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Westhelle treats readers to a startling range of insights about the dangerous—yet inevitable—centrality of the cross for Christian life. The gist of *The Scandalous God* is that the cross conveys an everlasting edginess that Christians have variously evaded, abused, and redemptively engaged. While some balk at making an execution the touchstone of revelation, Westhelle perceives in the cross a saving hope precisely because it cannot be fully removed or domesticated but pokes up discomfitingly wherever life takes a cruciform shape. Steeped sympathetically in Lutheran tradition, Westhelle nevertheless avoids an apologetically confessional stance that defends an “authentic” reading of Luther against “misunderstandings” of the cross as a tool that encourages enduring abuse or oppression. Instead, he nondefensively assumes the concerns of especially feminist cross critics, without reducing the cross to mere unfortunate tragedy. What emerges is a subtle subversion of the theological moves—though not the existential concerns—of such critics. Precisely by gazing steadfastly upon the apocalyptic, offensive, unsettling dimensions of the cross, Westhelle amplifies attention to the unhinging experiences of suffering that cannot be contained in any prepackaged formula of salvation—but must be met (even before they are prevented).

The features of Westhelle’s theology of the cross appear gradually amid a series of historical (chaps. 1–4) and thematic (chaps. 5–10) essays that present several typologies of theological uses and abuses of the cross. Chapter 1 tracks familiar Gnostic and Arian options for evading the scandal of a crucified God, noting also escape through excessively reproduced simulacra of the cross that pervert its meaning into military conquest or render it safely familiar—an idol. In chapters 2–3, Westhelle identifies early-to-Reformation Christian voices that do name the saving oddity of a God who died shamefully, building on Jewish lament traditions and an apocalyptic context in which—against worldly logic—marginalized peoples and places were the locus of revelation. Luther reinvigorated attention to divine power hidden in and behind the cross: righteousness for sinners revealed in Christ’s self-emptying interrupts ecclesial, economic, and political orderings that promise reward by merit. Westhelle then analyzes two modern critiques of the cross (chap. 4): Lessing’s Enlightenment portrayal of Jesus’s death as merely tragic (not atoning) and his resurrection absurd, leaving his moral teachings central—a reading repeated in some feminist/liberation theologies, and Nietzsche’s denouncement of the cross as a mystification of suffering that valorizes powerlessness. Westhelle traces theological responses to these criticisms to Hegel’s making place (albeit “necessarily”) for divine negation in the Spirit’s self-realizing action in history and to theological appropriations of Marx that link the resurrection to social insurrection—thereby downplaying the cross.

In chapters 5–10, Westhelle incorporates Pauline, Lutheran, Hegelian, and Marxist emphases on dialectical, liberation-seeking transformation into a postmodern rendering of a theology of the cross—a cross he depicts repeatedly in iconoclastic terms like the “margin,” “limit,” “fragment,” the “apocalyptic,” “destabilizing,” “ironic.” Assorted theological motifs frame these chapters, which pack in concepts and examples drawn from biblical, theological (notably Lutheran and liberation), continental, and literary authors. He distinguishes apoteletic (performative or atonement-related), moral/exemplary, and epistemological uses of the cross (chap. 5)—the last concerning the knowledge suffering reveals about its human causes, particularly when it is due to

a punitive response to honest naming of and lived challenges to unjust relations. Here Westhelle sometimes elides the cruciform with an eschatological speaking from the margins of “subjugated knowledge”—as if Jesus’s new-kingdom, perception-transforming teachings and healings were the (meaning of the) cross. Westhelle then harmonizes a cruciform condemnation of “this world” with an ecologically sensitive embrace of creation as a mask that indirectly reveals God (chap. 6); the work of the cross itself presupposes suffering matter. He distinguishes epistemic locations before the cross (chap. 7): a theology of the crucified, deriding, fleeing, and resurrection practicing. The last is the subject position of those who mourn crucifixion: it is while mourning that the women at Jesus’s tomb witnessed his resurrection by “keep[ing] history open, open to revisit even its past of victimization” (121). Westhelle extends the practice of mourning into *theoria* or contemplative beholding of the cross (chap. 8), a staying-with absence and emptiness—a practice he elides with Shabbat rest from ordinary human activities of communication (*praxis*) and production (*poesis*), since the women at Jesus’s tomb stopped mourning to keep the Sabbath, to encounter the God who transcended their expectations twice (in crucifixion, then resurrection). Critiquing on biblical grounds the reduction of eschatology to future-oriented time by Western colonizers (who had conquered “new” space), Westhelle depicts the New World opened up by cross/resurrection in spatial as well as temporal terms (chap. 9) that address dislocating experiences like “migration, homelessness ... invasion ... social location” (144). Westhelle concludes with a revised itinerary of the stations of the cross that diagrams the practices (and potential abuses) of the cross and resurrection as they accompany life experiences dancing between marginality and centered belonging (chap. 10): the cross moves from manifest suffering to mourning love (which can become paralyzed in “dolorismo” or “defeatism,” respectively); the resurrection moves from empowerment to scar-filled continuing life (risking respectively “resurrectionism”—suffering-denying optimism—and vulnerability-avoiding “cynicism”).

Although Westhelle aims not to offer an impossibly systematic discourse on the cross but to evoke “the scandal” and “thoughts about ... the crosses in and around us” (xi), his thematic approach can be frustrating, particularly when the chapters lack transitions and the significance of a chapter’s theme for a theology of the cross might be tucked into a learnedly dense exposition on an otherwise independent theological topic. Nevertheless, anyone seriously interested in a theology of the cross should tarry with this immensely perceptive series of meditations—surely among the richest on the subject. Westhelle blends instinctive empathy for the subject positions that generate critiques of the cross with an evangelical call to resist evading both the cross—unavoidable in creaturely suffering—and the scandal of its bearing the weight of divine revelation, an apocalyptic love that eludes repeated attempts to idolize or flee it.

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