

The Politics of the Crucified.

A study of the political theology of John Howard  
Yoder, Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino with special  
reference to the Crucifixion

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for  
the degree of Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

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Jesus died violently on the cross, the form of execution imposed on those who threatened the Roman imperial order. What difference does this make to Christian political theology? What is the revelatory value of Jesus' death with regard to political theology? This thesis explores these questions, using a Christocentric methodology and taking three theologians in particular as interlocutors -- the Mennonite theologian John Yoder and the Latin American liberation theologians Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino -- with special reference to an examination of the ways in which their political theologies are shaped by the cross. The first part of the thesis consists of a close analysis and comparison of the writings of the above theologians concerning the cross. In Yoder, the theme of a cruciform, non-violent and non-resistant church is emphasised. In Boff and Sobrino the cross is seen to represent a protest against suffering in the name of a crucified God in solidarity with a crucified people. In the second part of the thesis the perspective widens to examine two issues which particularly arise from this analysis -- how a Christian doctrine of political power is affected by the crucifixion, and how the contemporary church, particularly in Britain, might adopt a 'cruciform' political praxis. The conclusion is drawn that the chief Christian criterion for analysing political power is victimological -- i.e. from the perspective of the victims of power, rather than those who exercise it. In the light of this, and given its increasingly marginalised status, the church in Britain should abandon any pretensions to 'Christendom', formulate a cruciform political theology and willingly live out a cruciform status.

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## Chapter 1

### **Introduction – the cross and political theology**

What difference would it have made had Jesus died in bed, of old age or illness? In particular, what difference would it have made to political theology had Jesus not died, a political prisoner, on the instrument of execution used by the imperial power of the time to keep potential disturbers of the established order in their place? The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the difference made to political theology by the fact that Jesus did not die peacefully, of natural causes, but was crucified, in common with tens of thousands of others, on a Roman cross. How should the crucifixion affect the way in which political theology is formulated and lived out? What are the implications of this for the political role of the church?

It is perhaps surprising that attention to the crucifixion has had a comparatively small place in the formulation of Christian political theology, at least until the impact of Moltmann's *The Crucified God*. (Moltmann 1974) The cross has certainly played a more general role in illustrating the depths of human sinfulness, but the particular political circumstances in which the crucifixion took place have been too often been downplayed and their revelatory value neglected. The dominant tradition in political theology since the mid nineteenth century has been based upon an overall reading of more general Biblical themes, such as love, incarnation, justice, and sovereignty, and has attempted to construct a prudential political theology from them. In the Church of England, for example, political theology, following the tradition of Maurice and *Lux Mundi*, has rested largely on the doctrines of creation and incarnation. Without abandoning that tradition – I regard the cross as the ultimate point of incarnation - I would seek to place a greater emphasis upon the cross, and explore what that emphasis might entail. In particular, I seek to develop, in dialogue with three theologians, Yoder, Boff and Sobrino, a political theology where the significance of the cross is given due weight.

#### **a) Methodology**

##### ***Research methodology***

My practical methodology for this thesis is primarily text based. I examine critically the writings of three theologians, attempt to establish linkages and disagreements between them, and seek to achieve, where possible, a new and

coherent synthesis. Some Biblical exegesis is attempted, although this does not form a major part of the thesis, which concentrates primarily on theologians (and politics) of the twentieth century. Also, some illustrations are drawn from twentieth century political history. Although the thesis is generally based on texts, rather than on direct analysis and interpretation of concrete situations, my work as a parish minister is an encouragement in considering the practical implications of the literature studied.

### ***Theological methodology***

My theological methodology is Christocentric – in other words, primarily dependent on God’s self revelation in Jesus Christ. If God’s nature and purposes for humankind are revealed in the historical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the fact that Jesus’ life was ended, not naturally or peacefully, but by a violent political act, must have significant revelatory value in terms of political theology. The crucifixion and the political events which preceded the crucifixion should be seen not as a general and fluid metaphor for human sinfulness as a whole, but a definite indication of a particular type of human sinfulness, and Jesus’ response provides both a revelation of the divine nature and a model for Christian political action. Traditionally, theories of the atonement and redemption have centred (rightly) upon the death of Christ on the cross. I attempt to explore the particularity of that mode of death. I concentrate upon the relevance of this for political theology, but not in isolation from the doctrines of atonement and redemption, which, if they are to be holistic, must include the political. At the very least, the fact that political factors feature strongly in God’s way of atonement and redemption indicates that any such doctrine which does not include a political element must be deficient. A ‘pietistic’ non-political doctrine of atonement, with political elements as, at best, an optional extra, cannot be sufficient. It is not enough to say that Jesus died violently as a result of human sinfulness, as might perhaps be exemplified by a mugged traveller on the Jericho road who did not have the good fortune of being aided by a Good Samaritan. The violence of the crucifixion was the result of political choices, and it is against the background of those particular political choices, and Jesus’ response to them, that both a Christian doctrine of atonement and a Christian political theology must primarily be formulated. This is not, however, to restrict Christian political theology to a historical study of first century Palestinian politics. The

political choices which led to the crucifixion are paradigmatic, continue to be worked out in today's world, and demand a response which, if it is to be Christian, must follow the pattern of Jesus' response. If, by this methodology, the cross is seen to be privileged, it is because the uniqueness and power of the Christian revelation rests primarily upon the scandal of the cross, and the subsequent resurrection. The cross is the ultimate consequence of the incarnation and the defining point of any theology which calls itself Christian.

It is perhaps worthwhile to indicate at the outset what I am not attempting in this thesis. I am not attempting to draw out political implications from certain models of the atonement. This has recently been widely discussed, for example by Jersak and Hardin in their symposium *Stricken by God? Non-violent identification and the victory of Christ* (Jersak and Hardin 2007). It is impossible to go directly back to Jesus' cross totally unmediated by subsequent historical and theological interpretations, but I aim to concentrate on the historical crucifixion and its political implications rather than on subsequent more general models of the atonement. Nor do I explore at any great length the political implications of the resurrection. This has been recently attempted, for example, by Scott in *Theology, Ideology and Liberation* (Scott 1994). I acknowledge that, in the New Testament witness, cross and resurrection go closely together, and a theology which concentrates on one rather than the other runs the risk of imbalance. I am conscious of these dangers, and so would present my argument with the proviso that it is inevitably incomplete. Similarly, I make little reference to the Holy Spirit, while recognizing that pneumatology is a necessary component of a full political theology.

I have chosen three chief interlocutors - the Latin American liberation theologians Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino, with special reference to their Christologies and ecclesiologies, and the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, primarily in relation to his social ethics but also to his ecclesiology. I aim not to analyse and bring into dialogue the whole of the teaching of the above theologians, which would be a task far beyond the limits of this thesis, but to focus on what they have to contribute to the main point of this study - the crucifixion of Jesus and its relevance for political theology.

The above theologians have been chosen for the following reasons. First, since the issues facing Christian political theology and social ethics are increasingly global in their extent, there is a need for a global and ecumenical theology, drawing

on theological insights and contributions from a variety of cultural and ecclesiastical settings. While issues in social and political theology have ultimately to be interpreted locally and contextually, this is best informed by drawing on as universal and catholic a theology as possible. Boff, a Franciscan Roman Catholic working in Brazil, Sobrino, a Jesuit Roman Catholic working in El Salvador, and Yoder, a Mennonite working in the USA, represent a wide ecclesiastical and geographical range of background and experience.

Second, the crucified Jesus is a supreme example, humanly speaking, of powerlessness. Theologically, the truth of God is expressed through a tortured and humiliated victim of the powerful. Since this would seem to indicate a perspective ‘from below’, I have chosen as the chief interlocutors two liberation theologians working in Latin America who consciously attempt to do their theology from the perspective of the seemingly powerless ‘victims of history’ and a Mennonite theologian who stands consciously outside the ‘establishment’ of political and ecclesiastical power. All three have, moreover, written specifically and extensively about the significance of the cross for political theology.

### *Some preliminary definitions*

I would happily adopt the definition of political theology given by Cavanaugh and Scott in the *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*

Theology is broadly understood as discourse about God, and human persons as they relate to God. The political is broadly understood as the use of structural power to organise a society or community of people.... Political theology is, then, the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God’s ways with the world. (Scott and Cavanaugh eds. 2004: xi)

If politics is, in general terms, the gaining and use of power, political theology takes place at the interaction between divine revelation and the interrelationships of human structures of power. All theology is, ultimately, political, in that it reflects the political *loci* of its practitioners, and has political ramifications. Political theology, more specifically, involves doing theology consciously in the light of politics, and politics consciously in the light of theology. While ecclesiology is important in political theology – my concluding chapter discusses how a cruciform

political theology can be embodied in the community of the church - the horizon for political theology is not the church, but the kingdom of God.

I have refrained from giving a tight definition to descriptions such as ‘the poor’, or ‘the oppressed’. The use, primarily by liberation theologians, of such language describes both the context in which they work and the interpretation they put on that context. Poverty, whether the absolute poverty of lack of food and shelter, or the relative poverty of exclusion from good things taken for granted by large sections of society, forms the background to much of their writing and therefore to much of this thesis. Oppression implies both ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressors’ – at its simplest, the ‘oppressed’ being those who, by the working of a political or economic system are coerced into, or forced to remain in a position of deprivation and suffering by those above them on the socio-economic ladder. Oppression entails the human infliction, whether deliberately or through neglect, of needless suffering. In the discourse of liberation theology, the oppressed are those who suffer such oppression – oppressors are those who inflict it, deliberately, or through culpable and uncritical participation in an unjust political, social, sexual or economic system. I am content, in this thesis, to utilize this discourse, with which I am in substantial agreement.

### ***b) Outline of thesis***

The thesis is structured in the following way: In the first part (chapters 2 to 10) I engage in dialogue with the three chosen theologians, Yoder, Boff, and Sobrino, and attempt a close analysis and criticism of their political teaching concerning the cross. In the second part (chapters 11 and 12) I seek a wider perspective, and attempt to use insights gained in the first part to construct, first, a theology of power and, second, a framework for a corporate outworking of a cruciform political theology.

In order that a subsequent theology of the cross might be securely grounded, I begin in chapters 1 and 2 by ‘examining the foundations’. I pay particular regard to coherence – in chapter 2, the coherence of the cross based political theologies of Yoder, Boff and Sobrino with the totality of their theologies; in chapter 3, the coherence of their accounts of the historical circumstances in which the crucifixion took place with the historical evidence. In particular, I ask whether they are justified in constructing a definitive theology from those accounts. These foundations I

regard as essential, in that a political theology of the cross cannot be firmly established unless it coheres with an overall theological schema and can be firmly rooted in history, as far as that can be accurately ascertained. At the end of these two chapters I summarize what can be carried forward to form a basis for a constructive political theology of the cross.

In the next three sections I attempt to 'build on the foundations'. First, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, I draw from Yoder, Boff and Sobrino a cruciform response to suffering and oppression. In chapter 4 I examine how each theologian treats the cross as definitive for Christian political ethics – in Yoder, the necessity of redefining the nature of Christian politics as cruciform, in Boff and Sobrino the cross as a protest against suffering in the name of the crucified God revealed by Jesus. In chapter 5 I describe the three theologians' interpretation of the cross and political discipleship – in Yoder, the cross as a mark of radical nonconformity in imitation of the crucified, in Boff and Sobrino, the cross as inculcating a sacrificial spirituality of martyrdom. In chapter 6 I discuss the cross in relation to violence and the appropriate response for a Christian – in Yoder, his Christological and cruciform pacifism (alongside comparisons with other forms of pacifism), in Boff and Sobrino the question of violence in response to political oppression. Again, at the end of these chapters I summarize the above and outline a theology and spirituality of cruciform and costly imitation of the non-violent crucified God.

In the next section, in chapters 7 and 8, I analyse the theologies of Yoder, Boff and Sobrino in relation to two overlapping sociological communities – in chapter 7, the cruciform people, the church in its political responsibility, and in chapter 8, the crucified people, those who suffer oppression and injustice. In my discussion of the cruciform people, I concentrate chiefly on Yoder's doctrine of a new way of doing politics through a cruciform church. In my discussion of the crucified people I concentrate on Sobrino's emphasis on solidarity between the poor and the crucified Christ. Again, at the end of this section I draw together themes which emerge from the above - the meaning of Christian responsibility in the light of the cross, how the cross is manifested in community, the nature and use of powerlessness, and the crucified people as a criterion for political action.

In the third section of 'building on the foundations', chapters 9 and 10, I examine the cross in relation to eschatological hope and to divine and human power and powerlessness - Christian hope rests on the power of God manifested in the



resurrection of the crucified. In chapter 9 I discuss Yoder's eschatological ethic of faith and hope in the 'lamb who was slain', and Boff and Sobrino's proclamation of hope for the oppressed through the cross and resurrection. In chapter 10 I move to a discussion of the cruciform divine providence which forms the ground for that hope. Yoder's kenotic teaching on the cross as the key to God's providential action in overcoming 'the powers' is paralleled by a discussion of Boff and Sobrino's doctrine of power in the light of the cross. I conclude this section, as before, by summarizing the themes of hope, power and the cross in the light of the resurrection and by outlining a theology of a cruciform hope based on a kenotic doctrine of divine power.

In the second part of the thesis I depart from a close analysis of the three theologians, and attempt to gain a wider perspective on some of the themes which have been identified. First, in chapter 11, I discuss the cross in relation to power, divine and political. I argue that the cross exercises a critical function vis-à-vis political power, and defines the *telos*, or end-in-view of political power. I analyse the nature of power, using the distinction between power *over* and power *to*, and then turn again to the Pauline doctrine of kenosis, describing the kenotic power and 'weakness' of God in the light of the cross, before attempting to construct a kenotic and cruciform political ethic.

In chapter 12 I conclude by discussing how a cross based theology might be socially embodied. I return to the themes of the cruciform and crucified people, with special reference to the church in Britain, and end with a description of a cruciform church, based upon the beatitudes, as a community of solidarity, resistance, and hope.

### ***c) Hopes and consequences***

Two of the major present challenges to Christian political theology involve questions of power: - globalisation, with all the issues of neo-imperial power and domination arising from that process; and war, with similar issues such as use of power, resistance to power, and reactions to threat. These form the background of my attempt to outline a cruciform political theology which has power as its focus. My personal situation is that of a British, Anglican / Methodist Vicar / Minister, seeking, in and alongside my parish work, to explore how the British churches can exercise a prophetic ministry in their social witness to the crucified and risen Jesus.

I would hope that a consequence of this thesis might be an increased understanding of what that social witness might entail in relation to these crucial questions of political power.

## **SECTION I EXAMINING THE FOUNDATIONS**

### **Chapter 2**

#### **The context of the political theology of the cross in Yoder, Boff and Sobrino**

Before analysing the use of the cross in the political theology of Yoder, Boff, and Sobrino, it is necessary to set this analysis in the context of the totality of their theologies. How far do their more general theologies of the cross cohere with their more specifically political theologies? As will be seen, such a distinction is not always clear cut, since, methodologically, the ‘political’ cannot be neatly separated from the rest. I do not attempt a detailed exposition of each theologian’s doctrine of the cross, but pay special attention to the role of Christology – the significance of the person on the cross; to Soteriology – how the cross is instrumental in salvation; and to the political and ecclesiological context of their work.

I seek to demonstrate, as a basis for what follows in this study, first, that their political readings of the cross are not arbitrary additions to their theologies, but firmly situated within and coherent with their overall theological stance and, second, that the political nature of the cross has revelatory value and is not simply contingent to a ‘transactional’ soteriological purpose. (My use of the word ‘transactional’ describes a doctrine of atonement seen primarily in terms of the intra-trinitarian relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son, its historical outworking in the cross and resurrection, and its application to humanity through the Holy Spirit. I would not wish in any way to deny the truth and validity of such a view of atonement, but seek to extend its meaning.)

#### **a) The context of the cross in Yoder**

##### ***The importance of community – Mennonite and ecumenical***

Yoder is particularly concerned to root his theology in the church community, and regards it as his aim that his ethics should mould and guide that community. His ‘nonfoundationalism’ can perhaps be read most accurately in his taking the church community, rather than a preconceived philosophical position, as his epistemological and hermeneutical starting point. His is explicitly a church

theology, shaped by and intended to shape his context. For his social ethics, the distinction between ‘church’ and ‘world’ is crucial – Christian social ethics are primarily for Christians, and only of secondary and indirect relevance to those outside the ecclesiastical body, which he sees as a voluntary organisation, freely constituted rather than imposed by the authority of the state.

Yoder writes as a Mennonite, and that allegiance is closely bound up with his theology. The cross, both in Mennonite soteriology and in the history of a community which has frequently suffered persecution, has always been central to Mennonite belief. Yoder’s membership of, and the importance in his theology of the believers’ church, a church visibly identified as ‘other’ by ‘baptism, discipline, morality and martyrdom’ (Yoder 1998: 56) provide themes which run through his theology. His theological privileging of freedom and choice, and the willingness of a non-coercive God to respect that freedom, which, it will be argued, is one of the key themes of his theology (especially with regard to the cross) is firmly rooted in the free choice of adult baptismal membership of the church. The distinctive and demanding ‘cross bearing’ discipleship advocated by Yoder is undergirded and reinforced by a strong church discipline. The sense of a morality, both personal and social which is not necessarily shared by ‘the world’ and which may be antithetical to the world’s values, necessitates a refusal to participate in the generally accepted violence of the world, and hence involves a readiness to accept the often painful consequences of that refusal. This leads to one of the most significant ‘marks of the church’ - martyrdom, both in the sense of the inevitable suffering of the distinctively Christian church and the powerful witness inherent in that suffering. It is difficult to conceive of Yoder’s theology, especially with regard to the cross, divorced from its Mennonite context.

Yoder, however, cannot be read solely as a Mennonite theologian. A recent study of Yoder, entitled *Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Nation 2006) illustrates the breadth of Yoder’s theology. As a contributor to the radical Evangelical community / magazine *Sojourners* and keynote speaker at the founding meeting of Evangelicals for Social Action in Chicago in 1973 (Carter 2001:15) Yoder was sufficiently trusted by evangelicals to address that section of the church which is notoriously suspicious of outsiders. His seminal work, *Politics of Jesus* (Yoder 1994) was a major influence on the revival of a more socially conscious and ‘left wing’ evangelicalism. Yoder was (not always

to his satisfaction) identified as an evangelical by both evangelicals and non-evangelicals. (Nation 2006: xx-xxi) With regard to his theology of the cross, this is highly significant, given the stress placed by evangelicalism on the centrality of the cross and the emphasis on penal substitution as the privileged interpretation of the cross. Yoder in fact diverges significantly from this mainstream evangelical 'substitutionary' reading of the cross, but continues to engage evangelicals by emphasising, first, the centrality of the cross for Christian faith in general and, second, the broader significance of the cross for social ethics (which has been a significant gap in evangelical soteriology, the acknowledgment of which has contributed to the growth of a politically more radical evangelicalism). Yoder's catholic sympathies are seen explicitly in his teaching for thirty years at the (Roman Catholic) University of Notre Dame, but more generally in his insistence that his theology is not sectarian but for the whole church, and that his social ethics are an interpretation of what is inherent in the Chalcedonian formulations.

### ***Barthian Christocentrism***

If the church, in its present form as community and in its doctrinal formulations from the past give the context for Yoder's theology, his methodology, at least for his social ethics, can most appropriately be described as a Barthian Christocentrism. For Yoder, as for Barth, traditional 'Christendom', with Christianity the default position for society as a whole, is over. The church is a distinctive minority community, marked out from the rest of society by its confession of faith. In this, Yoder shares one of Barth's core beliefs in social ethics. He writes,

The definition of the gathering of Christians is their confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. The definition of the whole of human society is the absence of that confession. (Yoder: 1994: 108)

It is perhaps significant, from a European viewpoint of radically declining church membership and influence, to note that neither Yoder nor Barth seem to envisage a situation where the Christian church is in a very small minority position. Barth wrote at a time when the Christian churches in Europe were certainly in a numerical minority, but retained a considerable degree of strength and influence. The American churches which form Yoder's theological backdrop still retain that position of strength and influence. For a more radical (and realistic) critique,

Bonhoeffer's teaching on the powerlessness of a sidelined church is perhaps more relevant for the present European church.

Yoder's social ethic is based on uncompromising obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ – especially the crucified Christ - and an exploration of the radical implications of his exemplarity. Christian social ethics, if they are to be Christian and not just 'natural human ethics as held to by Christians among others' (Yoder; 1994: 10) must be controlled, firmly and definitively, by the example of Jesus. The centrality of the example of Jesus for social ethics cannot be overemphasized in Yoder's theology, and this exemplarity, Yoder insists, must not be diluted by any other authority or ethical norm, whether 'nature, reason, creation, or reality' (Yoder 1994: 19) or by an appeal to 'Trinitarian' social ethics, which removes, or at least weakens, the definitiveness of Jesus. The incarnation is the ultimate revelation of the nature and purpose of God, and is normative in its historical particularity. Yoder criticises the incarnationalist reading (popular in certain Anglican traditions) according to which God, by taking on human nature, thereby ratifies human nature as revelation. Rather, 'God broke through the borders of our standard definition of what is human, and gave a new, formative definition in Jesus'. (Yoder 1994: 99) This means that the historical deeds, attitudes, intentions, and strategies of Jesus (as far as we can read them) have revelatory value. Moreover, if the whole life of Jesus is revelatory, the cross, as the culmination and inevitable result of Jesus' actions and teaching, has supreme revelatory significance. The cross must not be isolated as an ahistorical symbol either of sin or sacrifice, as is the tendency (paradoxically) in both 'Christian realism' and the liberal optimism of much 20<sup>th</sup> century pacifism. Rather, the historical choices made by Jesus which led to the crucifixion have no less revelatory value than the fact of the crucifixion itself. To see the cross in isolation, solely as an expiatory sacrifice, a substitutionary penalty, in terms simply of an intra-trinitarian transaction, or merely as a symbol, however important, of human sinfulness, is grievously to detract from both its salvific and revelatory value. Yoder attacks this approach by describing it as follows: - 'Jesus had to die for reasons unrelated to his social humanity. Therefore the social humanity of how that necessity came to be carried out is unimportant' (Yoder 1994: 99) - apart from illustrating the general sinfulness of humanity. Yoder characterizes this approach as one of the 'docetic ways of avoiding the political Jesus', and hence stresses the need to take the cross into account when formulating social ethics.

### ***Chalcedonian Christology***

If, for Yoder, the cross is central to Christian theology and social ethics, the question of the identity of the crucified is also of the utmost importance. For Yoder, an ‘orthodox’ Chalcedonian reading of the incarnation, grounded in the historical acts and teaching of Jesus, is at the heart of his Christology.

What becomes of the meaning of the incarnation if Jesus is not normative man? If he is a man but not normative, is this not the ancient ebionitic heresy? If he is somehow authoritative but not in his humanness, is this not a new Gnosticism? (Yoder 1994: 10)

Yoder repeatedly looks back to the orthodox Christology expounded in the early creeds. His social ethic, he claims, is a drawing out of the implications of the church’s credal confessions, not by propounding a new Christology but by taking the Nicene and Chalcedonian definitions with the utmost seriousness. For Yoder, if Jesus is not, in Chalcedonian terms, true God (in that he definitively reveals the eternal purposes of God) and true man (in that those eternal purposes are revealed in a fully human life) his theology, and especially his social ethic, becomes weak and rootless. Since his social ethic depends upon the fact that God reveals himself definitively in Christ, any diminution of a high Christology is fatal to his project, and removes both divine authority and a sense of being in accord with, as Hauerwas put it in another context, ‘the grain of the universe’. (Hauerwas 2001) For Yoder, ethics is a reflection on reality as intended by God which in turn flows from the divine nature as exemplified in the human life (and death) of Jesus. Discipleship is the process of corresponding faithfully in the present time to the divine action in Jesus Christ in history. For Yoder’s political theology, the notion of correspondence between the disciple (and the disciple’s cross bearing) and the cross bearing action of God in Christ is central.

### ***Soteriology***

How does Yoder’s overall soteriology cohere with his political reading of the cross? Three themes recur – first, the elimination of any hiatus between the cross and preceding events; second, the incorporation into soteriology of the need for a potentially costly discipleship; and third, the emphasis on Christ’s (and God’s) respect for human freedom. In accordance with his ‘conversational’ style of theology, Yoder is reluctant to set out a definitive and systematic soteriology. The

closest he comes is in a repeated series of lectures to the Mennonite Biblical Seminary collected in *Preface to theology. Christology and Theological Method*. (Yoder 1982) It is worthwhile examining this in some detail, as it demonstrates the coherence, even identity, of Yoder's political theology of the cross with his overall theology. Yoder's political theology is not even to be seen as a deduction from what could be described as his more doctrinal theology – both are of one piece. First (Yoder 1982: 209ff) Yoder lists key New Testament models for explaining why Christ had to die – substitution, reconciliation, revelation of the love and righteousness of God, ransom, sacrifice, adoption, and redemption. These have to be woven together into a soteriology that is congruent both with the incarnation – the genuine humanity of and the divine presence in Jesus - and with Jesus' call to discipleship. Yoder then discusses various post-biblical models for atonement – Christus Victor, ransom, divinisation, moral influence, therapeutic, and satisfaction, and finds all of them wanting. He is especially critical of the Anselmian satisfaction theory, in that it sees God as the object, rather than the agent of reconciliation, and uses a substitutionary doctrine not supported by the New Testament. Salvation in the New Testament is (Yoder 1982: 221) 'not primarily the remission of guilt or the cancellation of punishment; it is reconciliation (reestablishment of communion) and obedience i.e. discipleship'.

Yoder's chief criticism of the Anselmian theory is that it has little to say about discipleship and obedience. Moreover, the actual historical life and death of Jesus has little relevance to the Anselmian theory: –

How the cross happened, the social reality of Palestine, the promises which Jesus proclaimed, the actions that offended the authorities and led to their killing him, are all irrelevant to this view. The only obedience that is required of him is that he committed no sin. (Yoder 1982: 224)

Yoder, while admitting the moral and spiritual force of the Anselmian soteriology, describes it as 'not a biblically satisfactory theory'. (Yoder 1982: 224) 'An alternative theory', suggests Yoder (Yoder 1982: 226) in a key passage, while taking sin as seriously as Anselm, has to include those themes neglected by Anselm, particularly the 'faith union' with Christ, and, most of all must

see Jesus as he was as a man, as a social figure, as a teacher, and as a moral figure, Jesus as acting within the political and cultural situation of Palestine. We would seek some relationship between atonement and his talking about



the kingdom, his forgiving people, his teaching people, his making of people a church – a body of disciples – his sending people into mission. We would see his getting crucified and his being raised from the dead as a social process.

Also integral to a full soteriology is a cruciform discipleship, since the cross of Christ demands and enables the cross of the Christian. We might try to affirm the unity of obedience, sanctification with justification...the unity of these in Biblical thought links the unity of our obedience with God's work in Christ, his cross with our cross, his death, our dying with him. This double unity is an element which is completely missing in Anselm and is present in the Bible.

Yoder, characteristically, declines to set out a definitive model for atonement, but offers the following 'presuppositions' or components in an adequate doctrine. (Yoder 1982: 227) First, a real identification-communion with God in Christ is necessary for the believer, expressed by such terms as 'faith union', 'abide in me' and 'in Christ'. Second, God's way of dealing with evil is through an agape which expresses itself in non-resistance. And, third, there is a real difference between church and world, and the Christian faith is distorted if this is not clearly kept in mind. It is significant that this part of Yoder's work dates from 1954, and can be seen directly to prefigure themes which emerge strongly in *Politics of Jesus* and thereafter – discipleship, non-resistance, and the world-church separation. Another 'presupposition' is the freedom of humanity to choose, and God's respect for that choice. Humanity is always given the freedom to choose whether to obey or disobey, and God's honouring of that freedom is basic to the divine-human relationship. God takes the risk of disobedience, since 'God is agape and agape respects the freedom of the beloved' – with no exceptions. (Yoder 1982: 228) God's total respect for that freedom leads to humanity's lost state, since overcoming that freedom by a divine fiat would contradict the nature of agape. This tension between God's desire both to save and to respect human freedom is at the heart of Yoder's soteriology: -

The question is how God can bring this man back to communion and obedience i.e. save him (expression of agape) and at the same time leave man free (expression of agape) which must include respecting the hold of

his sinfulness on him. How, in short, to reveal love to man without forcing it upon him, which forcing would contradict love. (Yoder 1982: 229)

We will see that a similar tension is found in Yoder's social ethics between the church's necessary loving involvement in political issues and a non-resistant refusal to take political responsibility, between the demand actively to express love in political and social ethics and the necessity of 'letting be' the sinner.

### *The obedient non-resistance of Jesus*

The answer to the human predicament lies in Christ's obedience (within the social and political circumstances of his time) to the absolute, freedom respecting, agape of God, which necessarily involves his non-resistance to those who would do him harm. Yoder sees the obedience of the perfect human being, Jesus Christ, living in free communion with God and loving humankind with divine love, as the focal point of atonement. Jesus respected the liberty of sinful humanity to the extent that he did not resist their sinfulness but himself bore the consequence of that sinfulness. This non-resistance demonstrates the fullness of divine agape in respecting to the utmost human freedom to sin against God and God's human representative. In Yoder's interpretation of the temptations, Jesus is faced with a series of short cuts which would undermine human freedom to reject him and therefore God. Yoder locates this within the political choices available to Jesus: -

The temptation to use political methods of violent self-defense was one aspect of this possibility. The whole way meant the cross. For since murder is the worst sin, as it takes away freedom most utterly, so the utmost in agape is the utmost in non-self-defence, to undergo murder, respecting the other's freedom to commit the worst sin out of love for the sinner-murderer. Which is what Jesus did. (Yoder 1982: 230)

Jesus died a (self) sacrificial death in allowing God to express agape through his non-resistance, which culminated in the crucifixion. 'His sinlessness, his obedience, is what he offered to God, and that sinlessness, utter faithfulness to love, cost his life in a world of sinners.' (Yoder 1982: 230)

If some of the strengths of Yoder's subsequent theology are prefigured here, so also are some weaknesses; Yoder can justly be accused of the tendency to isolate and absolutise certain concepts, and hence to lose perspective. It could be argued that Yoder makes this 'agape-respect' for freedom a mechanistic, legalistic concept,

unrelated to any realistic human analogy of agape; a parent would, out of genuine agape, override the ideal of absolute freedom in order to restrain (and punish) a child who might hurt itself or others.

***Resurrection and faith***

The resurrection is not to be detached from what precedes it – rather, it ratifies this sacrifice of the cross, and

vindicates the rightness, the possibility, the effectiveness of the way of the cross. But our present concern is the place of the resurrection in the dialectic of God's love, *which sought to save man by respecting his freedom to sin so far as to die at his hands.* (Yoder 1982: 251)

These words (in my italics) seem to sum up Yoder's soteriology. The resurrection is the ultimate endorsement of God's love which persists even when human beings do their worst to the agent of that love. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus thus preserves both elements of the salvific love of God; it overcomes sin without denying freedom to the sinner. This act of God in Christ has to be appropriated by human faith; a faith identified not merely as intellectual assent, but as 'faith union'. The Christian appropriates by repentance and faith the obedience of Christ, repentance being interpreted as an ethical 'turning round of the will'. (Yoder 1982: 251) In a similar way, faith is not merely the acceptance of something external which has been done on one's behalf, but rather an obedient discipleship and faith union with the one who has, by his obedience, made that relationship possible. Forgiveness is interpreted not as a transactional cancelling of sin, but as a restoration of obedient relationship. Yoder concludes: 'This view of salvation as restored communion and consequently restored capacity to obedience fits, better than Anselm's view, all the New Testament figures for atonement.' (Yoder 1982: 231) Salvation, as restored communion with God affording the capacity for costly and obedient discipleship, based upon the sacrificial and non-resistant obedience of the crucified Christ, is the starting point of Yoder's political theology.

***Can the cross bear the hermeneutical weight Yoder places upon it?***

As one who adopts the Christocentric, Barthian, methodology, Yoder regards the person and acts of Christ, and especially the crucified Christ, as the key to his interpretation of Christian politics. Yoder is concerned to stress that he is not

propounding a new Christology, but merely exploring the political implications of the orthodox Christology as traditionally taught and accepted by the church. The exemplarity of Christ, in the tradition of 'every act of Christ is for our instruction' is at the heart of his theology. Logically, therefore, Yoder must draw his theology from the totality of Christ and his impact on first century society, without isolating certain aspects to the detriment of others. Does he, in fact, over-isolate the cross? Or does Yoder treat as definitively revelatory aspects of the cross which are merely contingent to its salvific purpose? We have seen above Yoder's possible tendency to overemphasize and absolutise. Against this criticism, Yoder strives to locate the cross as an integral and inevitable consequence of Jesus' ministry. The cross, for Yoder, is not an accident, or an intra-trinitarian transaction worked out in isolation from the rest of Jesus' ministry, but the culmination and consummation of the whole. In *Politics of Jesus* Yoder is at pains to stress the cross as the inevitable consequence of the political choices of Jesus. Moreover, he shows that this is precisely how the cross was interpreted by his first followers, as evidenced by them adopting a similar cruciform and cross-risking lifestyle. The political cross is also at one with the overall salvific purpose of God – the pattern of non-resistant respect for human freedom is as much part of Yoder's doctrine of atonement as of his political theology. Given the traditional Christological framework of Christ the revealer of the divine nature and purposes, Yoder's emphasis on the cross as the key to understanding and formulating a doctrine of Christian politics is justifiable. The cross is the radicalization of the incarnation, where the incarnation comes to its sharpest point. Yoder recognizes this and seeks to draw out its implications.

***b) The context of the cross in Boff and Sobrino***

***Theology in the service of liberation***

As with Yoder, the ecclesial and social background against which Boff and Sobrino write significantly colours their theology. Both work as liberation theologians in Latin America, where poverty, violence and political oppression form a constant theme. Boff lived through the military dictatorship in Brazil, one of the more prosperous of the Latin American countries, but still divided by gross inequality. Sobrino is rooted in the context of the bloody civil war in El Salvador

which claimed thousands of lives, mostly of innocent peasants, at the hands of military and paramilitary death squads.

Boff's work is a practical and developing theology designed for use in Christian liberative praxis. The ultimate criterion for the truth of theology is practical – 'Theology is true insofar as it is translated into meditation, prayer, conversion, the following of Christ, and commitment to our fellow human beings.' (Boff 1980: vii) This judging of theology by its fruits is by no means confined to liberation theology, but, for Boff, the accent throughout is on discipleship exercised with a prior commitment to human liberation. Praxis is the essence of spirituality – 'Knowing is not the decisive thing. The decisive thing is real, effective action.....Salvation takes place when we make the leap from theory to real, authentic practice.' (Boff 1980: 36) Despite the Marxist influenced terminology, this need mean no more than James' 'faith without works is dead'. (James 2: 17) Boff, however, goes beyond this to the distinctive emphasis of liberation theology that 'praxis', commitment to liberation, is epistemologically prior to 'doxa', and that the standpoint from which theology is done decisively affects the content of that theology: –

The poor are not just another theme in the Gospel. They are of the very essence of the Gospel....Only from the standpoint of the poor can we understand the hope embodied in the gospel message of Jesus. And we can be saved only if we adopt the perspective of the poor. (Boff 1980: 39-40)

The setting for Boff's theology of the cross is the suffering of the poor of Latin America, which Boff links intimately with the suffering of the crucified Jesus. His theology is consciously and intensely contextual, in that it both reflects and serves its context. For Boff, the cross cannot be understood or interpreted without constant reference to its parallels today, in the suffering of the poor and in their struggle for liberation from that poverty. The fact that God continues to suffer in the poor and oppressed is central to Boff's theology of the cross, and crucial to his methodology. In his introduction to *Way of the Cross, Way of Justice*, he makes his programmatic statement: 'Theology is *ante et retro oculata*; it has two eyes. One looks back toward the past, where salvation broke in; the other looks toward the present, where salvation becomes reality here and now.' (Boff 1980: viii) This is not peculiar to Boff or to liberation theology, but it is given extra meaning by Boff's insistence that there is a continuity and even an equivalence between the sufferings

of Jesus and those of the poor and oppressed today. Hence the 'Way of the cross, with one eye focussing on the historical Jesus...Way of justice, its other eye focussing on the Christ of faith who continues his passion today in his brothers and sisters'. (Boff 1980: viii). This is the basis for Boff's spirituality of the cross, emphasising the present encounter with God which is the basis of any spirituality.

Boff's writings on the cross and Christology are chiefly directed not so much to the poor themselves as to those within the church who serve the poor. A possible exception is *Way of the Cross, Way of Justice*, which he describes as 'a prayerful theology or a theological prayer'. (Boff 1980: viii). This work can perhaps best be read as a popularisation of Boff's work on Christology and soteriology, taking the form of meditations on the fifteen Stations of the Cross, on a theme familiar in Catholic devotion, in simple, non-technical language and blank verse. However, in general, it is true to say that the poorest themselves are not the most likely readers of Boff's work. For example, in chapter 10 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, which summarises the themes of the work, emphasis is given to 'preaching' the cross. This emphasis may relate to Boff's membership of the Franciscan order, where proclamation and action are not finely differentiated. Of equal significance is the intended audience for Boff's work - not so much the poor themselves (for whom poverty is not a choice) but those Christians who have made a decision to place themselves alongside the poor (i.e. the practitioners of liberation theology) and act, in the Gramscian sense, as 'organic intellectuals'.

Although originating from Spain, Sobrino, like Boff, is a Latin American liberation theologian, differing in spiritual background (Jesuit rather than Franciscan), geographical location (El Salvador rather than Brazil), and language (Spanish rather than Portuguese). Both Sobrino and Boff share in a theology influenced by Moltmann and Marx, but, far more important than these, a *locus theologicus* of ministering in a context of suffering and poverty. This, especially, gives Sobrino's theology of the cross a radically personal edge, springing as it does from his close acquaintance with those martyred in El Salvador, especially Archbishop Romero, assassinated in 1980 and Sobrino's six Jesuit colleagues and their housekeeper and her daughter murdered by a 'death squad' in 1989. Sobrino's theology of the cross is thus formed not in a position of detachment, but through involvement in the struggles for liberation. If, as Sobrino argues, the best location for a *theologia crucis* is in the midst of those experiencing similar crosses, his

theological situation gives a key hermeneutical privilege by his propinquity to contemporary crosses. Sobrino writes of 'Latin America, where the cross is ever present. Among us the question is not, as it keeps being described in Europe, how to do theology after Auschwitz, but doing it in Auschwitz, that is, in the midst of a terrifying cross'. (Sobrino 1994a: 195)

***An Orthodox Christology from below***

In chapter 1 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* Boff begins by setting out the presuppositions that inform his work. There are two perspectives from which he is writing, both giving him a viewpoint 'from below'. Theologically, he interprets the person of Christ from the point of view of a synoptic, Antiochene, Franciscan Christology, beginning from the humanity of Jesus, rather than his divinity. Sociologically, his *locus* is 'the situation of captivity and resistance in which so many human beings live today'. (Boff 1987: xi) This orientation is in line with his role as a liberation theologian, doing his theology from the perspective and for the benefit of those at the grassroots.

My interest, then, is directed to the detection of the mechanisms that led Jesus to rejection, imprisonment, torture, and a shameful crucifixion. My interest is to demonstrate that this denouement was a result of a commitment and a praxis that threatened the status quo of his time. ...Finally, I seek to detail the meaning that the passion and death of Jesus possesses for our faith today as lived and tested in the context of our interest. (Boff 1987: 2)

It is important to note that 'from below' describes the perspective, rather than the content, of Boff's Christology, which can best be described as traditionally orthodox. His method is of great importance, as he sees the New Testament interpretation of Jesus, and especially the cross, as developing in response to the various pastoral challenges (most of all the challenge of persecution) faced by the early Christian community. The corollary Boff draws from this is a freedom to develop a Christology and soteriology in response to contemporary challenges to Christian community. This 'development of doctrine' emerges very clearly in Boff's interpretation of the cross – not denying the Biblical and 'traditional' explanations, but extending the meaning to answer contemporary questions.

Similarly, Sobrino's Christology can be described as essentially orthodox and traditional, but with an emphasis on contextuality. Sobrino is concerned to

describe a 'Latin American historical Jesus' – that is, his Christology begins, not 'from above' but from the historical Jesus as interpreted with the special insights of Latin America. This is especially relevant to what is probably the most significant contribution Sobrino has made to Christology, linking Jesus to the contemporary 'crucified people' in a reciprocal relationship. The nature and theological significance of the crucified people is derived from the crucified Jesus, and a theology arising out of the crucified people provides insights into the nature and significance of the crucified Jesus. Sobrino is much influenced by the philosopher Zubiri, for whom a subject's status is constituted by the relations in which that subject is embedded. Hence relationality plays an important part in Sobrino's Christology, which begins by analysing the historical relations in which Jesus is embedded. The two basic Christological relations are to 'the kingdom of God and to the God of the kingdom'. Also of great significance are Jesus relations with his followers, which, in the light of the cross, can be seen in history as that reciprocal relationship between the crucified Jesus and the crucified people.

Again, as with Boff, 'from below' describes the perspective, rather than the content, of Sobrino's Christology. Sobrino certainly makes a distinction between the eternal Sonship of Christ, confessed in the Christological creeds and dogmas, and the realisation of that Sonship in history, expressed in the historical Jesus' relationship with God. It is true, also, that the Vatican document detailing criticisms of Sobrino's theology, the *Notification on the works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: 2006) censures Sobrino for tending towards assumptionism, a form of adoptionism whereby the historical human Jesus was 'assumed' by the divine Son of God. These criticisms, however, can be levelled at most Christologies which begin from the perspective of below, and would seem to be a matter of perspective and emphasis rather than content. A more serious criticism is that Sobrino downplays Christ's uniqueness, especially the uniqueness of his cross. This arises, most of all, from Sobrino's linking of the theme of the crucified people to Christology. If the historical community which derives from Christ through relationality with him crucified is not solely the church, but a more diffuse and general 'crucified people', then such an interpretation of Christ is more vulnerable to the charge of pluralism or lack of specificity than a Christ whose being is tightly defined by ecclesiastical tradition and is confined to a community of explicit faith. This criticism points to an important fault line between liberation and



more traditional theologies which will be explored later at greater depth. If Jesus is portrayed merely as one of the millions of ‘crucified people’ in history, even as an ‘elder brother’, this continuity between his crucifixion and theirs, it is argued, might detract from his uniqueness. In fact, however, the converse would appear to be true. The reciprocal relationship between Jesus and the crucified peoples certainly would not be possible without a radical continuity between them. Yet without a traditionally orthodox Christology there would be little point in Sobrino describing the suffering of people as ‘crucified’, rather than machine gunned, starved, impoverished etc. Although much of the theological importance of the crucified people is intrinsic to them and their sufferings (and does not depend on a relationship to anyone else) the *theologoumenon* ‘crucified people’ derives from their relationship with Jesus, the definitive Son of God, who was crucified in a way that parallels their sufferings. If Sobrino did not consider Jesus to be the Son of God much of the force and meaning of his specifically ‘crucifixion language’ would be lost.

### ***Soteriology***

The relationship between Boff’s overall soteriology and his political reading of the cross is best seen in chapters 6 and 7 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the world*, where he sets out and criticises Biblical, Patristic and Scholastic interpretations of the crucifixion. He begins with the earliest Christian communities, who interpreted Christ’s death in terms of the death that awaited any prophet thus needing no special explanation. However, the suffering and persecution experienced by the early Christian community caused them to use the ‘suffering servant’ figure in interpreting Christ’s death, introducing new meanings of expiation and vicarious atonement, reinforced by a sacrificial, expiatory reading of the Last Supper in Eucharistic theology. Paul’s theology of the cross is seen, first, in the light of his pastoral involvement with those ‘pneumatics’ or ‘spiritual’ Christians of Corinth who downgraded the earthly, crucified Jesus and boasted of their ‘wisdom’. Against this, Paul sets the ‘eschatologico-critical function’ (Boff 1987: 81) of the cross as the criterion of Christian wisdom, the criterion against which all else is to be measured. This cross-wisdom is not based on worldly power, but on apparent weakness.

Boff now turns to the ways in which the crucifixion has been interpreted in post-Biblical tradition. The criterion he uses is highly significant for political theology: 'Do the images used in piety, liturgy, and theology to express Jesus Christ's liberation really succeed in setting in relief the genuinely liberative aspect of Christ's death and resurrection? Or do they conceal this aspect?' (Boff 1987: 86) Boff stresses the fact that the images used to express Christian interpretation of the cross are culturally conditioned, and convey ideological interests - hence, these images need to be re-examined, or perhaps, deconstructed, to convey liberative meaning today. There is a clear political corollary - do these images assist in the liberative purpose of the church, or do they contribute to oppression? First, Boff returns to an earlier theme in refusing to isolate the death of Christ as redemptive. 'Redemption is basically a praxis, a historical process, verified...in the turbulent reality of a concrete situation.' (Boff 1987: 89) In that praxis the whole of Jesus' life, not merely the moment of death, is redemptive and liberative. Boff is concerned to avoid a solely transactional account of redemption - he seems to see redemption (although he does not put it in these terms) in function and process rather than ontological status. Redemption is the process of being redeemed in the totality of life (including the political), as a consequence of the totality of the life of Jesus. It is not to be reduced to a transaction of a single moment. And so Boff criticises both the Greek and the Latin approaches for separating parts of the earthly life of Jesus from the totality, the Greek for concentrating on the fact alone of the incarnation (and downplaying the actual redemptive details of Jesus' life), the Latin for concentrating on the death of Christ to the detriment of the life which went before. Boff's target is a 'juridical, formal attitude toward sin, justice, and the relationship between God and human beings'. (Boff 1987: 91) He fears that concepts such as 'expiation, reparation, satisfaction, ransom and merit conceal rather than communicate the rich novelty of the liberation that comes to us in Jesus Christ.' Boff, however, seeks to salvage what he can from these images of redemption in a process of demythologisation.

The first model is that of expiatory sacrifice for the sins of his people, which Boff re-interprets as self-surrender for the sake of the Other, and for others. '[Christ] was 'being for others to the last extreme. Not only his death, but his whole life was a sacrifice: it was wholly surrender.' (Boff 1987: 94) The relevance of this for a spirituality of committed political action is evident - discipleship has an

‘outward’ orientation, both towards God and humanity, and this necessitates a commitment of the self away from the self which expresses itself in costly service.

Next Boff turns to ‘redemption as ransom’, a model of ‘captivity and rescue’. This model emphasises the ‘gravity of human perdition...we were the possession of something that refused to allow us our authentic being’. Traditionally, this was seen as a ransom from the power of the devil in a suprahistorical drama. Boff reinterprets this in relation to the need for liberation from oppressive social and religious systems.

Christ has delivered us from this captivity. Driven by a new experience of God and a new human praxis, he appeared among us as a human being who was really free, one who was liberated and liberating. By his violent passion and death, he paid the price of the liberty he had claimed in God’s name.  
(Boff 1987: 96)

The third model is ‘vicarious satisfaction’, the juridical Augustinian and Anselmian conception of atonement, by which ‘satisfaction’ is offered to God for humanity’s sin by the incarnation and death of Christ. Boff transmutes this theory into one of a humanity whose salvation consists of ‘being ever more and more themselves’ (in their truest being as intended by God) (Boff 1987: 98) yet being aware of an incompleteness in itself, and unable to overcome that incompleteness and dissatisfaction. The process of humanisation, in which Christ stirs us to achieve the humanity he has achieved, overcomes that incompleteness and is thus a modern (i.e. non-medieval) equivalent of the satisfaction theory. This is perhaps the least successful of his translations of traditional images of the atonement into modern images relevant for a political spirituality. The necessity for the cross is unclear (as, it must be admitted, is also the case in the Anselmian theory), humanisation resting on the perfection of Christ’s incarnation, rather than on the crucifixion.

Boff concludes this survey by asking the question – ‘How is he (Christ) in solidarity with us, and how does his salvific reality touch our reality, saving and liberating it?’ (1987: 99) Boff appeals to a sense of universal human solidarity, across geography, time and history. The incarnation, the divine-human unity is the key to (or the model of) the divine-human unity achieved by Christ in his solidarity with humankind.

Herein is the secret, profound meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

...Thanks to his solidarity with them in the same humanity, when he touches

them he opens to them the possibility of redemption and liberation, he inspires them with a project for the liberation of all their exiled sisters and brothers, he activates the forces that can shake off the yoke of all manner of servitude. (Boff 1987: 101)

The cross fits into this schema as a part of the incarnation, in the ‘deadly conflict he underwent’, as part of ‘God’s maximal self-revelation’ and ‘the maximal revelation of the openness of a human being’. (1987: 100) In other words, the cross is the end point of the incarnation. As elsewhere, Boff is determined not to isolate the cross, but to see it in close relationship with the rest of Jesus’ incarnate life.

This is also very much a theme of Sobrino’s soteriology – the totality of Jesus’ life-and-death is salvific, and it is a mistake to isolate Jesus’ death in an ahistorical soteriology. For Sobrino, salvation is deeply related to a primary conflict, between, as he puts it, ‘The God of life and the gods of death’. Salvation takes place within the one history, and is centred on the holistic coming of the kingdom of God in its concreteness. Salvation is not something performed by God alone, but by the co-operation of humans in the forwarding of the acts of healing, liberation and peacemaking that are specific to each situation where God’s kingdom is challenged. Sobrino writes:

The salvation brought by the Kingdom – *though this is not all the Kingdom brings* (my italics)– will, then, be being saved in history from the evils of history. What the benefits of the Kingdom might be is determined above all by the actual situation of oppressed human beings and not by an a priori decision about what salvation might mean. (Sobrino 1994a: 125)

Sobrino appears to recognise, from the words in italics, that the totality of salvation means more than a reactive response to political and social oppression, but, given his context, this is where he chooses to place the emphasis of his soteriology. Jesus is the salvific mediator of the kingdom, as the Son of God who promotes authentic humanization and divinization (humanity and divinity being not mutually incompatible).

For Sobrino, as for Yoder and Boff, there is an intimate relationship between the historical reasons for Jesus’ death and its soteriological significance. The bare fact of Jesus’ crucifixion means nothing in isolation from the historical facts which caused that crucifixion. Jesus’ death is not a contextless sacrifice at the hands of those whose sin is general and ahistorical. It was a historical scandal, a crime, a

deliberate ending of a life lived in the service of a liberative kingdom at the hands of those who were threatened by that kingdom. Sobrino describes the soteriological role of Christ in traditional terms – as sacrifice, new covenant, suffering servant, liberation from the law (Sobrino 1993: 223-7) and emphasises two aspects of the salvific role of the cross. First (Sobrino 1993: 227ff) it is ‘the manifestation of what is pleasing to God.’ The sacrificial death of Jesus is pleasing to God, not in itself in isolation, but as the culmination of a life lived in love. The suffering in itself is not a good thing pleasing to God – there is no deification of suffering. Rather, what is pleasing to God is a love that is willing, if necessary, to suffer. The manifestation of this, of Jesus as the *homo verus*, is salvific in that it invites and inspires ‘human beings to reproduce in their own turn the *homo verus*, true humanity’. Sobrino 1993: 230). Second (Sobrino 1993: 230ff) the cross shows the ‘credibility of God’s love’. The cross does not change God’s attitude to humanity.

The cross is not only what is pleasing to God, but that in which God expresses himself as pleasing to human beings...Jesus’ life and cross are that in which God’s love for human beings is expressed and made as real as possible. (Sobrino 1993: 230)

In Sobrino’s context of suffering in Latin America, the credibility of God’s love needs to be demonstrated in the most radical way possible. Sobrino quotes the famous words of Bonhoeffer which form a sub-text to much of Sobrino’s writing on the cross ‘Only the suffering God can help.’ (Bonhoeffer 1953: 361) God’s love can only be credible to the suffering if God himself has undergone the depths of suffering.

Various criticisms can be made of this soteriology, de-emphasising as it does certain aspects of the atonement familiar in more traditional interpretations – most notably the nature of sin being an offence, primarily, against God. The *Notification on the works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: 2006) criticises Sobrino for an exemplarist soteriology that ‘reduces redemption to moralism’, the goal being ‘the appearance of the *homo verus*, manifested in fidelity unto death’. Salvation and redemption ‘cannot be reduced to the good example that Jesus gives us’. However, Sobrino can be defended in two ways. First, in general it is in the nature of liberation theology not to present the whole of Christian doctrine at any one point, but only that which is most relevant to the particular context in which the theologian teaches. Second, it is misleading

simply to portray Sobrino's soteriology as exemplarist. The cross does not only reveal the love of God, but unleashes its reality in concrete situations. Sobrino looks to the cross of Jesus not merely as an example, but as a present and active force of suffering love.

***The 'necessity' of the cross***

The question of the 'necessity' of the cross is important to Boff, in seeking a theology of the cross which avoids a deification and glorification of suffering. This is exemplified in *Way of the Cross, Way of Justice*, where Boff translates necessity into inevitability. 'Viewed theologically, the passion of Jesus was the consequence of his fidelity to his Father and his fellow human beings.' (Boff 1980: ix) Although 'God did not spare his Son, He handed him over to these cruel barbarities and allowed him to experience the depths of human wickedness'. (Boff 1980: 11) It is certainly not the case that God actively willed the crucifixion – 'In the face of human rejection, the Father did not cease to will his kingdom and to press for its establishment even now in this world, even though it would mean the criminal elimination of his own Son.' (Boff 1980: ix) The 'necessity' or 'inevitability' of the crucifixion, which is stressed in the Synoptic accounts lies in this – 'Given the sinful condition of the world, Jesus would have to die if he wanted to be obedient and loyal to his Father.' (Boff 1980: ix)

Boff concludes, however, 'Despite rejection by human beings, the kingdom triumphed through the sacrifice of Jesus, who accepted his sacrifice in selfless freedom rather than fatalistically.' (Boff 1980: ix) This theme of inevitability recurs later - 'Given the situation created by people's refusal to undergo conversion, Jesus really 'had to die', as the scriptures put it'. (Boff 1980: 89) The fundamental cause of the crucifixion is human sinfulness – 'In the last analysis it was this sinfulness, which had taken root in human beings, hardened their hearts, and perverted fraternal relations, that caused Jesus to be condemned to death.' (Boff 1980: 6)

Boff is attempting to indicate a place for the cross in the divine purpose without implicating God as actively willing the crucifixion. The cross is a crime, and Boff is determined not to minimize its criminal nature, or to make God an accomplice in the crime. God the Father is determined to realise his 'project in history', the 'kingdom of God', the 'divine revolution' (Boff 1908: 29), even though it will inevitably cost the life of his Son. Given the nature of the world in its

hostility to God's ways, any 'historical project' of God will inevitably risk God's agent's suffering and death. God, in his love, freely accepts this sacrifice as a tragic necessity, in order that his 'kingdom, which had been rejected, is re-introduced into history'. (Boff 1980: 29-30) This seems to be the way in which Boff, at least in *Way of the Cross, Way of Justice* understands the salvific nature of the cross. The kingdom of God will be realised through the death of his Son - 'Jesus freely accepted condemnation to death. He died for our sins. In other words, he died because of our rejection of conversion brought about his death.' (Boff 1980: 90) Boff is content to use traditional language to describe the crucifixion - 'He took our sins upon himself, establishing solidarity with sinners, in order to free them from their wickedness.' - but with a crucial addition - 'In particular, he established solidarity with all the victims of human sinfulness'. This theme of solidarity with humanity is an important and recurring theme in Boff's political theology of the cross.

A similar doctrine of the 'necessity' of the cross is found in Sobrino. Again, 'necessity' is probably better rendered as 'inevitability'. Sobrino writes:

Rather than viewing the cross as some arbitrary design on God's part, we must see it as the outcome of God's primordial option: the incarnation. The cross is the outcome of an incarnation situated in a world of sin that is revealed to be a power working against the God of Jesus.

(Sobrino 1978: 201)

In such a world, given the nature of sin and evil, the cross is historically inevitable. If there is to be an incarnation into the processes of human history, the cross is 'necessary'. This is not so much a theological necessity as an inevitable consequence of human history. Although God's design of incarnation makes that crucifixion inevitable, human sin, not the will of God crucified Jesus. Here, again, Sobrino is careful not to 'deify' or to privilege suffering in itself. God's suffering in Christ is not for its own sake, but for the sake of a diminution of human suffering. A spirituality of 'dolorism' is futile, if by that suffering the suffering of humankind is not diminished.

### **c) Conclusion**

Contextless theology, done in a social and ecclesiastical vacuum, is impossible. For Yoder, Boff and Sobrino the background against which they do

their theology is highly significant, though in differing ways. Yoder's ecclesiastical setting in the Mennonite tradition of a non-resistant martyr church, and Boff's and Sobrino's situation of ministering to the suffering poor of Latin America determine the content of much of their theologies of the cross. All three theologians attempt to integrate their political theologies of the cross with their overall theologies – Yoder, with his insistence on a non-coercive God respecting (and permitting) human freedom, Boff with his liberative reinterpretation of traditional categories of atonement, Sobrino with his interweaving of Christology with the theme of the crucified people. All three profess an orthodox Christology, and seek to draw out the implications of an already well established theology for political and social ethics. All three have been criticized by more conservative members of their denominations for a defective (i.e. non-traditional) Christology, but have insisted that any divergence from the traditional is a matter of Christological perspective, rather than content. All three are concerned not to isolate the cross from its political causation in an ahistorical manner but to ascribe revelatory and salvific value to events preceding the actual crucifixion. Soteriology is, perhaps, less easy to assess. Yoder's soteriology diverges significantly from the Evangelical doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. Boff and Sobrino shelter behind liberation theology's tendency to emphasize only those parts of the Christian faith which serve the particular liberative purpose, with the result that it is difficult to ascertain the full content of their soteriological beliefs. Boff, in his reinterpretation of the traditional models of atonement, elicits from these models images of use to current liberative practice, but it is difficult to ascertain which model he would use to express a more 'traditional' form of atonement, where the focus is the restoration of relationship between God and humanity, broken by sin, rather than simply restoration of just relationships within humanity. Both Boff and Sobrino stress, however, the holistic or integral nature of salvation, and the fact that the kingdom of God, the goal of salvation, cannot be simply reduced to political activity, even though this is the focus of their concern.



### Chapter 3

#### ***The historical and political causation of the crucifixion in Yoder, Boff and Sobrino***

In the previous chapter I examined the theologies of Yoder, Boff and Sobrino, in order to test the coherence of their general interpretations of the cross with their specifically political theologies. In this chapter I discuss an equally fundamental question - how does each theologian present the causation for Jesus' crucifixion as an historical phenomenon? What political causes do they identify? It is important to note that the causation of the crucifixion cannot neatly be separated into the theological and the historical. When we claim that Jesus was crucified by the sin of humankind, this sin has no meaningful reality except in the concrete historical acts committed in reaction to him. Likewise, the revelatory quality of Jesus' reaction to human sin was actualised in historically analyzable strategies. Hence the theological and the historical necessarily overlap.

I pose the question –are the accounts given by Yoder, Boff and Sobrino of the crucifixion and its causation justifiable in the light of the evidence of the New Testament, especially as evaluated by current scholarship? A full and detailed examination of the coherence of the theologians' accounts with Biblical scholarship is beyond the scope of this thesis. What needs to be shown, however, is that their accounts of the crucifixion are reasonably consistent with a possible historical reconstruction.

#### ***Excursus – identifying the 'political'***

It is important to consider what is meant by 'political', as there is a sense in which most moral teaching has political ramifications, if pushed far enough. Socrates, for example, was a member of the politically participating class in Athens (i.e. free adult male citizen), took part in at least one of the significant political events of his time (the Arginusae debate in the Peloponnesian War), and was executed partly for political reasons, because some of his aristocratic followers had become involved as leaders in the oligarchic revolution of 404BCE. His teaching, by his own admission, was intended to make Athenian society re-examine its presuppositions, and in that sense was potentially subversive. In fact, one of the charges on which he was condemned was 'corrupting the youth'. His concern for the truth and his pursuit of self-knowledge would, of course, in the end lead to a

better society if widely practised. However, this was only of tangential political significance, in the sense of direct engagement in the power politics of his day. It is difficult to penetrate beyond the Platonic overlay, where Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece for his own thoughts, but it is unlikely that Socrates' teaching could be interpreted as having such direct political content. Although Socrates' indirect political relevance was a crucial factor in his trial and condemnation, his teaching was, as far as we can tell, directed primarily to the individual, and he does not seem to have been particularly interested in the business of political power or authority or in causing social or economic change. This, of course, is precisely how Jesus has been portrayed in certain strands of theology and spirituality. By contrast, the theologians studied in this investigation present Jesus as having much more direct political aims and influence.

***a) The historical and political causation of the cross in Yoder***

***Jesus ministry as inescapably political***

Yoder certainly presents the ministry of Jesus in political terms. Most notably, his seminal work, *Politics of Jesus*, is an explicit attempt to demonstrate the political nature of much of Jesus' ministry and its relevance for contemporary Christians. Yoder recognises that Jesus has often been presented as only possessing marginal political relevance, and insists that Jesus' ministry was much more directly political. Two examples suffice, from the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry. First, Yoder describes the jubilee influenced 'Nazareth manifesto' in Luke 4 as 'a visible socio-political economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, achieved by his intervention in the person of Jesus as the one Anointed and endued with the Spirit'. (Yoder 1994: 32) Second, the 'cleansing of the temple' is described by Yoder as 'the symbolic takeover of the temple precinct by One who claims jurisdiction there'. The attempt of the chief priests and other religious and political power holders to destroy him 'is linked to the messianic claim acted out in the non-violent seizure of the holy place, and not simply to the offence against order which might have been involved in his driving out the bulls'. (Yoder 1994: 41) In both instances, Jesus is represented by Yoder as deeply involved as an agent in questions of political power and change.

Nor is Jesus, according to Yoder, merely a solitary and individualistic prophet. The political and social change latent in Jesus' words and deeds must find its reality in a new community. In describing the course of Jesus' ministry, and the opposition to him by the power-holders, Yoder writes, 'To organised opposition he responds with the formal founding of a new social reality.' (Yoder 1994: 33) This alternative social reality is not another political party, but a whole new social order marked by the cross. Jesus, Yoder writes, is building a community 'to share in that style of life of which the cross is the culmination'. (Yoder 1994: 37-8) Jesus broadens the 'cross-bearing' from himself to his community. He does not 'reprimand his disciples for trying to establish some new social order – he reprimands them for misunderstanding the character of the social order that is to be established'. (Yoder 1994: 38) If cross bearing is the mark of this new social order/community, the function of the community is political and social change. Yoder describes Jesus' new community as having

those sociological traits most characteristic of those who set about to change society...a nonconformed quality of 'secular' involvement in the life of the world...an unavoidable challenge to the powers that be and the beginning of a new set of social alternatives. (Yoder 1994: 39)

### *A different kind of politics*

The new order taught, practised, and inaugurated in community by Jesus is intensely and directly political. But Yoder emphasises that it is a different kind of politics which Jesus promulgates. Again, the cross – or, more accurately, an approach to politics which would inevitably lead to the cross – is key. For example, Yoder reads the temptation narrative as a choice between different kinds of kingship the acceptance or refusal of which would define the nature of the mission and purpose of Jesus – in other words, the nature of the politics in which he was engaged. Similarly, Yoder sees the episode of the 'bread in the desert' (Luke 9: 10-17) as the turning point of Jesus' ministry, in that Jesus was dealing not merely with a small group of disciples but 'the first wave of inquirers coming to see if this kingdom which the twelve was announcing was for real'. (Yoder 1994: 34) Jesus rejects definitively a certain kind of kingship or politics for himself and his followers. The crowd wish to acclaim Jesus as the new Moses, 'the provider, the welfare king'. Yoder observes that 'His withdrawal from their acclamation is ...the

occasion for his first statement that his ministry was to be one of suffering and that his disciples would need to be ready to bear with him that cross.’ (Yoder 1994: 35) There is thus a clear choice between ‘cross and crown’. But Yoder stresses that this choice is not situated outside of, but within the arena of politics. It is a choice of a certain mode of politics, not a refusal of the political.

Yet what he proposes is not withdrawal into the desert or into mysticism: it is a renewed messianic claim... The cross is beginning to loom not as a ritually prescribed instrument of propitiation, but as the political alternative to both insurrection and quietism. (Yoder 1994: 35)

This last sentence sums up Yoder’s interpretation of the political choices of Jesus – a different way, certainly involving a challenge to the powerful, but not violent insurrection. That way, if not inevitably leading to the cross, certainly risked that outcome.

An example of this occurs at the climax of Jesus’ activity in Jerusalem. After the cleansing of the temple, the next step would be to ‘storm the Roman fortress next door. But it belongs to the nature of the new order that, though it condemns and displaces the old, it does not do so with the arms of the old’. (Yoder 1994: 43) In Gethsemane, too, the choice is not between political engagement and withdrawal, but between two options of engagement. Yoder asks (Yoder 1994: 45) what would ‘Remove this cup from me’ mean in the actual historical circumstances, and interprets this prayer in terms not of a withdrawal from a challenge to power but of a renewed temptation to messianic violence in pursuit of power i.e. a zealot-type option. Jesus resists this very real option, and chooses a renunciation of zealot-type means, in favour of the non-violent resistance which ends in, and is symbolised by, the cross. This, Yoder insists, does not imply the rejection of the need to pursue ‘a kingdom’. On the Emmaus road, Jesus rebukes the disciples not because they had been looking for a ‘kingdom’, and should not have been. Rather, ‘Their fault is that, just like Peter at Caesarea Philippi, they were failing to see that the suffering of the Messiah is the inauguration of that kingdom’. (Yoder 1994: 51) Yoder concludes, ‘The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come. Jesus is not concerned with seizing power by violent means according to the ‘old’ politics. Rather, his is a ‘new politics’, no less a challenge to the powers of his day, but reliant on non-violent means and hence vulnerable to the violence of the powerful.

*Jesus as politically subversive*

The subversive (and hence, in the political situation vis-à-vis the Roman, cross-risking) nature of Jesus' ministry is, according to Yoder, well established historically. Even before the climax of his ministry in Jerusalem, 'Herod cannot be seeking to kill Jesus for heresy or prophecy; sedition would be the only possible charge.' (Yoder 1994: 37) The language Jesus uses about taking up the cross is interpreted not in terms of a general self denial or dying to self but as a warning to the disciples about the standard punishment for insurrection or refusal to confess Caesar's lordship – even as an echo of a phrase possibly used in zealot recruiting. 'The disciples' cross is not a metaphor for self-mortification or even generally for innocent suffering – if you follow me, your fate will be like mine, the fate of a revolutionary.' (Yoder 1994: 38) To use such a phrase metaphorically without taking into account its inevitably political connotations would be, at the very least, unlikely. The subversive nature of Jesus' ministry has a parallel with the zealots, but with the difference that the zealots' subversion was exercised violently, whereas Jesus, though equally subversive was non-violent. Reflecting the scholarly controversy current in the 1960's over Jesus' possible zealot links, Yoder agrees with Brandon, a proponent of the 'Jesus as zealot' theory, that Jesus was executed for sedition, was socially close to the zealot movement, and had his revolutionary nature concealed through apologetic motives in early Christianity. Yoder, however, argues that Jesus' 'revolutionary initiative' was, in contrast to the zealots, non-violent. 'The fault we find with Brandon is not that he interprets Jesus as politically relevant, but that he assumes violence is the only model for such relevance'. (Yoder 1994: 42) (Because of the doubts concerning the existence of a group specifically named 'zealot' in the time of Jesus I have throughout put the word 'zealot' in lower case. It is, however, almost certain that there existed *zealot-type* groups at this time, even if not bearing the name 'zealot'.)

The key evidence for the politically subversive nature of Jesus' ministry is the cross itself. Any denial of this subversive nature and its consequence in the crucifixion (by what Yoder calls 'spiritualistic-apologetic exegesis) must depend on a huge (and historically incomprehensible) misunderstanding. The cross itself demonstrates the real threat which both Pilate and Caiaphas believed Jesus posed to the established order, unless they totally misread his actions.

That the threat was not one of armed, violent revolt, and that it nonetheless bothered them enough to resort to irregular procedures to counter it, is a proof of the political relevance of non-violent tactics, not a proof that Pilate and Caiaphas were exceptionally dull or dishonourable men.

(Yoder 1994: 49)

Yoder omits the possibility that Pilate and Caiaphas may have mistaken Jesus for a violent insurrectionist, not realising that his approach was radically different from the zealots. Evidence such as the gathering of the crowds in the wilderness, the ‘cleansing of the temple’, and the fact that Jesus’ close associates included at least one zealot sympathizer make that an understandable mistake. This does not vitiate Yoder’s main argument, that Jesus’ non-violent politics led to the cross – it simply means that Jesus’ politics were sufficiently close to the zealot option in their subversive capacity as to make Pilate’s and Caiaphas’ postulated mistake credible.

### ***Coherence with historical evidence***

How far is this interpretation coherent with the modern historical reconstructions of the New Testament evidence? On one level Yoder takes what has become known since his first writing of *The Politics of Jesus* as a canonical approach, dealing with the evidence of the ‘surface’ text rather than historical reconstructions of what lies behind the text. However, in the second edition of *The Politics of Jesus* he admits that his argument would be seriously diminished ‘if the historical questers were to come up with solid demonstrations that the ‘real Jesus’ they find is quite incompatible with what we find in the canonical account’. (Yoder 1994: 12) Yoder defends his position by examining the tendencies of the evidence on which a historical reconstruction can be based. He claims that ‘any...serious attempt at hypothetical reconstruction does move toward taking more seriously the economic-political threat Jesus posed to the Romans than does the traditional ecclesiastical interpretation’. (Yoder 1994: 50) The more one digs beneath the surface of the text, the more political and social motivation in Jesus’ ministry is unearthed, not less – a point corroborated by New Testament scholarship of the late twentieth century, which has increasingly seen Jesus teaching and actions earthed in first century Palestinian economics and politics, and not as something floating in a quasi timeless void (as Yoder observes in Yoder 1994: 13 on the contribution of

Bammel and Moule, in their symposium *Jesus and the politics of his day* and the various writers of the 'third quest').

When considering the social and economic background, Yoder rightly insists that his thesis is proved by a very low level of evidence:

All that needs to be affirmed to make our point is that Jesus' career had been such as to make it quite thinkable that he would pose to the Roman Empire an apparent threat serious enough to justify his execution. (Yoder 1994: 50)

Starting from the fact that the cross was the mode of execution for those who threatened the existing political and economic order, it is legitimate to read back into the preceding career of Jesus elements which would indicate such a threat. The only argument against such a reading is that Jesus was totally misunderstood, or misrepresented, and that his execution was based completely on mistaken premises. That is a certainly a possibility, but Yoder rightly argues that his 'political' interpretation is overwhelmingly more likely. Moreover, Yoder provides copious evidence, in Chapter 5 of *Politics of Jesus*, which he entitles 'The possibility of non-violent resistance' of contemporary parallels to the type of non violent resistance with which he associates Jesus. Such teaching and actions were not unfeasible in the context of first century Palestine in such a way as to make his portrait of Jesus historically improbable. He concludes his argument (in the original edition) with this summary -

Jesus was, in his divinely mandated prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, the bearer of a new possibility of human, social and therefore political relationships. *At this one point* there is no difference between the Jesus of historie and the Christ of Geschichte, or between Christ as God or Jesus as man, or between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus. No such slicing can avoid his call to an ethic marked by the cross, a cross identified as the punishment of a man who threatens society by creating a new kind of community leading to a radically new kind of life. (Yoder 1994: 52)

A similar point is made later, when Yoder points out that the episodes in the gospels which contain the most political significance are precisely those places where the 'historic' and the 'historical' Jesus most coincide, 'where there is least distinction between what the critic thinks must actually have happened and what the believing witnesses reported'. (Yoder 1994: 101-2) In other words, whichever interpretation is adopted, whether it is of the 'Jesus of history' or the 'Christ of faith', the sine qua

non is the crucifixion with all its political implications. In his epilogue, added in the second edition of *Politics of Jesus*, Yoder asserts,

It is noteworthy that within that debate [i.e. concerning the ‘historical Jesus’] what is least open to debate, in all of the Gospel accounts and in all the critical reconstructions, is the historical/political dimension of what Jesus did. It is with regard to the Zealot option, that is, to the prospect of anti-Roman violence, that the gospel text is closest to the issues of historical conflict. (Yoder 1994: 55)

Yoder summarizes his argument in his second edition of *Politics of Jesus*, ‘Scholarly developments have not had the effect of discovering an apolitical Jesus.’ (Yoder 1994: 15) More specifically, ‘It does not follow...that Jesus seen as sage, as rabbi, or as incarnate Wisdom, would be any less politically relevant than Jesus the non-violent Zealot.’ This is perhaps overstating the case. Given that, as argued above with the example of Socrates, the political nature of a teacher can be implicit or explicit, direct or indirect, there is a great difference between a teacher of moral (and mainly ‘religious’) aphorisms which are not necessarily directed to specific political, social and economic issues, but are only tangentially political, and one whose teachings (and actions) are more directly political. Hays (Hays 1996: 286n141) notes correctly that ‘the politically detached Cynic Jesus imagined by the historical critics of the Jesus Seminar would stand in fundamental tension with Yoder’s work’. He points out that although Yoder disclaims reliance on historical reconstructions ‘behind the text’, his thesis does actually depend on a particular reconstruction of the events underlying the text. This is a fair criticism insofar as an individualist ‘Socratic’ or ‘Cynic’ type Jesus would significantly weaken Yoder’s argument – as would a ‘Jesus the magician’, if the miracles are understood merely (and wrongly) as cases of individual healing without further social relevance. However, the tendency of Yoder’s argument is that the need for direct historical evidence for much of Jesus’ ministry is not great in order for his case to be proved, given the overwhelmingly political nature of the crucifixion and the political, social and economic threat which can be read back from that into the rest of his ministry – that is, of course, unless the crucifixion was a complete mistake caused by a gross misunderstanding or misrepresentation. The work of, for example, Borg (Borg 1984, 1988), Wright (Wright 1996), or Sanders (Sanders 1993) certainly does not rule out the political import of Jesus’ ministry – Jesus is directly ‘political’ to a



varying degree in their reconstructions, but the political nature of the crucifixion and the ministry which preceded it is certainly not excluded by such scholarly reconstruction. Such a political interpretation is strongly corroborated by scholars such as Crossan (Crossan 1991) and Horsley (1973), without necessarily ascribing to Jesus a strictly pacifist strategy.

### ***Crossing Lessing's ditch***

Yoder's theological methodology makes him particularly vulnerable to the difficulty which Lessing referred to as the 'ugly ditch' that 'the accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.' Yoder's political theology rests overwhelmingly on the revelatory content of Jesus' reaction to the political circumstances of first century Palestine which led to his crucifixion. How can those contingencies form a solid foundation for a twenty-first century political theology? What, for example, would have ensued in the admittedly highly unlikely event of Jesus' political programme being accepted by Romans, Sadducees and Pharisees?

Behind this question lies a huge debate concerning revelation and contingency. But in defence of Yoder's cross-based political theology, there is a sense in which the cross was inevitable, whatever the details of the historical contingencies. Given human sin, in particular the tendency for the powerful ruthlessly to preserve their power and to destroy those who seek to undermine it, any Christ-like threat to power would inevitably lead to crucifixion or the contemporary equivalent. In Jesus' passion predictions (e.g. Mark 8: 31) the language of necessity also bears the meaning of inevitability. The necessity of Jesus' crucifixion lies not just in the salvific intention of God, but in the inevitability of the circumstances which faced Jesus in Jerusalem. Thus it makes no sense to posit the questions – what if the crucifixion had not occurred - where would that then leave Yoder's theology? Given the sinfulness of humanity, independent of the details of the contingent historical circumstances, the cross has a tragic inevitability,

### ***Conclusion***

Yoder's strength is realistically to situate Jesus within the politics of his day, and to argue for a dangerously subversive, but non-violent strategy. In Yoder's

account, he was seen as such a political threat to the Romans that he suffered the penalty for challenging the imperial order. Although close, in many ways, to the Zealots, he decisively rejected their violence. He set himself against the Sadducean and Herodian parties, who collaborated with Rome in order to preserve at least some of their power. He rejected strategies of political withdrawal, whether the monasticism of the Essenes or the personal piety of the Pharisees. The alternative was a strategy which, if not leading inevitably to the cross, at least seriously risked that outcome.

***b) The historical and political causation of the cross in Boff and Sobrino***

***Jesus' death as a consequence of his life***

As a liberation theologian, Boff is concerned to establish Jesus' political relevance. He recognises, however, that the political agenda he brings to the gospels is not directly found in the gospels themselves, the interest of the gospel writers being primarily theological, rather than political. The gospels do not set out to analyse in any great depth the political causation of events in Jesus' ministry - their interest is more in divine causation. Any 'political Jesus' has to be found, either indirectly in the oblique political implications of his actions (such as his healing, or breaking of the Sabbath rules), or by arguing that a more directly political Jesus lies concealed by the other interests of the evangelists. Boff argues that the almost exclusively theological reading of the passion, with its emphasis on God's role, causes the gospel writers to downplay the actual historical causes and the political factors involved. The Passion is historically inexplicable otherwise. Boff states:

This interest of ours does not militate against a religious, transcendent meaning of the passion and death of the Lord, but only seeks to supply the dimension constituted by the historical, political mediations - in fine, the underpinnings of that religious transcendent meaning. We must not forget that Jesus did not die in bed. He was sentenced to execution and violently eliminated. Human responsibility played a role. (Boff 1987: 7)

By sifting through the interplay of fact and interpretation, Boff believes that there is sufficiently reliable material available to reconstruct some of the political factors which led to Jesus' crucifixion: - first, Jesus' overturning of religious traditions and systems of power in the name of humanity and justice (emphasised by Boff with

regard to his own struggles with religious authority); second, Jesus' eschatology which, although not directly political, used potentially political categories (e.g. the kingdom of God) and which posited the coming of the kingdom as something which calls into question human structures of power; and third, the passion narrative, in which Jesus is seen directly challenging the powers of his time (e.g. in the cleansing of the temple).

For Sobrino also, the political nature of Jesus' ministry comes to a climax in his death. 'Jesus died as a political offender and died the type of death that only the political power, the Romans, could inflict.' (Sobrino 1994a: 206) This, in itself, does not prove the political nature of Jesus' ministry - theoretically, as we have seen in our discussion of Yoder, a historical reconstruction could be made whereby Jesus' death was due to the political authorities misinterpreting Jesus and ascribing to him non-existent political relevance – but Sobrino sets Jesus' trial and death in the overall context of a political, or quasi-political confrontation between two 'mediations', the kingdom of God and the Roman empire, played out in a 'total encounter' between Jesus and Pontius Pilate. 'If one asks how a religious man like Jesus could be so dangerous to an empire, and have so much political influence, the answer is that religion touches and moves the foundations of society in a radical way.' (Sobrino 1994a: 209) Jesus' death is the sharpest point of this confrontation which shaped his whole ministry.

Both Boff and Sobrino stress that Jesus' death must not to be seen in isolation from his life, either theologically or historically. A person's life gives meaning to their death, and vice versa. Hence Jesus' death does not stand on its own as a salvific entity. Historical causation, including the events preceding Jesus' death, is an essential component in constructing a theology of the cross. Boff implicitly criticises the tendency of the creeds, and certain soteriologies, to treat Jesus' life as relatively unimportant (other than the fact that he was 'incarnate') compared to his death and resurrection. Hence the title of chapter 2 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* – 'Jesus' death as consequence of a praxis and a message'. It is a deficient soteriology - and one which severely downplays the actual incarnation of Jesus as revelatory - to focus on the divine drama of the crucifixion but to ignore the human causation. Boff is concerned to root Jesus' death in the concrete political history of his time, and to resist a dehistoricisation which sees the cross solely in terms of an intra-trinitarian transaction. 'Jesus' death

can be understood only from a point of departure in his historical praxis, in his message, in the demands he makes, and the conflicts he arouses.’ (Boff 1987: 9) Boff goes on to describe Jesus’ ‘historical project’, beginning with the challenges Jesus faced – ‘a general regime of dependency’; ‘socio-economic oppression’; and ‘religious oppression’. Although Boff does not make the parallels explicit, the terms used to describe the situation of first century Palestine would seem to be intended to evoke his *sitz im leben* of Latin America and his own struggles with the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

### ***Jesus’ death as a political execution***

It is significant that Boff does not attempt to make Jesus an explicitly political figure, certainly not a zealot, or guerrilla, a temptation especially attractive to a theologian of liberation, writing, at least in part, for those involved in a struggle analogous to that of the zealots.

He [Jesus] does not come forward as a revolutionary committed to modify the prevailing power structure, like a Bar Kochba. Nor does he rise up as a preacher interested only in the conversion of consciences, like a St. John the Baptist. (Boff 1987: 14)

Jesus’ message is broader and, Boff argues, further reaching.

He proclaims an ultimate end, one that calls into question social, political, and religious interests.....He does not proclaim a particular, political, economic religious meaning - but an absolute, all-comprehending, all-transcending meaning... the ‘reign of God’. (Boff 1987: 14-5)

And not only does Jesus make the proclamation, which could be seen as merely one of a series of utopian proclamations - he actualises the kingdom, the reign of God, he lives it out, he anticipates the future. This is the focal point of Jesus’ ministry, and his death was caused by his faithfulness to proclaiming and living out that reign. Boff indicates various ‘redemptive, liberative’ aspects of that reign – a change from an oppressive religion of cults and sacrifices to one where the criteria of salvation are found in the love of neighbour; liberation from a society divided by wealth, class, race, disease and sex to a new solidarity; a respect for the freedom and rights of others, and an insistence on the need for justice, forgiveness and mercy; and a commitment to living life as a gift to others, as sacrifice on behalf of others. (Boff 1987: 16-21) These aspects of the reign of God are potentially

politically and religiously subversive, and, ultimately, caused Jesus to be crucified by those threatened by his praxis and message. Hence 'Jesus died for the reasons any prophet ever dies. He placed a higher value on the principles he preached than on his own life'. (Boff 1987: 22) He thus joins the 'thousands of others' who have made a similar commitment. We are surely meant to see in this a reference to contemporary political activity and suffering in Latin America, not only in the church with its preferential option for the poor, but also in those working from a Marxist commitment who 'have preached the betterment of this world and the creation of a human society more marked by a communion of brothers and sisters and by a greater openness to the Absolute'. (Boff 1987: 22) The terms Boff uses are familiar in contemporary struggles against oppressive regimes in Latin America. However, while using such language, which would suggest affinity with the zealots (or their forerunners), Boff's analysis of the political nature of Jesus' ministry avoids trapping him in a zealot framework, while giving him a both a genuine political relevance in first century Palestine and also a deeper, more lasting political relevance.

Sobrinó's analysis is very similar. Jesus' death is represented not in ahistorical isolation, but as an inevitable consequence of his life and ministry – inevitable in the eyes of those who see contemporaries murdered for pursuing similar ends.

Why Jesus was killed is very clear in the gospels. He was killed – like so many people before and after him – because of what he said and what he did. In a sense, there is nothing mysterious about Jesus' death, because it is a frequent occurrence. (Sobrinó 1994a: 209)

Similarly, 'Jesus' death was not a mistake. It was a consequence of his life and this in turn was the consequence of his particular incarnation – in an anti-kingdom which brings death – to defend its victims'. (Sobrinó 1994a: 210) This anti-kingdom presents itself in various facets of oppression of the powerless by the powerful, some religious and only implicitly political, others more obviously of a political nature. 'What needs no discussion is the fact that Jesus' preaching and activity represented a radical threat to the religious powers of his time, and indirectly to any oppressive power, and that power reacted.' (Sobrinó 1994a: 196) The crucifixion was the culmination of the persecution Jesus encountered throughout his life from the 'oppressors' because of his words and actions on behalf

of the 'oppressed'. 'The causes cited for the persecution are various...Nevertheless, at root they are no more than Jesus' condemnations of oppressive power.' (Sobrinho 1994a: 200)

What differentiates Jesus from a contemporary revolutionary, whether a Camillo Torres (a Christian revolutionary) or a Che Guevara (a Marxist revolutionary whose motivation was not explicitly Christian)? Much of what Boff and Sobrinho write about the self giving, freely chosen passion of Jesus and the defence of the 'oppressed' against 'oppressors' could just as well be applied to either of the above, and to many others less well known. Sobrinho draws close parallels between the death of Jesus and contemporary events in El Salvador.

Jesus was essentially a 'man in conflict' and because of this he was persecuted. The man in conflict got in the way, and, in the simple words of Archbishop Romero, 'Those who get in the way get killed'. Jesus, surrounded by conflict, got in the way, in the last resort because he got in the way of the other gods and got in their way in the name of God.

(Sobrinho 1994a: 196)

What difference, then, is there between Jesus' crucifixion and the judicial murder of thousands throughout history? Boff gives two answers – first, the resurrection, and second, Jesus' new experience of God as gracious Father. 'Jesus incarnated the Father's love and forgiveness. He was good and merciful with all, especially with those rejected by religion and society..... It was the concretization of the Father's love in real life.' (Boff 1987: 24) Boff seems at first to be treading a tightrope between holding to a Christology of uniqueness, and indicating the points of contact between Jesus and contemporary figures who strive for liberation. This is, however, a false dichotomy given the logic of Boff's argument. There is no reason why Jesus' crucifixion should be any different in nature or historical cause from any other judicial murder perpetrated by authorities who felt their power threatened. If it was different, it would lessen the self-identification of Jesus (and God) with those who suffer similarly today. The uniqueness of Jesus crucifixion lay in its theological meaning, in Jesus' role in God's plan to establish his kingdom – 'God's Son was required to remain faithful to the divine plan and to accept death as a consequence of his fidelity.' (Boff 1980: 88) There is a salvific purpose to Jesus' death which renders it unique – 'He took our sins upon himself, establishing solidarity with sinners, in order to free them from their wickedness.' (Boff 1980: 90) Boff seems to

be arguing that it is this salvific purpose and the fact that Jesus was 'God's Son', confirmed by the resurrection, that differentiates Jesus' death, theologically, from the other crucifixions - although, considered from the point of view of historic causation, no differentiation can (or should) be made.

In chapter 3 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, Boff investigates the Passion narratives, and attempts to reconstruct the events which led to the crucifixion. He begins with the Bultmannian warning that presuppositionless, neutral exegesis is not possible. Not only were the facts of the events leading up to the crucifixion interpreted in a certain way by the evangelists for the communities for which they were writing, but subsequent exegesis of those texts is conditioned by the situation, mind-set, and beliefs of the exegete. This is a commonplace in Biblical interpretation, but Boff emphasises it here to legitimise his re-interpretation of the Passion and to introduce interests different from those of the evangelists i.e. political, rather than solely theological. Boff represents Jesus as a prophet who makes the journey to Jerusalem as the place of crisis, where 'all the great historico-salvific decrees of the divine plan must be verified'. (Boff 1987: 30) He goes expecting the fate of the prophets, a violent death. The Last Supper is seen in terms of 'covenant and sacrificial self-surrender'. (Boff 1987: 35) The Gethsemane experience is interpreted as anguish through Jesus' awareness of the coming apocalyptic conflict. Jesus is tried on religious and political grounds, by the Sanhedrin, for blasphemy, and by Pilate as a 'guerrilla subversive'. Jesus' death was 'judicial murder' or 'religio-political murder via an abuse of justice'. (Boff 1987: 41)

It is interesting that, on Boff's account, the Jewish authorities and the Pharisees, rather than the Romans, appear to be the prime motivators of Jesus' crucifixion. Boff takes a view, which does not sit easily with modern Biblical scholarship, that the Romans needed to be pressured into crucifying Jesus.

The Pharisees loathe Jesus, for his liberal attitude toward the law and toward the God of their sacred traditions: Jesus has been perverting the people, they feel. Political, national and religious considerations, then, all conspire to call for the prophet's liquidation. The Jerusalemites, incited by their threatened, fearful leaders, exert pressure on Pilate, who, out of cowardice, and fear of loss of favour with Caesar, orders Jesus to be tortured to death.

(Boff 1987: 40-41)

On this account the Romans may not have felt Jesus to be so much a subversive threat as simply a victim whose sacrifice was worthwhile for the preserving of political order. This is bound to weaken the argument, adduced by Yoder, Sobrino (and Boff in other passages) that Jesus was crucified as a subversive of the Roman *imperium*. It is interesting, again, that Boff (along with Sobrino) takes a 'traditional' view of the trial and death of Jesus in not allowing himself the (tempting) path of portraying Jesus as a zealot, for which historical evidence is at best dubious. He insists, however, that political and quasi-political factors (i.e. structures of socio-religious power being threatened) played a significant role in Jesus' condemnation. What is undeniable is that Jesus suffered the death of those who were seen to be a threat to the established order - the *servile supplicium*, the punishment inflicted on those outside the prevailing power structures by those who wished to preserve those structures.

### ***Jesus' interpretation of his death***

Boff, in chapter 4 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, attempts to shed light on the question of the historical causation of the crucifixion by examining the question of the meaning Jesus himself ascribed to his death, one of the key questions at the juncture of history, Christology and soteriology. First, he asks the essential prior question - did Jesus anticipate his crucifixion?

In general terms Jesus, as a prophet, knew the fate that traditionally befell prophets, the execution of John the Baptist being a recent example, and Jesus would probably have been aware that he was challenging vested interests in a similarly dangerous manner. In that sense, Boff argues, Jesus would have been aware of the possibility of his death. But in other senses he was not. Boff discounts the various passion predictions as *vaticinia ex eventu*, or as more general statements. In fact, Boff suggests that an awareness of the inevitability of imminent death only came to Jesus on the cross, with the cry of dereliction. This suggestion short-circuits the question of Jesus' interpretation of his violent death. It would be unlikely, to say the least, for Jesus to attempt to interpret something that he did not (at least immediately) anticipate would happen to him. As to the question of what Jesus actually expected in Jerusalem, Boff suggests the following scenario: - Jesus, as an eschatological prophet, preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand and was, in fact, present in him and his ministry, expected his challenge to the theological and



sociological heart of his people to result in a time of apocalyptic trial, through which he (and the kingdom of God) would be vindicated. It was only on the cross that this expectation ceased - hence the terrible cry of dereliction - although Boff does not seem to be sure whether Jesus died with a shattering awareness of dereliction or in faith, freedom and trust in God. At one point he treats the Lucan and Johannine words from the cross as non-historical, post-resurrection additions - later, he appears to build from them a theology of Jesus' final trust in God. What Boff stresses is that Jesus' persistence in and loyalty to his preaching of the kingdom of God brought about his death. In that lies much of the political significance of his death, the kingdom being a challenge to the political powers, with a 'preferential love for the poor, the weak, the insignificant and the sinful'. (Boff 1987: 58) What differentiates Jesus from any secular prophet is his intimate relationship with God, and the divine, all-embracing, and eschatological nature of the 'reign' he proclaimed and lived. Boff returns to an earlier theme in stressing that Jesus' death is not to be seen in isolation from the rest of his life, since it is Jesus' whole life, and not just his death, which is redemptive.

To Jesus, death represented the apex of his pro-existence, his being-for-others. In complete dedication and freedom, Jesus lived his death as surrender to God and human beings, whom he loved to the end.

(Boff 1987: 63)

Faithfulness to God's cause, not a consciousness of any further redemptive meaning, lay at the heart of Jesus' self interpretation of his death.

This theme is echoed in Sobrino, whose interpretation of Jesus' death closely resembles that of Boff. Sobrino discounts any self-interpretation of his death by Jesus in terms of models such as expiation, sacrifice, or satisfaction:

There are no grounds for thinking that Jesus attributed an absolute transcendent meaning to his own death, as the New Testament did later. This does not mean, however, that Jesus did not look for a meaning for his own death, that he did not see it in continuity with and supporting his cause.

(Sobrino 1994a: 201)

Jesus saw, from the history of the prophetic protest and from the contemporary power structures which he faced, the likely consequences of his ministry. But his faithfulness was such that he persisted and, in his last actions in Jerusalem,

especially the ‘cleansing of the temple’ seems to have deliberately and consciously intensified his challenge.

Jesus, then, suffered persecution, knew why he was suffering it, and where it might lead him. This persecution, consciously accepted, is the measure of his faithfulness to God...That is what later allowed his death to be interpreted as freely accepted and therefore, as an expression of love. But it also shows that Jesus knew and accepted the battle of the gods, and the negative power of history, which puts prophets to death.

(Sobrino 1994a: 201)

Again, Sobrino stresses the conflictual nature of Jesus’ ministry and Jesus’ determination not to shrink from the conflict. This faithful service is sacrificial, and ends in the sacrifice of death – not a deliberate self immolation, but a willingness to risk the almost inevitable consequences, in order that good might come. This is the meaning of the Eucharistic  $\acute{\upsilon}\pi\epsilon\tau$  (on behalf of) words in the Last Supper – ‘His death will be something ‘good’ for others...for, on behalf of, and this produces positive fruits. It is an understanding of Jesus’ life as service, and in the end sacrificial service.’(Sobrino 1994a: 203) Jesus whole ministry was that of a ‘faithful and compassionate prophet to the end’. (Sobrino 1994a: 204). The ‘transcendent meaning’ of Jesus’ death is interpreted in terms not of a divine transaction, sealed by the blood of sacrifice, but of self-sacrificial and faithful service, which is not in itself unique but provides an example for others to follow.

### *Coherence with historical evidence*

How far does the interpretation in Boff and Sobrino of the ministry of Jesus agree with the historical evidence given by the gospels and interpreted by current Biblical scholarship? (Boff’s work here predates the ‘third quest’ of the historical Jesus.) It has been noted above that Boff does not fall into the trap of making Jesus a first century politician. But the question remains - were Jesus aims and programme, which led to his crucifixion, such as Boff represents? Or is he over selective in his interpretation of Jesus’ mission? The danger is that he may fall into the familiar snare of constructing a new Jesus in his own image – ‘Jesus Christ liberator’, in succession to the other images of Christ constructed by other writers of ‘lives of Jesus’. Schweitzer’s criticism (of the liberal ‘Lives of Jesus’ in the nineteenth century) potentially applies to all reconstructions of Jesus. In fact, just as

the Christology Boff presents appears to be remarkably orthodox and traditional in its essence, so is his handling of the historical evidence. He seems to take the traditional Synoptic account of Jesus' ministry and use it as it stands (for example, in the ascription of responsibility for the crucifixion primarily to the Jewish authorities) and, as noted above, he seems to take care to describe Jesus' ministry as implicitly, rather than explicitly political. His interpretation rests on the fact that Jesus could have posed a deeper political threat without being explicitly political in his programme, for example, in aiming to overthrow the Romans or to bring about an immediate transfer of political power from the Sadducees to other groups in society. The controlling theme in Jesus' teaching, as Boff consistently points out, is the kingdom of God, which combines a primarily theological meaning with enormous and far reaching political ramifications. The question of whether or not Boff's account of the reasons for the crucifixion are consonant with modern scholarship can be answered in the same way as previously in the case of Yoder, who to a great extent shares Boff's view of Jesus' ministry as having political relevance, but not readily or neatly fitting into the political categories of his day.

Sobrino emphasises the hermeneutically privileged status of liberation theology in assessing the events surrounding the crucifixion, in that the setting of liberation theology among the poor and oppressed mirrors the social class most at risk from crucifixion, the *servile supplicium*. He does not offer definitive answers to exegetical questions, but the *locus* from which he does his theology offers a sharply focussed perspective, especially on the cross. 'The point I do want to make is that the cross that dominates the Third World greatly illuminates the coherence with which the passion and death of Jesus – as a whole – are described.' (Sobrino 194:196) This is a two way process, as Sobrino recognizes:

The view of the victims helps us to read Christological texts and to know Jesus Christ better. Furthermore, this Jesus Christ, known in this way, helps us to understand the victims better and, above all, to work to defend them. (Sobrino 2001: 8)

This double hermeneutic does not in itself provide a sure proof for Sobrino's reconstruction of Jesus' ministry, especially its culmination in Jerusalem, but it is significant that one of the increasingly used tools in studying ancient history and archaeology is the application of sociological, anthropological, and economic models derived from investigations of contemporary societies. One of the three

criteria of historicity Sobrino describes as guiding Latin American liberation theology is ‘the consistency of Jesus’ death with what is narrated of his life’ (the others being the criterion of multiple attestation and the criterion of dissimilarity).

There [in Latin America] the deaths of hundreds and thousands of persons is analogous to Jesus’ death, and the causes of their death are historically similar to the causes of Jesus’ death. That Jesus must have lived and acted in the way he is reported to have lived and acted is not only plausible, it goes without saying. (Sobrino 1987: 74)

This last comment is no doubt an exaggeration, but Sobrino points to an *isomorfismo*, or similarity in shape, between the experience of the first followers of Jesus and present day Latin American Christians, which enables the latter to, as it were, read the gospels from the inside. The dangers of a circularity of argumentation are clear – it is quite possible that the Latin American (or any other) Christian can read his own situation into the gospels – but this approach, if used critically and in conjunction with other criteria, should not easily be dismissed.

### ***Crossing Lessing’s ditch***

As noted in the discussion of Yoder, any theologian seeking to build a Christology upon the actions and reactions of the historical Jesus has to cross Lessing’s ditch between the ‘accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason’. Sobrino attempts the crossing by universalising the suffering of Jesus by constantly juxtaposing it with the contemporary sufferings of the Latin American people. The idea of *isomorfismo* is crucial to this process, as is the constant pattern of power and oppression throughout history. In Sobrino’s words ‘Jesus’ death was not accidental, but the culmination of a necessary historical process.’ (Sobrino 1994a: 199) All the groups that persecuted Jesus ‘hold some type of power: economic, political, religious, ideological, as religious models, military and police.’ It is not necessary to hold to the totality of a Marxist doctrine of class struggle to see such power structures, with the concomitant relationships between oppressor and oppressed (varying in different historical manifestations) as a constant throughout human history.

c) **Conclusion**

A number of themes are shared between Yoder, Boff and Sobrino. The cross must not be isolated, either historically or theologically, from the life of Jesus as a whole. The political nature of Jesus' ministry is stressed. For Yoder, Jesus' ministry is unashamedly political, but with a different kind of politics, involving a non-violent refusal to take power. For Boff and Sobrino, Jesus' 'historic project', the kingdom of God, has strong political connotations, and Jesus' death is a political execution, caused by his faithfulness to that historic project. Boff and Sobrino, in their concern to defend liberation theology from the charge of reducing Christianity to politics are concerned not to overpoliticise Jesus in his historical ministry, but at the same time draw parallels between his faithfulness to his mission and the faithfulness expressed by those in Latin America who give their lives for a similar 'historic project'. Yoder is attempting to establish Jesus as a subversive political figure against a background in North American Christianity which sees him as a spiritual teacher and his death as part of an atonement conceived primarily in transactional terms. The theological, as well as the social, contexts, of these theologians are essential to their understanding.

All three theologians display a remarkably similar methodology in their handling of the historical evidence underlying their theology. Yoder adopts what has come to be called a canonical approach, using the Biblical text as it stands. He is not unaware of the possible historical reconstructions behind the text, but is content that those reconstructions do not seriously damage his overall picture of the political nature of Jesus' ministry. Similarly, Boff and Sobrino work with the text as it stands, and do not rely on a political reconstruction of Jesus' ministry which goes significantly beyond (or contradicts) the texts. All three theologians face similar problems in justifying their portrait of Jesus in the light of the 'third quest'. However, their reticence in ascribing an over-definite political status to Jesus gives them sufficient leeway for their representations of Jesus not to be overturned by recent research – with the exception of that research which might portray Jesus as a teacher of individual morality who was crucified by mistake.

**Summary - towards a political theology of the cross (i)**

In the last two chapters I have attempted to lay the foundations for the subsequent study of Yoder, Boff and Sobrino. Before moving on, I outline elements, chiefly methodological, arising from these chapters which I believe to be necessary for constructing a political theology of the cross.

***An ambivalence towards the cross***

In order to establish a genuine political theology of the cross it is necessary to recover the power of the cross to shock. The cross was regarded, understandably, with horror in the ancient world, and the loss of that sense of horror in the modern world diminishes its power in political theology. The cross, as used by the Romans, was a bloody and obscene act of savagery perpetrated by a cruel and arrogant (if often well meaning) people whose imperial agenda led them to stop at nothing to hold onto their power, and to keep in check those outside the imperial power structure who threatened their rule, through the deliberate infliction of the maximum degree of pain and humiliation. The cross, when seen from this perspective, should elicit similar shock and revulsion as Auschwitz or the lynch rope. To use the cross as an object of devotion is to enter into a dangerous area of cognitive dissonance, and to risk, at best, sentimentalising, or, at worst, making God complicit in such suffering. To use the cross as a badge of political success – *in hoc signo vinces* - is to indulge in a gross contradiction in terms. The cross must be seen as a protest against suffering, the ‘cross against the crosses’, a protest in which God participates no less than does crucified humanity.

***The importance of context***

It has become widely recognised that any theology inevitably reflects its context, consciously or unconsciously. This recognition is useful both in terms of overcoming the ‘blind spots’ occasioned by the theologian’s context and also in ensuring that the theology speaks in a useful and accurate way to its context. In particular, an awareness of context provides at least a partial safeguard against the Marxist critique of theology as an obfuscating ideology whose (unintentional) consequence is to mystify the human situation and hence serve the interests of the dominant class. The context of any political theology of the cross is the crucifixion of millions of people – in other words, systems of economic and political power

which, while perhaps bringing many benefits, have caused and continue to cause unnecessary and avoidable suffering on a huge scale. The context for a political theology of the cross in European Christianity is that of the church's increasing marginalisation and weakness. In many ways, as we shall see, this is not a wholly negative situation, for at the heart of a political theology of the cross is the realisation that political theology should be exercised not merely, or even chiefly from the perspective of the powerful, but from outside the gates of power, from among the vulnerable victims of the powerful and the recipients of the decisions of the powerful. In both of these contexts, a political theology of the cross cannot be dispassionate or disengaged, but must be a resource for liberative understanding and action as a result of the theological insights gained. Nor must a political theology of the cross begin from a neutral position, but from a prior, pre-theological commitment to love, compassion and justice, without which the cross is politically and theologically meaningless.

The relation between the contextual and the universal is one of interpenetration – on the one hand, a theology of the cross must be local and contextual, as, for example, it speaks to the immediate victims and those who seek to bring them help and justice. But those contextual insights must be universalizable, in that a political theology of the cross must speak not just to the immediate context, but to victims, perpetrators, and those who are passive participants in a crucifying economic and political order.

### ***The centrality of Christ in revelation***

If a political theology is to be Christian, it must begin with Jesus and explore his political and social exemplarity – in other words, the pattern of his interactions with the power structures of his time. In John's Gospel Jesus is described as the *logos*, the self communication of God, the consequence being that by studying his historical acts we gain insight into the eternal truth of God and of his present workings. The saving exemplarity of the incarnation is central to a political theology of the cross, the cross being the radicalization of incarnation – more incarnate than the crucified Christ God could not become. The cross, therefore, has a necessarily central function in theology as a whole and in political theology in particular. The Lutheran saying, 'every act of Christ is for our instruction' can be taken to extremes, but to ignore one of the most important trajectories within the

life of Jesus, the way in which he reacted to the power structures of his day and the way in which they reacted to him, would be to omit something of enormous significance for political theology. In this study I adopt what might be described as a Trinitarian Christocentrism – my Christocentrism is set in the context of the Trinity, but the other persons of Trinity cannot be in contradiction to the central exemplarity of Jesus and the cross. This centrality, or uniqueness, of Christ, is inclusive rather than exclusive. On the one hand, Christ is the unique self expression of God, and his death a definitive expression of God's salvific relationship with humankind. On the other hand, Christ's death is in solidarity with and in historical circumstances no different from the millions of crucifixions through the ages, thereby expressing God's co-suffering in all those crucifixions.

### *Christological and soteriological coherence*

The exemplarity of Jesus as outlined above gains fullest force when allied with a high Christology. If Jesus is not the definitive 'human face of God' his exemplarity is much reduced. The methodology most profitable for a political theology of the cross is, in simple terms, not to set out a 'new Christianity', but to draw out fresh implications from the orthodox, traditional teachings of the church and the Bible, in the same pattern as can be traced in other movements of renewal within the church – to draw on the old sources of Christian faith in the light of new contexts.

In systematic theology, at least since Barth, there has been a tendency to identify a unity between creation and atonement, incarnation and redemption, so that these are not seen as separate categories, but as intimately related. Similarly, political theology must not be seen as separate in any way from other doctrines, but as something intimately bound up with the rest. A political theology of the cross is hence most effective if it coheres with an overall theological pattern, especially in terms of soteriology. A cruciform political theology should not be tacked on as if it were a separate issue, or even as a deduction from a perceived 'central theme', but should be integral to soteriology as a whole. For example, a recognition that God's atoning act is non-violent and that any violence in the cross is human, not flowing from a divine 'necessity' for blood shed, will radically affect both soteriological and political doctrines. Similarly, if a dominant symbol in atonement is peacemaking and restored relationships through self sacrificial solidarity, then both doctrine and



politics will bear the stamp of that symbol. (See Jersak and Hardin 2007) Political categories should be incorporated as integral parts of an overall soteriology – for example, with regard to the relationship between corporate and individual sin and the role of the cross in the breaking of sin’s power over both individuals and structures. Moreover, it is important to recognize that soteriology depends not solely on the moment of Christ’s death, but on the factors which preceded and caused it – for example, for Jesus, his self chosen vulnerability, his resistance to the powerful, his refusal to use violence in response to evil and, for his crucifiers, their ruthless resistance to any threat to their power, their use of political and religious ideology to buttress that power, and their reliance on the power of the sword as the ultimate criterion. Without an investigation into such factors, sin and salvation become merely mechanical concepts untouched by human reality.

***Coherence with historical scholarship***

A political theology of the cross as suggested above depends radically upon the historical exemplarity of Jesus, and hence upon our knowledge of the nature of Jesus’ ministry as sufficiently established by historical scholarship. This, however, need not entail a very high level of detailed historical reconstruction of Jesus’ ministry. For example, it is certainly not necessary to argue, in favour of a political theology of the cross, that Jesus was a zealot sympathiser. It is not enough, however, to ignore the importance of a careful historical reconstruction of Jesus’ ministry, since there are certain reconstructions which militate against a political theology of the cross. The most damaging stumbling block would be to interpret Jesus as a Socratic individualist – in first century terms, a Cynic-type figure - whose political interest was only tangential. Rather, a political theology of the cross relies on Jesus’ choices and teaching being situated within, and not outside of politics, and adopting a politically relevant stance, albeit as a ‘third way’ beyond the established political categories.

Underlying the ‘shifting sands’ of historical research, though, is the fact that the historical incontestability of the crucifixion – even on a minimalist reading by the most radical critics - argues overwhelmingly for the political relevance of Jesus and therefore the possibility of a political theology of the cross. Within historical scholarship the cross is an almost universally agreed datum, but the historical causation of the crucifixion falls into three rough categories of interpretation, of

ascending political relevance. First, Jesus may have been crucified as a result of a mistake by the Jewish leadership and Pilate – he would still be an innocent victim of political power, but the political significance of the cross, on this interpretation, would be attenuated. Second, Jesus may have been crucified as a threat to the Jewish leadership, who co-opted the power of the Romans to have Jesus killed. This, the traditional explanation, points to Jesus being crucified as a threat to those holding religious and political power. Thirdly, Jesus may have been crucified as a threat to public order by the Romans, who regarded him as an outsider who threatened their rule and therefore qualified for the *servile supplicium*. All three options interpret Jesus as the victim of the powerful, although only the last two make this the result of his deliberate political choices.

In all three interpretations it is, moreover, essential to stress the relevance of class to an analysis of the historical circumstances of Jesus' death. Jesus was, of course, crucified on a Roman cross by Roman imperial power. But is it useful to note the degree of co-operation and pragmatic unity between Roman imperialism and local political and economic aristocracies (this practice, widespread throughout the empire, was mirrored in the British Empire by the policy of co-opting the local elites in maintaining imperial power). It is therefore not sufficient to state that Jesus was a victim of Roman imperialism – he was also a victim of those powerful classes (for example, those who benefited from the temple system, or those who gained economic benefit from association with the Romans, such as the Herodians) in his society who saw him as a 'political' threat to their order – and, unless those classes and authorities were peculiarly obtuse, Jesus must at least have seemed a sufficient threat to their order for them to have brought about his crucifixion. The hallmark of crucifixion was the reinforcement of the dominance of one class over another, the public confirmation of the status of the crucifier and the crucified. In the very public nature of crucifixion the status of the dominated and of the dominating class was explicitly confirmed in the eyes of any who may have wished to question or challenge that structure of power.

### ***Crossing Lessing's ditch***

One of the most serious charges against a political theology of the cross is that Jesus' actions which led up to his crucifixion were contingent, restricted to his immediate context, not necessary (even irrelevant) to soteriology and therefore not

binding in a revelatory sense for the construction of a political theology of the cross. There are two interrelated issues here – first, the argument used by traditional soteriology that the only aspect of the cross of any salvific importance was that Jesus was crucified by sinful humanity in a sinful rejection of God’s Son, and, second, Lessing’s famous ‘ditch’ between the contingent facts of history and the necessary truths of revelation.

I have argued above that a soteriology dependent on the moment of Jesus’ death is deficient, and restricts soteriology solely to an intra-trinitarian transaction potentially and dangerously disconnected from human reality. To cross Lessing’s ditch, it is important to recognise the continuing and unchanging patterns surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus which are evident in contemporary ‘crucifixions’. For example, the continuing existence of classes of dominated and dominating, of powerful and powerless, and the pattern of the cross-risking challenge to political power and the crucifying response of the powerful are the same in today’s world as in Jesus’ time. Similarly, a faithful and costly commitment to the kingdom of God and the values of justice, peace and reconciliation invite from those who hold a different ideology the same potentially lethal response today as in first century Palestine. There is a historical parallelism, or to use Sobrino’s term, an *isomorfismo*, which enables the contingencies of Jesus’ crucifixion to be transformed into the necessary truths of revelation. It is no shame to admit that Jesus was killed for the same historical reasons as a Camillo Torres or a peasant in El Salvador, since the fate of all three indicates a consistent and continuing pattern in human society.

**SECTION II – BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATIONS**

**1) A CRUCIFORM RESPONSE TO SUFFERING AND OPPRESSION**

Chapter 4

**The cross as a definitive source of Christian political ethics**

In the previous chapters I have attempted to lay the foundations for a study of the cross in the political theology of Yoder, Boff, and Sobrino. I now turn to the ways in which these theologians interpret the cross in constructing political theologies of use to the contemporary church.

In this chapter I examine the role of the cross as a definitive source for Christian political ethics, and identify what the cross and ‘cruciformity’ might mean as a controlling theme for the above theologians. What, for each of them, is the basic relationship between Jesus’ cross and their political theology? In brief, for Yoder, the whole shape of ‘Christian politics’ as vulnerable non-violence is defined by the historical exemplarity of the crucified Jesus. For Boff and Sobrino, the cross is, most of all, a protest against suffering – the ‘cross against the crosses’, based on a doctrine of the ‘crucified God’.

**a) Yoder – The cruciform Nature of Christian politics**

Given the narrative and occasional nature of Yoder’s writing, any schematization of Yoder’s theology, such as it attempted here, is likely to have blurred and rough edges. The themes by which the theology of Yoder is analysed are not in any way self contained or distinct, and should not be read as such.

***Cruciformity as normative***

For Yoder Christian social ethics are to be modelled on Jesus’ incarnational exemplarity. Since the cross is the radicalisation of the incarnation and the starkest and most critical point of Jesus’ interaction with the powerful and identification with the powerless of his society, the crucifixion is bound to have a strong normative function in any social ethic with a firm Christological base. Yoder’s achievement is to take this definitive cruciformity seriously – more seriously than many other Christian social ethicists - and to see where it leads. Yoder aims for a social ethic which is distinctively and authentically Christian, where the key aspects of the faith, Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom and especially his subsequent death

and resurrection, are given full weight. Jesus is not merely an ahistorical, if central, figure. Yoder attempts to construct a political theology out of the concrete politics of Jesus which led to his crucifixion. It could be argued that Yoder does not necessarily read the cross and resurrection correctly at all points with regard to social ethics, but I would not wish to fault his cross-centred methodology.

The defencelessness of Christ on the cross is the lens, according to Yoder, through which we are to read God's intentions for human politics. Indeed, Yoder seems at times to regard this function of the crucifixion as primary, constituting 'a new stance to be taken by repentant hearers in the midst of the world'. (Yoder 1994: 97) Hence Yoder interprets Jesus' rejection of Peter's efforts to defend him not in terms of 'some metaphysically motivated doctrine of the atonement – it was because God's will for God's man in this world is that he should renounce legitimate defence'. (Yoder 1994: 98) This emphasis has occasioned the charge against Yoder of dissolving the gospel into politics – an unfair criticism, since, as we have seen above, Yoder's doctrine of atonement, with its insistence on a non-coercive and non-violent Jesus, holds political categories firmly within the context of the soteriological. Politics and salvation are not identical, neither are they separate. God's eternal salvation is effected through an historical act (or series of actions) of Jesus which fall within the realm of the political. The movement within Yoder's theology can be stated as follows: Jesus is the revealer of God's will for humanity; Jesus, in a series of political actions, instigates a new non-violent and non-coercive way of living which challenges the powerful and leads inevitably to his crucifixion; the character of God himself is thus shown to be non-coercive and vulnerable; therefore those who believe in that God are called to follow Jesus, individually and corporately, in a way of life that witnesses to that divine character.

### ***Redefining the nature of 'Christian politics'***

The nature of the politics in which Christians are called to participate is radically changed by the political acts of Jesus and their consequence in the crucifixion – and yet Jesus' alternative to conventional politics is no less politically relevant. In fact, Jesus' alternative of 'rejecting the sword and at the same time condemning those who wielded it' (Yoder 1994: 106) is so radically politically relevant that his opponents, the Jewish and Roman political leaders, felt it necessary to kill him 'in the name of both of their forms of political responsibility.' Yoder

argues that 'Jesus' way is not less but more relevant to the question of how society moves than is the struggle for possession of the levers of command; to this Pilate and Caiaphas testify by their judgement on him.' (Yoder 1994: 106) Politics is radically redefined, but still remains politics. It is important to note that Yoder's Jesus does not withdraw from politics – rather he refuses to play by the usual rules, or to 'concede that those in power represent an ideal, a logically proper, or even an empirically acceptable definition of what it means to be political'. (Yoder 1994: 224) Politics, for Jesus, is redefined, and it is redefined for the Christian by Jesus' cross.

### *Some criticisms*

Before examining Yoder's political reading of the cross in more detail in the following chapters, some preliminary observations and criticisms may be made. First, Yoder's is an unambiguous ethic. Combining his logic of the radical exemplarity of the historical acts of Jesus with the starkness of the cross as the defining symbol of Christian politics it is almost inevitable that this should be so. Such a social ethic can be contrasted with Niebuhrian realism, which recognises the inevitable ambiguity of most situations. This contrast, which will occur repeatedly in this analysis of Yoder's social ethics, is between an ethic which idealises moral purity in the sense of consistency of witness and one which attempts to make the best of a situation where moral purity is not achievable. The Niebuhrian approach requires a degree of moral humility in decision making, and a willingness to risk a good for the sake of a possibly greater good. Yoder's ethic is one of obedience and certainty, but its humility lies in a different direction - in its trust that God will honour the obedience given by the church and by Christians. Niebuhr's ethic is one of getting one's hands (and possibly one's conscience) dirty. Yoder's is one of a refusal to compromise a conscience formed by obedience. Both attempt to be faithful to the incarnation. The Niebuhrian might argue that the incarnation indicates a risk-taking compromise with the realities of history. Yoder argues that the incarnation does not baptize or ratify human sin, but offers a different model of humanity.

Secondly, if Christ is the norm for social ethics, what kind of a norm does Yoder mean? Wright, a sympathetic critic, points out the difficulty in distinguishing 'between that in Christ which is absolutely, presumptively, or suggestively

binding'. (Wright 2000: 95) Jesus' words and actions were directed towards a specific situation. How far, and by what process of interpretation, should those words and actions be seen as normative for different situations? Wright suggests that Yoder's emphasis on redemption needs to be complemented by a fuller doctrine of creation, if the 'normative meaning of Jesus for necessary institutions' is to be made clear, and argues that 'There remains obscurity about Jesus' mode of relevance and the building of the hermeneutical bridge from his situation to our own.' (Wright 2000: 95) This is a significant criticism, partly answered by the fact that Yoder, with his emphasis on the eschatological nature of reality, does not differentiate sharply between redemption and creation, between ethics suitable for a 'crisis' and the necessary institutional embodiment of 'Christian politics'. Moreover, the process of 'interpretative transfer' from the first century to the twenty-first does not of itself necessitate any weakening in the radicality of Jesus' ethic. Yoder's logic is that the crucifixion is where the incarnation, definitive of Christian political action, receives its full value. In whatever particular circumstance that incarnation might have occurred, the crucifixion is a necessary, in the sense of inevitable, concomitant. Therefore the pattern of the cross is definitive for every area of Christian social ethics and normative for Christian action in all circumstances – not just for first century Palestine.

Does Yoder here arbitrarily overemphasize the cross? Again, we return to the necessity of the cross and its centrality to the incarnation. The cross is no chance concomitant, but the fullest and most inevitable expression of God's vulnerable incarnation. Yoder's methodology also argues against such an accusation. Yoder bases his doctrine of the centrality of the cross on the totality of the New Testament witness, involving both the gospel accounts, where the history of the cross (and the choices which led to it) is described and the Pauline corpus, where the impact of the cross on the social and personal practices of the early Christian community is explored theologically and ethically. This is far from plucking an aspect of Christ's ministry without due regard for its centrality and using it as an interpretative crux. The charge of arbitrariness in the selection of the cross as the defining centre for social ethics can be met by pointing to Yoder's care for the wholeness (at least as regards the New Testament) of the canonical context as evidenced by his seminal work, the *Politics of Jesus*, and his placing the cross within that whole context. This is especially powerful given that the gospel Yoder chooses to study, Luke, is not

one where the cross is most obviously the controlling feature, as it is more clearly in Mark. If his basic logic is followed, that Christian political ethics are, at root, an imitation of the pattern of Christ's political life and execution, Yoder is justified in regarding the cross as the definitive source of Christian imitation of Christ, and, therefore of Christian political ethics.

***b) Boff and Sobrino - the 'cross against the crosses' and the 'crucified God'***

***Boff - The cross as a protest against suffering***

For Boff and Sobrino, as for liberation theology in general, the cross is a symbol both of suffering and of protest against that suffering. Boff sees the crucifixion as an evil and criminal act, as something to be resisted in itself, and only to be 'accepted' as a means of diminishing present and future 'crucifixions'. He describes the cross, in chapter 10 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, as a symbol of hatred, imposed by the 'creators of crosses' (Boff 1987: 131) on those who seek to remove the world's crosses. But when the cross thus imposed is accepted (in other words, suffering is risked as a necessary consequence of the task of removing crosses) a power is released: 'To accept the cross is to be greater than the cross. To live thus is to be stronger than death.' (Boff 1987: 131) The cross is not to be interpreted as 'an exaltation of the negative', or 'dolorism' (Boff 1987: 132), but rather as the result of a positive commitment to following Jesus in making it 'gradually impossible for human beings to crucify other human beings'. (Boff 1987: 132)

Boff is greatly concerned to resist misuse of the cross, especially in Latin American Catholicism, in inculcating a fatalism, or even a glorification, of suffering as something willed by God as spiritually beneficial in itself. Following the Marxist critique, he argues that the cross has been used by the powerful to demonstrate 'the need for suffering and death as part and parcel of human life'. (Boff 1987: 2) The cross is reduced to an individualist, fatalist and pietist necessity: individualist, in that there is no social consequence to bearing the cross beyond simply remaining within the class or social position in which one is placed; fatalist, in that there is no need or point in struggling against the situation, which simply has to be borne resignedly; and pietist, in that God blesses such an action. Crosses must be carried 'with patience and submission; indeed, it is by the cross that we reach the light, and



repair the offense done to the infinite majesty of God by our sins and those of the world'. (Boff 1987: 2) *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* is, to a great extent, a polemic against such a theology, the propagation of which is in the interests of those who hold, and are unwilling to relinquish, political power. God, Boff argues throughout his work, does not have a preference for human suffering. His will is for human well-being, and his glory is expressed in and through human life and happiness. The cross should not be idolised as an end in itself or made an object of devotion for its own sake, as if there is something intrinsically good in suffering. Rather, it is an inevitable concomitant in the struggle for liberation and against suffering. In fact, the essence of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* could be summarised as 'the cross against the crosses'. The *telos* is not the cross but the resurrection, the two being in an inescapable dialectic. 'Christian existence preserves its Christian identity only to the extent that it lives and maintains itself in the paschal dialectic of crucifixion and resurrection as an exigency of the discipleship and following of Jesus Christ'. (Boff 1987: 3-4) This tension, between combating and taking up the cross, between the cross as a hostile as well as a helpful symbol, is no merely theoretical technicality, but is central to a focussed political spirituality.

### ***Boff - modern theologies of the cross examined***

With this anti-suffering criterion in mind, in chapters 8, 9, and 10 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, Boff spends much energy on reviewing contemporary interpretations of the cross. In chapter 8 he considers various theologies of the cross, using the criteria of how they relate to human suffering, how evil is interpreted and, more importantly, how it is overcome. It is worthwhile analysing this chapter in detail, as it provides a good insight into the criteria by which Boff judges theologies of the cross. Boff's overriding criterion is practical - a theology which legitimises evil, and provides no way of overcoming suffering or evil, is illegitimate. The task of the Christian is to overcome suffering, not to acquiesce in it or, even worse, to make it an integral and valued part of spirituality and theology.

He begins with Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (Moltmann 1974) which, following a Lutheran emphasis (although Moltmann is actually of the Reformed tradition) on the *theologia crucis*, puts the cross at the centre of the theological task

as the distinguishing mark of Christianity. According to Moltmann, in Boff's interpretation, it is not enough to say that Christ died as a martyred prophet. The radical nature of the cross lies in the fact that Jesus was rejected by God, in addition to his rejection by his political and religious opponents. This fundamentally changes our concept of God, who is revealed in impotence, rather than power, beyond all human images which are nullified by the cross. This would, no doubt, be at least partially acceptable to Boff. But Moltmann moves beyond this to stress the profoundly intra-trinitarian nature of the cross - God the Father is instrumental in crucifying the Son, and suffers the death of the Son, in the pain of love. Crucifixion, death, is actualised in God himself, and 'God assumes the passion of the world. Human suffering is no longer exterior to God. It transpires within God'. (Boff 1987: 105) Death is not thereby eternalised, made permanent, as a part of God - for God is himself in process through his suffering love, and assumes his full identity when evil and death are conquered and God will be all in all (an aspect of Moltmann's theology which Boff seems to downplay in subsequent criticisms). It is perhaps not difficult to see the problems Boff has with such a theology. The cross is seen (or can be portrayed as being seen) as part of the suprahistorical, intra-divine drama which may not only sideline the need for salvation to be worked out politically but also risks making suffering an integral part of the divine *modus operandi*. Although in the end, when God is all in all, evil is defeated, God is still responsible for imposing the death of his Son, as part of his plan of salvation. Again, this is a theme Boff is concerned to avoid, as a legitimisation of human suffering. According to Boff, the 'necessity' of Christ's death lies not in a divine plan, but in the inevitability of Jesus' suffering if he is to carry through his 'historical project'. It is not something directly willed by God. Boff's God is crucified, not in any sense a crucifier.

Boff's basic criticism of Moltmann is that although suffering is to be eventually overcome, it is somehow internalised within God to the potential detriment of humanity. This, however, would not be a valid criticism. To conceive of a divine internalisation of suffering is justified, if it is a way of sympathy and solidarity with human suffering in order to overcome it. The danger, of which Boff is very much aware, occurs when suffering itself is 'deified' or valued as something not wholly evil. This critique, while pointing up certain inconsistencies in Moltmann's theology, would seem, in practice, to be extreme and unfair. One of the

central aspects of Moltmann's *theologia crucis* is his insistence on the relevance of the crucified and risen Christ to political change and his sympathy with those who suffer, especially the disabled. Moltmann has himself protested against the caricature of his theology as represented by the phrase 'God the crucifier'. There is a wide difference between a sadistic deity who actively wills the crucifixion of his son, and Moltmann's suffering God who 'unwillingly wills' or painfully allows Jesus to be crucified for the sake of fulfilling his mission of solidarity and love. Boff and Moltmann are, in fact, much closer than Boff allows, and the differences are perhaps exaggerated through the wish of certain liberation theologians to distance themselves from European political theology.

Boff next turns to Hedinger's *Against God's reconciliation with misery: a critique of Christian theism and a-theism*. Hedinger's thesis, that 'suffering is not to be accepted, it is to be combated' (Boff 1987: 106) receives Boff's approval. Hedinger refuses to attribute evil to God, or to sublimate evil and suffering. God cannot be responsible for the death of Jesus, which was a crime of political murder. Jesus did not have to die on the cross in order to manifest the love of God his Father. 'His death is the fruit of a life of fidelity to his Father.' (Boff 1987: 106) It is clear that Boff finds Hedinger's theology much more acceptable than Moltmann's. Hedinger argues that only a God without love would reject his Son. The relationship of God with Christ on the cross is not a rejection of the Son but a suffering alongside him – in a key passage which sums up much of Boff's theology of the cross, he argues that:

We may say that God suffers with us, and suffers in Jesus Christ, that God is in solidarity with Jesus' suffering and ours, that God is suffering too, to deliver us from suffering, introducing the universe to a kind of love that willingly assumes suffering and death, not because it perceives some value in it, but in order to render it impossible from within. (Boff 1987: 106).

The spirituality of a glorification of suffering, inculcating a political passivity, is one of Boff's chief targets. Hence Boff concludes his survey with the contribution of liberation theology. He quotes Sobrino: 'The cross is the outcome of an incarnation situated in a world of sin that is revealed to be a power working against the God of Jesus.' (Boff 1987: 110) Boff continues, 'The cross is to be understood as God's solidarity with men and women in the condition of human suffering - not to eternalize it, but to suppress it... not by domination, but by love.'

(Boff 1987: 110) The only cross that can be projected within the being of God is the cross of love - not the cross of hate. Boff concludes, in a highly significant phrase, that the task of the Christian faith is 'to render the hatred that generates the cross ever more impossible, not through violence, which simply forces whatever it wishes, but through love and reconciliation'. (Boff 1987: 110) Here is a profound insight into the political role of the church. The cross is a symbol not of resignation, but of protest against the continuing infliction of crosses. Boff notes also that such a political theology of the cross necessitates belief in a God who suffers (quoting the famous phrase of Bonhoeffer, that 'only the suffering God can help' (Bonhoeffer 1953: 361)) - that almost seismic shift in much late twentieth century theology, among theologians whom Boff criticises as well as those whom he praises. However, it is not enough to speak in general terms of a suffering God, or suffering 'in God'. More accuracy is needed in the language used to describe such suffering. There is a danger that a theology of the cross can be construed as suggesting that 'God causes pain in the world, and not merely that God suffers in solidarity with the pain of the world, suffers the pain of the world because the world suffers'. (Boff 1987: 111) This is Boff's chief point of issue here with Moltmann, whom he accuses of 'a profound lack of theological rigour' in speaking of a God who 'is both object and subject of death, a God who dies and who causes death [in willing his Son's death]'. (Boff 1987: 111) Such a God will be the God of a 'deeply ambiguous, primitive theological discourse'. As we have noted, Boff's concern is above all to avoid any suggestion of a theology that legitimises suffering, which treats it as anything other than an evil to be combated. Boff (to my mind, most unjustly) accuses Moltmann of reducing the passion, ultimately, to a 'single basic causality: that of God the Father'. (Boff 1987: 113) This he sees as both undermining the historical causes of Jesus' death and also involving God in a 'dehumanising dynamism of suffering.....If he [Jesus] takes on suffering *for the sake of suffering*, because Suffering is God - because God, too, suffers: God is suffering-then there is no way to overcome suffering. Suffering is eternal'. (Boff 1987: 113) In opposition to this Boff proposes a simple theology of an almost apophatic silence after the enunciation of the faith statement 'Jesus is God'. The cross is the 'death of all systems'. Speculative theology gives way to an ethic of discipleship of this Jesus who is also God. How can we follow him so as to come ever nearer to him?' (Boff 1987:113) Faith seeks understanding not by speculation, but by discipleship; not by

‘theodicy’ but by ‘ethics’. This way is, in fact, more true to the being, purpose, and suffering of God. God suffers in solidarity with the suffering of his creation, but with the aim not of glorifying, but of abolishing suffering. ‘Of what use is suffering? To change and to transform the world? Then it has meaning.’ (Boff 1987: 114) The quest for a politically relevant meaning to suffering is at the heart of Boff’s theology, his task being to provide spiritual resources for those of his contemporaries who suffer for the sake of justice. The deification of suffering, a view of the cross which produces fatalism and political apathy, is, as noted above, his chief target, both in his criticisms of academic theologians and of grass-roots Catholic spirituality. As has been argued, Boff may be unfair in his criticism of Moltmann, but his general emphasis, ‘the cross against the crosses’ is fully justified.

***Sobrino - Jesus as the revealer of the crucified God***

In his first major theological work, *Christology at the Crossroads*, (Sobrino 1978) Sobrino sets out fourteen theses on the death of Jesus. Number thirteen expounds what is possibly Sobrino’s major contribution to liberation theology, the linkage between liberation and the ‘crucified God’ in a Latin American context. At this point his theology closely follows and parallels that of Moltmann in a slightly earlier, European context.

On the cross of Jesus Christ God himself is crucified. The Father suffers the death of the Son and takes upon himself all the pain and suffering of history. In this ultimate solidarity with humanity he reveals himself as the God of love, who opens up a hope and a future through the most negative side of history. Thus Christian existence is nothing else but a process of participating in this same process whereby God loves the world and hence in the very life of God. (Sobrino 1978: 224)

There are also notable parallels with Bonhoeffer’s idea of the Christian life as participating in the suffering of God vis-à-vis his creation.

Sobrino, in *Christology at the Crossroads*, describes various ways by which the radicality and the scandal of cross are avoided: by concentrating on the resurrection; by burying the cross under the categories of noetic and salvific mystery; by holding a conception of God which does not begin from the cross; and by restricting the cross to the context of sacrificial cultic worship. (Sobrino 1978: 185) However, far from being the unchanged and unchanging God of Greek

metaphysics, God suffers. And this suffering has a profound meaning for political theology, in pointing to a divine solidarity and a vulnerability which radically subverts a theology of power-as-force, of paternalism, or of withdrawal. In his last major Christological work, *Christ the liberator* (Sobrino 2001) Sobrino returns to the ‘audacity and honesty’ of the Fathers, who ‘upheld the divinity of Jesus Christ even without knowing where affirming the divinity of a crucified man was leading them’. (Sobrino 2001: 257) An Arian Christ cannot reveal a God whose being is expressed above all in solidarity, vulnerability, and in suffering alongside and on behalf of his creation.

Is, then, suffering intrinsic to God? How can Sobrino avoid the charge Boff lays against Moltmann, of deifying suffering? Sobrino avoids this pitfall by stressing that suffering is intrinsic to God *in his relationship to a suffering world*. Since God is love, suffering is an inevitable concomitant of God’s response to a sinful and crucifying world. The cross is the inevitable result, given human sin, of incarnation. Sobrino describes God’s choice to become consistently incarnate in history, with the result that God is radically affected by sin and death. The cross is not arbitrary, or a cruel punishment inflicted on Jesus for the sake of a substitutionary atonement, but is a ‘consequence of God’s original choice, incarnation, a radical drawing near for love and in love, wherever it leads, without escaping from history or manipulating it from outside’. (Sobrino 1994a: 244) Since a large part of the sin which crucified Jesus and which ‘crucifies’ contemporary sufferers is political in nature (in the sense of a misuse of power), this divine incarnation-suffering has profound political implications. First, those who claim to follow Jesus are obliged to undergo a similar cross-risking incarnation. Sobrino quotes Romero in describing ‘a church incarnate in the problems of the people’. (Sobrino 2001: 273) Second, the cross demonstrates the divine solidarity-in-suffering with the victims. Sobrino points out that ‘the phrase ‘crucified God’ is therefore no more than another term, provocative and shocking, with the same meaning as ‘God of solidarity’. But why does solidarity have to be shown through crucifixion? Sobrino argues that solidarity without participating in the struggles and sufferings of those with whom one is in solidarity would be at best paternalist, and at worst despotic. ‘Solidarity in a world of victims that was not prepared to become a victim would in the end not be solidarity.’ (Sobrino 1994a: 245) Suffering, therefore, is part of the divine, not intrinsically, but as a necessary consequence of

God's choice to become incarnate in a suffering world. This suffering does not have value in itself, but only in relation to God's love reaching out to the world.

A sub-text in much liberation theology (and in much political theology as a whole) is the debate over the relationship between divine action and passivity, and the consequent relationship between the political responsibility and non-responsibility of the church (this tension is a major theme in Yoder's theology). This paradoxical tension comes to the fore most starkly in the cross. Sobrino boldly grasps the fact that on the cross God does not actively intervene, but allows the tragedy of the crucifixion. He continues, 'The cross therefore raises the most serious problem, whether and how not acting, not speaking, how silence, withdrawal, inaction can reveal anything of God'. (Sobrino 1994a: 240) Moreover, this divine non-intervention is not confined to the cross of Jesus, but to the 'countless unjust deaths throughout history – which God did nothing to prevent'. (Sobrino 1994a: 240) This tension is the crux of any political theodicy, but it is a tension which can be resolved only by a mixture of contemplation of the suffering God and action to relieve the suffering human.

The scandal of God's silence in the crucifixion, along with the faith that God, despite the scandal, is still present, is at the heart of genuine contemplation of the mystery of God, which can be honoured not by remaining simply in contemplation but by carrying the cross and taking responsibility for the crucified. (Sobrino 1994a: 252)

This involves the Christian being open to the possibility of bearing suffering: 'The only thing the cross says is that God himself bears suffering and – for those who in faith accept his presence on Jesus' cross – that it has to be borne.' (Sobrino 1994a: 242)

This does not, however, mean that there should be any acceptance of suffering as anything other than an evil. Sobrino, like Boff, insists that suffering is never to be justified or thought of as something essential to the being of God, with the crucial exception of God in his relationship to a crucifying world. 'What God encourages is real incarnation in history, because only in this way will history be saved, *even though* this leads to the cross.' (Sobrino 1994a: 244) Much of the theological backdrop to Sobrino's (and Boff's) discussion is the trinitarian theology of Moltmann, which is interpreted as representing the Father being instrumental in the crucifixion of the Son, and thus being, ultimately, a crucifier, responsible for

suffering. God, according to Boff and Sobrino, does not eternalize suffering in God's trinitarian being and thus perpetuate it. Rather, God resists suffering, even at the risk, in Jesus, of sharing victimhood with the victims. There is a necessary subtlety in the language used here. God did not abandon Jesus, neither did he intervene to stop him in his quest for faithfulness to his mission. God's prior decision for incarnation made the divine sufferings inevitable. Does this mean that God is silent (and non-interventionist) over contemporary crosses? Stalsett (Stalsett 2003: 465) points to a dialectic in Sobrino's thought. God is absent, yet present, and his presence-in-absence makes possible his solidarity with contemporary crucifixions. In other words, God is present on the cross in the person of Jesus, yet God the Father does not intervene in the crucifixion of his Son but abandons him to the necessity of incarnation in a crucifying world. A similar idea of the presence and the hiddenness of God is found also in Sobrino's recent theodicy following the Indian Ocean Tsunami. 'God is hidden in the earthquake and suffers in silence with the victims. But hope does not die, and in hope God remains mysteriously present.' (Sobrino 2004: 137)

### ***The crucified God and political salvation***

'Only the suffering God can help'. (Bonhoeffer 1953: 361) Bonhoeffer's profound words pose more questions than answers. How can a crucified, and hence, to a large extent, powerless, God help? Love without power would seem to be ineffective, and power without love oppressive. Sobrino discusses this key question by describing the need of the poor for a rescuer from outside (alterity) and a rescuer from alongside (affinity).

The poor turn to God to save them with his power, and in that they see effective love. But they also turn to God when they find him close to their own suffering, and in that they see credible love. (Sobrino 2004: 145)

This combination of vulnerability and intervention on behalf of the poor is, for Sobrino, exemplified in Archbishop Romero's rejection of personal protection whilst denouncing the forces which eventually killed him. Sobrino makes the enigmatic statement 'It is necessary to fight resolutely against sin in order to eradicate it, but this fight means bearing sin...injustice cannot be eradicated unless it is borne'. (Sobrino 1994a: 245-6) What does this 'bearing of sin and injustice' mean? This will be discussed at greater length in relation to the crucified people.



Suffice it to say, here, that the fight against sin and injustice is not conducted, as it were, from a safe place, but in solidarity with the victims. The crucified Jesus demonstrates both alterity – a salvation from outside (an intervention) – and affinity – a salvation from alongside (a sharing of the suffering).

In bearing this suffering God says what side he is on, what struggles he is in solidarity with. God's silence on the cross can be interpreted, very paradoxically, as solidarity with Jesus and with the crucified of history....History's victims look for an effective love, but also welcome a credible love. (Sobrino 1994a: 246)

Sobrino adduces this combination of alterity and affinity not merely as a theological formula, but as a guide to Christian pastoral and political practice. 'Power intervention' from outside of the situation must be balanced by empathetic presence from within.

### ***c) Conclusion***

Yoder's greatest contribution is to take seriously the normative nature of the crucifixion for Christian political ethics. Despite criticisms over a possible over-isolating of the cross as a norm, I regard Yoder's overall methodology as very fruitful and necessary. If a model of revelation is accepted in which Jesus is normative (and that is the basic assumption which Yoder makes, in my opinion, correctly), it is arbitrary to exclude either one highly significant aspect of Jesus' life – the crucifixion and its political causes – or one area of ethics – the political. Yoder seeks to redefine politics in obedience to the social exemplarity of Jesus, brought to sharp focus in the crucifixion, and to encourage the church to trust that God will honour that obedience.

The focus of Boff and Sobrino is different. For them, the cross is ultimately a protest against suffering and a necessary symbol of a campaign against such suffering. Both, but especially Sobrino, base this upon the fruit of the great paradigm shift in twentieth century theology, the doctrine of a God who suffers in sympathy with the sufferings of humanity.

All three theologians find their focus primarily in response to the historical fact of the crucifixion but also in reaction to prevalent theologies and spiritualities; in the case of Yoder, the 'Christian realism' of Reinhold Niebuhr and in the case of Boff and Sobrino the politically conservative dolorism of the Latin American

church (and, to a lesser extent, a misunderstanding of Moltmann's theology of the cross). Their starting points are different in terms of the background of spirituality, geography and politics against which they write, but their basic theologies of the cross are not necessarily contradictory.

## Chapter 5

### **The cross and political discipleship**

For Yoder, Boff and Sobrino, the cross is intimately associated with the practical demands of discipleship. In this chapter I explore their theologies to examine how a political discipleship can be exercised in the light of the cross.

#### **a) Yoder – the cross and nonconforming political discipleship**

##### ***Discipleship as bearing the cross of nonconformity***

Yoder insists that, just as crucifixion in the time of Jesus was a political event, as a method of preserving the current system of power and acting as a visible deterrent to those who would challenge that power, so the cross which the Christian disciple was called to bear in New Testament times and is called to bear in the present has inescapable and radical political connotations. Any other usage of the cross is, in fact, inexplicable, given the widespread knowledge in the ancient world of the cross as the prime Roman method of dealing with a challenge to their political hegemony. Yoder is, first of all, insistent in declaring what ‘bearing the cross’ (Mark 8: 34) is not. Contrary to popular usage, where bearing one’s cross means putting up with chance suffering due to sickness or other misfortune, Yoder insists that the ‘believer’s cross must be like his Lord’s, the price of his social nonconformity’. (Yoder 1994: 96) Yoder differentiates carefully between this political interpretation of cross bearing and what he describes elsewhere as the cross in Protestant pastoral care. ‘It is not, like sickness or catastrophe, an inexplicable, unpredictable suffering; it is the end of a path freely chosen after counting the cost.’ (Yoder 1994: 129) Nor is bearing the cross something inward or private, in the form of individual spiritual turmoil. Rather, it is ‘the social reality of representing in an unwilling world the Order to come’. (Yoder 1994: 96) Cross-bearing is not something which simply happens to a Christian in the course of his or her *private* existence – it is the risk taken, the consequence incurred, by the *social* nonconformity inherent in following Jesus. Persecution and suffering for the Christian are inescapable consequences of ‘our social obedience to the Messianity of Jesus’, and will parallel his suffering: ‘His people will encounter in ways analogous to his own the hostility of the old order’. (Yoder 1994: 96) Yoder gives a solemn warning to the contemporary church - discipleship involves a challenge to

the established powers, and, just as that challenge brought Jesus to crucifixion, so the Christian risks its contemporary equivalent.

Yoder stresses this point, since so much of both Protestant and Catholic spirituality has privatised the bearing of the cross and hence seriously restricted its nature. He sums up the conflictual and freely chosen nature of cross bearing: ‘To accept the cross as his destiny, to move toward it and even to provoke it, when he could well have done otherwise, was Jesus’ constantly reiterated free choice.’ (Yoder 1994: 129) And that choice led to predictable results – ‘The cross of Calvary...was the political, legally-to-be expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society.’ As we have previously noted, suffering in itself is not a virtue in an ascetic sense. It only has value as the result of a nonconforming and non-violent witness. The cross which the disciple bears is, therefore, the (potential) price of the social and political nonconformity which the disciple freely undertakes as a matter of deliberate choice in imitation of Jesus who likewise chose the path of such nonconformity.

This theme runs throughout the *Politics of Jesus*, but is also stressed in other writings of Yoder. For example, in *Royal Priesthood* (Yoder 1998) in his discussion of the *Notae Missionis* of the church, Yoder writes, ‘The true missionary congregation is marked by suffering...not the result of misbehaviour but of conformity with the path of Christ...the meaningful assumption of the cost of nonconformed obedience.’ (Yoder 1998: 86) Similarly, in *For the Nations* (Yoder 1997), in his discussion of the cross-language of Martin Luther King, Yoder writes that cross-bearing is not about ‘psychic or moral weakness’ – rather, it has to do with an ethical and strategic choice, consciously chosen suffering in response to injustice: ‘It signals the conscious choice of a path of vulnerable faithfulness, despite the knowledge that it will be costly.’ (Yoder 1997: 145-6)

### ***Discipleship as an imitation of the crucified***

At the heart of Yoder’s reading of the cross in this way is his insistence on discipleship as an imitation of Christ in the (often political) circumstances facing the Christian: - ‘social obedience to the Messianity of Jesus’. (Yoder 1994: 96) Yoder’s ethic in general is that of imitating the character of God as revealed in Christ. He is, however, careful to make the proviso that this imitation of Jesus can only be justified, by scripture, at the sole and particular point of the cross. *Imitatio*

*Christi* as a general pastoral, moral, or formational ideal (as in Franciscan spirituality or Islamic imitation of even the personal habits of Muhammad) is not justified by any appeal to the New Testament. It is only at the specific point of the cross (and the cross interpreted as the price of social nonconformity) that imitation is not merely allowed, but demanded.

This argument is stressed in two striking passages in the *Politics of Jesus*, first in the chapter which sums up the midpoint of his argument (Trial Balance). Yoder discounts the 'Franciscan and romantic' idea of imitating Christ in every particular of his life. Rather, 'only at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – is Jesus our example: in his cross'. (Yoder 1994: 95) Second, at the end of his survey of discipleship-language in the New Testament, he argues, in a key passage:

There is no *general* concept of living like Jesus in the New Testament... There is but one realm in which the concept of imitation holds... This is at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross in its relation to enmity and power. Servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility. Thus – and only thus – are we bound by New Testament thought to 'be like Jesus.' (Yoder 1994: 130-1)

A criticism can perhaps be made at this point. Whilst Yoder's is a useful corrective to the (pastorally useful, but Biblically unjustifiable) usages of cross-bearing language in terms of coping with unfortunate chance circumstances, he can justly be charged with neglecting the personal and psychological use of the cross in the Pauline terminology of dying and rising with Christ. Paul seems to go beyond Yoder's interpretation of a political imitation to one which at least includes the 'inward experience of the self'. (Yoder 1994: 129) The cross as a political punishment for social nonconformity is, at least in part, used as a metaphor by Paul for an inward experience (which, of course, has social consequences). Yoder seems to posit an either/or rather than a both/and. The Pauline language of the cross, deriving as it did from the political event of the crucifixion, could well be used also in psychological or mystical terms.

### ***Martyrdom and 'revolutionary subordination'***

Two aspects of a cruciform political discipleship identified by Yoder are martyrdom and 'revolutionary subordination'. The idea of the church as the

community that witnesses through suffering will be discussed later, but here it may be sufficient to note the relevance of martyrdom for Yoder's doctrine of political discipleship. Yoder writes in *Royal Priesthood*, in the discussion mentioned above concerning the *Notae Missionis* of the church, that suffering, due to the obedient following of the nonconforming Christ, is an inescapable mark of the church, and the church's witness is born through the testimony of its innocent suffering. Nor is this merely a temporary phenomenon – it is 'according to both Scripture and experience the continuing destiny of any faithful Christian community'. (Yoder 1998: 86) The traditional link of witness with suffering, and the increased value suffering gives to that witness, is a major theme in Yoder's theology of the church's political interaction with society. The outright collision of the values of the world and the gospel resulting in martyrdom should not be shunned by a community defined by Messianic pacifism. Indeed, those who suffer publicly as a result of this collision should be regarded as truly representative of that community. Discipleship entails participation in a community whose non-violent social and political nonconformity risks suffering which witnesses both to the character of God and the community's faithfulness to Christ.

Thus far Yoder's reading of the cross and the place of suffering, although diverging from the traditional reading in ascribing greater political content to martyrdom, is relatively uncontroversial. His doctrine of 'revolutionary subordination' (chapter 9 of *Politics of Jesus*) has attracted more serious criticism, with good reason. Yoder seeks to answer the question of how far the cross-ethic of Jesus persists in the early church. He adduces the example of the *haustafeln*, the 'home and family ethics' in the Pauline epistles, which, he argues, can be traced to the teaching and example of Jesus, especially his cruciform non-resistance. In brief, his argument is as follows: Slaves, women, and other people in 'subordinate' roles have received the news of freedom and worth in Christ. How should they use this freedom? By living out voluntarily Christ's self-giving, exemplified by the cross. 'Subordination means the acceptance of an order, as it exists, but with the new meaning given to it by the fact that one's acceptance of it is willing and meaningfully motivated.' (Yoder 1994: 172) The weakness here is that while such subordination may conceivably be good for the soul of the individual (not a very Yoderian argument!) it is, in fact, a damaging collusion with an unjust social order; one is to realize one's freedom but immediately relinquish it by locating oneself

again in exactly the same subordinate position in that social order. If a social order is unjust, it is dangerous to collude with it for the sake of supposed spiritual benefits, whether on earth or in the hereafter – the precise charge of Marx in his ‘opiate’ accusation. It is difficult to see how there can be any motive for change, either from ‘below’ or from ‘above’, if the existing order is upheld as a legitimate and inviolate framework for the exercise of the Christian’s discipleship. Yoder argues that the *haustafeln* indicate a new and unprecedented reciprocity in social relationships, but still the underlying social structure is maintained. ‘Freedom can already be realized within his present status by voluntarily accepting subordination, in view of the relative unimportance of such social distinctions when seen in the light of the coming fulfilment of God’s purposes.’ (Yoder 1994: 182) Again, Yoder’s insistence on the ‘relative unimportance’ of the present corroborates Marx’s criticism. Yoder’s social ethics are radically eschatological, but it is highly dangerous to downplay the importance of the present in the light of a promised better future. Yoder denies that ‘subordination’ is simply a religiously sanctioned confirmation of the existing power structures of society. Rather, ‘The subordinate person becomes a free ethical agent when he voluntarily accedes to his subordination in the power of Christ instead of bowing to it fatalistically or resentfully’. (Yoder 1994:186) However, the hard fact is that the ‘free ethical agent’ is still a slave in that stratified society, with the stratification essentially unchallenged, and with all the injustices that entails both for himself and for others. Yoder is seeking to discover ‘...how in each role the servanthood of Christ, the voluntary subordination of one who knows that another regime is normative, could be made concrete’ (Yoder 1994: 187) but seems to omit the wider social significance of such subordination.

Perhaps this is an instance of a recurring weakness in Yoder’s thought, in isolating a theme drawn from the example of the crucified Christ (in this case submission / subordination) and overemphasizing it in contexts where such an overemphasis is potentially misleading or even destructive. Yoder, while drawing this theme from the example of Christ, crucified through a certain combination of political circumstances, does not explain why it is intrinsically good in circumstances which may differ radically. We see here the form of action drawn from the crucified Christ – submission and subordination – overriding other equally valid aims.

**b) Boff and Sobrino – cruciform spirituality and martyrdom**

***Boff - a cruciform spirituality for political discipleship***

In chapter 10 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, 'How to preach the cross of Jesus Christ today' (Boff 1987: 129ff) Boff sets out the practical conclusions of his study of the political relevance of the crucifixion. He begins his summary by pointing to the present meaning of discipleship in Latin America. Preaching the cross means commitment to the 'kingdom' values of love, peace, community, justice, and 'a world where openness and self-surrender to God will be less difficult' (Boff 1987: 130) and denouncing whatever opposes those values. 'The consequence of this engagement will be crisis, suffering, confrontation, and the cross.' (Boff 1987: 130) In other words, the Christian is to take up Jesus 'historic project', and to expect the same order of opposition, with the same potential result. This provides the self-declared subtext of Boff's work - providing theological and spiritual resources for those involved in creating a more just society and, especially in this work, attempting to find a meaning in the suffering incurred by such a task. Boff's aim is to provide help to those 'who in their pain, seek to confer a meaning on the painful passion of the world' and, by meditating on Christ's passion, enable them to find 'some unsuspected source of strength for resistance and resurrection'. (Boff 1987: xiii)

For example, in chapter 5 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* Boff offers encouragement to those whose self-surrender in the liberative political struggles of Latin America leads them to 'the abyss of humiliation'. A spirituality emphasising total commitment is common in liberation theology, with the ever present reminder of, on the one hand the risks of martyrdom from oppressive governments and, on the other, the example of Marxist inspired 'total commitment' among the guerrillas of the left. The Christian has the example of the total commitment of Jesus which led not merely to a dead end in the cross, but also to the resurrection. The Pauline theme of dying to self, a dying paralleled and exemplified by the crucified Christ, is translated into a spirituality of political discipleship.

Boff ends *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* (Chapter 11, 'Conclusion - the Cross: Mystery and Mysticism') with a short meditation on the dual nature of the cross. On the one hand, it is a symbol of 'the mystery of a human freedom in rebellion [against God]....a symbol of crime'. (Boff 1987: 134) On the other hand,



the cross is 'the symbol of the mystery of human freedom in its power. When borne by a commitment to overcome it, to make it gradually less viable in the world, the cross is a symbol of a new kind of life'. (Boff 1987: 134) When borne in this way, by one who 'by combating it becomes its victim' the cross can become a symbol of love. This paradoxical ambiguity of the cross has to be kept in tension, otherwise it loses its power as the *logos tou staurou*. This is, however, a 'logic assimilable only through praxis: by combating and taking up, accepting, the cross and death' (Boff 1987: 135), a praxis which reveals 'ultimate meaning and life'. Evil is overcome not by reflecting on it from a safe distance, but by resisting it in its historical reality, following the example of Jesus whose 'historic project' inevitably led to the cross.

***Boff - the power of martyrdom***

This leads to another prominent theme in Boff's theology and spirituality, that preaching the cross involves martyrdom 'for God and for God's cause in the world'. (Boff 1987: 130) This 'martyrdom for justice' opens up the future, in the sense of being a protest against the fatalism which can leave 'closed systems' as they are. Martyrdom has a subversive effect in questioning the persistence of 'how things are' and in drawing attention to the disordered, inverted values prevalent in an oppressive society. The cross radically questions the commonly held values of such a society as 'an ordering... of disorder'. (Boff 1987: 130) 'The martyr rips the mask from the face of the system' (Boff 1987: 130) by embodying, and being willing to suffer for, another order. Boff speaks of those who 'suffer without hating, who bear the cross without fleeing'. (Boff 1987: 131) This seemingly paradoxical willingness to bear the cross is a prophetic sign of a reversal of values.

The theme of the crucified people will be discussed in Chapter 8 with reference chiefly, to Sobrino. But Boff also stresses the continuity between the cross of Jesus and the 'crucified people' of today. 'Jesus' passion goes on in the passion of our suffering people.' (Boff 1980: 7)

Jesus continues to be crucified in all those who are crucified in history.....there are not enough Stations of the cross to depict all the ways in which the Lord continues to be persecuted, imprisoned, condemned to death, and crucified today in the ongoing passion of human life. (Boff 1980: 92-3)

The 'history of the crucifixion' did not end with the deposition of the body of Jesus - Boff sees it continuing in the present experience of those seeking liberation.

'Christ's passion is being completed by each succeeding generation and its martyrs.' (Boff 1980: 108) There is a definite identity, continuity and similarity:

Today the passion of the mystical Christ, embodied in the lives of those who are sacrificed for the cause of justice, preserves the same structure as the passion of the historical Jesus. Like Jesus, many people today are being persecuted and killed for defending the rights of the lowly and the just claims of the poor. (Boff 1980: ix)

Martyrdom, and the parallels, traditional in Christian spirituality and theology since the early days of the church, between those martyred and the crucified Jesus Christ, play a central role in Boff's theology of the cross and, indeed, in Latin American liberation theology as a whole, with Archbishop Romero the most famous, but by no means the only, example. In chapter 9 of *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, Boff adduces a practical example of 'suffering born of the struggle against suffering' in the *passio vitae* of Fr. Carlos Alberto, symbolising the priests of the Latin American church who take up the liberation struggle and suffer through their commitment, those who 'give their lives in defence of the sacred rights of others'. (Boff 1987: 120) As we have previously noted, Boff, in his examples, reveals the focus of his work. He is attempting to offer spiritual resources to those who take up the defence of the oppressed, rather than primarily to the oppressed themselves. Boff draws an explicit parallel with the *Acta Martyrum* of the early church, and the catalogue of martyrs in Hebrews 11. The martyrs of the Latin American church, who go back to the very early days of the Spanish and Portuguese conquest, are to be seen in precisely the same category as the more traditional martyrs of the church, in witnessing to the truth of the gospel through their suffering and, in many cases, death. The truth of the gospel, 'integral salvation', is indivisible and so, Boff implies, there can be no distinction between martyrdom for purely 'spiritual' reasons and martyrdom for political commitment impelled by the gospel (as exemplified in the debate in the post war German church over the nature of the martyrdoms of the 'political' Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the 'non-political' Paul Schneider (see Slane 2004 and Foster 1995)). Their martyrdom has a profoundly subversive effect, in leaving behind a memory which both disturbs and gives hope (as in the *memoria passionis* in the theology of Metz). Through their commitment to

the gospel and their resistance to oppression, suffering is given a meaning. They follow in the steps of Jesus himself, of the ‘Suffering servant’ of Isaiah, and of the prophets who suffered because of their message. Again, Boff emphasises that suffering is not to be sought in itself, but only as an inevitable concomitant of resistance to those structures of oppression which contradict the gospel. Such a resistance inevitably involves conflict and suffering, but that suffering is not meaningless or hopeless, because it is undertaken with a positive end in view. ‘Suffering is worthy of the human being when it is for the sake of a just cause.’ (Boff 1987: 122) And, for the Christian, there is the hope given by Christ’s resurrection in overcoming the historical manifestations of human sin which caused the crucifixion and which, through contemporary ‘structures of sin’ continues to crucify.

### ***Sobrino - a spirituality of martyrdom***

Sobrino’s theology took shape in a context of political violence in El Salvador, in particular the deaths of those murdered by right-wing ‘death squads’, especially Archbishop Romero, to whom Sobrino acted as theological consultant and, even more personally, the Jesuit colleagues of Sobrino who were killed together with their housekeeper and her daughter. These, whom Sobrino describes as martyrs, are only the most widely known of the thousands of Salvadoreans killed in the civil war, predominantly by the army and paramilitary forces. Any reading of Sobrino’s theology must take into account this involvement with the political struggle and its personal consequences for Sobrino, in the tragic loss of colleagues and friends. It is perhaps no surprise that a cruciform spirituality of martyrdom is so prominent in his writing. Sobrino describes this most comprehensively in *Witnesses to the kingdom: the Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Sobrino 2003). ‘Liberation and martyrdom are fundamental realities for liberation theology and they endow it with a specific direction and pathos.’ (Sobrino 2003: 101) The combination of the two, in the light of a suffering God and a crucified people, constitute, alongside his Christology, Sobrino’s chief contribution to liberation theology. Sobrino stresses the close interrelationship: ‘Liberation and martyrdom recover and maintain two essential and foundational realities of the New Testament, the kingdom of God and the cross of Jesus; the relationship between them strengthens them both.’ (Sobrino 2003: 107) Without a willingness to witness to it

through the possibility of suffering, the kingdom of God risks becoming a superficial concept, divorced from the reality of a suffering world. Jesus, in the great prophetic tradition, witnessed to and proclaimed, in words and deeds, the kingdom of God, persisting in proclaiming it even when this brought him to crucifixion. The existence of martyrs in the contemporary church is the closest possible link with the ministry of Jesus. From one angle it provides the greatest hermeneutical aid in understanding the reasons for the death of Jesus:

Any Salvadorean peasant, no matter how limited in social awareness and in the ability to read and write, knows perfectly well why they killed Jesus: they killed him for the same reason that they killed Archbishop Romero and many others. (Sobrino 2003: 109)

There is, as we have noted previously, a parallel historical causation, in that the powerful necessarily eliminate those who threaten their power. From another angle, the martyrs provide the most penetrating theological perspective in relating the ‘crucified people’ to the crucifixion of Jesus. There is a parallel theological meaning, in that God, in Christ, suffers within and alongside the powerless at the hands of the powerful. The stark and physical fact of martyrdom brings those historical and theological parallels into the sharpest focus. Sobrino writes of the martyrs being a sign of the times in a suffering world; they bring realities to our attention and ‘in them the presence and the plans of God are made manifest’. (Sobrino 2003: 126-7)

Sobrino, like Boff, continually shifts the concept of martyrdom into another (less traditional) key, by referring to ‘Jesuanic martyrs’ who ‘die in the same way Jesus died and for the same reasons’. (Sobrino 2003: 120) These martyrs are ‘those who follow Jesus in the things that matter, live in dedication to the cause of Jesus, and die for the same reason that Jesus died’. Their violent death is a ‘culmination of a praxis of defending and loving the poor and oppressed, as Jesus’ death was’. (Sobrino 2003: 122) *Odium fidei* is transposed to *odium iustitiae* (Sobrino 2003: 123 – also see Rahner’s defence of a wider concept of martyrdom discussed in Sobrino 1994a: 266). Jesuanic martyrs ‘express God’s will to accept the cross for the salvation of the poor’. (Sobrino 2003: 131) Here Sobrino decisively crosses the line dividing the ‘Paul Schneider religious martyr’ from ‘Bonhoeffer political martyr’, as in the post-war German debate. Sobrino takes up this debate in detail in *Jesus the liberator* (Sobrino 1994a) in an extended discussion of the dispute over

the status of the modern Latin American martyrs. He points to the anomaly that 'those who today are killed in a way that most resembles Jesus' death are not held to share in this supreme death because they do not fulfil the canonical and dogmatic conditions for martyrdom'. (Sobrino 1994a: 265) Sobrino asks if, on the traditional criteria, Jesus himself was a martyr, and concludes that he was a 'martyr for the kingdom of God'. (Sobrino 1994a: 268) This is a significant use, since the term 'kingdom of God' transcends matters solely of faith, and extends infinitely further. This extended idea of martyrdom, claims Sobrino, is 'death for the sake of love'. (Sobrino 1994a: 269) 'People are not assassinated for purely external confessions of faith, but they are being assassinated for witness to the faith operating through charity (justice).' The faith witnessed to in martyrdom is not a form of belief, but the social, ethical and political actions which flow from that belief, exemplified by the canonization of Maria Goretti (murdered in attempting to resist rape), whom Sobrino adduces as an example of witness borne through moral conduct being added to more traditional criteria for the status of martyr. (Sobrino 1994a: 266)

***Martyrdom, the crucified people and the church***

So far we have seen Sobrino extending the concept of martyrdom to the social witness borne explicitly by Christians as a result of their faith. Sobrino extends the concept still further by including what may be called 'implicit' or 'anonymous' martyrdom (in a way analogous to his fellow Jesuit Rahner's concept of 'anonymous Christian'). Sobrino seems to elide the term 'Jesuanic martyrs' with 'the crucified people'. It is possible, perhaps, to trace a hesitation in his thinking on this point. In *Jesus the Liberator* (Sobrino 1994a) he seems reluctant to ascribe the status of martyr to those who do not consciously and deliberately suffer as Christians for the sake of justice. (Sobrino 1994a: 269) What about those who are killed after having espoused violence? 'By laying down one's life for love... they can share in martyrdom by analogy.' What about those masses innocently and anonymously murdered? There is no word to describe them – they are not martyrs, because they do not give their lives freely, since the poor do not have that freedom. Rather, they illustrate innocence and vulnerability. 'Whether these are called martyrs or not these masses who are oppressed during their lives and die in massacres are the ones who illustrate best the vast suffering of the world.' Does the exact terminology matter? In his later work, Sobrino insists that such martyrs are,

anyway, ‘martyrs in the church, but not of the church. They are martyrs of humanity, of the poor’. (Sobrino 2003:109) The distinction is made less sharp by the fact that the vast majority of the poor in Latin America are in fact members of the church.

Sobrino, in his later work, makes three important observations on martyrdom ‘in defence of the poor’. (Sobrino 2003:109) First, there can be an analogous understanding of martyrdom – the active martyrs, struggling against oppression, and the anonymous martyrs, the immense majority of the poor. Second, there must be a re-evaluation of sainthood – the active martyrs are saints through showing great love. Third, Sobrino stresses the importance of anonymous and passive martyrs ‘who have neither the freedom nor the heroic virtues that would enable them to become martyrs or saints’. Martyrdom, then, is a concept primarily and explicitly for those who are consciously acting and dying in the cause of (if not for the sake of) Christ. These bear witness to God’s desire for justice. This concept, however, is extendable by analogy to others who are simply the victims of violence. These bear witness to the need for God’s justice.

Sobrino’s is, above all, a political spirituality of the cross. In *Christology at the Crossroads* (Sobrino 1978), where he is working out the implications of a theology of the cross, thesis nine states: ‘The cross is the outcome of Jesus’ historical path: hence Christian spirituality cannot be reduced to a *mystique* [my italics] of the cross. Christian spirituality must consist in following the path of Jesus.’ (Sobrino 1978: 215) The martyrs within the Latin American church are those who have followed that path as far as death. Sobrino, in his discussion of martyrdom, reminds his readers that ‘The cross is not just private suffering – the cross is the death that comes from defending the oppressed and struggling against the oppressor. The cross is suffering caused by that elemental struggle’. (Sobrino 2003: 146) The ‘martyr church’ in Latin America participates in that struggle, and in the same way in which the early church prized those who remained faithful in the face of persecution, it similarly prizes those who have remained faithful to the present calling to seek justice. Sobrino enumerates the benefits such martyrs bring to the church (Sobrino 2003: 134): the martyrs challenge the church not to fall back; the martyrs make the church an incarnate, real church – not docetic; the martyrs point to the salvation of the crucified people, not its own good, as the end of the church; the martyrs inspire the church to take up the cross of reality against the

‘anti-kingdom’ ; the martyrs inspire the church to live in freedom, joy and hope, as a resurrected church (as triumph over self-centredness, as triumph over sadness, hope against resignation). More specifically, he asks how his colleagues, the Jesuit martyrs, will live on. What benefits have they brought to Salvadoreans? These martyrs are:

Witnesses to the truth, so that they go on believing that truth is possible in their country....Witnesses to justice – structural justice, to put it coldly, or more expressively, love for the people....Witnesses to the God of life, so that Salvadoreans go on seeing God as their defender. (Sobrinio 2003: 95)

### **c) Conclusion**

Yoder, Boff and Sobrinio are deeply concerned to explore how the fact of Jesus’ cross affects contemporary discipleship. For all three, taking up the cross involves a radical and sacrificial commitment to living out the kingdom of God. Again, the differences in their interpretations of taking up the cross are in many cases due to background as much as to theology. For Yoder, in a North American context, taking up the cross denotes social nonconformity; for Boff and Sobrinio taking up the cross can mean, literally, death. To take up the cross means to share the sufferings of Christ, whose social nonconformity cost him his life. For all three theologians, the cross is not to be sought in itself, but is the price of faithful and obedient praxis. Above all, taking up the cross is not merely a private, inward movement. Rather, it is public and political, hence the emphasis on martyrdom and witness. Where Yoder and (particularly) Sobrinio differ significantly is in the identity of those who bear the cross. Sobrinio extends the martyrdom of cross-bearing beyond the boundaries of church and explicit belief; for Yoder, witness is the task of the committed and faithful church. This difference is one which will be further explored in Chapters 7 and 8.

## Chapter 6

### **The cross and a response to violence**

For Yoder, the cross is a mark of social nonconformity, as the faithful Christian finds the values of the gospel running counter to the accepted values of the world. For Boff and Sobrino, the cross, in the form of persecution and death, is the risk run by those who protest against an unjust social order. All three theologians are therefore faced with the possibility of conflict. How should that conflict be handled? How should the Christian respond to those who wage that conflict violently? How does the cross inform such a response? These questions are the subject of this chapter.

#### **a) Yoder - The Cross and Non-Violence**

##### ***Christological pacifism***

The most significant contribution of Yoder to Christian social ethics has been to reinvigorate the pacifist tradition by providing a firm Christological foundation. Yoder sums up his central thesis in the *Politics of Jesus* as the pre-eminence in the New Testament of ‘a social style characterized by the creation of a new community and the rejection of violence of any kind’. This is firmly based on the cross, which is the ‘model of Christian social efficacy, the power of God for those who believe. *Vicit agnus noster; eum sequamur*’. (Yoder 1994: 242) The message Yoder draws most of all from the crucifixion is a total rejection of violence and an absolute refusal to countenance its use. As exemplified by the ‘agony in the garden’, faced with the possibility of armed insurrection and the eschatological temptation of apocalyptic war with the support of ‘legions of angels’, Jesus deliberately chose the way of absolute, non-negotiable non-violence and allowed himself to be crucified – or, more strictly, took the path whose inevitable end was crucifixion.

Yoder locates Jesus’ way of the cross against the background of political choices before him. He rejected the short cut of violence, the ‘zealot option’ of revolutionary armed struggle, even if that violence was to be exercised in what seemed an overwhelmingly righteous cause. Two other alternatives are also discounted: social and political withdrawal into a privatised spirituality (e.g. the ‘monasticism’ of the Essenes or the ‘pietism’ of the Pharisees) or an alliance with



the Sadducean establishment ‘in the exercise of conservative social responsibility’. (Yoder 1994: 97) Yoder is here referring obliquely to current political options for Christians: the violence in a righteous cause espoused, to a degree, by liberation theologians; the privatised spirituality of much evangelicalism and traditional Catholicism; and the Constantinian alliance with the political establishment on the Christendom model. Yoder sums up Jesus’ threefold rejection, which is to be paralleled by contemporary Christians, of ‘quietism ... establishment responsibility, and the difficult, constantly reopened, genuinely attractive option of the crusade’. (Yoder 1994: 97) Against the liberation theologians (or, more accurately at the time of writing of the first edition of *Politics of Jesus*, the theologies of revolution popular in ecumenical circles) Yoder sets Jesus’ rejection of ‘the temptation to exercise social responsibility, in the interest of justified revolution, through the use of available violent methods’. (Yoder 1994: 96)

As we have seen, Jesus as interpreted by Yoder is in many ways close to the zealots (or their forerunners). There is a significant overlap in social stance on behalf of the poor, creation of a tight-knit community of committed disciples, and even in the language used. Where Jesus and the zealots differed was in the justification of violence in a seemingly righteous cause. For Jesus, in Yoder’s interpretation, the zealot option was not radical enough, since ultimately it rested on the same foundation as that of their opponents: the violence symbolized by the sword, the sacrifice of human lives to political ideology, the continuation of structures of oppressive power rather than divinely ordained suffering service. This interpretation closely echoes criticisms of liberation theology for not being thorough enough in its critique of the nature of power.

Yoder’s pacifism, in line with his overall Christocentric method, is radically Christological. In his survey of ‘varieties of religious pacifism’, *Nevertheless* (Yoder 1971) he is careful to differentiate this Christological pacifism from other forms of pacifism – that, for example of ‘utopian purism, the virtuous minority, the categorical imperative, absolute conscience’ etc. Christological, or messianic pacifism, is the heart of Yoder’s social ethic. It relies for its justification not on a broader ethical basis (for example, consequentialism) but solely on the person of Jesus and the pattern of his political engagement, which inevitably led to the cross. Hauerwas correctly describes Yoder’s pacifism as a ‘correlate of his Christology’. (Hauerwas 1973: 252) It rests not on isolated individual teachings of Jesus (the

traditional criticism of both Anabaptist social ethics and much liberal pacifism) but on the historical actions of Jesus focussed on the cross, where Jesus' non-retaliatory self-giving comes to its sharpest focus. Since Yoder's Christology is a 'high' Christology, whereby Jesus definitively reveals the divine purposes, 'messianic pacifism' indicates, through the exemplarity of Jesus, the will of God for the pattern of human political action.

This pacifism could additionally be entitled 'pacifism of community witness to the non-violent Messiah'. Such a pacifism, although potentially attractive in some ways to the non-Christian, makes sense primarily as an outworking of the Christian profession of the lordship of Jesus, and can be properly exercised by those who voluntarily acknowledge that lordship. The validation of such pacifism is not by its immediate results, but by its faithfulness to the controlling pattern of Jesus' non-violence as demonstrated by the cross. This cruciform pacifism is in sharp contrast to any pacifism of immediate ends, or 'calculating pacifism'. Yoder insists that non-violence is an absolute, not a mere tactic. Jesus' crucifixion is grossly misunderstood 'if we think of the cross as a peculiarly efficacious technique (probably effective only in certain circumstances) for getting one's own way'. (Yoder 1994: 237) The accent is not on any calculation of effectiveness, but on an obedience which reflects the character of God. Suffering is not a tactical tool, but a sign of faithfulness to that divine character. Yoder continues, 'The kind of faithfulness that is willing to accept evident defeat rather than complicity with evil is, by virtue of its *conformity with what happens to God when he works among us*, aligned with the ultimate triumph of the Lamb.' (Yoder 1994: 237) The italicized clause is key to Yoder's understanding of pacifism as a cruciform imitation of the crucified God.

### ***Some questions***

Yoder argues that Jesus' 'third way' led inexorably to the cross. Is this a legitimate argument from the historical evidence? Did the choice of this particular strategy, of non-violent challenge, necessarily lead to crucifixion? Or, conversely, could Jesus have been crucified through following other political choices? The first is readily answered. The Romans were inordinately suspicious of any possible challenge to their hegemony (for example, Trajan's letter to Pliny, the Governor of Bithynia, about the possible dangers of people combining even to form a fire

brigade! [Letters, Book 10]) If, as Yoder claims, Jesus' gospel and practice involved a challenge, albeit non-violent, to the power structures of his time, he risked the accusation of subversion and therefore a subversive's death, crucifixion. The second question is not so easily answered. The mere fact that Jesus died on a cross does not necessarily indicate his preceding strategy. As we have seen, Jesus could, perhaps, have advocated a spirituality of withdrawal, and been grievously and fatally misunderstood. He could have attempted some symbolic act intended to precipitate an apocalyptic conflict, and been labelled a subversive in consequence. He could, although the evidence is very much against this, have been an early first century 'zealot', with the inevitable crucifixion if apprehended. The cross of itself does not necessarily identify Jesus with any one strategy (apart, perhaps, from ruling out Sadducean collaborationism). It has to be seen in conjunction with Jesus' general teaching and actions. This Yoder attempts to do, to set the crucifixion in the context of Jesus' ministry whose credible, and inevitable, outcome is crucifixion. It is one of the triumphs of *Politics of Jesus* that Yoder reconstructs, from the survey of a whole gospel (and particularly key episodes such as the temptations and the cleansing of the temple), a credible account of Jesus' ministry which led inevitably to his death as a subversive who adopted a radically different method of non-violent politics.

### ***Some criticisms***

Apart from the above historical question and criticisms of pacifism in general, two specific criticisms can be made of the methodology of Yoder's messianic pacifism. The first is that Christianity is somehow dissolved into pacifism, and Christian politics made co-terminous with pacifism. However, any reading of Yoder's work would indicate that there is much more to Christianity than pacifism. Yoder certainly sets pacifism firmly within the context of Christianity, and his Christological pacifism makes sense only on the basis of a strong Christology. But that does not mean that Christianity and pacifism are identical or co-terminous. It is true to assert that the pacifist, non-violent and non-coercive social ethic taught by Yoder rests upon a doctrine of God as peacemaking, non-violent, and non-coercive, which colours Yoder's whole theology. From that perspective, non-coercive pacifism and the overall action of God in Christ can be seen to mesh closely. This, however, should not be seen as a fault, but as a strength.

If this objection can thus be overcome theoretically, it is perhaps not so easily overcome in practice. The distinctiveness of Yoder's theology, and of the Mennonite community as a whole, rests largely (although not exclusively) on its pacifism, and in practice, pacifism could be seen (unfairly) to be the focus of their faith rather than, as Yoder would assert, Christ.

A second criticism is perhaps more serious. Mott (quoted in Wright 2000: 92) argues that Jesus' cross does not represent one definitive social-political-ethical option which is binding on subsequent Christian action. The cross is unique, and therefore Jesus' actions which led to the cross are not normative for all time. 'His powerlessness was a matter of timing rather than of ethical choice, not a principle of non-violence but the unique enactment of sacrifice.' In other words, the crucifixion was a one-off event for a particular salvific purpose, and cannot be used as a pattern for Christian politics. What the Niebuhrian realist supports and the Yoderian pacifist refuses, armed defence on behalf of one's neighbour, was not, suggests Mott, within the possible options presented to Jesus, and therefore his actions (and his crucifixion) cannot be a guide to Christian conduct in this area of social ethics. This argument can be answered on a number of levels. If the cross is primarily salvific, it is necessary (if God's consistency is to be maintained) to assume that the mode of salvation and the method by which it is attained is consonant with both divine character and also the more general divine intentions for humanity. Yoder has demonstrated that non-violent non-resistance, exemplified in the crucifixion, is integral to the character of God and is not merely an arbitrary addition. Jesus' non-resistance on the cross and God's non-coerciveness are one, and are therefore normative for the Christian. The atonement, although unique, should not be seen in isolation from (or indeed in contradiction to) other aspects of discipleship; salvation and sharing practically in the non-violent nature of God mesh closely. Finally, Jesus was faced with a genuine political choice. He could well have taken the zealot option, of violence in a righteous cause, taking up arms to defend one's neighbour against a tyrannical aggressor. That option was open to him, but was refused, not just in the events which immediately preceded the cross but throughout his whole ministry.

*Excursus – British liberal pacifism of the 1930's*

It is, perhaps, instructive and illustrative of Yoder's method to compare his Christological and cruciform pacifism with the British liberal pacifism of the 1930s, the particular period of English history when pacifism was a widely adopted political and religious option (the more restricted nuclear pacifism of the 1950s and 1980s is perhaps of a different order). How does its use of the cross differ from Yoder's? This is an especially relevant question for a time when the cross was used in popular culture as a symbol of military self-sacrifice.

The 1930's were the high water mark of traditional liberal theology in Britain. Although a Barthian theology of crisis was promulgated by theologians such as Hoskyns, it had not penetrated far into the general ecclesiastical consciousness. The leading pacifist theologian was Charles Raven, a vehement opponent of Barthianism, who combined an optimistic evolutionary liberalism with a Christocentric emphasis which saw the centre of Christianity as a personal relationship between Christ and the individual. Raven, like Yoder, insisted on the exemplarity of the crucified Christ. Wilkinson comments: 'Raven defines pacifism as the new way of defeating evil opened up by Christ on the cross.' (Wilkinson 1986:108) He saw the cross as the supreme example of pacifist non-resistance, and regarded martyrdom as the Christian's ultimate obligation. Where he differed most markedly from the later Yoderian ethic was in his political optimism, shared by many at the time, that pacifism had the spiritual force to defeat the Nazi and Fascist dictators. This reflected the liberal evolutionary progressivism, which somehow survived the First World War, but not the Second. Yoder's hope is more humanly pessimistic and starkly eschatological, without necessarily abandoning the (admittedly not sufficiently worked out) theme that 'God will fight for us' (chapter 4 in *Politics of Jesus*). Also, Raven's pacifism was, despite his membership of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, primarily an act of individual discipleship. Yoder's stress is much more on the corporate nature of the pacifist witness, the pacifism of the Messianic community. The great populariser of pacifism in inter-war Britain was Dick Sheppard, whose catchphrase was 'Not peace at any price, but love at all costs.' It is difficult to see Yoder disagreeing with this. Paradoxically, the 'theology of crisis' used the cross as an argument against pacifism. The proto-Barthian P.T. Forsyth wrote in *The Christian Ethic of War* (Forsyth 1916: 39) of liberal pacifism, 'It is the climax of a genial and gentle religion with the nerve of the cross cut.' The

cross stands for a realism about sin which was absent from liberal optimism. One of Yoder's greatest contributions to Christian social ethics was that he rescued pacifism from such liberal optimism, and constructed a pacifism which rests precisely and definitively upon the foundation of the cross.

Wilkinson (Wilkinson 1986: 125) identifies five characteristics of British pacifism of the inter-war period which it is useful to compare with the pacifism of Yoder. First, it rested on an optimism about human nature, a legacy of nineteenth century liberalism (with the cross being a more general symbol of tragedy) which both Yoder and Niebuhr criticize for its weak and unrealistic view of human sinfulness. Second, British pacifism was largely an act of individual dissent, rather than an expression of corporate witness. Britain has never had a consistent 'peace church' tradition. Nonconformity, despite its opposition to the Boer War and its campaign of passive resistance to the Education Act of 1902, joined vigorously in the jingoism of 1914. Even among the Society of Friends a third of male adherents enlisted in the First World War (Wilkinson 1986: 53). For Yoder, pacifism is not merely a personal, but a corporate witness, exercised not just by individuals who bear the cross, but by a cruciform church. The pacifism of individual witness was granted legitimacy by such as Niebuhr and Temple, but the pacifism of a defined and disciplined church (i.e. a Yoderian church) was certainly not. Third, there was no agreed political programme or set of objectives. Yoder deliberately eschews such thinking, but in the 1930's there was much confusion about what practical steps a pacifist could take. Fourth, there was much discussion about the spiritual power of non-violence, especially influenced by Gandhi's campaigns. For Yoder, although he recognizes the spiritual strength of pacifism, Messianic pacifism should not be turned into a technique for political achievement. Fifthly, pacifism and appeasement largely overlapped, and the difference between the more pragmatic 'pacifiers' and the more dogmatic 'pacifists' was blurred. Yoder's pacifism can hardly be described as pragmatic.

### ***The cross and non-resistance***

The cross is a sign of non-violence, but Yoder goes a step further in treating it as a sign of non-resistance. Whether Jesus actively offered himself as a willing sacrifice, or whether the cross was the unsought, but inevitable consequence of his strategy, the Jesus of Yoder (and of the gospels) does not resist his assailants.

Therefore, according to Yoder, the Christian and the church must espouse a similar non-resistance. It is, however, not always clear what this non-resistance entails. The traditional Mennonite insistence on non-participation in political life and their rejection of even non-violent resistance is certainly bypassed by Yoder, as shown by his admiration for Martin Luther King and Gandhi in their active opposition to evil. Also, acts of Jesus such as the cleansing of the temple can hardly be described as passive. However, as will be noted, Yoder distances himself from the Gandhian use of non-violence as a political tactic. This ambivalence is shown in Zimbelman's survey of the 'axioms of love [which, according to Yoder] constrain and shape Christian motives and actions'. (Zimbelman 1992: 389) These, Zimbelman suggests, include a commitment 'to undertake one's actions with the motives and intentions that conform to the mind of Christ; not to retaliate in kind.' Thus far Yoder would be within the mainstream, Gandhian, pacifist tradition. Zimbelman, however, goes on to include commitments which are certainly not in the Gandhian tradition: 'to avoid resistant action if it involves a Christian in a power struggle; and to avoid resistance of any kind if it jeopardizes the existence or proper functioning of duly appointed political authorities'. While holding to a certain degree of non-resistance, Yoder seems to be situated between an absolutist (traditional) Mennonite stance of non-resistance and a more Gandhian position.

Another example of this attitude can be found in chapter 10 of *Politics of Jesus* 'Let every soul be subject', where Yoder discusses the Christian's relationship to the state in the light of Romans 13. Yoder opposes the Calvinist doctrine of the legitimacy of rebellion against an unjust state, but does not ratify such a state. Relationships with the state are another area in which 'subjection' should be exercised. 'The call is to a non-resistant attitude towards a tyrannical government.' (Yoder 1994: 202) However, Yoder qualifies 'non-resistance' in a footnote, as not meaning 'compliance or acquiescence in evil, but ...the suffering renunciation of retaliation in kind. It does not exclude other kinds of opposition to evil.' Such 'other kinds of opposition to evil' would presumably mean some form of non-violent civil disobedience, the setting up of alternative networks of 'doing politics' etc. The Christian is simultaneously to 'rebel against all and be subordinate to all; for subordination is itself the Christian form of rebellion. In this way we share in God's patience with a system we basically reject.' (Yoder 1994: 200) For reasons discussed above, it is difficult to accept Yoder's view of subordination as

‘the Christian form of rebellion’. However, his basic point is clear; the Christian is in an ambivalent (or perhaps dialectical) relationship with the state, being ‘subject’ and yet creating cruciform (and therefore non-violent and non-resistant) alternative ways of ‘doing politics’.

***The cross and non-coercion***

Yoder’s doctrine of the cross entails, first, non-violence and a certain form of non-resistance. In this he has much in common with a strong minority stream in Christian ethical thought. But he goes far beyond this in his insistence that the non-violent and non-resistant cross entails also non-coercion. Yoder here reads the cross in the light of his Mennonite allegiance (Anabaptism was in the forefront of the struggle within Christendom against coercion in religion). His championing of political non-coercion is consonant with his overall theology; we have seen how non-coercion is at the heart of his theology of the atonement, and later we will examine how non-coercion is traced by Yoder from the character and shape of a non-coercive providence. The problem arises when Yoder seems to make the assumption that coercion is impossible without violence, or at least the threat of violence. He perhaps neglects the fact that, for example, governmental coercion is maintained usually through non-violent means (through consent and custom, backed up by police and fiscal powers) and that there is an important distinction between violence and force (a distinction which Yoder himself later recognized (see Zimbelman 1992: 388)).

Non-coercion entails a radically different form of Christian responsibility. Yoder’s central and repeated claim is that it is not the responsibility of the church or the individual Christian to ‘move history in the right direction’ through coercive means. Even pacifism is not a technique, as such, to coerce others. This is not the task given by God to the church, which must see its role in different terms. It is necessary to note that Yoder’s position has subtly changed in emphasis over time. Zimbelman describes how in his later works (after 1974) Yoder often uses the phrase ‘non-violent resistance’ rather than ‘non-resistance’ This usage reflects ‘Yoder’s changing appreciation of the ways in which the Christian might expansively express a life of redemptive engagement and witness’. (Zimbelman 1992: 388) This is a real shift in Yoder’s thinking, in acknowledging that a certain amount of non-violent coercion is indeed an option for the Christian. Yoder makes



the all-important distinction between violent force and a coercion which is not necessarily violent. Zimbelman comments that 'rather than define force and coercion as simply the tools of individuals and states functioning in the Constantinian ethos, the terms are now used by Yoder to describe morally neutral classes of action', force being defined as 'application of power' and coercion as 'force which opposes the intentional volition of another person'. This has significant implications for the life of the Christian community, since a recognition of the necessary coercive role of government opens up opportunities for Christian political involvement which would previously have been considered impossible.

### ***Excursus – Yoder and Gandhian peacemaking***

In an earlier excursus Yoder's cruciform pacifism was compared with British liberal pacifism in the 1930's. Another form of pacifism, or near pacifism, which became a political option at this time was that of Gandhi (later adapted by Martin Luther King (see Bishop 1981)). Gandhian peacemaking, despite significant differences, shares much with a Yoderian approach. The word Gandhi invented to describe his political campaigns was *satyagraha*, literally meaning 'holding on to truth', or 'truth force', encompassing *ahimsa* - non-violence (or more strictly, non-harm), *sat* (truthfulness) and a self-sacrificial commitment to social change.

It would be foolish to deny the significant differences between Gandhi's *satyagraha* and Yoder's cruciform and Christological pacifism. Most importantly, *satyagraha* does not denote an absolutist pacifism. Gandhi actively recruited for the British army in the First World War and continued to regard violence as an option in extreme circumstances. *Satyagraha*, for Gandhi, was a technique conditioned by and fitted to circumstances, and was intended to have a direct political effectiveness, in contrast to Yoder's rejection of the criterion of effectiveness. Yoder's pacifism rests on an orthodox reading of Christology and of Christian doctrine and an attempt to be faithful to and controlled by Biblical revelation. Gandhi's *satyagraha* is pragmatically eclectic in the extreme. *Satyagraha*, in Gandhi's thought, is associated with strict asceticism. This aspect of spirituality is absent from Yoder's pacifism. Finally, Yoder's political theology has its focus in the church, an ideologically defined community with strong shared beliefs, rather than primarily in society as a whole. Gandhi's *satyagraha* was intended to be much more of a mass movement.

Given these large and significant differences it is tempting to conclude that there is little in common between the two approaches. There are, however, striking similarities both in form and content, to which Yoder himself occasionally alludes. The practical parallels between Yoder's non-violence and Gandhi's *ahimsa* (refusal to harm) are plain, even if their theological source is different. The use of the Gandhian practice of *ahimsa* by Martin Luther King demonstrates the practical similarities and transferability between Gandhi's work and a Christian pacifism. Such practice, moreover, in both Gandhian and Yoderian thought, is not merely the passive non-resistance of the weak, but the confident and creative non-violence of the spiritually strong. For both Gandhi and Yoder non-violence involves the voluntary acceptance of suffering, and hence demands a courageous and trained discipleship, adopting communal spiritual disciplines. Being a member of the church, for Yoder, involves a spiritual discipline analogous to that of the *satyagrahi*. The Gandhian ideal of renunciation can be paralleled by a Christian kenotic, self denying, discipleship. In both Gandhi and Yoder there is a refusal to separate ends from means, and an insistence on the corrupting nature of attaining 'good' ends by evil means. Gandhi's emphasis on *nishkama karma*, or disinterested service, doing the right thing because of its intrinsic value, without regard for consequences, has direct parallels in Yoder's dismissal of a consequentialist defence of Christian pacifism. One difference of approach lies in the seeking and use of political power. Gandhi was a skilled and experienced politician who unashamedly sought and used political power to bring about large scale social change. Yoder's views changed from a deep suspicion of power and an emphasis on servanthood to a more nuanced view of power, if exercised as servanthood, praising the work of Gandhi and King as examples of the potential for a minority ethic to accomplish political change. Finally the word, *satyagraha*, which Gandhi uses to describe his peacemaking, associates 'force' or 'power' with truth. Yoder's pacifism is based on the revealed truth of the nature of God, and of the necessity for Christians to base their actions on the closest possible approximation to that nature as revealed in Jesus and not to deviate from the uncompromising truth of the gospel. There is an openness and directness about Yoder's ethic which parallels Gandhi's adherence to 'truth-force'.

Whilst the prime Christian influence on Gandhi's *satyagraha* was the teaching of Jesus, the cross certainly played an important part – his favourite

Christian hymn was ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’, and the only icon he allowed in his ashram was that of the crucified Jesus. Whereas the chief meaning of the cross for Gandhi seems to have been a symbol of personal self renunciation, without the explicit connotations of political nonconformity ascribed to it by Yoder, the cross also had an implicit meaning as demonstrating the redemptive and transformative power of suffering love, which would certainly not be alien to a Yoderian interpretation.

***b) Boff and Sobrino – a cruciform response to oppression***

***Boff – violence and the cross***

In his emphasis on Jesus’ commitment, courage, and self-surrender which culminated in the cross, Boff has in mind the similar qualities required of those struggling with poverty and oppression in Latin America. But Jesus’ death is more than an example of courage in the face of a cruel death; Boff touches tangentially (although, as noted below, he does not develop the theme) on Jesus’ death as a model for Christian resistance to evil. In this section we explore elements from Boff’s writing which indicate a cross-informed non-violent and non-retaliatory approach to resistance. Such elements in Boff’s writings go some way towards countering the accusation that liberation theology operates with the same categories of power, violence, and retaliation as its opponents.

For example, Boff writes of Jesus that ‘His reaction did not fall within his enemies’ scheme of things. A victim of oppression and violence, he nevertheless did not use violence and oppression to force himself on others.’ He continues: ‘Though Son of God he made no use of the divine power that can change all situations.’ (Boff 1987: 64) Here Boff touches on a very fertile theme indeed - that of the relationship between the divine refusal (or redefinition) of power as expressed in the death of Christ and ‘power as domination’. The power of domination is ‘the diabolical side of power, this is the power that generates oppression and obstacles to communion.’ Rather, the true power of God is love, ‘a love that liberates, establishes human beings in solidarity with one another, and opens them to the laborious process of liberation’. (Boff 1987: 64) This liberating love is described in terms strikingly similar to those of Yoder; it excludes ‘all violence and oppression, *even for the sake of imposing itself* [my italics]’. The

effectiveness of love is in a different category to the effectiveness of violence, since violence brings about a change, but at the cost of human lives, and ‘fails to free itself from the spirit of oppression’. The effectiveness of love is more long term and enduring: ‘The courage to sacrifice one’s very life for love, and the certitude that the future belongs to right, justice, love and a communion of sisters and brothers, and not to oppression, revenge, and injustice.’ (Boff 1987: 64-5) It is interesting that Boff begins this theme which is more fully taken up by theologians such as Yoder and Hauerwas, but does not follow up its implications – a regrettable omission, since it has great relevance to the debate in liberation theology over the ethics of revolutionary violence and the nature of political power. Later, Boff writes of the revelation of God’s power and salvation in weakness and powerlessness. In such vulnerability ‘is manifested the might of love itself, the power to conquer hearts, the strength to initiate a genuine salvific revolution’. (Boff 1987: 82) Again, the power/weakness motif is touched upon, but not fully developed.

We have noted Boff’s purpose of providing a spirituality for those engaged in the struggle for justice. But, no less significantly, he gives a pointer to the practical conduct of that struggle. The Christian is not merely committed to the struggle, but to a particular way of conducting that struggle. Boff writes of the efficacy of the ‘just in apparent defeat’, and contrasts this with the illusory effectiveness of violence, which ultimately fails because it locks the participants into the spiral of violence. By contrast:

The effectiveness of suffering in consequence of a just cause is less visible, but is genuine. It demonstrates that what is in store for human beings, what is desirable for human beings, is on the side of right, justice, love and communion, and not on the side of greed violence and the will to power.’  
(Boff 1987: 125)

Here again are resonances of a Christian pacifist theology of suffering and the cross, as found in theologians such as Yoder and others in the Mennonite tradition. That this theology is not more fully developed is probably due to Boff’s sense of solidarity with those who feel compelled to adopt (defensive) violence in response to the violence of the state. However, it is significant to discover in Boff’s political theology seeds similar to those which in Yoder grow into a fully fledged pacifist ethic.

*Sobrino – the question of violence*

One of the major elements in Sobrino's political Christology is that of the victimhood of Jesus, and the fact that any victory of Jesus is that of the 'victorious victim', from a position of affinity rather than alterity. This radically affects both the nature of the victory and the methods by which the victory is won. Sobrino is fully aware of the debate over the use of violence in resisting oppression, and over the possible overlap between Jesus and the violent 'freedom fighters' of his day, the zealots. For the Latin American church, the dilemma over the use of violence to resist evil is an ongoing ethical, theological, and pastoral problem. Sobrino adduces as an example Bishop Casaldaliga, who 'would rather give his life than take someone else's' but teaches 'that he has no right to forbid anyone to take up arms to defend the victims of horrible abominations and to try to change the centuries old structures that make these possible'. (Sobrino 1994a: 216)

Sobrino argues (Sobrino 1994a: 214) that there is no recorded attack by Jesus on the zealots, and that Jesus shared certain zealot attitudes. However, Jesus' followers included a publican collaborator, and the Sermon on the Mount in many places runs directly counter to zealot violence. Jesus himself was certainly not a zealot, even though he 'could be presented with some plausibility as close to those who sought the end of Roman domination by force of arms'. (Sobrino 1994a: 215) Rather, Jesus' attitude to power is more nuanced. Sobrino's recognition of this goes some way, as we have seen in our discussion of Boff, towards countering the attack on liberation theology for advocating a doctrine of power not significantly different from that of the 'oppressors'. Sobrino suggests that the kingdom of God does not consist in an apolitical stance or 'pure pacifism – understood as an absence of struggle' (a rather weak and unsatisfactory definition of pacifism, by either Gandhian or Yoderian standards), but is rather to be 'expressed and established by the best of human values: by the power of truth, justice and love. It was to be established – and this is the greatest difference from all other groups – by grace.' (Sobrino 1994a: 215)

It is perhaps worth noting that Sobrino, like Boff, does not link this view of power and violence explicitly to the cross. For Yoder, the definitiveness of the crucified Jesus refusing a violent response necessitates a rigorous and uncompromising pacifism. Sobrino is more doubtful as to how definitive a stance on violence can be ascribed to the words or actions of Jesus. Three examples may

suffice: ‘We cannot know for certain what Jesus would say today about violence...I do not think that we can deduce from his life and his words what he would say about the legitimacy of an armed insurrectionary struggle... violence is so complex that there does not seem to be a single response that is adequate and embraces the innumerable problems it poses, even in terms of the gospel of Jesus.’ (Sobrino 1994a: 216) ‘These facts [i.e. the historical evidence of the gospels] do not allow us to produce anything like a doctrine of Jesus on violence as a way of transforming society today, and the expectation of the imminent coming of the Kingdom would make it anachronistic.’ (Sobrino 1994a: 215) Sobrino does, however, set down four principles: first, the necessity of unmasking structural injustice as institutionalized violence; second, the fact that violence, even if legitimate, is potentially dehumanizing; third, that Jesus offers as an alternative to violence the utopia of peace as a goal to aim for and as a means to achieve it, through what Sobrino describes as ‘Utopian gestures’ i.e. vulnerability and forgiveness, which break the spiral of violence; fourth, that all violence needs redemption. (Sobrino 1994a: 215ff)

Is the cross, then, a form of ‘utopian gesture’? It is here, perhaps, that Sobrino comes closest to Yoder in ascribing to the cross a power to overcome violence itself. In a meditation on the fact that violence always needs redemption, Sobrino writes:

...in Christian terms, all redemption has a specific structure with an element that is necessary, though by no means sufficient: bearing the evil from which we have to be redeemed. This means fighting against the roots of violence, *but also bearing it* [my italics]. As historical violence comes from injustice, we have to bear the injustice, which means taking the side of the victims of injustice and its violence, the poor majority, and bearing their fate: violence cannot be redeemed unless it is borne in some way. (Sobrino 1994a: 216)

Here, in embryo, is a more Yoderian theology of the cross, where suffering the consequences of violence is a way (although Yoder would say ‘the’ way) of overcoming that violence.

Sobrino ends his excursus on ‘Jesus and Violence’ in *Jesus the Liberator* by quoting words of his colleague and mentor Ellacuria on the violent situation of El Salvador (Sobrino 1994a: 218). It is worth examining this passage in detail, as it

provides another useful answer to those who accuse liberation theology of a too ready advocacy of violence. The Christian faith regards violence as ‘intrinsically related to evil’. It is inevitable, even for a Christian, to ‘accept certain forms of violence...whenever it is non-terrorist liberating violence, related especially to liberation from the death which strikes the poor majority of the Third world.’ Violence in response to an overwhelming structural violence is not, therefore ruled out. Ellacuria, however, makes the striking statement: ‘It would seem from a more Christian point of view, that of the perfection of the discipleship of the historical Jesus, that Christians who are doubly Christian in their lives and actions, should not use violence.’ Using language which resonates (unconsciously) with that of Yoder, ‘Christians as such do not normally give their specific witness through violence...it is a matter of giving the fullest and most comprehensive witness that life is above death and love is above hate.’ This, however, will only be effective if Christians, in the Yoderian sense, take up the cross. ‘This attitude would be acceptable and effective if Christians were willing to risk even martyrdom in defence of the poorest and in the fight against the oppressors with the witness of their word and life.’ A refusal to use violence is justified if Christians are willing to sacrifice themselves in (peaceful) defence of those at risk. ‘The Christian vocation calls for the use of peaceful means, which does not mean less effort, to solve the problems of injustice and violence in the world, rather than violent means, however much these may sometimes be justified.’ Jesus’ eschewing of violence even in a righteous cause is at the heart of Yoder’s theology, and it is significant that Ellacuria (quoted with approval by Sobrino) uses a similar argument.

### **c) Conclusion**

Yoder’s vision of a Christological pacifism is firmly based on a theological foundation where non-violence is integral to the being and actions of God, and, therefore, obligatory for his people. It does not stand as an adjunct to Yoder’s theology – it forms the basis for that theology. Where Boff and Sobrino lean towards non-violence, it appears to be much less soundly based on a coherent theological framework, especially with regard to the cross. Differences in ecclesiastical background should not be underestimated. Yoder writes from a tradition of uncompromising pacifism, which he integrates into a coherent theological framework. Boff and Sobrino write from a tradition where pacifism is

exceptionally rare, and the just war theory dominant, and both would gain from a more systematic approach to the non-violence which Yoder sees inherent in the cross. However, faced with the structural violence of Latin America and the 'crosses' which that violence inflicts, Boff and Sobrino appear to believe that a certain degree of violence is justified if the crucified are to be 'taken down from their crosses'. The option of using violence is limited by the demands of the gospel, but both Boff and Sobrino are aware of the dangers of a doctrine of passive suffering which totally rules out active (and sometimes, as a last resort, violent) resistance. Such a doctrine would risk inculcating a fatalism which inevitably plays into the hands of the powerful. Both Boff and Sobrino could perhaps gain from Yoder's interpretation of a cruciform pacifism which is soundly based upon Christology, exercised by community, and motivated by the divine demand for justice. Yoderian pacifism could perhaps benefit from the realism and immediacy with which Boff and Sobrino treat the 'crucifixion' of the poor and oppressed, and their attempts to 'take the crucified from their crosses', which may *in extremis* involve the reluctant use of limited violent means.



**Summary - towards a political theology of the cross (ii)**

In the last three chapters I have attempted to explore how the theologies of the cross in Yoder, Boff, and Sobrino can shed light on political discipleship in a world of poverty, suffering and oppression. Before moving to a consideration of the ‘cruciform and crucified people’, I outline elements arising from these chapters which I believe should be incorporated in a political theology of the cross.

***A cruciform imitation of the crucified God in a crucified world***

A political ethic which bears the name Christian must, at the very least, attempt to approximate to the pattern of Jesus’ incarnational social exemplarity. Since the crucifixion is the place where the incarnation is at its most radical, a Christian political ethic must be shaped by the cross – that is, it must be cruciform. This definitive cruciformity is an essential element (perhaps *the* essential element) in any political ethic which calls itself Christian. This can perhaps be summed up by the following formula: a cruciform imitation of the crucified God in the context of a crucified world. At the heart of Jesus’ ethical teaching is the command ‘Be as your Father’. The follower of Jesus is called, in all his or her actions, to act in conformity to the character of God as seen in the words and actions of Jesus: an *imitatio dei* through an *imitatio Christi*. Burridge describes the ‘entire story of Jesus’ as a ‘moral paradigm that offers normative guidance’. (Burridge 2007: 75) It is clear that the above formula does not say all that needs to be said about Christian political involvement, but can it perhaps set a useful framework. A cruciform politics will attempt to imitate the character of God as seen in the historical acts of Jesus (and their consequence, the crucifixion), will bear witness to the character of God by its political actions, and will have the faith that God will honour that imitation and witness.

This has relevance both to the content of the political ethic and to the location of its practitioners. The content of a cruciform politics, to give a very over-simplified outline, is that of a non-violent, non-retaliatory form of political action which seeks justice and compassion, and which has the ever-present potential to threaten the powerful. The location of a cruciform politics is no less significant. Just as the crucified God is pushed to the margins of power, so the place where a Christian political ethic comes into sharpest focus is likewise on the margins, among the ‘crucified people’, or at least in contact with them, and with their

interests at the forefront. It must therefore be recognized that the cruciform nature of this political ethic means that a significant process of interpretative transfer must take place before it can be used by those holding positions of power. This is certainly not to argue that Christian political ethics are irrelevant to the Christian politician – that would be to take the Lutheran two kingdom doctrine to ridiculous lengths. It is, however, essential to recognise that the *fons et origo* of Christian political ethics is not Pilate's palace or the offices of the Sanhedrin but the cross outside the gates of power.

***A different criterion for political success***

One of the most important tasks for a political theology of the cross is to investigate how the cross can be liberative, and not oppressive. Theologically, the cross entailed a reversal of values for the first Christians; politically, the cross entails a similar questioning of values. In Mark's account, on the journey to the dénouement at Jerusalem, Jesus, having warned his disciples about the forthcoming crucifixion, makes one of his most significant political statements: 'You know that among the Gentiles the recognized rulers lord it over their subjects, and the great make their authority felt. *It shall not be so with you.*' [My italics] (Mark 10: 42-3). The cross likewise radically redefines both the aims and conduct of politics, calling into question established political values such as power or victory. For example, the cross subverts power as violent force, by its demonstration of the alternative power of suffering love; paternalism, by its demonstration of involved affinity rather than detached alterity; and 'non-political' withdrawal, by its demonstration of costly compassion. Most of all, the overriding aim of politics is redefined not as the quest for power per se, which is undercut by a cruciform hermeneutic of suspicion of power, but the relief of human suffering – taking the crucified from their crosses – and its converse, the promotion of human flourishing.

This view of Christian politics should be undergirded by a careful analysis of the relationship between God and suffering, especially with regard to the cross. God must not be represented as inflicting suffering, or in any way privileging it, in theologies either of providence or atonement. The only part God plays in the violence of the cross is to endure it, both 'physically' in the suffering of Jesus, and 'psychologically' in his agonized and reluctant willingness to allow Jesus to endure crucifixion in fulfilment of his mission. Suffering is intrinsic to God only vis-à-vis

his suffering creation, as he seeks to diminish that suffering. Here we see the ambiguity in the symbol of the cross; the cross of Jesus is only valid theologically as a way to remove the crosses of humanity, both the ‘cross’ of physical suffering and the ‘cross’ of alienation from God.

***A spirituality of costly commitment***

The cross is at the heart of a spirituality of costly commitment for those working to bring about political change in the direction of the kingdom values of love, peace, justice and community, and opposing whatever contradicts those values. Jesus’ commitment to his ‘historic project’, which led to the cross, must be mirrored by those who continue that historic project, against sometimes lethal opposition. Their suffering is given meaning by the cross; in other words, their suffering is seen not just as individual suffering, but as part of a grand narrative in which they share. Again, the ambiguity of the cross is manifest; cruciform suffering is certainly not sought, but is the inevitable by-product of engaging in the struggle to remove the crucified from their crosses.

This political spirituality is further resourced by the ‘justification by grace through faith’ which finds its focus, in Pauline theology, in the cross. The gratuitousness of salvation and the consequent redirection of energy away from a concern for one’s standing with God energized, for example, Wesley. A similar personal decentring and recentring on others frees the Christian for political action. A cruciform spirituality is based on decentred solidarity – solidarity with God in the divine suffering and solidarity with the suffering peoples of the world. Bonhoeffer wrote of ‘sharing in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world’, and that ‘it is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.’ (Bonhoeffer 1953: 361) A cruciform spirituality is conscious of this participation in the divine suffering, and also of solidarity in bearing the cross with others across national, ecclesiastical and socio-economic boundaries. This consciousness and this solidarity mean that Christian political involvement is based on affinity, rather than alterity – salvation from inside (compassionate and empathetic solidarity) rather than merely from outside (intervention ‘*de haut en bas*’).

*Non-violence the default option for the Christian*

The defencelessness of Jesus on the cross radically questions a Christian's right to adopt premeditatedly lethal means of self defence, and indicates what can be described as a Christological pacifism. Such a pacifism, exercised by the Christian community as a whole, is based on imitation of God's action in Christ, witnesses to God's character as revealed in Christ's reaction to violence, and rests on faith in God who raised the non-violent Christ from the dead.

It is important to emphasize that this is not necessarily an absolute ethic, since there are (as we will explore in subsequent chapters) 'ethics of conflicting duty' to be brought into the equation. Short term and limited defensive violence in protection of the vulnerable may be a possibility, as Christology cannot totally trump consequentialism in ethical judgment. If Christians do not have the right to defend themselves, they may have the duty to defend others. A cruciform ethic may well be an ethic of vulnerability, but it may not be legitimate to sacrifice the vulnerable to theological consistency. This will be explored in more detail later, but is a potential Achilles heel of absolutist pacifism. To paraphrase Berdyaev's famous saying about bread for myself and my neighbour, defence of myself may be a material question, but defence of my neighbour is a spiritual question. There is also the complicating factor of the complexity of violence, in the form of structural injustice and institutional violence, which means that to restrict pacifism simply to questions of war and peace is potentially misleading, in that it fails to come to terms with underlying violence which is often more pernicious than outright warfare.

Can pacifism become a policy, rather than (or as well as) a witness? Yes, in terms of a practical, if non-absolutist, pacifism. A cruciform social ethic entails a strong predisposition towards non-violence, with only exceptional factors overcoming a radical eschewal of violence. Just as Jesus shared many similarities with the zealots, but with the literally crucial difference of adopting non-retaliation and non-violence, so a cruciform ethic indicates an analogous role for the church, in going beyond categories of power and violence to conduct a different kind of pacifist (peacemaking) politics. This means, in practice, no 'crusades', in the sense of violence in a righteous cause, either, from the left, in revolutionary violence, or, from the right, as part of the military establishment. Violence must be radically questioned, since it is both dehumanizing (in the sense of being destructive of human life) and 'detheizing' (in the sense of being contrary to the character of God

and involving a defacement of God's image in humanity). The futility of violence and its self replicating nature must be recognized, with a deep cynicism towards human motives in choosing violence, especially in military adventurism. If violence is to be used, it should be as an absolute last resort, and under the character of extended police actions rather than war. In short, a cruciform church can be a brake on the ever-present tendency to use the short cut of violence.

It must be recognized, however, that such a non-violent stance on behalf of the church is only possible if Christians are willing to take up the cross which is the price of such non-violence. A cruciform response to violence involves not inflicting more violence, but rather, potentially, suffering the violence on behalf of others. As Gandhi observed (quoted in Wink 1992: 163) 'Just as one may learn the art of killing in the training for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence.'

***Martyrdom, and resistance to privatizing the cross***

Taking up the cross, for the Christian, is not something private or primarily individual, but public and corporate. Cross-bearing is the price of social nonconformity in imitation of the social nonconformity of Jesus which brought him to the cross. This is to be exercised both individually and corporately, in terms both of personal discipleship and of the church publicly seeking the kingdom of God and publicly paying the price for that commitment. A rediscovery of the concept of martyrdom is needed; the cross was a public political event, and is paralleled by the public political event of martyrdom, in the sense of a potentially suffering witness to the kingdom of God. This witness can come about through compassionate action, conscientious withdrawal, and public payment of the penalty when that stance is rejected by an unbelieving society. The traditional concept of martyrdom can also be usefully expanded. Primarily, martyrdom is 'Christian' – the traditional form, suffering and death for explicit faith in Jesus; secondarily 'Jesuanic', suffering and death for taking up Jesus' 'historic project,' the justice, peace and wholeness of the Kingdom of God; and thirdly 'anonymous' – the unwilling and often unconscious witness made by the victims of the world's crosses, who are martyrs by analogy, who suffer, not consciously in the cause of Christ, but in the same way and for similar historical reasons as Christ. Such martyrs are 'signs of the times', prophetic indicators of different and often subversive values. The

effectiveness of such martyrdom cannot be precisely calculated or deliberately used as part of a political strategy (a point usefully made in Howey 2008). However, the political power of martyrdom should not be underestimated, as it demonstrates in human history the divine willingness to suffer without retaliation, and hence puts a brake on the spiral of retaliatory violence.

***The inevitability of conflict and the necessity for engagement***

There is a profound paradox in that a political theology of the cross indicates non-violence, but also presupposes the inevitability of conflict. The cross is the conflictual meeting place of the powerful, ruthlessly seeking to defend their power, and the powerless, attempting to subvert (or escape from) that power. Any pacifism arising from a theology of the cross cannot expect an absence of struggle. Pacifism, in both its etymology and its fullest political meaning, is not withdrawal into neutrality, but active peacemaking; living, in the Quaker phrase, in the 'life and power that takes away the occasion for war'. Christological and cruciform pacifism, in contrast to much optimistic liberal pacifism, seeks to be a realistic ethic, taking seriously the power of sin and conflict.

**SECTION III – BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATIONS**

**2) THE CRUCIFORM AND CRUCIFIED PEOPLE**

Chapter 7

**The cruciform people – the church and political responsibility**

One of the leading themes of the Bible is the way in which God is represented as working through sociological groupings: the family of Abraham, the people of Israel, and the Christian community. The way the ‘people of God’ organises and expresses itself politically is central to its task of bearing witness to God and acting as a channel through which God can work in the world. What does it mean, in this context, for the church to be cruciform – in other words, to correspond to the crucified Jesus whose present ‘body’ it is? How might that affect its political responsibility? In this chapter we examine the differing ways in which Yoder, Boff and Sobrino answer these questions.

**a) Yoder - the church, the cross and the question of responsibility**

***The question of ‘social responsibility’***

Yoder’s aim is to enunciate a cruciform political ethic, and to guide the church to be cruciform in its political activities. We have noted how this leads him to conceive of the church’s political task in terms which differ significantly from the dominant ‘realist’ paradigm. The most severe criticism levelled at Yoder’s cruciform political ethic is in the area of political responsibility. Does the cross imply (and necessitate) a radically different form of responsibility, so different that the charge of irresponsibility (from a Niebuhrian perspective) can be maintained? Does Yoder react against what he terms Constantinianism so much that his theology becomes unbalanced at this point? Is his reading of the cross definitive, or is his emphasis on non-coercion drawn from other sources? Does Yoder take one aspect of the cross and over-emphasize it to the detriment of other aspects of Christian politics (a recurring criticism of Yoder’s theology)? These questions underlie the following discussion of Yoder’s doctrine of, if not non-responsibility, at least a radically different responsibility.

A key statement on the aims of Jesus vis-à-vis social responsibility is found in Yoder’s discussion in *Politics of Jesus* of the temptations in the wilderness and

Gethsemane. These passages are especially significant since they delineate the range of possible options open to Jesus and the choice he makes – a choice which, in the one case, determines the nature of his ministry from the outset, and, in the other, confirms his political choices at the climax of that ministry. Yoder writes (Yoder 1994: 96) in a passage quoted previously: ‘The one temptation Jesus faced – and faced again and again – as a constitutive element in his public ministry, was the temptation to exercise social responsibility, in the interest of justified revolution, through the use of available violent methods.’ This is a central passage in understanding Yoder’s interpretation of the social and political role of Jesus. Yoder’s Jesus refuses to exercise social responsibility, even if in a good cause (i.e. for the sake of liberating his country from oppression) by adopting the politics of violence.

Is Yoder’s Jesus interested in exercising social responsibility at all? Yes, but in such a different way that the meaning of social responsibility is radically altered. Jesus’ temptations are interpreted by Yoder as revealing Jesus ‘facing, and rejecting, the claim that the exercise of social responsibility through the use of self-evidently necessary means is a moral duty’. (Yoder 1994: 98) Jesus does not refuse social responsibility i.e. kingship as such, but by refusing to play the game of using the obvious and traditional methods (i.e. violent and coercive) he transposes social responsibility into another, more distant key.

What is the relationship of the cross to such a strategy? Yoder argues that Jesus’ non-violent and non-coercive yet politically subversive actions led to the cross. It is, however, likely that Jesus would have risked the cross equally (if not more) if he had set himself up as a violent and coercive rebel against the Romans. Yoder’s ‘different social responsibility’ seems therefore to be based not so much on the acts of Jesus which led to his crucifixion, as on the non-coercive character of God, who allows his Son to be crucified rather than sending the ‘twelve legions of angels’ to defend him.

### ***‘Moving history in the right direction’***

Yoder’s chief target for criticism is the view that the goal of Christian social ethics is to move ‘history in the right direction’, if necessary by coercive means and through the use of the political structures of power by the church. The place of Reinhold Niebuhr as the trusted adviser to American presidents is a prime example



of this ‘chaplaincy to power’ approach to social ethics. There is, according to Yoder, an obsession with ends; Christian social ethics are overwhelmingly teleological or consequentialist.

Christians in our age are obsessed with the meaning and direction of history. Social ethical concern is moved by a deep desire to make things move in the right direction. Whether a given action is right or not seems to be inseparable from the question of what effects it will cause.

(Yoder 1994: 228)

Therefore ‘part if not all of social concern has to do with looking for the right ‘handle’ by which one can ‘get a hold on’ the course of history and move it in the right direction.’ Once this ‘handle’ is identified, ‘it is justified to sacrifice to this one cause other subordinate values.’ Yoder adduces as examples Luther’s alliance with the Princes at the time of the Reformation and, from a Marxist angle, the compromises of Communist Russia with small scale capitalism. Yoder criticizes this theory on two grounds – he questions first whether it is possible to manage cause and effect with (inevitably) inadequate information to guide such management, and second whether the ‘overriding moral yardstick’ is effectiveness in achieving these goals (Yoder 1994: 230). Once the ‘right cause’ is identified, ‘it is assumed that we should be willing to sacrifice for it – not only our own values but also those of the neighbour and especially the enemy... This creates a new autonomous ethical value ‘relevance’, itself a good in the name of which evil may be done.’ (Yoder 1994: 248)

Yoder’s intention throughout is to establish a political ethic concerned with faithfulness, and not with a calculation (if this were possible) of the consequences. This intention is Christologically grounded, in particular in the kenotic ‘hymn’ in Philippians 2, where equality with God is interpreted by Yoder as not some metaphysical attribute, but control over the universe. What was rejected by Christ was the ‘element of providential control over events, the alternative being the acceptance of impotence’ (Yoder 1994: 34) – an impotence graphically and definitively demonstrated by the cross. Jesus, according to Yoder, did not simply renounce ‘the metaphysical nature of Sonship, but rather the untrammelled sovereign exercise of power in the affairs of that humanity amid which he came to dwell.’ The kenosis Paul describes, the servant nature and the obedience to the death of the cross, is read as ‘his renunciation of lordship, his apparent

abandonment of any obligation to be effective in making history move down the right track'. (Yoder 1994: 235) This kenosis is honoured by God, the designation 'Lord' being an 'affirmation of his victorious relation to the powers of the cosmos.' A kenotic strategy is extended to the cross-bearing of Jesus' followers, being 'the inevitable suffering of those whose only goal is to be faithful to that love which puts one at the mercy of one's neighbour'. (Yoder 1994: 236)

Cross-bearing is interpreted as something positive – not an aloof withdrawal, but active peacemaking and reconciliation. This, it seems, is 'moving history in the right direction', but in a more oblique way.

What Jesus renounced is not first of all violence, but rather the compulsiveness of purpose that leads the strong to violate the dignity of others. The point is not that one can attain all of one's legitimate ends without using violent means. It is rather that our readiness to renounce our legitimate ends whenever they cannot be attained by legitimate means itself constitutes our participation in the triumphant suffering of the Lamb.

(Yoder 1994: 237)

There seems to be a significant shift here (or possibly confusion). We are, after all, to 'move history in the right way' i.e. there are legitimate ends – but only by using legitimate i.e. cruciform, non-violent means, following the divine pattern exemplified by the historical acts of Jesus which culminated in his crucifixion.

Yoder recognizes that modern social ethics are primarily (and almost inevitably) consequentialist and based on the use of immediately available power, rather than on a more long term faithfulness, which is only seen to be correct in the light of the resurrection and the 'eternal glory of the Lamb.' Christian politics, suggests Yoder, is not a question of 'determining which aristocrats are morally justified, by virtue of their better ideology, to use the power of society from the top so as to lead the whole system in their direction'. (Yoder 1994: 238) It is easy to identify Yoder's targets here – 'Christian realist' social ethics, which operate from a position of 'chaplaincy to power'. The question must be asked, however, whether Yoder fails to recognize a difference between a Constantinian 'seizure of power' in order to 'move history' and action taken in response to particular situations in obedience to the love command of Jesus. In that particular, is the Christian to refrain from 'moving history in the right direction? Yoder could justly be accused of setting up a straw man to demolish. As we shall see, Yoder has a (perhaps

dangerous) suspicion of the use of power itself. Yoder's major adversary is that symbol of the alliance of Christianity and worldly power, Constantianism.

***The cross against Constantinianism***

Yoder interprets the cross as indicating a Christianity the 'right way up'. Constantine, or the socio-religious changes associated with him, turned Christianity upside down, by systematically reversing Jesus' emphases, to the extent that Jesus was crucified by the same empire and the same values which Constantine embodied. Constantinianism (whatever the exact nature and timing of the changes, and whatever Constantine's own role in them) stands as an important symbol of Yoder's diagnosis of a wrong turn in Christian social ethics which still has immense influence across the political spectrum. Constantinianism describes the church imposing what it sees as the values of Christianity from a position of political power and social privilege, and using that power to forward God's will and kingdom as interpreted by the church. This 'Constantinian postulate' assumes a state church and Christian control, or at least very strong influence, on the levers of power, so that ideally there is a unity of ideology and intent between the church and the ruling powers. Hence the task of the Christian (and the church) in politics is to stand in solidarity and alliance with those who hold power in order to determine the course of society in a way which approximates as closely as possible to the kingdom of God. This view, which is close to the Christendom tradition, takes seriously the necessity for power to achieve (at least relatively short term) aims in politics – and short term aims in politics are the practical norm. Beyond that, Constantinianism aims for 'Christianization' of society as a whole, with the church the religious expression of the community in general.

It is not difficult to see how such a vision is antithetical to Yoder's cruciform Christology and ecclesiology. Jesus was crucified precisely by such an alliance of religious and political power, by those who sought to keep intact their handle on moving history in the right direction, and were willing to sacrifice an innocent man for that worthy cause. As a Mennonite, Yoder's ecclesiology is that of a markedly separate, distinctive, and voluntary church, whose task is not to handle the levers of power (rather, it is to renounce all semblance of 'control') but faithfully to fulfil the function of vulnerable witness, prophetic worship, and

reconciling fellowship. The church's prime responsibility is to be the church, and not to assume (a probably unrealistic) responsibility for everything that happens.

By contrast, Constantinianism rests on the responsibility of those who hold power, of the individual Christian and of the church to exercise their power, where possible, to achieve righteous ends. This emphasis on responsibility implies accountability; both church and government are accountable to God for exercising or neglecting to exercise, if necessary by coercion, their power for good. The contrast with Yoder's voluntary, subordinate and non-coercive model, which sees 'responsibility' in radically different terms, is stark; Constantinianism is centred not Christologically, but on the (presumably God given, but fatally sinful) capabilities of humanity.

Yoder sees such Constantinianism as shared by political theologies both of the right (the traditional conservative alliance between church and state) and of the left (theologies of revolution and liberation). In the chapter 'Christ, the hope of the world' in *The Original Revolution* (Yoder 1972: 140ff) Yoder indicts liberation theology as 'neo-neo-neo-neo Constantinianism'! The ideology of those in power is not so great a problem as the church's attempts to associate with those in power. Echoing the criticism that liberation theology is not radical enough in its critique of power, Yoder finds fault with liberation theology not so much in its goals as in its Constantinian methodology, in overemphasizing the need for seizing political power. In brief, Yoder's quarrel with Constantinianism seems largely to be over its use of coercive and often violent power even for 'justifiable' ends - God's love, as expressed in the crucified Jesus, is radically non-coercive. The cruciform church, therefore, must eschew coercion as incompatible with the gospel.

### ***Criticism – an unwarranted suspicion of power***

Any theology focused upon the powerless figure on the cross is likely to exercise at least a hermeneutic of suspicion of the exercise of power. But Yoder's reading of God's crucified and uncoercive love necessitating a distancing of the church from political power leaves him open to the charge of a dangerous suspicion (and avoidance) of power itself as expressed necessarily in government. This suspicion of Christian involvement in structures of power and government manifests itself at certain points in *Politics of Jesus*. Yoder is discussing the absence in the New Testament of an invitation to 'the king to conceive of himself as a public

servant'. Yoder asks whether this was due to the social composition of the early Christian congregations, or to a more profound reason – 'Was it that... Jesus has instructed his disciples specifically to reject governmental domination over others as unworthy of the disciple's calling of servanthood?' (Yoder 1994: 183) Yoder here comes perilously close to prohibiting Christians from taking part in government, by making servanthood the exclusive and solely determinant Christian social position vis-à-vis power. On this reading, Christians should be as servants, (or, to take the New Testament context seriously, as slaves) always on the receiving end of power, not its wielders. Good government is necessary – but Christians are excluded from the role of governors. This dangerous tendency in Yoder's thought plays down the necessary servant aspect within government – as in the British 'civil service'. He writes in a similar manner:

Is there not in Christ's teaching on meekness, or in the attitude of Jesus towards power and servanthood, a deeper question being raised about whether it is our business at all to guide our action by the course we wish history to take? (Yoder 1994: 230)

Here Yoder is in danger of a simple withdrawal from anything resembling the exercise of power through his misreading of the example of Jesus, and especially the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross. His concentration on the target of Constantinianism can lead to a seemingly over rigorous prohibition of Christians exercising political power at all.

At the heart of Yoder's argument is his strict differentiation between church and state, especially with regard to their use of power, the church being a community of servanthood using non-violence and non-coercion, the state resting, ultimately, on coercion and at least the threat of violence. Problems arise when church and state are seen as hermetically sealed categories, with no interpenetration; where participation in one 'power structure' excludes participation in the other. The church and state are, indeed, correctly identified by Yoder as separate entities – but the relationship is a dialectical one, and individual Christians should not be barred from participation as 'servants' in the (God-given, as Yoder would agree) state structures.

Yoder's rightly observes that it is highly dangerous and contrary to the gospel for the church to exercise the function of state. But it is not legitimate to argue, by extension, that Christians are to remain wholly outside the power

structures of the state. This rests on an unstated presupposition that Christians have a minority status in the extreme. Otherwise who would staff the necessary police or law enforcement? Is this to be left to non-Christians? This argument applies not merely to the area of justice, but also of welfare and taxation, which rest not on voluntary participation, but on some form of coercion (even if this coercion is usually non-violent). It is difficult to identify the areas of the state in which the Christian can participate as a wielder of 'power'. Are Christians, then, limited solely to free enterprise? One is bound to ask, with Hauerwas (Hauerwas 1981: 218) if Yoder is too Hobbesian in his understanding of the state. Coercion need not be violent, and laws within a community can be – and, in practice, usually are – based on common consent. It is only in extreme situations that the essence of the state is violence, and Yoder errs in neglecting the state's constructive aspect, its reflection of the human capacity for co-operation for the common good. In modern Britain the state is symbolized not so much by the sword (i.e. violent coercion) as by the National Health Service and social services.

Yoder's definitive Christocentrism and concentration on the powerlessness of Christ crucified by an oppressive state risks neglecting a necessary Lutheran corrective, God's 'strange work' which conceives of a divinely sanctioned use of power by government to limit human sin. Power is not necessarily an evil, and an overemphasis on Christ's powerlessness as a necessary model for the Christian leads to a dangerous imbalance. A useful distinction in emphasis can be made between political theologies such as Christian realism, which emphasise the constructive use of power in the 'long haul' of human history, without much eschatological emphasis save in a far off final judgment, and theologies such as Yoder's, which rest on a more immediate eschatological consciousness. Zimbelman discovers a more dialectical relationship with the state in Yoder's doctrine of subordination - 'It does not demand passivity...not absolute obedience. Christians may be subject to government, but they may also act in ways that run counter to the demands of unjust and ungodly structures.' Zimbelman adduces acts 'of conscientious objection and resistance aimed at altering specific attitudes, actions and policies of the state while still permitting a person to remain subject to the state'. (Zimbelman 1992: 398) There is a fine line but a crucial difference - between critical solidarity, where the Christian sees himself within the power structure and critical subordination, where the Christian sets himself deliberately outside (or on

the bottom rung of) such a structure, seeing participation in the power structure as not a Christian responsibility. In practice, Yoder allows a degree of the former, whereas his logic would probably necessitate the latter.

***Criticism - ethics of conflicting duty***

Another aspect of Yoder's doctrine of 'responsibility and non-responsibility' which can justly incur criticism is in the area of 'ethics of conflicting duty'. (Wright 2000: 92) Such a criticism can be directed at pacifism as a whole, and is certainly not confined to Yoder's interpretation, but, in his doctrine of 'messianic pacifism' his disavowal of direct responsibility for preventing evil consequences lays him open to a sharper criticism. Yoder draws an absolute ethic of non-resistance from the non-resistance of the crucified Christ, and prescribes such non-resistance for the Messianic community which follows his example and witnesses to him. It might be argued that Yoder chooses the wrong absolute - he emphasizes non-resistance as an absolute, but the true absolute is love (which includes, as a subset, justice, and thus can sometimes mean coercion). Which takes priority - non-resistance or the welfare of the neighbour?

It is not simply a question of either/or; justice and peace are deeply interconnected, and the one cannot be treated in isolation from the other. But the question of priority, and of ruling out absolutely one form of action - a coercion which rests on violence as its ultimate sanction - is settled by Yoder firmly on the side of absolute non-violence. Neighbour-love, in the sense of intervening (with the possibility or probability of violence) on behalf of a neighbour in need of protection, or on behalf of a neighbour suffering injustice, takes second place to the priority of non-violence as a witness to the gospel. Yoder thus lays himself open to the Christian realist criticism that by aiming for the ideal he refuses to ameliorate a situation which it is within his power to ameliorate. He argues that there are hard choices, but insists that it is false to posit only two options and to ignore the possibility of non-violent resistance. He is reluctant to accept the necessity of ambiguous choice through fear of undercutting the maxim that Christian ethics should not be determined by hard cases or exceptional circumstances. An exception cannot be predicted. Once prepared for it becomes the determining norm. (As argued by Wright 2000: 91-2) It is true that borderline situations should not determine the overall thrust of ethics - yet war and violence are in themselves

*grenzfallen* or ‘exceptional circumstances’. Barth’s doctrine of borderline situations and Bonhoeffer’s example of a heroic individual taking responsibility for violence as *simul justus et peccator* can usefully be set alongside Yoder’s normative pacifism. Yoder runs the risk of neglecting this by his insistence on the absolute priority of ‘witness’ over ‘responsibility’. This tension is particularly acute in situations where to refuse to use force would allow greater evil to ensue, at least in the immediate context. The demands of love and justice, on the one hand, and non-violence on the other may well come into irresolvable conflict, and the criterion of immediate ‘effectiveness’ cannot totally be discounted. Yoder’s emphasis on the crucial importance of the unalloyed witness of the church to non-violence and its long term value will be discussed in the next section. Here it may suffice to note the dilemma at the heart of all pacifist systems occasioned by the ethics of conflicting duty, which is particularly acute in the case of Yoder’s pacifism with its radical dependence on the example of Christ crucified transmitted through the church.

### ***Criticism - the social responsibility of the church***

What, then, is this social responsibility of the cruciform church? Does Yoder shrug off the question of responsibility - or is the difference merely between two varieties of social responsibility (which is probably a more accurate analysis of his position)? One approach could be described as proactive and direct, seeking to influence (if not control) policy from inside the walls of power. The other could be described as a reactive and indirect approach, prophesying and witnessing from outside those walls. Neither approach can justly incur the reproach of opting out. The key question for Yoder is which approach is most congruent with the one who was crucified ‘outside the gates of power’ by the powerful. Yoder insists that he is moving the goalposts concerning responsibility, and that one can be both faithful and responsible. If the common view of responsibility is accepted, then Yoder might be thought to be irresponsible. But the parameters of the discussion on responsibility, set by Troeltsch and the Niebuhrs, are precisely what Yoder questions, in the name of an alternative social construct, the church. The church’s primary ethical task is to be the church, and to live out a faithful and consistent witness. This is stressed by Yoder, whose theological and ethical strategy is shared by Hauerwas, who argues on the grounds of actual effectiveness as witnessed to by history: ‘The church does not fulfil her social responsibility by attacking directly the



social structures of society, but by being itself it indirectly has a tremendous significance for the ethical form of society.’ (Hauerwas 1981: 212) The issue is, according to Yoder ‘not whether the Christian is to be responsible or not, but rather what form that responsibility is to take in the light of God’s action in Jesus Christ’. (Hauerwas 1981: 214)

‘Responsibility’ in the Constantinian sense is, as we have noted, a temptation both for left and right. The liberation theologian, however, might well argue - *cui bono* Yoder’s idea of responsibility? The damaging structures of power remain the same, and all the church does is nibble at the edges. Yet Hauerwas continues with the suggestion that one of Yoder’s strengths is that the ‘interest of the poor and disadvantaged’ is not the sole determining factor in Christian social ethics. Certainly, ‘the Church has a special relation to the poor as it is obedient to the call of its Lord, but this does not mean that it is its job to simply identify with the self interest of the poor in terms of the power strategies necessary to achieve a more relative justice’. The conflict with liberation theology is clear. The church must be aware that ‘the political tactics used by the poor, while perhaps achieving a greater justice according to the world, only makes them as men more subject to the powers of this world’. (Hauerwas 1981: 214) This, as has been previously observed, echoes criticisms of liberation theology that its analysis of human sinfulness vis-à-vis power is not deep enough, if its aim is merely to change one power structure for another. Rather, a more radical critique of power itself is required. This may well be true (and will be explored in depth later) but risks the obvious criticism, that a government which uses its power justly is clearly preferable to one which uses its power oppressively. For the poor on the receiving end of governmental power, proximate justice is preferable to preserving to what may seem to be an abstract theological principle. Hauerwas stresses (Hauerwas 1981: 215) that this must not be misused in a conservative way, but claims that ‘true justice cannot be achieved by engaging in action that forces us to join hands with the devil as we work for good ends’. This means that ‘the Christian cannot participate in every form of life he finds present in his societal context’. Any participation is secondary to this: ‘The first question of significance for Christian social ethics cannot be which social cause should the church support, but rather what form the church must assume in order to be true to the Lord of all society.’ (Hauerwas 1981: 216) That shape is cruciform,

which means, according to Hauerwas and Yoder, a radically different doctrine of responsibility.

The most obvious example of such a church, whose prime theological concern is to be ‘the church’, is the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, and it is instructive and perhaps disturbing to assess the political consequences of such a church. (It is no accident that Yoder’s theological mentor Karl Barth was one of the main theological influences on the Confessing Church). The Confessing Church steadfastly resisted Hitler’s attempt to co-opt the church, and separated from the ‘German Christians’ who did so, thus maintaining its witness uncorrupted. It is all too easy to criticize the behaviour of a threatened minority faced with an overwhelming tyranny, but the Confessing Church’s record of political resistance to Nazism and protest on behalf of the Jews (with the exception of Jewish Christians) was not good, despite the urgings of Bonhoeffer. A negative, even if pure, witness is not enough for a church which seeks to be cruciform. (A similar parallel from the German resistance might be between the ‘Yoderian’ non-violent approach of von Moltke of the Kreisau circle and the ‘realist’ assassination conspiracies of von Stauffenberg and other army officers.) The Confessing Church cannot be equated with a Yoderian church in its entirety – its doctrine was not self consciously non-resistant and its witness not non-violent, since few of the members took a pacifist stance – but its concern for preserving an uncorrupted witness and its limited sense of wider political responsibility (caused, to some extent by the totalitarian society in which it was set, but also partly by its Lutheran social ethic) show both the strength and the potential weakness of Yoder’s ‘cruciform’ church. In the next section we will explore how Yoder’s political theology of the cross utilizes a different and more positive view of historical causation and the church’s role in that causation.

***A new way of ‘doing politics’ – through a cruciform church***

The criticisms of aspects of Yoder’s theology as outlined above are serious, but need not be fatal to his central claim, that the Christian (and the church) is called to share in the pattern of the divine love as revealed definitively in the cross of Jesus. The manner in which God deals with evil through the patient non-violence and non-resistance of the cross might not supply an all-inclusive ethic, but certainly points towards a stance which has far reaching social and political implications. Whilst the correspondence between divine providential action and human political

action need not be absolute, it would be paradoxical and even ridiculous if the two were unrelated. The fact that God's way in Christ of encountering evil (in its starkest political form) involved self-giving, non-violent, and non-resistant love cannot be irrelevant to any strategy which can bear the name Christian. This necessitates, for the corporate church and for the individual Christian, an alternative way of doing politics. Yoder's concern is to redefine what it means to 'do politics':

He [Jesus] refused to concede that those in power represent an ideal, a logically proper, or even an empirically acceptable definition of what it means to be political. He did not say (as some sectarian pacifists or some pietists might) 'You can have your politics and I shall do something more important'; he said, 'Your definition of polis, of the social, of the wholeness of being human socially is perverted.' (Yoder 1994: 94-5)

In attempting to formulate a 'Christian politics' which conforms to God's action in the cross, Yoder emphasizes the role of the church as the cruciform community, patiently suffering and witnessing, as the supreme agent of God's purposes. The argument can be summarized as follows: the distinction between the church and the world is central to social ethics; the pattern of social ethics must be Christocentric and hence cruciform; this pattern can, indeed must, be required of the church, but is not expected of the world. An obedient church bearing a consistent, Christlike and cruciform witness to God's kingdom in an unbelieving world through its 'deviant' values is at the heart of Yoder's thinking.

The church itself is a social ethic, and the most valuable contribution the church can make to society is to be itself, uncorrupted and consistent. The cruciform church is to be a community of creative dissent, and is to beware of the temptation, in Martin Luther King's analogy (King 1986: 300), of merely being a thermometer reflecting the temperature of society (although perhaps Yoder would regard King's rhetorical alternative, the church as thermostat controlling that temperature, as assuming too much direct responsibility). The key community for the exercise of 'Christian politics' is not the state and its exercise of coercive power, as in realist thought; nor the nation, as in conservative thought, but the church. Whereas the realist seeks to forward a Christian politics through close interaction with those who hold power, the Yoderian strategy is to concentrate on the church: first by the positive steps of building a Christlike community and second by the negative steps of refusing to participate in actions which violate the cruciform, non-

violent essence of the gospel. Hence, the church, not the state, is the first target of prophetic criticism. Judgment begins within the house of God and the church's contribution to the mentality in which nations wage war. 'The polemic of a valid Christian pacifist witness must be theological and first of all directed to the church.' (Yoder 1994: 240) 'The audience to whom it needs to be directed is the circle of those who have affirmed knowledge of and commitment to an overarching divine purposefulness active in history.'

This is especially relevant in twenty first century Europe with the demise of Christendom and no reasonable pretension to Constantinianism possible, either in its conservative or liberal variety, due to Christianity's minority status. As will be explored more fully, the church's witness is paradoxically more valid in a post Constantinian situation since it has been forced to relinquish Constantinian pretensions, and to bear witness from a position of relative powerlessness (a painful exception to this being the influence of the radical right on American government policies). Yoder acknowledges this new (at least post-Constantine) situation for Christian social ethics, where Christians live as a minority in a pluralist world, and any possibility of 'managing' society is excluded. The church exists through its solidarity-relationship to and unity with Christ, not through any parasitic relationship with the state. The church is theologically prior to the state, as a foretaste and catalyst of the reconciliation of humanity to God through evangelization and through preserving the purity of its essence and witness.

### ***Church, kingdom, and world***

The church's relationship to the kingdom is that of a foretaste, a model, and a herald of what is to be. The church itself is not the kingdom, but the reality of the kingdom must be distinctively visible in the church, in its conformity to the character of Jesus and in its solidarity with him. The church is a visible sign in time of the eternal realization of God's kingdom – which means that salvation should not be over-identified in the liberative political movements which liberation theology regards as at least a part of the process of salvation. Not only, Yoder argues, is this neo-Constantinian, but also it is dangerous to read in a Eusebian way political victories as signs of God's providence.

If there is a continuity in the relationship between church and kingdom, there is much less in that between church and world, due to the church's cruciform

distinctiveness. Yoder's non-resisting pacifist witness is, as we have seen, firmly Christological and cruciform – but such cruciformity cannot be expected of society as a whole, certainly not the voluntary cruciformity assumed by the church. We shall examine later how liberation theologians treat involuntary 'cruciformity'. The believing, voluntary church is separate in its ethical norms from unbelieving society. Yoder asks, rhetorically, if it makes sense to expect the enforcement by public authorities of 'standards of fraternity and equity which Christians can seek after in the church on the basis of the free assent of those who claim to be committed to Christian obedience'. (Yoder 1994: 239)

The Christian is not to be indifferent to the politics of the world, since the relationship of the church to the world is parallel to that of God to the world – sacrificial and loving concern but without an attempt to manage or control. This delicate balance, of concerned engagement, but from a position of service rather than of power, is difficult to maintain, but could have the effect of liberating the church from a compulsion to control in order to exercise its proper role vis-à-vis society, primarily to be formed into a body which shares in the love of God as revealed in Christ and seeks to witness to that love by word and deed. Yoder suggests that 'A church once freed from compulsiveness and from the urge to manage the world might then find ways and words to suggest as well to those outside her bounds the invitation to a servant stance in society.' (Yoder 1994: 240)

In *The Priestly Kingdom* (Yoder 1984: 96ff) Yoder writes of the church's 'servant strength'. This servant strength, itself derived from the self giving of the crucified Christ, both requires and empowers patience, in its dual etymological meaning of persistence and suffering. Just as God (and, in his earthly ministry, Jesus) accepts and suffers the consequences of the world's spurning of God's saving initiative, so must the church do also. This does not mean that the church writes off the world and lives hermetically sealed from it. Rather, the church continues to serve the world even as the world rejects the gospel and, in that rejection inflicts suffering on the church. This is not a denial of responsibility, or a form of opting out. By its patience and its distinctiveness the Yoderian church preserves its capacity to be a channel for the divine movement of history which a more obviously 'responsible' but compromised church would lose. The danger of a social ethic of 'responsibility' is an over-identification of the church with the world, so that the social message of the gospel and the ethical nature of the church are watered down

into a pragmatism unsatisfying, ultimately, to both church and world; where the church attempts to formulate an ethic which is a weak compromise between the radical demands of faith and policies acceptable to the non-Christian.

Moreover, a conscious withdrawal from ‘responsibility’ is, paradoxically, a strategy supported by a strictly ‘realist’ view of social ethics, given the minority situation and social weakness of the church (a position much more marked in Britain than the USA). The church simply does not have the power to exercise ‘responsibility’, since there are huge areas of life which cannot possibly be under its control, even if it believed it right to attempt such control. It must therefore, according to Yoder, free itself from fruitless concerns over responsibility, in order to concentrate on its true mission – its identity as a body bearing a consistent witness to the revelation of God in Jesus and its prophetic ministry, which seeks to speak to particular acts of injustice or abuse rather than to assume responsibility for the whole picture.

### ***Criticisms of Yoder’s doctrine of the cruciform church***

Yoder, in his view of a ‘non-responsible’ social ethic of a cruciform church witnessing within a majority unbelieving society, can be criticized at various points, both empirically and with regard to the doctrines of the Spirit and the Trinity.

The first and major empirical criticism, is that Yoder idealizes (and idolizes?) the church. The church is the ‘Messianic community’ – but regarded empirically, it falls far short of its calling as a body which witnesses to Christ by its ethical consistency and solidarity with its founder. It can appear to many, both within the church and outside, that non-Christians often have higher ethical standards, at least in the realm of social ethics (for example, the destructive alliance between certain forms of evangelicalism in the USA and the political right). Moreover, even churches with a strong form of *magisterium*, whether ecclesiastical or Biblical, differ widely in their political ethics. A political ecclesiology such as Yoder’s has to be based on how the church actually is, and not merely on an idealised church. In addition to the discrepancy caused by human sin between the church’s ideal nature and actual performance, the church is always in a dialectical relationship with the community in which it is set. There is, perhaps, much more interpenetration, for good or ill, than Yoder recognizes, and his rigid church-world dichotomy is probably overdrawn – certainly in Britain, where the established

church has relatively weak boundaries. Yoder counters this empirical view of the actual performance of the church by asserting, that although the church falls short of its vocation, it is in a process of continual self-examination, self-criticism, and self-correction. Yoder writes, in his introduction to *The Priestly Kingdom* that 'Any existing church is not only fallible but in fact peccable. That is why there needs to be a constant potential for reformation and in the more dramatic situations a readiness for the reformation even to be radical'. (Yoder1984: 5) Yoder has in mind a disciplined body with a shared and accepted ethical strategy, a situation not possible for the traditional 'Christendom' churches. Perhaps as the churches are forced beyond Christendom to a position of minority status this distinctiveness might be easier to attain.

Next, it is possible to criticize Yoder's distinction (highlighted in Hauerwas 1981: 205ff) between the 'norm of Christ and the form of the world. The kind of life assumed by the faithful Christian is not the same as the secular man of good will'. It must be questioned how far this is empirically correct. Without accepting Rahner's 'anonymous Christian' hypothesis in its entirety, there is surely a sense in which God's Spirit can inspire, even if unconsciously, those 'of good will'. For example, in participating in the attempted rescue of Jews in the Nazi occupied Netherlands, the ethical value of the actions of the devout Christian Corrie ten Boom was precisely equivalent to those of a secular Dutchman. A Christian may have (and does have) an added motivation, but the form of the world in a particular instance may often be identical to the norm of Christ. It is true that an ethically mixed body of people cannot have the same ethical discipline as a smaller, more homogeneous group, and cannot draw on the same resources as a faith community, but Yoder runs the risk of underestimating both the inescapable sinfulness of the church (which in effect may resemble 'the world' much more closely than he would perhaps care to admit) and also the role of the Spirit in working beyond the church.

This aspect of the work of the Spirit is seriously downplayed in Yoder's theology. Reinhold Niebuhr provides a necessary corrective, in criticizing a doctrine of an over wide disparity in the actual performance of 'church' and 'world' - 'The church must recognize that there are sensitive secular elements within modern nations, who though they deny the reality of divine judgment, are nevertheless more aware of the perils of national pride than many members of the church.' (Niebuhr 1946: 33) Similarly, Daniel Day Williams suggests a broader perspective: 'A

hidden Christ operates in history. Therefore there is always the possibility that those who do not know the historical revelation may be more repentant than those who do.' (Williams 1968: ch.12) A more Trinitarian theology, with an increased emphasis on God the creator and sustainer, and on the Holy Spirit working beyond the boundaries of the church, would greatly enhance (and would certainly not weaken the impact of ) Yoder's analysis. It is possible to assert the necessary distinctive and voluntary cruciformity of the church whilst acknowledging that the Spirit may work beyond the church, even (as will be investigated later) in an involuntary cruciformity in civil society.

***Cruciformity as suffering non-resistance***

To sum up: Yoder argues that the church's cruciformity is exhibited in its non-resistance (and therefore non-participation in certain aspects of society) and in its readiness to suffer as a part of its witness. Non-resistance and non-participation, moreover, should not be seen as opting out in an irresponsible way, but as a contribution to social good. Yoder comments in a key passage in *Politics of Jesus*, that the Christian

chooses not to exercise certain types of power because, in a given context, the rebellion of the structure of a given particular power is so incorrigible that at the time the most effective way to TAKE responsibility is to refuse to collaborate, and by that refusal to take sides in favour of the victims whom that power is oppressing. This refusal is not a withdrawal from society. It is rather a major negative intervention within the process of social change, a refusal to use unworthy means even for what seems to be a worthy end.

(Yoder 1994:154)

Sociologically, a minority community which chooses carefully the areas of its participation and non-participation in society can have a great impact through its promulgation of an alternative way of living. Its smallness can, paradoxically, be an advantage, in removing both the temptation to control and the threat to others whom the church might in other circumstances wish to control, and in allowing a consistency and a discipline impossible in a more disparate community.

The church, as an alternative society, must be prepared for suffering inflicted by the society to which it refuses to conform. This may not necessarily be for 'religious' reasons. Just as Jesus was crucified, not for his specifically religious



reasons but for his social nonconformity, so the church will suffer for its social nonconformity. Persecution is usually a response by the powerful to a challenge to their power. If the church's message was merely 'vertical', there would be no need for persecution – it is when the 'vertical' aspects of faith impinge on the 'horizontal' that persecution is incurred (for example, again, the debate in post-war Germany over whether Bonhoeffer should be accounted a martyr, because his execution was for political resistance). Yoder comments:

Such a dichotomy between the religious and the social must be imported into the [Biblical] texts; it cannot be found there. The 'cross' of Jesus was a political punishment; and when Christians are made to suffer by government it is usually because of the practical import of their faith, and the doubt they cast upon the rulers' claim to be 'benefactor.' Yoder 1994: 125).

Suffering is not a good in itself, nor should nonconformity be courted for its own sake; it is only required because the values of 'the church' run counter to the values of 'the world' (although, as we have seen, the division is not always necessarily clear cut). This suffering has an added significance as a sign of participation in the divine presence and purpose. Yoder describes such suffering as 'a participation in the character of God's victorious patience with the rebellious powers of his creation'. (Yoder 1994: 209) By the suffering of the Christian church, 'the suffering of the cross is perfected in history'. (Yoder 1982: 237) The suffering of God, and hence his power to 'move history', is represented within that continuing history by the suffering of the church. The importance of this concept of correspondence between the cruciform church, which takes up the cross of suffering, and God's action in the crucified Christ is central in Yoder's thinking. The church's power and purpose derives from the witness it gives through that correspondence. It is through that witness that the church fulfils its chief role in politics. Zimbelman (Zimbelman 1992: 383) contrasts the Constantinian rationale of direct, humanistic causation with Yoder's theology of a providential vision of history where causation is more oblique. He describes this redefinition of the role of the church in politics in terms of an 'expressive' rationality, whereby deeds must be measured not only by whether they fit certain rules, nor by expected results we hope to achieve, but by what they 'say.'

The church, then, eschews a proactive role, to adopt a witness uncorrupted by compromise. In this, a cross-bearing pacifism is not an optional extra or a mere

tactic; it is intrinsic to the church's distinctive being as 'participants in the loving nature of God as revealed in Christ'. (Yoder 1994: 240) Any other stance would be self contradictory. This is not an ethic of withdrawal, for the essential 'otherness' of the church provides a base for a reactive political activity wherever the church discerns, first, that there is a need and, second, that it can act without going against its essential non-violent ethic. In Archimedean terms, Yoder seeks a *dos moi pou sto* ('give me somewhere where I might stand' and I will move the world) outside of (or at least on the fringes of) the compromises of politics, in contrast to the Niebuhrian who seeks to move politics from the inside. This nonconformist stance will bring suffering which, as martyrdom, is itself a witness to God's essential non-violence, suffering and patient love. As Yoder states in his conclusion to *Politics of Jesus*:

The kind of faithfulness that is willing to accept evident defeat rather than complicity with evil is, by virtue of its conformity with what happens to God when he works among us, aligned with the ultimate triumph of the lamb.  
(Yoder 1994: 238)

### **b) Boff and Sobrino – politics and a cruciform church**

We now move to a discussion of what it means in the theology of Boff and Sobrino to be a cruciform church, and how the cross might inform the church in its political involvement. This will be discussed under three headings: cruciformity as sociological re-positioning; as persecution and martyrdom; and as a redefinition of accessing power. The three ecclesiological works discussed are Boff's *Church, Charism and Power* (Boff 1985) and *Ecclesiology* (Boff 1986) and Sobrino's *The True Church and the Poor* (Sobrino 1984).

#### ***Sociological repositioning***

For liberation theology in general, the cruciformity of the church can be seen in its sociological location among the poor and powerless, rather than, as in Yoder, an policy of nonconforming self-restraint towards the use of power, and of suffering as a result of that nonconformity. The aim of liberation theology has been to become a 'church of the poor', and the 'base ecclesiastical communities' have become a significant component of Latin American church life, even if their growth and development has not matched the high hopes of the 1960's and 1970's. For

Boff, this is rooted in a Franciscan spirituality which seeks an authentic following of Christ in a committed community marked by poverty, equality, and a concern for the disadvantaged. For liberation theology in general, this was encouraged by the ecclesiology of Vatican II, with its emphasis on collegiality, subsidiarity, and the church as the ‘people of God’, and by the teaching by the CELAM Medellin conference on the necessity of taking the ‘option for the poor’.

As a Brazilian, Boff’s ecclesiological work is radically influenced by the Base Communities, which began to be founded in Brazil and Nicaragua in the mid 1960’s and hence form the backdrop to much of his work. The Base Communities can be described as liberation theology in practice, groups of lay led Christians, usually in rural or slum areas, meeting regularly to read the scriptures, pray, worship, discuss community problems and how to react to them; a ‘popular’ rather than ‘institutional’ church, but usually with a link to parish churches for liturgical services. It is perhaps significant that the base communities do not usually seem to include the poorest of the poor, but are drawn from the more articulate, aware, and (potentially) politically active. There is a differentiation in Sobrino’s theology (which will be explored in more detail in the next chapter) between the ‘active crucified people’ and the ‘passive crucified people’ – those who are organized for political change, and those who are simply the passive recipients of disadvantage and injustice. It is arguable that the former are further to the forefront of Sobrino’s thought in his teaching concerning the salvific role of the crucified people. Boff champions such groups, and sees in them a ‘reinvention’ (Boff 1986: 23ff) of the church. His trenchant criticism of the institutional church caused him to be silenced, for a year, in 1985 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He sees, however, a role for both institutional and ‘base’ church, while stressing the importance of the style in which the institutional church lives, ‘whether the functionaries are over the communities...or within them’. (Boff 1986: 60) *Church, Charism and Power* is specifically concerned with issues of power within the church, emphasizing power ‘from below’, lay leadership rather than clerical hegemony, but Boff’s analysis of power has political implications beyond the church.

The base communities are not universal in Latin America. In Central America, the Solentiname community in Nicaragua became famous through the work of Ernesto Cardenal, but in El Salvador the emphasis in liberation theology

has rather been on a more general 'church of the poor'. Sobrino differentiates between a church 'of' the poor and a church 'for' the poor (Sobrino 1984: 92); the church must not just be concerned for the poor; such a church 'assists the poor but ignores the poverty'. The privileged theological position of the poor means that the poor must constitute the essence of the church. The church of the poor 'does not seek to organize itself on the basis of what the world calls power, wisdom, or beauty, but rather on the basis of the poor, the persecuted and all those crucified by history'. (Sobrino 1984: 154) It accepts the 'scandal of history' and uses it as a basis for its own structure. In this way it expresses authentic Christianity, deriving from Jesus himself and expressing his presence. Sobrino stresses that 'the risen Lord who brings a community into existence is not just any human being or any Christ but the crucified Jesus of Nazareth'. (Sobrino 1984: 89) A church which expresses Jesus must reflect his crucifixion. This is achieved by making the 'crucified people' the sociological, as well as the theological, essence of the church.

### ***Persecution and martyrdom***

Such a repositioning puts the church in a position of extreme vulnerability. Sobrino quotes Archbishop Romero's words concerning the persecution of the church in El Salvador:

I rejoice, my brothers, that priests have been murdered in our country. It would be a sad thing if, when so many Salvadoreans have been murdered, no priests would be murdered. They show that the church has taken flesh in poverty. (Ellacuria and Sobrino 1994: 695)

Sobrino is writing against a background of persecution, most dramatically illustrated by the murders of Fr. Rutilio Grande and Archbishop Romero (documented in Berryman 1984, especially chapter 5 concerning El Salvador), and later by those of Sobrino's Jesuit colleagues. The centrality of martyrdom has been discussed previously, and need not be revisited at great length here. Sobrino links the persecution of the contemporary church closely with the 'persecution of Jesus' and the cross which ensued. The church in following Jesus' praxis will receive the same persecution. This, however, is not foreign to the mission of the church, but congruent with its early experience, uncorrupted by the Constantinian compromises. Boff contrasts the primitive martyr church with the later Constantinian (and, by extension, compromised contemporary) church. The primitive church 'did not care

about survival because it believed in the Lord's promise that guaranteed it would not fail...The later church was opportunistic; that it would not fail was a question of prudence and compromise that allowed it to survive in the midst of totalitarian regimes, at the expense of gospel demands.' (Boff 1985: 54-5) Here, the idea of the consistency of the church, relying on the providence of God rather than prudence, leading to a possible crucifixion, is strikingly similar to Yoder's insistence on a refusal to compromise the values of the gospel to maintain a position alongside the powerful.

### ***Redefinition of accessing power***

At the heart of liberation theology is the conviction that the church is inescapably political. This, of course, is nothing new. The church has always acted politically in blessing certain governments, institutions, armies or weapons. A refusal to speak out, for example, against the widespread torture in Argentina under the military junta, was as political as denouncing such actions. It is, moreover, ironic that liberation theology should be accused of politicizing the gospel when, in the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic church has encouraged major party political involvement in the shape of, for example, the Catholic Centre Party in Weimar Germany and the Christian Democrats in post-war Europe. By contrast, liberation theology has exercised a remarkable reserve in refusing to endorse, or, as Gutiérrez puts it, 'baptize' specific political programmes, Christians for Socialism in Chile and the Cardinals' participation in the Sandinista government in Nicaragua being relatively minor exceptions to the rule. Nevertheless, it is clear that liberation theology insists on the church becoming politically involved with the poor in their struggle for change and liberation. In what might be described as the seminal text of liberation theology, *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez writes that the church has an inescapable political dimension, and must both denounce unjust and dehumanizing situations and announce the need for transformation. (Gutiérrez 1973: 114ff)

Catholic social teaching (for example *Sollicitudo rei socialis*) emphasizes the need to transform sinful social structures. The contribution of liberation theology in this area has been to stress the need for change from the bottom up rather than by conversion of the power holding elites. Liberation theology looks to Christ crucified outside the gates of power, rather than to the residents of Pilate's

palace. The stark image of Jesus the powerless crucified by the powerful provokes a radical suspicion of power, the motives of those who hold the power, and the lengths to which they will go to maintain that power. Hence power must be sought in different ways, not by associating with and attempting to influence the power-holders, but by looking to power ‘from below’. In *Ecclesiogenesis* (where his focus is primarily power within the church, but his analysis can be translated to a wider critique of power) Boff contrasts the ‘top down’ institution with ‘from below’ community. He sees the institutional church as centred in ‘society’s affluent sectors, where it enjoys social power and constitutes the church’s exclusive interlocutor with the powers of society’. (Boff 1986: 8) The church is therefore faced with a choice: either to ‘continue good relations with the state and wealthy classes represented by the state or take the network of basic communities seriously, with the call for justice and social transformation this will imply’. This is a cross-risking path – for with this second course of action comes ‘insecurity, official displeasure, and the fate of the disciples of Jesus.’

### **c) Conclusion**

In contrast to the next chapter, where the focus is upon the ‘Crucified People’ as interpreted by Boff and Sobrino this chapter has concentrated upon Yoder’s cruciform ecclesiology. Yoder’s teaching on the relationship between church and politics is a direct challenge to the ‘Christian realist’ school, and envisages an alternative approach which could be especially fruitful given the church’s increasing marginalisation from traditional political power. However, serious criticisms can be made. The social and political nonconformity indicated and empowered by the cross is arguably strong on form, but weak on content. Nonconformity of itself is morally neutral, and Yoder runs the risk of deifying nonconformity as such, without necessarily examining the destination to which that nonconformity leads. The ends of political nonconformity (e.g. justice, freedom, and ‘shalom’) are as important as the method by which those ends are attained, and both are intertwined. Yoder’s ethic here faces the objection that it provides an essential negative function – a way of criticising certain violent responses to evil and oppressive power and exploring how suffering can be used in a Christian response, in non-retaliation and non-violence. But *in itself* it does not provide a wide enough framework for a Christian politics. Yoder’s Jesus rejects certain kinds

of kingship, but how should a 'king' use the 'royal' power? Yoder goes half way – a crucial half way, but not the full journey. For example, Yoder's remark that 'the cross is the kingdom come' could be seen to confuse means with ends. Yoder's deliberate neglect of how to handle power could condemn the Christian to a state of mind where permanent opposition is preferable to government (as in certain sections of the Labour party in the 1980's) or, paradoxically, to an attitude which serves the conservative purpose of keeping existing powers undisturbed. Of course, Yoder's general oeuvre provides many examples of a wider framework (the necessity of justice, for example) but it would perhaps strengthen his case if the doctrine of the exemplarity of Jesus included, alongside cross-bearing, other aspects of Jesus life (for example his radical inclusiveness of 'sinners and outcasts').

Against this criticism, Hauerwas argues that Yoder's interpretation of cross-bearing is in fact of the highest political significance, because it points to a radically different way of political interaction. Jesus 'brought a definite form of politics by calling men to participate in the non-resistant community'. (Hauerwas 1973: 252) Christ's cross is not primarily for my personal justification, whether pietist or existential – it is 'the first mark of the creation of a new social reality'. (Hauerwas 1973: 252) The defining characteristic of the imperial Roman order was that it ruled by violence – therefore a politics which did not attempt violence was in itself subversive of that ultimately destructive order. Non-resistance is not merely negative. It means being part of a community which 'gives a new way to deal with a corrupt society; it builds a new order rather than smashing the old.' (Hauerwas 1973:253) Form, according to this argument, can be as significant as content. In defence of Yoder, it must also be stressed that in his definitive work, *Politics of Jesus*, he is not attempting a systematic and comprehensive statement of Christian politics, where issues of justice, equality, inclusiveness etc. might be further developed (although Yoder deals with such issues extensively in other more occasional articles). He is attempting to read off a definitive political method from the life, and particularly the death, of Jesus, which can be applied to contemporary politics. The Liberation theology of Boff and Sobrino does not start from the same theological basis as Yoder, but it is, ironically, in the Base Communities of Latin America that such a Yoderian politics has most vividly been put into practice. These Christian communities have taken a vulnerable position outside the 'gates of power' and have exercised a powerful political witness.

## Chapter 8

### ***The crucified people – solidarity between the poor and the crucified Christ***

The last chapter concentrated on the political ecclesiology of Yoder, and his attempts to express the relationship between politics and a cruciform church. In this chapter we change the usual order, and begin with the teaching of Sobrino on the crucified people. We then consider aspects of the theology of Boff and Yoder which might illuminate Sobrino's teaching.

#### ***a) Sobrino – the crucified people***

##### ***Introduction – the theme of the crucified people***

When discussing the theme of the crucified people in the theology of Sobrino, it is important to recognize its antecedents, especially the contribution of Ellacuria, Sobrino's martyred Jesuit colleague in El Salvador. The 'scourged Christ of the Indies' has been a theme in Latin American theology since the time of De Las Casas. His famous saying 'in the Indies I leave Jesus Christ, our God, being whipped and afflicted, and buffeted and crucified, not once but a thousand times, as often as the Spaniards assault and destroy those people' (quoted in Sobrino 1994a: 11) forms the backdrop to Sobrino's (and Ellacuria's) theology of the cross. Ellacuria, in an article written as a preliminary paper to the CELAM Puebla conference in 1979 (Ellacuria and Sobrino 1993: 580-603), linked this old, but often neglected, theme with soteriology in a new and radical way. In European theology, in his groundbreaking work *The Crucified God* (Moltmann 1974) Moltmann had formulated a theology of crucifixion, but in this early work he restricted the metaphor of 'taking up of the cross' to Christian believers without extending it more widely to those who do not choose to bear the cross, but have it thrust upon them. (Moltmann 1974: 64) It is significant that, probably under the influence of Latin American theologies of the cross, Moltmann later extended cross bearing to sociological as well as religious categories.

Sobrino locates the rediscovery of this theme in the political circumstances of El Salvador. He relates how Ellacuria 'saw the Salvadorean reality as poverty, injustice, oppression, repression and war. He saw the people bearing the burden of it all. He called them 'the crucified people.' Ellacuria applied his reading of the



situation in El Salvador more widely, and interpreted the reality of the world in terms of crucifixion. A large part of humanity has been and continues to be 'crucified by the oppression of nature and, above all, by historical and personal oppression'. (Sobrino 2004: 50) The crucified people are a constant factor in world history, although the mode of crucifixion might change. They become the historical successors to the Biblical figure of the suffering servant.

Sobrino, following Ellacuria, links the present crucified people intimately with a fairly traditional and comprehensive Christology. He also integrates the theme of the crucified people with soteriology, and gives them an important soteriological role. This linking of the 'crucifixion' of peoples, of Christology, and of soteriology, in the light of such Biblical passages as the 'servant songs' and Paul's enigmatic phrase about 'completing in their flesh what is lacking in Christ's passion' (Colossians 1: 24) poses searching questions about the identity and salvific potential of Christ's suffering body in history, the relationship between the cross of Christ and the individual or collective crosses of Latin America, and the spirituality which responds to such 'crucifixion'

In Sobrino's early works the theme is present only indirectly. In *Christology at the Crossroads* (Sobrino 1978) Sobrino links contemporary Latin American suffering with the cross. He writes of 'the cross of Jesus and the historical crosses' in tandem. (Sobrino 1978: 230) In *Jesus in Latin America* (Sobrino 1987) Sobrino includes a chapter entitled 'The Risen One is the One who was Crucified: Jesus' resurrection from among the world's crucified' and describes the 'crucified of history' as constituting not just the conscious and faithful followers of Jesus but: 'In the human race today – and certainly where I am writing – many women and men, indeed entire peoples – are crucified.' (Sobrino 1987: 148) He adds, 'We must not forget that there are millions of persons in the world who do not simply die, but, in various ways, die as Jesus died.' (Sobrino 1987: 151) Sobrino's collection of essays originally published in 1992 is significantly entitled, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Sobrino 1994b). The fullest outworking of this theme is found in his developed Christology, *Jesus the Liberator* (Sobrino 1994a) and in his tribute to and theological reflection upon the Jesuit martyrs in *Witnesses to the kingdom: the martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Sobrino 2003). In one of his later works, *Where is God? Earthquake, terrorism, barbarity and hope* (Sobrino 2004) Sobrino returns to this theme. The

motif of the crucified people is ‘vigorous and rigorous’ – it denotes people really dead, not merely hurt; killed, not dying ‘naturally’; dying a shameful and undeserved death; and dying a death connected to Jesus and his fate. (Sobrinho 2004: 51) The ‘crucifier’ is injustice: ‘Injustice crucifies; there are different forms of crucifixion according to the circumstances.’ (Sobrinho 2004: 53) It is from these works that a description and a critique of the theme will mainly be drawn, in dialogue with the Norwegian theologian and social ethicist Sturla Stalsett whose study *The crucified and the Crucified* (Stalsett 2003) is a comprehensive and penetrating examination of the theme from a Lutheran viewpoint.

***What is meant by the crucified people?***

In discussing this question it is salutary to remember that the crucified people are, first of all, a tragic sociological reality and only secondarily a theological concept. Sobrinho locates the theme of crucified people in the linkage between the historically crucified body of Jesus and a contemporary ‘body of Christ’. He asks of this contemporary ‘body’ ‘whether this body is crucified, what element of this body is crucified, and if its crucifixion is the presence of the crucified Christ in history’. (Sobrinho 1994a: 254) The cross is not confined to the time of Jesus, but is a present reality, especially in the ‘historical catastrophe’ of the Third world, where ‘there is no doubt that the cross exists, not just individual crosses, but collective crosses of whole peoples.’ The only way to express the theological and sociological gravity of the situation is to use the term ‘crucified peoples.’ (Sobrinho 1994a: 254) The term ‘crucified people’ denotes not just any death, but primarily that actively inflicted by unjust structures, the ‘institutionalized violence’ of poverty and oppression. There are not only victims but also executioners. On a religious level the cross represents the death that Jesus died, and therefore for the believer it can ‘evoke the fundamentals of the faith’ and link, in Stalsett’s term, the ‘crucified’ with the ‘Crucified’. The crucified people are the ‘actual presence of the crucified Christ in history’. (Sobrinho 1994a: 255) The relation between Christ and the crucified people is reciprocal: ‘In this crucified people Christ acquires a body in history and ... the crucified people embody Christ in history as crucified.’ (Sobrinho 1994a: 255)

Sobrinho later amplifies this (in Sobrinho 2003:156). The language of contemporary crucifixion is metaphorical and conveys much better than other

language ‘the historical enormity of the disaster and its meaning for faith.’ It denotes the ‘slow, but real death caused by the poverty generated by unjust structures’. Such death is multifaceted and includes not just the obvious violence of war. ‘...Swift, violent death, caused by repression and wars, when the poor threaten these unjust structures....Indirect but effective death when peoples are deprived even of their cultures in order to weaken their identities and make them more defenceless.’ It is a useful and necessary description of a conflictual reality ‘because cross expresses a type of death actively inflicted. To die crucified does not mean simply to die, but to be put to death; it means that there are victims and there are executioners.’ The Latin American people’s cross has been inflicted upon them by various empires: Spanish and Portuguese yesterday, the US and its allies today, ‘whether by armies or economic systems, or the imposition of cultures and religious views, in connivance with the local powers’. Such language is useful and necessary at the religious level also because the word ‘cross’, denoting the fact that Jesus suffered death on the cross and not any other death ‘evokes sin and grace, condemnation and salvation, human action and God’s action’. The cross is a symbol, but much more than a symbol; it is the presence of God himself on the cross that is an effectual sign to humanity. ‘From a Christian point of view, God himself makes himself present in these crosses, and the crucified people become the principal sign of the times. This sign [of God’s presence in our world] is always the historically crucified people.’

The language used is metaphorical; cases of actual contemporary torture and execution by crucifixion, in a manner physically identical to that of Jesus, are of course not the point of Sobrino’s work. The relationship between the cross of Jesus and the ‘crosses’ of Latin America is analogical and as with any analogy it is essential to note there is not necessarily complete correspondence. We explore later how Sobrino perhaps aims for a more complete correspondence in terms of salvation than is warranted. The language of crucifixion, however, has a meaning which it would be difficult to express in any other way, especially for a Christian theologian seeking to link religious truth with the contemporary situation of suffering. It describes a conflictual situation common to both the crucifixion of Jesus and the contemporary world. Most of all it links the crucified people with the person of the crucified Jesus, in a reciprocal movement – the crucified people shed historical and sociological light on the crucified Jesus, and the crucified Jesus sheds

theological light on the crucified people. This is, perhaps, separating too sharply the theological and sociological; a liberation theologian would argue that the two are intimately linked.

***Who are the crucified people?***

We have already noted that one of the innovations of Ellacuria and Sobrino was to extend the bearing of the cross from those who specifically choose to do so as Christians to those who have ‘crucifixion’ thrust upon them, those who, in Rahnerian terminology, are ‘anonymous’ cross bearers rather than cross bearers by choice. Ellacuria defines the crucified people as follows:

That collective body, which as the majority of humankind owes its situation of crucifixion to the way society is organized and maintained by a minority that exercises its dominion through a series of factors, which taken together and given their concrete impact within history, must be regarded as sin.

(Ellacuria and Sobrino 1993: 590)

Hence the term denotes those suffering from the consequences of a sinful ordering of society. This suffering is not due to the chance misfortunes of life, but to a situation of structural oppression, deliberate in that there are those who benefit from sinful structures and seek to keep them in place. Given the metaphorical nature of the language, there is some inevitable flexibility in its usage, and this lack of precision can lead to potential dangers, especially when the crucified people are linked with soteriology. Perhaps Sobrino uses differing aspects of the crucified people imprecisely? Liberation theology is, above all a contextual theology, and it is important to recognize how changes in context broaden the scope of the theme of the crucified people. Analyses of Latin American poverty have increasingly encompassed issues of sexual and racial inequality and erosion of traditional culture, and globalization has (at least partially) changed the nature of economic poverty from oppression to exclusion. Does Sobrino have in mind the poor as politically organized (most specifically, the base communities) or, in Marxist terms, the ‘lumpenproletariat’ poor who simply ‘die en masse, innocently and anonymously’ (Sobrino 2003: 132)?

The theologically controversial leap undertaken by Ellacuria and Sobrino is, as suggested above, to extend ‘cross bearing’ from those who bear the cross as a result of their following Jesus to a wider suffering community. Is it justifiable to

make such an extension, from suffering explicitly for Jesus' sake to a more general suffering? If Rahner is at all correct in arguing for 'anonymous Christianity' i.e. that it is not necessary to name Christ explicitly to be sharing his way, then the corollary might be that it is not necessary to suffer explicitly for Christ to share in his suffering. It is necessary only to suffer in the way that Christ suffered, and for similar historical reasons – at the hands of those who hold power, and crucify those who threaten that power. Sobrino wrestles with this in his discussion of the relation between the 'Jesuanic martyrs' and the crucified people:

If martyrdom is the response of the anti-kingdom to those who struggle actively for the kingdom, then the analogatum princeps is being like Jesus, as exemplified in Archbishop Romero. If martyrdom is bearing the burden of the sin of the anti-kingdom, then these defenceless majorities – killed innocently, massively and passively, are the analogatum princeps.

(Sobrino 2003: 132)

The crucified people 'without intending it and without knowing it.... fulfil in the flesh what was lacking in the passion of Christ.' Sobrino will be aware that in using this verse (Colossians 1: 24) in this way he is going far beyond the meaning of Paul, who refers in that passage to those engaged in apostolic labours for the sake of the church. Is this transposition justified? Or is Sobrino pushing the language too far in identifying the crucified people too closely with those in the New Testament who suffer with and for Christ? I would argue that such an identification is justified, so long as the metaphorical nature of the crucified people language is recognized, and an attempt is not made to apply the metaphor indiscriminately to every point of comparison.

### ***Interpreting the role of the crucified people***

As before, it is important to recognize that the 'crucified people' do not, primarily, have a 'role'; they simply exist in their own right and are defined as crucified people by their oppressed situation. Stalsett has attempted to describe three 'axes', or interpretative relationships, between Jesus and the crucified people in Sobrino's theology. (Stalsett 2003: 164-5) The first he names as 'Epistemological-hermeneutical', denoting the two-way hermeneutic we have already noted between Jesus and oppressed peoples today. Theological and sociological understanding of one aids similar understanding of the other. The

second he describes as ‘Historical-soteriological’. Salvation is manifested and transmitted in history by the crucified people. The third of Stalsett’s ‘axes’ is ‘Ethical-practical’. Jesus’ historical praxis and that of the crucified people ‘mediate a call from God to all human beings to participate in the mission to overcome all suffering – to ‘take the crucified down from their cross’’. (Stalsett 2003: 165)

Although I would regard these ‘axes’ as useful, I wish to analyse the theme of the crucified people in a slightly different way: first, in relation to a discipleship shaped by the reality of suffering interpreted through the prism of the cross of Jesus; and, secondly, in relation to solidarity and salvation. Since the second is the most theologically innovative, I will devote much of my discussion here to the soteriological aspects of the crucified people. This is not, however, to downplay the pastoral and ecclesiological aspects of the crucified people, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

### ***The crucified people and a theology of cruciform discipleship***

The reality in which Sobrino does his theology is a crucified reality – in other words, a reality of suffering, and this crucified reality forms the bedrock of his interpretation. It may be argued that to regard reality as fundamentally ‘crucified’ is arbitrarily to pluck out one aspect and to privilege it above all others. This criticism can be answered in two ways. First, liberation theologians work consciously from their context (liberation theology argues that other theologies likewise work from their context, but often unconsciously), and Sobrino’s context in war torn and often desperately poor El Salvador is best described, theologically, as crucified. Secondly, a downplaying of suffering, when it is regarded as merely yet another aspect of the world, risks the accusation of theological and social complacency and an ignorance (unconscious or wilful) of the mechanisms by which the powerful hold their power and the powerless are excluded. A theological and pastoral recognition of the crucified people makes possible a true knowledge both of the crucified reality of the world and of the divine response to that crucified reality. What Gutiérrez described as the ‘underside of history’ (Gutiérrez 1983) is brought to the surface. This gaining of a true knowledge of reality through the prism both of the cross of Christ and of its historical concomitant, the crucified people, forms a concrete and transformative ‘epistemological hermeneutic’.

The transformative potential of the hermeneutic provided by the crucified people is immense. At its simplest, for theology to recognize the existence (and centrality) of the crucified people is to shift the perspective in theology from the powerful to the victims. This is the prism through which theological truth is mediated in a privileged way. Theology and praxis are intertwined, so that the theological truth thus mediated is translated into compassionate discipleship, an encounter with the crucified people in a discipleship of the crucified Jesus. This encounter must not be from a position of neutrality or for a purpose of detached observation or philosophical theodicy. Sobrino, as we have seen, extends the first world's dilemma of how to do theology *after* Auschwitz to the yet more challenging how to do theology *within* Auschwitz. In such a situation, analysis of crucifixion without an attempt to abolish crucifixion is pointless. Sobrino recounts how Ellacuria admired Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (a bloodstained copy of which was found in Ellacuria's house following his murder by a paramilitary 'death squad') but he made a point of stressing a more urgent practical and theological idea: the crucified people. 'The sole object of all this talk must be to bring them down from the cross'. (Sobrino 2003: 155)

### ***The crucified people, solidarity and salvation***

In exploring a parallelism between the crucified Christ and contemporary suffering, Ellacuria and Sobrino have followed a path which can be traced in more traditional theology. However, in ascribing salvific significance to the crucified people they consciously go beyond the traditional. It is important to preface an analysis of this by a consideration of what Ellacuria and Sobrino mean by salvation. Sobrino states: 'There is no history of salvation without salvation in history.' (Sobrino 1994a: 262) Salvation is not simply an intra-trinitarian operation, nor something solely to be awaited in a far off unworldly future, but something to be experienced in the present history of the world. This is not totally to discount the more traditional views of salvation (although there is little doubt that in practice the traditionally 'heavenly' aspects of salvation are downplayed in much liberation theology) but to emphasize its present reality in the particulars of history. In a similar way, Gunton argues that 'the universal salvation must take concrete shape in particular parts of the creation'. (Gunton 1988: 170) It is the role of the Holy Spirit to 'particularize the universal redemption in anticipations of the eschatological

redemption'. Salvation is seen by Boff and Sobrino in such terms as humanization and deification (the two not being contradictory). It is not simply brought about by a divine fiat of grace but is (at any rate in its historical manifestations, upon which liberation theology concentrates) accomplished by active human participation. It is important also to note the gap not only between traditional and liberation theologies, but between Protestant and Catholic understandings of salvation: the Protestant emphasizing the never to be repeated gracious action of God in Christ; the Catholic the ongoing participation in that action by humanity. As a Roman Catholic liberation theologian, it is hardly surprising that Sobrino's view of salvation presupposes salvation as something to be worked out in the present. The correctness or otherwise of this presupposition deeply affects any judgment of the appropriateness of utilizing the theme of crucified people, especially in soteriology.

Sobrino's doctrine of the crucified people rests on a solidarity between God in Christ and those who suffer. Sobrino argues: 'The crucified people are the presence of Christ crucified in history....it is idle to say that Christ crucified has a body in history and not identify it in some way.' (Sobrino 1994a: 264) There is a parallelism which goes beyond mere similarity – Stalsett usefully describes a *communicatio idiomatum*, a mutual exchange of properties (Stalsett 2003: 166) between the suffering Jesus and the suffering people. If the cross of Jesus demonstrates the vulnerable presence of God in sharing human suffering, then it is analogically correct to ascribe God's vulnerable presence also to the crosses of the contemporary world. This divine sympathy is in itself a sign of salvation, in demonstrating God's solidarity with those who suffer. Sobrino takes this further by utilizing the Isaianic figure of the 'Suffering Servant' (especially in Isaiah 53). He finds significant similarities between the suffering servant and the crucified peoples of today, in their suffering, in their being 'despised and rejected', and in their being killed for 'establishing right and justice'. This triple identification, of the suffering servant, of Jesus, and of the crucified peoples, is the starting point for Sobrino's new soteriological departure.

It is interesting to note that Sobrino does not necessarily ascribe a greater salvific role to those who are active in political and economic change. He certainly likens this role to that of the servant: 'The Servant shares both Jesus' mission and his fate.....Too many die formally like the Servant for trying actively to establish justice.' (Sobrino 1994a: 257-8) But identification with the suffering servant is not



restricted to those who identify themselves as Christians or who are political activists:

Among the crucified people there are also many – the majority – who end up like the Suffering Servant but not directly for what they actively do, simply for what they are. They are killed passively, for just being what they are: even when they say nothing, they are the greatest proof of injustice and the greatest protest against it. (Sobrino 1994a: 258)

The relationship is a reciprocal one. ‘Without the active Servant, the passive Servant would have no voice, and unless the passive Servant existed, the active Servant would have no reason to exist.’ (Sobrino 1994a: 259) The Servant ‘bears the sin of the world’. (Sobrino 1994a: 260ff) In other words: ‘The invisible wrong done to God becomes historical in the visible wrong done to the victims. ‘Died for our sins’ ...means really to be crushed in a particular historical situation – by sinners.’ What, then should be done about sin? It is necessary to ‘eradicate it, but with one essential condition – by bearing it’. The theme of ‘sin bearing’ is crucial for Sobrino: ‘Rather than taking on the guilt of sin, bearing the sin of others means bearing the sin’s historical effects: being ground down, crushed, put to death.’ This is not merely negative, but has soteriological import: ‘The crucified people bear the sins of their oppressors on their shoulders...nevertheless, by really taking on the sin historically, the Servant can eradicate it.’ This is a remarkable statement by Sobrino, especially when followed by: ‘It becomes light and salvation and the scandalous paradox is resolved.’ The crucified people become bearers of ‘historical soteriology’ - in a similar way to the suffering servant’s role as bearer of salvation. In a significant later passage Sobrino writes: ‘The one chosen by God to bring salvation is the servant, which increases the scandal.’ (Sobrino 2003: 160) The scandal is salvation coming ‘from below’, from an unexpected place. The crucified people are not only those to whom God’s salvation is primarily offered, but are also the key to the world’s salvation (there is an interesting parallel in the privileged position of the proletariat in Marx’s scheme of ‘salvation’). Sobrino downplays the ‘vicarious expiation’ aspect of the Servant’s role as not illuminating ‘what salvation the cross brings, far less what historical salvation the cross brings today’. (Sobrino 2003: 160) And yet, to be true to the Biblical model, salvation must somehow be found in the figure of the suffering servant. This is not ‘only or principally a matter of speculation and interpretation of texts. It is a matter of grasping the reality’.

Sobrino attempts to describe three ways in which the suffering servant/crucified people can be said to be bearers of salvation – ‘as shedding light on the human situation; as offering humanizing values; and as bearing the ‘sin of the world’.

First, the crucified people bring into sharp focus the injustices of the world. Sobrino writes of the light given by the crucified peoples:

It will produce panic and disruption, it will also dispel the darkness and heal....It will produce the light of utopia: that true progress cannot consist in what is offered now, but in bringing the crucified people down from the cross and sharing the resources and everybody’s goods with all.

(Sobrino 2003: 161)

This light ‘Shows the nations what they really are’. It unmask lies: ‘If the First World cannot see its own reality in this light, we do not know what can make it do so.’ It demonstrates the ethical unsustainability of the present situation: ‘The solution offered by the First World today is factually wrong, because it is unreal; it is not universalizable. And it is ethically wrong, for them and for the Third World.’ (Sobrino 2003: 160) The first step (although, as Sobrino perhaps neglects to mention, only the first step) in salvation is the manifestation of the sin, what might be called in traditional evangelical language ‘conviction of sin’. The existence of crucified people means that economics and politics are revealed to be a matter not merely of figures on a balance sheet or games played by the powerful, but involve actual crucifying effects on human beings. They show the reality of sin, its effects upon humanity, and what must be done with it.

Next, Sobrino turns to the positive and notes the salvific (in Sobrino’s terms ‘humanizing’) values which the crucified people bring (Sobrino 2003: 161):

The crucified people offer values that are not offered elsewhere..... evangelizing potential.... the gospel values of solidarity, service, simplicity and readiness to receive God’s gift; a humanizing potential, offering community against individualism, co-operation against selfishness, simplicity against opulence, openness to transcendence against blatant positivism, so prevalent in the civilization of the Western world.

(Sobrino 1994a: 263)

The crucified people offer hope, great love, forgiveness, a faith, a way of being church ‘and a holiness that are more authentic, more Christian and more relevant to the present day world, and that recapture more of Jesus’. Sobrino is aware of this

from personal and pastoral experience – there is the danger, though, that in other hands this doctrine could veer too closely toward a naïve Rousseau-like idealization. The crucified people of the ‘third world’ offer these gifts to the whole world in what could be a beneficial exchange: ‘Liberated and given grace by the crucified people, the first world could become grace and liberation for them.’ (Sobrino 2003: 162) Moreover, the crucified people demonstrate some of the most striking features of Jesus’ life in the world, and hence show what it means to share in Jesus’ status as a son (or daughter) of God. In this sense, they mediate the life of Jesus to the world.

Third, the poor ‘bear the sin of the world’. The crucified peoples, as the chief recipient of the harmful results of sinful economic and political structures, can be said to ‘bear the sin of the world’ in that they bear its consequences. However, Ellacuria and Sobrino seem to go beyond this relatively simple concept in suggesting that the power of sin can only be overcome by bearing its consequences, by suffering under it. Stalsett interprets this to mean that ‘Salvation in history can be achieved only through confronting sin in an active struggle against it, and bearing the consequences of the opposition which such a struggle always – by historical necessity – will meet’. (Stalsett 2003:141) This would in itself be an adequate and fruitful interpretation, but Ellacuria and Sobrino seem to go beyond this in ascribing to the crucified people a special salvific role with the phrase: ‘There is no liberation from sin without the bearing of sin.’ But does ‘sin’ (in the liberation theologian’s sense of injustice and dehumanization) have to be ‘borne’ in the sense of suffered, for ‘salvation’ to take place? Can it not simply be halted, changed, brought to an end? This change may well involve suffering on behalf of those who attempt such a course, but Ellacuria and Sobrino seem to suggest that there is something not only ultimately beneficial but absolutely necessary in ‘soaking up’ the sin by suffering injustice and oppression. This image (Christ nullifying the power of sin by ‘soaking up’ all that could be directed at him) has been fruitful in providing a new model of atonement, but it is difficult to see how this can be used profitably with the crucified people, whose liberation lies not in receiving more injustice in order to ‘soak it up’ but in being delivered from it.

Stalsett provides a useful summary of the salvific benefits of the crucified people and attempts to integrate Sobrino’s teaching with more traditional doctrines of salvation (Stalsett 2003: 538ff). ‘Since God’s presence with the crucified Jesus is

a salvific presence, there are signs of God's salvific presence also in the crosses of history.' This happens in the following ways: 'The crucified people share salvation with the world by testifying to God's salvific presence, and by transmitting and communicating signs and fruits of this salvation to others.' Their role is that of an effectual witness: '...through hope, through promoting life, forgiving, they generate solidarity and mercy, and confess the God of life'. Stalsett is careful to distinguish between Jesus and the crucified people in the mediation of salvation: the crucified people mediate salvation in a derived sense; Jesus is the prime mediator, and calls others to follow him. Similarly, whereas the crucified people are indispensable for salvation, they do not create salvation. They are not, in Stalsett's view, saviours, and do not play a salvific role in an ultimate sense. Jesus alone is the saviour. They do not carry the sins of others away; this, according to Stalsett, would be a wrong extension of the suffering servant analogy. They may carry other people's sins as scapegoats, in a Girardian sense, but Christianity breaks the logic of scapegoating, since Jesus is on the side of the scapegoat, and enables those who are scapegoats to break free. Suffering in itself is not salvific – salvation lies in the love of God, present in the Crucified.

I would largely agree with Stalsett's sympathetic critique. This doctrine of the crucified people is a dramatic and vivid transposition of the historical cross of Jesus to present circumstances. By analogy with the presence of God in the suffering Jesus, it emphasises God's solidarity with those who suffer today. Perhaps Sobrino would have been wise to restrict salvific value to that divine solidarity, and to have been more hesitant in over applying the analogy with Christ. Sobrino risks appearing to suggest that the crucified people themselves take over the work of Christ, if not *in toto*, then to a substantial degree. There are two problems with this: first, that it derogates from the unique and definitive nature of Christ (although Sobrino is clear that the crucified people's mediation of salvation is a derived mediation, and in line with the traditional theology of the body of Christ perpetuating Christ's ministry); and second, that it portrays only a partial view of salvation – there is (rightly) nothing ascribed to the crucified people encompassing such soteriological models as atoning sacrifice, substitution, etc. which are found within the model of the suffering servant. Perhaps refuge can be taken in the argument that liberation theology only emphasises that part of theology which is particularly relevant for its own situation – it does not deny the rest, but

concentrates on certain aspects. For example, the crucified people undoubtedly illustrate certain aspects of salvation, in acting as an 'open wound' of humanity thus bringing into sharp focus political and economic sin and the need for redemption.

There is, however, a further problem in directly ascribing salvific value to the crucified people's sufferings. True, their sufferings do bring to light an unjust situation, but that is, as we have seen, only a preliminary to salvation, not salvation itself. Sobrino himself suggests that salvation occurs when the crucified people are taken down from the cross. Their sufferings may well enable acts of remedial justice, kindness, compassion to take place, and hence have value, but that is similar to a pastoral situation where a seriously ill, or disabled person is informed that their life has value and purpose in being a focus of love, in being a recipient of care and an opportunity for others to demonstrate compassion. This may well be true, but it fundamentally transgresses the Kantian ethic of never treating humans as means to an end, but as an end in themselves. Sobrino's theology here risks instrumentalising the crucified people – in addition to the ever present danger of legitimizing poverty. This danger can to some extent be countered by his insistence on the absolute primacy of taking the crucified from their crosses. Although God, in Sobrino's theology, chooses the poor as the principal means of salvation, this does not mean that he intends them to remain poor or sacralises their poverty.

Much of the above criticism is lessened if the salvific element of the crucified people is specifically identified as those (within the crucified people or acting on their behalf) who actively resist systems of poverty and political oppression, and suffer as a consequence. The obvious candidates, close to Sobrino's own experience, are those other sections of the church which seek to 'take down the suffering people from their crosses' (most notably, the martyrs of El Salvador). Sobrino states that 'Ignacio Ellacuria said many times that the specifically Christian task is to fight to eradicate sin by bearing its burden.' (Sobrino 2003: 96) This would describe very accurately those within the Latin American church who actively campaign against poverty and oppression, and bear the burden of suffering which this entails. Sobrino continues: 'Although it is true that historical sin can only be eradicated by means of a power outside the sin, it also has to be done by someone willing to bear the burdensome reality of that sin which destroys and sows death'. (Sobrino 2003: 103) In other words this means not merely attacking the 'system' from the outside, but bearing the consequences of that system from within

and being willing to accept the possible outcome. Suffering, in itself, does not bring salvation, but a willingness to suffer for a salvific cause is part of the salvific process, a distinction well made by Stalsett: 'Life in service of the kingdom saves, with death a possible and likely consequence. Therefore the suffering people are salvific only insofar as there is a reproduction of Jesus' service for the kingdom in history.' (Stalsett 2003: 148-9) That service, and therefore salvific action, can be unconscious or anonymous (in the Rahnerian sense) and Jesus does not need to be named for the service to be Christlike. Sobrino is well aware of the distinction between 'active' salvific action and 'passive' salvific action. Perhaps his unwillingness to dismiss 'passive' salvific action is due to a justifiable reluctance to separate too radically the politically active from the masses they represent. It would probably be more accurate to identify different sections of the crucified people with different parts of the salvific process – the 'passive' with the role of providing evidence for 'conviction of sin', the 'active' bearing the weight of that sin in order to overcome it.

**b) Boff and Yoder – a theology of solidarity**

***Boff and cruciform solidarity***

Sobrino's doctrine of the crucified people rests on the solidarity of God with those who suffer. This theme of solidarity, between the poor and the crucified Christ, and, by extension, between the poor and the present body of Christ, is central to Boff's theology. In his summary chapter 'How to preach the cross of Jesus Christ today', he expounds this theme in two ways: 'To carry the cross as Jesus carried it means taking up a solidarity with the crucified of the world.' (Boff 1987: 130) This commitment and solidarity involves the dangerous process of both defending the oppressed and denouncing their oppressors. 'Jesus' cross and death, too, were the consequence of such a commitment to the deserted of this world.' (Boff 1987: 130) Boff no doubt has in mind the option for the poor adopted by the Roman Catholic church in Latin America following Medellin. Also, the cross is the sign of God's actual, historical solidarity with the victims of history.

God's preferred mediation is the concrete, real-life suffering of the oppressed...To draw near to God is to draw near the oppressed. To say that God took up the cross must not be a glorification or eternalization of the

cross. That God has taken up the cross shows only how much God loves. God loves sufferers so much that he suffers and dies along with them. (Boff 1987: 132-3)

Boff finds a radical congruence between the perspective of the poor and that of the crucified Christ. A key Biblical passage in Boff's interpretation of the cross is Matthew 25: 31-46 ('When did we see you.....?') He comments: 'God really does lie hidden and unknown beneath every person in need.' (Boff 1980: 37-39) The fact that God, or Jesus, continues to suffer in the poor and oppressed is at the heart of Boff's theology of the cross, and crucial to his methodology.

Hence, Boff writes of the 'one eye focussing on the historical Jesus... the other eye focussing on the Christ of faith who continues his passion today in his brothers and sisters'. (Boff 1980: viii) This forms the basis for Boff's spirituality of a present encounter with God. Where does that encounter occur? What are the ramifications of that encounter? Boff stresses the mystical solidarity between Jesus (and God) on the cross and those 'crucified' today. 'Since God himself was crucified in Jesus Christ, no cross imposed unjustly is a matter of indifference to him. He is in solidarity with all who hang on crosses'. (Boff 1980: 16) How does God wish to be encountered? 'God wishes to be encountered and served in the face of this humiliated and outraged person, in the disfigured face of this man who was the victim of violence.' (Boff 1980: 45) This divine choice is central to genuine spirituality: 'God chose to concentrate his presence, to privilege certain situations. If we do not encounter him there, where he chose to be, then we simply do not encounter him at all, nor do we commune with the real God of Jesus Christ.' (Boff 1980: 46-7) The *locus* chosen by God for the divine human encounter is first of all Jesus Christ, a 'frail, powerless human being'. (Boff 1980: 47) 'Second, we encounter God in the lives and faces of the humiliated and the downtrodden' Boff combines Jesus as the 'human face of God', Matthew 25, and the identification of God with Jesus on the cross to create a spirituality of encounter with the divine in the ongoing 'crucifixion' of human beings.

To adopt Kitamori's phrase (Kitamori 1965), Boff's is a theology of the 'pain of God'. Boff stresses that God suffers as a result of being love, and takes up the cross as something very much *extra deum* as an expression of that love. 'Here is the meaning of a God on the cross, a God in pain.' (Boff 1987:115-6) A

contemplation of God in such suffering, and human suffering in the perspective of the divine, means that:

Only in solidarity with the crucified can we struggle against the cross; only in identification with the victims of tribulation can there be real liberation from tribulation. And this was Jesus' road, the road of God incarnate...God assumes the cross in solidarity with and love for the crucified of history, with those who suffer the cross. (Boff 1987: 115-6)

The cross and suffering is *extra deum*, and therefore not intrinsic to God, but God takes them up in freedom, and invites others to take up the cross in freedom and love as a means of accomplishing liberation from the 'crosses' of oppression. This is the basis for Boff's cruciform spirituality of liberation: the cross is 'the place where the power of love is shown. The cross is hatred destroyed by a love that takes up the cross and the hatred. This is liberation.' (Boff 198: 116) The chosen and free solidarity of God, in Christ, with the suffering of the oppressed must be paralleled by a similar chosen and free solidarity on behalf of the church. In this way the church truly incarnates the present 'body of Christ'.

This emphasis on solidarity is fundamental to Boff's Christology, and is a radical outworking of his doctrine of the 'cosmic Christ'. Through the resurrection, 'Christ penetrated [the world] in a more profound manner and is now present in all reality in the same way God is present in all things.' (Boff 1978: 207) Boff is indebted to Rahner (as pointed out in Waltermire 1994: 40) in the extent to which sees the 'cosmic Christ' at work in all people. This means that 'each person is actually a brother or sister to Jesus and in some way participates in his reality'. (Boff 1978: 218) Presumably the converse holds true, that the 'cosmic Christ' participates, often incognito, in the reality of each person. Reality, in Teilhardian terms, has a 'Christic structure'. (Waltermire 1994: 42)

### ***Yoder – discipleship as solidarity***

Yoder's cruciform discipleship rests on a multifaceted solidarity with the crucified Christ. The disciple, in imitation of the character of God as revealed in Christ, shares radically in Christ's sufferings. Yoder uses such words as 'participation' or 'correspondence' to describe this relationship (Yoder 1994: 113), and describes 'suffering with Christ as the definition of apostolic existence'. (Yoder 1994: 120) The Christian thus shares in the 'divine condescension', exemplified in



the incarnation and especially the crucifixion of Jesus. Christ's free solidarity with suffering humankind through the cross is paralleled by the church's willingness to suffer in solidarity with him. Being 'in Christ' necessitates and empowers an identity between Jesus and the disciple-church which gives the church both its political ethic and its vulnerability to suffering. This solidarity-in-suffering of the church with the suffering Christ is the practical and historical source and outcome of the political nonconformity undertaken by the church in obedience to Christ.

### **3) Conclusion**

Boff's stress on the solidarity of God through Christ with the world's suffering is a useful complement to Sobrino's doctrine of the crucified people. Both themes are Christologically focused, through Boff's teaching on the 'cosmic Christ' and Sobrino's linking of the 'crucified' with the 'Crucified'. Both rest, too, on a theology of a suffering God who in freedom suffers the pain of the creation, and both give rise to a political spirituality of commitment, encounter and identification. Both (particularly Sobrino) are concerned not to restrict the crucified people to those claiming explicit Christian commitment or church membership. This is the critical point of divergence between Yoder's theology of Christ in solidarity with his suffering (Christian) people and Sobrino's theology of a crucified people whose only qualification for the title is their suffering. For Yoder, such solidarity is gained not through a more general suffering, but through suffering specifically as a member of a Christlike, persecuted church. As previously noted, it is important to recognize that the distinction may not in practice be as clear cut as it first appears. Sobrino and Boff write within a situation where the 'default position' of most people is Christian, and where despite the decline in the practice of Catholicism in Latin America, most would regard themselves as Christians and members of the church. For Yoder, membership of the church is, both sociologically and theologically, more a matter of choice. There is, however, a fundamental difference between Sobrino's approach, much influenced by Rahner's 'anonymous Christianity' and Yoder's theology, which is based on a committed and disciplined church, consciously imitating Christ's suffering. I would argue, however, that the two approaches can be combined. Yoder's committed and suffering community is an explicit sign of Christ's cross - but that does not diminish the truth that a God of

sympathy and solidarity does not restrict that sympathy and solidarity to those who bear the name of Christ.

**Summary - towards a political theology of the cross (iii)**

The last two chapters have discussed the cross in relation to two categories of people – the cruciform and the crucified people. I now attempt to outline elements arising from these chapters which I believe should be incorporated in a political theology of the cross.

***The corporate Christ and the people of God***

In Pauline theology, Christ has a corporate, as well as an individual, nature. This is especially significant in Paul's teaching about the 'body of Christ', referring not just to the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth but to his community of followers. From the human perspective, what is described as the 'body of Christ' is a continuation in physical form, in the present, of the reality of the historical Jesus. From the divine perspective, it denotes that part / aspect / mode of the divine that was in Jesus which takes shape in human reality today. Hence the 'body of Christ' is intimately linked with the historical Jesus as well as being a present sociological reality. In that sense, the body of Christ is an extension of the incarnation. How can that present body act politically, as Jesus did? How far is that body bound to follow the same pattern of life which, for Jesus, led to crucifixion? How far does that 'body' extend? Is it restricted to those who bear the name of Christ, or does it include those who have done to them what was done to Christ? In general terms, I have described the former as the 'cruciform people' and the latter as the 'crucified people'. There is certainly an overlap, but the term 'cruciform people' denotes those who actively choose to be members of a community seeking a political path which may lead to 'crucifixion'; the 'crucified people' denote those whose 'crucifixion' is not necessarily chosen, but inflicted as a result of their unchosen sociological location. Both can claim to share in the corporate nature of Christ, the former through willing participation in his mission, the latter through unwillingly undergoing the same persecution he suffered at the hands of those whose power is threatened.

***The cross and a modified responsibility***

The church's political responsibility is enlarged, not diminished, by the cross. The fact that Jesus' political choices led him to a position of non-resistance, non-violence and non-coercion does not mean that Christian responsibility for the

world is denied. The Christendom approach may involve a tragic category mistake in conflating Christianity with civil power; the Niebuhrian ‘chaplaincy to power’ strategy runs the risk of complicity in evil, but the Christian’s loving responsibility for a suffering world cannot be escaped. The question is – how is that responsibility to be exercised? In the teaching of Jesus, sins of omission are as harmful as sins of commission, and a refusal to ameliorate a situation when it is within one’s power to do so should not be countenanced unless for overwhelmingly good reasons. The ethics of conflicting duty – on the one hand to peace and non-violence, on the other to justice and love of neighbour – mean that moral decisions cannot necessarily be clear cut, and the tension between witness and responsibility remains acute. The Christian should not be afraid of wishing to move history in the right direction; in the light of the eschatological hope of the coming kingdom, the Christian recognizes a *telos* and seeks to move towards it.

This is not to argue in a totally consequentialist manner that the *telos* requires a strategy to which all else can and should be sacrificed. There are legitimate ends – but the means to those ends are as important as the ends themselves. Legitimate Christian responsibility should only be exercised through legitimate (i.e. non-violent and non-retaliatory) channels. Can the goodness of the legitimate ends ever outweigh the evil of illegitimate methods? A short term Niebuhrian realist would answer in the affirmative, the Yoderian (relying on the efficacy of long term witness) in the negative. For reasons outlined above, it is difficult totally to discount the short term approach – provided that one maintains a deep awareness of human sinfulness, a wise cynicism about the motivation for supposedly good actions, and an awareness of unforeseen and unintended consequences. The Second World War is, perhaps, a prime example: a war fought for overwhelmingly legitimate ends, in defence against a criminal, vicious, and racist expansionary dictatorship, but fought in alliance with a comparably evil totalitarian regime, and with increasingly barbaric methods (such as the escalation of bombing from purely military targets to civilian terrorization). Can responsibility and a faithful witness to the non-violent nature of God be combined? This will be discussed more fully in the next section, but it is worth noting at this point that the truest witness to God reflects all possible aspects of the divine nature. A non-violent church witnesses to the non-violence of God, but also a responsible church witnesses to the loving responsibility of God. The church can never witness

perfectly to the character of God – the best that can be hoped for is an ethic of approximation to the form of Christ.

It is a false dichotomy to posit the choice between ‘being the church’ and taking on the responsibility of ‘doing politics’. ‘Being the church’ in a negative and defensive way is not enough, even if this preserves, in one sense, a purer witness to one aspect of God’s character. Nor is it a question of Christian social ethics choosing between ‘which cause should the church support’ and ‘what form should church take’. The church supports ‘causes’ because of what it is, and its actions – or, on occasion, abstaining from action – witness to what kind of a body it is. Either way it can incur the risk of ‘crucifixion’. This risk of crucifixion is the hard alternative to fight or flight. Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, was confronted by the alternatives of fight (the legions of angels), flight (returning quietly to Galilee) or remaining and facing the inevitable crucifixion (a point well made by Hovey 2008: 86). Similarly, the church can fight (attempt to integrate itself into a system of power), flee (into a withdrawn and supposedly pure state which contradicts the principle of the incarnation) or remain, as a vulnerable martyr/witness of the gospel.

### ***The cruciform people, the state and the church***

The cross provokes a strong hermeneutic of suspicion of Constantinian power. The Constantinian revolution was unfortunate, if perhaps inevitable, in co-opting Christianity to the power of empire. The crucifier assumed the mantle of the crucified, and the effects of that uncomfortable fit have skewed Christian social ethics ever since. Most perniciously, the concept of Christian territoriality arose, and Christendom became an entity to be defended by violence. Crusade replaced cruciformity. The myth of ‘Christian nations’ hid the fact that there is no sociological entity which can properly bear the name Christian except the church (and, to a limited extent, certain para-church organizations). This hermeneutic of suspicion of Constantinianism need not lead to a refusal by Christians to support movements which seek political power (for example, liberation theologians supporting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua). It would be foolish to deny that for the victims of society, a benevolent government is better than an oppressive tyrant. However, one should still retain a radically cruciform suspicion of power (both on the left and the right) and an awareness of the danger of its corruption.

If the cross entails a hermeneutic of suspicion of civil power, it should equally entail a hermeneutic of suspicion of the church, since it was an alliance between civil and religious authorities which crucified Jesus. The separation of the church from the world can be overemphasised, the relationship being better described as dialectical, and the boundaries between church and society often blurred. The church, like any other human institution, is corrupt and fallible, and falls foul of the temptations of illegitimate power. While it is unrealistic, given human sinfulness, to expect the church to be anything other than what it is, the inescapable essence of the task of the church is to be a foretaste of and a witness to the kingdom of God. There is a sense in which the prime (but certainly not the only) community for the exercise of Christian politics is the church. The church should be the community in which the salvific values of the kingdom of God are promoted most energetically and seen most clearly.

It is a mistake to see the church as essentially 'other' with regard to politics, as if it could stand outside politics and move politics from a position of grand detachment. However, attention needs to be given to the question of where the church positions itself vis-à-vis state power. Here, the liberation theologian's championing of a 'church of the poor' is significant. A cruciform church is most effectively situated among (or at least in touch with and conscious of) the needs of the vulnerable. Whereas the church's relationship with political power has traditionally been from a position of equality and collegiality, a different approach is indicated. Speaking from the position of the vulnerable and assuming the possibility of conflict entails a critical yet participative approach to power which takes the perspective of the crucified rather than the crucifiers. Any engagement with and participation in structures of power must be done in terms of service rather than power seeking, with an awareness of the ever present danger of co-option. Withdrawal can of itself be a positive witness by refusing to collaborate with an oppressive state and taking sides with its victims.

### ***Powerlessness and persuasive witness***

In the kenotic hymn in Philippians chapter 2 Paul describes Jesus as rejecting control and choosing a powerlessness which culminated in the cross. Jesus' choice is paralleled by the prior decision of God, whose chosen power is that of suffering love. God chooses to restrain the divine power, abstaining from any

coercion which might destroy human freedom, and, ultimately, the possibility of loving relationships. This restraint, although based on God's free choice, is not totally contingent, given both God's nature of love and the necessity, for human freedom, for God to distance himself from his creation. The church aims to share in this pattern of divine love, revealed to its greatest extent in the cross of Jesus, and seeks to live in a self-giving, non-violent, self-sacrificial love which best witnesses to the divine character. Hence the church should not use coercion as a strategy, but should rely on the persuasive power of its witness - the more consistent the witness, the stronger the persuasive power. However, while the church *qua* church should not use coercion, there is no reason why the individual Christian, acting as an agent of a beneficial state should not use a degree of coercion, provided that this coercion is exercised within the limits of love. It is important to recognize that the state is not normally constituted by the sword of lethal violence (rather than that of limited coercive police action).

The church in twenty first century Britain seems to be moving into a position of imposed and involuntary powerlessness. Such cruciform powerlessness is not to be sought as an ideal in itself, but is nevertheless a situation from which good things can come and which can release spiritual resources otherwise fettered by a reliance on the short cut of power and force. This theme will be developed in the final chapter.

### ***The crucified people – metaphor and reality***

The phrase 'crucified people' sheds light both on the crucifixion of Jesus and on contemporary suffering, conveying the shocking enormity of that suffering and linking it with Christology. The crucified people are a constant throughout world history, the grim and continuing story of executioner and victim, of powerful and powerless. It is, however, important to stress the metaphorical nature of the language used. As with any metaphor, there is not a complete correspondence between the language used and the reality described. If this is forgotten, it could seem that the negative is being unduly privileged. The whole reality of the crucified people is not described by this metaphor; joy, community, co-operation, faith and love co-exist with the 'crucifixion'.

The phrase crucified people is, however, more than a metaphor. It describes the continuation in space and time of the sufferings of Christ, and his solidarity with

those who suffer. The parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew chapter 25 illustrates this solidarity, as does Paul's enigmatic phrase in Colossians 1: 24 '...completing what remains for Christ to suffer'. This, as has previously been discussed, raises the question of the extent of the crucified people. If it is those who choose to bear the cross, its extent will be limited to Christians. If it is those who stand in the place where Jesus stood and are killed for the same reasons as Jesus, then its extent is far wider. As has been suggested, Rahner's use of the phrase 'anonymous Christians' may perhaps be found useful. God's solidarity with suffering is not restricted to those who bear the name Christian, and the concept of the 'anonymous crucified' might express the link between those who consciously and willingly bear the cross of Christ and those who have it thrust upon them.

### ***The crucified people and salvation***

While the theme of the crucified people links well with Christology, the link with soteriology is less well established. Much depends on how salvation is defined, and, as mentioned above, there are significant differences not only between liberation theology and more traditional theology but also between Protestant and Catholic understandings of salvation. Care is needed with the language used, especially by liberation theologians, lest salvation be understood as being simply coterminous with social justice. Equally, more traditional theology must be aware of the possibility that salvation can be represented as hardly touching the earth at all, but detached from the reality of human struggle and the concreteness of sin. At the heart of salvation is a gift of God given in absolute grace through Christ, which restores a right relationship both between God and humanity and between human beings. That gift has to be appropriated, and that appropriation produces the fruits of justice, peace, restored relationships, healing 'humanization and deification'. Others can mediate salvation, but Jesus is the only definitive saviour. How then can the crucified people be described in soteriological terms? Do the crucified people save others, or are they simply recipients of the saving love of God? It is perhaps best to describe the crucified people as: first, a vivid sign of the need for salvation; second, a sign that that salvation is in process; and third, the *locus* where the saving God is especially evident and present.

The crucified people stand as an open wound of humanity, and provide a shocking revelation of the reality of the world and hence its need for salvation. In



that sense they enable repentance and conversion by dispelling ignorance, bringing to consciousness as nothing else can the stark fact of human sin. They ‘bear the sin of the world’ as an exposed nerve bears the pain of the body. In their struggles for liberation and in the love, solidarity and compassion they display within that struggle they demonstrate that salvation is at work, and offer those hard won values both to the rest of the world in general and to other ‘crucified peoples’ in particular.

***The crucified people, ideology and idolatry***

Theologically, the crucified people demonstrate the reality of Jesus, in the sense that they are the most vivid parallel possible in the present world to the historical crucifixion of Jesus. By demonstrating that reality, they prevent God from being seen idolatrously as a dispassionate monarch, rather than a ‘fellow sufferer who understands’. (Whitehead 1979: 350) The ever present temptation to idolatry is most effectively overcome by the cross, which rules out any easy interpretation of the divine as conforming to, and thereby buttressing, structures of human power. If the cross, and the incarnation in general, is to be interpreted most accurately in the present world, the crucified people provide the most illuminating context for that interpretation. Their suffering forms a definitive place of encounter with the God who shares that suffering and seeks to abolish it.

An attention to the theme of the crucified people can also help preserve theology from the Marxist charge against Christianity of forming a misleading ideology. Ideology, in the Marxist account, is described by Scott as follows: ‘Ideas have a particular function: either as a contribution to the explanation of our situation and so to overcoming or transcending this situation or as a contribution to the mystification or misconstrual of our situation.’ (Scott 1994: 15) Marxism accuses theology of ‘a capacity to mystify or obscure the ‘real’ social relations of contemporary capitalist society’ (Scott 1994: 64) thereby preserving the power of the dominant classes in society. According to this charge, the ideological effect of Christianity is ‘autonomous individualism or, at best, an intersubjectivity’. (Scott 1994: 60) This, according to Marxist analysis, has a doubly pernicious result – the suffering classes are prevented from accurately recognising their true situation, and those who analyse society are given a misleading short cut by an over-general and non-historical doctrine of sin. If everything can simply be ascribed to ‘sin’, there is a diminished need for social analysis.

The theme of the crucified people provides a robust answer to these criticisms. First, the identification within Christian theology of a theological and sociological category of people as 'crucified' by analyzable socio-economic and political factors sheds light upon, rather than mystifies their oppressed situation. This is not a short cut, avoiding socio-political analysis, but an added layer of analysis. Mere individualism is explicitly renounced – the people are crucified as a people, and not merely as individuals. Second, the self-recognition by the oppressed as 'crucified people' enhances, rather than diminishes, their knowledge of their situation. Since domination often requires the 'consent' of the dominated, through ignorance of their true potential, the self-consciousness of a people as being 'crucified' helps to dispel that ignorance and provides potential for 'resurrection' in what Foucault described as 'the insurrection of subjugated knowledges'. (Foucault 1980: 81)

**SECTION IV – BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATIONS**

**3) HOPE, PROVIDENCE, POWER AND THE CROSS**

Chapter 9

**Hope, eschatology and the cross**

We now turn to wider questions of providence, power and eschatology in the light of the cross. It is essential to recognise that in the New Testament the cross is not seen in isolation from the resurrection. In this chapter, therefore, we continue to focus on the crucified Jesus, but also consider the impact of his resurrection from the dead. We begin by examining the place of hope in Yoder, Boff and Sobrino. What difference to Christian politics does it make to hope in a crucified saviour?

**a) Yoder - the cross, the church, and the political providence of God**

***An ethic of faith and hope***

One of the most important elements in the theology of Yoder's cross-based pacifism is the centrality of faith in the resurrection and of eschatological hope. In chapter 4 of *Politics of Jesus*, 'God will fight for us', the Holy War tradition in the Old Testament is interpreted as a call for Israel to trust in God, who 'fights' for his people, and not in their own (armed) strength. Yoder's is an ethic of active faith in God and trust in his appointed strategy, and the seeming 'risk' of faith in a God whose purposes are active in history is accepted as the ethical norm.

The resurrection of the crucified Christ is central to that faith and hope, in opening up hitherto unsuspected possibilities and confirming the rightness of the way (of the cross) chosen by Jesus. This is no arbitrary or short term choice, but corresponds to the divine pattern of working within history – a vulnerable love that is willing to be crucified. The resurrection demonstrates both the rightness of that choice and the fact that the universe is indeed open to such cruciform action. In a key passage summing up the argument at the centre of *Politics of Jesus*, Yoder writes that the resurrection pre-empta a choice between 'crucified agape' and (violent) 'effectiveness' since 'in the light of the resurrection crucified agape is not folly (as it seemed to the Hellenizers to be) and weakness (as the Judaizers believe) but the wisdom and the power of God'. (Yoder 1994: 109) If politics is the art of the possible, the resurrection pushes far back the accepted boundaries of the possible.

Since the victory of God takes place through the divine act of resurrection, neither calculations of cause and effect nor reliance on control or violent self defence can have the last word. The last word lies with the God who raises the crucified Jesus from the dead, and thus opens up unforeseen possibilities and instils courage to follow faithfully.

Yoder thus postulates a particular form of causality, through the action of God, of which the resurrection of the crucified is the major example. His Christological pacifism is throughout based on the character of God and the work of Jesus Christ, therefore 'the calculating link between our obedience and ultimate efficacy has been broken, since the triumph of God comes through resurrection and not through effective sovereignty or assured survival'. (Yoder 1994: 239) This must beg the question: how does 'resurrection' actively take place within history, except in 33CE? It is easier to read crucifixion into political history in terms of the suffering of peoples than it is to interpret resurrection. Does Yoder mean a divine intervention, which God brings about in response to God's people's obedience? Is it possible to point to such past 'interventions' in history? Or is Yoder speaking more figuratively in terms of God's Spirit encouraging, directing, and healing, and generally bringing good out of tragedy in honouring the faithfulness of God's people? The resurrection, as an event within as well as beyond history, is a sign of God ratifying a cruciform historical course of action, and thus acts as a hopeful indication to the Christian that acts corresponding to Jesus' life and character follow the grain of God's intentions. This must be received by faith, but perhaps the only true verification, for Yoder, is eschatological.

Yoder's pacifism is based in realism, not a Niebuhrian realism but a reliance on the perceived reality of the nature of the universe when seen in the light of the cross and resurrection. If the cross and resurrection give ultimate meaning to history, the Christian can have hope that what seems to be weakness will in the end turn out to be strength. Pacifism, on this account, may not necessarily be 'effective' in the immediate situation, for the pacifist, the aggressor, or the victim. Its effectiveness is more long term, in the overall fulfilment of God's purposes. Yet signs of the eventual accomplishment of God's purposes are evident in the very act of peacemaking and non-violence itself, in what can be described as the active inbreaking of God's kingdom, or as manifestations of the Spirit at work.

### *An eschatological ethic*

For this reason the eschatological context of Yoder's theology is highly significant. It is instructive to compare Yoder's eschatological perspective with that of 'Niebuhrian realist' or 'Constantinian' theology. Yoder's view of the Christian faith is radically eschatological, looking for the inbreaking of God's kingdom and living in faithful anticipation of that inbreaking. By contrast, 'realism' is more an ethic for the long haul, with no end in sight, save a distant heaven, making the best of a bad job with human resources, in the belief that this is the responsibility to which God has called humanity. Any early Christian political eschatological hope was in effect neutralized by the establishment of a Constantinian Christendom. If Christian political success was measured in terms of holding the levers of power, there could be nothing more to expect. Politically, eschatology was realized in the Constantinian settlement, and the element of hope, in the sense of active divine involvement, was downplayed. Without this hope, and the 'freedom for obedience' this brings, Constantinianism felt obliged to resort to violence, as the only option for change (argument in Carter 2001: 230). In contrast to the anthropocentricity of the Constantinian and 'realist' analysis, Yoder's eschatological orientation is theocentric. His political eschatology focuses on the cross and the resurrection in equal measure, avoiding both a sense of hopelessness and also a facile evasion of the fact of suffering (it is no coincidence that Moltmann's first *magna opera* concerned first hope, and then the cross).

The church is the bearer of the new aeon, and points beyond the possibilities of the old aeon to another form of historical causation. In his 1994 epilogue to *Politics of Jesus*, changing his emphasis a little to include 'effectiveness' and answering criticisms of irresponsibility, Yoder defends his pacifism against the realist accusation of sacrificing effectiveness and liberation in favour of moral purity and heavenly recompense. To trust in Christ means that 'in Jesus we have a clue to what kinds of causation, what kinds of community building, which kinds of conflict management, go with the grain of the cosmos'. (Yoder 1994: 246-7) Of that cosmos 'Jesus is both the Word (the inner logic of things) and the Lord ('sitting at the right hand')'. In other words, history does not need to be 'moved' by the church. It is the church's ethical task to align itself with the divine movement of history, to witness to that without deviation from it, in the faith that this is where true long

term effectiveness lies, since the world is ‘enclosed within... the sovereignty of the God of the Resurrection and the Ascension’. (Yoder 1994: 246-7)

***Discerning the presence in history of ‘the lamb who was slain’***

Long term effectiveness, resting on the ‘Lamb who was slain,’ is the key to Yoder’s interpretation of the movement of history, and the political role of the church within it. For the church to fulfil its purpose it must correctly read and faithfully follow the pattern of God’s action (in the sense of long term historical causation). Yoder argues that the church’s calling is to be the ‘conscience and the servant within human society’ and points to the necessity to discern ‘when and where God is using the Powers.’ (Yoder 1994: 155) This task calls for wisdom to recognize God’s working in history. This, as Yoder recognizes, is no straightforward task, given the danger of falling into what he describes as the ‘Sadducean or ‘German Christian’ temptation, to read off the surface of history a simple declaration of God’s will’. (Yoder 1994: 155) Reading ‘the signs of the times’ accurately is central to the church’s political task – in other words, locating the interpretative key to history and its movement. ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’, writes Yoder ‘is a declaration about the nature of the cosmos and the significance of history, within which both our conscientious participation and our conscientious objection find their authority and their promise.’ (Yoder 1994: 157) And, most significantly, the Christ who is Lord is the ‘Lamb who was slain’, which gives us a clue to both the nature of the universe and the political (and individual) ethics by which the world must live. The ‘Lamb who was slain’ is one of the key images in Revelation, and it is in interpreting this apocalyptic imagery that Yoder provides his most cogent portrayal of the cruciform meaning of history. The Biblical apocalypses, suggests Yoder, demonstrate

how the crucified Jesus is a more adequate key to understanding what God is about in the real world of empires and armies and markets than is the ruler in Rome, with all his supporting military, commercial and sacerdotal networks. (Yoder 1994: 246)

(By extension, the crucified Jesus is a better model for Christian political ethics than is a church relying on an alliance with military, economic and ‘establishment’ power.) The apocalypses attempt to describe God ‘active in history’, God working in past history and promising to be active in the present. How does that divine

activity take concrete form in the power structures of the world? In a key passage, and one which sums up the thrust of *Politics of Jesus* as a justification for pacifism, Yoder writes that the Lordship of the 'lamb that was slain' means that 'the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power determine the meaning of history'. (Yoder 1994: 232) As a result of this, the Christian is called to be patient – a key word in Yoder's social ethics, combining, as we have seen, both waiting and suffering. Yoder contrasts this with the realist criterion of effectiveness. The Christian can be patient – in other words, can wait in a potentially suffering hopefulness – and be obedient to God's call to non-violence because the fundamental reality of history is on the Christian's side. 'The triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of cause and effects, nor because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys.' (Yoder 1994: 232) There is a different, divine causality which, if the church is to be faithful, it must respect: a causality not based on human power but on that of the cross and resurrection. All this is firmly rooted in Christology, in the historic pattern of the life and crucifixion of Jesus, whose choices, of 'suffering servanthood rather than violent lordship, of love to the point of death rather than righteousness backed by power' form the inescapable pattern for the Christian.

Jesus himself is the key to the meaning of history – he is both 'a mover of history and as the standard by which Christians must learn how they are to look at the moving of history'. Jesus is the prime example of the choice facing the Christian, between immediate effectiveness and long term obedience; the apocalyptic motif of the slain Lamb is inseparable from the political execution of Jesus by the Romans. Jesus could have aimed at 'success' or 'effectiveness' by an alliance with the forces of the zealots or some other power group; this was a genuine option, but was rejected. 'The choice he made in rejecting the crown and accepting the cross was the commitment to such a degree of faithfulness to the character of divine love that he was willing for its sake to sacrifice 'effectiveness'.' (Yoder 1994: 234) This is not to be seen as a kind of backdoor route to effectiveness, since 'Jesus excluded any normative concern for any capacity to make sure that things would turn out right'. Yoder's intention throughout is to establish a political ethic concerned solely with faithfulness (i.e. faithful and consistent witness to the character of God), not with a calculation of consequences.

This follows closely the imagery of Revelation, where the Lamb receives his praise from those who defeated the dragon 'by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony (i.e. by martyrdom) for they loved not their lives even unto death'. (Yoder 1994: 235)

To conclude, Yoder describes the paradox, inherent in his work, of the dialectical relationship of faithfulness and effectiveness, of the long term effectiveness of a counter-intuitive neglect of short term consequences. Loving the enemy will in the long run be effective, because it follows the nature of God, yet effectiveness is not the reason why a Christian acts in such a way. The rejection of violence is counter-intuitive in the short term:

It remains foolish like the cross of Jesus. Its only moral ground is the conviction that the cosmos is like that. Yet it is precisely people who think that about the cosmos who tend to get things done. (Yoder, in an unpublished paper presented at the AAR Section on Religion, Peace, and War in Philadelphia, November 18<sup>th</sup> 1995)

**b) Boff and Sobrino – hope for the victims**

***Boff - hope for the oppressed through the cross and resurrection***

Although Boff and Sobrino grant a larger role to human endeavour in the moving of history than Yoder, eschatology, in the sense of a hopeful faithfulness, plays an equally important part in their theology and political spirituality. For Boff, the cross and resurrection give a meaning to suffering which is not wholly negative. Boff is aware of the danger of glorifying suffering per se, but writes, '[Jesus Christ] transfigured suffering, pain, and condemnation to death by transforming them into a way to God and a new approach to those who rejected him.' (Boff 1987: 131) The self abandonment or 'de-centring' involved in taking up the cross achieves an ultimate meaning which is made sure and manifest by the resurrection. 'Resurrection is the fullness and manifestation of the Life that resonates within life and within death. The only way for the Christian to make this assertion is to look at the crucified Jesus - who now lives.' (Boff 1987: 132) Moreover, the life of the resurrection is found not just after death, but 'lies hidden in death itself'. (Boff 1987: 132) 'This life is found in the life of love, solidarity and courage that has so suffered and so died'. There is a unity between passion and resurrection, with the



result that those ‘who have died in rebellion against the system of the world....are the risen ones. Insurrection for the cause of God and neighbour is resurrection.’ (Boff 1987: 132) Here Boff confuses (perhaps deliberately) the ways in which he writes of resurrection - the resurrection of Jesus, which he treats as having a historical and definitive nature, in that Jesus was raised by God as a validation of his nature and mission, and resurrection as meaning that those who die in the cause of liberation are ‘risen’ because of the liberative nature of their death. Is Boff justified in running together these meanings of resurrection? It could be argued that this rather loose use of language confuses, rather than clarifies. Because of his radical empathy expressed in the cross, God takes the side of the oppressed. ‘God intervenes and justifies, in the risen Jesus, all the impoverished and crucified of history.’ (Boff 1987: 133) Again, Boff’s use of the motif of justification is looser than the traditional, Pauline, sense. It might seem as if a person is put in a right relationship with God solely through his or her poverty, so that poverty and oppression replace faith as the channel of justification. Rather, he interprets this in terms of the resurrection:

The meaning of the resurrection is that justice and love, and the struggles waged for both, have meaning. Their future is guaranteed. Justice, love, and our struggles to attain them only appear to have failed in the process of history. They shall triumph. Good, and good alone, shall reign.

(Boff 1987: 133)

Boff thus interprets the resurrection retrospectively, in justifying and ratifying former actions (the liberative ministry of Jesus) and prospectively, as encouraging and strengthening future actions (the liberative ministry of Christians, and those who follow Christ’s way). He represents the resurrection both as God’s stamp of approval, or vindication, of Jesus and his liberative ministry, and also as a ‘matrix of liberative hope’ (Boff 1987: 66), where death is not the ultimate reality. The resurrection is ‘the epiphany of the future that God has promised’. (Boff 1987: 67) It is, however, significant that Boff identifies ‘resurrection’ even within Christ’s crucifixion, in terms of ‘self-surrender for our sake and God’s ...so boundless, so complete that it defeated death’s very dominion. This is the meaning of resurrection, resurrection bursting forth from the very abyss of humiliation.’ (Boff 1987: 65) Again, there is a potentially dangerous looseness of meaning here. On the one hand, resurrection must be seen to be that of the crucified Christ, whom God

raised to ratify his faithful self surrender. In that sense resurrection arises from the midst of the crucifixion, and resurrection hope is offered to those crucified in the struggles of history. On the other hand, to identify crucifixion and resurrection too closely could obscure the sense of tragedy, cruelty, and (in a human sense) finality of crucifixion. Crucifixion has a dread (and theologically significant) reality apart from resurrection.

The timing of Boff's writing is important in understanding this aspect of his work, in which he attempts to use the crucifixion and resurrection to give meaning to the present sufferings and the lack of success of movements of political liberation. *Passion of Christ* (originally published in 1977) and *Way of the Cross* (originally published in 1978) were presumably written in the late 1970's, following the defeat of Salvador Allende in Chile but prior to the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, at a time when the tide of revolutionary optimism in Latin America was on the ebb. This is the background to such statements as, 'Even in defeat they can give meaning to their lives. Rather than allowing themselves to be conquered by evil, they can overcome it by goodness. They can offer up their lives as a sacrifice to God...' (Boff 1980: 82) He stresses the importance of hope for those who find it difficult, in the midst of the struggle, to envisage success. Human struggle is a history of many defeats, but the Christian can have a firm hope. 'God has guaranteed final victory in the triumph of the Kingdom of love and goodness, but God allows the Way of the Cross with its suffering and seeming failure to go on from one century to the next.' (Boff 1980: 99)

In other words, Boff is encouraging those working for justice and liberation to see their struggle in the context of a grand narrative, where, even if they do not see the results final success is assured. (as in Boff 1980: 99) Crucifixion, either of Jesus or of themselves, is not the end; the cross and the ensuing resurrection give meaning to the present struggle. There is a creative tension throughout Boff's thought. On the one hand the cross is a symbol of defeat, of suffering criminally imposed, in which God shares the victims' victimhood. On the other hand, the cross is a sign of hope, that rests on the very fact that God does share the victims' victimhood, and is therefore 'on the side' of the victim. And the crucifixion, as we have noted, is not to be seen in isolation from the resurrection, which 'proves that the sacrifice of one's life out of love for the downtrodden and abused is not

meaningless. It means sharing in the fullness of life and the definitive triumph of justice.’ (Boff 1980: ix-x)

Boff continues, ‘The Crucified One is the Living One. Those who are crucified today will also live.’ Here again Boff utilises the idea of solidarity, which we encountered in our discussion of the crucified people. There is an identity between the ‘crucified’ and the ‘Crucified’ in both cross and resurrection. Moreover, the resurrection is a sign, embodied in the risen person of Jesus, of God’s intentions, where the eschatological purpose of God breaks into history:

The resurrection realises the utopia of God’s kingdom - not universally because of human rejection, but personally in the destiny of Jesus. In the person of Jesus, we glimpse what the cosmos and humanity are summoned to achieve, complete victory over everything that divides and threatens life....God was not defeated by the ability of human beings to reject him... (Boff 1980: 124-5)

This aspect of Boff’s theology of the cross and resurrection is exemplified in his discussion of Metz’s theology of *memoria passionis*, a subversive memory of ‘the humiliated and the wronged, of those who were vanquished but whose memory can stir up dangerous visions, and launch new liberation movements’. (Boff 1987: 108) This is the story of Jesus, and the task is simply to tell the story of the crucified victim. The present ‘negativity with no present meaning whatever’, the meaningless suffering of the present victims can have a glorious future revealed in the risen Jesus. Hence a *memoria passionis* becomes a *memoria resurrectionis*. Meaning is not solely the monopoly of the powerful; the resurrection reveals another kind of meaning, the future of those whose lot it has been to be the *massa damnata*, those forgotten by history. By retelling the story, by living the memory, the church functions as an ‘unmasker of totalitarian ideologies’ and a conveyor of resurrection meaning to those who are oppressed.

### ***Sobrino – the crucified as participating in resurrection***

In his ‘Theses for a historical Christology’ from *Christology at the Crossroads* Sobrino’s thesis 14 states that:

The cross is not the last word on Jesus because God raised him from the dead. But neither is the resurrection the last word on history because God is not yet ‘all in all’. Christian existence in history draws its life from the

dialectics of Jesus' cross and resurrection. This translates into a faith against unbelief, a hope against hope and a love against alienation.

(Sobrino 1978: 229)

Although Sobrino's most original contribution to theology concerns the cross of Jesus and the crucified people, the cross is not the 'last word'. The resurrection is central, as a historical triumph over injustice, an eschatological sign, and an existential question. In his collection of essays *Jesus in Latin America* (Sobrino 1987) he develops those three aspects. Chapter seven is entitled 'Jesus' resurrection from among the world's crucified', and stresses that 'Jesus' resurrection is to be concrete, Christian good news and not abstract and idealistic good news'. (Sobrino 1987: 148) It is the triumph, not simply of life over death, but of justice over injustice, of the unjustly victimized over their victimizers. Second, the resurrection is a sign of hope: 'Jesus' resurrection is first and foremost hope for the crucified. God has raised a crucified one, and from this moment there is hope for the crucified of history.' (Sobrino 1987: 151) Third, a searching question is posed by the resurrection: 'whether we too do not participate in the scandal of putting the just one to death – whether we are on the side of the murderers or on the side of the life-giving God'. (Sobrino 1987: 150)

In his second work of Christology, *Christ the Liberator* (Sobrino 2001) Sobrino develops these themes. Resurrection is described in terms of hope in the providence of God – in an echo of Niebuhr, the impossible becomes possible, the crucified are taken down from the cross and given life. The task of the Christian in overcoming oppression is described in terms of giving analogous signs of the resurrection and the approaching kingdom. (Sobrino 2001: 48) This analogous giving of signs or, as Sobrino writes, 'putting oneself at the service of the resurrection' involves 'working continually, often against hope, in the service of eschatological ideals: justice, peace, solidarity, the life of the weak, community, dignity, celebration, and so on'. Sobrino is careful to qualify these as only partial, but 'these partial 'resurrections' can generate hope in the final resurrection, the conviction that God did indeed perform the impossible, gave life to one crucified and will give life to all the crucified'. (Sobrino 2001: 49)

For Sobrino, the resurrection is both a historical and eschatological reality. (At least, the disciples' faith in the resurrection is a historical reality – Sobrino seems to regard it as impossible, in terms of historical verification, to go beyond the

fact of the disciples' faith.) Sobrino does, however, appear to believe in the resurrection as objective, rather than subjective truth and a present (and equally eschatological) reality for Jesus' disciples. This reality engenders hope, which allows the disciple, even when faced with 'crucifixion', to look to God for ultimate victory. This hope is of special relevance to the crucified people, since the historical circumstances of Jesus' death and resurrection show it to be not just a generalized victory over death, but specifically a victory of the victims over their oppressors. Sobrino would appear to share an 'inaugurated' eschatology, in that he sees the kingdom as not yet present in history in its fullness, but as initiated in history by Jesus and lived out by his followers in hope, joy, and anticipation.

*c) Conclusion*

Yoder, Boff, and Sobrino all take eschatology seriously in underpinning their political theologies, and in stressing the need for faith in God who is active in history, most notably in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the vindicated victim.

Yoder's reliance on God, rather than the church, to 'move history in the right direction' particularly rests on an active eschatological hope. Eschatology, for Yoder, is faith's projection into the future of the character of the world as designed and intended by God, where those who practice non-violence and justice are working with the true grain of the universe, and not against it. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus opens up new possibilities by justifying the historical non-violent acts of Jesus and offering his disciples power to follow in his steps.

For Boff and Sobrino, the resurrection of Jesus offers hope to those who are crucified within history. A criticism can, however, be made, especially of Boff - a paradoxical criticism to make of a liberation theologian. Does Boff take history sufficiently critically as a means of revelation of the divine nature and purpose? He stresses, correctly, the 'continuing history of crucifixion'. But the problem with reading history as a continuing pointer to revelation lies in its potentially selective nature. The controversy between Barth and the 'German Christians' such as Hirsch is a salutary example of the possible pitfalls. There are few problems with reading from history evidence for a 'crucified people'. But that, by itself, gives limited hope. It is more difficult to read evidence in history for an analogous resurrection. History, the liberation theologian would argue, is overwhelmingly a story of unjust and repeated human suffering. It is possible to identify the passion and crucifixion

of God in human suffering; it requires more subtle analysis to identify the 'resurrection' acts of God in liberation. How is God's active power at work in history? How does the conjunction of the divine weakness as evidenced by the crucifixion and the divine power as evidenced by the resurrection bring about liberation? It could be argued that the two are not equivalent. The passion, whereby God is 'acted upon' by humanity and the resurrection, which is an act of God 'breaking into' human history, may be thought of as belonging to different categories. As the language suggests, one is 'passive', the other 'active'. To give human beings freedom, God's 'active' power has necessarily to be restrained. Hence it is unreasonable to expect similar forms of 'evidence' in history for 'crucifixion' and 'resurrection'. Boff is able to point to evidence of 'resurrection':

The resurrection is a process that began with Jesus and that will go on until it embraces all creation. Wherever an authentically human life is growing in the world, wherever justice is triumphing over the instincts of domination.....there the purpose of resurrection is being turned into a reality. (Boff 1980: 126)

The resurrection is an event which is part of, and yet transcends, history, a sign of the final purpose of God which was proleptically realised in the resurrection of Jesus but which has finally to be realised through the slow processes of crucifixion and resurrection in human history.

## Chapter 10

### **Power, providence and the cross**

In this chapter we explore the themes of providence and power in the light of the cross. We begin by examining the doctrine of kenosis, which I regard as central to Yoder's theology, and which provides fruitful possibilities for a political ethic which will be more fully discussed in the next chapter. We then move to a consideration of Yoder's use of 'powers' language, and end with a brief examination of the teaching of Boff and Sobrino on this theme.

#### **a) Yoder - the cross, power and providence**

##### ***Yoder - kenosis and politics***

'The conviction that the cosmos is like that' is the foundation on which Yoder builds his pacifist ethics. Christian politics, then, according to Yoder, is an imitation of God's patient, kenotic and cruciform relationship with the cosmos. Key to Yoder's argument is his use of the 'kenotic hymn' in Philippians 2. Yoder notes that although the initial *kenosis* lies further back behind the cross, in Jesus abandoning the privileges of the divine nature, yet in Paul's interpretation *kenosis* is radically cruciform: 'The reference to humiliation becomes not simply 'human form' but the 'form of a servant', and this even to the extremity of death on a cross.' (Yoder 1994:109) Yoder further notes that the equality with God rejected in the hymn is not a metaphysical attribute of the divine nature, but 'providential control over events, the alternative being the acceptance of impotence' (Yoder 1994: 234) and also the 'claim to govern history'. (Yoder 1994 *passim* in Chapter 4) Yoder sees it as significant that the point in Philippians 2 at which the Christian is invited to follow the example of Christ is his rejection of sovereign exercise of power over the world: 'What Jesus renounced was thus not simply the metaphysical nature of sonship, but rather the untrammelled sovereign exercise of power in the affairs of that humanity amid which he came to dwell.' (Yoder 1994: 235) His kenotic acceptance of the form of servanthood and obedience unto death is 'precisely his renunciation of lordship, his apparent abandonment of any obligation to be effective in making history move down the right track.' This renunciation, this rejection of direct control over events, rather than something negative, is judged by God to be a positive step in the fulfilment of the divine purposes. 'This ancient hymn...one of

the earliest extended snatches of Christian worship on record, is thus affirming that the dominion of God over history has made use of the apparent historical failure of Jesus as a mover of human events.’ (Yoder 1994: 236) Yoder thus suggests a philosophy of history ‘in which renunciation and suffering are meaningful.’ This is ‘profoundly linked with the person of Jesus’ who in concrete historical circumstances rejected the zealot (or, for that matter, the collaborationalist) option. The hymn is not just about a mythical Christ figure, coming down from heaven and returning thither, but about the historical Jesus and his political execution.

The renunciation of the claim to govern history was not made only by the second person of the Trinity taking upon himself the demand of an eternal divine decree; it was made also by a poor, tired rabbi when he came from Galilee to Jerusalem to be rejected. (Yoder 1994: 236)

Yoder’s logic is this: Jesus’ historical rejection of power and control mirrors God’s refusal to exercise ‘powerful’ control over history, and necessitates a corresponding political posture in the Christian. Yoder skilfully links the actual historical circumstances of Jesus’ political choices and the historical causation of the cross with the grand narrative of God’s ultimate purposes. The first two rejections of power and control – those by Jesus and by God – are, in my opinion, theologically valid. The consequences for human politics are not so firmly established. As we have already frequently noted, Yoder discounts an ethic of loving compromise for the sake of the immediate good of humanity in favour of a long term ethic of correspondence with the nature of God.

### ***The cross as the hermeneutical key to God’s providential action***

Yoder uses the cross as the hermeneutical key for interpreting the New Testament as a whole, including passages which are otherwise interpreted in cosmological or incarnational terms. The cross reveals not simply the political events of first century Palestine, but the whole shape of the divine interaction with the world. If Jesus is the definitive *logos* (as in John 1) his words and deeds reveal the pattern of the action of God in the whole of history. This is the fundamental Yoderian method, to draw eternal patterns from the historical circumstances of Jesus’ life. We have already discussed how Yoder attempts to cross Lessing’s ‘ugly ditch’ at this point. The particular kenotic action of God in Jesus, in becoming vulnerable to the actions of humanity, is a sign of God’s eternal nature. The self



emptying of the creator in creating and suffering is paralleled and lived out historically by the crucified Jesus. The cross marks not only marks a point in the historical existence of Jesus, but reveals the nature of creation as a whole. The cross in Yoder is an interpretative sign of all divine action in history vis-à-vis humanity; God's whole relationship with humanity is cruciform and therefore, according to Yoder, non-coercive. This is seen particularly (but not exclusively) in the atonement. (It is a welcome characteristic of Yoder's overall theological method that the atonement, creation, and discipleship cannot be seen as self-contained units, but as deeply interrelated in God's cruciform dealings with humanity.) The cross is the supreme revelation of God's response to evil; in the forgiveness of the guilty, in the refusal to use violent or coercive means even in self defence, in the non-resistant way in which suffering was patiently born, we see revealed the whole character of God, the nature of divine providence, and the way of atonement.

The patience of God in the face of suffering (it is again useful to remember the dual aspects of patience as suffering and waiting) is most of all exemplified by the cross, and therefore indicates the same attitude for the believer. Yoder suggests that 'The willingness to suffer is then not merely a test of our patience or a dead space of waiting; it is in itself a participation in the character of God's victorious patience with the rebellious powers of his creation.' (Yoder 1994: 209) A coercive and violent seizure of power, even for the laudable aim of avoiding or diminishing suffering, is outlawed. Wright draws attention to the analysis of Yoder's method by Gayle Koontz, who notes that God, according to Yoder,

Persuades and suffers rather than determines; his providence is expressed by redemptive and suffering love rather than through the limitation, sustenance and control of humans...Yoder's theology revolves around how God responds to evil and his refusal to violate his creatures' freedom through coercive interventionism....It is the pattern of all the divine activity towards humankind...(Wright 2000: 94)

The persuasive power of suffering love in Yoder has (perhaps surprising) links with the idea of providence outlined in process theology, where a potentially changing God (suffering implying the capacity to be changed) persuades rather than compels.

***Methodological and ethical criticisms***

I regard the above as a meaningful and legitimate reading of God's providential working, and Yoder's theology is remarkably consistent in drawing out the implications of this reading. The question must, however, be asked whether it is justifiable to read off from a 'letting be' of evil (to use McQuarrie's phrase (McQuarrie 1966 *passim*)) in the divine working of providence a corresponding human 'letting be' of evil in politics and society? Is Yoder's parallelism, in fact, a form of category mistake? One reason why God does not use 'coercion' in atonement may well be, as Yoder argues, God's determination to exercise an agape which absolutely privileges and preserves freedom (although, as we have noted, by analogy, a parent is not bound by agape to preserve the absolute freedom of a child – that freedom is limited by agape). On this account Yoder's 'letting be' of evil may be transferable to human politics. But another reason could be that God forswears direct coercion to preserve the gap, necessary for a faith/love relationship, between the human and the divine (the Jewish doctrine of *zimzum*, as applied by Moltmann to Christian theology (Moltmann 1985: 88)). Were God to intervene too readily, for example in a more 'coercive' atonement or providence, that necessary gap would be destroyed. Here the concern is more to preserve God's 'otherness' than to privilege human freedom. The criticism could also be made that God's ultimate freedom is compromised by Yoder's insistence on agape as demanding total freedom for humanity (as Pinches argues in 1989: 250). Against this, God's 'ultimate freedom' is in any case always 'compromised' by God's nature of love, and if love necessitates freedom, that is bound to restrict God's options in providence. The 'gap' argument can be answered by the fact that any such 'gap', while necessarily preserved for the sake of God's 'otherness' is equally or even more necessarily preserved for the freedom of the human counterpart. The question remains, however, whether there is (or should be) a total parallelism and correspondence between God's action and human action, and whether there are some aspects of God's work that humans are not to 'copy' in their entirety. A Yoderian would answer that what is to be 'copied' is God's character as revealed in the historical acts of Jesus, and the fact that God's character is of such a kind determines God's actions and therefore the actions of the Christian.

A more telling criticism, as has been previously argued, is the seeming complicity with evil which the non-resistant pacifist position might entail.

Yoder is well aware that his doctrine of absolute divine respect for human freedom, as an essential component of agape, is subject to this criticism, but describes it in terms of patience, rather than complicity. A severer criticism could be levelled against this 'patience' when transferred to the human reaction to evil. A 'realist' would argue that a person (or a nation) who is able to protect a victim from unjust aggression and yet does not is morally culpable, whereas a Yoderian pacifist certainly would not. There are real difficulties here, not least since the Yoderian view, as has been previously argued, seems to contradict an important trend in Jesus' teaching; that sins of omission are of even greater weight than sins of commission. This points up the fundamental difference between the 'realist' and the 'Yoderian' - the insistence, for the latter, on the absolute primacy of human freedom and divine patience, the overriding necessity for the Christian to witness to God's character, and the eschatological hope that following this course faithfully will ensure a sharing in God's ultimate triumph. The Christian's duty is obedience and faithfulness, rather than a calculation of responsibility. Through such an obedient and faithful community, the church, God can work most effectively.

### ***Conflict with 'the powers'***

It remains to examine another aspect of Yoder's political theology, the relationship between the cross and 'the powers'. Yoder devotes chapter 8 of *Politics of Jesus* to this theme, developing a theology of the cross as a critique and unmasking of the powers, and hence power itself. This requires a different kind of politics to the 'domination system', in Wink's phrase. (Wink 1992 *passim*) According to Murphy, 'the most significant contribution that Yoder's reading of scripture makes to political analysis is his use of the Pauline doctrine of the 'principalities and powers'. (Murphy in Hauerwas et al 1999: 49) This is perhaps overstating the case, as much work had already been done (by the time of the writing of *Politics of Jesus*) on this subject primarily by Hendrikus Berkhoff. (Berkhoff 1962) (Yoder in fact translated Berkhoff's seminal work, making it available to the English-speaking world). However, Yoder's exposition of the 'powers' adds significantly to his argument in *Politics of Jesus*, and indicates ways in which the early Christians framed their language to interpret the impact of the crucifixion on the power structures of their day.

The 'powers' are necessary in the providence of God, as structures of regularity, system and order without which human beings cannot live, but they have become absolutized and enslaving. Salvation has to deal with these powers, not in the sense of abolishing them (since they are necessary for human existence) but by setting them in their proper place, with their sovereignty broken, but 'holding together' in Christ - fallen, yet redeemed. Yoder writes 'If then God is going to save his creatures in their humanity the Powers cannot simply be destroyed or set aside or ignored.' (Yoder 1994: 144) The 'powers' as created by God are essential to the functioning of human society, as demonstrated, for example, by the benefits of Roman imperial rule in Palestine. But those same powers become tyrannical and oppressive, as demonstrated by the practice of crucifixion. And so it is necessary to break their sovereignty. This, argues Yoder, is what Jesus did, 'concretely and historically, by living a genuinely free and human existence. This life brought him, as any genuinely human existence will bring anyone, to the cross'. The death of Jesus was a direct result of his conflict with 'the powers', symbolized by the Roman imperial and Jewish religious authorities, who acted in collusion to bring about his crucifixion. The positive side of the powers – the peace, good government, order and stability which the Roman Empire at its best provided, and the religious devotion of both the Pharisees and Sadducees, were corrupted horribly into collusion in judicial murder.

Preaching and incorporating a greater righteousness than that of the Pharisees, and a vision of an order of social human relations more universal than the Pax Romana, he permitted the Jews to profane a holy day (refuting their own moral pretensions) and permitted the Romans to deny their vaunted respect for law as they proceeded illegally against him.

(Yoder 1994: 144)

It is interesting to observe Yoder postulating the cross as a form of entrapment, in causing the powers to overreach themselves fatally – with echoes of earlier 'baited hook' theories of the atonement. Murphy, in her chapter in Yoder's 'posthumous festschrift' links his theology of the powers with various traditional models of the atonement. She draws attention to the closeness of Yoder's doctrine of the atonement to the 'classic' model, but points out that he 'fills the gap left by the excision of a mythical Devil by means of the interpretation of the 'principalities and powers' described above'. (Murphy in Hauerwas et al 1999: 54) Jesus frees

humankind from these superhuman power structures ‘both by his example [and here the moral influence theory gets its due] and by stripping them of the illusion of absolute legitimacy, precisely because their most worthy representatives abused him in his innocence’. Here again, the cross is central, as in the substitution models of atonement, but for different reasons: ‘Yoder does not ignore personal sinfulness, but he gives it neither the significance nor the inevitability that it has in Augustinian Christianity.’ (Murphy in Hauerwas et al 1999: 54) Yoder concentrates more on ‘institutionalized sin’ – in other words, structural sin as interpreted by liberation theology.

One aspect of the corrupted ‘powers’ is their tendency towards a ruthless self-defensiveness when challenged as, in this case, by Jesus. ‘This they did in order to avoid the threat to their dominion represented by the very fact that he existed in their midst so morally independent of their pretensions.’ (Yoder 1994: 145) Jesus by his very life challenged those pretensions, and by persisting in his moral consistency even to death he gained a victory over them – and not only over the proximate ‘powers’ of the Roman and Jewish establishment, but over the ‘powers’ in general. The victory of the crucified Jesus over the ‘powers’ lay in his authentic humanity, free from the pretensions of the powers, even when those powers threatened his life. ‘This authentic humanity included his free acceptance of death at their hands. Thus it is his death that provides his victory’.

It is clear that Yoder (and other theologians, such as Berkhoff, who champion the ‘powers’ language) use the word ‘triumph’ in a moral, rather than a physical sense. In the latter sense, the ‘powers’ triumphed over Jesus by crucifying him – in the former sense Jesus, by his death, won the victory. Yoder quotes Berkhoff in describing the Pauline theology (in Colossians 2:13-15) of the victory of Christ over the powers. (Yoder 1994:146) First, Jesus ‘made a public example of them’, by demonstrating, most vividly and radically in the crucifixion, their true nature. ‘Now that the true God appears on earth in Christ, it becomes apparent that the Powers are inimical to him, acting not as his instrument but as his adversaries.’ Every ‘power’ with which Jesus comes into contact has its pretensions exposed – the scribes, the Pharisees, Pilate, representing religious law, personal piety, and secular justice, are unmasked by their complicity in the crucifixion. The power of illusion is the greatest weapon in the hands of the ‘powers’ – ‘their ability to convince men that they were the divine regents of the world, ultimate certainty and

ultimate direction, ultimate happiness and the ultimate duty for small, dependent humanity'. Now that the illusion is stripped away by the cross, it can be said that Christ has 'disarmed' the Powers. The Christian who sees the public degradation of the powers as revealed in the cross, and the divine justification of Christ in the resurrection, is freed from that most powerful illusion. 'Unmasked, revealed in their true nature, they have lost their mighty grip on men. The cross has disarmed them: wherever it is preached, the unmasking and the disarming of the Powers takes place'. (Yoder 1994:146)

***The church as sharing in the victory of the cross over the powers***

The church is the body of people who have grasped this freedom from the dominion of the powers and now live as a sign of that freedom. (Yoder 1994:147ff) The church itself is 'resistance and attack' as it demonstrates in its fellowship how Christians can live freed from the Powers. The 'weapons' the church bears are defensive: 'Our weapon is to stay close to Him and thus to remain out of the reach of the drawing power of the Powers.' As we have seen previously, the first task of the church in Yoder's political theology and action is, simply, to be the church. 'The very existence of the church is its primary task. It is in itself a proclamation of the Lordship of Christ to the powers from whose dominion the church has begun to be liberated.' In this the cross is vital, since the church is the society formed by reconciliation brought about by the cross and bearing the marks of the cross in its ongoing life. It is a counter cultural witness, a new humanity created by the cross and not the sword. (There are significant parallels here with the 'crucified people as martyrs/witnesses' theme which we have noted in the theology of Sobrino.)

Another key Yoderian theme emerges here: the primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is the Christian community. Power is the good creation of God, and so Christians cannot opt out of the power structures of society entirely. Yoder's is not an ethic of Essene type withdrawal, but of a choice not to exercise certain types of power. The existence of a cruciform church that suffers through its ongoing stand against the powers continues nothing less than the work of the crucified Christ. Just as the powers were defeated by what Yoder calls the 'concreteness of the cross', so they continue to be defeated by the church whose faithfulness and consistency mirrors that of Jesus: 'The historicity of Jesus retains, in the working of the church as it encounters the

other power and value structures of its history, the same kind of relevance that the man Jesus had for those whom he served until they killed him.’ (Yoder 1994:158) And, just as Jesus suffered at the hands of the ‘powers’, so the church risks suffering when it stands against the powers and empowers others to do so.

***The cross, power and the powers***

The question of power is central to Yoder’s work and, as is his practice, he seeks to redefine its meaning. His exegesis of ‘powers’ language points towards such a redefinition. The powers are real – otherwise Jesus would not have, very concretely, been crucified at their hands. And yet their power rests on a shaky foundation, which the cross uncovers. This tension is both a strength and weakness in Yoder’s work, which is shared by other theologians who talk the ‘powers’ language. From one perspective it makes little sense to talk about the defeat of the powers when they continue to tyrannize. The concreteness of oppression is quite definitely not an illusion, and it would be grossly mistaken to deny that concreteness in the name of the ‘illusory’ nature of the powers. The cross reveals, in fact, both the continuing strength of ‘the powers’ and also their undermining. The strength in Yoder’s ‘powers theology’ is to point to the potential, enabled by the cross, of victory over the powers. The weakness is to tend to give an impression that such victory has already somehow been concretely achieved. Cullman’s image of D-Day and VE-Day (in *Christ and Time*, Cullman 1951) is appropriate here: a decisive victory has been won, but the final victory is yet to be, and much suffering lies between.

Perhaps the most telling use of this language is its redefinition of divine power. Rather than power being understood as coercive, and at least potentially violent, divine power is interpreted in the light of the cross as uncoercive, persuasive, and creative. The radical nature of this shift, both theologically and practically, cannot be underestimated, since it undercuts many mainstream secular and religious doctrines of power. Pinches, in his exposition of Yoder’s political theodicy, describes how ‘the cross of Christ is in fact a new definition of truth, both as power and as wisdom’ and comments that ‘The truly powerful forces in history are perhaps those which stand clear of the coercive mainstream and call noncoercively, as Jesus did, for a transformation of the human spirit.’ (Pinches 1989: 248) A vision of ultimate effectiveness is gained by recognizing this shift in

the definition. The cross radically redefines power and how it can most effectively be accessed. According to Yoder, the view of power-as-destructive-force is futile and leads to an ethical blind alley.

***b) Boff and Sobrino and the question of power***

***Liberation theology and 'power' language***

One of the strengths of liberation theology has been its acknowledgment of the significance of power. The theologian's setting in the political and economic structures of power is, according to liberation theology, crucial for self understanding and for the very nature of the theology taught or written. For example, an insistence on the structural nature of sin, as against a purely individualistic doctrine, is a major emphasis of liberation theology. Overcoming the power to oppress and promoting the power to liberate is at the centre of the liberationist project. One criticism already noted is, indeed, that liberation theology does not go far enough in its critique of power; early forms of liberation theology may have given the impression of being interested in merely changing the power holders, rather than challenging the form and nature of political power itself. It is then, at first sight, puzzling that the kind of powers language found in Yoder and, more recently, in Wink (Wink 1984, 1986, 1992, and 1998), has not loomed large in Latin American liberation theology. Perhaps this is due to the danger of syncretism in a culture where Catholicism sits alongside other religious movements in which powerful 'spirits' are deemed to be an ever present force. It could be argued that this provides an opportunity for such language, but possibly the risk of misinterpretation would be too great.

***Boff and Sobrino – oppressive and liberating power***

The fact that neither Boff nor Sobrino seem to use the language of 'the powers' does not mean that they do not seek to convey something similar in different ways. Boff, in *Church, Charism and Power* (Boff 1985), discusses power within the church, rather than secular political or economic power, but his analysis is significant over a wider area. In chapter 5 he sketches a history of the early church, from its first three centuries as a movement lacking significant political power to its Constantinian rebirth as an institution not only allied with state power



but incorporating those structures of power into its essence. Boff, like Yoder, sees the Constantinian revolution as a disaster - as the paganisation of Christianity, rather than the Christianization of paganism. (Boff 1985: 50) The key concept in Catholicism came to be *potestas* – power exercised in a similar way to secular power, but worse since backed by divine sanction. This power, seen (and personally experienced) by Boff as oppressive, continues to this day, and leads to both a deadening centralization within the church and an unscrupulous defensiveness in relation to the world, exemplified by the concordat with Nazism. By contrast, the power of God is revealed in Jesus Christ, who ‘renounced power as domination; he preferred to die in weakness rather than use his power to subjugate people to his message’. (Boff 1985: 60) It is significant that Boff here adduces the death of Christ as the prime example of a refusal of power, in terms strikingly similar to Yoder. The power of love, on which Jesus relied, is ‘fragile, vulnerable, conquering through its weakness and its capacity for giving and forgiveness’. (Boff 1985: 59) Again, the emphasis on a cruciform power, in its chosen vulnerability, is striking.

Sobrino, too, links a Christian view of power with the cross. In his ‘thesis 8’ on the cross he questions what kind of power mediates God.

Is it the kind of power advocated by the Roman Empire and the Zealots, or is it the kind of power exemplified in Jesus? The power of Jesus is that of ‘love immersed in a concrete situation’, ‘political’ rather than ‘idealistic’. The whole question of the true nature of power becomes acute when one views it in terms of Jesus’ cross. (Sobrino 1978: 209)

Sobrino does not naively view power in a consistently negative light – to do so would, in his opinion, be to make a nonsense of belief in God, whose nature presupposes a form of power. To deny that would be to fall into ‘logical contradiction. But Jesus denies the oppressive and authoritarian nature of power’. (Sobrino 1993: 144) God’s power is liberating power, a power which allows ‘human beings their freedom and responsibility for themselves’. In a similar way to Yoder, Sobrino interprets the temptations of Jesus in terms of what sort of Messianic power he should exercise – ‘whether to carry this out with the power that controls history from outside or with immersion in history, with the power to dispose of human beings or with self-surrender to them’. (Sobrino 1993: 149).

The distinction between a power from above, dominating and (at least potentially) oppressive, and a power from alongside, encouraging and suffering, is

fundamental to Sobrino's theology of the cross. Power as such is not liberating, but some power is needed to bring about liberation. Sobrino argues from the point of view of 'history's crucified who await salvation. They know that power is necessary for this. At the same time they mistrust pure power, since this always shows itself unfavourable to them in history.' (Sobrino 1987: 152) As previously discussed, Sobrino recognized the need of the poor for a rescuer from outside (alterity) and a rescuer from alongside (affinity). This power from alongside is seen, paradoxically, in the weakness of the cross. 'On Jesus' cross, in a first moment, God's impotence appeared. Of itself this impotence is not a cause of hope. But it lends credibility to the power of God that will be shown in the resurrection.' (Sobrino 1987: 153) The impotence of the cross is something positive and salvific, the 'expression of God's absolute nearness to the poor, sharing their lot to the end.' The affinity aspect of salvation is, thereby, satisfied. God's power is not oppressive. Sobrino stresses the cross-demonstrated nearness of God to human beings. Without that nearness, he argues, 'God's power in the resurrection would remain pure otherness and therefore ambiguous, and, for the crucified, historically threatening. But with that nearness, the crucified can really believe that God's power is good news, for it is love.' The alterity is the inbreaking of divine power in the resurrection of the crucified.

### **c) Conclusion**

There is certainly a difference in language used by Yoder, Boff, and Sobrino to describe the use and abuse of power. We have noted how liberation theology largely avoids the 'powers' theology of Berkhoff, Yoder, and Wink. However, there is much more shared ground in their teaching on the nature of the powers, in the sense of sinful structures which extend beyond individual and personal sinfulness, the pretensions and oppressive nature of those powers, and their undermining by the cross of Jesus. Yoder questions the nature of power and the relationship of the Christian with power more radically than Boff and Sobrino, stressing (perhaps overstressing) the reluctance of Jesus to take power, and hence deducing the necessity for the church to refuse the responsibility of power. Boff and Sobrino, on the other hand, helpfully point to the soteriological need of a power which combines both affinity and alterity. The sympathy of affinity is not, in itself, sufficient; a power which can actually rescue the vulnerable from their oppressors is also required.

**Summary - towards a political theology of the cross (iv)**

The last two chapters have explored the cross in relation to hope and power. As before, I attempt now to outline elements arising from these chapters which I believe should be incorporated in a political theology of the cross.

***Hope, power, and the cross***

The categories of hope and power are fertile ground for an exploration of the paradoxical nature of the cross. Perhaps the paradox can too easily be missed - the cross of Jesus, in one sense, is the epitome of hopelessness and powerlessness, as it was for tens of thousands of unfortunates in the Roman world. Politically, the cross was intended to humiliate, and to be a public demonstration of the dead end of rebelling against the imperial power.

The Roman world was notorious for its lack of hope, at least in the sense of hope for improvement of social conditions. The imperial ideology promoted hope, but only in a very general and superficial sense, as was displayed on the often fatuous slogans on imperial coinage. At the advent of a new emperor, especially after a time of war, a new age of peace and prosperity was often proclaimed. It is difficult to imagine any thinking person taking this seriously. One possible exception, at the juncture between Republic and Principate, was Virgil's 'Messianic' Eclogue, heralding the birth of a new ruler and a time of new hope after war, but by the early imperial period that Virgilian hope had turned to an Ovidian cynicism. A future 'golden age' was so far off as to be totally unrealistic. In general, in the Roman world there was little conscious movement towards significant social reform, apart from minor efforts from some of the more humane emperors. Any sense of social progress, in a progressive liberal or Marxist sense, was absent. Hope was replaced by a static fatalism about social conditions.

This fatalism was reinforced through means of callous violence and the exercise of crushing power by the imperial authorities, whose interest lay in a passive acceptance of the status quo by the people of the empire. Any resistance to the imperial order led to the living death of the mines or the torture of the cross. The acquisition of *imperium* (power) was the goal of political success, and when seized was exercised ruthlessly. The absolute powerlessness of the cross was the reverse side of the coin of the Roman idolization of political power, which kept the mass of the people hope-less. To associate hope for the future with the cross would have

seemed to Jesus' gentile contemporaries totally paradoxical. To the Jews, whose sense of social hope was in many ways more real and vibrant, the paradox would have seemed even greater. Their hopes rested on a Messianic future, and for a Messiah to be crucified was a contradiction in terms.

For the early Christians, these paradoxes could only be resolved by the resurrection. Therefore a contemporary political theology of the cross must incorporate a corresponding emphasis on the resurrection. Otherwise, the element of hope, essential for a balanced political theology, is missing.

### *A cruciform faith as a precondition of hope*

One of the major differences between the Yoderian and 'realist' is over the need for faith. The 'realist' approach rests not so much on faith as on wisdom and discernment. The Yoderian approach simply does not make sense without faith – faith in God who turns death to resurrection, faith that the universe is as it is, and that by going with the grain of the universe God's purposes will be forwarded. Yoder does not expect miraculous 'quick fixes', but sees God's involvement in terms of a long term divine purpose, a divine pattern running through the processes of history, which it is the church's task faithfully to imitate in a trustful reliance on a causality different from that of the crude categories of power and force. That faith constitutes the church in its political choice and stance. To be the church consistently, to bear the seeming 'folly of the cross' of nonconformity, requires continuous acts of faith in the divine nature and the divine pattern within history. Faith seeks to be realistic, in the sense that the reality believed in is, in fact, the ultimate reality. Yoder claims that his, rather than Niebuhr's is, paradoxically, the true realism, because it is based on a Christocentric faith in that ultimate reality. Hope projects that faith forwards into an expectation that reality is now, and will be in the future, congruent with the form that is seen in Jesus, and especially in his cross and resurrection.

How far is it possible to construct political policy on such faith and hope? The Yoderian would regard this as an illegitimate question, since it is not the task of the church, the primary Christian political body, to construct policy. Moreover, political policy is almost always short or medium term, and a Yoderian Christian politics takes the long view. However, it is the church's task to recall the politician to that long view as a measure of the rightness or otherwise of shorter term policies,

and the Christian politician's task to have that long view in mind in creating those short term policies.

***Reading crucifixion and resurrection in history***

Twentieth century theology provides notable examples of (mis) reading contemporary history theologically. The convergence of liberal Protestantism in the early twentieth century with an optimistic secular belief in inevitable human progress was shattered by the First World War. The controversy in the 1930's (documented in Ericksen (1985) and Reimer (1990)) between the Nazi Hirsch and the Socialist Tillich over recognizing 'kairos moments' in history demonstrated how two theologians, beginning from similar theological presuppositions, could come to diametrically opposed political conclusions.

The danger of this conflation of revelation with contemporary history is compounded by a loose use of language to describe events in history, when words such as resurrection and justification have their meaning so far extended from their original usage as to cause a conceptual confusion. This tendency has been noted among liberation theologians, but is by no means restricted to them. The problem is that the opposite course, to confine such concepts either, at one extreme, to a divine realm 'above' human life or, at the other, solely to events in Palestine in 33 CE is, first of all to diminish their relevance to the present and also to be untrue to their very nature. The crucifixion and the resurrection are both historical (in the sense of having happened at a certain time and in a certain place) and also meta-historical, because of the 'corporate' nature of the Christ who is crucified and risen and the work of the Spirit which continues the reality of Christ in the present. In that sense Christ's crucifixion and resurrection *are* contemporary events, and their signs should be discernable in history. Every liberative, salvific and humanizing change in human history is both an act of God and an event potentially open to socio-scientific examination.

How, then, does Jesus' resurrection give hope for an earthly, as well as a heavenly, future? Does the resurrection give an immediate hope, or a long term hope that in the end all will be well? The long term heavenly hope certainly has political relevance, in providing a *telos* for human endeavour, the vision of which can be worked back into current politics. It is not merely to be discounted as a distraction from earthly reality, since the hope in God of ultimate healing provides

an incentive for a more proximate healing of the world. In the shorter term, one of the key themes in Paul is that of the power that raised Jesus from the dead being released into the world in a pattern of crucifixion and resurrection. This shorter term expectation, which can be described as partial vindications of the ‘Lamb who was slain’, is the work of the Spirit, who strengthens the Christian as he or she follows the divine pattern of vulnerable love. Contemporary ‘resurrection’ after ‘crucifixion’ is not merely a metaphor, but is brought about by the same Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead.

In the light of this hope, can there be discernible progress within history towards the eschatological *telos*? The persistent presence of the crucified people within history would say no. It is misleading to speak of hope in the sense of an inevitable progress in history – hope is for the short and medium term, in that God can bring the possibility of good things out of any ‘crucified’ situation and will strengthen those who work in accordance with the divine pattern, and for the long term, in the sense of a ‘heavenly hope’. In the light of this hope, the realist prizes immediate effectiveness and puts off a purity of conscience to the long term (and trusts to the mercy of God for forgiveness for the compromises thus entailed), but the Yoderian prizes immediate obedience in the expectation of long term effectiveness (and is willing to suffer the consequences in the meantime).

***The relationship between cross and resurrection in political theology***

In the New Testament the cross and the resurrection are not seen as independent entities, but as inseparable. What relevance has this unity for political theology? First, the resurrection ratifies the meaning of the cross. Jesus’ ways of non-violence, his political choices which led to the cross, are given the divine stamp of approval. The cross is confirmed in its role of stripping away the illusory nature of the ‘powers’. Those who are willing to die like Jesus in a liberative cause can see themselves justified in the grand narrative of cross and resurrection. Second, the resurrection is not only the raising of someone who was dead, but also the vindication of a victim. There is therefore hope for victims of underserved suffering because God is on their side. The cross is a stark symbol of injustice, the resurrection of its overturning. Third, the resurrection opens up new possibilities by setting free new power in the world, especially the possibility that the crucified can be taken from their crosses and live. Whatever the situation of crucifixion there can

always be new possibilities of resurrection, thus engendering ‘hope against hope’. Fourth, the cross and the resurrection demonstrate both sides of salvation, alterity and affinity – affinity by the divine empathy with the crucified, alterity by the divine power that raised the crucified. God’s radical empathy is not defeated by death but has the final victory. Last, the resurrection brings the future of hope into the present of crucifixion. A Christian, living in a state of crucifixion yet in the light of the resurrection, brings God’s just future into present reality and recognizes analogous signs of resurrection. These signs, moreover, are not merely analogous, but are the working of the same Spirit by whom Jesus was raised from the dead.

***Kenosis and the cross***

The kenotic hymn in Philippians chapter 2 is a key text in a political theology of the cross. It is important to recognize the radically cruciform nature of this kenosis; the self emptying of Christ would make sense if applied simply to the incarnation, but is immensely deepened by its application to the cross (as Paul recognizes in verse 8). The doctrine of kenosis describes the abandoning by Jesus of not just divine attributes, but also of the exercise of coercive power. Behind the kenotic Christ is the kenotic God, who similarly abandons ‘control’ in the exercise of providence, choosing instead to work through a different paradigm. The cross, therefore, is the key to interpreting God’s providential working. Persuasive patience replaces the power of dominion. God is revealed as uncoercive, vulnerable, liberative and creative, rather than controlling.

This necessitates a radical redefinition of power – the difference between power from above, dominating and (potentially at least) oppressive, and power from alongside. Through this redefinition of divine power, which combines a restraint in the use of power and a willingness to suffer the consequences of that restraint, God’s whole relationship with creation is seen as cruciform. It is that cruciform pattern that the church is called to imitate in order to conform and witness to the character of God. A fuller exploration of these themes is attempted in the two concluding chapters.

**SECTION V – A WIDER PERSPECTIVE**

**Chapter 11**

**The cross and political power**

The question of power is central to both theology and political ethics, to such an extent that it is impossible to construct a valid political theology without a realistic doctrine of power. In theology, the doctrine of providence attempts to explain and illustrate how God's power operates in the world. Creation and redemption are, at their root, doctrines of power, in the sense that they involve a divine ability to bring about change through the working of divine power. (I define power as the means of change used by its possessor in order to bring about a state of affairs closer to the possessor's intention.) Power is no less central in political ethics and forms a key concept in analyzing the workings of national societies and international relationships. The earliest reflections on government in Greek political philosophy employ power terminology: democracy is the power, or *kratos*, of the *demos*, the people en masse; aristocracy, the power of the *aristoi*, the political elite established by birth. In the political culture contemporary with Jesus, a key concept was *imperium*, the power of the person or nation which is given (or seizes) dominance over others. The language of power is fundamental to an understanding of contemporary politics. For example, the globalization process is increasingly regarded as involving a neo-imperialism of the 'north' over the 'south', and American foreign policy is interpreted, with praise or blame, as instituting an American 'empire' (for an eloquent critique, see Nelson-Pallmeyer 2005). Imperialism, whether traditional or 'neo' exemplifies an imbalance in power relationships. The imperial power exercises economic or political domination over the (relatively) powerless subject nation or community. This imbalance of power is not confined to international relationships. Questions of power and the possibilities of its imbalance are involved in every area of human existence, from personal relationships to macro-economic transactions. Although the conservative political or structuralist sociological critique may see these imbalances as inevitable, harmonious, and creative, there is always the potential for such imbalances to become oppressive, and for the less powerful to become the suffering victims of those who hold the power.



The crucified Jesus is both an historical example and a potent symbol of this victim status. Historically, Jesus was the victim of both the imperial power of Rome and the national power structures of first century Palestine. In devotion the figure of the crucified Jesus has symbolized a victim both of human violence and of a divine decree interpreted, tragically, in terms of God the Father actively inflicting violence upon God the Son. How can a Christian doctrine of power, both in terms of divine providence and political ethics, be formulated in the light of the crucified and powerless Jesus? What sort of power is legitimate? How can the Christian concept of power be reformulated so as to be consistent with a 'crucified God'? Is there a sense in which political power can parallel and be modelled upon the providential power of God, so that the 'grain of the universe' as intended by God can be a guide to the well-being of human relationships, thus bringing the doctrine of providence and political ethics into convergence? What political ethic can be thus formulated? These questions form the background to this chapter.

Our previous interlocutors have radically different attitudes to power, and to Christians exercising power. Yoder in effect rules out from Christian political action the immediate use of political power, as traditionally conceived. For him, the (literally) crucial power, on which, by faith, the Christian is to draw, is the eschatological power of God, as demonstrated historically in Jesus. The liberation theologians Boff and Sobrino, by contrast, have no such hesitation in encouraging the seeking of political power in order to 'remove the crucified from their crosses'.

***a) The cross as criticism of political power***

***Dissonance and applicability***

It must be acknowledged at the outset that there is a striking dissonance in attempting to incorporate the cross, an instrument of oppression by the powerful over the powerless, into a theology of political power, unless that theology is primarily done from the perspective of the powerless. For the powerful to adopt the cross as a political symbol (the first and most notorious being Constantine) is a glaring contradiction in terms. Christian political thought has long suffered from this unresolved and frequently unnoticed dissonance. One tactic is to opt out of questions of political power. Yoder comes dangerously close to constructing a political theology which seeks to insulate the church from having to ask the awkward question: what sort of help might a Christian involved in politics receive

from their faith, and, especially, from the cross, the hallmark of their faith? The most obvious Yoderian outcome is that of a sect entirely withdrawn from politics, a course which Yoder, nevertheless, eschews.

There is little doubt that there is a better 'fit' between a cruciform politics and those who are situated on the periphery, outside of 'Caesar's palace', rather than within the corridors of power. One of the chief differences between a Christian and an Islamic view of politics is that for the first three hundred years of its existence Christianity was a religion of the politically powerless, whereas almost from the beginning Islam was the religion of the rulers of the community or state. Where a non-violent 'cruciform' politics has been attempted by those who have entered the political process, there have certainly been successes (Gandhi and Martin Luther King being striking examples) but this has to be balanced by the confusion in pacifist politics in the 1930's, exemplified by the spectacle of the devoutly Christian pacifist Labour leader Lansbury being instructed by the 'realist' Ernest Bevin to 'stop hawking his conscience around the conference table', which was to lead to Lansbury's resignation as Labour leader and Bevin's successful participation in the wartime coalition government and subsequent role as Foreign Secretary at the beginning of the Cold War. (Taylor 1965: 381-2) It is tempting to suggest that Lansbury's withdrawal from politics signified the only possibility for a consistent cruciform pacifism, thus corroborating Niebuhr's dismissal of pacifism as a useful minority vocation.

Nevertheless, the question of political power cannot be sidestepped so easily unless Christianity is indeed to withdraw into a sect mentality. An attempt must be made, *pace* Yoder, to find a place for a distinctively cruciform politics within the centres of political power as well as on the fringes. What might be described as a cruciform political epistemology is indicated – in other words, an attempt to understand politics from the point of view of the 'crucified people', the victims, those on the periphery, so that political decisions involving the exercise of governmental power may be informed by cruciform insights. This might be achieved in three ways. First, the starting point for cruciform politics must be the periphery. The 'cruciform politician' (the verbal dissonance is striking, but must be held in tension unless political withdrawal is chosen) must begin from, (or at least, relocate to) a position among those on the periphery, not from within the established centres of power as a member of a political elite. Second, the cruciform politician

must continually keep in touch with the periphery by physical, psychological and economic location, and through that location exercise a continual hermeneutic of suspicion of political power, resisting the temptation to seek power for its own sake rather than for the sake of the vulnerable and suffering. The creation of a political ‘class’, whether a traditional quasi aristocratic elite or career politicians detached from ordinary life and comfortable in power, is antithetical to a cruciform politics thus conceived. Thirdly, a cruciform politician must use the cross and the theologoumenon of the crucified people as a test to assess the validity of policy – in other words, what the effect of policy decisions might be on the vulnerable, the crucified people.

### ***The ‘telos’ of political power***

The above criteria pose a more basic question: what is the goal, or *telos*, of political power, in the light of the cross and of the crucified people? The overarching principle is, as we have seen, and as has been eloquently propounded by liberation theologians, to ‘remove the crucified from their crosses’. In other words, the fundamental political task for the Christian is the diminution of suffering and oppression, and, its converse, the promotion of justice, freedom, wholeness, and flourishing. This perspective is, of course, not one peculiar to Christians, but the shocking fact of the cross and the crucified God at the centre of the Christian faith immensely concentrates this humanitarian protest against suffering. This *telos* for Christian politics does not exclude other elements, such as (as Yoder stresses) bearing witness to the nature of God, but this is achieved both by the very act of ‘removing the crucified from their crosses’ and by the methods used. Nor does this *telos* provide an exclusive agenda for the church, given its other roles alongside the political – worship, mutual upbuilding in fellowship, evangelism. But for the church qua political body, and especially for the Christian involved in politics, the *telos* is all important. And the church, no less than other human institutions, falls under the judgment of that *telos*. There is a key division in interpretation within Christian political thought between an ‘independent’ Jesus standing, as it were, outside Christianity and questioning the power structures of church and Christendom, and a ‘domesticated’ Jesus standing within Christianity and questioning those outside, whether contemporary Jewish authorities, Roman power structures, or modern governments. Perhaps, as Wilfred Owen wrote, to see Jesus ‘in no-man’s land’

(Owen 1973: 68) is the better perspective, which can allow the crucified Jesus to critique all structures of power, both within the church and in society as a whole.

It might be argued that the above *telos* is all too obvious, and perhaps naïve. Does not all political action at least claim the intention of improving the human lot? This would, however, be to ignore the radical hermeneutic of suspicion (entailed by the cross) of political power, and the necessity, as mentioned above, for a cruciform political epistemology. Such a hermeneutic of suspicion needs to be consistent and thorough. In whose interests is political power actually sought and exercised? Is it, in reality, for personal or national self aggrandizement, to defend the vested interests of a particular class (of power holders)? The cross necessitated, among the earliest Christians, a radical questioning, even a reversal, of theological values, as they attempted to come to terms with the paradox of a crucified Messiah. Perhaps the huge scale of a similar redefinition of the aims of politics required by the cross has been underestimated.

The European theologian who has most contributed to this cruciform redefinition is Jürgen Moltmann who, in his *Crucified God* (Moltmann 1974) points to a suffering, rather than a monarchical God, and draws the conclusion that the role of Christian politics is to use power to aid the suffering, alongside whom God also suffers, not to preserve present power structures corroborated by divine sanction. For Moltmann, the cross radically critiques any idolatry of political power (as in Luther's '*crux probat omnia*' – quoted in Moltmann 1974: 7). The cross is seen at the heart of a Christian 'critical theory', parallel to the Marxism of the Frankfurt school, posing such questions as how can the false values of existing society, concealed by 'ideology', be exposed, so that there can be a transformation of the present structures of power? The cross, in Moltmann, performs an iconoclastic function, stripping bare any religiously corroborated illusions by which the present order of power is undergirded, since Jesus was crucified 'in the name of the state gods of Rome who assured the Pax Romana.' (Moltmann 1974: 136) The danger of political religion occurs where religion is used for social or national self-justification, to confirm the existing power structures and to absolutise those who rule (communist, capitalist, or fascist). The fact that Jesus died in powerlessness at the hands of the politically powerful means that religion can never be used as a sanction for political power. Any religious justification of political power from

above (i.e. monarchical or hierarchical) is ruled out. This critique can be extended to a continuing hermeneutic of suspicion of all power.

The *telos* of ‘removing the crucified from their crosses’ is another way of stating the necessity of seeing history from the perspective of the powerless rather than the powerful – in other words, those who actually suffer, rather than those who control (or attempt to control) the degree of that suffering. A Christian *telos* for politics must inevitably be victimological, and political power must be judged by how it affects its victims. The dominant criterion is that of social pain, as exemplified by the cross and the crucified peoples. Social pain, on this account, can never be a price worth paying for supposedly beneficial advances. Martin Hengel has usefully illustrated this aspect of the crucifixion in his analysis of how crucifixion might have been regarded by different sections of Judean society. ‘The Palestinian peasant...saw in it the hated and feared instrument of repression employed by his Roman overlords.’ This is contrasted with the probable attitude of the inhabitants of the Hellenized cities, who will have regarded it as a horrible but nevertheless necessary ‘instrument for the preservation of law and order against robbers, violent men and rebellious slaves’. (Hengel 1977: 79) For the latter, the infliction of such social pain was a price worth paying for political stability and civilized well-being. A cruciform political theology denies that the creation of even a minority crucified people is justified in terms of a supposed future good. A modern illustration can perhaps be found in a conversation between the Skipton World Development Movement Group and their local MP, when discussing the possible long term benefits of globalization set alongside the social pain inflicted on large numbers of people in the (supposed) short term. It was pointed out that, with hindsight, the undoubted gains of the industrial revolution were achieved at a vast and unjustifiable social cost, and that a greater awareness of that cost could have greatly ameliorated the social pain without significantly diminishing the future good. Perhaps a similar analysis will be made of the globalization process by future economic historians. A cruciform theology, aware of the current social pain of a crucified people, and seeing economics from a victimological perspective, is a necessary corrective to the optimism of the ideology of globalization.

The traditional focus of the cross, theologically, has been God orientated, in terms of salvation or theodicy. Without in any way diminishing that focus, a more human orientation is valuable in the analysis of power and the political process.

This has been attempted in our discussion of the crucified people and the political criterion of the diminution of social pain. Where the divine and human orientations most fruitfully coincide is in the area of power, in a cruciform analysis of divine power and political power.

**b) The nature of political power**

In this section the nature of political power will be examined in a broad context. Two aspects of political power will be identified, critiqued, and contrasted, and a preliminary outline of a theology of power suggested. All this is preliminary to the final section of this chapter, when a theology of power with particular reference to the cross is proposed.

In addition to my definition of power at the beginning of this chapter, another general definition of power might be ‘the realization of possibilities through the voluntary or coerced co-ordination of agents’. This can be applied to the power of an individual human body as much as to the power associated with human relationships, including politics and government. It has already been suggested that power is the central concept in political analysis. For example, Bertrand Russell writes that ‘the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics’. (Russell 1938: 10) Politics centres around the acquisition, distribution, and use of power. Tillich stresses that in pursuit of love, Christians should not be afraid of power, but should harness it in the work of love (see Tillich 1960). This is echoed by Martin Luther King, who states that ‘Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose...to bring about social, political, or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice.’ (King 1967: 37) Love requires the dynamic energy of power to be effective, and power needs the discipline of love to be just. In the American Civil Rights struggle the quest for freedom was naturally overtaken by the demand for power, but King was careful to differentiate between the potential violence of Black Power and the non-violence of collaborative and transformative power. Christine Hinze, to whose analysis of power this section is indebted, points to a significant split in the analysis of power, between, in her terms, power *over* and power *to*. (Hinze 1995 *passim*)

***Power over***

Power over can be described as the power of authority and control. It is hierarchical, structured, coercive, asymmetrical and dominating. This idea of power is at the heart of Max Weber's analysis of politics and society. He defines power as *macht*, 'the probability that one actor in a social relation will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests', exercised as *herrschaft*, the 'authoritarian power of command', 'the probability that a command with a specific given content will be obeyed by a given group of persons'. Political power, as defined by Weber, is 'the possession of a monopoly on the use of legitimate force within a given territory'. It is potentially backed by violence, and is an inevitable and inescapable phenomenon in human society, whatever the economic system which underlies it. It is interesting, given Yoder's disavowal of 'responsibility' as a guide in Christian politics, that Weber distinguishes between *gesinnungsethik* (conviction, inspiration, ultimate ends, moral codes of love and compassion) and *verantwortungsethik* (ethic of responsibility based on desired political consequences). (Hinze 1995: 33) On this analysis, for a responsible social ordering, a strong element of coercion backed ultimately by lethal force is necessary in order that society should hold together in the face of potentially disruptive and violent forces within it. Coercion is not necessarily overt; authority can be founded on convention, prestige, custom, or communal agreement. Potentially violent legitimate force is, however, the bedrock on which political power resides. This analysis of power has been prevalent in much early twentieth century Christian political analysis. Power as 'superordination' has been treated as basic to human social and political living, given the need to govern, justly and efficiently, large and complex nations and societies for the common good. For Niebuhr, the will to power is one of the chief sources of social sin, but legitimate superordinationist power is 'the primary weapon for checking that sin'. (Hinze 1995: 85)

This superordinationist view of power has been criticized most fundamentally by Marx, who sees such asymmetrical relationships as the power of one class to dominate another, the power-exercising state being in the possession of the dominant class. Alienation arises when 'people's communally generated transformative efficacy, or power to [see below], is wrested from them and re-introduced as an alien force, which is then experienced as dominative power over

the community'. (Hinze 1995: 44) In the Marxist analysis, the possession of power by the mass of the people rather than by a controlling elite is the goal of politics, hence the Marxist warning that no matter what the ruling class gave to the workers in terms of better living and working conditions (as in the proto-welfare state of Bismarckian Germany) they would never give them power. In general, liberation theology seems to envisage democracy as the sharing of power by the mass of the people, in the sense of both governing and refusing to be dominated, and demands that this power sharing democracy should be extended to economics no less than politics. Power over can be criticized also in non-Marxist terms for its innate pessimism (which its defenders would, of course, describe as realism). To use the terminology of Radical Orthodoxy, original violence is presupposed, and society regarded as a scenario of conflict, tension, and grasping. Hinze points out that on the power over analysis, von Clausewitz' axiom, that war is simply politics carried on by other means, 'is equally truthful when inverted'. (Hinze 1995: 114) The task of politics is to win the conflict, to impose one's (beneficial) policies, and to defend them, ultimately by the use or threat of force.

### ***Power to***

Power to, in contrast to power over can be described as the power of transformative creativity. Hinze defines this mode of power as 'effective capacity – power is primarily people's ability to effect their ends'. (Hinze 1995: 5) Such power is collaborative and non-hierarchical (or, at least, not necessarily hierarchical), involving the co-ordination of resources to achieve a goal. This may necessitate some elements of power over, but the emphasis is on shared growth and creativity, rather than dominion of one individual, group, class, or nation over another. If Weber is a prime example of a power over analysis, Hannah Arendt can serve as an example of promoting power to. She stresses the nature of power as capacity to effect creative change, tracing a wrong analysis of political power to Plato who 'identified rule as constitutive of politics, mistaking relations of asymmetry and force for the heart of public life'. (Hinze 1995: 132) The essence of power is not the rule of one person or social group over another, but collaboration to achieve shared goals. Force and coercion are not the norm in social and political life, but a stop gap, which takes a decided second place to the power generated by the common consent of the people. Power is a shared strategy to enable human flourishing,



rather than the coercive upholding of an asymmetrical structure. The power exercised by government does not exist for the sake of the government, but in service to the common good of the governed, who give that power by their consent.

The reaction against power over has been greatly strengthened by feminist social theory, through its critique of the masculinist dominance model in personal relationships and wider politics. Feminism 'emphasizes transformative capacity and seeks ways to foster and enhance the collaborative and efficacious features of social and political relations' (Hinze 1995: 164), with a view of power that emphasizes 'energy and competence rather than dominance'. (Hinze 1995: 169) The aim of power to is the enhancement of the capabilities of others, rather than the diminishment of their freedom, through empowering, interdependent, collaborative relationships. The purpose of power within a community is not to perpetuate structural differences, but to enhance the flourishing of each member in a creative and harmonious, rather than a conflictual and zero-sum, manner. Similarly, liberation theology stresses the liberative transformation of people from the status of being objects within a class based hierarchy to that of subjects who develop their own powers in a context of mutual community. Power is realized when the previously powerless gain an energy and capability formerly denied them.

The chief criticism of power to is on the grounds of its perceived political naivety and unrealistic utopianism. Power over theorists such as Weber and Niebuhr certainly acknowledge the virtue of power to, but regard power over relationships as inevitable, given the fact of human inequality, and necessary, since even in mutual co-operation some authority is needed to bring about the co-ordination required to achieve goals. For Niebuhr, the sinfulness of humanity confines the practicability of power to within the realm of interpersonal relationships and eschatological aspirations. Justice in a fallen world needs power over relationships as a defence against individual and sectional threats to the common good. Against this, power to theorists argue that it is a mistake to make power almost synonymous with violence, since this omits much of the essence of power, and privileges what is only a comparatively small, and anomalous, element. Domination is sinful, and not therefore inherent to human wellbeing, and, although it may not be eliminated, should be minimized. Yet even power to is in itself ambivalent. Co-operative effectiveness can be used in collaboration for the greater good of a nation or community, but can also be turned to evil ends, for example, in the holocaust,

impossible without the SS's esprit de corps and the co-ordination of modern technology and transport.

*The use of power and its dangers*

It is clear that neither of the two above mentioned aspects of power is sufficient in itself to provide a total analysis of political power. For many Christian social ethicists the greatest problem with power over has been its maldistribution. Power over in itself is morally neutral; problems arise when that power is kept as the preserve of the few, exercised to perpetuate existing oppressive structures of power, and leaves the powerless at the mercy of the powerful. Powerlessness can be as morally corrupting, in terms of fatalism, despair, and self destructive apathy, as the holding of power. There is therefore religious justification for taking power from those who use it unjustly (a tradition going back to the Calvinist theory of revolution) and using it for the common good. Power is not to be sought per se, but as an instrument for social change, and, even in a power structure of command and obedience, the presupposition is that of basic human equality between those who command and those who obey.

This critique is significantly broadened, especially in feminist writings, by questioning any justification for power over. It is admitted that there may be a need for a limited instrumental power over. This is, however, only provisional, temporary and fluid, as in parent-child relationships; it is strictly subservient to the goal of co-ordinating resources for the common good; it is for the emergency rather than the norm. In other words, it provides safeguards against occasional threats rather than being the overriding social factor; and serves to empower others, not to remove power from them. In political action, even when the aim is to gain power over, the means for this should be consistent with the end goal of a shared, creative, and mutual relationship of power to (as exemplified in the tradition of Gandhi and King). Walter Wink illustrates the differences between power over and power to by comparing the 'domination system' with 'God's domination free order.' (The two roughly correspond to Hinze's distinction between power over and power to.) The contrast is drawn between a power to take life and to control destiny and a power to support and nurture life; between domination and partnership; between win-lose and win-win; between competition and co-operation; between exploitation, greed, privilege or inequality, and sharing, sufficiency, responsibility, or equality; between

domination hierarchies and actualization hierarchies; between the authoritarian and the enabling. (Wink 1992: 46) God's new order, and its embodiment in Jesus, is antithetical to the 'domination system', and the conflict between the two, Wink believes, caused Jesus' death: 'When the domination system catches the merest whiff of God's new order, by an automatic reflex is mobilizes all its might to suppress that order.' (Wink 1992: 139)

### ***A preliminary theology of power***

Hinze usefully suggests that there is no simple correspondence between Christian doctrines and power 'over' or 'to'. (Hinze 1995: 286) Both elements of power are present in Christian conceptions of God, and in the doctrines of creation and redemption. Traditionally, the prevailing power-image of God has been that of dominance, with images of God as king, Lord, Almighty. Feminist theologians have questioned the power-anthropology engendered by this one sided theology, and stressed the need for images of holy power as creative capacity, reciprocal and mutual power in addition to (or in place of) the traditional power over images. (Hinze 1995: 246-50) This is of great significance not only for a doctrine of God but also for social ethics, since, if God's normal way of exerting power is through human creatures, the character of the God exerting the power will radically affect the ways in which the human creatures expect to exercise power. A misguided dynamolatriy will inevitably have deleterious political consequences. Barbour writes that 'divine love, like human love at its best, seeks neither [domineering] power over others nor [ineffective] powerlessness'. (Barbour in Polkinghorne 2001: 15) The theologian's task is to construct a doctrine of divine power which utilizes not only the traditional power-as-dominance images, but 'power as gentle efficacy' and creative empowering. A liberative theology rests on the divine power to energize God's creatures both to realise their own liberation, and to become instruments of God's liberating will for others. In constructing such a theology the cross, as we will see, is central.

### ***c) The cross, kenosis, and power***

#### ***Kenoticism, Philippians and the cross***

I will argue in this section that the theological model which best expresses this liberative power of God is the kenotic, and that this model most accurately

describes God's cruciform interaction with the world, providing the clearest indication of a Christian politics and a doctrine of political power in conformity with the character of God. I will also argue that while kenoticism may be valid, up to a point, without the cross, it is immeasurably deepened and strengthened by the crucifixion. One proviso must, first, be made. Kenoticism is a diverse concept, and covers a wide gamut of usage; the metaphor of self emptying can be used in various ways, including self-sacrifice, self-giving, self-limitation etc. I begin with a brief description of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century kenoticism, turn to more contemporary exegesis of Philippians 2: 5-11, and conclude with an adumbration of a cruciform kenoticism which will form the basis for a theology of a kenotic, cruciform God and a kenotic, cruciform political ethic. Yoder's use of the kenotic motif has already been noted. In the following description of kenoticism it should be noticed how much of Yoder's theology is fleshed out, especially with regard to the self limitation and patience of God.

Kenotic theology arose in Germany in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century and in Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in answer to the Christological problem of how to speak realistically of Christ's human life whilst maintaining his divinity. Given that Christ was truly human, with the limitations inherent in human life (limited knowledge, physical and psychological growth and development etc.) how could the doctrine of the incarnation preserve the traditional duality in unity of humanity and divinity in one person? A doctrine of the incarnation had to be reformulated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century context of the rise in historico-critical studies of Jesus revealing his limited knowledge, and of the increasing psychological research into human growth and development. If Christ retained the divine prerogatives, perfection, and powers of the eternal Son, how could he be truly human? The answer given by the German kenoticist Gottfried Thomasius, the English Charles Gore, and others, drawing on Philippians 2: 5-11, was that God in Christ 'emptied himself' i.e. took up a human existence with the necessary limitations of time, space and knowledge, and lived a human life, with the human processes of growth and development. Divine attributes, such as omnipotence and omniscience were laid aside (or, at least, concealed). Moltmann usefully points out (Moltmann in Polkinghorne 2001: 137-151) that this 19<sup>th</sup> century kenoticism dealt not so much with Christ *who has become human* (i.e. the life of the historical Jesus) as Christ *in his becoming human* (i.e. the point at which Jesus entered history as a human

being). The divine logos retained the attributes which appertain to God's eternal inward nature – holiness, love, mercy, faithfulness – but renounced the 'external' divine attributes relating to the world – omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence etc. It is important to note that the kenotic doctrine arose not in opposition to incarnational Christianity, but in support of it. In more modern interpretation of kenoticism, Balthasar (as in Balthasar 1990) interprets the kenotic motif in Trinitarian terms, in seeing the historical self-emptying of Jesus paralleling the eternal self giving of the Son to the Father. In becoming a 'servant' Christ's divinity is not compromised, but rather reinforced, since his eternal relationship with the Father is played out in human history.

In traditional kenoticism Christ is a pre-existent being who, in becoming incarnate, divests himself of divine attributes. More recent exegesis of Philippians 2 has questioned this account, locating Paul's focus in a kenosis within the life of Jesus rather than in a pre-incarnate decision. It has been argued that traditional kenoticism interpreted Philippians 2 in the light of subsequent Patristic Christological debate, and that Jesus' kenosis was not metaphysical, but ethical and socio-political. Dunn interprets Philippians 2 as speaking of the humanity of Jesus, whose sharing in the form of God denoted not pre-existence but the perfect likeness of God in the sense of the first Adam. (Dunn 1989: 114ff) Moltmann comments that in Paul's account 'Jesus did not take advantage of his superiority over virtually all humans in status and ability. Instead, he showed what the image of God truly is by serving others, by healing, forgiving, and submitting in love to the power of evil.' (Moltmann in Polkinghorne 2001:152) The emptying is not the incarnation in itself, but the humble and self giving course of Jesus' incarnate life, culminating in the cross. The kenosis, on this account, focuses much more on the cross than on the incarnation. McClendon draws attention to the political implications of such an interpretation, in pointing out that Christ's renunciations are meant to parallel Paul's list of renunciations in the previous chapter of Philippians – race, tribe, status – for the sake of Christ. Jesus' choice not to grasp the 'form of God' means 'a rejection not of metaphysical perfections, but earthly temptations to kingship, in favour of identification with servants and outcasts, even though that identification would lead to his death'. (McClendon 1994: 268, quoted in Murphy and Ellis 1996: 176) This would clearly be very much in line with a Yoderian theology and also, given its emphasis on Jesus' self sacrifice, with a cruciform political theology.

Much modern exegesis of Philippians 2 is not, then, concerned so much with the metaphysics of the Trinity as with the structure of the incarnational narrative used by Paul to make an ethical point to his readers. For our purposes it is this narrative structure of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ which is important, rather than the precise starting point of that narrative. Even more important, the narrative structure is inescapably cruciform. Both traditional and modern interpretations describe a narrative of descent (or humiliation) and exaltation – it is simply that one (the traditional) starts further back than the other. Both end the downward movement with the cross, followed by the upward movement of the exaltation. On the traditional interpretation, taking the form of a slave included the act of the incarnation; compared to pre-existent divine glory any human limitation, even that of a king, would seem like slavery. But Paul (as the traditional interpretation agrees) goes far beyond this to describe a certain kind of cruciform incarnation. Philippians 2 is about more than simply becoming human; it is about a certain way of becoming human. There is a definite progress in the narrative of Philippians 2 from the humanity of Christ to a certain kind of humanity – a slave – ending with the particularly servile punishment (the *servile supplicium*) of the cross. In both interpretations, kenosis is inescapably cruciform in the narrative of descent to the lowest point, the crucifixion. Without the cross, the kenosis of the incarnation would lose much of its power. As has been argued previously, the cross is the radicalization of the incarnation; more incarnate than this God could not be, than to suffer the death of crucifixion. This is not to argue that cruciform and kenotic theologies are co-terminous; it is possible to have the one without the other, though both would lose considerable force. Hengel makes this point vigorously:

The *thanatou de staurou* [death of the cross] is the last bitter consequence of the *morphen doulou labon* [taking the form of a slave] and stands in the most abrupt contrast possible with the beginning of the hymn with its description of the divine essence of the pre-existence of the crucified figure, as with the exaltation surpassing anything that might be conceived.... If it did not have *thanatou de staurou* at the end of the first strophe, the hymn would lack its most decisive statement. (Hengel 1977: 63)

Kenosis is associated by Paul inextricably with the cross. Without the cross there would indeed be a kenosis in the incarnation (if that is what Philippians 2 is about) but it would be a much diminished kenosis, with a diminished political relevance.

***The cruciform and kenotic character of God***

In addition to the differences in the exegesis of Philippians 2, there has been a significant shift in emphasis from the primarily Christological concerns of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century kenotic theologians to an attempt by late 20<sup>th</sup> century users of the kenotic motif to apply kenoticism to God's intrinsic nature, and in particular to God's providential relationship with creation. MacGregor describes a contemporary suspicion of kenoticism as a solution to the Christological puzzle, but indicates an increasing openness to a kenotic understanding of the very being of God. (MacGregor 1987: 71) That the concept of kenosis has been expanded significantly beyond its original Christological context is hardly surprising, given Jesus' role as the revealer in time of God's eternal essence. Christ, kenotic in either (or both) his incarnation or his earthly life (but especially his crucifixion) reveals an eternal divine kenosis. Robinson sees the human limitations of Jesus not as antithetical to divinity, but as a *plerosis* of divinity. (Robinson 1973: 208) God, in freely restricting the divine power is not less, but more, divine. God is seen as almighty in humility and self giving rather than simply raw power. This emphasis on power as creative and loving self giving rather than on power as dominance and control is clearly paralleled by the distinction mentioned above between power over and power to, and makes a significant difference to our understanding of both divine and political power.

The temporal actions of Jesus reveal the eternal kenotic nature of God's providential action. Moltmann in *The Trinity and the kingdom of God* (Moltmann 1981) draws attention to a long tradition in Anglican theology of linking a self-sacrificial God with the revelatory example of Christ. He quotes C.E. Rolt: 'What Christ did in time, God does in eternity. His nature is the eternal self sacrifice of love. His suffering love is at the root of all evolution and all redemption...'  
(Moltmann 1981: 31) Even earlier, F.D. Maurice interpreted the crucifixion in similar ways:

The crucifixion of Jesus does not represent an emergency rescue package hastily put together to deal with the unforeseen consequences of human sin; it is a revelation of the eternal character of God, 'for the mind of the ruler of heaven and earth is a mind of self sacrifice; it is revealed in the Cross of Christ.' (Bradley 1995: 172)

If the crucified Christ is, as Paul writes in Colossians 1:15-20, the pattern of creation, the source of all distinctively Christian discourse about God in his creation and providence, then it follows that the overall activity of God in creation and continuing providence is cruciform and kenotic. The Barthian movement in theology, of which Yoder was very much a part, championed the insight that the humiliation of the cross, far from denying Christ's divine nature, revealed God's fullness. Hence, to go beyond some of Barth's interpreters (though not the later Barth himself), there should be no contradiction between 'natural' and 'revealed' theology in a cruciform doctrine of providence. What we see definitively in the pattern of Christ's ministry, death and resurrection, and what we read less definitively in the pattern of creation and providence, should be congruent.

Peacocke, both a biochemist and a theologian, writes:

Belief in Jesus the Christ as the self expression of God in the confines of a human person is entirely consonant with those conceptions of God, previously derived tentatively from reflection on natural being and becoming, which affirm that God, in exercising divine creativity, is self limiting, vulnerable, self emptying, and self giving – that is, supremely love in creative action. (Peacocke in Polkinghorne 2001: 41)

The kenotic creative and providential actions of God are universal, but are revealed in concentrated and definitive form in the actions of Jesus Christ. These actions took shape not in a vacuum, but in a political context where questions of human political power were remarkably paralleled by questions of God's power in providence.

The cruciform and kenotic (therefore vulnerable) character of God necessitates an alternative way of interpreting power and political effectiveness, as we have seen, in Yoder, Boff, and Sobrino. For Sobrino and Boff the pain and vulnerability of God continuing in and reflected by the 'crucified people' is central to their political theology. For Yoder, a kenotic and cruciform doctrine of God revealed through Jesus' ministry and crucifixion is the basis for an eschatological doctrine of political effectiveness. In *For the Nations*, Yoder writes [My italics]:

...the church's being shaken and moved, being vulnerable, defines or constitutes its participation in the travail of the Lamb who was slain and is therefore worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and blessing. That suffering is powerful, and that weakness wins, is



true not only in heaven but on earth. That is a statement about the destiny  
*not only of the faith community, but also of all creation.* (Yoder 1997: 35)

The nature of the power of God, and therefore human political power, is radically questioned by the cross and by a cruciform doctrine of providence. The contrast between, to use Hinze's distinction, a dominating power over God and a vulnerable power to God is the basis for much of Moltmann's thesis in *The Crucified God* (Moltmann 1974). Here the distinction is repeatedly made between the political consequences of a *theologia gloriae* and a *theologia crucis*. The concept of power is naturally and instinctively linked to God, and an image of power-over is most closely associated with much of the Biblical language (almighty, king, etc) used to describe God. Hence the shock of a cruciform doctrine of God, which does not totally rule out power over, but admits suffering into that sovereignty and leads to a much greater emphasis on power to. Bonhoeffer contrasts the natural human desire for divine power with the cruciform divine power revealed in Jesus: 'Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world, and the Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering.' (Bonhoeffer 1953: 361) If, as Hall points out (Hall 2003: 79) God's purpose is to bring us salvation through the 'power of suffering love', then 'no application of power in the usual (i.e. power over) sense can attain this object'. If power is interpreted as power over, the 'weak' suffering of the power holder would seem to decrease that power – hence the unwillingness of traditional theology to allow a doctrine of divine suffering (as suggested by Hinze 1995: 270). But if power is interpreted as power to, there is a more integrated relationship between power and suffering, between vulnerability and creativity, between self sacrifice and transformation. This 'weakness' inherent in suffering is paradoxically the divine strength in salvation – as Paul stresses in the Corinthian correspondence, especially in 1 Corinthians 1: 25 and 2 Corinthians 2: 9-10.

### ***The power and 'weakness' of God in the light of the cross***

One of the most moving and powerful statements of divine cruciformity is found in the poetry of Studdert Kennedy (especially Studdert Kennedy 1947), inspired by the sufferings of the First World War. A similar poetic statement can be found in 'Jesus of the Scars', by Edward Shillito, also written in response to that war (most notably quoted in Temple 1945: 385):

The other gods were strong, but thou wast weak  
 they rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne  
 but to our wounds only God's wounds can speak  
 and not a god has wounds, but thou alone

What does it mean to ascribe 'weakness' to God? The term can cover a wide range of options from, on the one hand, a power over which allows itself in some areas to become vulnerable, but retains what might be described as reserves of power, to a metaphysical weakness where the very being of God is totally contingent upon the response of creation. Adapting descriptions commonly used of the Trinity, a distinction may be made between the 'essential weakness' and the 'economic weakness' of God, the former seeking to describe God's metaphysical essence, and the latter seeking to describe God's relationship with creation. This is not an absolute distinction, as we will see, but can perhaps serve to clarify the concept of divine weakness. As examples of essential weakness I take Process Theology and the 'weakness' theology of John Caputo and to illustrate economic weakness the Lutheran tradition of which Bonhoeffer and Moltmann (Lutheran in his cross-theology, if not in his ecclesiastical allegiance) are a part.

It is sometimes difficult to penetrate Caputo's playful post modernist talk of God as 'event', and the boundaries between realism and non-realism are (deliberately) obscured, so it is virtually impossible to describe the 'metaphysical' essence of God in Caputo's work. His 'weakness theology' is, however, a fascinating combination of Derrida and the cruciform theology of Paul. Caputo contrasts a traditional 'strong' church theology, complete with its traditional images of God as king, divine rule, the control of history, hierarchy, powerful domination, with a 'weakness theology' which portrays God as a subversive and vulnerable promise for the future and a summons to justice. God is not a dominant power or even a metaphysical force, but a 'weak' and vulnerable force which nevertheless claims us persuasively, persistently, and unconditionally. Caputo writes of the 'power of powerlessness' and the 'kingdom of weak forces'. (Caputo 2006: 16) God is a 'weak force that lays claim to us unconditionally but has no army to enforce its claims'. This 'weak force' has political connotations

Suppose the sense of 'God' is to interrupt and disrupt, to confound, contradict, and confront the established human order ... Suppose God has no time for the hierarchical power structures that human beings impose upon

one another and even less time for the power of God over human beings, which is actually the power that human beings exert 'in the name of God'.. (Caputo 2006: 34)

Caputo locates the focal point of this 'weak theology' on the cross

The weak force of God is embodied in the broken body on the cross.....The power of God is... the power of powerlessness, the power of the call, the power of protest that rises up from innocent suffering and calls out against it, the power that says no to innocent suffering, and finally the power to suffer with innocent suffering, which is perhaps the central Christian symbol. (Caputo 2006: 42)

A more systematic, if less dramatic and provocative, approach to the 'weakness' of God is that given by Process Theology, which understands the divine interaction with creation as involving persuasion rather than coercion. In the famous words of Whitehead, God is a 'fellow sufferer who understands'. (Whitehead 1979: 350) God, as an entity, is affected by other entities, and hence vulnerable to change, while remaining constant in character. Hence Whitehead's doctrine of God as dipolar, sympathetically responding to the world and experiencing the painful struggle endemic to creation, but still remaining God. Thus, for a process theologian, kenotic self restraint is not chosen by God, but is an integral part of the divine nature, which is limited and vulnerable in its very essence.

There is a sense, however, in which the distinction between essential and economic weakness, or necessity and contingency, is unreal. Process theology suggests that the kenotic limitation on divine power occurs from metaphysical necessity rather than through divine choice. But if God's essential nature is to be loving and creative, it is impossible that God could choose to be other than loving and creative. If love implies vulnerability, and God's freedom is freedom only to love, then God's vulnerability is not so much a choice as a necessity compelled by God's own nature. Or, to put this another way, divine omnipotence is not a power to do everything, but to act to the limits according to God's nature of love. So the omnipotence of God, with regard to creation, is to share the suffering of creation to the fullest extent. The humiliation of the cross is not a diminution of divine omnipotence, but its fullest outworking.

In the Lutheran tradition the cross is central to knowledge of God and therefore of God's power. In the Heidelberg thesis number 20 Luther wrote that

‘He deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.’ This theme of a cruciform epistemology is emphasized by Bonhoeffer, in his stress on knowing God as marginalized and excluded. Contrary to a ‘god of the gaps’ epistemology, humanity knows God through what we experience as a prime human category – suffering. For Bonhoeffer, a (potentially) suffering discipleship of a suffering God is the mark of Christian living by participating in the divine passion in the midst of ordinary life. ‘Man is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world.’ (Bonhoeffer 1953: 361) God does not help us by omnipotent power over, but by the power to manifest in creative suffering:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8, 17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his own omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. (Bonhoeffer 1953: 360)

Similarly, for Moltmann, God’s power is limited by the nature of his creative love. Moltmann’s political theology is predicated on the centrality of the cross in giving true knowledge of God’s compassion, sympathy and fellow suffering. In his doctrine of creation he uses the Kabbalistic concept of *zimzum*, God’s withdrawal of omnipotent power over in order to give room for his creation’s free flourishing. God is powerful, but in the sense of power to, in giving power from the divine self to creation. ‘God does not create merely by calling something into existence...he ‘creates’ by letting be, by making room, and by withdrawing himself.’ (Moltmann 1985: 88) God’s greatness is not compromised by such a withdrawal: ‘God never appears mightier than in the act of his self-limitation, and never greater than in the act of his self-humiliation.’ (Moltmann in Polkinghorne 201: 148) This power involves the patience of suffering. As Moltmann continues, ‘God acts in the history of nature and of human beings through his patient and silent presence, by way of which he gives those he has created space to unfold, time to develop, and power of their own movement.’ (Moltmann in Polkinghorne 2001: 149) Nor is this patience simply uninvolved waiting, but God is gently at work, persuading and inviting a response, and suffering both the rejection of that offer and the pain of humanity as it suffers the consequences of that rejection. This forms a major theme of Moltmann’s *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (Moltmann 1981) where (in chapter 2, entitled

‘The Passion of God’) he outlines attempts to construct a model of divine action taking as its starting point the suffering of the cross, rather than, as in previous Christian tradition, the concept of impassibility. In addition to such diverse authorities as the Jewish Heschel, the Spanish Catholic Unamuno, and the Russian Orthodox Berdyaev, Moltmann draws on a strong tradition in Anglican theology (in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century) of God’s passibility. Although Moltmann links this specifically with the Anglo-Catholic doctrine of Eucharistic Sacrifice, there are significant parallels with the contemporary emphasis on kenosis. We have seen how Moltmann particularly adduces *The World’s Redemption* by C.E. Rolt, (Rolt, 1913) a specialist on the mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite. Rolt stresses that the omnipotence of God must be interpreted in the light of the cross, as the ‘almighty power of suffering love’. The ‘cross on Golgotha has revealed the eternal heart of the Trinity’, and the ‘historical passion of Christ reveals the eternal passion of God’ (Moltmann 1981: 31-32), self sacrifice being of the very essence and nature of God.

***Power, weakness, and love***

Is it correct, then, to speak of God’s ‘weakness’? If by weakness we mean helplessness and a total powerlessness, in terms of either power over or power to, such a description is grossly misleading. But if by weakness we mean vulnerability, kenotic humility, and restraint in exercising power, even on a power over model, weakness is a justifiable description, provided that weakness is interpreted economically and not essentially. From a power to perspective, such weakness is better interpreted as creative and vulnerable kenosis, self emptying, which, in the form of love, is an integral attribute of God. This weakness is certainly not helplessness, but the fullest and most effective compassion. God’s nature of non-coercive love gives birth to a suffering creativity, the infinite and yet costly ability to give and share power. God is, as McGregor put it ‘self emptying being’. (McGregor 1987: 179) God’s nature is to give self sacrificially in love, and that nature defines and limits the nature of the power God exercises. As feminist theology necessarily points out, God’s power is not a magnification of normal human (masculinist) power; human power is redefined by the self giving power of God.

In his cantata *Ani Maamin* (I believe) Eli Wiesel (Wiesel 1973) meditates on the shattering impact of the holocaust on the fate and faith of the Jewish people. God's deliverance comes six million deaths too late, and such a God seems powerless – a remorseful deity who can suffer but cannot enable. McGregor states bluntly, in his kenotic theology *He who lets us be* (McGregor 1987) that a powerless deity is useless to anyone. This problem has been discussed above in the debate concerning Yoder's priority of witness over (at least short term) effectiveness and in Sobrino's distinction between a God of affinity, a co-sufferer, and a God of alterity, a rescuer. A sufferer may well ask, is God powerful enough to do anything about their suffering, other than to sympathize? There is a risk of polarization between a theology of the suffering of God which may leave the sufferer untouched and unrescued, and a theology of controlling divine power which is both experientially unsustainable and results in an idolatrous and sub-Christian view of God.

The question of the effectiveness of divine power cannot be sidestepped. The traditional power over images of God's sovereignty and authority have clear connotations of effectiveness – but so do the power to images. If God's power does not sustain creation, promote creation's flourishing, and empower others, it cannot reasonably be designated as any kind of power at all. George Murphy wisely comments that kenosis 'does not mean God's abdication, but God working in a way that is not recognizable to the theologians of glory'. (Murphy 2003: 80) Similarly, Polkinghorne draws the contrast: love without power means that God is a compassionate but impotent observer; power without love means that God is a cosmic tyrant. (Polkinghorne 2001: 91) How can a 'weak' or power-to God be transformative? The traditional Christian answer, in 2 Corinthians 12: 9, speaks of strength made perfect in weakness. God's purposes come to fruition not despite suffering, but through it. Perhaps a better designation, beyond the power over / power to dichotomy, is power *from alongside*, the power which is particularly demonstrated by a kenotic incarnation. God's power is seen as uncoercive, vulnerable, not controlling, and yet liberative, healing, and creative.

These questions are discussed here not so much in an attempt to discover an answer as to point up their relevance to political theology. A political theology modelled on power to may be more in accordance with God's cruciform nature and action – however, weakness, in the sense of loss of power over, risks (at least in the

short term) a lack of ability directly to protect the vulnerable or to decrease immediate suffering.

**d) Constructing a kenotic and cruciform political ethic**

***The relationship between divine power and human power***

In Yoder and the liberation theologians the strict distinctions between the doctrines of creation and atonement, of incarnation and redemption, are minimized. This accords with a general trend to see such doctrines not independently but as intimately related. A similar process can be seen in political theology: in Yoder, for example, his stress on an uncoerced response to love in his doctrine of atonement leads naturally to an avoidance of coercion in his political theology. In attempting to construct a kenotic and cruciform political ethic, an important question must first be tackled: how far is it possible to model a political ethic on God's nature and character as expressed in the creation, incarnation and atonement? We have seen how divine power is not solely or chiefly power over, but power to – or more accurately, power alongside. Since it is at the heart of a Christian anthropology to see humanity in the image of God and created according to the divine plan and purpose, there should be some kind of relationship between divine power thus redefined and human power - at the very least, some parallelism between God's action and Christian political ethics. Political ethics have at their centre the nature, use and distribution of power; hence the importance of the question of how far a Christian political ethic of power can mirror God's power in its nature and use. Can a political ethic of power be constructed which 'goes along the grain' of creation as theistically interpreted?

I will argue that such an ethic can be constructed – with some important provisos. First, as Kant taught, in ethics 'ought' implies 'can'. Is a kenotic ethic possible in a sinful and fallen political world? Niebuhrian realism would, as we have noted on many occasions, argue that a kenotic, cruciform ethic, may be the ideal, but needs to be adjusted if it is not to be irrelevant in a world of power over. As has been argued above, 'realism' is not a blank cheque for abandoning any attempt to form a cruciform ethic, but the possibly harmful consequences of such an ethic cannot simply be ignored. Second, is a parallelism between divine and human power obligatory? Does the correspondence have to be total between divine

character and human ethics? The powerlessness of Jesus on the cross signals that divine power is of a certain type, but the crucifixion is not necessarily the exclusive paradigm of divine-human relationships. It may well be overwhelmingly decisive, but is not the only paradigm. To put the problem another way, is it axiomatic that the Christian has to imitate the cruciform nature of God in all circumstances? Or are there circumstances where faithfulness to God requires the Christian not to share in the cruciform divine nature? The problem of conflicting duties has already been mentioned in our discussion of Yoder, and is relevant here. There exists also the possibility that there may be parts of the divine personality which are solely divine and have no easy correspondence to human politics. There is no automatically straightforward correspondence between Christian doctrine and questions of power.

This difficulty can be illustrated by twentieth century attempts to build social ethics on certain aspects of Christian doctrine. For Moltmann, the trinitarian doctrine of God as a community of three equals, whose life consists of a self giving, cruciform love, provides a good indication for a social ethic of democratic socialism. For Caputo, a 'strong' theology leads to militarism and violence, and so, in order to promote peace and justice a 'weak' theology is needed. It is a widely accepted maxim that if the object of worship is hierarchical or oppressive, the ensuing social ethic will probably be similarly hierarchical and oppressive. David Nicholls, in *Deity and Domination* (Nicholls 1989), outlines a fascinating history of correspondence between images of God and concepts of political power, drawing attention to the potential pitfalls. For example the Nazi sympathizing jurist Carl Schmitt argued, in his teaching about the 'sociology of the concept' that the most important concepts in modern political and legal theory were 'secularized theological concepts', both in their historical derivation and in their formal resemblances. (Nicholls 1989: 106) The danger in the mutual interrelationship is clear: erroneous theological concepts can lead to erroneous political theologies and secular ideologies, and vice versa. The difficulty, as Nicholls suggests (Nicholls 1989: 232) lies in avoiding the historical mistakes in such an *analogia entis*. He concludes:

The attempt to find fixed criteria by which to assess the validity of the images used of God results in a wild goose chase...[there are] no wholly objective criteria to which we can appeal that are free from the taint of cultural context. (Nicholls 1989: 241)



This gloomy prognosis can perhaps be confirmed by surveying some of the less beneficial ways in which the divine-human correspondence, especially with regard to the cross, has been used. For example, the kenotic imagery of sacrifice has been widely used to glamorize war and imperialism. Rupert Brooke, with his seeming joy at the opportunity for self sacrifice in war (Now God be thanked, etc) and hymns such as 'O Valiant Hearts' take the theme of sacrifice and use it to support a militarist and nationalist ideology. There is indeed a sense in which the armies suffering the hell of the trenches could be said to form part of the crucified people (such imagery was not unknown in the war poets), and the poetry of Studdert Kennedy (significantly chosen by Moltmann as an outstanding pioneer of a theology of divine suffering) dramatically expresses God's suffering and sympathy. However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that such language was frequently commandeered by those who sought to inculcate a spirit of sacrifice for dubious ends.

All this is not to argue that it is impossible to construct a social ethic which seeks to correspond to the character of God. To argue that there need be no such correspondence would remove such an ethic from any pretension of being called Christian. The problem is one of arbitrariness: how does one choose the particular aspect of God, or the particular aspect of Christian doctrine to which a Christian social ethic should correspond? There are perhaps three criteria by which the validity of a cruciform, kenotic ethic, corresponding to the character of God can be assessed. The first two are more associated with Yoder, the latter more with Sobrino and Boff.

The first criterion is that of revelation. The Christian belief is that the incarnate Jesus reveals the truth about God. In order to gain access to the aspects of the nature of God with most relevance to political ethics, it would seem reasonable to look to those aspects of the life of Jesus which connected most closely to the politics of his day. If Jesus lived a kenotic political life which ended with the inevitability of crucifixion, if Jesus renounced power over in favour of power to or alongside, then something definitive is revealed both about the nature of divine cruciform and kenotic power and the kind of politics to which the Christian is committed in following Jesus at this point. The second criterion is that of imitation. The moral character of God is revealed in Christ, and the Christian is called to imitate Christ as part of 'being in Christ'. This imitation forms the social ethic

which is an integral part of Christian discipleship. Yoder stresses that in the New Testament imitation of Christ is centred almost exclusively on the cross. There is no general concept of imitating random aspects of Christ's ministry; the only imitation in the New Testament being of the cross-bearing Christ, and hence of the particular kenotic use of power which this implies. This imitation leads to an ethic which aims to reflect the character of God, not just any aspect of the character of God, but his kenotic and cruciform nature. The third criterion is that of vulnerability. If the previous criteria rested on contemplating Christ in his relation to first century politics, this third criterion rests on contemplating Christ in his present sufferings in the crucified people. What is the effect of a doctrine of power on the present sufferings of Christ? What does the solidarity of Christ with the suffering have to say about the nature of power a Christian should seek to exercise? In the following section an attempt is made to outline a cruciform, kenotic political ethic which seeks to correspond to the cruciform, kenotic character of God in accordance with the above criteria.

***Kenosis as a subversive ethic***

If the ultimate power, the divine, is kenotic, all human pretensions to power are to some extent questioned and subverted. Kenosis parallels the ethic of reversal found in the Sermon on the Mount, and especially in the Beatitudes which illustrate what Kraybill (Kraybill 1985) described as the 'upside down kingdom'. Jesus frequently spoke in 'power language', of a 'kingdom of God', without overt irony. But the nature of that kingdom (where the first is last, and the meek inherit the earth) and the way of entering into it (as a little child) reveal a covert irony which is confirmed by the overall kenotic shape of his coming. Caputo captures this element in his description of the kingdom of God as 'an anarchic field of reversals and displacements', and invites us to consider the name of God as describing 'a disturbance or a holy disarray – a sacred anarchy, a hieranarchy'. (Caputo 206: 14) Such a God cannot be a guarantor of any existing status quo, as in traditional conservatism, but a radical question mark against the nature and use of power. This questioning of power does not necessarily abolish structures of power, but makes them accountable, both to those for whose benefit such structures exist (for example, in order to maintain the necessary organizations of a technological

civilization) and to those whom such structures may, deliberately or inadvertently, exclude from power.

In my outline of a possible kenotic ethic I make a rough division between a personal ethic of political kenosis, centred on a spirituality of kenotic political discipleship focusing on issues of lifestyle, and a social ethic of political kenosis, centred on a redefinition of power with the stress on non-violence. I conclude with two provisos on the nature of such an ethic. I take as the most important arena for such an ethic the continuing crises of globalization, environmental degradation, poverty and inequality in the world economy, seeking to indicate how such an ethic can be of use in this arena.

### *A spirituality of kenotic political discipleship*

Murphy and Ellis, in *On the moral nature of the universe* (Murphy and Ellis 1996) attempt to work out a kenotic political ethic on the basis of what they believe to be along the grain of both God's kenotic nature and kenosis as demonstrated within creation. It is their political interpretation of kenosis which forms the basis for the discussion in the remainder of this chapter. Their ethic can be summed up as follows: 'Self-renunciation for the sake of the other is humankind's highest good.' (Murphy and Ellis 1996: 118) This ethic or (equally accurately) spirituality consists of self-sacrifice, other-centredness, forgiveness, a willingness to accept suffering, and humility, exercised not merely privately but in relation to social and political life as a whole. We have already seen such a self-sacrificial cruciform spirituality in the writings of Boff and Sobrino in the context of Latin American discipleship and martyrdom. In a European context, Bonhoeffer, whose proclamation of Christian self sacrificial discipleship – 'when Christ calls a man, he calls him to come and die' (Bonhoeffer 1959: 79) – began as a metaphor and ended as a tragic reality, can serve as an example of such a political spirituality.

Such a kenotic ethic has been widely criticized. In its original Victorian and Edwardian forms (see Bradley 1995: 161) it has been interpreted as a product of the guilty consciences of wealthy members of the middle and upper classes. This criticism has particularly been made by feminists, who have seen self-sacrificial kenosis as relevant to a predominantly male paradigm, and dangerous to women, for whom it leads to a self-destructive subordination (see Hampson's rejection of kenosis in the discussion in Coakley 2002: 3). According to this feminist critique,

self development and self realization rank higher than self sacrifice. This criticism is valid, as a warning against the ever present tendency for any spirituality to become corrupted in the interests of those holding power. It would be ironic in the extreme for a kenotic spirituality to be used as an instrument of confirming the powerless in their powerlessness, rather than as an encouragement for power sharing on a basis of equality. As we will see, kenosis is an insufficient ethic in itself if isolated from wider considerations. However, this criticism does not fatally vitiate a kenotic ethic, if by means of such an ethic the overall aim is, in the words of the Magnificat, to 'cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly'. (Luke 2: 52) In that task, self sacrifice, renunciation, suffering, and detachment from material reward may well be essential virtues. If a general kenotic social ethic is indicated, there is also a need for a kenotic spirituality and a cruciform spiritual discipline to give that ethic support, impetus, staying power and validity.

### ***Kenotic lifestyle choices***

In the light of the environmental crisis and the continuing destructive economic and political inequality between 'first' and 'third' worlds, a kenotic ethic is required from those at present enjoying a disproportionate share of the world's resources. This kenotic ethic would take the form of a voluntary self limitation in the use of resources, food and wealth. The link between kenosis and lifestyle has long been established. For example, in ecumenical theology of the 1970's, Mar Ostathios (Mar Ostathios 1977: 104), in an article headed 'the rich must become poor voluntarily' wrote of the church and the Christian using Christ's kenosis as a pattern to follow in adopting a simpler lifestyle.

I take as a recent historical example of this kenotic ethic the 'Lifestyle Movement' of the 1970s, the ethos of which has mushroomed in the contemporary Green Movement. Other similar examples were the evangelical 'International Consultation on Simple Lifestyle' which grew out of the Lausanne Conference, and Roman Catholic concerns for lifestyle initiated by the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. (Details to be found in Peet, Crucible, 2005) The 'Lifestyle Movement' arose chiefly under the aegis of Horace Dammers (Dean of Bristol Cathedral) who set out the principles of the movement in *Lifestyle, a Parable of Sharing* (Dammers 1982). The movement had its beginnings in the Church Leaders Conference in

Selly Oak, Birmingham, in 1972, in the Commission on 'Man's Stewardship in God's World', where the following 'invitation' was put to the conference:

The Commission, convinced that environmental responsibility and social justice on a world scale demand changes in personal as well as national ways of life, recommends to each of its own members and invites all members of this Conference to pledge ourselves to a simplicity of life which is generous to others and content with enough rather than excess; and that each should privately review his or her life before God so as to implement this pledge, as necessary, by altered patterns of consumption.

(Dammers 1982: 106)

The links between environmental responsibility, social justice, and the lifestyle of the individual, the ideals of 'simplicity', 'enough' and avoidance of 'excess', and private and personal responsibility for implementing the commitment were themes incorporated into the Lifestyle Commitment, which included the famous phrase used by the ecumenist / biologist Charles Birch 'I therefore propose to live more simply that others may simply live.' The commitment is given to 'change my own lifestyle as may be necessary.....and to enjoy such material goods and services as are compatible with this commitment.' Support is pledged 'to such political and social action and to such economic policies as tend to conserve, develop, and redistribute the Earth's resources for the benefit of the whole human family.' A percentage of income is to be given away, and participants are encouraged to join a 'Life style cell' or to form one. This 'simple lifestyle' is not seen as the end, but as a means to an end, in a holistic framework which presupposes and includes political action; it is not, at least in intention, a privatized and individualistic venture. Ronald Sider, the author of the work, *Rich Christians in an age of hunger* (Sider 1977), which, more than any other, influenced evangelicals towards a simpler lifestyle, wrote that the purpose of a simpler lifestyle was 'a desire for structural change to bring about a new kind of global community'. (Sider 1982: 26ff) This was an attempt to answer the chief criticism of lifestyle movements, that they accept the existing economic order and power structure as basically sound and concentrate on the responsibilities and uses of economic power while ignoring the necessity for a more radical critique of the acquisition and maintenance of that power.

Lissner, a Dane working for the World Lutheran Federation, gave ten reasons for adopting a simpler lifestyle (quoted in Dammers 1982: 81-2). A simple

lifestyle is an act 'of faith, of self-defence (against over-consumption); of withdrawal (from the 'neurosis' of a materialist society); of solidarity; of sharing; of celebration; of provocation (a prophetic act); of anticipation (of a new era); of advocacy; and an exercise of purchasing power.' Historically, the lifestyle movement arose in the 1970's from a sense of disillusionment with the prevailing model for development, with its assumption of a shared interest between the wealthy and the poor (an assumption which is still prevalent in much development economics). A more conflictual model may well be indicated by a cruciform political theology, accompanied by an uneasiness about benefiting from an unjust economic system – in the sixties phrase, a desire to cease from being part of the problem, and become part of the solution. The environmental crisis has added weight to what might be called a Kantian criticism of the present maldistribution of the earth's resources, given the finite nature of these resources and an awareness that it is impossible for the whole of humanity to enjoy levels of consumption hitherto the norm in the richer nations. A Kantian ethic, by which a situation's moral acceptability rests on the rightness (and possibility) of its universalisation, would seem to question the consumption of the rich, in the light of shortage of resources and the potential for conflict (military or economic) over them.

In this situation, some sort of a kenotic ethic would seem to be essential, for three reasons. First if (as seems overwhelmingly likely) the chief cause of the environmental crisis is over-consumption on behalf of the rich, some form of kenotic restraint is essential in order to remedy the situation. Second, one of the simplest arguments for a kenotic, simpler lifestyle, is the subsequent transfer of resources from the 'first world' to the 'third', either through massively increased charitable giving - a course of action vigorously advocated by Peter Singer in *The life you can save* (Singer 2009) or through socially useful forms of investment, such as micro credit schemes (as recommended, for example, by the Agra Covenant on Christian Capital – see Sider 1997: 234-5). This argument for a kenotic lifestyle circumvents the debate over whether the wealth of the 'first world' is a contributory factor to the poverty of the 'third'. Even if it could be demonstrated that first world wealth and third world poverty are not causally linked, the Christian would still have a responsibility to alleviate the suffering that exists. In the New Testament, and especially the teaching of Jesus (for example, Matthew 25: 31-46, Luke 10: 25-37, and Luke 16:19-31) the rich are judged not so much for their part in directly and

consciously causing suffering, but for their callous indifference to it and their refusal to use their wealth to alleviate it. A kenotic lifestyle, lived in awareness of the suffering of the 'crucified people', adopted by members of the 'first' world would be an attempt to obey the teaching of Jesus at this point. Any charges of economic naivety, in that decreased 'first world' demand entails global economic recession, could be countered by the fact that 'first world' kenoticism would lead to increased 'third world' investment and therefore beneficial economic activity.

As we have seen, one of the criticisms (perhaps, in practice, unjustified) of lifestyle movements has been their tendency to cultivate a privatized ethic, which ignores the need for structural change. This leads to the third reason for a kenotic lifestyle, that such a lifestyle gives integrity to political campaigning for such structural changes and brings about a shift in public attitudes which are usually a precursor to change. Syder adduces the example of the abolitionists of the nineteenth century, who would have had no case against slavery had they themselves kept slaves (Syder 1991: 226). Elliot sees a significant role for the churches in the creation of an alternative consciousness which can bring about political change. This he sees as the 'true task of the church in development' (Elliot 1987:117) advocating 'centres of resistance' - small cells of people 'who are discovering the interpenetration of prayer and praxis in their own situation' - such as the Base Communities of Latin America and the Sojourners of the United States. (Elliot 1987: 180) A kenotic theology could well form the basis for what Taylor called a 'joyful resistance movement' (Taylor 1975: 68) tackling environmental degradation and the persistence of poverty and inequality.

### ***Kenotic power as em-powering***

So far we have examined a mainly personal kenotic ethic and spirituality. How might a kenotic ethic become capable of social and political embodiment? This begs the question of whether such an ethic is primarily for a relatively small number of committed individuals (i.e. a Yoderian disciplined church) or whether it is legitimate to extend such an ethic more widely. Whilst recognizing that the further removed from a committed minority grouping the greater the inevitable dilution of a kenotic ethic, it would be paradoxical to argue that what is valid for one group in society is not applicable in any way to society as a whole. If the divine intention for humanity is some form of a kenotic ethic, modelled by the church, then

it is legitimate to outline what a kenotic ethic might mean, and what social embodiment it might take, beyond the boundaries of the church.

I wish to examine this with particular reference to both political and economic power – two sides of the same coin, converging in the running, for example, of the IMF, World Bank and other international economic organizations. In general terms, a kenotic doctrine of power aims to enable power in others through a degree, at least, of self giving and self sacrifice for the common good (the category of power to). As Aneurin Bevan is said to have remarked, the purpose of getting power is to be able to give it away. The logic of the cross, the ‘Son of Man coming not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10: 45) indicates a kenotic empowering through service and a renunciation of the power whose main object is domination. In the globalization debate, this would indicate a shift from coercive, dominating, centralized neo-imperialist power to an em-powering and enabling power, power to build up local strength and responsibility, power to enable others to fulfil their potential.

Murphy and Ellis describe four levels of economic activity, from non-kenotic to kenotic (Murphy and Ellis 1996: 122). First, where the aim is totally self serving; second, where there is sharing in order to create new economic opportunities (where my sacrifice means, in the end, my gain in addition to the gain of others, for example, in microcredit loans); third, where there is pleasure from seeing someone else use a resource, even if it excludes me from certain good or benefits (an example being the sacrifices made in family life); fourth, sacrifice for others, whose enjoyment will not contribute directly to my own happiness (for example, present sacrifices made for the environmental benefit of future generations).

Given the intrinsically selfish character of liberal free market capitalism, which by its very nature is incapable of a kenotic instinct, the role of a kenotically influenced government would be to mould the course of the economic process by means of incentives and regulation towards a sharing and democratizing of economic power in the interests of those lacking that economic power. Here a paradox can clearly be seen: on a personal level, a kenotic spirituality or discipleship cannot be imposed by coercion or law, but can only be freely chosen. On a macro scale, a kenotic national or international ethic involves, where power is shared or devolved, a degree of coercion (or at least, governmental encouragement).



This would mark a kenotic decision by society as a whole as to how it wishes its economy to operate.

Similarly, Murphy and Ellis outline a scale of kenoticism in the political sphere, 'a scale of attitudes and behaviour, characterizing how political organizations relate to their members and the community, and a similar scale for a government's relations to its own citizens and to other states'. (Murphy and Ellis 1996: 132) Murphy and Ellis suggest on the non-kenotic to kenotic scale: first, a centralized unilateral form of decision making enforced by tyrannical methods, with other groups dominated and brought into line by coercive methods; second, broadly democratic methods of majority decision making, but with the minority forced to accept the decision of the majority, power negotiations being undertaken with outside groups; third, participatory democracy, policy arrived at as general agreement, taking into account minority views, with methods of persuasion, negotiation, and accommodation used in relation to other groups; finally, consensus decision making within the organization, and 'true political kenosis in outside relations, opening oneself to the opposition and using methods that have the potential of transforming enemies into friends.' Examples of the latter might be individual leaders such as Gandhi, King, Dolci – but, significantly, not national governments. It is doubtful whether in a large complex society such pure or 'true' kenotic behaviour, in the form of consensus decision making, is at all viable, at least in the functioning of national government.

However, a move towards kenoticism can certainly be made on what might be described as the structural and intentional levels. Structurally, policies such as the devolution of power, subsidiarity and federalism tend towards a kenotic power sharing away from the centre and bring about local political enabling. And if it is the intention of government not to govern in the interests of a section of society or a dominating class, but to seek the common good, both for its own citizens and in international affairs, then that government can move in a 'kenotic' direction, where power to gradually replaces power over. Problems occur when conflicts arise between the supposed good of its own citizens and the good of citizens of another nation. This poses the question whether a government can obey a kenotic international ethic to the (at least short term) detriment of its own citizens, for example in refraining from increased national prosperity in the interests of sharing prosperity with others. A democratic government, elected on a kenotic manifesto,

would be justified in pursuing such a policy. Whether or not such a situation would be possible could depend upon a change of consciousness in a kenotic direction in which a kenotic church might be a significant catalyst. In fact, it is unrealistic to expect the adoption of a kenotic national policy without such a witness from a committed minority, in which a kenotic and cruciform church could play a leading role.

*Non-violence as the presumption*

At the heart of a kenotic politics is the abandonment of expansionist self aggrandizement, whether territorial, economic, or political. Expressed thus, a kenotic ethic cuts decisively across the grain of human history, a history of the waxing and waning of self aggrandizing empires. It is important to recognize that a kenotic ethic calls for nothing less than a disposition and a policy diametrically opposed to this historical norm. Murphy and Ellis go so far as to declare that the kenotic ethic ‘entails the proscription of violence’ (Murphy and Ellis 1996: 142) and envisage a decreasing need for the violence of coercion as a kenotic ethic is applied: ‘A consistent policy of using the least coercive means possible in each social situation will affect the character of the individuals involved such that less coercion will be needed in future resolutions of conflict.’ (Murphy and Ellis 1996: 151) They adduce various different forms of coercion, beginning with the most kenotic, and ending with the least: persuasion by argument and, if necessary, by accepting suffering or self-sacrifice; non-violent coercion, including indirect action through strikes or acts of non-cooperation; social coercion through ostracism or collective pressure; and finally, violent coercion (Murphy and Ellis 1996: 153-4). They comment that ‘the factor that distinguishes the kenotic category of actions from other non-coercive forms of persuasion is the issue of suffering and of sacrificing oneself for the sake of the other’. (Murphy and Ellis 1996: 156)

It is significant that, as in Yoder, the grounds for such non violence lie not so much in an inner logic of kenoticism as in an imitation of the character of God, who, in the historical cruciform paradigm given by Jesus, refused to resort to violence, and in his providential relationship with humanity does not violently coerce. Concern is therefore shown not merely for self defence, or for the defence of the neighbour, but for the good of the aggressor. There is a willingness to suffer in order to break a cycle of violence or, indeed, to prevent its initiation. A kenotic

non-violence renounces the right not only to attack, but to defend oneself if that self defence oversteps the possibility of reconciliation. Such an ethic is certainly not passive or negative, in the sense of the mere avoidance of violence. Nor does such an ethic ignore the necessity to initiate and accomplish political change; it does, however, recognize that there are limits to the degree of coercion permissible in bringing about that change.

We return now to the basic difference between Yoderian (and Murphy and Ellis kenoticist) pacifism, and the Niebuhrian realist position, whose stance on the permissibility of violence is shared (reluctantly) by Boff and Sobrino. Given the ‘competing duties’ argument inherent in any Christian discussion of violence, it is not clear why some degree of force, in terms of police action, should be totally excluded in a kenotic ethic. One can renounce self defence kenotically, but to renounce the defence of others may not be so easily justified. The nature, extent, and violence of force is certainly limited by a kenotic ethic, but force is not necessarily ruled out *per se*. Indeed, as Ellis points out (Ellis in Polkinghorne 2001: 123) a kenotic ethic involves putting oneself at risk in the interests of others. If the only way to defend those at risk is by force, it is, paradoxically, a relatively short step to a kenotically self sacrificial ‘just war’. It is important to recognize that both approaches rest on valid principles (and principles which can be justified by an appeal to the cross), the Yoderian pacifist imitating the kenotic action of God in Christ, and the liberation theologian being sensitive to the Christian’s responsibilities towards the suffering, including their defence.

In practice, this tension is at least partially resolved by a kenotic spirituality which emphasizes the necessity for giving up revenge in favour of the long term benefits of peace, and of prioritizing reconciliation with the enemy over strict justice. Such a peacemaking theology has been developed, for example, by Shriver in *An Ethic for Enemies* (Shriver 1995) and the ‘Forgiveness and Politics Study Project’, initiated by the British Council of Churches. In practical politics this approach has been most recently exemplified in South Africa, in the forgiveness and magnanimity demonstrated by Mandela, and the workings of the Truth and Justice Commission.

*Two Provisos*

The Niebuhrian objection to a kenotic politics is not that it is wrong, but that it is disastrously unfeasible, given the sinfulness of humanity, and likely to result in the further suffering of the vulnerable. This is a significant objection, and not simply to be countered by a Gandhian (or Yoderian) belief in the purity of means, while leaving the ends to God. A kenotic ethic, according to the Niebuhrian, is certainly suitable for a highly committed minority, whose non-violent witness would no doubt be valuable in pointing towards an ideal, but is totally unsuitable for the practical politics of governing a state, or establishing international order.

This is partially countered by my first proviso – that a kenotic ethic is not absolute. There is a mean to be established between Yoderian kenotic risk and Niebuhrian responsibility. For example, a parent will, for the sake of a child's personal, social and moral development, allow a degree of risk, but that allowing of risk is not absolute; it is limited by the responsibility for the prevention of excessive harm. Here also we return to the theme which is basic to this subject – the necessity to construct a social ethic imitative of the character of God. It is essential to remember that the supreme and controlling attribute of God, on which all theology, political and otherwise must be modelled, is not kenosis, but love. Kenosis may be the overriding way in which power is ideally exercised in love and forms the definitive way in which God interacts lovingly with creation, but kenosis is a concept secondary and subsequent to that of love. It may be argued that love in itself is an insufficient concept, and needs to be 'fleshed out' by a kenotic incarnation which gives historical reality to that love, but love is still prior to any concept depending upon it. It is possible that love may sometimes override kenosis in divine providence, and therefore in a Christian politics.

This leads to my second proviso: kenosis in itself is not enough. Jesus' kenotic advice to the rich young ruler was not simply 'go, sell your goods, and follow me' (Mark 10:17-25), but also 'give the money to the poor'. The command was not simply for the good of the rich young ruler's soul, in fulfilling an abstract kenotic demand, but for the good of the most vulnerable in the wider community. Likewise, kenosis does not consist of self-emptying or suffering for its own sake (or for the sake of the individual) but for the good of the world. Kenosis could lead to a self absorbed blind alley unless coupled with a further vision for justice and the desire, actively 'to remove the crucified from their crosses'.

## Chapter 12

### ***The cross, the church, and the crucified people***

The underlying question discussed in this concluding chapter is how a cruciform social ethic can be embodied in the community of the church. If, as Bonhoeffer asserts, the church is ‘Christ existing in community’ (Bonhoeffer 1995: 65), then political theology, ecclesiology, and Christology are inextricably entwined. How can the contemporary church be a social witness to the Crucified and the crucified? In particular, how can a ‘mainstream’ church in Britain, such as the Church of England or the Methodist Church, live out a political ethic marked by the cross? These questions are essential to any British discussion of a political theology of the cross. Similarly, as Moltmann declares, ‘Every statement about the church will be a statement about Christ. Every statement about Christ will be a statement about the church.’ (Moltmann 1977: 6) What statement does the crucifixion make about the church, and the social ethics bound up with that ecclesiology? In answer to these questions I seek to outline a theoretical framework for the political role of the mainstream British churches, drawing on the insights of Yoder, Boff, and Sobrino, in particular Yoder’s vision of a cruciform minority church, and Boff and Sobrino’s emphasis on the ‘crucified people’.

#### ***a) Questions of definition – the cruciform and the crucified***

##### ***The church as the body of Christ, and therefore cruciform***

The mode and meaning of the death of Christ entails the cruciform character of the church as his present ‘body’. It is significant that the Christological definition of the church as the ‘body of Christ’ in Pauline thought is rooted from the beginning in the concept of the suffering, ‘crucified’, people of God. At his conversion, Paul is convicted that by persecuting the Christian believers he is persecuting Christ himself (as pointed out by Robinson 1952: 58). On this account, from the very outset, Paul sees the suffering church as Christ’s persecuted body. The church’s task is to embody Christ in the contemporary world and to create a continuing Christ-shaped community. Since Jesus’ historical interaction with the society and the politics of his day led to his crucifixion, so that same vulnerability to suffering and persecution should inevitably continue in the contemporary church’s social and

political witness. The church's cruciformity is an inescapable consequence of its nature as the body of Christ.

It is no exaggeration to assert that the very genuineness of the church is recognized by such cruciformity. This is certainly not the sole defining feature of the church; the church is a community of joy, of worship, fellowship, love and service, with the distinctive *notae* of holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The church is also, in the words of Bishop Geoffrey Paul, a 'glorious mixture of saints and fatheads' (Paul 1986: 135), and its historical and sociological reality is therefore bound to fall far short of its ideal nature, being inevitably corrupted by a sinful conformity. It is however significant that in New Testament ecclesiology (most notably in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, but also in Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes) suffering is pre-eminent as the distinguishing mark of the followers of Jesus. A Pauline *theologia crucis* leads inevitably to an *ecclesia crucis*. If the church's identity is found elsewhere than in the vulnerability of the crucified Christ, it foregoes its right to be called, in any meaningful way, the body of Christ. The pre-eminent contradiction of Christendom lies in the creation of an ecclesiology which obviates the need for vulnerability and therefore severs the link, in its sociological practice as a community, with the historical Jesus. A church which thus pretends to be the body of an uncrucified Jesus is living a lie. The church's essential cruciform vulnerability is well expressed in William Cavanaugh's reflections on the Chilean church under Pinochet:

The true body of Christ is wounded, marked by the cross. As the body of Christ, the church participates in the sacrifice of Christ, his bloody confrontation with the powers of this world. The church's discipline then is only the discipline of martyrdom, for Christ's body is only itself in its self-emptying. The church does not exist for its own sake; it is not predicated on its own perpetuation, as is the state. Its discipline is a constant dying to itself for the sake of others. (Cavanaugh 1998: 271)

### ***The relationship between the church and the crucified people***

Moltmann, in his systematic theology of the church (Moltmann 1977: 129), quotes Ignatius of Antioch's *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*: 'wherever Christ is, there is the catholic church.' (In the Latin translation the formula *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* originally reinforced the authority of bishops!) Christ's presence is located in the

fellowship and mission of the institutional, visible church, in the sacraments and the worship. But he is present also in the poor. ‘This double presence is needed if it is to be the church of the crucified Christ whose appearance it awaits.’ (Moltmann 1977: 132) The crucified Christ is present both in his cruciform body, the church, and in his crucified body, the crucified people. There is a clear problem here for those who, like Yoder, stress the distinctiveness and the firm boundaries, enforced by discipline, of the believers’ church, rather than the broader crucified people defined by suffering rather than belief. Is ‘bearing the cross’ restricted to those who bear the name of Christ (defined here as the cruciform people) or can it refer more widely to those who have done to them what was done to Christ (the crucified people)?

I have suggested previously that Christ’s solidarity with suffering is not restricted to those who bear the name Christian, and that the concept of the ‘anonymous crucified’ might express the link between those who consciously and deliberately bear the cross of Christ and those who unwillingly have it thrust upon them. One way of imagining the relationship is that of two overlapping circles – one representing the cruciform people and another representing the crucified people. There are areas where there is no real overlap – on the one hand, where ‘taking up the cross’ is purely voluntary, and, on the other, where there is suffering, but no overt consciousness of sharing the crucifixion of Christ. But there is a large and growing area of overlap, especially since, as Jenkins points out (Jenkins 2007a *passim*) the increasing majority of Christians are from the poorer areas of the world, in the ‘global south’, and there is huge population growth in many predominantly Christian countries (such as Uganda, the Philippines, Brazil). The crucified people will thus not be coterminous with the church, but will approximate to it much more closely than previously. On this ‘overlapping circles’ model, there is still a distinction between the cruciform and crucified peoples, but also a continuity and an ever increasing overlap. It may, at first sight, seem that there is little of this overlap in the predominantly middle class British mainstream churches, and compared to the gross disparities and deprivation in communities in the ‘global south’ British Christianity is, in general, economically prosperous. However, being disproportionately female and elderly (i.e. lower paid or no longer earning) the economic potential of British Christians is probably well below the average with regard to the population of Britain as a whole. Data is scarce, but this possibility is

indicated by figures obtained through a recent exercise in the Bradford diocese to establish a fair diocesan share (the amount congregations contribute to the diocesan funds). This exercise, whereby individuals anonymously indicated their income, demonstrated that the earnings of congregational members appeared to be well below the average (unpublished statistics from the Bradford diocese).

A formal parallel to this model of the continuity and discontinuity between the 'cruciform' and the 'crucified' can perhaps be seen in Aquinas' teaching on the relationship between baptism and martyrdom. Those who have not received baptism but share the suffering of Christ as martyrs (as may have been common in the persecutions in the early church) may be held as having received the sacramental effect of baptism in water without actually having received physical baptism. (Summa Theologiae 3.66.11) Rahner, whose concept of 'anonymous Christians' has been noted above with reference to the crucified people, suggests that 'In martyrdom, what had previously been signified and made present through the sacramental sign of baptism is here simply fulfilled.' (Rahner 1961: 102-3) The martyrdom to which Aquinas refers is, of course, a conscious and willing witness to Christ, and it might perhaps be thought unreasonable to extend the 'sacramental effect' of baptism to those individuals who unconsciously (and unwillingly) witness to Christ's sufferings. However, when considering the 'crucified people' as a whole, it is here that the continuing divine suffering is most made manifest and therefore stands as a continuing witness to the cross of Christ. It would be a mistake to draw the lines of demarcation too clearly, especially given the imprecise and provisional relationship in Jesus' teaching between the community of his followers and membership of the 'kingdom of God'.

### ***b) Unchosen cruciformity***

#### ***Chosen and unchosen cruciformity***

In the remainder of this chapter I consider both types of cruciformity, chosen and unchosen. Chosen cruciformity can be seen in two ways – primarily as that of the Christian who seeks to take up the cross, but also as that of the non-Christian whose service in the cause of 'removing the crucified people from their crosses' adumbrates, if unconsciously, that of the Christian in performing the same task. This, as discussed above, has been a leading theme in Latin American



liberation theology. Likewise, unchosen cruciformity can be interpreted in two ways: first, as has already been described, the unchosen cruciformity of the ‘crucified people’; and second, the unchosen cruciformity of the contemporary church in its marginalized situation in Britain and Western Europe.

***The unchosen cruciformity of British Christianity***

In the 1960’s Archbishop Michael Ramsey made a disturbing observation concerning the Church of England: ‘It may be the will of God that our Church should have its heart broken.’ (Hastings 1991: 533) In the 1930s Studdert Kennedy wrote of Jesus coming to Birmingham and simply being left out in the rain, weeping for Calvary. (Studdert Kennedy 1947: 34) Both describe the painful marginalization of the church in Britain, in Studdert Kennedy’s case when that marginalization was a shadow of the present situation. Compared to the physical suffering of the church under active persecution, it might seem a gross exaggeration to describe this situation by the metaphor of crucifixion, but the unchosen weakness, marginalization, and powerlessness of the present church in Britain can perhaps go some way towards justifying its description as cruciform, in contrast to its previous Constantinian status.

It is difficult to overestimate the revolution in political theology necessitated by this new situation, just as it is difficult to overstate the vulnerable position of the contemporary British mainstream churches. Most models of Christian political theology presuppose a strong, or at least a relatively strong, church. Even Moltmann, for all his radicalism, seems to presuppose a church numerically and sociologically strong enough to provide a powerful continuing political witness. Boff and Sobrino write against a background of a mass of people whose roots are firmly grounded in Christian practice and devotion. This is clearly no longer the case in Britain. Theology now has to be done ‘outside the city wall’, to aid a weak church in a situation where Christendom is only a memory, or is preserved merely in rituals which have become increasingly empty and meaningless. This decoupling from Christendom indicates a more Yoderian theology – yet even Yoder, with his minority ecclesiology, presupposes a strong and disciplined church able to give a powerful witness. The changes to the future religious geography of Britain caused by both decline in numbers and the dangerously skewed age profile of most congregations, mean that such a witness will inevitably be weakened and

diminished unless the very process of numerical decline, by a kind of Darwinian selection, increases the cohesion and discipline of the churches which remain. A more 'sectarian' future seems unavoidable, with the inevitable consequences for social ethics. Yoder writes

It is one of the widely remarked developments of our century that now one dimension, now another, of the ecclesiastical experience and the ecclesiological vision once called 'sectarian' are now beginning to be espoused by some within majority communions. (Yoder 1984: 5)

Yoder adduces Rahner preparing European Catholics for a 'diaspora' existence, where it will no longer be a presupposition that the church can dominate a culture numerically or politically. Significantly, he also adduces the liberation theologian Juan-Luis Segundo's prophecy that 'the church of the future needs to be a ministering, voluntary minority, instead of the mass'. (Yoder 1984: 5) In such a 'sect' or 'diaspora' existence, the task of political theology is to formulate a theology of divine power which coheres both with the cruciform God revealed in the scriptures and the situation of weakness in which the church exists.

### ***The marginalisation of the British Churches***

The decline in institutional British Christianity has been well documented by religious sociologists such as Davie and Bruce. Davie has characterized British religion as 'believing without belonging' (Davie 1994: 5) but even the diffuse penumbra of belief she describes seems now to be shrinking. Hastings, in his history of the church in England in the twentieth century, writes that 'between 1960 and 1985 the Church of England as a going concern was effectively reduced to not much more than half its previous size'. (Hastings 1991: 604) This dramatic collapse in Christian practice and observance is corroborated by current statistics.

'Whichever indicator is selected – electoral roll figures, communicant numbers, baptisms per live births, proportion of marriages taking place in church, confirmations and ordinations' (Davie 1994: 52) there is a downward trend, with the added 'generational time bomb' in that the proportion of children and young adults attending worship is shrinking the fastest. This decline is regionally varied and countered, to some extent, by a rise in numbers of independents and Pentecostals, especially among immigrant communities, but it is difficult to disagree with Greenwood and Burgess in their statement that in Britain 'the

churches are facing the death of their current incarnation'. (Greenwood and Burgess 2005: 15)

This shrinking of institutional Christianity in Britain, at least in its present form, would seem to be incontestable and has serious consequences, not only for pastoral care, worship and evangelism, but also for political theology. If, as Davie argues, 'nominal allegiance is by far the most prominent form of religious attachment' (Davie 1994: 49) then the possibility of the church having anything approaching a traditionally conceived hegemonic role is slim, since it is unlikely that the non (or infrequently) worshipping Christian will have their political beliefs significantly influenced by church teaching or formed in a distinctively Christian matrix. As Hall points out, 'What Peter Berger and others have called 'cultural establishment', that is, identification of Christianity with the cultural and social norms of society at large, is over.' (Hall 2003: 160). Similarly, Bruce writes that 'the Christian churches have lost their ability to shape popular thinking... [popular] images of the supernatural are no longer structured by Christian precepts. They are amorphous and idiosyncratic and have few, if any, behavioural consequences.' (Bruce 1995: 71)

This is not to argue that the churches in Britain have little or no social or political significance. Recent statistics show that one in six of Britain's adults attend a church service at least once a month (Barley 2006:13) and the decline in institutional religion has to be set alongside wider sociological patterns, such as the widespread reluctance to join organizations or to take on responsibility for running them (membership of political parties being now a quarter of the 1964 level, and ever decreasing). Recent campaigns over international debt and trade justice might demonstrate some continuing influence on government by the churches – although the era of Temple and Tawney, whose Christian socialism shaped the welfare state for half a century seems far distant from the contemporary situation. The present 'exile' of the churches, to use Whitworth's phrase, (Whitworth 2008 *passim*) is in an uneasy dialectical relationship with the remnants of Christendom. On the one hand, there is an increased willingness by government to use religious agencies to plug gaps in the welfare state; on the other hand, we are seeing what van den Heuvel described as the 'humiliation of the church' (van den Heuvel 1967) – the fact that, as Medhurst and Moyser put it in their discussion on secularization, 'organized expressions of religious life [have been] shunted aside from the

mainstream of social, economic, and cultural life, and inherited religious beliefs have seemingly lost immediacy or plausibility for significant sectors of society'. (Medhurst and Moyser 1998: 18) Christendom, in the sense of the church as the 'guardian of authoritative cultural norms' and as a base for shared values and societal unity, is over. Christian 'ideological hegemony' can no longer be assumed; the churches have been forced (or, perhaps, eased) to the margins of 'whole departments of life for which it once assumed the lion's share of responsibility'. (Medhurst and Moyser 1998: 24) Given this loss of power and influence, this relocation of Christianity from 'within the gates' to 'outside a city wall', a new strategy is required.

### ***Loss and gain***

Such a strategy, taking into account the enforced cruciformity of the church in the sense of its powerlessness and marginalization, may well lead to a more faithful witness to the nature of God and to a political role more consistent with the pattern exemplified by Jesus' ministry and crucifixion. Bonhoeffer wrote of God, paradoxically, both at the centre of life (i.e. not a 'God of the gaps' or a *deus ex machina*) (Bonhoeffer 1953: 282) and pushed to the margins (Bonhoeffer 1953: 360). A cruciform church pushed to the margins better represents a crucified God pushed to the margins, since a powerful church can fall into the unconscious idolatry of attempting to represent a non-existent God of misconstrued power. The God revealed in Jesus is a crucified God, and is therefore represented by and witnessed to most accurately by a cruciform church. God's providential relationship with the world does not entail control or coercive direction, and for a church to represent God as controlling and powerful in this way is both spiritually and politically disastrous. Exile, or cruciformity, may be the church's best friend (as argued in Whitworth 2008: 97). A recurring theme in the Old Testament is how, through the painful process of exile, God made the chosen people fit for purpose by making them totally vulnerable; it is not inconceivable that a similar process could be at work for the good in a cruciform church.

While considering the possible benefits of the weakness of the church, it is worthwhile enumerating the potential dangers of this weakness. First, although 'exile might be the church's best friend', is it in the best interest of the society in which the church is called to serve as the 'leaven in the lump'? Christendom

certainly had its disadvantages, but it could well be argued that it provided at least a check against an even greater barbarism than European history has so far demonstrated. Second, whereas a weak church may be a more 'purified' body for the furthering of God's purposes, Davie asks (Davie 1994: 75) 'is there a minimum size beyond which an active minority is no longer effective in society?' A church which is too small, fragmented, and marginalized could reach a point where it simply becomes irrelevant and virtually invisible. Third, weakness and a sense of persecution may turn the church's political outlook into that of a selfish and self interested pressure group, concerned above all with self protection. Bartley draws a useful contrast between the persecution of the European churches in the pre-Christendom and post-Christendom eras (Bartley 2006: 128). Then, persecution involved torture and death; now, 'persecution' involves exclusion from the mainstream and complaints over loss of privilege. Fourth, and most significantly, a minority church is not necessarily a healthy witness of Christ to the majority society, if and when its morality is believed to fall below the standards of that society. Recent child abuse scandals are an obvious example. Perhaps less widely recognized within the church is the effect on wider society of the debate over gay relationships, where a defensive and embattled church can appear to be fighting on the wrong side against what many 'in the world' would see as a more gracious morality.

Given these reservations, the end of Christendom could provide a liberating opportunity for the British churches, so that the sociological actuality of the church might better fit its theological and cruciform essence. It is foolishly unrealistic and theologically naïve to envisage a church totally freed from corrupting political and cultural structures so that it somehow achieves its pure being, since the church cannot exist in a vacuum, and its life is inevitably shaped in a dialectical interaction with the society in which it is placed. Nevertheless, any study of church history will provide examples of where that corruption has been almost overwhelming, and where attempts have been made (as is the nature of all movements of spiritual renewal) to return to a more purified essence. Yoder writes that the deconstantinianisation of the church need not be feared, but welcomed 'as an opportunity for the free church to be the church – to live out its vocation as a visible people in the world bearing witness the Lordship of Christ over the world'. (Yoder 1984: 54) The decline of civil religion where, for example, the Church of England

risked becoming merely the amorphous religious expression of the British people, is a liberative opportunity, especially since that religion played a key role in the maintenance of an hierarchically structured society. One sign of this healthy trend might be the increasing refusal of the Church of England automatically to support the state when it wages war. This questioning stance was negligible during the First World War, developed through the prophetic work of George Bell in the Second, and continued in the 'Church and the Bomb' report, Archbishop Runcie's refusal to turn the Falklands memorial service into a triumphalistic celebration, the opposition of the Scottish churches to nuclear weapons, and the misgivings voiced by Archbishop Williams over the Iraq war. Hastings comments that the traditional structures of conservative English religion were put up 'not only to fortify religion but to domesticate it...to sacralise society this much, secularize religion that much, effectively encapsulate the spirit within a given social and political order'. (Hastings 1991: 586) A cruciform, marginalized church is free from that overtly benign, yet inwardly corrupting control. Willingly to accept this enforced cruciformity, to welcome its challenges, and not to look back nostalgically to the old Christendom model, repeatedly to make the choice to take up the cross, is the only realistic option for the English churches, both pastorally and politically.

### *c) Chosen cruciformity*

#### *A corporate taking up of the cross*

Taking up the cross is not primarily for the individual, but for the community of which the individual is a member, as part of a communal, corporate commitment in a cruciform church. Before discussing what form this taking up of the cross might take, it would be useful to sum up what is meant by a cruciform church. A cruciform church is one which has a minority status – it is not the 'state church' of the majority; it operates in a context of political weakness – it does not have, or aspire to, Constantinian power; it exists as an 'exposed nerve' to suffering – it consists of, or is in close touch with, the 'crucified people'; and it seeks to witness to the crucified Christ (and his current embodiment) by word and action. Such a church attempts to shape its political ethic by Jesus' incarnational social and political exemplarity (the historic political actions of Christ which led to the cross)

and seeks a cruciform imitation of the character of a crucified God in the context of a crucified world.

This is the ideal, but this ideal must be worked out in the reality of a mixed and sinful body of people whose commitment to that ideal is variable and often unfocussed. Yoder's vision of a highly disciplined and tight knit church is, in the Anglican context, neither sociologically possible (although contraction, especially if it involves a diminution of a 'penumbra' of occasional worshippers, will inevitably make church membership more closely defined) nor theologically desirable. One of the strengths of the Church of England has been its inclusivity, where the boundary lines between church and kingdom of God have not been too tightly drawn, and it would be dangerous to abandon that balance in favour of a more disciplined, but more exclusive body.

I describe chosen cruciformity, the corporate taking up of the cross, using two images: first, the Isaianic image of the suffering servant; second, the metaphor of the woman in labour. Together these may convey the sometimes painful but potentially creative political witness which is the task of a cruciform church.

### ***The suffering servant – solidarity***

The servant songs of Isaiah 53 describe a figure (interpreters differ on the figure's historical, corporate, or symbolic status) which combines the roles of solidarity, prophecy and martyrdom. The Servant stands in solidarity with the people of Israel (to such an extent that the servant figure has, in some interpretations, been thought to represent the exiled community); speaks a message from God to the contemporary society from a situation of affinity and solidarity; and undergoes suffering, death, and eventual vindication. The parallels with the work of Christ are clear (although New Testament scholarship is divided as to how the suffering servant figure affected Christ's self understanding or the early church's interpretation of him – see the discussion in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant*. (Bellinger and Farmer 1998)) No less clear are the parallels with Christ's body, the cruciform church.

Just as the 'suffering servant', displays solidarity with the exiled people of Israel, the social and political location of the cruciform church is essential to its identity. In the Christendom model, the church's location has been alongside and in a collegial relationship with those in power. A cruciform church, by contrast, is

located with the crucified rather than the crucifiers, in solidarity with those who suffer from power rather than those who exercise it. This can be seen as a variant on Bonhoeffer's call for Christians to 'share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world'. (Bonhoeffer 1953: 361) The Christendom temptation is to be within the structures of power as insiders exercising, at best, an ameliorating chaplaincy to power, at worst, an inquisitorial theocracy. The cruciform role is to stand outside the structures of power, or if, as may sometimes be necessary through historical circumstances, the Christian or the church is positioned within those structures, still to take a guiding perspective from those situated on the outside. This political, social and psychological location is crucial to the political witness of a cruciform church, and involves a deep attentiveness to suffering. This attentiveness can, undoubtedly, be attained by those located within the structures of power, but the temptation to become insulated by those structures and to treat power as an end in itself can be fatal to such attentiveness. As has been previously mentioned, because of such solidarity Christian political involvement is on the basis of affinity (salvation from inside) rather than alterity (salvation from a distance). Moreover, solidarity with the suffering means that political neutrality is not possible; the Christian is called, if necessary, to take sides and not to maintain a bland even handedness. This is not naively to minimize the problems of moral decision making in the complexities of modern economic and political systems. Rather, it is first, to determine the rightness or otherwise of economic decisions by their effects, both short and long term, on the most vulnerable, as experienced from their perspective, and, second to exercise a prophetic and critical discernment based on that perspective. The churches in Britain, with their strong links to sister churches in the 'global south', and through their missionary societies and relief organizations, are in a better position to realize this solidarity with the poor abroad than any other institution within British society. Similarly, the church's presence within the Britain's own marginalized communities can facilitate that solidarity with the poor at home. It is significant that possibly the most effective instance of recent Anglican intervention into politics, *Faith in the City*, (1985) gained a certain moral authority because of the presence of the church among the powerless in the inner city and urban estate parishes, and not because of the church's association with the powerful. This intra-national and international solidarity does not occur naturally,



automatically, or easily, but it forms the basis for any meaningful British political theology.

***The suffering servant - prophecy and martyrdom***

The ‘Suffering Servant’ spoke God’s message as a prophet, from a location in solidarity with the people of Israel. Similarly, the role of a cruciform church is to exercise a prophetic ministry based on such solidarity. An important aspect of this role is to ‘unmask the interiorities’ (to use Nancey Murphy’s phrase, in Gingerich and Grimsrud, eds. 2006: 37) of social and political systems by demonstrating their outward effects on the most vulnerable. These ‘interiorities’ are brought to light in two ways: first, by having their effects not only made visible but also widely publicized by the church as it stands in solidarity and continuity with the vulnerable; and second, by being analysed in the light of the gospel of a crucified and vulnerable God. This deeper prophetic role stands alongside the church’s ongoing dialogue with government and secular authority.

In addition to the role of prophet in solidarity with the people, the ‘Suffering Servant’ fulfilled a martyr role, in witnessing to the truth of God through suffering. The location of a cruciform church, alongside and attentive to the suffering, brings its own vulnerability. A cruciform church witnesses to Jesus, both the risen Christ present in and among the faithful and the crucified presence of Christ in and among those who suffer. This witness can be from a position of safety or of minor discomfort, but can also take the form of suffering when that witness is rejected by an unbelieving or oppressive society. As we have previously seen, the concept of martyrdom can usefully be extended from the traditional form of suffering on account of explicit faith in Jesus to a wider form of suffering as a result of witnessing on behalf of the present ‘crucified people’ and taking up Jesus’ ‘historic project’ of the kingdom of God. These related concepts of martyrdom, both ‘Christian’ and ‘Jesuanic’, have played, as we have seen, an increasing role in Latin American liberation theology (for example Okura et al 2003). The task in Britain may well be to develop the wisdom to discern the difference between ‘martyrdom’ for the wrong reasons (for example standing up for the perceived interests of an embattled and minority church) and for the right reasons (a willingness, if necessary, to go against the grain of society’s expectations for the sake of others, and to pay the penalty for such a stance).

*The cruciform church as a woman in labour – an agent of change*

The image of a woman in labour can convey the sometimes painful process of new creation which belongs to the political role of the cruciform church. Cruciform weakness does not mean withdrawal or ineffectiveness. The church may have relinquished the Christendom model of ‘responsibility’ for society, but, as Yoder stresses (Yoder 1998: 63) his critique of the Christendom view of social ethics does not posit the two alternatives, responsibility or withdrawal. A post-Christendom church continues to have, as an integral part of its mission, a responsible involvement in society, even if that responsibility is exercised from below rather than from above. Yoder writes of the original disciples

There are thus about the community of disciples those sociological traits most characteristic of those who set about to change society: a visible structured fellowship... a clearly defined life-style distinct from that of the crowd... The distinctness is not a cultic or ritual separation, but rather a nonconformed quality of (secular) involvement in the life of the world.

(Yoder 1994: 39):

Similarly, he writes that ‘Only a continuing community dedicated to a deviant value system can change the world.’ (Yoder 1971: 136) The church’s political responsibility is not diminished by its marginalization or by its primary focus on ‘being the church’, since an integral part of ‘being the church’ is a love which encompasses the whole of society and which therefore necessitates political involvement. This political involvement, marked by (to use Yoder’s terms) nonconformity and deviance from oppressive value systems, risks conflict and therefore the possibility of the cross – a possibility which forms the dramatic background to much of the writing of the liberation theologians.

A key role of the church is to give birth, or at least to act as a catalyst, to new liberative human possibilities. The role of the church as politically creative is a necessary adjunct to a cruciform doctrine of power and the kenotic ethic which flows from it, as discussed in the previous chapter. A kenotic ethic, and the creation of a community increasingly marked by such an ethic, cannot be imposed by law or coercion, but can only be a voluntary choice – and in a democracy the critical mass of voluntary choices shapes the policy of the government. The role of the church is, then, that of a persuasive exemplar, giving birth to increasingly kenotic possibilities. Hinze writes, ‘Since a group has not real capacity for reflective or moral self-

transcendence, leaders never have warrant to agapaically sacrifice the multiple interests of their own constituencies.’ (Hinze 1995: 93) One of the main political roles of a cruciform church is to embody and enhance such moral self-transcendence, in order that society may move in a kenotic direction. To use Gramscian terms, it is the task of such a church to promote a gradual cruciform and kenotic counter-hegemony, not by coercion (which is not possible, even if it were desirable) nor by sheer weight of numbers, but by (suffering) servant witness. The birth of such a gentle counter-hegemony may not be without pain or sacrifice, since it will cut across the grain of society’s expectations or challenge vested interests, which will fight back. The relevance of this political role is growing, especially in Western Europe. If MacIntyre is correct to assert in *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1984: 263) that the unifying metanarratives of society have all but collapsed, and that new and smaller scale moral communities are needed, the church, even if a small minority, can have a significant part to play in forwarding its own kenotic and countercultural metanarrative by its prophetic being and actions. To use Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (Niebuhr 1951) categories, Christ may best be seen in creative and painful tension with culture, the cross symbolizing the labour pains of that process.

***The cruciform church as a woman in labour – a sign of hope***

If, according to the Yoderian analysis, ecclesiology is the starting point for social ethics, the pattern of existence of the church is both a model for the present and a foretaste of the ultimate divine intention for the world. God’s intention for human social interaction is prefigured in the church, which is a sign both of present witness and future hope. This statement must, of course, be set uncomfortably alongside the continuing imperfection and sinfulness of the existing church, but the ideal cannot be set aside. A cruciform church is inextricably caught in tension between the pessimism of the cross and the hope of the resurrection. The cross indicates an almost Hobbesian pessimism about politics and liberative human possibilities in general, given the sinful nature of human power structures illustrated so dramatically, and so dreadfully, by the crucifixion of Jesus. There is no necessary progress in history; that is a nineteenth century liberal or Marxist concept, and not Christian, at least in terms of relatively short term progress on earth. In a Christian reading of history, ‘resurrection’ will be followed by further ‘crucifixion’, and so

on. The aims of the church in the light of this necessary but realistic pessimism are limited, if essential: to take the crucified from their crosses, but with the expectation that they or others will probably be put back there again. The political task of the church is to stand again and again alongside the vulnerable, pointing to the divine sympathy exemplified in the cross and the hope offered by the resurrection. Resurrection hope means that the present situation of injustice and suffering does not always have to continue – there is no fatalistic necessity against which it is impossible and pointless to struggle – but the force of sin shown by the crucifixion means that such hope cannot be an easy optimism in an almost automatic movement of history. This is certainly not a counsel for despair, but a recognition that earthly hope is not for a decisive once-and-for-all breakthrough to a new utopia, but for the continuing possibility of the removal of the crucified from their crosses and for the promise of divine power in accomplishing that task. The kingdom of God does not advance inexorably; the persistence of the crucified people throughout history decisively denies that illusion.

Hope, then, this side of heaven, is limited and temporary but nonetheless real. The cruciform church is to be a sign of that hope, a model and bearer of renewed human possibilities. Hope, shaped by the cross and resurrection, is not facile or unrealistic, but based on the unchanging divine purposes and character which it is the church's task to live out and to which the church bears witness. There is no automatic, easy causality in 'moving history' since history cannot be 'moved' except by slow and painful steps. Rather, a politics informed by the political actions of Jesus proposes a cruciform causality radically different from the violence of the world. The church is thus both a sign of that hope and a participant in making that hope a reality. The church, in its life of worship, fellowship, love and evangelism, becomes a context where these present practices and future possibilities are explored, clarified and shared, where an ethic of reliance upon the character of God and the promised Holy Spirit can be lived out. Such a church may not have the numbers or strength coercively to bring about change, as was attempted by the Christendom project which failed both theologically and historically – but can be the matrix of wider transformation through its witness and example, and through its cruciform contradictions of the powers of the world. Sharon Welsh writes of the church as a community of 'solidarity and resistance'. (Welch 1985) This could usefully be extended to the church as a community of solidarity with the crucified

people, of resistance to the crucifiers (risking crucifixion in the process) and hope in the resurrection of the crucified.

***d) Conclusion***

***The future of a cruciform church in Britain***

Part of my aim in sketching a political role for a cruciform church arises from my position as an Anglican Vicar and Methodist Minister in two small semi-rural / commuter villages. Here, the marginalization of the church is painfully evident, even in communities where there is much good-will. Given the age profiles of the congregations, it is probable that the religious geography of these communities, and of much of the surrounding area, will be significantly different in a few years time. The church will still be present, in the form of groups of committed Christians, living and witnessing in the local community, but the future of the church as a powerful institution, with an assured and integral place in society, would seem to be precarious. This undeniable institutional decline is uncomfortable both for those in positions of leadership who have to manage a shrinking and therefore pressurized organization, and also for those at the grass roots who feel marginalized and powerless in the face of sociological factors beyond their control. However, grim pessimism is a temptation to be avoided by those who believe in a God of resurrection hope. In 1832, the pessimistic assessment of the Church of England given by Thomas Arnold, ‘The church, as it now stands, no human power can save’ (Edwards 1978: 30) was overtaken by the subsequent Anglican revival. The church will continue, but in a different form. Jenkins uses an analogy from astronomy in describing the smaller, but more focused bodies which will probably constitute the future for the European church: ‘When a star collapses, it becomes a white dwarf – smaller in size than it once was, but burning much more intensely. Across Europe, white dwarf faith communities are growing within the remnants of the old mass church.’ (Jenkins 2007b) For such a church, Yoder’s vision of a new, cruciform, way of doing politics, eschewing ‘control’ (which is impossible anyway) and concentrating on bearing a consistent and faithful witness to Christ crucified and risen is a useful pointer to a realistic political role. This is not to minimize the dangers inherent in institutional decline and marginalization. A critical choice faces the church: to embrace a Yoderian redefinition of power and witness, or through

panic, confusion or resigned pessimism to retreat into a defensive and fearful semi-fundamentalism. How the church in Britain deals with its marginalization will be crucial for its internal nature and external political role.

### ***Lessons for the wider church***

If the church in Britain and Europe is moving away from a Constantinian role vis-à-vis political power, that is certainly not true for the church worldwide. Jenkins (Jenkins 2007a Chapter 5) draws attention to the ways in which the churches of the global south are increasing in terms of numbers, spiritual dynamism and political power and influence. This is a time both of great opportunities and potential pitfalls. In particular, Jenkins (Jenkins 2007a Chapter 8) points to an increasing tendency for communities or nations to define themselves by their religion, especially on the dangerous fault line between Christianity and Islam in Africa, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The sad consequences of such identification of Christianity with nationalism are amply demonstrated by a reading of European history. At this critical juncture, it would be particularly tragic if churches of the global south repeated the mistakes of the European churches and attempted a Christendom-type social theology. It is to be hoped that the churches of the global south, as they emerge into a new era of independence, confidence and strength, can resist the temptation to use their new found power in a way which has been shown in Europe, by hard experience, to be both a political dead end and a spiritual hazard. The adoption of a cruciform doctrine of power is a useful corrective to this danger.

### ***The political role of a cruciform church***

The political role of the church can be described in general terms as the shaping, by its words and actions, of a liberative vision of what it is to be human, in imitation of the character and workings of God as seen through the lens of Jesus Christ. In particular, the church can witness to a redefinition of power and its uses, by exercising a two-fold critique. First, the critique must be inward, recognizing that a marginalized church is not necessarily less likely to misuse power than a dominant church, but may do so in very different ways. A dominant church will try to exercise power over society as a whole; a marginalized church may seek to exercise a crude power internally, as it pulls up drawbridges against 'the world'. Second, the critique must also be outward, challenging a totalitarian use of power

both in society as a whole and in religion in particular. A totalitarian exercise of religious power is an increasing phenomenon worldwide, and one of the tasks of a cruciform church is gently to counter such totalitarianism. This critique should not merely be verbal, but by living out an alternative model of religion and power.

If Yoder can be said to provide the means to that end, Boff and Sobrino provide the content – the criteria by which a Christian politics can be judged – through their emphasis on the ‘crucified people’. Again, in very general terms, what differentiates a ‘Christian’ politics from others is its interpretation of suffering. The dominant political doctrines of the twentieth century had at their heart a willingness to sacrifice huge numbers of human beings for the sake of the (supposed) greater good of other human beings, either in the present or the future. Nazism was prepared ruthlessly to cleanse the world of what it saw as a Jewish and Slavic threat in order to create a better world for the Aryan *ubermensch*. Communism was willing to sacrifice millions of those who were seen as barriers to the revolution on the altar of industrialization and political repression in order to achieve utopia for the ‘workers’. Liberal capitalism, with a similar, if less deliberately pernicious, anthropology of regarding human beings as mere units of production, was and is willing to commit millions to a subhuman existence in order to achieve economic progress which would, ultimately, bring wide benefits. Nazism and Communism are now discredited. Liberal capitalism still seems to rest on the assumption that a certain amount of suffering, usually on the periphery, is a price worth paying for general future prosperity. The supposed ‘impossibility of making an omelette without breaking eggs’ could well be the motto of twentieth century politics, and continues into the twenty-first. Such thinking, in the light of the cross, is revealed as not only anti-humanitarian, but blasphemous. The ‘eggs’ that are ‘broken’ are the crucified people, with the value and dignity of people made in the image of God, loved by God, and revealed by the cross to be in solidarity with the crucified God. The crucifixion of Christ and the dehumanization of those who are thus written off are in close parallel. The church best exercises its political function in pointing to that cruciform parallel, in identifying with and, if necessary, defending the ‘crucified’, in solidarity with them, and in bearing witness to the causes of their ‘crucifixion’.

***In conclusion – the church as a beatitude community of solidarity, resistance and hope***

A cruciform church will seek to live out a spirituality of kenotic generosity. Such a spirituality bears a striking resemblance to that outlined in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-12. A cruciform church will be 'poor in spirit'. Whatever Jesus meant exactly by that enigmatic phrase, a cruciform church will know the poverty of lack of power and of marginalization. It will not be a proud and domineering church, but will be conscious of its own weakness. A cruciform church will 'mourn'. One of the roles of the church is to act (as the Jewish people have been described) as an 'exposed nerve of humanity' consisting of or closely connected to the 'crucified people'. Such a church will mourn, in that it will feel deeply the pain of the world. A cruciform church, unless it falls prey to self-delusion, cannot be other than 'humble' or 'meek', since the appurtenances of power will have been stripped away. A cruciform church will 'hunger and thirst', not for power for itself, or for past glories, but for righteousness and justice. The political role of such a church will not be self-defensive, but will actively work for the rights of 'the other'. A cruciform church will be 'merciful'. Such a church will be conscious of its own sinful past responsibility and present potential for inflicting crucifixions, and so will be merciful to fellow sinners. A cruciform church will have the 'pureness of heart' of having the external trimmings of power and success stripped away, in order to concentrate on its essential being and task. A cruciform church will, most of all, 'work for peace', in that it will seek to mirror God's character of peacemaker. Finally, a cruciform church will, by its very nature, be vulnerable to persecution, in seeking to do what the crucified God requires.



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