

# **Luther's Theology of the Cross and its Relevance for South Asia.**

Colleagues,

This week amidst world-wide fiscal crisis [remember: "crisis" is the Greek word for "judgment"], a book review about Luther's theology and Asia. Is that relevant? You decide.

Remembering also that the Best News for facing God's "crisis" is God's "Christos,"

(His) Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

---

**Christ as Sacrament and Example. Luther's Theology of the Cross and its Relevance for South Asia.**

**By Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka**

**Minneapolis: Lutheran Univ. Press**

**2007 217 pp., paper, \$15.00**

The two-line title says it all. Luther's theology of the cross is indeed relevant for South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan). Christ-as-Sacrament and Christ-as-Example are the author's code words for the center of Luther's theology of the cross. In that cross-theology Christ-as-Sacrament designates God's mercy-move to sinners in Christ-crucified. Christ-as-Example calls such forgiven sinners into the world as "little Christs," a favored term of Luther's.

The South Asian context is also a two-faceted reality. One is “massive poverty: a pervasive reality.” The other is “Multi-religiosity: a distinctive characteristic of South Asia.”

Right at the outset Ekka tells us: “We defend the thesis that it is in the affirmation of Luther’s theology of the cross, with its exclusive claims of God’s final revelation in the vulnerability of the cross of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, one is able to be truly open to the other faith as well as become genuinely concerned for the poor people.” (22)

The path for the project is this. 1) The Context Delineated. A survey of the world of South Asia and a survey of the theology of the cross from Biblical times to the modern period. 2) Ekka’s own understanding and presentation of Luther’s theology of the cross. 3) The present debate—a broad spectrum—in interpreting Luther’s theology of the cross and where Ekka takes his place in that debate. 4) M.M.Thomas and Aloysius Pieris—two eminent South Asian theologians and their theologies of the cross. Coming to closure, Ekka’s own construction in chapter 5: The theology of the cross amidst many religions and many poor. And finally 6) The markers of a South Asian theology of the cross, concluding in Ekka’s constructive proposal: Theology of the cross as a “Theology of the Way.”

Chapter 4 is Ekka’s dialogue with two classic South Asian theologians, M.M. Thomas (Protestant) and Aloysius Pieris (Roman Catholic). He values their work, but finds their respective versions of cross-theology “not good enough” when measured by Christ-as-Sacrament and Christ-as-Example, the two anchor points of Luther’s theology of the cross.

For Thomas “humanization” is the code word for the good news of Christ’s cross. With help from Bonhoeffer’s “Christ the man for others,” Thomas’s “understanding of Christ’s New Humanity based

on the resurrection of Christ led him to assert the presence of Christ's transforming power in secular movements and religious traditions [in India]."

Measured by Luther's cross-theology, says Ekka, Thomas overvalues human action by moving it into the realm of "Christ-as-sacrament," God's redemption project to bring lost children (aka sinners) home. Under Luther's "sacrament" rubric –God's mercy-act to and for sinners—it is Christ and Christ alone who exercises this specific "transforming power." Luther finds all "secular movements"— and even "religious traditions among Christians!" yes, even "humanizing" Christian religious traditions—incapable of such sacramental power, and surely not automatically so.

With reference to Luther's other touchstone, Thomas doesn't appropriate "Christ-as-Example" radically and fully enough even with "his unrelenting stress on humanization." Thomas's Indian dialog-partners were the educated elite of contemporary Hinduism, the establishment voices in Brahman culture. With reference to the vast population of "truly oppressed communities of his country, namely, Dalit and tribal communities, . . . wronged and marginalized for centuries, Thomas is unable to speak powerfully on their behalf, about the injustice often inflicted upon them by those who profess to represent them." (115) In newly emerging "Dalit theology," an expanding voice among Indian Christians, Thomas is not seen as an ally. He valued Hinduism too highly and didn't address the "serious issue of Hinduism's religious apartheid," which places "Dalits, tribals, fisher folk, etc." into permanent chains of nobodiness. That is the very opposite of humanization.

Christ-as-Example in Luther's cross-theology is not merely the "man for others," as Bonhoeffer tells us. Christ is the "man for ALL others," millions of nobodies everywhere. Also in India

Considerably farther “left” on today’s spectrum of South Asia’s Christian theology is Aloysius Pieris, Roman Catholic, a Sri Lankan Jesuit priest. His is a radical liberation theology, going well beyond the Latin Americans who taught us the term decades ago. In order for “the church IN Asia to be the church OF Asia” (Pieris’ mantra) he intensifies and Asian-izes liberation theology’s “option for the poor” into a “radical option for the poor.” He rallies us to two “signature phrases”—the “Calvary of Asian poverty” and the “Jordan of Asian Religions.”

The “Calvary of Asian poverty” designates the crucifixion of the poor in Asia, just as was true of Jesus in Jerusalem. And in both cases at the hands of the rich and powerful whose God is Mammon. Mammon and Mammon-worshippers—the power center as never before of today’s global capitalism—constitute THE enemy in Pieris’ cross-theology. Therefore in the light of Asia’s overwhelming poverty [aka Calvary], Pieris proclaims “the hard gospel demand for renunciation, ‘denying oneself,’ the ‘taking up the cross,’ as the absolute requirement of true discipleship.” (119)

The “Jordan of Asian Religions” links Pieris’ theology to Jesus at the Jordan. In accepting John’s baptism at the Jordan Jesus “identified with the religious poor,” discovered his own “prophetic asceticism,” the “point of departure for his own prophetic ministry.” The Jordan-parallel in Asia for the “two streams” intersecting at Jesus’ baptism (prophetic asceticism and the religious poor) is the “twofold spiritualities of the monks and the peasants in Asia.” Though these two spiritualities are specific to Asian contexts, they reach far beyond. He calls them “the metacosmic spirituality of the monks and the cosmic spirituality of the peasants.”

In Pieris’s reading of Jesus, from baptism to Calvary he

struggles against but one enemy, "mammon with all tis principalities and powers." The agenda for the church, to be the church OF Asia, is "to demolish mammon that stands against the liberation of the people and hence against the Kingdom of God." (123)

Ekka concludes "Pieris interprets the cross as planted on Calvary by 'the money-polluted religiosity of his day,' helped by 'a foreign colonial power.' Thus for him, the cross exclusively refers to the empowerment of the poor for the one and only purpose of liberation." In Luther's cross-theology the message is quite different. At Calvary "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting trespasses [of both the rich and the poor], but bestowing on them the very righteousness of God." Pieris has no antennae for Calvary as an event that changes God's relationship with Asian sinners, nor with sinners of any age or context. Christ-as-sacrament (understood as Ekka hears Luther proclaiming it) has no place at all in Pieris's program. Christ-as-example is the whole story. But even that limps in Pieris's cross-theology.

For Christ's unique "example," where Christ is exemplary indeed, is precisely his life and work and word as God's "sacrament" of rescue at the divine-human interface. So by ignoring, even negating, Christ's sacramental self—his reconciling sinners to God — Pieris (unwittingly?) also downgrades Christ's exemplary self "cosmically," and, yes, "metacosmically." Pieris's Christ-as-example with no Christ-as-sacrament is shriveled—even as example.

Ekka's shows us in his own constructive proposal how Pieris could REALLY be radical if he rediscovered Christ-as-sacrament in the paradigm of Luther's cross-theology. In similar fashion he shows us how M.M.Thomas could have a more expansive program of "humanization," were he too to exploit Luther's Christ-as-

Sacrament, where the blood was shed “for ALL.” This is the unique “universalism” of Christ-as-sacrament, and from this Christic universalism (for all), Thomas too could have a Christ-as-example “for ALL others,” embracing also the nobodies that Thomas never quite got to.

In conclusion Ekka takes the pregnant Indian religious term “marga” (the way) and links it to THE WAY, a favored term in the NT for the Gospel as Christ’s own “way” into the world, into ALL the world. His final sentences are: “An Asian theology of the cross will take shape in daily encounter with and confession of Christ the way and draw believers to the way the Savior lived and died. The proclamation and practice of this Way . . . promise true Christian identity and relevance in South Asia. Indeed, the theology of the cross is the theology of the way.”(180)

I think that there is even more in Luther’s cross-theology than Ekka has yet mined for his project. E.g., the centrality of promise and the role of faith. But this he has solidly documented: Luther’s cross-theology is very good news for God’s people living in South Asia.