

# Luther and World Christianity.

## Part Two

Colleagues,

Here is the second half of the essay "Philip Jenkins' Global Christianity Viewed through Luther's Lenses" Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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### ***PART III: THE SOUTH IS COMING NORTH***

*JENKINS' THESIS #3. By that time [sc. within a few decades] Christianity in Europe and North America will to a large extent consist of Southern-derived immigrant communities.*

*LUTHER: If these Southern-derived communities bring with them a theology-of-the-cross gospel—all will benefit. It'll be Platzregen and Gospel ripples.*

*When Jenkins speaks of "Southern-derived communities," he's thinking of immigrant communities from the southern hemisphere who arrived in Europe and North America in the past few decades. Whether or not they bring with them, or articulate in their northern environment, a theology of the cross is not yet clear from what I know at present. That needs to be investigated and reported out. Even apart from these "Southern-derived communities," there are samples already on the scene of such a southern-accented non-Northern cross-theology. The four samples I have in mind are not (with one possible exception) "southerners" who have come north at all. And they are not*

really recent either, but voices of cross-theology speaking during the last half of the 20th century. The “possible exception,” one who did not migrate to the north on his own, but whose forbears were brought there as slaves, is curiously enough marked with the word Southern. I’m referring to the cross-theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his community, The Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Cut down in mid-life because of his theology and action, he was enacting “southern” theology of the cross nearly half a century ago in the USA. Tuesday of this week was the 38th anniversary of his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee.

The other theologians of the cross whom I have in mind are two Asians and two Africans: Endo Shusaku (Japan) and Francisco Claver (Philippines), both Roman Catholics, and Gabriel Setiloane (Botswana) and Gudina Tumsa (Ethiopia), both Protestants.

I will attempt a brief presentation of MLK’s cross-theology here, and treat the other four theologians in the final section about “Southern churches . . . seek[ing] their own solutions to their particular problems.”

#### MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR’S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AS “NON-VIOLENT DIRECT ACTION”

The element of suffering in cross theology is obvious. King discussed that in great depth in his life and work, especially in his leadership of the non-violent direct action events in which he participated. Non-violence meant “you don’t inflict suffering; instead, you bear it when it comes from the oppressors.” In the training sessions for the protest marches this was a fundamental theme. And if prospective marchers finally could not say yes to that axiom, they were not permitted to march. The paradigm for non-violence for King was,

*of course, Jesus.*

*But the suffering element was not merely imitative, and surely not Uncle Tom-ism. It was strategic for the entire movement. It was not passive pacifism—"just hit me, I won't retaliate"—but, as the last half of the motto says, it was "direct action." Non-violence linked to acts of public pressure, even coercion. I might as well tip my hand: with "non-violent direct action" King was practicing the right-hand, left-hand ambidexterity that his namesake, Martin Luther, had learned (so he said) from the Bible: God himself ambidextrously at work in the world. "Non-violence" was the Gospel in action, God's right-hand witness and work to redeem even the worst segregationist "brothers" (as King always called them). "Direct action" meant the concrete enactment of economic pressure, publicity pressure, political pressure, moral pressure—yes, all of it indeed coercive, rightfully coercive—to undo injustice and augment God's law-ful "care" of oppressed black people in America.*

*SUMMA: King didn't expect the pressuring action to convert segregationist hearts, but he did expect the Christic non-violence with the (right) hand extended to the racist and the audible word "Brother" from the mouth behind the hand to do just that. King saw two fundamental problems in American racism. One was coram hominibus, the human interface of segregationist laws and practices in the land. One was coram deo, the divine interface of the segregationist heart, trusting who-knows-what instead of God and his Christ. God's own law of equity-recompense—a boycott's economic pressure for a community's economic injustice, etc.—did indeed work to change the laws of the land.*

*But human hearts don't change with coercion. Even God doesn't (can't?) coerce heart-changes. The way God healed the coram deo*

problem in Christ is what King sought to enact with the brotherly hand and word, coupled with the refusal to strike back, and the acceptance of suffering when it came. Christians claim that this was Christ's own "non-violent direct action" culminating on Good Friday. If Easter Sunday signals God's vindication both of Christ and of his method, as King proclaimed when he preached about Easter, he trusted that Easter would also work in Selma, Montgomery and Washington DC in the USA. Granted, that is an eschatological hope and confidence. Like all things Christian, King's dream too awaits confirmation on the last day.

## **PART IV: WHEN THE SOUTH COMES NORTH, DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE CHANGE**

JENKINS' THESIS #4. Southern churches will fulfill neither the Liberation Dream nor the Conservative Dream of the North, but will seek their own solutions to their particular problems.

LUTHER: Gospel as solution to problems? Yes and No.

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS IN SOUTHERN THEOLOGIES IS ALREADY AT HAND. WILL THE PLATZREGEN PERSIST IN THE FUTURE?

We've already seen MLKing's approach to "solving the problem of segregation" in American society. I've proposed that he appropriated Luther's theologia crucis with its ambidextrous deity in doing so. His fundamental axiom of non-violent direct action makes distinctions. Distinctions about problems. The Gospel, God's work of the right hand, solves one particular problem, the coram deo problem at the divine-human interface. God's left hand attends to coram hominibus problems at the human-human interface. Important is to keep the specs straight about each hand's operation, lest both be damaged—the Gospel of redemption becoming legalized, and the law of preservation becoming emasculated.

Here are four examples of “southern” theologians of the cross—two Africans, two Asians—seeking solutions to local “particular problems.” They all merit full-scale treatment, well beyond the limits of this essay. For two of them I give more extensive coverage; for the other two less so.

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GABRIEL SETILOANE, a Methodist from Botswana, addressing the *coram deo* problem. [ 2004]

The concluding stanzas from his remarkable theological poem “I am an African” [full text may be found in Anderson, Stransky. *MISSION TRENDS* #3. “Third World Theologies.” 1976. pp 128-131.]

“For ages He eluded us, this Jesus of Bethlehem, Son of Man;  
Going first to Asia and to Europe, and the western sphere . .  
. . .

“Later on, He came, this Son of man;  
Like a child delayed He came to us.  
The White Man brought Him.  
He was pale, and not the Sunburnt Son of the Desert.  
As a child He came.

“A wee little babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.  
Ah, if only He had been like little Moses, lying  
Sun-scorched on the banks of the River of God  
We would have recognized Him.  
He eludes us still, this Jesus, Son of Man.

“. . . . And yet for us it is when He is on the cross,  
This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands  
and open side, like a beast at a sacrifice;  
When He is stripped naked like us,  
Browned and sweating water and blood in the heat of the sun,  
Yet silent,

*That we cannot resist Him.*

*“How like us He is, this Jesus of Nazareth,  
Beaten, tortured, imprisoned, spat upon, truncheoned,  
Denied by His own, and chased like a thief in the night,  
Despised , and rejected like a dog that has fleas,  
for NO REASON.*

*“No reason, but that He was Son of his Father,  
OR . . . Was there a reason?  
There was indeed . . .  
As in that sheep or goat we offer in sacrifice,  
Quiet and uncomplaining.  
Its blood falling to the ground to cleanse it, as us:  
And making peace between us and our fathers long passed away.  
He is that LAMB!  
His blood cleanses,  
not only us,  
not only the clan,  
not only the tribe,  
But all, all MANKIND:  
Black and White and Brown and Red,  
All Mankind!*

*“HO! . . . Jesus, Lord, Son of Man and Son of God,  
Make peace with your blood and sweat and suffering,  
With God, UVELINGQAKI, UNKULUNKULU,  
For the sins of Mankind, our fathers and us,  
That standing in the same Sonship with all mankind and you,  
Together with you, we can pray to Him above:  
FATHER FORGIVE.”*

*The “northern” Jesus brought by the missionaries was a  
theology-of-glory Jesus—“he eludes us still.” Au contraire the  
Christ of cross-theology: “And yet when he is on the cross . .*

. How like us he is, this Jesus of Nazareth. . . . We can pray to him.”

[For fuller discussion –and the full text of the poem–see Edward H. Schroeder, “Lessons for Westerners from Setiloane’s Christology,” *CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION*. Vol. 13,2 (1986) pp. 71-80.]

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*ENDO SHUSAKU, Roman Catholic novelist, Christian apologist from Japan, addressing the coram deo problem. [ 1996]*

*Endo Shusaku articulates an extraordinary theologia crucis in his novel “Silence.” The setting is the early generations of Christian missionaries in Japan. Sebastian Rodrigues, a young and dear Jesuit from Portugal, after years of work in Japan, finally is arrested and put on trial for his faith. No torture, just a request for apostasy. And apostasy will be but a simple act, no one but his judges will witness it. He must only place his foot on the face of Jesus crudely portrayed on a wooden plaque. It is called a “fumie.” Just step on the fumie. That is all.*

*Rodrigues heroically refuses. But after a while he learns the cost of his heroism. Peasant Japanese converts to faith in Christ, who have already placed their foot on the fumie are still being tortured until he, the priest, apostatizes. He hears their screams. It is indeed a diabolic persecution. The fumie is brought before him again.*

*Endo’s text: “The interpreter had placed before his feet a wooden plaque. On it was a copper plate on which a Japanese craftsman had engraved Jesus’ face. Yet the face was different from that on which the priest had gazed so often in Portugal, in Rome, in Goa and in Macau. It was not a Christ whose face*

was filled with the strength of a will that has repelled temptation. The face of the man who then lay at his feet was sunken and utterly exhausted.

“Many Japanese had already trodden on it, so that the wood surrounding the plaque was black with the print of their toes. And the face itself was concave, worn down with the constant treading. It was this concave face that looked at the priest in sorrow. In sorrow it gazed up at him as the eyes spoke appealingly: Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross.”

During all his years in Japan Rodrigues was grieved that the mental image of Christ he’d brought with him from Portugal, a beautiful image always in mind when he prayed, never spoke to him. For the first time ever in his life it was the wretched *fumie* Jesus that spoke to him! And if that weren’t enough, this Jesus called him to apostatize! Only a tormented Christ could speak to a tormented man. Only an agonized Christ could speak to a man in agony. The glorious Christ of power and beauty had always been silent to Rodrigues. And supremely so as he was devilishly maneuvered into apostasy for the sake of Christians converts who had already done so. Only a *fumie* Christ, the Christ of *theologia crucis*, had good words—acceptance, peace and hope—for him in such a time: “Trample! Trample! It is to be trampled on by you that I am here.”

[See Douglas J. Hall, “Rethinking Christ. Theological Reflections on Shusaku Endo’s *SILENCE*.” *INTERPRETATION*, vol. 33 (July 1979) pp. 254-267.]

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*SUMMA*: There are surely other witnesses to explicit *theologia*



*crucis in Southern Christianity. I have in mind two more, and these I've been closer to. Whereas ENDO and SETILOANE above articulate a theologia crucis for the coram deo problem, these two articulated—and practiced—that theology in confronting coram hominibus problems of oppressive political power. One is FRANCISCO CLAVER, now retired Roman Catholic bishop from the Philippines, a tireless cross-theologian during Marcos' dictatorship and in the bloodless EDSA revolution that finally toppled him. The other is GUDINA TUMSA, Lutheran churchman from Ethiopia, addressing the Marxist reign of terror that swept his country in the 1970s. For that witness he paid with his life, leading some of his fellow-Lutherans to name him "the Bonhoeffer of Ethiopia." [ 1979]*

*To review their theology here would go beyond the scope of this essay. Other scholars are at work to bring them into public view. A Gudina Tumsa Foundation exists to do just that for his life and work. Claver continues to practice theologia crucis in the ongoing turmoil in his native land, the harvest of which appears regularly in pastoral statements from the Catholic Bishops Counsel of the Philippines—and in other venues. ["Google" both names to learn more. I just did. 423 references for Claver. 535 for Gudina Tumsa.]*

*Articulating and then practicing theologia crucis vis-a-vis "particular problems" coram hominibus, the social-political interface, is no easy task. We saw that with King and his hard, hard work in confronting America's institutionalized racism with cruciform "non-violent direct action." For him, and for Gudina too, it led to martyrdom. The way of the cross is a way to a cross. Jesus himself said it first. "Take up your cross and follow me. Trying to save your life is a guaranteed way to lose it. Losing your life for my sake is the [only] way to save it." Luther sought to be following that master and that mantra. So much so, that he could say in his lectures on the Psalms:*

*“Crux sola est nostra theologia”–the cross alone is our theology.*

*If southern Christians follow that mantra as they “seek their own solutions to their particular problems,” they will be blessed and so will all the rest of us – even us remnant-northerners – in “the coming of global Christianity.”*

*Peace & Joy!*

*Ed Schroeder*