Cross and context

by Douglas John Hall in the September 7, 2010 issue

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It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the ninth in the series.

For seven splendid years (1953-1960) I studied at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Someone told me that visitors to the seminary were occasionally brought around to the tutors' office, where I worked as a graduate student, in order to glimpse "the Barthian"—of which species I was apparently the only one in captivity in that place. As such, I struggled with Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, John C. Bennett, Daniel Day Williams, Wilhelm Pauck, Paul Scherer and other luminaries of that unique period in Union's history—and therefore I learned a great deal from

them. All three of the significant changes that have occurred in my thinking over the past half-century could in some anticipatory way be attributed to their influence.

But it was indeed Karl Barth who, long before I went to Union, brought Christianity to life for me. I had grown up in the church, as one says, but Christianity only became interesting (well, indispensable) when, through the direct influence of one of Barth's students, I felt myself drawn into the "strange, new world in the Bible" as it was illuminated by the great Swiss theologian, along with others—especially Dietrich Bonhoeffer—whose faith had been forged in the white-hot crucible that was Europe in the early decades of the 20th century.

Having acknowledged this foundational Barthian orientation, however, I must immediately demur: I mean in particular the early Barth—the Barth of dialectical theology and the "theology of crisis," or Barth before his Calvinization (in the English-speaking world, his Presbyterianization).

It was more the critical, kerygmatic aspect of Barth than the later constructive, dogmatic aspect that intrigued me. Here finally was a Christian who could rekindle Pascal's "Fire!"—who could speak of a God "wholly other" than the gods of the philosophers and the prelates. He was as hard on "Christendom" as were Søren Kierkegaard and Franz Overbeck, both of whom he admired then. He said that doing theology was like trying to draw a picture of a bird in flight: you ended up with either an unmoving bird forever suspended in midair (orthodoxy) or an oblong blur (liberalism). Yet one knew even as he said this that Barth would not be able to resist the urge to try.

Perhaps, in the end, he was too successful. Much as I love vast passages of the *Church Dogmatics* and believe that serious theology has to strive for comprehensiveness, I began early in my career to wonder whether Barth's courageous attempt to "see the thing whole" did not end in the former danger: a bird fixed in time and space—what Emil Brunner once called "a frozen waterfall" and Bonhoeffer termed Barth's "positivism of revelation." Certainly most of the self-confessed Barthians I have known have courted that danger.

Barth himself gave many demonstrations of his ability to rise above his own system. Yet a system it was, for all his protestations. And the first major change that took place in my thinking occurred when I realized that a great deal of what Barth wrote in the *Dogmatics* and elsewhere just didn't fit the situation in which, from the mid-

1960s onward, I found myself.

For a decade (1965-1975) I taught in a theological college (seminary) of my denomination, the United Church of Canada, located in what is (next to Quebec) probably the most politicized province of our country—Saskatchewan. It is the home of universal medicare and other "socialist" dangers currently disturbing the souls of all Americans who are (in Michael Moore's apt phrase) in love with capitalism. My students were absolutely rooted in the grain-growing soil of that province—"stubble-jumpers," they called themselves. Besides, it was the sixties. If one didn't notice that one was no longer living in New York City or some other part of the mistrusted East, the characteristic events of that era, whether in Marxist or bohemian countercultural form, rose up and shouted at one—sometimes quite literally in the shape of aggressive students who seemed not to understand the polite ethos of seminaries in the 1950s: "Do you know where you are? Do you know what time it is?"

Like many in my generation of educators, I fought them for a time: they should please understand that they were called into a tradition thousands of years in the making! They should learn to listen before presuming to pontificate! But (partly because I began to care about some of them personally) I realized after four or five years that my students had a point: theology made in Europe, however beautifully and persuasively articulated, cannot be promulgated in Canada or the United States as though it were immediately applicable, with perhaps only a few local illustrations.

I began to see how imperceptibly I, though thoroughly a child of this "New World" myself, had been swept into the powerful narrative of European Protestant neo-orthodoxy, so called. My own nation's geography, history, sociology, politics and culture had played a very small part in the evolution of my Christian understanding. What had occurred in patristic, medieval, Reformation and modern Europe had had a greater voice in my theology than had the struggle of my own ancestors for a place in the sun. Like most North American writers and preachers, I had borrowed my theology ready-made from the sufferings of others. The uniqueness of Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian I most admired at Union, only then began to dawn on me in all its epistemological fullness.

This awakening to my own context (I think I was among the first to employ this by-now-overworked term in theological discourse) also prompted in me second thoughts about Tillich, the greatest challenger of my seminary musings. Tillich too had created a system, and a captivating one. But it now appeared to me that his

system, while intentionally and beautifully systematic, was in fact not as closed as Barth's; for in his "method of correlation" what Tillich named the human situation—which poses "the question" that "the revelatory answer" must endeavor to engage—by definition remains radically open to historical specificity and change. Without abandoning Barth (who, after all, also knew that the newspaper had to be kept in hand if the Bible were not to become an idol) I therefore turned with belated gratitude to the teacher with whom I had argued most.

What I was seeking, however, was something still more concrete. Tillich's sense of time was wonderfully sensitive: though a 19th-century man in many ways, he knew himself to be living (as he said) "on the boundary" of a quite different age. Because he opened himself personally to the moral as well as intellectual instabilities of that "shaking of the foundations," he could tell us about it with the brilliance and poignancy of a great novelist. (He did that best, I think, in his sermons and in *The Courage to Be.*) But in terms of his place-consciousness Tillich remained a European—specifically a German, transplanted by circumstances at age 47 to New York City, which is certainly not America.

I began to find the language and nuance that I needed to articulate this discrepancy between our borrowed theology and our actual experience as North Americans when I noticed, after 1967, what was happening in the latest wave of Germanic theology. I refer to Jürgen Moltmann's "theology of hope." My closest friend, the German pastor and theologian Friedrich Hufendiek, now of Berlin, introduced me to Moltmann's book before it had been translated into English. I loved it. But then, after its appearance in the English-speaking world, I was astonished at the manner in which, without grasping the foundation of the theology of hope in the Reformation's theology of grace and faith (without, in most cases, even reading Moltmann's difficult book), some liberal Christians in North America picked up the slogan "theology of hope" and ran with it.

Such an uplifting idea—hope! I found it appalling that a theology hammered out on the anvil of European despair (and personal suffering, in Moltmann's case) could so easily be co-opted by North American Christianity's always-eager market for happy messages. I wrote my first serious theological essay under the shock of that realization. I called it "The Theology of Hope in the Officially Optimistic Society."

Moltmann read my essay and invited me, during my first sabbatical leave in Münster, Westphalia, to visit him in Tübingen. I found him working on his next book,

which he saw as a corrective; for he too had discovered how Christians were misusing his theology of hope to bolster the cheap hope of religious answers that knew nothing of the questions—answers that in fact repressed the real questions. He said he would call his new book *Der gekreuzigte Gott,* and it would be an exposition of what Luther named the "theology of the cross"—a theology, as he said, "never much loved" but absolutely needed.

It was enormously encouraging to me that Moltmann, two years my senior, had been driven to explore again the *theologia crucis,* for I had embarked on this long sabbatical leave with the precise purpose of writing a book about that much-neglected and even despised tradition, which Luther, its namer (not its inventor!), had contrasted with theological triumphalism (the "theology of glory"). In the wake of my new awareness of the vital role of context in theological thought, as I cast about to see what kind of a response thinking Christians in Protestant North America might look for if they wished, as I did, to address the real but deeply repressed human despair of our context, I had concluded that it would have to be some indigenous articulation of just this thin tradition.

That it was that kind of Christianity to which I felt I needed to testify was both accidental and predictable. It was accidental in that I had no personal Lutheran connections whatsoever, but it was predictable in terms of my inherent spiritual and intellectual predisposition. I had always mistrusted the exaggerated and overconfident religious declarations of the dominant forms of Christianity and the moral smugness that invariably accompanied them. I had detested the bourgeois triumphalism that manifested itself in the "successful" churches of the 1950s. And on the positive side, I had always felt at home with strange figures scarcely known to the WASPish Christianity of my context—Luther (certainly, among us, the least familiar of the Reformers), Kierkegaard, Kafka and Bonhoeffer (whose *The Cost of Discipleship* had been the first explicitly theological work I'd ever read). In fact, what I liked about Barth, I realized now, was the distinct hint of that same thin tradition still present in his early works, before the "triumph of the Third Day" took over.

Even if I had never heard any of those names, the *theologia crucis* had already claimed me when, as a young student of music at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto, I heard Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* for the first time. Anyone who contemplates the question why the Anglo-Saxon world is so everlastingly enthralled by Handel's *Messiah* and so unfamiliar with any of Bach's Easter or Christmas oratorios will understand why I felt that my vocation was to articulate a theology of

the cross as gospel in the North American Anglo-Protestant context.

That, in any case, is how I saw my task as I sat down to write my first major book. While Moltmann was hammering out *The Crucified God* and Dorothee Sölle her *Suffering,* I was not far away in Münster trying to explain to myself (and hopefully a few others) why, as Paul wrote classically in 1 Corinthians 2, the cross of Jesus Christ is the center and basis of the Christian message; why it is not just a prelude to Easter; why, in fact, it must not be made null and void by the kind of resolution ("closure") effected by what I called our North American "resurrectionism." The resurrection, I felt (with Ernst Käsemann), is "a chapter in the theology of the cross." And what we are doing when we treat it as resolution is nothing more than an ecclesiastical projection of the ideology of success that drives the American dream and its paler Canadian counterpart.

The truth is that "man's story is *not* a success story"—words of Reinhold Niebuhr that appeared under his picture on the front of *Time*'s 25th anniversary issue in 1948. The "religion of progress" (George P. Grant) serves only to blind human beings to the reality of their own and their neighbors' vulnerability, pathos and suffering. When the Christian religion allows its witness to stray so predictably from the cross of the Christ to its "glorious denouement," it is simply lending itself to the deceptive project of the technological society—which is (as Ernest Becker so poignantly argued) "the denial of death."

When we turn the story of Jesus into a success story, we both cheat ourselves out of its depth and effectively banish from our purview all those (and they are billions now) whose actuality precludes their giving themselves eagerly to stories with happy endings. The gospel of the cross is not about rescuing us from our finitude; it's about a compassionate God's solidarity with us in our (yes, perhaps impossible) creaturehood and the slow grace of divine suffering-love which, without pretending finality, effects its social and personal transformations from within.

So with Moltmann, Sölle and others of our postwar cohort I saw my task as one of recalling the churches to a theology that had unquestionable biblical and Reformation roots but had rarely surfaced as the core message of the Christian faith. However, unlike the Europeans and non-Westerners like C. S. Song and Kosuke Koyama, as a North American I could count on little or no religious or secular sympathy for such a message, for the churches here as well as the society at large were deeply and almost exclusively predisposed to the ideology of triumph. Even

the American Lutherans, as Joseph Sittler once said to me, had forgotten the theology of the cross, though they have a sufficient memory of the *language* of that tradition that, unlike most Protestants, they at least do not find it utterly foreign.

Borrowing a phrase from Archbishop Cranmer's beautiful evening prayer, I called my book *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross.* I intended the title to suggest a little irony; for our darkness, I felt, was a hidden darkness that masquerades as pure light.

That book appeared in 1976, and the events of the past 30-plus years have, I believe, made its thesis a little more accessible; for the "success story" of the North Americans has been profoundly battered throughout these decades, and there has been a greater openness among us to accounts of existence (including President Obama's) that look for light in the darkness and do not ignore or presume to banish it. I have not felt as isolated during these latter decades as I did when I first began to explore the theology of the cross for its pertinence to our sociopolitical reality. With very many of the theological-ethical trends of the past 30 or 40 years (the various theologies of liberation, "black" theology, feminist theologies, gay and lesbian Christianity, environmental theologies, etc.) I have almost always felt common bonds.

At the same time, I have long wondered whether these many "theologies of," based as they usually are on specific issues, causes or identities, necessary and exciting as they have been, have not had the cumulative effect of distracting the Christian movement in the postmodern era from its ongoing task of articulating a gospel that speaks to the human condition at its ontological roots, as Tillich did--and speaks to this condition as gospel.

The great question facing the residue of classical Protestantism in North America, I think, is whether it may be said to have a gospel. Too often the issue- and identity-based theologies by which much liberal Protestantism has been energized have been heard chiefly in the imperative mood--radical imperatives, and at their best luminous and right imperatives; but still imperatives—socioreligious analyses issuing in moral directives: law, but not necessarily gospel. In their passion for specifics, they tend to leave the whole untouched. Entire areas of life, and entire classes and conditions of human beings, are effectively excluded from their counsels (and communities)—except perhaps as guilty perpetrators of the wrongs that these theologies name (usually with right).

What I learned from my teachers—not only Barth, but Tillich and Niebuhr too—is that the thinking that is driven by faith (*fides quaerens intellectum*) necessitates an ongoing endeavor to address creaturely existence in its complex and variegated wholeness. There is this comprehensive thrust in the faith because, as Havelock Ellis once put it, the "quintessential core" of religious faith "is the art of finding our emotional relationship to the world conceived *as a whole.*" To this I would add a caveat: Woe betide the theologian who thinks that he or she has actually and finally grasped the whole and translated it into propositions and dogmas and systems. As Augustine so wonderfully and succinctly warned us: *Si comprehendis, non est Deus!* "If you think you comprehend, then it's not God you're talking about!"

And yet the attempt to "see things whole"—at least to point intelligently enough to the "bird in flight" to help others see that it is actually a bird and not, for example, Superman—belongs to the life of faith as such and to the vocation of Christian theology in particular. Moreover, there is no reason why a contextually sensitive theology cannot at the same time make this attempt at comprehensiveness, the attendant dangers notwithstanding.

That is why I dared, in the decade preceding the millennial transition, to try to work out a contextually specific theology which at the same time addressed all of the cardinal questions by which Christian theology over the ages was guided in its search for a gospel that could speak to the human condition: revelation and reason, theology, Christology, creaturehood, ecclesiology, eschatology. For me, the exegetical core of this theology had to be the theology of the cross, and, as the early Barth rightly observed, that theology is "a broken theology"--therefore a theology that defies, in any ultimate sense, comprehensiveness. So there could be no bravado in such an undertaking. But Christian theology must strive for the unity of truth even—or perhaps especially—when it knows that Truth is a living Word whose ineffability defies translation into ideas and words. Even a "negative theology" (and the theology of the cross is perhaps the only consistently apophatic theology that the West has attempted) must busy itself with critiquing what is false if the mystery that is the incarnate Truth is to be contemplated truly.

I shared with most of my generation of serious Christians the assumption that the Christian faith, sobered now by the various critiques of the secular world as well as those of its own best representatives, would increase—perhaps even numerically, but more importantly as a prophetic social force. Unlike our earlier 20th-century progenitors we did not on the whole believe that this would be the "Christian

century," but neither did we entertain the thought that we might be living in the last days of "the Constantinian era." Indeed, the postwar euphoria of the 1950s, with new churches going up on every corner of the suburban sprawl, encouraged many of us to believe that we were at the beginning of a new period of Christian "relevance" (a key word of the epoch).

Gradually, however, the evidence for such a vision waned. And by the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, in some parts of the once solidly Christian West the quantitative depletion of the so-called mainline churches made it virtually impossible to ignore the fact of a major shift in religious sensibilities. Not only were the old Protestant churches being sidelined, but Catholicism too was losing ground. In Quebec, the year 1960 is usually indicated as the onset of La Revolution Tranquille (the quiet revolution)—a silent but dramatic rejection of the almost medieval Catholicism that had shaped French Canada. Canada generally began to look more like Western Europe in terms of both the numbers and the influence of Christians. Given the complex political role of Christianity in America, the decline of the churches was less conspicuous in the U.S. But there too it was the older, once most established denominations that felt the icy winds of change.

The question confronting all of us who achieved some thoughtful awareness of this metamorphosis: What then is the mission of a church that can no longer count on its favored status in Western civilization to ensure its meaning and its continued existence?

I believed that the very first responsibility of Christian communities in such a situation was a) to begin at last to recognize the radical incompatibility of Christian establishment with the biblical and best traditional conceptions of the Christian movement, and b) to explore the possibilities of Christian witness and service from a position outside or on the edge of the dominant culture.

I remember a conversation early in the 1970s in which a small group of clergy in the city where I lived were discussing the question, "On the pattern of Revelation chapters 2 and 3, what do you think ought to be the 'message of the Spirit' to the churches of *this* city?" I found myself answering this question almost without knowing what I said: "The Spirit writes to the churches of North America: Disestablish yourselves!"

I'm afraid my words fell on the ears of my hearers as though I had been speaking in tongues. But I continued to pursue that theme in many lectures and in a whole series of books and papers on the future that I envisaged, with the help of many others, for a Christian movement that had seriously tried to disentangle itself from the ethos and assumptions of the imperial peoples of the West, with their explicit or implicit racism, ethnocentrisms, militarism and ideologies of power. There is, I argued, a truly fundamental discrepancy between the concept of Christendom (the dominion of the Christian religion) and the way of the One whom Christians call *Dominus*. The secular world, in its way, had begun to intuit this incongruity before most Christians noticed it, and the sex scandals that had already begun to show through by that time only punctuated that "judgment that begins with the household of faith."

Instead of waiting for wave after wave of militant secularism, materialism, atheism, etc., aided and abetted by the growing public awareness of religious plurality, to wash over them, the churches should take the initiative in their own disestablishment. Instead of clinging to absurd and outmoded visions of grandeur, which were never Christ's intention for his church, serious Christian communities ought now to relinquish triumphalistic dreams of majority status and influence in high places and ask themselves about the possibilities of witnessing to God's justice and love from the edges of empire—which is where prophetic religion has always lived. Instead of mourning their losses or naively hoping for their recovery, Christians who are serious about their faith ought to ask themselves why all the metaphors Jesus uses to depict his "little flock" are metaphors of smallness: salt, yeast, light—small things that can serve larger causes because they do not aim to become big themselves. I loved what a onetime fellow student at Union Seminary, Albert van den Heuvel, once wrote: "The real humiliation of the church is its refusal to be humiliated!"

Such a message, which is of course nothing more nor less than the application of the theology of the cross to ecclesiology, is largely still an unwelcome one in churches that not long ago were at the center of things. But it remains, I believe, the existential challenge of the present and future. The greatest dangers to human welfare in today's global village are all of them products of, or backed by, religions driven by immodest claims to ultimacy. A Christianity that still hankers after Christendom, as nearly all of us did until quite recently, can only increase the reign of death that is tearing our planet apart. Only a nontriumphalistic Christianity, an

ecclesia crucis, can contribute to the healing of the nations.

Probably, if I am granted more years beyond my present 82, my mind will change again. But I hope that it will always be change for the sake of distinguishing a living and therefore modest faith from the great temptation of all religion, which is to imagine itself true.