

REV. MARCIN SKŁADANOWSKI

POLITICAL STAUROLOGIES
THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT AND THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES
OF REINTERPRETATION OF JESUS'S CROSS IN LIBERATION
AND FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

A b s t r a c t. In the article the emphasis will be put on the reinterpretations of Jesus's Cross in political theologies whose developed forms are liberation theology and feminist theology. The article will consider the reasons which compelled the representatives of these lines of theological thinking to question traditional staurologies and to suggest new attempts of reflection on the Cross. Further, I will present typical for these movements attempts of ahistorical and ideological theology of the Cross along with their consequences for the Christian faith. Finally, an attempt will be made to answer the question whether all the presented attempts of political reinterpretation of the Cross could be called 'staurologies', that is an exhaustive and systematic theological approach to all that is contained in Jesus's death for Christians, or whether they are of a different nature.

Key words: staurology; Cross; liberation theology; feminist theology.

The Cross is a commonly recognisable sign of Christianity indicates the connection between the Church and its mission in the world, and a particular historical event – the death of Jesus Christ with its geographical, cultural and legal position. By recognising the Cross as its symbol Christianity expresses its identity as a historic religion that connects its history and meaning of existence with the person, mission and teaching of Jesus. Nonetheless, this common recognition of the Cross as a sign of Christianity does not, by any

Rev. MARCIN SKŁADANOWSKI, PhD, Dr habil. – member of the research staff of the Institute of Dogmatic Theology of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; main fields of interest: Catholic and Lutheran understanding of the Cross (theologia crucis) and Christian anthropology; address for correspondence: e-mail: skladanowski@kul.pl

means, imply the agreement within the Christian community as far as the theological interpretation of this sign is concerned. Although the historical reflection on the order of events that led to sentencing and killing Jesus based on the will of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, does not pose major difficulties, the problem of significance of the Cross for the Christian faith – apart from its purely historical meaning – still remains. The New Testament, and in particular St. Paul, shows that while interpreting the Cross one cannot limit oneself to the area of historical facts but one has to notice that the Cross is an expression of deep content of the whole Christian message. From these biblical statements various interpretations of religious meaning of the Cross have developed over the centuries. Given the situation in which Christianity found itself in the middle of the 20th century, earlier interpretations have been completed by new ones, which are connected to new ideas influencing theology.

1. AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL REASONS FOR THE REINTERPRETATION OF THE CROSS

One should not discredit in advance the attempts to critically reflect upon the content of the Christian message spread in the world and the manner of its conveyance. They are justified in situations in which comprehending and accepting this message becomes more and more difficult, and the preachers themselves are not able to stand up to a challenge of bearing witness in a reliable way. When we take into consideration the conditions in which, even in countries that were culturally shaped by Christianity, the Gospel does not have enough strength to influence the society, it seems justified to wonder whether some elements of the Christian message are not off-putting and questioning its credibility. One has to necessarily bear in mind, however, that preaching the Gospel by Jesus himself raised misunderstanding, controversy and even open protest, and the requirements He set made many disciples of His leave (John 6:60-66). Searching for those elements of the doctrine and testimony of the modern Church which should be purified or even removed could only encompass human-made distortions and corruptions; with full awareness that the Christian teaching itself raises protest and it would lose its authenticity if the world started to praise it (Matt 6:1ff) rather than hate it (John 15:18ff).

It is this reason to renew Christian theology and to purify the Church cult of those elements that are difficult to comprehend and accept nowadays

which motivates popular in progressive Church circles political theologies, such as liberation or feminist theology, to criticise traditional Christian interpretations of the Cross, which are based on interpreting, following St. Anselm, the death of Jesus as the sacrifice for the sins of humanity. According to the progressive approach, such an interpretation is a justification for violence, both in the form of individual acts as well as structural violence, and it makes the violence itself sacred.¹ Such theology, moreover, perceives St. Anselm's thought as a classical example of the idea of God's violence which is supposed to be the degeneration of patristic theology.² This hypothesis is to be supported by an argument of the opposition against the Cross, which is motivated by ethical and aesthetic reasoning. Opinions that the cruelty of the Cross does not attract people to the Christian faith but it repels them, are expressed by the progressively thinking Jesuit theologian Robert J. Daly, who writes:

This assumption of the necessity of Christ's suffering resulted in and/or went along with false ideas about God. Such false ideas about God and a consequent false morality are inevitable if the scapegoating death of Jesus is a necessary, divinely planned, transactional sacrificial event that God brings about like a puppet master manipulating human events.³

Since the middle of the 20th century attempts to reinterpret the Cross have been made; these attempts, although they preserve some elements of the Christian doctrine connected with Jesus's suffering, direct those elements differently in their ethical dimension. These attempts have been generally limited to making the suffering universal so that it became a general symbol of injustice experienced by the innocent. In some theological movements this striving to ethically reorient the Cross has led to marginalisation of interest of Jesus's fate and consequently, of His personal attitude towards the coming death. The universalised Cross, separated from the particular history of Jesus, would be instead a sign of radicalism of Christian life, which would concentrate on crucifying oneself alongside Christ.⁴ This direction in the reflection

¹ Cf. Lisa S. CAHILL, *Global Justice, Christology, and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 204.

² Cf. Robert J. DALY, "Images of God and the Imitation of God: Problems with Atonement," *Theological Studies* 68(2007), 45.

³ *Ibidem*, 48-49.

⁴ Cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Select Questions on the Theology of God the Redeemer*, III,25-27, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1995_teologia-redenzione_en.html (15.10.2016).

over the Cross highly developed at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries in its political form, in which the Cross – still separated from the only history of Jesus and the interpretation done by Jesus and the original Church – became a symbol of the oppressive and highly unjust world, and simultaneously a call to fight against existing exhibits of violence and oppression.⁵

From such a perspective, giving Jesus's cruel suffering a central position and choosing the Cross to be a symbol of Christianity would, apparently, go against the positive message of the Gospel. Christianity, perceived also by some Christians as 'a bloody religion of the Cross', would be doomed to fail unless it reinterpreted these most difficult and simultaneously central elements of its message. From this perspective, searching for an answer as to the salvation meaning that Christ's Cross presents for man, what the Cross says about God and His relation to man would be all considered irrelevant or even meet with complete rejection. A meaningful example of this tendency is a memory of R. Albert Mohler Jr. from the first lecture heard in the theological seminary which he attended:

The professor introduced the syllabus, and then he asked each of us to state our name and where we were from and to give the reason why we were taking this course in New Testament studies. As each student answered, chair to chair and desk to desk, it finally came to a young woman who was studying to be an international missionary. She gave her name and home state, and then she said, «I am taking this course because I want to know more about Jesus Christ and his shed blood.» The professor exploded. He said, «**There will be no more bloody cross religion in this classroom!**» [sic! – M.S.] I was unprepared for this. The class was unprepared for this. He continued, «This is not to be tolerated. It is beneath dignity and self-respect to believe in a God who had to kill in order to forgive».⁶

Besides, according to numerous representatives of progressive classical theology, Christian understanding of the Cross as a propitiatory sacrifice for human sins is the source of almost all the violations in the Church life. This variety of accusations has been enlisted in the opinion of individual authors by Lisa S. Cahill:

the atonement paradigm sanctifies violence (Denny Weaver, Stephen Finlan); worships a divine sadist (Dorothee Soelle); turns God into an omnipotent child abuser (Rita Nakashima

⁵ Cf. Douglas J. HALL, *The Cross in Our Context. Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis [Minnesota]: Fortress Press, 2003), 48-49.

⁶ R. Albert MOHLER Jr., "Why They Hate It So. The Denial of Substitutionary Atonement in Recent Theology," in: Mark Dever [et al.], *Proclaiming a Cross-Centered Theology* (Wheaton [Illinois]: Crossway, 2009), 147-148.

Brock); encourages women to be scapegoats (Mary Daly); depoliticizes and spiritualizes the cross, obscuring its real cause, Jesus' praxis (Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza); speaks no word of salvation to African American women and others resisting oppression (Delores Williams); and provides murderous fanatics, fascists, and torturers with validating symbols (Jürgen Moltmann, Mark Taylor).⁷

The aims of criticism of the traditional theology of the Cross done by progressive theologians are practical in nature. They aim, firstly, to question and change the fundamentals of the cult (most of all the Catholic understanding of the sacrifice of the Mass as realisation of the one and unique sacrifice made on Calvary), and further, to weaken the fundamentals of Christian morality. Abovementioned Robert J. Daly repeatedly mentions that the traditional Christian interpretation of redemption done on the Cross leads to 'wrong morality of Christians', which is based on violence and which accepts violence, although one would struggle to find a reliable proof for such a statement.⁸ Although Daly's conclusions are unclear, one could get the impression that he rejects the sacrificial character of the Cross both with relation to the Christian imperative to follow Jesus as well as with relation to the Church's worship.⁹

2. INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF THE CROSS IN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Although liberation theology at its starting point does not avoid the real history of Jesus, it analyses this history from political and historical perspective in such a way that the interpretations of the Cross, both in Jesus's announcement and the testimony of the early Church, do not seem relevant. International Theological Commission believes that from this perspective, Jesus's death can be perceived as a result of the fight against unjust political and religious structures; Jesus is a defender of the rights of the poor, rejected and persecuted. His death could be called redemptive because it inspires the fight for justice.¹⁰ Confirmation of this critical opinion one can find in the statements of the creators and promoters of liberation theology. It can be seen in the interpretation of Jesus's death provided by Leonardo Boff. While

⁷ L.S. CAHILL, *Global Justice*, 205.

⁸ Cf. R.J. DALY, *Images of God*, 39, 45, 48, 50.

⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, 39, 48.

¹⁰ Cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Select Questions*, III,28.

analysing the Cross from the perspective of liberation theology, he emphasises the experience of political, economic and cultural oppression of one group of people by another, privileged one, as well as the call to oppose the injustice and fight with oppression that necessarily arises from the Cross. According to this interpretation, crucified Jesus is primarily a *Man of sorrows*, with whom all those suffering can identify themselves.¹¹ Although this manner of perceiving Jesus is not new, considering the interpretational tradition of the Cross a distortion and manipulation in the hands of the Church to strengthen the existing oppression and injustice seems to be a clear attempt to break with the said tradition. Boff writes:

Few subjects in theology have been so manipulated and distorted in their interpretation as particular – the powers that be – have utilized the symbol of the cross and the fact of the redemptive death of Christ to demonstrate the need for suffering and death as part and parcel of human life. Piously and with resignation, it is said, we must all carry our crosses, day by day: the important thing is to carry them 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 own sins and those of the world. This manner of discourse is extremely ambiguous, and open to facile manipulation. It ignores the historical death of Jesus, which was a matter neither of blind fate nor of resigned acceptance. It was provoked: its causes lay outside it. And it was executed with violence. It resulted from a praxis on Jesus' part that struck out at the basic elements of society and of the Judaic religion.¹²

Jon Sobrino goes even further in assigning the death of Jesus a new meaning unknown either to the New Testament or the early Church. He is utterly convinced that citing blasphemy as the reason behind sentencing Jesus to death by archpriests (Matt 26:65) is a later addition of the editors. The context of this statement allows us to deduce that this addition falsified the nature of Jesus's death, if Sobrino believes that the real reason behind sentencing Jesus was His opposition against religious, political and economic dominance of the Jewish elite centred around the Jerusalem temple. This elite oppressing the Jewish people was decidedly rejected by Jesus, which led to His death for political reasons.¹³

¹¹ Cf. Leonardo BOFF, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World. The Facts, Their Interpretation, and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today*, transl. R.R. Barr (Maryknoll [New York]: Orbis Books, 2001), 1-2.

¹² *Ibidem*, 2.

¹³ Cf. Jon SOBRINO, *Christology at the Crossroads. A Latin American Approach*, transl. J. Drury (London: SCM Press, 1981²), 179-235, esp. 211-213, 217-219.

Leonardo Boff does not throw an accusation of a lie towards the traditional theological interpretation of the Cross, merely a distortion which omits or at least conceals the real reasons of Jesus's death as their exposition would undoubtedly reveal the political and revolutionary dimension of the Cross as an obligation to fight. Boff considers acceptance of suffering as the main guilt of the traditional theology of the Cross. The Cross is to conceal the injustice of numerous existing social practices, which are considered further crosses carried daily by suffering and dying people. Seeing such a corrupt manner of using the Cross, Boff warns us that it should never be interpreted in order to justify the evil.¹⁴ The motif is also pursued by Sobrino, who expresses an opinion that liberation theology cannot limit itself to the Cross because its centre is hope to overcome the injustice that is expressed by the Cross. Overcoming this injustice is not to happen in the distant future, at the moment of the Judgement Day but 'now' – due to particular commitment of the Christians.¹⁵ Setting aside the utopian character of certain instructions of liberation theology, one can notice that many of them reveal their soundness in those political, economic and social realities, in which evil adopts a structural form and penetrates various forms of human activity affecting huge groups of men and women. Nonetheless, this observation is accompanied in Boff's work by narrowing down the interpretation of the Cross which leads to omitting that which is crucial in it and which could conceal its political message. Jesus's death has in this interpretation only one explanation:

The death of Christ was a crime, not a requirement of the will of a God eager for the reparation of humanity. [...] Christ's death means the condemnation of oppressive practices, a denunciation of the mechanisms that spew out suffering and death. It may never be allowed to serve their consecration and legitimation. The cross is never a masochistic symbol. Rather it calls us to struggle against pain, and against the causes that produce a cross. Piety and theology require the recovery of the historical concreteness of the cross of Jesus Christ, in opposition to its transformation into a pure symbol of resignation and expiation, in line with the mystifications to which any symbol is vulnerable.¹⁶

According to such an interpretation, the Cross alone cannot become a symbol of Christian hope. It has positive content only in this respect that it is a sign of opposition against violence and oppression, and it calls to destroy

¹⁴ Cf. L. BOFF, *Passion of Christ*, 3.

¹⁵ Cf. Jon SOBRINO, *Christ the Liberator. A View from the Victims*, transl. P. Burns (Maryknoll [New York]: Orbis Books, 2001), 44.

¹⁶ L. BOFF, *Passion of Christ*, 3.

unjust and oppressive structures.¹⁷ If, however, the Cross in its essence expresses evil and motivates us to fight it, there are no reasons for making it a subject of the Christian worship. According to liberation theology, a Christian is supposed to look not at the Cross but at the Crucified, who resurrected and is alive.¹⁸ The Cross becomes, therefore, a dramatic episode of the history of Jesus's life, which cannot be given any lasting value for the faith in the light of the Resurrection. It is a reminder of actions of oppressive forces in the world and encouragement to fight them; it most certainly does not reveal God and therefore, its worship cannot be justified. Jon Sobrino writes about this praising those theological movements which after the Second Vatican Council emphasised Christ's Resurrection, which consequently led to reducing the significance of the Cross both in theology and in Catholic devotion. He identifies the cult of the Cross with sufferingism and cruelty of 'evil theology', which is focused unilaterally on the sacrifice (*sacrificialism*) realised in liturgy. Sobrino expresses his content that post-conciliar reforms, including the change in Catholic liturgy, moved the Cross to the background and allow theology and liturgy adopt a fully paschal character.¹⁹ In 'paschal' theology and liturgy, in the way Sobrino understands it, the Cross does not play any significant role any more.

3. THE CROSS AS A SIGN OF PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION – A FEMINIST APPROACH

According to feminist theology, the Cross is supposed to indicate that for Christ's followers suffering is a necessity. Glorification of suffering, however, would also have a hidden agenda – it would serve to convince women, who experience different kinds of violence, to concentrate more on the persecutor than on themselves.²⁰ In such a way, the Cross is perceived as a symbol of patriarchal oppression and a tool that conserves it in social structures including the Church.

The reinterpretation of the Cross done in feminist theology begins with distortions that affected not only accounts of Jesus's death but also the whole

¹⁷ Cf. Theodore W. JENNINGS Jr., *Transforming Atonement. A Political Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis [Minnesota]: Fortress Press, 2009), 55, 57-59.

¹⁸ Cf. L. BOFF, *Passion of Christ*, 3.

¹⁹ Cf. J. SOBRINO, *Christ the Liberator*, 11.

²⁰ Cf. L.S. CAHILL, *Global Justice*, 205.

Christology in classical theology, which is accused of androcentrism. Elizabeth A. Johnson mentions, among such doctrinal deformations, treating Christ as Pantocrator, that is a ruler, king of glory.²¹ Meanwhile, feminist approach to Jesus's fate, and His death in particular, excludes such an interpretation regardless of the extent to which it is rooted in the New Testament as well as the doctrinal and liturgical tradition of the Church. From this perspective a new reflection upon Jesus's Cross and critical assessment of Church statements in this regard seem necessary. One cannot ignore the fact that Jesus has become a victim of patriarchal culture.²² All attempts to explain the Cross that connect God with violence itself or sanctioning this violence are unacceptable. It is also impossible to claim that God would have required a sacrifice as a means of salvation.²³

Rejection of the possibility of it being a sacrifice made by Jesus and dedicated to God for the sins of humanity forms connects the interpretation of the Cross presented by feminist theology and the propositions of liberation theology. Feminist theology justifies this rejection with its typical argumentation. According to Elizabeth A. Johnson: „Such a view is virtually inseparable from an underlying image of God as an angry, bloodthirsty, violent, and sadistic father, reflecting the very worst kind of male behavior.”²⁴ Jesus's Cross does not mean, therefore, the fulfilment of God's will but the opposition against Him, the sin. It is a consequence of Jesus's opposition against unjust social norms.²⁵ For feminist theology, like for liberation theology, the Cross can have a positive meaning in the dimension in which it radically questions the existing androcentric structures of power, which are always the structures of violence and oppression.²⁶

²¹ Cf. Elizabeth A. JOHNSON, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” in: *Freeing Theology. The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. C. Mowry LaCugna (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 118.

²² Cf. *ibidem*, 126.

²³ Cf. Th.W. JENNINGS Jr., *Transforming Atonement*, 10-14.

²⁴ E.A. JOHNSON, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” 124.

²⁵ Cf. *ibidem*.

²⁶ Cf. Rosalene BRADBURY, *Cross Theology. The Classical Theologia Crucis and Karl Barth's Modern Theology of the Cross* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011), 25. The androcentric character of oppression that affected Jesus is proven by the fact, in view of the feminist researchers, that according to St. Mark's account (Mark 15:40), Jesus's male disciples abandoned Him while they were women who witnessed His suffering (cf. Monika FANDER, “Gospel of Mark: Women as True Disciples of Jesus,” in: *Feminist Biblical Interpretation. A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff, Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids [Michigan]: Eerdmans, 2012), 639.

4. CONCLUSIONS

One cannot underestimate the directions of reinterpretation of the Cross proposed by liberation theology and feminist theology. In many aspects their remarks are correct and direct our attention to those elements of the theology of the Cross which for many reasons have not been emphasised enough in the Church teaching and in the practice of Christian life, and which need to be brought to light to preserve the credibility of Christianity in the modern world. Two elements seem to be of particular importance and are emphasised by both mentioned theological movements. Firstly, it is a reminder that in its deepest, primary meaning the Cross has a negative aspect which reminds us of an unjust sentence that condemned innocent Jesus. This is the light in which one should interpret the whole history of injustice that accompanies the development of humanity and pervades human structures and institutions. Secondly, it is an indication that the Cross contains an element of obligation as well. Those who notice the injustice of Jesus's fate are not able to pass over the examples of injustice in the world lightly; both the injustice that is economically motivated and strives to maximally use people in order to increase the profit as well as the injustice that is rooted in the discrimination motivated by gender or other aspects that determine human life or their position in social, political and economic structures.

At the same time, however, the credibility of interpretation of the Cross presented by feminist and liberation theologies weakens ideologically motivated reductionism. It can be firstly seen in such an approach to the Cross which wants to present itself as historically accurate by emphasising that the Cross, being an unjust form of punishment, was originally unequivocally negative in character. At the same time they do not take into consideration those interpretations that were given to the Cross by Jesus being aware of the approaching death as well as the original Church, on par with the testimony of the New Testament and the Fathers. The idea that attempts to explain the Cross in other than political categories – by referring to the Old Testament prophecies, in Jesus's written words and in clear faith of the Church that unites the Cross with the sacrifice of human sins – are a later distortion of historical truth is obviously an ideological assumption, which is not defensible in the light of biblical and patristic testimony. Recognising that some of the elements of the theology of the Cross have been not expressed enough in the teaching of the Church cannot form the basis to arbitrarily invalidate biblical accounts and repudiate the Church doctrine, including the oldest

testimonies confirmed by the suffering of the Christians preaching the Cross in the Roman Empire.

Although recognising the actual value of research done within liberation and feminist theologies as far as a variety of contextual meanings of the Cross and its reference to modern situation of various oppressed or socially excluded groups of men and women are concerned, one should point out that they do not exhaust stauology, which gives a complete interpretation of the Cross, both in its historical as well as theological dimension. Their significance is weakened by subjugating theological reflection to previously accepted political premises which make it impossible to notice the value of Christian theological tradition that is confirmed in liturgy, not understandable at least from the Catholic point of view without the sacrificial interpretation of the Cross, and in moral life for which Jesus's sacrifice is an important instruction and support.

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STAUROLOGIE POLITYCZNE

KONTEKST IDEOLOGICZNY I KONSEKWENCJE TEOLOGICZNE REINTERPRETACJI KRZYŻA JEZUSA W TEOLOGII WYZWOLENIA I TEOLOGII FEMINISTYCZNEJ

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł koncentruje się na reinterpretacjach Krzyża Jezusa w teologiach politycznych, których rozwiniętymi formami są: teologia wyzwolenia i teologia feministyczna. W artykule rozważa się przyczyny, które skłoniły przedstawicieli tych nurtów myśli teologicznej do zakwestionowania tradycyjnych ujęć staurologicznych oraz do zaproponowania nowego podejścia w refleksji nad Krzyżem. Następnie artykuł przedstawia typowe dla tych nurtów próby ahistorycznej i ideologicznej teologii Krzyża wraz z ich konsekwencjami dla wiary chrześcijańskiej. Na zakończenie w tekście podejmuje się próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie o to, czy zaprezentowane ujęcia politycznej reinterpretacji Krzyża mogą być nazwane „staurologiami”, czyli wyczerpującym i systematycznym teologicznym podejściem do tego, co dla chrześcijan zawiera się w śmierci Chrystusa.

Słowa kluczowe: staurologia; Krzyż; teologia wyzwolenia; teologia feministyczna.