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EXALTED PRIESTS? MINISTERIAL FORMATION AND THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS[1]

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Abstract

Following Douglas John Hall, I note that in this article triumphalism rather than a theology of the cross is generally the basis for ecclesial praxis. I then go on to outline a feminist theology of the cross and argue that this theology of the cross should be the foundation of ecclesiology in South Africa at this time. In particular, it should be the basis for theological education and ministerial formation.

Keywords: Theology of the Cross, Ecclesiology, Ministerial Formation

Introduction

On the opening day of the 2006 Soccer World Cup I was startled by a news report which advised that the churches in Germany are holding "half-time" services for soccer worshippers to pray for divine intervention for their teams. Whilst I am not saying the church should not look for ways to engage a contemporary idiom and find ways of communicating with people who do not normally attend church services, I shall be arguing in this paper that this model of church ignores completely the theology of the cross, which, I shall be arguing, should be the foundation of all our theology.

I teach theology in an Anglican (Church of the Province of Southern Africa – hereafter "CPSA") theological college where we are involved in academic and ministerial formation of people preparing for ordained ministry. From this experience I shall reflect on what, in my view, is a refusal to follow the way of the cross, or more accurately a *theologia crucis*. Even where we are aware of (and perhaps even teach about) the theology of the cross, our church praxis, including ministerial formation, does not often flow from or support this theology. Instead, the theology of the cross is seen, at best, as a kind of "optional extra", rather than the foundation on which all our theology and especially ecclesiology is built. The consequence of this is what Douglas John Hall calls triumphalism which presents itself as a "full and complete account of reality" excluding the possibility of error or difference of opinion. (Hall 2003:17). This triumphalism is manifested in the inwardness of many of our churches with the focus on the service on Sunday rather than service of the community; and debates about ordination rather than how best to challenge injustice; and with a theology of certainty and absolutes rather than doubts and questions. I shall say more of this later. I want to argue that the choice between triumphalism or the theology of the cross is not simply a question for academic debate. As Hall (2003:1) asks, provocatively:

> is the violence in which a religion is involved … coincidental, perhaps even accidental, or can it be traced to core beliefs or unthinking presuppositions of the faith in question?

[1] I acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of my colleague Dr Jonathan May who read and commented on an earlier draft of this article and discussed with me many of the ideas in this paper. Thanks too to the students at the College of the Transfiguration who constantly challenge me to re-think and develop my theology and to Prof John de Gruchy whose comments at the first reading of this paper helped me sharpen some of my thinking.

> ...What must be asked is whether a religion directly or indirectly courts [the use of violence] ... whether its foundational teaching and tone render it open to misuse or whether ... it manifests any clear checks and balances against co-optation by such mentalities.

I shall be arguing that given the contemporary South African context with its huge wealth discrepancies, the HIV and Aids pandemic, high levels of corruption and violent crime, and its very new democracy, choosing a theology of the cross is not simply a matter of personal preference, but a foundational ethical, spiritual and theological imperative. By way of arriving at this conclusion, I shall outline what I understand the theology of the cross to involve as well as considering some critiques of the theology of the cross, especially from women theologians.

Theologia Crucis and its Critics

In rather broad strokes, I shall sketch out the *theologia crucis,* because my experience is that it is largely a forgotten or ignored theology perhaps because, as Moltmann (1974:3) suggests, it is a "not much loved" theology.

As I understand it, the theology of the cross is a theology rooted in paradox: The paradox that God is revealed not in glory and power but in weakness and shame. As Luther noted in his twentieth thesis: "He (sic) deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." In other words God is revealed, according to Luther, not through reason, but through the passion of Christ. The key texts (though by no means the only texts) underlying this theology are the linked ideas of Isaiah 45:15: "Truly you are a hidden God" and 1 Cor. 1:18-35, namely that the message of the cross is foolishness. For Luther the *theologia gloriae* (which is the much better loved theology) results, ironically, in confusion because it presents God's revelation in a straightforward, authoritarian way. At best, according to Luther, we catch glimpses of the reverse side of the hiddenness of God in the cross.

An important re-statement of the theology of the cross in modern times is that of Jürgen Moltmann in his *The Crucified God.* Moltmann, though acknowledging his debt to Luther, moves quite some distance from Luther's theology. His retrieval of Luther's theology is part of his project to outline a theology of hope in which he sought to attempt to make sense of those "shattered and broken survivors" (Moltmann 1974:1) of his generation who returned from the 1939-1945 War. He summarises what the theology of the cross means for him in four statements, viz. that the theology of the cross:

1) must be read and interpreted in the light of the resurrection;
2) demands that we ask ourselves: Who is God in the cross of the abandoned Crucified One?;
3) implies a concern for much more than personal salvation and instead inquires about the liberation of all people;
4) must be understood to critique both church *and* society (Moltmann 1974:4).

There have been, since Moltmann's revival of Luther's theology of the cross, several writers who reacted sharply to Moltmann.[2] In particular, a number of feminist theologians have dismissed the theology of the cross on the basis that it justifies the abuse of women and other oppressed people.[3] The complaint is that, simplistically expressed, if Jesus, the right-

[2] See, for example, Boff 1987:102-116, Sölle 1975.

[3] See, for example, Daly 1973:77, Brown and Parker 1989:2.

eous one suffered, then we too must expect to suffer. I wish to raise two points in response to his critics:

1) Moltmann himself is aware of the possibility of his theology being used against those who already suffer. Thus he writes:

> Too often peasants, Indians and black slaves have been called upon by the representatives of the dominant religion to accept their sufferings as "their cross" and not to rebel against them ... Thus it makes a difference who speaks of this mysticism of the cross, to whom he speaks and in whose interests he speaks. In a world of domination and oppression one must pay close attention to the concrete function of any preaching and any devotion. As "opium for the people" produced by those who caused the suffering, this mysticism of suffering is a blasphemy, a kind of monstrous product of inhumanity. But this does not explain the strange fact that the Christ of the poor has always been the crucified Christ ... they find in him a brother who put off his divine form and took on the form of a slave to be with them and to love them. They find in him a God who does not torture them as their masters do, but becomes their brother and companion (Moltmann 1974:49).

2) Moltmann's entire theological project is steeped in his doctrine of the social Trinity. The "handing over of the Son" can therefore not be said to be divine child abuse, but an event *within* God:

> The gruesome image can then arise of a divine sadist who looks on at the torment of his "beloved Son" and does not intervene. But if we look more closely, then we recognize the Father *in* the Son (Moltmann 1991:75).

Thus, I want to argue (along with theologians such as Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel 1991, Mary Grey 1989 and Kwok Pui-Lan 1984) that it is possible (and indeed desirable) to subscribe to a *feminist* theology of the cross.

Firstly, we may note that not all women theologians dismiss the image of Jesus the suffering servant of God. Chung Hyun Kyung (1991:53) notes that this image is most accessible to women who suffer. She goes on to suggest that any attempt to image Jesus as triumphant king and high priest is simply to align him with the oppressors of those who suffer. However, she too is aware of the dangers and notes that "making meaning out of suffering is a dangerous business" (Chung 1991:54).

Secondly, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel (1991:86) encourages us to understand a feminist theology of the cross to include not only the death of Jesus, but his life, work, network of relationships and resurrection too. In other words, whilst the cross exemplifies this mysterious revelation of God, so too does Jesus' life of association with the outcasts and sinners and the resurrection message grasped by the women. The theology of the cross is the way Jesus lived his whole life, not just the last three hours of it.

Thirdly, and to my mind most importantly, essential to a feminist theology of the cross is the realization that the theology of the cross is not inextricably tied to the Anselmian satisfaction theory of atonement. Luther, of course, drew on Anselm's theory of atonement. However, it is possible to describe a theology of the cross that is not based in Anselm's theory. As Hall (2003:24) notes:

> ... if the atonement had [not] been ... taken over lock, stock and barrel by Anselmic sacrificial theory ... we would not have Christian feminists and humanists today who find the cross of Jesus Christ an obnoxious and ethically dangerous symbol.

Without dealing with this in any detail I wish simply to note that a number of black, feminist and womanist theologians have pointed out the problems of adopting Anselm's satis-

faction theory.[4] Anselm proposed that in the light of human sin, the only way for God's honour to be satisfied was by the death of Jesus. Black, feminist and womanist theologians have noted that Anselm's understanding not only heaps guilt on those already marginalized in society, but that it also takes no account of the unequal positions of black and white people, men and women. In fact it accommodates racism and sexism because it refuses to see structural sin and the participation of some groups in such structures. Consequently a number of these theologians argue for an alternative theory of atonement, most notably so-called victory theories. John Denny Weaver (2001) helpfully suggests a contemporary understanding of what he calls "narrative *Christus Victor*". In his understanding, Jesus' death is not a consequence of the will of the Father [sic], but a result of Jesus' prophetic challenges to the injustices of the imperial Roman rule, the abusive power exercise by the temple priests, the scribes and Pharisees, and the unthinking mob of Jerusalem.

The theology of the cross for which I would thus argue is one that is not based on a satisfaction understanding of the atonement, and is one which understands Jesus' death on the margins of society, crucified between two criminals, as a consequence of his refusal to submit to the triumphalist powers of his day (the temple priests and Pharisees and the Roman political occupiers); and precisely in that painful, abandoned death, paradoxically, God is revealed.

To summarise then, in the most helpful words of Hall, the theology of the cross is characterized by the three virtues named by Paul in 1 Cor. 13, namely faith, hope and love.

But, remembering the importance of the *via negativa* for both Paul and Luther, the three positive virtues should be stated together with what they negate: Faith (not sight), hope (not consummation), love (not power). ... The theology of glory ... is invariably tempted to be a theology of sight, not faith; finality, not hope; and power, not love (Hall 2003:33).

Thus I want to argue that this theology of the cross should be the foundation and touchstone for all our theology. From this claim, I want to go on now to consider the implications of this for our ecclesiology and church praxis, and in particular the implications for theological education and ministerial formation.

Implications for the Church

I would like to deal with these implications under three headings: The drive towards absolute Truth, self-serving inwardness and competitiveness.

The Drive towards Absolute Truth

I noted a moment ago Hall's call for faith, not sight, hope, not consummation and love, not power. However, doctrinal propositions of sight, finality and power, based in literal Biblicism, form the basis of much preaching, and certainly in my recent experience, form the basis of much of what goes for theological enquiry in students preparing for ordained ministry. This is not the fault alone of students or teachers of theology. Fundamentalism is (and has been for several decades) on the rise. As Volf (1992:90) notes:

> Whether we like it or not, the fundamentalist movement has almost paradoxically become one of the main ways of transmitting and inculturating the Protestant form of Christian faith in today's world.

And, as Cochrane (2001:37) has pointed out, fundamentalism is not limited to the theologically conservative evangelicals. There may be a number of fundamentalisms. However,

[4] See, for example, Cone 1997, Ruether 1998, Heyward 1999, Williams 1993.

common to each is the conviction that it possesses the truth, the desire to convert those in error and to exclude those who are different. The "debate" (though that is perhaps too charitable a description) surrounding the place of homosexual people in the CPSA offers a clear illustration of this point. People on all sides of the debate have issued polemical statements which include a call for exclusion of those who do not share their views. Many Anglicans fear the Anglican communion will be split apart by these debates and the question on many lips at Anglican meetings is: "How can we save the church?' I want to suggest that if we follow the theology of the cross, this is not a proper question or concern. If we follow the theology of the cross, then we should not be worrying about "saving" the church, but rather how we can discover the love of Christ amongst people we perhaps do not feel too comfortable with, which ever side of the debate we are on. A theology of the cross must be hesitant about any dogmatic statements because it realises that the foundation of all theological statements (viz. God) is revealed in paradox, or as Luther suggests "from behind". We don't get a clear view and so all our statements about God will need to be tempered with caution.

This does not preclude making *any* statements about God. That would, for theology, be absurd. So, for example, we may wish to state that it is a truth of Christian theology that "God is love". This truth arises from the story of God as told in the Christ event. The problem arises when we fail to recognize our interpretation of God's love is precisely that – our interpretation – and that others may interpret that love differently.

As Hall (2003:159) points out, the drift to fundamentalism may become "the inspirer and propagandist of racial, ethnic, sexual and political ideologies", but in the long term the even more damaging effect is what he calls "the unnuanced and sloganized expressions of doctrine" (Hall 2003:159). A theology of the cross should remind those of us who teach and learn that all theology is provisional, often paradoxical:

> Because Christians are people on the way to their final destiny, their knowledge cannot be a knowledge of those who have already arrived. To treat beliefs about ultimate reality as ultimate themselves would be to confuse being-on-the-way with reaching-the-goal (Volf 1992:96).

Self-serving Inwardness

Thirty years ago Moltmann (1974:7) diagnosed the "double crisis" of the church as the crisis of relevance and the crisis of identity. He could have been talking about South Africa in 2006. Prior to 1994 most churches in South Africa were vitally involved in challenging apartheid. However, since then, we seem to be scrabbling about trying to re-discover our identity and relevance in a post-apartheid, democratic South Africa. And it seems to me that the way we have been attempting to discover our identity is by focusing on ourselves. So much energy goes into the Sunday service, the church guilds, the buildings, the committees. At the College of the Transfiguration, where I teach, we not infrequently face complaints from senior clergy that we have not spent enough time in teaching ordinands "the Anglican ethos", or training them to preach and lead the liturgy. I have not yet faced a complaint that we do not do enough to train ordinands to go out into the community and take on the suffering of the poor, the sick, survivors of rape and abuse or shack-dwellers. For all that we pay lip service to these things, what the church as organization wants is well trained liturgists and managers of the church business. So in a number of dioceses in the CPSA, parishes that cannot sustain themselves financially (which can often be a euphemism for parishes that are not rich enough) are forced to close down, or to lose their stipendiary ministers. Conversely

parishes with a few wealthy members are allowed to keep going with a weekly Eucharist and precious little besides, simply because the members "pay" for their church.

Even when our hearts might be said to be in the right place, the underlying theology is a theology of glory. Let me offer an example. I have been teaching a short six week section of a course on theological responses to HIV and Aids. Though many of these students are hard-working and selfless in ministering to people living with Aids, the theology revealed by almost all of their conversations is one of "us the privileged" serving "them the afflicted". This is a theology of glory. I do not want to be harsh towards our students. They are no different from the rest of us, formed by a triumphalist church that wants to provide answers to the have-nots. I think that this is exacerbated, at least in the CPSA, by the changing character of those coming for ministerial training. Most ordinands in the ministerial formation programme have become over the years, if not more middle class in fact, at least in their aspirations. Nearly all expect a reasonably comfortable house and a good car the year after leaving College. Many now question quite vigorously a suggestion that in doing theology we should give epistemological privilege to the poor. How much more difficult then to embrace a theology of the cross that for many implies going back to the very place and people they have escaped. I raise these issues with a degree of caution. I speak from a privileged position. However, I cannot help noticing that some at least of those who come to us for training seem to be there in order to get a reasonably paid job with good security.

Whether or not a theology of the cross was an appropriate foundation for ecclesiology prior to 1994, today it is most appropriate. The church is no longer a prophetic church under threat from an authoritarian government. Without making pronouncements on the authoritarian nature or otherwise of our present government, because of the very nature of governments (especially one dominated by so large a majority party as this one) this is a critical moment for the churches. It is an opportunity, in my view, for us to recognize that it is the time to move away from being in uncritical solidarity with the government (despite the government's impeccable struggle credentials) and to become a church that rediscovers its identity and relevance in the theology of the cross. Otherwise we face the criticism that we are pursuing a triumphalist way rather than the way of the cross. The easy movement of church leaders into government structures is evidence of just this. So, instead of walking away from power and triumphalism, the organized church has instead in most cases watched the TAC challenge the government over its Aids policies, and the poor of Matatiele and Khutsong challenging the government over its failure to exercise democratic process amongst the poor.

Perhaps this is precisely the point. The organized church will always be hard-pressed to engage a theology of the cross, because the organized church is always driven by its own need to survive. This leads me to my final point concerning church praxis, namely competitiveness.

Competitiveness

Each time I attend a meeting of the clergy the conversation traverses the same territory – how hard-working we all are, or rather how much harder than everyone else I am working. Then we move to how big our church is or is growing. Churches are evaluated on criteria such as the size of the congregation, the number of ordained ministers, the amount of revenue raised, the quality of the liturgy, music or preaching. Seldom, is a church valued because it has placed itself at the prophetic edge of defending the poor and marginalized and even suffering persecution for this action. That was of course not always the case. Some of

the churches and many of their members here in the 1980's and 1990's indeed suffered for their prophetic challenges to the state. Some still do, but by and large we operate in competitive mode.

It seems to me that we foster this from the very beginning of ministerial formation. We allocate marks to students who become known as "good" or "bad" depending on the marks they score. Of course some of us try and alleviate this by designing group projects and facilitating cooperative ways of working, or reminding students that marks are what *this* piece of work is worth, not what she is worth. However, I believe that we foster competitiveness at a much more fundamental level. For example, hardly a single student makes it through all three years of College without suffering a bereavement in the family, which then involves the dislocation and expense of travelling home for the funeral, the grief of this and other remembered deaths, and missing out on several days of classes and other College activities. Of course life in the College must go on. But there is no system in place to cushion and assist a bereft student returning after several days or a week's absence. Life moves on without them. That is because of the models of theological education and church that we have long followed. I wonder if a theology of the cross would suggest a different way of pursuing education – one that allowed us all to stop and bring back on board the bereaved student. Totally impractical? May be, but may be that's what a theology of the cross invites.

Sitting on the ordained side of the clergy/lay fence, it hardly lies in my mouth to wonder about the value of ordination. However, I shall risk doing so, especially in the light of the models of ordained ministry which we perpetuate. Ordination is the prize for which all our students strive. Because of the perceived notions of what ordination involves, as well as the very real practices of some bishops, it is imperative for ordinands to hide weaknesses, not to be found out, not to be seen to fail at anything. How can we possibly go out and sit amongst the crucified if we are relentlessly pursuing models of perfection and power?

In Conclusion

By way of an in conclusion I need to say that I don't have answers. I don't know how I would organize the church or even ministerial formation if I had power for a day to do so. What I am convinced about is the need to be more intentional about training ourselves and our students to live with more, not less ambiguity. I am convinced that whilst we cannot neglect ministry to the non-poor, most of us are presently neglecting, instead, ministry amongst the poor. What I am convinced about is the need to learn to make more room for difference and diversity and the need to live more openly and lovingly with our own and others' brokenness. In other words, we need to live out of a theology of the cross.

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