of liberation, the pendulum swings towards human agency and resistance to evil. James Poling, for example, "raises to ontological status human resistance to evil," suggesting that resistance to death is in human beings' true nature, reflecting God's will embodied in Jesus to resist death and bring life through the experience of repaired relationships. The cross, then, represents resistance to evil and Jesus' solidarity with victims.

Other authors in this volume question the idea that Jesus' death is an acceptable sacrifice for a debt owed to God. Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams states that "[h]umankind is...redeemed through Jesus' life and not through

Jesus' death." Rosemary Carbine clarifies in her article "Contextualizing the Cross for the Sake of Subjectivity" why atonement theories should move away from placing singular emphasis upon Jesus' death: Disconnecting Jesus' death from its historical and theological context, namely from the whole of his life and ministry, risks idealizing a victim identity and losing active agency in confronting sin in its historical context. Furthermore, in an atonement system in which a death seems to be demanded, God becomes an "avenger," (see J. Denny Weaver), even an "abuser."

The problem is solved, according to writers like Carbine, by paying attention to Jesus' whole ministry. By focusing upon Jesus' resistance to contextual forms of death and oppression in his life and ministry, that is, by underscoring Jesus' absolute intention to bring life to all whom he encountered as a complete articulation of God's will for him, the cross is reclaimed as a life-giving symbol and reality. Carbine sees the truth of the cross as the in-breaking of the future realm of God. Eschatology calls for a new world, one in which Jesus' followers risk suffering, rather than passively endure oppression.

A movement toward a wholistic understanding of Jesus' ministry reflects another theological trend or recovery, namely, the emphasis upon the "relational" nature of salvation. In fact, in this edition, the concept of relationship emerges as the fundamental understanding of atonement. Mary J. Streufert writes that, "[r]elationship, as the heart of life, indeed, as the heart of the gospel itself, saves." James N. Poling sees the encounter with the living Christ who enters humankind's historical story as part of a "relational web" (emphasis mine) that transforms the individual. Trelstad imagines a relational model as a "parental model of love or grace," God's free gift of life-giving relationship with humankind. Salvation is the

“human-divine relation” reconciled.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann also argues for a relational theology and understanding of atonement. He begins, however, from an analysis of “suffering” as the fundamental relational moment. In the midst of suffering, and most clearly upon the cross, Jesus related completely to humankind in the very depths of suffering places where no one else can find us. Christ relates most deeply to us and for us in the passion. Moltmann’s emphasis upon the profoundly relational quality of Christ’s suffering distinguishes him from other European theologians. This distinction is fascinatingly highlighted in a posthumous exchange with Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who with his disciple Johann Baptist Metz argues against such a passionate God and for a Deus impassibilis. For Moltmann, such a characterization suggests a deity disconnected from humanity and incapable of offering real comfort.

A relational concept of atonement also plays into responses to Martin Luther’s theology. Mary J. Streufert claims that Luther’s theology of the cross relies upon a sacrificial paradigm (the sacrifice of a hero) in which Luther’s “happy exchange” seems more like a legal transaction than an impacting, transforming relationship. While acknowledging the divide between contemporary feminist theologians and Luther, Deanna A. Thompson argues compellingly that Luther’s theology is deeply relational. She offers an insightful explanation of what it means for Jesus to become sin for humankind: Jesus meets humans in the depths of their need. The cross becomes the image and reality of God in Jesus. Following Gerhard Forde, Thompson understands Luther’s famous pro me assertion concerning Jesus’ actions to mean standing “on our behalf” not “instead of us.” By choosing to be in relation with us, Jesus bears all for us. Thompson calls this a model of deep friendship as opposed to a forensic model of payment for a debt

owed.

Mary M. Solberg claims that "Luther understood theology to be relational at its heart," moving him to be concerned with how human beings live in relationship with others. One understands who God is by Jesus' relational connection to the poor and lost. Failure and culpability are confronted in this relational connection to Jesus. All are called to a "responsive accountability" to stand in solidarity with the "excluded." In the context of a relationship with Jesus and neighbor, humankind recognizes failed relationships with God and others: We stand *coram deo* and *coram mundo*, individually and corporately convicted, having opposed God's will and having oppressed the one whom God sent. Having come to give life, Jesus experiences death all around him. His experience underscores that his life was not simply a "lead-up" to the cross event, but rather that all the events of his life were marked by the cross. There was never a moment when Jesus failed to resist sin, death, and the devil in all their individual and corporate forms.

In *Cross Examinations*, the Gospel of John implicitly emerges as the fundamental scriptural resource for critique of atonement theories based on an understanding of death as a payment to a vindictive God. The reviewer offers two observations. First, the Gospel of John emphasizes Jesus' announcement that he has come to give life, as opposed to the synoptic Gospels' emphasis on the prediction of Jesus' death. Second, John's gospel is more conversational and relational. Unlike the synoptics in which the realm of God is often read as a place, in John's gospel the realm of new life is a conversation in which the dialogue partners with Jesus radically "believe into" him and his new reality.

In a relational understanding of atonement, and in critique of

the notion that Jesus was sent to die, traditional language of “sacrifice” also falls under suspicion: either God is an avenger, or powerless people are encouraged “to sacrifice” their agency and personhood to abusers. In an insightful article, Mark S. Heim, relying on the recent work of the literary critic René Girard, argues that Jesus was indeed a sacrifice in the sense that since the beginning of history scapegoats have been killed to placate humankind’s violent nature and maintain social order. But Jesus’ death was the sacrifice to end all sacrifice, to renounce all violence, to restore all victims. Heim claims that the “kind” of death Jesus died, that is death on the cross, makes a difference. Any other death is simply the sound of inevitability. Jesus’ death is our death as we are the ones who sacrifice and who are sacrificed. Only a death on a cross can be effective, not because God demands extreme suffering, but because this death is uniquely ours both in cause and victimage. Jesus’ death on the cross puts an end to it all. Heim’s analysis of sacrifice language echoes Moltmann’s assertion that the cross of Christ ended sacrificial religion “once for all.”

The articles in *Cross Examinations* attend to another pressing social concern, an ecological understanding of God’s work. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda asks, “What suffers more these days than our own planet?” In “A Theology of the Cross for the ‘Uncreators’” she calls us to think of the earth itself as being crucified, and for humanity to understand sin as actions that undo God’s creation. Attention to the creation concomitantly attends to the oppressed and lost because they are the human casualties of economic policies that wreak havoc on the environment. (On this topic, see also the article by Jay McDaniel.)

This collection of articles describes the cross not as an isolated reality, but rather as reflective of the life Jesus lived and came to bring. In bringing good news and the realm of

God to all people, especially the lost, Jesus lived a cruciform existence, rejecting all offers of power that depended upon the oppression of others. He accepted the consequences of standing with those who endured the devastation of being devalued and deemed unworthy of God's acceptance and love. Jesus stands in divine relationship with all in need and calls the powerful to repent of actions contrary to God's will to care for all of humanity and creation. Inasmuch as the cross marks Jesus' entire life, it is the will of God. God's will for us is that Jesus find us where we suffer, never permitting suffering to deflect him from God's will to bring life.

Finally, these articles describe the cross as a paradoxical image, a simultaneity of contraries. Jesus willingly goes to the cross to find the lost, driven there by the forces of death, in which all participate. The very place to which he has been driven becomes the place from which he restores. The cross simultaneously serves as an image of individual and systemic sin. It symbolizes the violence by which political systems maintain order and also stands as a symbol of particular victims and individual participation in systems of violence. Because human beings have driven Jesus to the cross, he becomes sin for us, "pro nobis," not to assuage God, but to change us. We cannot be transformed until we stand before the cross, which tells us the truth of ourselves: we have opposed God and driven Jesus in a deadly way to the cross. From the cross we are embraced in the new truth that transforms our existence. We are transformed by Jesus standing with us and forgiving us. Because the articles are more victim- than sin-oriented, the authors only thinly reference forgiveness-a notable omission because forgiveness is a deeply relational and transformative reality in either understanding.

This volume also has implications for the concept of faith. (See particularly Alice Vargas, "Reading Ourselves Into the

Cross Story.”) The wholistic approach corrects an exclusive emphasis on Jesus’ death that distances human life from Jesus’ life, rendering faith an abstract event hardly involving the believer. Looking at the entirety of Jesus’ life and ministry reveals not only the truth of Christ but also the truth of ourselves. Consequently, Paul’s call to die daily to sin and rise to new life makes experiential sense, and faith becomes a transformative force in the world. Jesus is really present in daily life, not a supernatural ideal.

Salvation, then, is relational, not substitutionary. Jesus’ complete ministry—his life, death, resurrection— is one of relating to humankind in the most extreme circumstances. Faith, a deep trust in the one who relates completely to us and brings life, is no passive event, but an event of agency in which we confess the truth of ourselves and cling to the one who finds us and forgives our worst and most deadly moments. Then, called to agency by the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to resist death wherever we encounter it.

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