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**The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross**, by Vítor Westhelle, Fortress Press 2006 (ISBN: 0-8006-3895-6) xii + 180 pp., pb \$22.00

In *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross*, the Brazilian theologian Vítor Westhelle, now professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, undertakes a difficult and perhaps ultimately impossible task: to speak of the cross without domesticating it. His central and guiding source for this project is Luther, but Westhelle also draws on a wide range of literary sources: Pier Paolo Passolini, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, and a number of Latin American poets. This unconventional list of sources reflects the unconventional nature of the work itself. It does not offer a systematic exposition of a doctrine of the cross, because for Westhelle, the theology of the cross names not a positive body of propositions but rather a certain swerve or twist that interrupts theological discourse: “it is neither a theology among others nor a doctrine but a way of doing theology; it does not cancel any other theology but brings a provoking, ironic gesture” (pg. 110). Westhelle’s work is thus best characterized as a fragmentary intervention into the theological field.

The book can be divided into two sections. The first four chapters give an historical account of the emergence and evasion of the theology of the cross, and the remaining six each address a contemporary theological concern from the standpoint of the cross. The first chapter reveals Westhelle’s basic trajectory, briefly outlining the original trauma of the cross, the way that trauma was ultimately domesticated in Constantinian Christianity, and finally the reemergence of the theology of the cross in Luther. The second chapter traces the early church’s attempt to come to terms with the cross in the gospel narratives and later in normative orthodoxy, which for Westhelle provides a conceptuality that can help theologians not to evade the cross. The third chapter focuses on Luther and in particular on his insistence on an irony that interrupts analogy without destroying it altogether, while the fourth chapter lays out the basic modern critiques of the cross, reappropriating them as critiques of those strains of Christian theology that evade it.

The second half of the book opens with a consideration of the questions that we bring to the cross. In the fifth chapter, Westhelle argues that we need to get beyond the initial question of the moral or soteriological effects of the cross and face the radical effect that the cross has on the very structure of our epistemology. Taking Luther’s famous claim that “a theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is” (pg. 85), Westhelle links the theology of the cross to Foucault’s understanding of “*parrhesia*, to speak the truth boldly, or plainly saying it all, without reserve” (pg. 86). In the sixth chapter, he turns toward a consideration of a major contemporary theological concern, the doctrine of creation. Admitting that the cross and Luther’s teachings more generally seem initially to militate against a positive valuation of the created world,

Westhelle nonetheless argues that the cross provides a privileged means to discern the true meaning of creation. Specifically, it allows us to see that God “is hidden in the beauty and goodness of nature as much as in ugliness and evil” (pg. 101). The seventh chapter approaches the resurrection through the Shabbat of Holy Saturday. Theology of the cross reveals itself as the necessary obverse of a “practice of resurrection,” but this “practice of resurrection can only be exercised in the face of the dismal experience of the cross that in the Shabbat is remembered and thus brought back” (pg. 124). The eighth chapter reads Aristotle’s notion of *theoria* through this concept of Shabbat, arguing for a rehabilitation of the allied notions of *praxis* and *poiesis* as distinct modes of human doing (roughly speaking, as the political and the economic, respectively). The ninth chapter argues for an eschatological understanding of space, and the tenth accordingly provides a kind of itinerary for the continual movement through the space of cross and resurrection. Instead of a fixed doctrine, Westhelle gives us a way of keeping in motion and avoiding overt betrayal, while insisting that this itinerary could be interrupted at any moment by God’s ever-new act of *poiesis*.

Westhelle not only provides a strong argument for regarding the theology of the cross as a style of doing theology but also provides a good model. He is at his best when working within the Christian tradition, and he particularly shines in his reading of gospel texts. When he ventures outside of this familiar territory, however, his readings sometimes seem to move too quickly in assimilating the text to his own project. Another notable shortcoming stems from his desire to be faithful to Luther while remaining accountable to Latin American liberation theology. In his eagerness to portray Luther as a forerunner of liberation theology and a “contextual theologian” (pg. 58), Westhelle fails to even mention the well-known facts of Luther’s political interventions against the peasants and tirades against the Jews. Given the ways that he later brings the theology of the cross into dialogue with liberation theology, Westhelle could likely have made a persuasive case that Luther’s own actions contradicted the true subversive force of his thought, but as it stands, his treatment of Luther seems like something of a whitewash. Overall, though, Westhelle has given us a thought-provoking and often quite poetic text, one that offers many suggestive avenues for further reflection.

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