

Theology of the Cross or Theology of the Resurrection?

Colleagues,

Every Friday noon during the current academic year Robin Morgan and I have joined a handful of other folks at St. Louis (Jesuit) University for a brown-bag lunch hour at the Theology Department. Robin's in a doctoral program there. One item of her program has her working with "Theology Digest," a department publication. At the Friday event a few of us "separated siblings" (aka Lutherans) get together with RC colleagues to review an essay being considered for a future Theol. Digest issue. Even when an essay isn't so good, the convivial exchange always is.

Couple of Fridays ago Robin was leading us through an essay by John Pawlikowski, social ethics prof at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Its title: "Christology after the Holocaust." Her patent sympathy with the article during our discussion led one SLU staffer, Ron, to ask—just as we were about to leave: "Why do you like this piece, Robin?" "Pawlikowski is urging a theology-of-the-cross Christology," she said. "That's the best kind, I think."

"Well," said Ron, "there are all kinds of theologies of the cross. Luther's, for example, was taken straight from Anselm. But there are others." That prompted my intervention: "Whoa! Ron. Agreed there's a variety of theologies of the cross going around these days—and some of them not very good. But that Luther got his from Anselm—no way! Luther's is a critique, a replacement, of Anselm's picture of what happened on Good Friday." But time was up, so this exchange got no farther than that. But it may come up tomorrow as we look at an essay on

Minjung theology, sometimes called a Korean theology of the cross. It's Robin's turn to present again.

Since the Pawlikowski discussion I've read Gerhard Forde's ON BEING A THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS. Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 [Eerdmans 1997]. It's a little over 100 pp. long. I recommend it. Forde doesn't touch on the Anselm and/or Luther question. So I'll have to do it myself. The next two paragraphs signal the direction I'd take, maybe even with Ron tomorrow.

My "take" is that Anselm gets stuck on the category of "rectitude" in spelling out his "substitutionary satisfaction" picture of the cross. That means he never gets beyond the language of the law. Taking images from medieval feudalism Anselm shows how sinner-serfs are woefully in arrears with their obligations to God, the honor they owe to their divine liege Lord. Rectitude requires balancing the accounts. "Satisfaction," making it equal again, restoring God's honor is called for—and that restoration from humans, not angels or some other beings. Sinners, woefully deficient in the business of honoring God, obviously cannot do it for themselves, let alone anyone else. But a sinless human could, especially if that human were also God. For then his human acts of honoring God would have INFINITE dimensions. Thus they would be more than enough to substitute for, to cover, the FINITE dishonor present in each sinner's account with the deity. No matter how many zillion finite sinners there are to cover for, Christ's infinite rectitude, his "rightness" in honoring and obeying God, is by definition sufficient for the task. In a nutshell that's "Why God became Human," or in the Latin title of Anselm's magnum opus: "Cur Deus Homo?"

Luther can also talk substitution and satisfaction, but for him the cross is God's Gospel getting the last word, finally

abrogating the law. It is not God and Christ finding a way to have the law “work” to get sinners saved, as Anselm proposes. Swedish Lundensian theologians earlier in our century contrasted Luther with Anselm, portraying Luther’s atonement model as the “classical” one of early church history, viz., “Christus Victor.” This focuses on Christ conquering the powers that tyrannize sinners: death, wrath, Satan, and yes, even God’s own law. Nearer to the truth, I think, is that Luther had as many “atonement models” as did the Biblical texts he was teaching/preaching on at any one given time—from the cultic picture of sacrifice (Lamb of God) to the commercial “sweet swap” of II Corinthians 5 with several others in between.

Back to Forde’s book. He tells us that the title was purposely chosen. It’s not a book on Luther’s “theology” of the cross. Why? Because the primal Luther document for the topic, the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 [hereafter HD], is not a set of theses on theology of the cross. ‘Fact is, that term [Latin: *theologia crucis*] appears only once in the 28 theses. Luther’s topic in HD, says Forde, is the “theologian” of the cross, the person doing Christian theology. Said even more precisely, the person to whom, on whom, God does his own cruciform work, resulting in “That person deserv[ing] to be called a theologian, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross.”

The word “cross” itself appears only three times in the entire set of theses and doesn’t actually pop up until thesis 20 in the sentence just cited above. So is the Heidelberg Disputation about cross-theology or not? Well, yes, but not as a theology that you could sit back and learn and then give lectures on. Such a procedure is close to that of the “other” kind of theologian—and the ONLY other kind there is—the theologian of glory. Now wait a minute...

The historical context for HD was Luther coming to the 1518 chapter meeting of his fellow Augustinian monks and laying out before them what was going in Wittenberg. This was of more than casual interest since his 95 Theses on Indulgences the year before were now a public hot potato. In HD Luther is laying out his fundamental critique of scholastic theology with its foundations built on good works of the law [theses 1-12] and human free will [13-18]. Drawing on St. Paul and "his trustworthy interpreter St. Augustine," authorities no one would want to argue with, Luther blows away those twin pillars before he even mentions the "cross."

Then moving to the language of I Cor. 1, in theses 19-24, we hear all three mentions of the cross and its contrasting term in "theologians of glory," his summary label for the scholastics. The first mention of the cross in thesis 20 has been cited above. The other two references are #21: "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is," and #24: "Yet that wisdom [sc. the "wisdom" that theologians of glory relish, the law's wisdom] is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross we misuse the best in the worst manner."

Glory theologians, says theses 21, not only misread God, but they also misread the world. Such misreading is not just a slight blur, but 180 degrees wrong. Correspondingly, the law with its pressure on us to perform, is not per se perverse, but in the hands of glory theologians becomes precisely that.

In hyping the cross Luther is not saying that Good Friday is the one and only item of Christian theology. Rather Christ and his cross are eye-opener and then the eye-piece for viewing everything that can be called Christian. Call it the "cross-hairs" in the scope. The subject matter in cross-theology is the

entire breadth of the Biblical narrative—from creation to Bethlehem to Calvary and Easter and Pentecost and the Parousia. Theologians of the cross are not the opposite of theologians of the resurrection. Only through the cross-hairs can we see Easter as the Good News is it “for us and for our salvation.” So also the term “glory” is not a No-No for theologians of the cross. Instead the issue is: what’s the glory? Where and how do you find it? Answer: not in our doing “whatever we can” to move toward God, but in Christ’s move toward us “manifesting things of God through suffering and the cross.”

In an earlier book on this topic (from the days of non-inclusive language) WHERE GOD MEETS MAN, Forde had spoken of the “traffic problem” arising from our human yen to move somehow, someway, at least just a little, up toward God, while God opted to move down—way down in suffering and the cross—to us. One of the chapters portrayed the sinner’s dilemma (and God’s too) as humans being intent on “Moving Up the Down-Staircase.” That’s still a compelling image.

There’s a lot of other “goodies” in Forde’s HD study. And it’s not at all an exercise in Reformation archaeology. He’s constantly in dialogue (read “argument”) with churchly and secular voices today, many of whom write off theologians of the cross as pessimists or masochists, or even sadists. But not so, says Forde. Pursuing cross-theology is no more “negative” than helping an addict, an alcoholic, “hit bottom” so that healing may begin. And like such a one, even theologians of the cross are not “healed,” but “being healed.” The Old Adam and Old Eve, chronic theologians of glory and thus addicted to believing in their own achievements (however infinitesimal) and their free will (doing the best I can), still spook around within all cross-theologians. So they too say freely, even cheerfully, “I’m a recovering glory-theologian; but I am recovering.” Call it Resurrection. Call it Easter. Risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Peace & Joy!
Ed