

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS: SIGNIFICANCE FOR DIALOGUE

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THE DOCTRINE of the Spirit holds potential, I suggest, for interfaith discussion and understanding, and for Christians' dialogue with the secular world.¹ This is especially so if the theme of Spirit is understood within the genre of theology known as "theology of the cross." The Holy Spirit, who is, according to Christian faith, none other than the Spirit of Jesus Christ, is the universal Creator Spirit, present to all people, of all religions and of no religion, to inspire, lead, and bless. Yet, if we are to be faithful in our specific identity as Christians, the universality of the Spirit must be understood in intimate relationship with the particularity of Jesus Christ and his cross. I content that in our context a theology of the universality of the Spirit of God needs to be kept in tension with the particularity, even exclusivity, of a "theology of the cross," if genuine dialogue is to occur between Christians and people of other faith communities and between Christianity and atheism. This is a dialectic not simply of particularity/universality (a particular instance of a universal truth) but of exclusivity/inclusivity, i.e. specific truth claims are being made which, *ipso facto*, exclude other truth claims. Yet it is "dialectical," in that apparent poles or contradictory opposites are held together and challenge each other. There resides in a theology of the cross also, I argue, a potential for speaking of the universality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ in a way that avoids triumphalism and seeks to respect and learn from the faith of others, i.e. a potential for true dialogue.

SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

In the last analysis it is unhelpful and unproductive for Christians to engage in "dialogue," whether with secular people or people of other faiths, which begins from a reductionist theological stance. By reductionist I mean any position which reduces and discounts the scandalous, universal truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Particularly, any approach to interfaith relations which (to use the language of George Lindbeck) discards the "grammar" or "communally authorita-

¹ In our context, it is not only people of religion, but "secular" people as well, with whom Christians must be in dialogue. This is recognized by the World Council of Churches' subunit on dialogue with living religions and ideologies.

tive rules of discourse, attitude and action”² of either of the partners in dialogue precludes the possibility that real communication between historic faith communities will occur.³

Certainly the “grammar” of Christian faith is scandalous in both the universality and the exclusivity of its affirmations—the “authoritative rules of discourse” of its canonical sources, creedal traditions, official liturgies and hymnody. It is universal in that Jesus Christ is sung and proclaimed as the Savior of the world. The universal saving significance and unique identity of Jesus Christ is affirmed by all the major New Testament authors. According to Paul, “God was in Christ reconciling the *kosmos* unto himself” (2 Cor 5:17); for John, Jesus is the “lamb of God that takes away the sin of the *kosmos*” (Jn 1:29), and “God so loved the *kosmos*” as to give the “only Son” (3:16). As a consequence, Jesus Christ is to be proclaimed to all nations (Mk 16:15; Mt 28:20) and “unto the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In light of the universal grace and salvation which God has wrought in the cross of Jesus, he alone is called the crucified “Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). It is said of him exclusively that “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9) and that “all things were created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). He is God’s own Word, Godself made flesh (Jn 1:1, 14). The crucified Christ is “designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4). For many NT authors God’s resurrection victory in Christ over the power of sin and death and all the principalities and powers has been accomplished through the humility and suffering of this very specific human person in that minutely particular time and place in the history and geography of the world.

This very particularity is scandalous. It was already scandalous (i.e. offensive, contemptible, laughable) in the days of the early Church in a religiously pluralistic Graeco-Roman world where a multiplicity of religions and philosophies flourished. Again, it is scandalous in our time, with the passing away of the established culture of Christendom. Universal claims had perhaps a certain cultural plausibility coming from the successful religion of a triumphant civilization. However, a claim to universal truth on the part of one minority religious group appears again to be absurdly arrogant and unreasonable: “Christ crucified, a *skandalon* to the Jews and folly to gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). Indeed in the ancient world the claim of Christians—that God is

² George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 18.

³ See David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

uniquely present and disclosed in the utter powerlessness of the obscene event of crucifixion—was contemptible and laughable,⁴ and it is increasingly incredible today in a culturally and religiously pluralist society.

The typical modern strategy to be rid of the scandal of particularity was enunciated lucidly by G. E. Lessing: "Accidental, historical truths can never become evidence for necessary truths of reason."⁵ According to this view, the doctrines formulated about Jesus are symbolic expressions of a general human truth or wisdom which arises from time to time out of human religious consciousness. The general truths of reason, as Lessing said, cannot be dependant upon contingent "facts." The "fact" of Jesus, then, is strictly speaking, dispensable. It is the religious or ethical truths that he teaches or which he symbolizes that have lasting value. It is "God," of whom he is a symbol, that matters. This is the approach to doctrine which Lindbeck calls "the experiential/expressivist view" (a view which Lindbeck does not espouse). According to this tradition, religious doctrines arise out of the "prereflective experiential depths of the self."⁶ The gospel of cross and resurrection is of a piece with all religious truth and is not to be regarded as *sui generis*. The embarrassing scandal of particularity, then, is transcended, and the charge of arrogance avoided.

However, this solution does not do justice to the particularity asserted by the Christian canonical sources, which persistently identify Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, as the unsubstitutable divine-human agent of salvation.⁷ To abandon the exclusivity/universality of Jesus as Savior of the world is finally self-destructive for Christian faith and identity, and, strangely enough, tends to make of Christianity a white Western tribal religion (e.g. "We have our religion, they have theirs," or "It isn't true for the whole world, it's only true for us"). It dissipates not only the scandal, but also the glory of the cross, that is the cross of the "crucified God." "In the cross of Christ I glory," says an old hymn. The crucifixion of Jesus as God's own self-gift and "death in God"⁸ is the powerfully moving and self-authenticating datum which draws the

⁴ Recall the ridiculing attitude of Celsus to the Christian claims concerning Jesus. See J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 206.

⁵ G. E. Lessing, quoted by E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 585.

⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* 21.

⁷ Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974).

Christian believer to Jesus (Jn 12:32). The *apokalypsis* (revelation) in Jesus proves to be not simply one more instance of general human religious wisdom, but a reversal of the wisdom and righteousness of the world. It is *evangelion*. It is something not previously known, *news* of the reign of a humbled and suffering God of love, news, which is hidden from the wise and revealed to babes (Mt 11:25), of a sheer unconditional grace which unmasks the world's wisdom and righteousness. It is news embodied in the contingent fact of a poor Jew crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem two thousand years ago, who is said to have been raised from the dead.

The theology of the cross, with its primary source in Paul and developed explicitly by Luther, is a minority tradition in Christian theology which emphasizes the radical difference between the gospel of Jesus Christ and human wisdom. In the *Heidelberg Disputations*, Luther sharply contrasted *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae*. Regarding the latter, he declares in Thesis 21:

He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls "the enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil 3:18), for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works.⁹

Luther's radical rejection of human wisdom is a corollary of his understanding of justification by faith alone. The glory of human wisdom is another aspect of the proud "good works" that cause people to be puffed up. Luther knew little about the religions of the world and had never encountered a modern secularist. His rejection of human wisdom was particularly a rejection of theology based in Aristotelian philosophy, and of what we would call "natural theology":

He deserves to be called a theologian . . . who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in 1 Cor 1 calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things so that those who did not honour God as manifested in his works should honour him as he is hidden in his suffering. . . . Now it is not sufficient for

⁹ Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputations*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. H. J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 53.

anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross.¹⁰

Luther's *theologia crucis* was never widely understood or accepted in the days of cultural Christendom. Even Luther himself did not appear to realize the sociopolitical implications which some have found in it for church and mission. Today, though, this minority tradition is finding new and creative proponents among both Catholics and Protestants. Some contemporary political/contextual and liberation theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann, Jon Sobrino, and Douglas Hall, have found *theologia crucis* fruitful for the formulation of relevant and credible theologies in our own time.

Jürgen Moltmann's rejection of what he calls "monotheism" in favor of a trinitarian faith in the crucified God of the cross is, amongst other things, a dialogical response to what he regards as a perfectly legitimate "protest atheism" in a world of terrible suffering. Moltmann's version of *theologia crucis* particularly addresses postholocaust twentieth-century atheism: "[I]n the broken mirror of an unjust and absurd world of triumphant evil and suffering without reason and without end it does not see the countenance of a God, but only the grimace of absurdity and nothingness."¹¹ The only ground for faith and hope in such a world is a theology of the cross which finds its way past protest atheism by recognizing in the crucified Christ suffering in God's being itself, and in its rebellion against suffering, "rebellion in God."¹² This is a very particular kind of faith in God, quite different from most traditional religious theism, whether Christian or other. Of particular interest to us here is Moltmann's argument that belief in such a vulnerable and risk-taking Deity calls for a risk-taking lifestyle, including vulnerability to the pain and potential joy of genuine listening to, and communication with, people of other faiths.¹³

Jon Sobrino, Salvadoran liberation theologian, working as he does in a context of unspeakable oppression, civil war, and poverty, rejects any "natural theology" that attempts to gain access to God through what is positive in existence. In a situation of drastic negativity, arguments for the existence of a benevolent God ring hollow, and a crucified God is the only one that makes sense.¹⁴ He writes, "On the cross God does not show up as one who wields power over the negative from *outside*;

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (Thesis 20) 52.

¹¹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God* 219.

¹² *Ibid.* 227.

¹³ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1977) 161.

¹⁴ Here we find intimations of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. E. Bethge (London: SCM, 1953) 360–61.

rather, on the cross we see God submerged *within* the negative."¹⁵ Sobrino proceeds to link *theologia crucis* to liberationist praxis with and for the poor. In accordance with Mt 25:31–32, we find access to God preeminently not in experiences of majesty and glory, but in fellowship and solidarity with the afflicted. Thus, "going to God means going to the poor."¹⁶

Douglas Hall, Canadian contextual theologian, while not emphasizing the exclusivist Christological aspects of *theologia crucis*, draws out its ethical and missiological implications for a nontriumphalist Church in an "officially optimistic society."¹⁷ Hall calls for a renunciation of the Christian imperialist mentality, which is so glaringly incongruent with the crucified Christ. The spirit of success and the ideology of empire and faith in progress have so consistently informed Constantinian Christendom and the Church's mission that the wisdom of the cross and the power "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9) has been all but forgotten.¹⁸ A recovery of *theologia crucis* should enable Christians to begin to learn from others.

But what could Christians learn from others, if these others are possessors only of human wisdom, the "wisdom of the world," which is so to be contrasted with the wisdom of God in the cross? What can tolerance and respect mean for people who believe they alone are really in touch with the Truth? Can their humility in dialogue be anything but a sham in view of their claims to "the foolishness of God which is wiser than men" (1 Cor 1:25)? I believe we have a clue to this dilemma in a theology of the freedom and universality of the Spirit. But first let us consider what it means for people of faith to have tolerance in a pluralist society.

FAITH, TOLERANCE, PLURALISM

Undoubtedly Christians in Western/Northern societies in the late twentieth century are moved by their pluralist contexts to formulate a positive, appreciative theological and practical stance toward other living faiths, and also toward the spiritual and ethical quality of life that is often found amongst secular people. Representatives of all the

¹⁵ Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978) 220–21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 223.

¹⁷ Douglas John Hall, *Lighten our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) chaps. 3–6; also Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 22–33.

¹⁸ Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986) 106.

major world-religious traditions can be found in our neighborhoods or places of work, challenging us, befriending us, even marrying our children. Often they exhibit qualities of reverence, peacefulness, justice, and integrity which we admire and respect. We believe we observe in them something of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22–23). We feel we can learn something of God's truth from them. We think we discern "wisdom" in them, and not only the "wisdom of the world." Also, people of no religious involvement at all are often found in social-action organizations—the peace movement, environmentalist or native solidarity groups—exhibiting a remarkable depth of spirituality and dedication to peace, justice, and the wholeness of creation. Moreover, many secular people exhibit an attractive personal wholeness, a quality of love and humility which appears to us to be "of God." We are reminded that "one who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 Jn 4:7). Both religious and secular non-Christians often appear to us to be doing God's work and contributing to the growth of God's reign in the world. A narrow understanding of God's presence and salvific activity becomes implausible in such a pluralist context as ours is, and there can be no doubt that context is properly a major ingredient in theological thought. What is thinkable or "seriously imaginable"¹⁹ in our time and place inevitably has bearing on our hermeneutical selectivity in the use of Scripture.

What is culturally plausible, however, cannot be our primary criterion of theological truth, if, as a minority, we are to avoid being swamped by prevailing ideologies or intellectual fashions. A minority faith community will, by definition, adopt stances which seem incredible to the cultural majority. Christians who espouse a theology of the cross are explicitly opposed to what appears plausible in a success- and power-oriented world; indeed the whole notion of "scandal" directly implies that Christians are permanently at odds with the "wisdom of the world," and that their primary criterion of truth is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the predominant "wisdom" today is the popular religious relativism and agnosticism in which no particular religious truth claims are taken seriously. Religious beliefs are commonly regarded as subjective emotional preferences, or systems of meaning and value without ontological significance. "Tolerance" often takes the form of abandoning particular truth commitments in a way that eventually undermines deep and passionate faith. But we cannot avoid the reality that, as Harold Coward put it, "to hold a belief is to believe that some-

¹⁹ Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 48.

thing is true."²⁰ Nor is it enough to say "true for me." Truth claims are inevitably in some degree "exclusive," in the sense that when we assert some things to be so, we imply that other things are not so. It is not necessarily arrogant to make exclusive/universal truth claims; most of the world religions and philosophies do so. People make exclusive/universal claims constantly in fields such as politics, ethics, aesthetics, without being accused of arrogance. We need to recognize that truth claims in theology (as in many other disciplines) are not universally demonstrable, i.e. we make statements about God, Jesus, salvation, by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). Hopefully we assert them in humility, acknowledging that others do not share them, and allowing others to make different faith statements, or none at all. This is tolerance, which is quite different from relativism.²¹

Relativism is, in the last analysis, quite *intolerant*, condemning or smiling condescendingly upon all particular religious truth claims. Carl Starkloff makes the point cogently: "[I]f I say that my way is merely a relative way, I call on the other to hold the same position. I find this a strange relativist absolutism that in the long run forbids us to challenge one another or to do very much more than to be nice to one another."²² People of faith certainly cannot be relativists in this sense; we need to confess our faith forthrightly, and proclaim a message which we hold to be true. Our primary question, then, cannot be whether our context pushes us to open appreciation of other religious or secular stances (as it surely does), but whether internal dimensions of our own faith require such openness. To put it another way: our pluralist contextual experience pushes us around the hermeneutical circle back to our canonical sources to find in them a fresh, living Word for our time and place. I have already suggested that *theologia crucis*, for all its exclusivity, implies an attitude of respect and vulnerable give-and-take with those who do not share our faith. But I argue that there are other internal elements of Christian faith that move us toward such an attitude, and here I would especially focus on the biblical language of Spirit. When we look closely at "Spirit of God" and "Holy

²⁰ Harold Coward, "Religious Pluralism and Christian Theology," in *A Long and Faithful March*, ed. Harold Wells and Roger Hutchinson (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1989) 199.

²¹ See Jay Newman, *Foundations of Religious Tolerance* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1982).

²² Carl Starkloff, "Christ and the Tribes: A Re-examination of a 'Constitutive' Christology" (paper for Toronto School of Theology, Systematic Theology Colloquium, 1990), later revised and published as "Aboriginal Cultures and the Christ," *TS* 53 (1992) 288-312.

Spirit" in the Bible we find again a dialectic of particularity/universality, and exclusivity/inclusivity.

THE PARTICULAR WORK OF THE SPIRIT

Of course the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, is, quantitatively speaking, overwhelmingly concerned with God's particular work with Israel, in Jesus, and in the Church.

Israel's experience of the redeeming God at work in the events of its history was understood metaphorically as *ruach*—wind or breath, which in English we translate "Spirit."²³ The great formative liberating event of the Exodus from Egypt was understood as a blast of God's *ruach* which blew back the sea to allow the people to cross to freedom; as expressed in the Song of Miriam: "At the blast of your *ruach* the waters piled up. . . . You did blow your wind, the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters" (Exod 15:8,10). Not only the dramatic crossing of the water, but the whole process of inspiration, guidance, and struggle that led to it can be seen as a work of the divine Spirit: giving courage to the women who defiantly protected the infant Moses; revealing God's holiness and compassion to Moses in the burning bush experience, and so dedivinizing and undermining the tyrannical authority of the pharaoh; giving vision to Moses in the struggle for liberation. The people of Israel believed it was the *ruach* of God that guided and fought for them as they made their way through the wilderness and who inspired their charismatic leaders and early prophets (e.g., Jud 6:34; 11:29; 1 Sam 16:13). The wind metaphor (the most prominent, but not the only metaphor of God in the OT)²⁴ is especially eloquent concerning God's life, power, and freedom. God, like the wind, is uncontained, uncontrollable, unpredictable. The Spirit "blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes." (Jn 3:8).

The prophetic hope for God's reign of justice and peace envisaged one who would come from God upon whom the *ruach* of God would rest: "The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might" (Is 11:2); and because of this, righteousness shall reign and "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb" (Is 11:6). Another prophet spoke of a suffering servant: "I have put my Spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations" (Is

²³ See Paul W. Newman on wind as metaphor of God in *Spirit Christology: Recovering the Biblical Paradigm of Christian Faith* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987) 69–101.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 71–74.

42:1). The prophetic hope was often universal in its scope, yet it was Yahweh's anointed of Israel who would bring this salvation "to the nations."

The New Testament proclaims that this expected one has appeared in Jesus, who is "full of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 4:1). He is conceived by the Spirit. His baptism, his strength in temptation, his preaching and healing, his Messianic ministry for the oppressed and poor, are all empowered by the Spirit: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18). In the Spirit's power he goes obediently to his death (Heb 9:14), and by the power of the Spirit he is raised up (Rom 1:4; 8:11).

Following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Spirit that empowered him is poured out upon those who believe in him. The Holy Spirit given at Pentecost (Acts 2), or breathed by the risen Jesus upon the disciples for the work of mission (Jn 20:22), is the same Spirit which was at work in him. The Spirit of God is now specifically identified as Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9), Spirit of the Son (Gal 4:6). Paul uses "Spirit of God" and "Spirit of Christ" interchangeably with "Christ in you" (Rom 8:9-11). For John, the *paraklētos* (sustainer) or "Spirit of truth" is sent by the Son from the Father (Jn 15:26) and the Spirit's work is specifically to bear witness to Christ (Jn 16:14). The indwelling Spirit is one with the indwelling Christ (Rom 8:9-11; Jn 14:20; 15:7). The oneness of Christ and Spirit and of each with the Father pushes inexorably toward a trinitarian understanding. But the particularity we have to notice here is this: the Holy Spirit is the ongoing life, presence, and activity of the risen Jesus.

The New Testament continues to speak in a particular, even exclusive manner, of a new work of the Holy Spirit which, from the time of Pentecost, occurs on the presupposition of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Spirit of the New Testament is not, of course, a different reality than the Spirit of God that we hear in the Old Testament. But now we hear of a new, particular working of the same Spirit. The Baptist promises, "He [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1:8). Acts and the Letters of Paul speak repeatedly of people being baptized in the Spirit, or of being given the Spirit, (Acts 8:17; 10:44; 14:8; 19:6; 1 Cor 12:13; Rom 8:15, etc.) and this in response to the preaching of the gospel. The indwelling of the Spirit is something that characterizes only those who believe in Jesus, and without the Spirit no one can say "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3). Paul becomes quite exclusivist when he declares, "Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom 8:9). This exclusivism of "having the Spirit" parallels the exclusivism of the Christ revelation itself, and may be regarded as even more scandalous. Here Christians

claim not simply uniqueness for their Lord, but a corresponding uniqueness for their own particular Spirit-gifted relationship with God!

It should be noted that this uniqueness is not a claim to moral superiority, nor to deeper spirituality. Specifically, a theology of the cross is the total reversal of any such claim, emphasizing on the contrary that we are "justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom 3:28). In light of this, the Christian is precisely the one who claims no moral or spiritual virtue. Indeed it is essential to the *skandalon* of the cross that Christ is the "end of the law" (Rom 10:14). In a theology of the cross, those who "have the Spirit" are those who claim only the justification which is God's gift through faith in the God of cross and resurrection. Nevertheless, such particular claims, so out of step with the relativism of our pluralist society and offensive to general human and spiritual consciousness, will sound arrogant to contemporary ears. Further, they run the risk of contributing to the religious conflicts that plague humanity. It is the Christ who, having superseded the law, abolished the "dividing wall of hostility" between Jews and Gentiles. "He is our peace . . . creating one new humanity" (Eph 2:14,16). If the Christian gospel is to give offense, let it be the offense of the cross and not the offense of proud Christian superiority. Christians have to give others their due, and even "count others better" (Phil 2:3). That is why it is so important that, without renouncing this particularity, or reducing the scandal of the cross, we pay attention also to the universality of the Spirit's presence and work in the world.

UNIVERSALITY OF THE SPIRIT

The rich language of Spirit, with its implication of uncontained freedom, serves well to speak of God's universal activity. Its widespread usage among many religions and cultures²⁵ to speak of a reality which is both exterior and interior, both mindful and powerful, enables us to acknowledge that all creation lives and moves and has its being in God (Acts 17:28). The God who *is* Spirit cares for the whole creation.²⁶ The salvific presence and work of that life-giving Spirit turns out to be not confined to Jews and Christians. Israel knew Yahweh's liberating work was not confined to its own salvation history. The *ruach* of God brought Israel out of Egypt; and yet, "Are not you Israelites like Cushites to me? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt,

²⁵ Paul W. Newman, *Humanity and Spirit: An Anatomy of Hope* (Toronto: Image, 1983) 21.

²⁶ See John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1972) 179.

the Philistines from Caphtor, the Aramaeans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). Malachi acknowledges that God gladly receives the worship and honor given by others: "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts" (Mal 1:11).

Israel's experience of the redeeming God whose Spirit led them from Egypt to the promised land, spoke through their prophets and accompanied them in exile, inspired in them an awareness that Yahweh was the life-giving Creator of all. According to the priestly writer, the same *ruach* that liberated Israel had been at work at the beginning of creation, ordering the chaos: "the *ruach* of God was brooding over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2). According to the Yahwist, when God shaped humanity from the dust of the earth, God breathed *life* into its nostrils (Gen 2:7). The gift of humanness is the work of the Creator Spirit. Humanity's very humanness is this in-breathed life of God, which is given to all of humanity by the Spirit. Human beings as such, not any particular nation or faith community, are given a unique place in creation as those who are charged to "till and keep" the garden (Gen 2:15). By their common humanity, in-breathed by God's Spirit, the human family is one. The Hebrew Scriptures' story of God's covenant with Noah—"the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth" (Gen 9:16)—again affirms the providential relationship of God with all creation.

Israel's awareness that God's creating and redeeming presence was not territorially limited implied God's omnipresence: "Whither shall I go from your Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from your presence? . . . If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me" (Ps 139:7,9). Faith in God as omnipresent is not an attribute deduced by pure reason from the general concept of God. Karl Barth, e.g., affirms the omnipresence of God as a corollary of God's self-revelation and special presence to Israel and in Christ:

It is as we look back and forwards from God's special presence that his general presence in the world is recognized and attested and the authenticity and efficacy of his general divine omnipresence consists always and exclusively in the identity of the God who is present generally with the God who is present in particular.²⁷

The universal presence and activity of God as Spirit to the natural

²⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2/1, ed. and trans., T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957) 478.

world, as well as to all humanity, is attested in many parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is not difficult to gather texts from a wide variety of sources: from the Prophets, Wisdom Literature, the Psalms, and elsewhere, to show that the universality of the Spirit became fundamental to Israel's faith. According to Isaiah, the Spirit "poured out from on high" makes of the wilderness a "fruitful field" and also brings about "justice, righteousness and peace" (Is 32:15-17). Second Isaiah sees the Spirit as the sustaining, life-giving source of all earthly blessing (Is 44:3-4). A Psalmist extols the *breath* of God as Creator: "By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Ps 33:6). Yet this is not merely a single, completed act of creation: "When you send forth your Spirit they are created, and you renew the face of the ground" (Ps 104:30). Again in Job: "The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job 33:4). In a still more ancient text, the Spirit is credited with God's provision of intelligence and skill to Bezalel: "I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship" (Exod 31:3).

The Spirit of God, then, whom Christians identify as the Spirit of Christ, is persistently seen, in many parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, as the ever-present source, power, and life of all creation. The Spirit is to be found everywhere and amongst all people, giving and sustaining life. The Spirit's work, we may sure, is not for nothing; it is always salvific, creating wholeness and blessing.

Of particular interest to us here, is that the Spirit gives wisdom. This is an inherent part of Israel's understanding of the universality of God's presence to the whole world. The Wisdom Literature knows that humanity in general is endued with God's wisdom: "But truly it is the Spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding" (Job 32:8). The Spirit of understanding is a gift to be sought in prayer. It is "a kindly Spirit" which "fills the world, is all-embracing, and knows what a man says" (Wis 1:5-7). George Montague comments:

So open is the author to the working of the spirit among the gentiles that we may wonder whether in his view every [human], gentile included, has this holy spirit from birth and that all he need do is not lose it by sin. But this view is an over-simplification. . . . Wisdom and the spirit of wisdom are not possessed by a [human being] because of birth but rather are a gift bestowed upon [one] who asks.²⁸

²⁸ George T. Montague, *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1976) 105.

True human wisdom, we may conclude, is not mere foolishness, but a gift from God. The "wisdom of the world" may indeed be utterly false, but this cannot be said of all human wisdom as such, for all true *hokmah/sophia* is of God. The "wisdom," the depth and wholeness which we discern in people of other religious traditions and in secular people, cannot be dismissed as idolatrous "wisdom of the world." Nor is it merely our contextual experience that pushes us to say this; as I have argued here, it is inherent in many parts of the biblical testimony that God is present to the whole world to grant wisdom, to bless, guide and shape the life of the whole human family and the whole earth.

A theology of the universality of the Spirit could appear to be at loggerheads with the exclusivity and particularity of a *theologia crucis*. I suggest that actually this opposition is more in the nature of a dialectic. The exclusivity and universality found in the biblical sources challenge and illumine each other. To acknowledge the general work and presence of the Holy Spirit as Creator Spirit is not inconsistent with theology of the cross. Reformed theologians such as Calvin, Barth, Moltmann, and the Lutheran Robert Jenson, are notably affirmative of the longstanding theological tradition of Creator Spirit.²⁹ Robert Jenson's comment is of particular interest.

Thus if the Holy Spirit is God, this Spirit's wind must blow on and through all things. In the New Testament, the creator Spirit is almost exclusively proclaimed as the creator of the new life of God's particular people; but the very meaningfulness of this New Testament discourse depends on the Hebrew Scriptures, which evoke the Spirit as a universal creativity. . . . The enterprise is also perilous, for it must be the particular Spirit of Jesus and of the church to whom we attribute cosmic efficacy.³⁰

But what significance does all this carry for Christians' dialogue with people of other faiths, or with secular people?

SIGNIFICANCE FOR DIALOGUE

The significance of the universality of the Spirit of God for dialogue lies not in *homo religiosus*. The point is not to establish a natural

²⁹ John Calvin: "For it is the Spirit who, everywhere diffused, sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and earth. . . . In transfusing into all things his energy, and breathing into them essence, life and movement, he is indeed plainly divine" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.13.14). See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.1, 2d rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975) 450; Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (London: SCM, 1988) 16.

³⁰ Robert Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols., ed. C. Braaten and R. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 2.165.

capacity of human beings to know God and therefore relativize the need for revelation, nor to find in "religion" as such the possibility of salvation. Rather, the truth and wisdom found in North American native spirituality, in African traditional religion, in Islamic or Hindu religion, or in the "nonreligious," person, must be seen as God's gift. If the Spirit of God, whom Christians also name Spirit of Jesus Christ, is present and at work in all creation and with all people, we must eagerly expect to find truth and wisdom in many places. It is not for nothing that God's Spirit is omnipresent in the world. The presence of the Lord of exodus and resurrection is always for blessing, and for truth. That is why we listen intently to hear what God's wisdom has taught the Confucianist, the Taoist, the Muslim. That is why we thank God for the courage and love of justice which we find in many secular social activists; we may find in them too a risky and visionary thrust toward the future which is indeed an authentic "faith" response to the blowing of God's Spirit in history.³¹ The freedom of the wind of God to be at work everywhere should allow us to give thanks for signs of the presence of God's reign which often appear more dramatic and authentic in the lives and work of non-Christians than in Christians.

Karl Barth, notable for his uncompromising stance toward "religion as unbelief" and his insistence on the "one Word of God" which is Jesus Christ, also attempts a *theologia crucis*. Barth, being much more familiar with modern European secularism than with the world religions, is more positive about the former than about the latter, affirming that there are "true words spoken in the secular world." He does so on the basis of the resurrection of the crucified Christ, since "all the powers and forces of the whole cosmos are subjected to Him."³² While explicitly mentioning the secular world, he affirms the presence and activity of God amongst all people:

[W]e recognize and confess that not we alone, nor the community which, following the prophets and apostles, believes in Him and loves Him and hopes in Him, but *de iure* all men and all creation derive from His cross, from the reconciliation accomplished in Him, and are ordained to be the theatre of His glory and therefore the recipients and bearers of His Word. . . . We can and must be prepared to accept "parables of the kingdom" in the full biblical sense, not merely in the witness of the Bible and the various arrangements, works

³¹ See discussion of the Holy Spirit's work in movements for social justice and liberty by Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 210; and José Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) 51–55.

³² *Church Dogmatics* 4.3 (1) (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961) 116.

and words of the Christian Church, but also in the secular sphere. . . . We have ears to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd even there too.³³

Since the universal Lordship and presence of Christ by the Holy Spirit pertain to the sphere of the world's living faiths as well as the secular sphere, true dialogue is indeed possible for the Christian with both secular and religious people, especially for the theologian of the cross. This means that we enter dialogue in an attitude of love, honoring the experience and faith of the neighbor, seeking both to communicate and to learn, to enrich our knowledge of God and God's will. It means that we can genuinely listen with the expectation of growing in wisdom, wisdom which God has given to others. It means that our own faith and theology may change, even profoundly, through conversation with others.

But does all of this imply a negation of the particularity and exclusivity of *theologia crucis*? That would be the case, if we were to suggest that all religions are "equally true," or that all philosophies, all ways of life, or all historical occurrences were equally "of God." Dialogue, however, also involves disagreement and discernment. If dialogue meant negotiated compromise, some dilution of Christian faith, it would in fact negate theology of the cross. But in true dialogue, Christians must not only listen but also bear witness.³⁴ The Muslim, Sikh, or atheist is not interested in so-called "dialogue" with a *former* Christian. The Christian must bear witness to the crucified and risen Christ, in all his scandalous particularity, as Savior of the world.³⁵ Jesus Christ cannot be reduced to "our Savior" or merely "our way" in some esoteric sense. We cannot escape Luther's forthright words quoted above: "He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering." Even those who possess a good measure of God's *hokmah/sophia* may regard the cross as foolishness. Yet for Christians, the cross of Christ is now our true wisdom (1 Cor 1:20, 30). In dialogue the Christian has something astounding to tell. It belongs not to the Christian, but to the Holy Spirit, already at work in our dialogue partner, to convince or convert.

In view of the universality of the Holy Spirit, it is the foolishness of God on the cross which can move Christians to an attitude of vulner-

³³ Ibid. 177; see also 123. See comment by Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative* 31–39.

³⁴ See David Lochhead, "Being Neighbour to People of Other Faiths," and "Bearing Witness to People of Other Faiths," *Touchstone* 9/1 (Jan. 1991).

³⁵ An exclusivist doctrine of salvation, proclaiming the damnation of all non-Christians is obviously not supported here. Nevertheless, "Savior of the World" implies that Christ is "constitutive" of salvation. See J. Peter Schineller, "Christ and Church: A Spectrum of Views," *TS* 37 (1976) 545–66.

able openness to people of other faiths and of no faith. Followers of the humble and broken Christ, when stripped of the trappings of cultural and political power, should be well suited to the humility of learning from others and of "counting others better" than themselves (Phil 2:3). Paradoxically it is this very particularity and scandalously exclusivist/universalist faith in the crucified Christ as Savior of the world which can move us to an attitude of humility in our encounters with others, and to a genuine eagerness both to learn and to share.