

CROSS, CREATION, AND ECOLOGY

The meeting point between the theology of the cross
and creation theology in Luther

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I.

When in 1967 Lynn White Jr in his article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", charged the Judeo-Christian tradition with the attitude developed in the West toward nature, he set fire to a theological circus overtly concerned with keeping the christological performance on the central stage. Even if he did not point directly to christocentrism as the fertilizer feeding the roots of the ecological crisis (as others following his steps would), the message was well understood: theology, too much focused on the *homo perditus et Deus salvator* has, in its relationship to God, lost a more incisive view of nature (human included).

A theocentric perspective in theology followed the criticism of the so-called "Unitarianism of the Second Article" (H R Niebuhr). Consequently, theologies of creation began to exercise the muscles of the atrophied classical dogmatic *locus*. Proposals went from renewals of Thomist infrastructural approaches to *quasi* pantheistic views of nature and creation as an "original blessing" (M Fox) or as mother earth incestuously raped by her own children.

The prominence of the theology of the Word in Protestant theology caused the resurgence of a theology of creation with some peculiar characteristics. As opposed to the Roman Catholic tendency to regard nature as a somehow positive epistemological *datum* for the construction of the knowledge of the relationship between Creator and creature, Protestants tended to favor a negative epistemological view. Even if there was some resistance to a radical rejection of natural revelation (the case of E Brunner vs K Barth), the significance of creation was focused on salvation history: creation as the first act of salvation.

Until very recently the suspicion that a theology of creation swept away the energies of theologians who were failing to take seriously enough the political challenges in the history of suffering prevailed in the political and liberation theologies. A "green" theology would not blend with a "red" theology, until the peoples of the Amazon rain forest and other indigenous peoples of the world vindicated the urgency of having what could be called a "brown" theology.

Despite the strong emphasis of the Reformer on the theology of creation, there has been a clear embarrassment in the Lutheran tradition in dealing with this issue. With the exception of some major works in the last three or four decades (e.g., H Bornkamm, P Watson, R Prenter, J Stittler, D Löfgren) Luther's emphasis on creation has been much filtered through the *Ordnungstheologie*, whose heritage is a static view of nature allied to some political and ideological uneasiness. Lutheran theology attempted to regain credibility and relevance with the works built on the theology of the cross. Luther's concern with creation was largely dismissed as a well-intended, even insightful inventory of theological motifs, but not systematized enough to serve as a foundational theological argument.

The difficulty of linking Luther's theology of the cross — with its assertion that "God is not to be encountered but in suffering and in the cross"¹ — with the theology of creation — with Luther's affirmation of the double knowledge of God² — is a point of conflict and dispute. The distinction between special and general revelation as a way of interpreting Luther's *duplex cognitio Dei* has been regarded with suspicion by those who consider the cross as the radical Christian specificum, constituting both the identity of God and God's relevance for the definition of God's immanence and divine economy.

On the other hand, uneasiness has also been felt by those who esteem the restriction of God's revelation to a Christian specificum to be a hindrance to the growing awareness of ethnic, cultural, and anthropological relativism or, to the ecological sensitivities eager to read the divine hieroglyphics in the book of nature. Are these two incompatible ways of organizing a Lutheran theology?

II.

I would like to suggest that the basic difficulty I have pointed to concerns the conceptual distinction and articulation between the visible and the

Word, between creature and Creator, the outer and the inner, between what the senses register and reason draws together, and what grace reveals to the heart. I shall use these sets of categories instead of the common approach of situating the issue in the relation between the First and the Second Article of the Creed because, before it becomes a dogmatic problem as such it is an epistemological one. It refers to the mode of cognition of, and the constraints for, the knowledge of God. Therefore, the correct *locus* for this discussion is revelation and not primarily creation or redemption.

In Luther there is a paradoxical and asymmetrical relation between the two sets of categories within which Luther operates to formulate his understanding of the *duplex cognitio Dei*: By paradoxical I mean, that one (the visible) points to the other (the Word) but is in it simultaneously negated or contradicted. It implies the rejection of analogical reasoning with apparent analogical correspondence, i.e., its mode of argumentation is ironic. By asymmetry I mean that what appears to be the case in one set of categories is not simply reflected in the other, but is shaped in the other in unexpected ways.

Let me exemplify this with some of Luther's well-known imagery. Particularly in his commentaries on the Psalms we find affirmations that nature is full of parables, metaphors, and signs. He will deny nevertheless that through them the Creator can be known. In fact even what is seen is de-based if not seen through faith. Only faith can see creation? That means that the view we have of nature is simultaneously our blindness to creation. Between one and the other there is no analogical leap. The "mechanism" through which we link creation and Creator cannot be grasped externally.

The famous metaphor of nature as a mask (*larva*) or wrapping (*invalocrum*) of God points to the same ironic mode of reasoning. This can be understood better if we go to the origin of the mask metaphor. It is worth remembering that Luther adopted the motif of the mask from the medieval carnival. Here the mask served as a means of caricaturing reality, revealing it but, at the same time, concealing it in its reverse. The mask presented popular projections of social and political life with burlesque resources within the space of the festival. Nevertheless, restricted to that space, it also concealed the true social relations in everyday life: it provided a glimpse of the "unseen" and intentionally distorted it. Nature is the carnival of creation.

The same goes for the wrapping motif: it reveals a presence while denying to sight any evidence of its content or even of its existence. The wrapping is all to sight, but it also blinds one to the essential. The one who

1 *At Deum non inveniri nisi in passionibus et crucem.* WA I, 362, pp. 28f.

2 *Duplex est cognitio Dei.* WA 40 I, 607, p. 28.

3 *WA 38.53, p. 24f.*

receives a wrapped present is convinced, if at all, of the existence of an unseen content by trust alone in the giver.

The visible things (*visibilia*) do not allow for any direct or indirect access to revelation, but they are what simultaneously makes it directly and indirectly present. In the visible God's presence is a "mediated immediacy" (J. Baille). Still, this very affirmation attests only to God's utter absence. To rely on natural reason for evidence or indications of God's presence will reveal only the idol of the heart (*idolum cordis*).⁴ The visible becomes an idol if it is seen as a directly reflected image of the unseen so that the gaze of the beholder is captivated by it. Yet, at the same time, it can become a "picture" of the unseen when the gaze does not stop at, nor is frozen in, what is presented to sight, even if it cannot go beyond it to have a direct vision of the unseen. An oxymoron, like "mirroring transparency," is here required to convey the intended meaning. What is reflected is not the visible presence as such, like in the reflection of a mirror, but it is an absence manifested in the reflection.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the visible is indifferent or neutral with regard to the knowledge of God. The *Deus vestitus* — the potential idol⁵ — is simultaneously that which protects us from the *Deus nudus* — the irresistible abyss of being. The clothed God is the representation of that which cannot be represented. By affirming its very absence it simultaneously offers the experience of a presence. The clothed God is the God of religious experiences by which humans open themselves up to whatever transcends real existence while at the same time closing themselves off to the radical experience of otherness.

Such is the importance of the "majesty of matter"⁶: it prevents our knowledge to convince us of the need for God's self-revelation through the Word. In this sense the double knowledge of God is affirmed, even though in paradoxical and asymmetric terms. What Luther said about the efficacy of the liturgical elements is exactly what could be said about the visible in general: not because of them but never without them.⁷ God, as Luther would state it in the Heidelberg Theses,⁸ is neither to be seen nor sought behind creation, nor to be inferred from it, but only to be recognized in and through it. However, this "in and through" would again be misleading were we not to understand that that which creation "reveals"⁹ is the concealment, the absence of God or, our blindness to the divine reality.

4 WA 14.587, p. 30.

5 WA 31/1.230, pp. 24f.: "der Teuffel wird und ist kein Teuffel, er sey zuvor Got gewesen."

6 WA 39/II.4, p. 32.

7 WA 19, pp. 72-73.

8 WA 1.354, pp. 17f. (theses 19-20).

Behind the notion of the *Deus absconditus* lies the conviction that the visible in general presents us a clothed God who, as such, remains a mystery. The *Deus absconditus* is not to be taken as an axiological statement alone that accounts for the presence and the role of evil by manifesting God's strange work (*opus alienum*). For Luther this is also an ontological statement. God is not only hidden in wrath, but in fact hidden in the external things in general! The reason that the concealment of God is realized in God's wrath through the *opus alienum* is because it is through evil, in particular, that one comes to realize the failure to come to know God through the visible. This means that God is hidden in the beauty and goodness of nature, and also in ugliness and evil. The point is that it is tempting to find evidence of the divine in goodness and beauty whilst simultaneously rejecting evil as a pedagogue. This amounts to idolatry. Not because beauty and goodness are false instructors, but because they become false projections of the heart when separated from evil and ugliness. The goodness I see outwards conceals the evil that lies *absconditus*, inwards. And the reverse is also true: the evil I see outwards reveals the goodness that lies inwards.

For Luther evil is not beyond God's infinity. Hence, there is only an epistemological primacy of the *opus alienum* in the knowledge of God. God should not be praised for the greatness of creation in spite of evil; God should be praised in the midst of evil where God's continuous creation works out of the annihilating force of evil. Because of this force — the nihilicity of evil — God's creativity is manifest in and through it. It is this creativity, then, and not evil itself, that makes the knowledge of God possible. This is the fundamental thesis for supporting theologically the *creatio ex nihilo* within the negative Augustinian view of evil as the sole absence of goodness (*privatio boni*).

A call for responsibility grows out of the awareness of our sinful condition. For Luther, nature did not fall, but suffered the curse of evil because of human failure. "Not only in the churches, therefore, do we hear ourselves charged with sin. All the fields, yes, almost the entire creation is full of such sermons, reminding us of our sin."¹⁰ Therefore, the point in Luther's use of the mask motif is not as much to stress that God is hidden, as to underscore that we are hiding ourselves by not recognizing this mask for what it is, either by trying to get a glimpse of the face behind it or simply by ignoring it.

The hidden God raises a mask in which humans recognize themselves as in a deceptive mirror, for it reveals the other side of the goodness creation has been endowed with. Humans are called to recognize themselves in it, in its beauty, and from its sinister side. The *Deus absconditus* is then also

9 WA 42.156, pp. 24f.

the *Deus revelatus* because God's concealment, once recognized as such, prompts the emergence of the *homo revelatus*. Therefore, the Reformation's outcry for letting God be God corresponds to the motto "let nature (human included) be nature." Auschwitz, Hiroshima, or the hole in the ozone layer are the masks of God raised for our self-recognition, in which we measure ourselves as much as in the lilies in the fields. The nature we see is the mirror image of what we have made it, or have allowed it to become. Nevertheless, in the experience of evil we do not have the mask as such, but a fissured mask in whose clefts we have the terrible sight of the abyss of being. This is why evil, as a cracked mask, becomes a pedagogue: by its cracks we know that we are not looking at a face, and through them we know that there is no pretty face behind it.

III.

If the visible is the projected side of our own inner beauty and hideousness, the Word is always the word of the other. If I can possess what I see (because I can reduce it conceptually to my own sameness), the Word comes always from beyond the limits of my possible domain. Without the Word, reality loses all focus and *telos*, for the visible does not allow for transcendence. It is by definition the immanent. What it reveals is not the other but, rather, only what we have made ourselves to be. The Word is the creative force in God's continuous work of creation. A transcendent force capable of bringing reality out of non existing things (*creatio ex nihilo*).¹⁰ If reality becomes aimless without the Word, it is the presence of the Word that attributes finality to reality, because, in the presence of the Word, reality itself is being constituted, restored, and created.

It is the epiphanic presence of the Word, as transcendence in immanence, that attributes to reality a sacramental character. It is in this sense that we can affirm God's ubiquity in creation itself. This affirmation is not deduced from a capability of "seeing" beyond the visible, but, precisely, because the visible becomes transparent. In being transparent it does not, strictly speaking, have a beyond! The visible does not, by its sacramental character, gain a magic force. The transparency of nature is in fact its own mirroring transparency effect through which we are sent back to the depths of our own existence, which in Luther's excentric anthropology is outside us. Nature loses, therefore, its own pretensions of otherness. And this is the same as saying that we lose our illusion of being strange to na-

ture in recognizing ourselves as strange to God. This lies at the core of the *finitum capax infiniti*, for the infinite is never attainable, but always present in the mirroring transparency of the visible.

Luther defines this sacramental or mysterious character of God's ubiquitous presence through Christ in the context of his discussion of the three modes of Christ's presence¹¹ of which the third mode presents him "as near in all creatures as God is immanent in them." Precisely this argument of Luther's is quoted in the Formula of Concord to support the position that affirms at once the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, and the distinction between a sacrament *stricto sensu* and the affirmation that all of creation entails God's masked presence¹². What distinguishes the sacramental or mysterious character of God's presence in creation from the proper sacraments for the authors of the Formula of Concord is not the combination of element and Word, but its use (*usus*) in the ritual tradition instituted by Christ.¹³ Nature entails the continuous interrelatedness of Word and creature.

The word can only be the way in which otherness comes to me if I have accepted to take the visible for what it is. The theologian, said Luther in reference to the theology of the cross, "names things as they are."¹⁴ To ignore the visible or to flee from it in the search for the pure Word is to take the cross out of this world (something like the satirical paintings of the crucified Jesus in the paintings of Salvador Dali). This is but another version of the theology of glory with the difference that the one Luther criticized took the visible as a mediation to the invisible, while here there is a direct or immediate leap into the invisible, not realizing that the invisible — encompassed in the visible — is the very transparency of the visible.

Suffering, the unbearable sight of the visible, makes this visible transparent when the suffering seen is the suffering of which the human, *quia human*, knows itself to be an active agent. In Luther there is no ontological distinction between natural evil, and human evil. The cross of Christ as the archetypical shape suffering takes in the Christian story (the suffering of God's own self) manifests the *Deus revelatus* when it is known to be caused by the evil powers engendered in the human heart without appeal (*non posse non peccare*). The confession of the Centurion in Mark 15 is of such theological significance not because he knew the deeds or the teachings of Jesus, but because he knew himself to be part of those who directly

10 It is important to remember that the origin of this concept, in 2 Macc 7, is the experience of evil; it is a response to the theodicy question and not a cosmogonic argument.

11 WA 26, pp. 335ff. This point is elaborated in the article by N.H. Gregersen in this collection.
12 T.G. Tappert (ed.), *Book of Concord*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1959, pp. 584-587.

13 I owe to P. Heifer this insight for distinguishing a sacramental/mysterious character from a sacrament proper.

14 Theologus crucis dicit id, quod res est. WA 1.354, pp. 21f.

posed suffering. Seeing himself in that mask it became for him that "mirroring transparency" into his own condition.

In the cross of Christ general and particular revelation meet each other, for God's creativity is witnessed in its annihilating force. Therefore, the cross is the material criterion by which the visible becomes constitutive for the knowledge of God, as much as the theology of creation (creation out of nothing/evil) establishes the formal criterion for the recognition of the visibility of the cross and the suffering in the world. Through the theology of creation the cross becomes "essentially identical" (R Prenter) with the suffering in and of the world. Through the theology of the cross the suffering in and of the world is recognized as the *locus* of God's creative work.

The suffering of nature (human included) assumes a privileged sacramental character not in and of itself, but because in it and through it, divine creativity manifests itself. The primacy of the word in God's creative redemption is for humans only a passive primacy that allows them to stand and behold suffering for what it is: On the human side, the response is one of action, the practice of giving glory to whom glory is due. The work is not meritorious precisely when and because it assumes this doxological character.¹⁵ This practice is not done by the redemptive merit of the work accomplished, but because it is the only way to express our confession of sin, the human sin through which evil insinuates itself into nature (human nature included).

IV.

From here we can understand that for Luther the care and concern for nature are the response to the belief that God is the cause and source of all creatures. Humans are the poets of a medieval carnival creating masks through which we protect ourselves from the terrible sight of the abyss, the vision of the *Deus nudus*, the *horror vacui*. Therefore, ecological responsibility is neither a mystical nor a romantic response to the positive goodness of creation, nor a conformity to a natural law, but a doxological act of repentance and renewal out of the depth and the void that emerges from the clefts of a broken mask. We should not fear that nature has become artificial (K Marx). We should fear a view of nature, bucolic or scientific, which protects us from the experience of suffering and of the cross. Far from a naive view of nature or from the modern divorce between *homo* and *natura*, Luther's theology provides for criteria to face evil in nature and society: the

visibility of suffering in the silence of the innocent is what opens the space in which the creative Word resonates evoking our practical response. Every vocation is a stewardship in and through (and not for and to) God's creation. The focus of the ecological responsibility is not in the preservation or protection of nature, but in the knowledge we have for the power we exert in and through it.

As I have tried to show, the problem of Luther's theology for contemporary appropriation is not linked to the supposed incoherence in relating special and general revelation. The problem lies in the fact that, while Luther advanced far beyond the medieval understanding of nature, he remained medieval in his understanding of social institutions (*ecclesia*, *politia*, *oeconomia*). The anthropological reductionism in Luther's equation of sin and redemption fails to comprehend sin and evil in their structural dimensions. *Addio salis grano*, nature was for him artificial, but the institutions were natural. The nature we see is not the creation we believe but the production of our own knowledge and power. The inability to recognize that this knowledge and power consubstantiates itself in institutions and social structures, and is not only a direct expression of our individual sin, is the missing connection in Luther's theology. In this sense E Troeltsch was right to recognize the medieval character of Luther's social thinking, even if he has gone far beyond medieval constraints in his concept of revelation where the theology of the cross and creation theology meet.

¹⁵ See CA XX: "It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God's will and glorify him."