

Dialog

Testifying to the Scandal¹

With the recent publication of Vítor Westhelle's *The Scandalous God*, an opportunity presents itself to reflect on his multiple contributions to theology.² Westhelle is a global theologian. While this often is code for theologians in the southern hemisphere, Westhelle moves with wisdom in multiple locals and therefore is truly global. While he is passionate about God's presence in his native Brazil, he also knows North Atlantic theologies inside and out. Luther, Hegel, and Hall dialog with Latin American struggles and visions. While Westhelle moves freely in the "elaborated discourses of the academia",³ he does so in such a way that "the pleading cry of the oppressed may rule the theological agenda."⁴ For him this dialectic is an essential element of a "dispositional practice" shaped by the theology of the cross.⁵

While Westhelle presents fascinating theological concepts such as an eschatology attentive to place, his primary contribution is methodological. His statement in an article on theological education is true for his whole project, "Instead of probing the *object* of the theological discourse or the theological discourse as object, I am interested in asking how it is being done when it is being done."⁶

The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ

Following Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, Westhelle believes that a theologian of the cross perceives God "in suffering and the cross."⁷ Luther refers to where a theologian looks for God's presence, but also to the place from which she looks. For Westhelle, theology of the cross is only secondarily about soteriology, morality, or divine ontology. First and foremost, it offers us an epistemic key to perceiving God's ways in the world. This revelation happens in a place that reason says should be God-forsaken. "[Golgotha] was a space in which God's revelation would not occur, a place that could not witness to divine glory; it was an anti-epiphanic space..."⁸ Yet God's apocalypse took place there. And what was unveiled? What was seen by those with eyes to see? Westhelle turns to Mark's gospel to find his answer. The apocalypse of Jesus was seen by none other than his executioner. "The confession of the centurion in Mark 15:39 is of such theological significance not because he knew the deeds or the teachings of Jesus (most likely he did not), but because he knew himself to be part of all of us who directly or indirectly imposed that suffering."⁹ The centurion sees the price extracted by the system in which he is embedded and from which he benefits. He sees the violence that preserves the glory of Rome. God opens him up to see what he has committed his life to so that he might repent and find new life. What is seen on the cross "strikes our conscience with terror at what is happening and makes us confess

¹ The title of this article comes from a poem by Pier Paolo Pasolini that Westhelle cites in "Exposing Zacchaeus," *The Christian Century*, Vol.123, No.22, (October 31, 2006): 31.

² A bibliography is available at <www.lstc.edu/people/faculty/individual/westhelle.html>

³ "A Vision: Culling Some Prophetic Thoughts," in *Envisioning a Lutheran Communion: Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*, Mark Thomsen and Vítor Westhelle, eds. (Minneapolis: Kirk, 2002), 145.

⁴ "The Right Ahead and the Left Behind?" *Dialog* 44/2 (2002): 128.

⁵ *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 113.

⁶ "Theological Education: *Quo Vadis?*" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24/3 (June 1997): 282.

⁷ Translation mine, WA 1.354.17-20; cf. LW 31.40.

⁸ *The Scandalous God*, 20.

⁹ *The Scandalous God*, 103.

our share in it.”¹⁰ To say that God is revealing this even as Jesus cries out to the absent God is scandalous. Jesus’ execution stretches the limits of human expectations for God. “With the cross God becomes offensive.”¹¹ The God that Christ reveals critiques all idols and the systems that they generate. The cross is nothing but foolishness and weakness according to our dominant ways of organizing the world.

Certainly Dangerous

Westhelle recognizes with Foucault that power is organized through régimes of reason that act upon the world. These systems tell us whom to notice and whom to ignore; they tell us what ultimately matters; they direct our living toward their promise. Most often they do this without coercion. They exercise power by getting so deep into our psyche that we cannot see their dominance in our lives, yet we are compelled to see the world within the parameters they set. Westhelle notes the convergence of knowledge and power, “The encoded or canonical official language of hegemonic institutions is not only an instrument for the communication of power, but it is itself the exercise of power that works by depriving other voices of legitimacy.”¹² Luther understood this and dared to speak of a reality that would crack people open to those hidden in the crossroads of his own Germany.

[Luther’s] attack on philosophy (with its ‘reason’), the economic system (with its ‘markets’), jurisprudence (with its ‘justice’), the territorial states (with their ‘politics’), and the church (with its ‘hierarchies’) was not intended to remodel them...He wanted to find or even provoke a crack, a crisis, in the systems that controlled and organized the institutions basic to a general medieval consensus: *ecclesia, oeconomia, and politia*.¹³

Luther’s attack was on idolatrous ideologies. He attacked the systems of thought that were taken for granted. Luther understood that “the ‘essence’ of the idol is deception wrapped in certainty”¹⁴ and therefore he challenged the legal, political, economic, and religious canons of his day by appealing to Christ’s cross. Luther’s proclamation of the grace of God that was revealed in the scandal of the cross spoke “a risky and dissonant word, a word that cannot be cashed into the system, that does not fit into the economy, the rules of this earthly house; in short it is not a merchandise.”¹⁵

Through the word of the cross the régimes of knowledge are cracked open and revealed for what they are. We are freed from their invisible governing of our lives and opened up to see new possibility. The cross of Christ and the crosses of today expose us to the godlessness of the reigning régimes, “free[ing] theology from the captivity of the dominant modes of rationality...”¹⁶ Hope can enter when régimes are left ajar. We are freed to hear the promise of God when we turn from the epistemes that rule with empty promises.¹⁷ In fact, “When one gives up accepting things as they are, gives up compromising with the prevailing system, then one can begin to imagine a new and different world.”¹⁸

¹⁰ “Exposing Zacchaeus,” 27.

¹¹ *The Scandalous God*, ix.

¹² “Communication and the Transgression of Language in Martin Luther,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 17/1 (Spring 2003): 7.

¹³ *The Scandalous God*, 41.

¹⁴ “Idols and Demons: On Discerning the Spirits,” *Dialog* 41/1 (2002): 9.

¹⁵ *The Scandalous God*, 53.

¹⁶ *The Scandalous God*, 47.

¹⁷ *The Scandalous God*, 42.

¹⁸ “Revelation 13: Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial, a Reading from Brazil,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, David Rhoads ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 188.

Crossed Out Knowledges

Westhelle's dispositional practice causes a theological crisis. The crisis does not come down in a verticle line from heaven as in Barth nor does it come from the future as in Moltmann. As the cross of Jesus challenged the régimes of his day, God's apocalypse still comes from the places and people who are excluded from our own dominant concerns and commitments. "Reading the cross in an epistemological key offers an invitation to move constantly to the margins...., [to] the knowledges that stand at the edge of the established canonic epistemes, the conventionally accepted régimes of truth."¹⁹ In the places we have been taught to ignore, the end of world breaks in on us.

The eschaton is not only a time in which an end will occur, it is the places in which the end is experienced, in which the limits of one's existence, one's language, one's home, one's land, one's culture, one's resources, one's religion, one's sexual orientation, is met. This is the place of crisis. But instead of lamenting it, instead of whining over it, there is a clear sense of hope that the place designated as the end is also the place of a beginning, that where the last (*eschatoi*) are to be found there also the first (*prothoi*).²⁰

Westhelle is not calling those in the center to help out the margins, but to see in the margins the whole reality in which we ourselves also live. Westhelle's writings often defer on this point to anthropologist Mary Douglas. She "once observed that the marginalized are the fragile side of a society, and that is why they must be kept hidden. The centers of power see their own weakness in the margins, and they don't want those margins exposed."²¹ To expand the earlier image, the centurion not only knew of damage that Roman régimes did to Jesus, he began to suspect the way that they also robbed him of abundant life, the way he also was vulnerable to their whims. Yet where hope in our own ways evaporates, we are free to listen to the One whose ways are not our ways. "[T]he visibility of suffering in the silence of the innocent opens up the space in which the creative Word resonates."²² In the awareness that "our own efforts or understanding" cannot save us, we cling with faith to the promises of the scandalous God. Since God's definitive Word to us is unmerited grace, faith arises that sustains us "against all the flaws in our attempts of creating a better world, against all our lapses in bringing about understanding, discernment, and justice."²³ God re-creates us out of nothing, having encountered us through those whom we thought were nothing. The God who raised Jesus from the dead raises up for us a world we could never have imagined on our own!

The Solidarity of the Shaken²⁴

When we journey to the margins in order to allow our world to come to an end, we are finally free to be human. God invites us simply to be human, to break bread with the hungry, to cloth the naked, to listen to those whose voices have not been given a public hearing. God is known in the most basic of human needs and in real acts of human sharing.²⁵ This is the gift of resurrection as

¹⁹ *The Scandalous God*, 91.

²⁰ "A Vision," 144.

²¹ "Exposing Zacchaeus," 31.

²² *The Scandalous God*, 105.

²³ *The Scandalous God*, 141.

²⁴ A phrase Westhelle cites from Jan Patočka, in "The Church's Crucible: *Koinonia* and Cultural Transcendence," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31/3 (June 2004): 218.

²⁵ "A Vision," 145.

insurrection.²⁶ In “hopeful solidarity, the solidarity of those who are moved by the pain of God in the midst of this world, or by the pain of the world in the midst of God” new life is experienced.²⁷ Westhelle holds up the women who went to the tomb as exemplars of this way. They went to honor Jesus after his death, when he could not possibly pay them back for the care they offered his remains. The women at the tomb, coming to care for the body “practiced the unlikely act of love without expecting it ever to be returned.”²⁸ They conformed their life to the truly human one, Jesus, and in that very act Jesus met them again with his own offer of unconditional love. In the midst of the brokenness of our world, we go to the turbulent waters in which God chooses to swim.²⁹ There we find that

God shares the condition of those rendered invisible by the official inscription. It is out of this invisibility that God becomes the one who brings to sight what was exiled from the field of vision. What is thus made visible is, however, a fragmented reality. Wholeness is won by a faith that sees in the dispersed fragments of the world the reintegrative and marvelous force of divine grace.³⁰

Truth is known in this strange, new embrace, truth to be lived out, like Gandhi’s understanding of truth, as the active, non-violent power of love, *Satyagraha*.³¹

The End that Marks the Beginning

Westhelle shows phenomenal restraint in describing the grace that will be discovered in solidarity. To offer us a picture of what is to come would run the risk of idolatry. Content with the postcard he sends us, we might never travel to see the living face of poor whose gifts evolve and vary across time and place. So Westhelle offers us the promise that the gift will be there when we arrive. It will become available to us through our participation and solidarity with those who meet us in the margins, including, of course, God. In the gathering a new vision will arise, but Westhelle is clear:

I will not be the one to give it. It is the people, those of other faiths, the women, the displaced in their own land and elsewhere, the poor of the earth, those of other cultures, those of different colors, all those ... voices ... will weave it together...Are we ready to accept the gift?³²

Philip Ruge-Jones is Associate Professor of Theology at Texas Lutheran University. Vitor Westhelle was his doctoral advisor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Ruge-Jones has two books on the theology of the cross coming out in 2008. *Cross in Tensions* (Pickwick) and *The Word of the Cross in a World of Glory* (Augsburg Fortress).

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²⁶ *The Scandalous God*, 73.

²⁷ *The Scandalous God*, x.

²⁸ *The Scandalous God*, 120.

²⁹ "Thinking about Luther in a Submersed Reality," *Lutherjahrbuch* 57 (1990): 173.

³⁰ With Hanna Betina Götz, "In Quest of a Myth: Latin American Literature and Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3/1 (August 1995): 20.

³¹ *The Scandalous God*, 88.

³² "A Vision," 145.