



Theology of the Cross and Popular Culture

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The young redemptrix hangs upon a cross, head bowed and blood flowing from the stigmata, the wounds of Christ. Under this image on the DVD cover we read, “The messenger must be silenced.” After many special effects and presumptive supernatural activity, the movie (*Stigmata*) ends with the young “victim” being saved from death at the hands of the murderous cardinal by the efforts of the young, hunky priest investigator, thus exposing the cover-up attempt by the Roman Catholic Church. Fade to black, and then the following statement: “In 1945, a scroll was discovered in Nag Hammadi, which is described as ‘the secret sayings of Jesus.’ This scroll, the Gospel of Saint Thomas, has been declared by scholars around the world to be the closest record we have of the words of the historical Jesus. The Vatican refuses to recognize this gospel and has described it as heresy.” Roll the credits.

In *Dogma*, the statue of “Buddy Jesus” greets worshipers at “Cardinal” George Carlin’s happenin’ church entrance, but seems ill equipped to handle the influence, frustration, and finally the demonic power of fallen angel Ben Affleck. In the end “dogma” is preserved by God’s coming in the person of Alanis Morissette, destroying the angelic menace and preserving the creation.

In *What Dreams May Come*, Robin Williams chases his wife’s soul into the

In popular culture, religion is generally marked by supernatural special effects and a dualistic worldview. A theology of the cross challenges such simplistic portrayals, offering a more viable and hopeful theological response to human suffering and the ambiguity of life.

lower reaches of hell through storm, fire, and fury to the roof of a blackened, inverted gothic cathedral where his love saves her from her own self-imposed hell. Even “the Arnold” (Schwarzenegger) takes on Satan himself in hand-to-claw combat in *The End of Days*, and after trashing a church in the closing scene he is finally victorious in vanquishing the forces of destruction and saving the world once more for Republican economics. Religion is alive—but not necessarily well—and appearing at your local theater.

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Should such religious depictions be taken seriously or are they merely entertainment? Do they create or convey social values and attitudes in their use of religious imagery? How do such depictions handle suffering and evil? Does popular culture, by at times trivializing or distorting religion, undermine religion’s ability to address suffering and provide a viable ground for realistic hope in our society? Do these portrayals and many others in the popular media convey what Frank Kermode has called a “fallacy of the end,” always having to end happily with no loose ends or ambiguity? Or is there much more going on here, including contemporary expression of the current religious confusion and spiritual questing? Is it possible for theology to engage in high analysis and miss the folk, popular cultural values, meaning, and issues that are present in such portrayals? I think the answer is yes. For many people today, especially the young, popular culture *is* culture, and theology, to remain true to its calling, must take such cultural expressions seriously. The question then becomes, does the theology of the cross have anything to say to popular cultural portrayals of religion? It is the contention of this essay that it does, precisely through employing the concepts of *kenosis* (self-emptying) and hiddenness to address the suffering of humankind. A constructive response is possible that takes seriously the persuasive power of mass media for popular culture but also provides an alternative vision for the treatment of suffering.¹ A kenotic theology of the cross can embrace suffering in a way meaningful and accessible to contemporary popular cultural expression. It can challenge the need in popular culture to dismiss, deny, or avoid suffering and the ambiguity suffering represents. A kenotic theology of the cross can do this, not only by way of critique of present cultural portrayals, but also by offering a viable alternative approach to understanding suffering and ambiguity. The challenge, then, is not simply to ignore these creative efforts but to engage them in a constructive manner that affirms as well as critiques—indeed, to engage popular culture theologically.

¹See Andrew Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: Thomas More, 1988).

A KENOTIC THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Joseph Sittler points out that, “Theology is the proposing of relations between the testimony of a community of faith and the life of that community in nature and history.”² As such, theology involves a method of correlation between the testimony of the faith tradition (Scriptures, creeds, and confessions) and life experience, including not only what humans do to one another (history) but also the wider ecosystem of which humanity is a part (nature). Further, a theology of the cross involves the self-emptying, self-sacrificial love of God wherein God’s action becomes hidden in the midst of the suffering of the world.³ This hiddenness is at the heart of kenosis and, I think, offers some valuable insights for critiquing the role of religion in popular culture, especially in mass-media portrayals.

The principle of the incarnation is that the spiritual is manifest in the material, that the “Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Out of the incarnation flows God’s justifying grace and forgiveness of sins. By becoming creature, the Creator has sanctified human earthly existence, reconciling us not only to God but also to one another and the earth. The earliest scriptural analogy for understanding this divine action is found in Phil 2:6-8. Most biblical scholars believe it was an already existing liturgical hymn that Saint Paul employed to express his understanding of *how* God could be present in human history.⁴ Lucien Richard observes, “The incarnation is not an assumption of a human nature on the part of the eternal Logos, but rather a self-emptying on the part of God. The personal humanity of Jesus is not prior (and so we do not have adoptionism) but comes to be and is constituted in essence and existence when and insofar as God empties Godself.”⁵ It is also believed that Paul added his own touch to this hymn by the addition of the phrase “even death on a cross” to characterize the depth of divine emptying. In the Christian tradition the cross is the lens through which God is viewed, albeit “darkly.”⁶ The cross is a paradoxical and complex disclosure of the divine.⁷

There is a paradoxical, twofold hiddenness involved in God’s disclosure on the cross. First, there is the form of the opposite, where power comes in weakness, victory in defeat, and life in death. Second, there is the totality of divine reality, God within God’s self, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that is beyond the disclosure of God in Christ. God is more than God’s self-disclosure in Christ. This gives us both a critical and a material principle for theological reflection. Critically, it tells us that the work of God on Calvary must be related to all Christian thought.

²Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

³Some material in this section comes from my “Toward a Kenotic Pneumatology: Quantum Field Theory and the Theology of the Cross,” *CTNS Bulletin* 19/2 (1999) 11-16.

⁴Lucien Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist, 1997) 56-72.

⁵*Ibid.*, 94.

⁶See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁷See George Murphy’s articles, “The Theology of the Cross and God’s Work in the World,” *Zygon* 33/2 (1998) 221-231, and “The Third Article in the Science-Theology Dialogue,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 45/3 (1993) 162-168.

The cross alone is our theology (*crux sola nostra theologia*) and functions as a *critical principle* for the assessment of theological formulation. The *material principle* is the character of divine love as *agape* or self-giving love, which I believe can be understood as the expression of divine kenosis. Divine love, to enter the world, must limit itself in order not to destroy the creation it loves and which is a product of that love. Kenosis is a means for the expression of divine love. *Divine self-emptying makes possible divine self-giving*. A kenotic christology leads directly to a kenotic understanding of creation and the activity of the Holy Spirit.

In this theological model, kenosis is understood as the way God relates to the world. Creation is a work of love, and that love is made possible by God's self-limitation both in creating "space" for a free creation to occur within divine power and in the self-giving love that makes creation possible at all.⁸ The "emptying" of God into creation, however, is not a full disclosure of God. Just as in the cross, God remains hidden behind the masks of materiality. The creation, too, becomes *larvae dei*, the "masks of God," which means that while in faith one may appeal to God as Creator, one cannot prove such a creation by observation of the natural world. Scientific analysis can neither prove nor disprove the presence of God in creation. Divine kenosis involves the emptying of divinity in order for the creation to occur. The creation is not divine, although it is related to the divine. The kenosis of God in creating allows for true relationship and community by creating the "other" to which God can be related. In this sense, the incarnation is an intensification of the kenotic process of creation. George Murphy observes, "The most profound aspect of the cross is that *God himself* shares in the suffering of the world. In the Incarnation, God becomes a participant in the evolutionary process, sharing in the evolutionary history which links humanity with the rest of the biosphere."⁹ Through the incarnation the Creator further self-limits and empties in order to enter the suffering "other" of the creation itself.

This leads to what I am calling a "kenotic logic" of the Trinity and, therefore, of the Spirit.¹⁰ By the internal consistency of the divine nature the Spirit, too, must be kenotic. The logic is thus: a kenotic christology yields a kenotic understanding of divine activity that yields the self-emptying of God to allow for the creation, a kenotic creation. This twofold relational activity of God can yield a kenotic understanding of the divine nature of love which, in turn, yields a kenotic understanding of the activity of the Holy Spirit—in effect, a kenotic Trinity. Jürgen Moltmann puts it this way, "The Spirit is the Spirit of surrender of the Father and the Son. He [*sic*] is creative love proceeding out of the Father's pain and the Son's self-

⁸See Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); John Polkinghorne, "God in Relation to Nature: Kenotic Creation and Divine Action" (unpublished essay, 1998); and Richard, *Christ*, ch. 8, "Kenotic Creation."

⁹George Murphy, "'Chiasmic Cosmology' and the 'Same Old Story': Two Lutheran Approaches to Natural Theology," in *Facets of Faith and Science*, ed. Jitse van der Meer, vol. 4 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996) 137.

¹⁰See also Richard, *Christ*, 109-118.

surrender and comes to forsaken human beings in order to open them to a future for life.”¹¹ The Spirit is the self-emptying, self-limiting agapaic love of God, sanctifying the creation toward life and fulfillment. In such a kenotic theology it is possible to see the work of the Spirit “in, with, and under” the forms of popular culture.

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AND POPULAR CULTURE

To critique the treatment of religion in popular culture, we must keep in mind that many of the people in our society have been conditioned to think about religion more by its portrayal in the mass media than by their own families or religious institutions. Fundamentally, the problem is the treatment of religion as a form of entertainment or escape from ambiguity and suffering rather than a resource for coping with and adapting to them. Being technologically mediated and socialized, the treatment of religion in popular culture often functions as a distraction from, rather than a resource for, coping with suffering. Relying primarily upon mass media for its formation, popular culture does not prepare people to address the ambiguity, suffering, and failure that occur in their own lives, encouraging religion as an escape from rather than a grappling with reality. Traditions that used to provide resources for dealing with ambiguity and suffering are no longer consulted and have lost their power to persuade and inspire.

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This kenotic theological critique of the treatment of religion in popular culture will focus on three fundamental areas: the hiddenness of God in the world, the presence of ambiguity in life, and the response to suffering in human experience. This focus should be no surprise, as I think the quest for meaning and spirituality in our time is a response to the inadequacy of the treatment of religion in popular culture. As with most theologies of glory, it is fine when the sun is shining, but when the rain comes it tends to wilt and fade. In a time of global transformation and struggle, people are looking for ways to understand the negative as well as to constructively engage it. Religion acquired through entertainment and diversion is not up to the task.

The Hiddenness of God in the World

In reflecting upon the theology of the cross, Luther observed that in the cross God comes in hiddenness, in the form of the opposite, precisely to make room for faith. For Luther faith was clearly described by the statement in Heb 11:1: “Faith is

¹¹Jürgen Moltmann, “The Crucified God: A Trinitarian Theology of the Cross,” *Interpretation* 26/3 (1972) 294-295.

the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It is precisely this hidden dynamic of faith and hope that is missing in most popular-culture portrayals of God. The experience of hiddenness is not taken seriously, but rather its opposite, manifestation of the supernatural, is what is most often depicted. We find a mirror image of hiddenness in, namely, direct revelation. Supernatural powers appear in many forms, from burning bushes (*Ten Commandments*) to demonic dames (*Ghostbusters*) to beams of light and halos (*Touched by an Angel*) to supernatural cruciform suspension (*Stigmata*). This is very entertaining, precisely because the ambiguity of the divine or the supernatural is taken away. The supernatural makes for great special effects. But herein lies precisely the problem. That which is hidden is “revealed” to entertain or shock because in everyday life it is not so clear.

It is not accidental that the portrayal of the divine in popular culture is so obvious, hokey even, because in the more sophisticated understanding of physical existence, the physical and life sciences, the divine is so hidden. The result, of course, is that persons are not enabled to deal with this hiddenness. Instead, they are given the sense that the divine would reveal itself if it could, or that in “olden days” God did so, but today God does not, so perhaps God is really gone! The God portrayed in most mass-media presentations is dead in contemporary society and personal experience. The insidious side of these portrayals of God is that they are not intellectually or experientially tenable. Those in society who claim to be so sure of God’s existence, especially in public, are viewed as fanatical, contradicting experience and understanding. Much better to treat this subject in private, like a hobby, than to try to prove the unprovable or make claims contradictory to experience.

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While the entertainment and diversion approach to religious subjects does provide some momentary relief from the absence of the divine in today’s world, it also conditions people to think of that presence in a way in which it could never be present. Is this what God’s activity looks like? Then no wonder we never see it in operation today. It is absurd. This is what social psychologists call “group amplification,” where a collective experience repeated and shared tends to build conviction in its participants.¹² Through popular culture people are, in effect, socialized into a caricature of the divine, which then makes divine presence in the world untenable. No help is given to cope with the more powerful spiritual encounter of divine absence.

¹²David Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 287.

The theology of the cross takes God's hiddenness and absence seriously: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is precisely meeting this hiddenness head-on that establishes meaningful faith. The Christian tradition at its best has always insisted that God's ways are hidden in creation because of the distinction between creature and Creator. We now see that in the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of the divine there comes a theological hiddenness that is ontological and not simply epistemological. The world cannot and will not contain God, so God's hiddenness is the only way in which God can be present in the creation without destroying it. This means that God's presence must be discerned through faith and not through empirical demonstration. This world is messy, ambiguous, and full of suffering. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Only the suffering God can help."¹³ Mass-media portrayals of such a God are not impossible, but they are not very entertaining. In the absence of such portrayals people go questing after divinity of their own making, which will be less hidden and more idolatrously satisfying.

The Presence of Ambiguity in Life

Life is complex. It is multivalent and does not often lend itself to clear-cut interpretations and meanings. Does the mass-media portrayal of religion in popular culture prepare persons to handle such ambiguity? I think not. Its attraction and entertainment value lie precisely in the absence of that ambiguity. Here, at least, good and evil are clearly portrayed, and the good will always win out in the end. Even though Indiana Jones is put through one impossible challenge after another, deep down we know that he will get out of it and triumph. The Nazis will not get the Ark! Or in another genre, the death star will be destroyed. In fact, George Lucas indicated that he introduced moral dimensions into the *Star Wars* trilogy precisely to encourage young people, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, to reflect on moral issues and to have a sense of hope.¹⁴ Yes, this can inspire, but it can also set up unrealistically clear moral expectations that can play into a dualistic ethical mind-set. It is just when we do not know who is wearing the white hats that the moral challenge is engaged. This can lead to self-critical reflection and humility in the face of our own morally ambiguous motives. But if people are encouraged instead toward the opposite of such reflection, then we get scapegoating and self-righteous crusades or, through ethical fatigue, moral nihilism.

The message of the cross is that God is really present in the midst of the ambiguity of life. The fight of faith is joined in the midst of the ambiguity of human experience and moral decision making. To acknowledge ambiguity is to affirm the tensions of human life and the paradoxical character of human existence. We are Spirit-breathed humus, able to contemplate events before our arrival and after our demise. In effect, we are a part of the universe become self-conscious and able to

¹³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, 3d ed. (London: SCM, 1967) 197.

¹⁴Bill Moyers, "Of Myth and Men: A Conversation between Bill Moyers and George Lucas on the Meaning of the Force and the True Theology of *Star Wars*," *Time*, 26 April 1999, 91-94.

reflect back upon itself. But this is always the finite attempting, yearning, and searching for the infinite, for that which it cannot itself contain. There will always be, à la Kierkegaard, an “infinite qualitative difference” between time and eternity.¹⁵ We build our nests in the flux of spatiotemporal duration beyond our full comprehension. To ignore or deny ambiguity is to deny ourselves and our experience of life. Granted, not everything is ambiguous, but it is precisely the flattening of the complexities and tensions of life, leading to an absolutist vision of reality, that is the seedbed for totalitarianism and fascism. Simple answers to complex life questions do not encourage growth but rather fanaticism and repression, especially of those who disagree. This condition in itself accounts for much of the self-inflicted human suffering in the world. Finally, it is this condition of suffering that is so critically ignored in the treatment of religion in popular culture.

Response to Suffering in Human Experience

The unrealistic treatment of suffering in the mass media is one of its most egregious offenses against human experience. Films like *Schindler's List*, *Life Is Beautiful*, *Gandhi*, *Romero*, or *The Mission* attempt to correct the imbalance, but for every one of these films there are dozens of others. The level of violence without consequence in film and television as well as music videos is enormous. Research indicates that while not causing violence, such portrayals can lead to a callousness towards violence, desensitizing through a constant barrage of images. Movies like *Saving Private Ryan* again come closer to depicting the reality of violence, but they are few in number. The loss of human life is even parodied in movies like *Galaxy Quest*, where one of the characters is named “anonymous crewman,” indicating the person usually killed off early in an episode. What is missing, of course, are the devastating effects of violence, not only on the victim but also on others and the wider society. Is violent reprisal the first or last line of defense? The spate of school shootings certainly raises serious questions about the socializing role such mass-media treatment may play in our society.

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The challenge is the attitude with which suffering is addressed. Is human suffering seen as unnecessary and extraneous because technology, especially biomedical technology, can prevent it? Or is the reality of personal suffering trivialized because it is not on a grand or violent scale? Does emotional or mental suffering appear on our societal screens as significant? The ontological uniqueness and singularity of human existence must be constructively accounted for if a person is to

¹⁵See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980) 126.

grow and flourish in life.¹⁶ According to Christian tradition, one is not alone in this solitariness, and at the heart of spirituality is a self-transcending selfhood that enables people to reach out beyond themselves. As Berdyaev once remarked, “To eat bread is a material act, to break and share it a spiritual one.”¹⁷ The treatment of religion in popular culture tends to play into the privatized individualism of American society and most often encourages a consumer attitude towards spiritual “products.” Most of the religious books, tapes, clinics, growth groups, retreat centers, and programming offered in our culture rely on such individual consumption for economic viability. Witness all the items for sale, from Bible studies to figurines, that are constantly offered by the televangelists. Religion is hawked like any other merchandise. This encourages a consumer attitude toward the individual resolution of suffering as well as a callousness toward its occurrence in others. A theology of the cross provides a healthy alternative to such merchandising of religion, for it speaks not only to the reality of suffering individually and collectively but also to the involvement of the divine within it. The great challenge is how to communicate such a theology in the midst of the cacophony of popular culture.

We have seen that contemporary American society is not a secular wasteland, nor is it godless. Religious searching and expression are rampant in twenty-first-century America. The great challenge facing mainline religious institutions and faith traditions is to communicate their religious reflection in a way that is accessible to those living in a technologically socialized, mass-media-driven, popular-culture-dominated society. The first requirement is to take the treatment of religion in popular culture seriously both in scholarship and in teaching. The task is to inform as well as to empower—to inform about the richness of the great world religious traditions, including the Christian, and to empower persons to do careful critique of religious reflection and experience within contemporary society. We must find ways, as Catherine Albanese has argued, to connect religious scholarship with popular religious experience.¹⁸ This is essential for the fostering of an informed critical mass of persons to guide social as well as religious decision making. Informed religious reflection can assist in cultivating the common good and counter the social pressures against its establishment. This is an enormous task, but it is a goal worthy of the effort.

A more critical awareness of the theology of the cross can assist Christian believers in addressing the issues of the hiddenness of God in the world, the ambiguity of life, and suffering in human experience. A theology of the cross meets these concerns head-on and does not deny them or simply explain them away. It does not try to “fix” everything in human life but places it in a wider context of meaning.

¹⁶Alfred North Whitehead once remarked, “Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness”; see *Religion in the Making* (New York: Meridian, 1926, 1954) 16.

¹⁷Quoted in Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1966) 229.

¹⁸Catherine Albanese, “Religion and American Popular Culture: An Introductory Essay,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64/4 (1996) 733-742. The entire issue is devoted to this theme.

By so doing, the Christian tradition may be empowered to make relevant and constructive contributions to the formation of the developing global culture. The stakes are high, with nothing less than the ongoing engagement of the Christian tradition with contemporary life and thought at stake. Will this challenge be as creatively and constructively enjoined as previous challenges in the history of Christian thought? Only time will tell, and the clock is ticking. ⊕

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