

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## Contemporary Theologies of the Cross, II

IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY Luther rejected a theology of glory choosing instead a theology of the cross. Somewhat analogously historians of the late-twentieth century have come to recognize that there has been a traditional bias in favour of a history of 'glory' written from the viewpoint of the ruler, the politician, the victor and the powerful. Less attention, if any, has been given to the viewpoint of the ordinary citizen, the voiceless, the vanquished and the powerless. That is why the modern historian regards it as his or her task to 'brush history against the grain'<sup>1</sup> and reveal the 'underside of history'. This contemporary scholarly interest has provided the context for a *historical theology of the cross* 'sought among those who live under the cross and who suffer the sufferings of this present time' (Moltmann).

A theology of the cross committed to the 'underside of history' as the preferred locus of God's saving action, does more than merely identify with those who 'suffer' rather than 'control' history. It totally reverses normal patterns of perception and judgement. In this theology the ruler learns from the ruled, the rich are evangelized by the poor, the oppressors by the oppressed, the believer by the unbeliever. This theology rejects *any* form of triumphalism (glory), *any* claim to superiority, *any* will to dominate. God is to be sought *sub contrario*, in the opposite to that which we might expect. So a theology of the cross looks not to historical patterns of continuity, progress or achievement but to patterns of discontinuity, rupture and failure. The faith born of the experience of the cross begins in 'that darkness where human beings have come to the end of their know-how'.<sup>2</sup>

In our own century whole communities and nations have experienced some of the 'hells' of modern existence, marked by God's apparent absence or silence and by human liminality. Often the *memory of suffering* has been kept alive by an oral tradition of story-telling, shaped by a particular cultural and ecclesial heritage. The second part of this article will focus on four such experiences:

- A) The Jewish experience of *Shoah* (destruction) otherwise known as Holocaust.
- B) The experience of Christians in the Soviet Union.
- C) A Central American experience of poverty and civil war.
- D) A European experience of unbelief.

The question is: can these experiences yield a theology of the cross—the possibility of a faith born of the night of darkness which can become a *locus classicus* for contemporary theological reflection?

A) *The Jewish experience of Shoah (Holocaust)*

A European theology committed to history as the locus of God's saving action has been radically challenged by the events of two world wars and the Nazi destruction of six million Jews between the years 1933 and 1945. The latter was a catastrophe of such dimensions that it took two decades for it to be named: *Shoah*. It has taken even longer for *post-Holocaust theology* to emerge in Jewish and Christian thought, and seemingly insuperable obstacles remain to prevent its 'reception' in either community. Many Christians find the Jewish response to the Holocaust over-sensitive, obsessive and unforgiving. The empowerment of the state of Israel raises further serious questions. Many Jews find the Christian response to the Holocaust insensitive, uncomprehending and unwilling to accept its own share of responsibility for the disaster. Nevertheless a growing number have come to recognize that the event of *Shoah* has 'interrupted' and challenged the normal Judaeo-Christian understanding of a God who saves. Even to speak of the 'cross' in relation to the extermination camps leaves sensitive Christians uneasy. One possible way may be that suggested by Marc Chagall in his painting *White Crucifixion* (1938). Here Jesus is portrayed as the suffering, righteous Jew, his loincloth is the prayer shawl of the pious rabbi. Before this cross the Christian is silent because Christian anti-semitism has been the instrument of crucifixion. This cross cannot immediately (if at all) be spoken about as redemptive or purifying. It marks a permanent setback to the history of humankind, and points to the 'very real connection between a theology of glory and the anti-semitism of western Christendom'.<sup>3</sup>

Post-Holocaust reflection has often used one particular story from Elie Wiesel's book *Night*, as the *locus classicus* for its theology. Wiesel describes how he and other prisoners in Auschwitz were forced to watch the execution of two Jewish men and one boy.

The camp commander refused to serve as hangman. Three SS took over the job. Three necks were put into three nooses . . . 'Where is God? Where is he?' said someone behind me. The three chairs were tipped over . . . We marched past . . . the two men were no longer alive . . . but the third rope was still moving . . . the child was lighter and still living. Behind me I heard the same man ask 'Where is God now?' and within me I heard an answering voice 'Where is he? Here he is—he hangs here on this gallows'. In this night the soup had the taste of corpses.<sup>4</sup>

For some, like the young Elie Wiesel, this was to be the end of his faith—'the death of God in the soul of a child who suddenly discovers massive evil' (Mauriac). For the majority it was to be the daily, relentless struggle to survive. The testimony of many Holocaust victims speak of three related experiences in the death camps: a pervasive sense of being abandoned by God, the physical experience of being brutally dehumanized and degraded at the hands of other human beings, and the experience of being abandoned and forgotten by the outside world. 'Theirs was an experience of night. Forgotten by God, forsaken by him, they lived alone, suffered alone, fought alone.'<sup>5</sup>

The event of the Holocaust poses the *theodicy* question in an acute form: what does it mean to speak of a loving, compassionate God when faced with such incredible suffering? But it also poses the *anthropodicy* question: what does it mean to speak of being human in a world which performed or passively witnessed such evil? The Jewish writer Arthur Cohen<sup>6</sup> uses the phrase '*malign tremendum*' to try to express the unspeakable horror of genocide. The term *tremendum* was first used by Rudolph Otto (1869–1934) to describe the fascinating, awesome, powerful holiness of God; it expressed the abyss between a transcendent God and human beings. Cohen now speaks of the Holocaust as a manifestation of a *malign unholy tremendum* which is an inversion of the divine/human relationship. It is a demonic *subscendence* measuring the abyss between human freedom and human corruption. A human 'freedom' which can use its negative power to eliminate the Jewish people, also has the power to eliminate the entire human species in a nuclear disaster. There is a sense in which the Holocaust is not the *exception* but rather the *paradigm* of other holocausts in our century: Mao's purges in China, Stalinist purges in Russia, Khmer Rouge massacres in Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> Holocaust and Hiroshima stand as permanent symbols of our power to 'locate hell on earth' and of the possibility of permanent self-destruction.

How can one begin to formulate a response to the God question and the human question in the light of Holocaust? We must begin by listening to the voices of the victims themselves. In the prison camps the drive to testify to suffering for the sake of the future was intense.

Let us tell tales so as to remember how vulnerable man is when faced with overwhelming evil. Let us tell tales so as not to allow the executioner to have the last word. The last word belongs to the victim. It is up to the witness to capture it, shape it and then communicate that secret to others.<sup>8</sup>

From the ruins of the death camps where so many were reduced to non-personhood and finally silenced, a vast literature has been retrieved: diaries, autobiographies, poetry, novels, eye-witness accounts, graffiti,

prayers, stories. 'To be remembered; that was all they wanted' (Wiesel). But Holocaust literature is modern literature: gone is the 'triumphalism which was once the prerogative of being a survivor'.<sup>9</sup> The restrained, dignified and immensely moving documentary *Shoah* (1986) is an audio-visual record of the witness of some of those who survived. *Va Vashem* (the Holocaust memorial) and *Beit Hatefutsot* (the diaspora museum) are permanent public memorials in Israel to the sufferings of the Jewish people.

Holocaust literature provides many deeply moving accounts of the unshakeable courage and faith of Jewish women and men in the death camps. The diaries of Etty Hillesum (1941-43), found in eight closely-written exercise books, have only been edited and published comparatively recently.<sup>10</sup> Etty lived and worked in Amsterdam during the period when persecution and annihilation closed in on the Jewish community. Her diaries record a remarkable personal growth and inner liberation at the precise time when her outer world was collapsing. 'Her vision had nothing to do with escape or self-deception and everything to do with a hard-won, steady and whole perception of reality.'<sup>11</sup>

I once thought 'I would like to feel the contours of these times with my finger-tips'. And then I was suddenly flung into one of the many flashpoints of human suffering. And there, in the faces of the people, in a thousand gestures, small changes of expression, life stories, I was suddenly able to read our age—and much more than our age alone. And then it suddenly happened: I was able to feel the contours of these times with my fingertips.<sup>12</sup>

Two months before she was taken from the transit camp at Westerbork and sent to Auschwitz, Etty wrote:

Oh God, times are too hard for frail people like myself. I know that a new and kinder day will come. I would so much like to live on, if only to express all the love I carry within me. And there is only one way of preparing the new age, by living it even now in our hearts. Somewhere in me I feel so light, without the least bitterness and so full of strength and love. I would so much like to help prepare the new age.<sup>13</sup>

Etty died at Auschwitz on 30 November 1943.

The complexity and diversity of the Jewish response to the event of the Holocaust over the past fifty years has been documented elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> For their part Christians have been slow to undertake that 'work of sorrow' which recognizes anti-semitism within the Christian tradition and the need to ask forgiveness from those who have been wronged. There

are striking similarities between early and medieval Church law and Nazi legislation on such matters as segregation, compulsory ghettos, forbidding marriage between Jews and Christians and preventing Jews from holding public office. Down the centuries Christians have usually said: 'You have no right to live among us as Jews'.<sup>15</sup>

Christians who take the Holocaust theology seriously have become convinced that Christianity must undergo a radical *metanoia* with regard to its attitude towards Judaism. We can no longer speak the language of a Christianity which sees itself as 'superior to' or 'superceding' God's enduring covenant with his people Israel. We remember that in encountering Jesus we encounter Judaism, and that 'spiritually we are all Semites' (Pius XII). We wish to repudiate any form of a 'teaching of contempt' (Jules Isaac). As we experience our own diminishment we can learn from Judaism how to live in a *diaspora* situation. Though we believe in the Resurrection we may understand from the terrible sufferings of the death camps that many experienced the 'burial of God' in their lives, those long hours after the crucifixion and death of Jesus when a corpse was all that seemed to remain of the son of God incarnate. Yet, because of the incredible witness of an Etty Hillesum, or the unknown writer of the prayer found at Ravensbruck, we are aware of the likeness of so many poor, humbled Jewish men and women to the suffering Messiah:

O Lord, remember not the men and women of good will but also those of ill-will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have brought, thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to the judgement let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.<sup>16</sup>

The cross of Christ our *Shalom* (peace) is both the sign and the source of the complete reconciliation of the Jewish people and the Gentiles whom he has made one in himself (Eph 7, 14-16).

#### B) *The experience of Christians in the Soviet Union*

There are several reasons which suggest that it is an opportune moment for western Christians to become more open and sensitive to the traditions and witnesses of Christians in the Soviet Union. In December 1987 the United States and the Soviet Union signed a treaty to reduce intermediate nuclear weapons. During 1988 millions of Christians in the USSR and throughout the world celebrate the millenium of the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, symbolizing also the baptism of the medieval state of 'Rus'.<sup>17</sup> For the last seventy years of that millenium, since the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, there has been an official denial of Christianity, and

a period of persecution and martyrdom for many believers. But the recent policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) have led to at least a partial admission that the Soviet peoples have paid a terrible price in blood as a result of the revolution in the events of the civil war, the Volga famine, the collectivization campaign, the Ukranian terror-famine, the purges and the Gulags. There is a growing realization within the USSR that it can only come to terms with the fears and burdens of its terrible past by truthfully remembering and recording what *actually* happened. In a year of special remembrance it is appropriate that we come to a greater understanding of how Christians from the 'underside' of Russian history responded to their ordeal.<sup>18</sup>

Russian Orthodox theology is a theology of the beauty and so of the glory of God.<sup>19</sup> When in 988 the envoys returned to the court of Vladimir, they confessed that they had been overwhelmed by the beauty of the Christian worship in Constantinople, and recommended that Rus should adopt this religion. Much later Dostoyevsky was to affirm that 'the world will be saved by beauty'. In the Russian Orthodox tradition God—Father Son and Spirit—is experienced as a God of beauty and tenderness (*umilenyie*) and the tree of God's life 'is seen to bow down with a huge humility because of the very load of its living fruitfulness'.<sup>20</sup>

It was the custom of our ancestors to go to church for warmth, to keep their treasure there and to seek refuge in it from enemies. To enter a Russian church is rather like creeping under a blanket or throwing a fur coat over one's head. But this fur coat is God's own and it is only right and proper that it should be truly magnificent.<sup>21</sup>

This God of beauty and loving kindness has dwelt among a people whose history has been one of incredible suffering. Julia de Beausobre has described it as a particular kind of suffering.

It is the suffering of individuals endowed with a feeling for personal freedom so profound as often to verge on the anarchic, and who have yet been continually compelled to live, through all the superficial changes in the pattern of their life, under a succession of despotisms resolutely bent upon the destruction of their freedom.<sup>22</sup>

The intertwined themes of freedom, suffering and redemptive love appear in the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and in those of their twentieth-century successors, Pasternak, Solzhenitzyn, Rasputin. The four great poets of the Soviet period—Pasternak, Tsvetayeva, Akhmatova and Mandelshtam—were all Christians who drew on these traditional themes.

The Russian Orthodox Church inherited from Greek Byzantium a sense of the inevitability of human suffering and tragedy, of which Christ's passion was the prototype. In this tradition there is a loving preference for the icon of Christ's descent into hell, rather than for the icon of the cross. In every new Good Friday of human suffering there is the presence of the victorious Christ who enters the hell created by his absence and raises the dead to life.<sup>23</sup> And so the descent into hell is a splendid thing, a cause for celebration, since it is the final victory of goodness and love over cruelty and evil. Holiness is ascribed to those who like Christ 'voluntarily undergo the passion'.<sup>24</sup> The experience of those who have 'passed through the disciplines of history' is that beauty and tenderness have flourished in the most unexpected and unbeautiful places in the Soviet Union: they have experienced the presence of God in what by human standards seem to be places marked by godforsakenness.

In *A precocious autobiography*, Yevtushenko tells the story of how as a child he was taken by his mother on a visit to Moscow and there saw his 'enemies' for the first time. Stalin had ordered that twenty thousand German soldiers were to be paraded through the streets and the pavements swarmed with onlookers—mostly women. They gazed with hatred in the direction from which the troops were to appear.

The women were clenching their fists . . . All at once something happened to them. They saw German soldiers thin, unshaven, wearing dirty bloodstained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down . . . Then I saw an elderly woman in broken down boots push herself forward . . . She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a coloured handkerchief and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier . . . and now suddenly from every side women were running towards the soldiers pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people.<sup>25</sup>

For Yevtushenko that was an early experience of *umileniye*, that melting of the heart which can overcome deep hatred and division.

During the Stalinist purges Anna Akmatova spent seventeen months waiting in prison queues in Leningrad hoping to get parcels through to her imprisoned son. One day she was recognized by an unknown woman in the queue who whispered in her ear, 'Can you describe this?' Anna replied, 'I can'. And so her great poem *Requiem* took shape. It described the women of Leningrad standing before the Kresty prison on the Vyberg side of Leningrad. 'Kresty' literally means 'crosses' and the poem bears the additional sense of standing before the cross.

For them I have woven a wide shroud  
 From the humble words I heard among them  
 I will remember them always, everywhere,  
 I will never forget them.<sup>26</sup>

Anna has been described as the 'poet of orphans and widows' whose writing has been nourished on 'lack of possessions, parting and loss'.<sup>27</sup> She has spoken on behalf of many humble, unknown women, who are taken for granted, even despised, but who in reality are those righteous persons 'without whom, as the saying goes, no city shall stand'.<sup>28</sup>

Solzhenitzyn was determined that the horrors of the purges and the Gulag should not be suppressed in the psyche of the Russian people, but communicated and told in all truth. His powerful but restrained art has been described as 'a vast liturgy of the Good Friday of history, of the crucifixion and descent into hell of so many innocents'.<sup>29</sup> He was a survivor from three experiences of living death: a prisoner of war, a cancer patient and a dissident in a Gulag camp. War, like imprisonment or serious illness, uproots a person from the coherent, familiar world of normal life. It can be a destructive experience of 'hell', but also a time of 'winnowing' or learning to 'see the essential' in a life stripped to the bare essentials. Solzhenitzyn's aim was to speak for the millions who did not survive and whose stories have never been told. Within these living 'hells' there were many stories of endurance and courage: those like Gleb or Innokenty (*First circle*) who deliberately and with their eyes open, made a choice of goodness and fidelity which inevitably led to the reprisals of the police state. Through them goodness triumphed over the evil system.

Julia de Beausobre describes how the only way to survive the sadism and cruelty of her torturers was, as far as possible, to enter into the minds and motives of those who were inflicting pain. If she could do so with detached sympathy and insight, she was, in some sense, entering into an act of redemption.

He who pities another must leave his own place among the good people on the sunny side of the gap, must go out and find the other where he is—in the darkness on the side of evil—and be ready to stay with him there; if he returns at all, it is with the other and at his pace.<sup>30</sup>

She admits that this may seem both impracticable and dangerous: in fact linked with the Russian figure of the *yurodivy* (the fool). But 'to scour the drinking houses in search of God has been the constant occupation of every Russian from Dostoyevsky down to the most unassuming ploughboy'.<sup>31</sup> Evil is not to be avoided or shunned but somehow entered into by 'participation' and transformed by loving insight and understanding. Julia de Beausobre affirms that this attitude is one predominant in Russia even towards the great evil of Bolshevism.

It has taken a considerable period of time for some in the West to come to recognize that 'the most powerful ideology in the world in terms of unexamined slogans and promises is not communism, but anti-communism'.<sup>32</sup> From our limited perspectives it has been too easy to equate the sufferings of the Soviet peoples simply as a form of protest against a communist regime. We have admired the witness of Andrei Shakaroff, Anatoly Shcharansky, of the Baptist Anna Chertkova imprisoned for fifteen years in a Soviet psychiatric hospital, of Irina Ratushinskaya sent to prison for writing poetry. But these Jewish and Christian witnesses from the 'underside' of Russian history have a deeper message than that of resistance to communism. They share in that long Russian tradition of *umilenyie*, of *metanoia* as the 'melting of the heart' towards those who do us evil. In our search for world peace in the context of East/West relations, this could have very great significance.

C) *A Central American experience of poverty and civil war*

At a recent conference in Budapest a Uruguyan priest, Luis Perez Aguirre, identified the respective tasks of the first and third worlds:

Your most urgent task (Europe) is to prevent a possible genocide in the first world. My urgent task is to halt the actual genocide in the third world. Today, by midnight, as each day, in the sight of our frightened eyes, more than 45,000 of our children will be dead . . . because of malnutrition . . . The toll of hunger of human life is equal to a Hiroshima explosion every three days . . . The opposite of love is not hate but indifference.<sup>33</sup>

Once the facts of the North/South divide begin to strike home, then it becomes impossible any longer to 'do theology with one's back to the poor of the world'. There is a theology of the cross born of the struggle against injustice and poverty. But there is also a theology of the cross born of the realization that one's culture and life style have contributed to, and are responsible for, past and continued world poverty. The first world's bid for dominance through colonialism and its continued economic dominance, is directly linked with the gross imbalance between the rich and the poor nations of the world. 'We have become so accustomed to seeing ourselves in the role of Samaritans that it is hard for us to envisage ourselves as thieves.'<sup>34</sup> The pain of conversion implicit in the recognition of these facts becomes a 'work of sorrow' when we acknowledge the triumphalism, sense of superiority and will to dominate, which have so often been part of our cultural assumptions. Instead we deliberately choose a new way of solidarity by a commitment to justice and by trying to see the world from the standpoint of the poor, allowing ourselves to be converted and instructed by them. *They* will be our eschatological judges.

The primary task of the first world should be to see the reality of the poor through the eyes of the poor. So often the poor are perceived through the eyes of the rich as those *without* possessions, *without* employment, *without* knowledge or power. 'But when we enter the continent of the poor and try to think through their eyes and from their social position, we discover their strength, their resistance, their courage, their creativity.'<sup>35</sup> Moreover the urgency of liberation is seen to be beyond doubt. Society *must* be transformed if poverty and gross inequality are to be alleviated.

Theology has to accept and take very seriously what Puebla said about the 'evangelizing potential of the poor'. The poor do not 'do' theology in the technical sense of the word, nor does attention to the word of the poor obviate the need for the work of the professional theologian. But the poor, 'with a radicality and authenticity hardly attainable elsewhere, render the present the *res theologica*'.<sup>36</sup> Their lives are 'theological occurrences in the present', which reveal the little, humble comings of the kingdom of God among us. From the many possible experiences, two are selected here: that of a base Christian community in El Salvador, and of a community of *campesinos* (peasants) on the shores of Lake Nicaragua.

In the *Faith of a people* a European priest tells the story of the creation and ongoing life of a base Christian community during the years 1970-80. This community was situated on the outskirts of San Salvador 'between the fields and the slums where there is no water system or electricity or school. The people here are poor, deprived, numberless and gloryless'.<sup>37</sup> It began with a few Christian men and women who had the vision to see in the 'undeveloped negatives' of humanity in these slums, the 'images of God waiting to be lighted up by the good news'. As they meditated on the Gospel of John, they understood that this is what Jesus meant by 'light' and 'darkness'. But it was not an easy task to fashion a 'people of men and women who are poor, resigned, and disunited, persons who despair, and are alienated'.<sup>38</sup> Very slowly others joined the group and had doors of hope opened to them. They undertook little acts of exorcising the 'demons' which had a hold over their lives: drink, debt, despair and temptation to suicide. They found the courage to form a money-lending co-operative, a housing co-operative, a way to bring electricity to the area. They experienced little miracles of the coming of the kingdom of God among them—courage, unselfishness and generosity. But they also had to cope with the 'demons' of selfishness, malice, machoism and greed within the group. Gradually salvation in the biblical sense of healing and reconciliation became possible among them.

But the community soon came under suspicion for being progressive and dangerous. They experienced arrests, interrogations and persecution. The great climax of the book describes the murders of Fathers Rutilio

Grande, Alfonso Navarro and Ernesto Barrera (1977-78). Archbishop Romero, convinced that these priests had not died in 'armed confrontation' but for the cause of justice, spoke out against the murderers. He had been converted to the cause of the poor. His own murder on 24 March 1980 came shortly after he had sent a letter to President Carter urging him to stem the flow of weapons to El Salvador. This was the Good Friday of the community. But Romero had said earlier:

I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you that as a Christian I don't believe in death without resurrection, if they kill me, I will rise up in the Salvadorean people . . . And if they carry out their threats I now offer my blood to God for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador.<sup>39</sup>

A second experience of the growth of a base Christian community comes from Solentiname, a small archipelago on the southern end of Lake Nicaragua, with a campesino population. When Ernesto Cardenal came to minister among this people he replaced the more usual Sunday sermon with a shared homily. There have been many gospel commentaries which try to help people to find out what the gospel *should* mean to them. Here the process was reversed; the peasants of Solentiname related, very simply, what the gospel *actually* meant to them in the context of their daily lives. Cardenal collected and published these shared reflections which took place before Samosa's destruction of Solentiname (1977) and his subsequent downfall (1979). When the people returned to begin its reconstruction, a selection from the commentaries was made to accompany paintings by local artists. This was published as: *The Gospel in art by the peasants of Solentiname* (1984).<sup>40</sup>

The paintings and commentary illustrate the beauty and fruitfulness of this lovely land which is at the same time torn apart by continuous civil war. Nicaragua is a 'mystery of grace and iniquity' (Casanas). The conflict between the Sandinista government and the American-backed contra rebels continues and the poor are caught up daily in the struggle. Groups of wives and mothers who sought to bring food and clothing to their men on the front line, were captured, raped, horribly mutilated and killed. Stories of both courage and appalling brutality abound.

This is the background to the gospel commentary of Solentiname, which shows Jesus and Mary in contemporary peasants' dress, and the soldiers of Herod in the uniform of Samosa's national guard. The flight into Egypt recalls the many campesino families who have had to leave their homes fleeing from misery or hunger, or because they have been driven off their lands. The passion of Christ is directly related to the passion of their contemporary situation, and because of that they are enabled to read the gospel with new eyes.

He died while all Jerusalem was celebrating Holy Week . . . just as David Tejada was beaten to death on Good Friday, at the hours when they were making the stations of the cross on the streets of Managua. And his body was then thrown into the crater of the Masaya volcano.<sup>41</sup>

In the midst of poverty, injustice and war, this peasant population have been enabled to draw hope and courage from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who lived by the shores of another lake, understood the realities of a fishing and farming life, and died in the cause of the kingdom of God.

D) *A European experience of unbelief: R. S. Thomas: poet of the hidden God*

The ministry of Ernesto Cardenal, priest and poet, among the campesinos of Solentiname, and that of Ronald S. Thomas, priest and poet, among the hill farmers of North Wales, provides a stark contrast in cultural and ecclesial styles. R. S. Thomas writes with compassionate understanding of his Welsh people 'fretting under the barbed sting of English law' and prone to indulge in romantic nostalgia for past glory. During forty years of active ministry he served in three small country parishes until his retirement to Port Neigwl near Aberdaron in 1982.<sup>43</sup> Each of these places was off the beaten track, 'not particularly useful for business'. But within each the essential drama of human life was enacted.

Stay then village, for around you spins  
On slow axis a world as vast  
As meaningful as any poised  
By great Plato's solitary mind.<sup>44</sup>

In his small village this poet-priest watched, prayed and struggled to see *whether* or *how* religious belief can inform human life as he saw it around him. For over forty years 'poetry breaks the thin window between R. S. Thomas and life and we see how his mind cuts itself as it goes through'.<sup>45</sup> He observed the harsh reality of rural life in Wales:

The marginal land where flesh meets spirit  
Only on Sundays and the days between  
Are mortgaged to the grasping soil.<sup>46</sup>

His thought became focused on the figure of Iago Prytherch, a farm labourer whose prototype he had seen docking swedes high up on a hill farm on a cold grey November afternoon. What was the sense of a life totally numbed by unremitting hardship and physical labour? And yet this life *had* something of its own to offer: a sturdy endurance of which the more sophisticated onlooker knew little. 'Remember him, then, for he too is a winner of wars/enduring like a tree under the curious stars.'<sup>47</sup> In a strange way the life of the priest-poet paralleled that of the peasant;

both have to wait patiently for the barren soil to yield its fruits; both know the precariousness of the elements which do not guarantee a harvest.

There is no other sound  
 In the darkness but the sound of a man  
 Breathing, testing his faith  
 On emptiness, nailing his questions  
 One by one to an untenanted cross.<sup>48</sup>

R. S. Thomas set out on his dark journey in search of a hidden God. He wanted no easy answers, no short cuts, no evasions, only the truth of trying to see and understand things as they are.

Who said to the trout  
 You shall die on Good Friday  
 To be food for a man  
 And his pretty Lady  
 It was I, said God  
 Who formed the roses  
 In the delicate flesh  
 And the tooth that bruises.<sup>49</sup>

Nature is beautiful but also cruel. 'Calling God "good" by inference from what we see around us, seems to go beyond what the facts allow.'<sup>50</sup> Our idea of God must 'come in at the right place', in the interplay of dialectical patterns of thought. 'The message is always in two parts/must it be on a cross that is made one.'<sup>51</sup>

Over the years R. S. Thomas's poetry explored the variety of human responses to the question of ultimate reality: there are those for whom the question does not arise; those who seek quick, superficial answers; those who see human success as a mark of divine favour; those who live lives of inner and outer barrenness and loneliness. Often the form of Christianity which is offered to them is too rarified, out of touch with the realities of a farming existence. In *The minister*, the Reverend Elias Morgan B.A. arrives to begin his ministry among the country people but with very limited knowledge of country life. He and his congregation are attracted to that kind of religious experience 'which can give elation within the confines of the chapel, but which remains unmediated in the details of everyday life and hence makes no serious demands on them'.<sup>52</sup> He and they are carried away by the *hwyl*, the fervour of the instantly moving sermon. Outside chapel the minister's attempts to reform the sexual *mores* of the village meet with failure. Gradually over the years he learns to keep silent. 'Although I never pried I knew it all . . . /and they knew I knew and pretended I didn't'.<sup>53</sup>

His ministry did not heal the harshness of people's dealing with each other, nor the backbiting, evil and malice. Morgan's ministry was 'wrong from the start'. But where is the right place to start?

As form in sculpture is the prisoner  
of the hard rock, so in everyday life  
It is the plain facts and natural happenings  
that conceal God and reveal him to us  
little by little under the mind's tooling.<sup>54</sup>

It may be necessary to endure forms of purifying atheism in order to force us to abandon false images of God. R. S. Thomas's poetry is about 'sharpening sensibility or focusing discrimination', so that 'the bogus is winnowed from the false and those elements that make for life and enrichment are distinguished from those which atrophy the mind and heart'.<sup>55</sup>

*Abercuawg*<sup>56</sup> the place where the cuckoos sing, becomes a symbol of paradise where God dwells, beyond the pollution, soulessness and monotony of much that passes for modern civilization. But *Abercuawg* is never quite within our sight; it is always *just* over the next mountain, just beyond our reach.

There are moments of illumination during this long dark journey, such as a time when walking over a moor he became aware of the rain falling in its gentle impartiality—like the divine grace of forgiveness. Suddenly, after a long period of silence, God

addresses me from a myriad  
directions with the fluency  
of water, the articulateness  
of green leaves; and in the genes  
too, the components  
of my existence.<sup>57</sup>

In his later poems there is a deepening of a sense of wonder, compassion and insight. The 'meaning is in the waiting'<sup>58</sup> and, like Job, he discovers that patient seeking may mean dying to former questions.

There have been times  
when, after long on my knees  
in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled  
from my mind, and I have looked  
In and seen the old questions lie  
folded and in place  
by themselves, like the piled  
gravecloths of love's risen body.<sup>59</sup>  
But faith is still precarious:  
I am alone on the surface of  
a turning planet. What  
to do, but like Michelangelo's  
Adam, put my hand  
out into unknown space  
hoping for the reciprocating touch.<sup>60</sup>

In his poetry R. S. Thomas exercises great reserve in his use of theological or pastoral language 'allowing a credal or priestly standpoint to emerge from a mere phrase or image'.<sup>61</sup> This makes one wary of attributing to him a 'theology of the cross'. However he undoubtedly gives one of the finest contemporary poetic expressions of the search for a *deus absconditus*. This 'Poet of the hidden God' is nailed to the cross of patient but unremitting 'living with the facts' and his more usual condition is 'somewhere between faith and doubt'.

Many Christians living in what Clodovis Boff has called the 'ecclesial winter' of European Christianity, may share R. S. Thomas's conviction that:

in times  
like these and for one like me  
God will never be plain and  
out there, but dark rather and  
inexplicable, as though he were in here.<sup>62</sup>

### *Conclusion*

An exploration of some of the 'crucifying events' of our time has yielded differing theologies of the cross.

- a) There is the cross born of the struggle against political or social injustice which is characterized by a holy impatience, a sense of urgency and a need for courage and vision. It is often a call to abandon attitudes of fatalism and passivity in the face of evil (Central American experience).
- b) There is the cross born of the struggle to 'see the essential' (prison experience) or to 'see and understand things as they are' (R. S. Thomas). This is characterized by patience, by the 'stature of waiting',<sup>63</sup> a conviction that in all important matters delay is necessary for maturation.
- c) There is a cross born of the realization that one's personal, cultural or ecclesial assumptions or prejudices have inflicted suffering on others. This *metanoia* undertakes a further 'work of sorrow' which asks forgiveness from those whom our anti-semitism, racism, sexism or economic dominance have injured. It seeks to be evangelized precisely by those whom it once considered inferior.
- d) There is the cross of the victim in a moment of total rupture such as Auschwitz or Hiroshima, in which he or she has no hope of survival and little hope of a posthumous hearing. For many this is a 'descent into hell', the mystery of iniquity at its deepest and sharpest, where God seems to be not only dead but buried. But even here the imprint of the risen Christ has been seen in the witness of so many women and men of faith and courage.

Each of these experiences from the underside of history—Jewish, Russian, Central American, Welsh—seeks to *remember* faithfully so that a new future may be created from past suffering. For 'to forget is to

continue the exile; to remember is the beginning of redemption'.<sup>64</sup> The *memoria passionis* is at the very heart of both Jewish and Christian worship. The event of the Holocaust remembered and 'received' by both communities could effect a new passover, the movement from centuries of Christian anti-semitism to creative solidarity. The *memoria passionis* emerging from the underside of Russian history is calling the peoples of the USSR to *Pravda*, the word of truth, in relation to their immediate past. But it is also a call to western Christians to forgo a false ideology of fighting a 'holy war' against an 'evil empire' and justifying a nuclear arms race to do so. The future of East/West relations and of the peace for the world lies in the movement from hostility to solidarity and co-operation. In Central and Latin America the *memoria passionis* has become focussed in the deaths of the new martyrs for justice. But in the context of the North/South divide, the cry of the poor is also a call to end the dominant structures which have kept them in dependence. In the setting of the first world, the poetry of R. S. Thomas draws attention to 'false remembering', to those deadening traditions which bind rather than liberate, and to the 'cross of unbelief' which can play a part in shaping a mature and honest faith.

It is appropriate to end with a story from a Jewish Hasidic source, illustrating the God who is to be found *sub contrario*:

One of the pupils of Rabbi Mosche Leib von Sassow, once asked him why God had created atheism. The old Rabbi answered: 'So that you shall not let any one in need starve by comforting him with the next world or persuading him to trust in God to stand by him . . . you should help him as if there were no God in the whole world, but only one person who could help, you alone and no other! That is why God created atheism'. This was the pious old Rabbi's reply.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, quoted in Ellis, Marc: *Toward a Jewish theology of liberation* (Orbis Books: New York, 1987), p 95.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, Douglas G: *Lighten our darkness: towards an indigenous theology of the cross* (Westminster Press, Pennsylvania, 1976), p 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 238.

<sup>4</sup> Wiesel, Elie: *Night* (Collins: Penguin Books, London, 1981), p 76.

<sup>5</sup> Wiesel, Elie, cited by Susan Shapiro 'Hearing the testimony of radical negation: the Holocaust as interruption', *Concilium* 175 (1984), p 3.

- <sup>6</sup> Cohen, Arthur: 'In our terrible age: the *tremendum* of the Jews', *Concilium* 175 (1984), pp 11-16.
- <sup>7</sup> See Ellis, Marc: *Faithfulness in an age of holocaust* (Amity House: New York, 1986), chapter 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Wiesel, Elie: 'Art and culture after the Holocaust'. *Auschwitz: beginning of a new era?* ed. Eva Fleishner (New York, 1977), p 14.
- <sup>9</sup> See Gerhart, Mary: 'Holocaust writings; a literary genre', *Concilium* 175 (1984) p 78.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ety: a diary, 1941-43* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1983). First published in Holland in 1981.
- <sup>11</sup> Gaarlandt, J. G.: *Ety*. Introduction, p ix.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 177.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 157.
- <sup>14</sup> For an overview, see works by Marc Ellis cited in notes 1 and 7.
- <sup>15</sup> Ellis, Marc: *Towards a Jewish theology of liberation* p 25. For a table of comparative legislation p 123.
- <sup>16</sup> Prayer found by the body of an unknown child in Ravensbruck.
- <sup>17</sup> I am much indebted to the as yet unpublished lecture of Donald Nicholl, 'A thousand years of the Russian idea' given at Pax Christi in London in November 1987.
- <sup>18</sup> Though attention is focussed on the Russian Orthodox tradition, it is recognized that most Christians in Lithuania, Latvia, Byelorussia, Kazakstan and Ukraine are not Orthodox and are in communion with Rome. The Armenian Church and the Baptists form other significant Christian groups.
- <sup>19</sup> This is a theology of glory which contains or alternates with a theology of the cross. It is not triumphalism.
- <sup>20</sup> Tertz, Abram (Andrey Sinyavsky): *A voice from the chorus* (Collins, London 1976) p 238. A series of observations and meditations made during his years in a prison camp.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p 238.
- <sup>22</sup> Beausobre, Julia de: *Creative suffering* (SLG Press 1940, reprinted 1984), p 4.
- <sup>23</sup> See Evdokimov, P.: *Le Christ dans la pensée russe* (Du Cerf, Paris, 1970).
- <sup>24</sup> Clement, O: *The spirit of Solzhenitsyn* (Search Press, London, 1976), p 18.
- <sup>25</sup> Yevtushenko, Y.: *A precocious autobiography* (Collins, London, 1963), p 40.
- <sup>26</sup> Akhmatova, Anna: *Requiem, and Poem without a hero*. Translated by D. M. Thomas. (Paul Elek, London 1976), p 32.
- <sup>27</sup> The critic Chukovsky cited in Akhmatova, A: *Selected poems* (Oxford University Press, London 1969), p 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Solzhenitsyn, A.: 'Matrona's house' in *Stories and short poems* (Bodley Head, London, 1971), p 54.
- <sup>29</sup> Clement, O.: *The spirit of Solzhenitsyn* p 174.
- <sup>30</sup> Beausobre, J. de: *Creative suffering* p 13.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p 15.
- <sup>32</sup> Golden, R., and McConnell, M.: *Sanctuary: the new underground railway* (Orbis Press, New York, 1987), p 179.
- <sup>33</sup> Cited by M. Hebblethwaite 'Seminar in Budapest', *The Tablet*, 9 January 1988, p 47.
- <sup>34</sup> Hall, D.: *Lighten our darkness*, p 219.
- <sup>35</sup> Boff, L., and Elizondo, V.: 'Editorial: theology from the viewpoint of the poor', *Concilium* 187 (1986), x.
- <sup>36</sup> Sobrino, Jon: Foreword to *Faith of a people* by Pablo Galdámez (Orbis, New York, 1987) p xvi.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p xi.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p xiii.
- <sup>39</sup> Sobrino, Jon: *The faith of Archbishop Romero* (CIIR Justice papers no 8, London, 1986), p 6.
- <sup>40</sup> Ed. by Philip and Sally Scharper (Orbis Books, New York, 1984).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p 62.

<sup>42</sup> See Phillips, D. Z.: *R. S. Thomas, poet of the hidden God* (Macmillan Press, London 1986) to which this section is much indebted.

<sup>43</sup> R. S. Thomas, born in Cardiff 1913, ordained in the Church in Wales in 1937. Rector of Manafon, Montgomeryshire, 1942, vicar of Eglwys Fach in Dyfed 1954, and of Aberdaron on the Lleyn peninsula, 1967-1982. Has published nineteen collections of poetry, including three anthologies of earlier and later poems.

<sup>44</sup> 'The village', *Selected poems, 1946-1968* (Rupert Hart Davies, London, 1973), p 34.

<sup>45</sup> Phillips, *Hidden God*, p xiv.

<sup>46</sup> 'The minister', *Selected poems*, p 12.

<sup>47</sup> 'A peasant', *ibid.*, p 3.

<sup>48</sup> 'In church', *ibid.*, p 204.

<sup>49</sup> 'Pisces', *ibid.*, p 39.

<sup>50</sup> Phillips, *Hidden God*, p 1.

<sup>51</sup> 'Voices', *Between here and now* (Macmillan, London, 1983), p 138.

<sup>52</sup> Phillips, *Hidden God*, p 29.

<sup>53</sup> 'The minister', *Selected poems*, pp 30/31.

<sup>54</sup> 'Emerging', *Later poems, 1972-1982* (Macmillan, London, 1983), p 117.

<sup>55</sup> Merchant, W. Moelyn: *R. S. Thomas* (University of Wales Press, 1979), p 38.

<sup>56</sup> *Abercuaawg*—National Eisteddfod annual literary lecture (Cardigan, Gomer Press, 1976).

<sup>57</sup> 'Suddenly', *Later poems*, p 16.

<sup>58</sup> 'Kneeling', *Selected poems*, p 119.

<sup>59</sup> 'The answer', *Later poems*, p 121.

<sup>60</sup> 'Threshold', *Between here and now*, (Macmillan, London, 1981), p 155.

<sup>61</sup> Merchant, W. Moelwyn: *R. S. Thomas*, p 12.

<sup>62</sup> 'Pilgrimages', *Later poems*, p 125.

<sup>63</sup> See Vanstone, W. H.: *The stature of waiting* (DLT, London, 1982), whose experience of waiting is similar to that of R. S. Thomas.

<sup>64</sup> Sayings of Hasidic Rabbi, Baal Shem Tov, 18c.