



Vítor Westhelle's "Scandalous God"

MARK W. THOMSEN

Vítor Westhelle's *The Scandalous God* might be subtitled "Reflections from the Abyss."¹ His text is a series of profound reflections upon life marked by absurdity, pain, suffering, horror, meaninglessness, the experience of chaos and the abyss. For Westhelle the cross is the lived reality of hell and darkness. Furthermore, he incisively describes how Christians continually hide, deny, and decorate the reality of the cross or the abyss. Westhelle will not allow his readers to escape the cross. But, he argues, life is not only the abyss. There are also unexpected signs of light and life within the darkness. These surprising events of hope are only to be found in the midst of the abyss when people live out expressions of love in the shadow of the cross. For Westhelle the theology of the cross is not a theological articulation of some objective truth. Rather "it is a practice [a journey] of solidarity with the pain of the world, which follows the encounter with Christ crucified" (112).

One does not read Westhelle's text. One meditates on it, is challenged and blessed.

WESTHELLE'S PRIMARY PERSPECTIVE

Theologies of the cross begin from a variety of experiential and theological perspectives. The most dominant of these within our Christian communities is rooted in a medieval world in which royalty was to be given due respect. If the laws of the realm were violated—if, for example, a king's deer was illegally killed and eaten by a poverty-ridden family—then royalty was offended and the realm dishonored. The "world" had been thrown out of joint by the offence. The balance of justice had to be restored and the king's wrath assuaged. The violator in some way had to pay the price so that royalty's honor might be restored. This is often called the Anselmian perspective. In bloody horror Mel Gibson's *Passion* film portrayed the price that had to be paid for human violation of God's cosmic law. We have sinned; a price needs to be paid; we are incapable of paying such a price. However,

¹Vítor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). Page numbers in the text of this article refer to this book.

through the suffering of God's Son God pays the ultimate sacrifice and by his stripes we are healed (Isa 53:5).

Martin Luther, although accepting something of this medieval tradition, dramatically changed the perspective from which one could see the death of Jesus. Luther found this new radical perspective in the Apostle Paul. Faith did not only contemplate the cross of Jesus as an objective reality, but the believer, in faith, personally entered the reality of death and resurrection (Rom 6:1–6). One dies to sin and rises to life in the Spirit.

We are all sinners. Sin is that which throws the world out of joint. For Luther sin is being centered in self rather than in God. When the axis of life moves from God to our own desires, then the world begins to shake. Salvation for Luther takes place when the obsessive self is put to death and God performs a contemporary resurrection. Through the power of the Spirit we are raised as new creations—people who in trust live with God as the center of life. Luther emphasizes that this work is God's work, a free gift received in faith. We are right with God—justified by God's grace through faith. Being a theologian of the cross for Luther is not a quiet, academic study of Jesus crucified. Rather it is experiencing the wrath of God burning through our guilt against our sin. In angst one's pride-filled ego is annihilated in preparation for life centered in God.

Vitor Westhelle lives, breathes, and thinks in this theological world of Martin Luther. However, he radically transforms the perspective and vocabulary. For

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Westhelle as for Luther, the cross is a contemporary experience. But for Westhelle it is not limited to an individual experience of death and resurrection. It involves the very death and resurrection of God. Westhelle's primary motif is not found in medieval Europe with Anselm or in the argument of Romans with Paul and Luther, but in the post-New Testament world of Melito of Sardis (150 A.D.). Westhelle quotes Melito: "He that hung up the earth in space was Himself hanged up; He that fixed the heavens was fixed with nails...God put to death!" (2).

The death of God, the resurrection of God: this is Westhelle's perspective. This perspective has its beginning in the Hellenistic Christian church where assertions of the deity of Christ were presupposed. This theme—God died and dies, and God lives—is central to Westhelle's reflections.

Having written his PhD dissertation on G. W. F. Hegel, Westhelle finds Hegel's thoughts helpful. He quotes from Hegel's *Christian Religion: Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*:

God has died, God is dead: this is the most frightful of all thoughts, that everything eternal and true does not exist, that negation itself is found in God....However, the process does not halt at this point, rather, a reversal takes place....God arises again to life, and thus things are reversed. (70)

For Hegel, religious language is true but takes the form of immature pictures rather than the form of mature abstract philosophical categories. Theology had said that God died and God lives. As a philosopher Hegel moved from this theological imagery to abstract language and described all reality as a cosmic rational system: *Geist* (the Absolute Mind or Spirit). For Hegel this cosmic system was not static but a vital living organism that progressively moved toward a goal. First, there was the Absolute Mind/ Spirit, and then this Absolute (God) annihilated itself and died into a world of matter. The Absolute, God, dies. Transcendent Spirit becomes immanence in a material process. Nevertheless, the Absolute Spirit lives again and begins to think and become self-conscious through the human process and mind. In human thought the Absolute Spirit that died is lifted and lives again in the human spirit.

Westhelle finds the religious thought of Hegel, although not the rationalistic system, helpful in articulating his own vision of the cross. For him the phrase "God died" does not just point to the Son of God's death on the cross but points to a cosmic experience and expression of reality, similar to that found in Hegel. Death, suffering, alienation, conflict, and oppression are present realities. They are the manifestation of God's death, the death of everything that is life, love, and truth.

Westhelle's reflections are steeped in the pain and suffering of the world. In pain, death, poverty, marginalization, oppression—and this is what is meant by the death of God—we experience living in the abyss, in darkness and despair. That is the truth of human existence. Truth telling points to the abyss and the agents of death. Westhelle continually quotes Luther saying that a theologian of the cross

calls a thing what it is.² A theology of the cross calls us to recognize the suffering of the world and the pain of God. We are called to name suffering, death, chaos, and oppression what it is, and we are called to live in solidarity with the pain of God and the world.

Luther's understanding of dying and rising, death and resurrection was focused on an individual experience of dying to self and being raised in faith to justification and the life of the Spirit. Westhelle's perspective and vision focus upon a cosmic divine death and life, of which the individual is a small but significant participant. A theology of the cross rips away the façade that attempts to hide pain and death and invites one into the abyss where in the darkness there is the possibility of life and light. But there is no possibility of life unless we are first willing to participate in the death of God, the pain of the world.

Westhelle uses a gospel image to express our journey in the aftermath of the darkness and death of the Friday crucifixion (the abyss). He relates the story of the women walking to the tomb of Jesus on that Sunday morning. They walk in an atmosphere of deep sorrow, expressing their love for Jesus as they go to anoint his body for the last time. In performing this act of love to their dead master they experience the resurrection, or life and hope. Westhelle sees this as what gives meaning to life—performing acts of love in the shadow of the abyss. This is what makes light shining in the darkness possible. God died and God lives. The abyss is reality but love in the shadow of the abyss makes the return of God possible.

This is Westhelle's primary perspective for a theology of the cross. A cosmic death of divinity and a cosmic resurrection are a reality portrayed in the cross and resurrection, but much more, they are a cosmic reality in which we participate.

WESTHELLE ON LUTHER

Westhelle writes out of a Lutheran perspective and finds many of his themes and insights in Lutheran texts from the Reformation. He references Luther's profound words, "The cross is our theology." Although using the language and texts of Luther, Westhelle discovers new possibilities for meaning in Luther. He uses these new insights for the purpose of developing his own theology of the cross. This particularly reflects Westhelle's dialogue with postmodernism, which emphasizes that all language is molded by its cultural-historical context and, in one sense, its truth or relevance is limited to its own cultural-historical context. However, texts are also remembered and transcribed and therefore become detached from their original intent and context. They float beyond their time and place and are always open to new insights and meanings.

This, it appears, is how Westhelle reads the texts of Luther. We have already seen how Luther's death and resurrection themes have been transformed from per-

²Luther wrote, "A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is." See the "Heidelberg Disputation" (1518), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 53.

sonal dying and rising with Christ to a cosmic death and resurrection within the totality of reality, the death and resurrection of God, or in Hegelian terms, the death and life of the *Geist* (the Universal Spirit). In a similar way Westhelle reinterprets Luther's understanding of the wrath of God in the form of pain and suffering. Luther sees suffering, particularly spiritual/psychological suffering (inner despair or angst), as the abyss exploding from an encounter with a terrifying God. In the midst of this terrifying encounter one may experience the abandonment of God. God's wrath, experienced in a terrified conscience, is God's annihilating power crushing the personal ego, making possible life in the Spirit. This vision is rooted in Luther's vision of the bondage of the will and irresistible grace. For Luther, humans are bound in sin eternally, bound in pride-filled self-centeredness. Persons are incapable of escaping from this ego-centered prison. God alone with irresistible power (grace) can break this bondage. God does that through God's wrath, which through suffering, pain, and a terrifying spiritual abyss destroys one's egocentricity. It is put to death, annihilated in order that a resurrection might occur, a faith-life of the Spirit be realized. Westhelle recognizes this original spiritual struggle of Luther and is aware of how Luther found answers to his quest for a gracious God in a radically new understanding of righteousness/justice. We receive what is not due to us (40).

Steeped in Luther's world and writings, Westhelle deals with a floating text that is not necessarily bound to Luther's original form of angst but is still angst, despair, the abyss. From Westhelle's perspective he explains that Luther's statement of God's "breaking down in order to restore" is the consequence of "speculative strategy about God's way of dispensing salvation," and indicates that Luther at this point was molded by (not free from) his medieval monastic tradition. Luther or rather the contemporary Lutheran text does not really intend to say that God annihilates the ego as a means of salvation, but what is truly intended by the text is the prevention of any claims on our part to merit our salvation (54).

By avoiding a direct conflict with Luther's intent Westhelle is able to continue his dialogue with Luther in the context of twenty-first-century reality. For Westhelle that is expressed in the theme that God died and God lives. Suffering, pain, and the abyss are realities; life (the resurrection of God) is experienced as love shared in the shadow of the abyss. Within the new paradigm Luther's experience of angst is shared today in another form by those who experience the death of God, the abandonment of God, in the form of oppression, marginalization, hunger, pain, and death. Furthermore, those who recognize the death of God or the reality of the abyss experience the transformation of life, for they are no longer resisting God's grace. In recognizing themselves as abandoned by God and dwelling in the bondage of death they are ready to count on God's grace to lift them up (55). This is the twenty-first-century expression of justification by grace.

Westhelle reads another set of Luther texts that deal with the hiddenness of God in a similar way. He recognizes that Luther speaks of a hiddenness of God in

the passion of Christ: God is met in the opposite—death or the cross. However, in *The Bondage of the Will* Luther speaks of a second hiddenness which is behind the cross. For Luther this second hiddenness of God arises for faith when confronted by the fact that some persons come to faith by the irresistible power of God and others do not. Why so? The answer is hidden in the terrifying otherness of God. I have argued elsewhere that Luther at this point sacrifices radical crucified truth for continuity with Hellenistic rationalism, which Luther claims fully to reject.³

Westhelle, however, argues that the double sense of hiddenness found in Luther does not represent “alternative options for interpretation” (56), because both are valid. Nevertheless in claiming their validity he changes the perspective of Luther. Luther’s convictions arise out of the experience of being saved by irresistible grace; however, Westhelle argues that it arises out of our experiences of being abandoned. Within the context of Westhelle’s primary paradigm—God died, God lives—the second hiddenness of God arises out of the abyss when life and meaning are gone. He quotes David Tracy (from *Form and Fragment*) who sees Luther’s affirmation of a second hiddenness as rooted in our experience of God as “frightening, not tender, sometimes even as an impersonal reality—‘it’—of sheer power and energy signified by such metaphors...as abyss, chasm, chaos, horror” (57).

Westhelle at this point plays the role of the confessional theologian claiming that floating textual interpretations are not only legitimate but enriching of the tradition. In this case he argues that Luther’s own interpretation was not based on a rational argument involving irresistible grace but upon the authority of Scripture. He continues:

But it is better to admit there is an inscrutable shadow-side to God than the other options available to us. It would be simply a descriptive statement of our finite experience, and of the very finitude of our reason. But if it is blasphemy, it is the one of Job. This is the one God is great enough to take. (57)

Amazingly, one has to add to Westhelle’s thought that God takes more than the blasphemy of Job. A theology of the cross affirms that God takes the blasphemy of the death of Christ into God’s own being, agonizes over the victimizers and blasphemers as well as the abandoned and even embraces them with love. Only such love has the audacity to say, “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.” Westhelle has much wisdom to share about the cross shattering all rationality. Loving one’s enemies is the heart of irrationality and the heart of the cross. Westhelle does not reflect upon this absurdity. Interestingly, instead of love of enemy as the epitome of love he reflects on the love of the dead friend as that epitome, since the friend can no longer return the gift (referencing Kierkegaard).

Westhelle as theologian is obviously free to express his theological witness and, as most theologians, free to deal with confessional texts floating apart from

³Mark Thomsen, *Christ Crucified: A 21st-Century Missiology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2004) 51–53.

their original context and intent. But it is also legitimate to point out that this does not express what Luther himself writes in *The Bondage of the Will*. I simply prefer to deal with theological texts insofar as possible in their context and intent and state that I believe or think this to be true or not true. In Westhelle's words: simply state what it is. Having read the original text in its own context one is free to say that the tradition must be stretched and reinterpreted for the contemporary context.

Westhelle's texts are fascinating to read and contemplate. Without doubt, he writes out of his own experience of the abyss and the experiences of the millions who share participation in the contemporary death of God. His interpretations of Luther's texts that make possible a focus upon the reality of pain, suffering, the abyss, injustice, oppression, and tyranny are a gift for which we owe him gratitude. His use of Luther texts to call for truth telling—to call a thing what it is—is profound. His imagery of sharing the fragrance of love with the smells of death is truly hope.

MARK W. THOMSEN is a former executive director of the ELCA Division for Global Mission. As a visiting professor of world missions at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, he has been a colleague of Vitor Westhelle.



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