

## GUDINA TUMSA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEOLOGY

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**Abstract:** Gudina's way of doing theology is important because it is both contextual and universal. The dynamics are universal, the focus on relationality is universal, the holistic emphasis is universal, while at the same time these dynamics intentionally take seriously the here and now of individuals and particular peoples and engage their specific social settings so seriously that the end result turns out to be deeply contextual--but contextual in a way that does not set one part of the church against another. There can still be a common witness to the centrality of the power and presence of Christ and the ongoing activity of God in the world. The kind of theology Gudina practiced continues to be of great value for all who confess the Christian faith, today and on into the future. We honor him best by appreciating and learning from his theology.

It seems appropriate to open this paper with some remarks about my relationship to Gudina Tumsa. In 1963-4, I was a second-year student at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Sometime before the school year began, I agreed to share a dormitory room with an overseas student I had not yet met. He turned out to be Gudina. Because those advising his studies were worried about his ability to handle English, he spent the first part of the school year at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Minneapolis. Thus, he did not arrive at Luther Seminary until the end of November.

We quickly became friends. We had many serious discussions and frequently joked with each other. He traveled with me to my parents' farm in North Dakota to celebrate Christmas with my extended family. He and my farmer father hit it off. They spent hours talking with each other. Despite their dissimilar backgrounds, they had at least two things in common: a lot of wisdom regarding human beings and a capacity for conversations filled with good questions and attentive listening.

Gudina was twelve years older than I. He was married, while I was not. He had children. I did not. He had already served as an evangelist and a pastor. I had not. Looking back, to him I must often have seemed very immature. But it soon became evident that I brought to the relationship the benefits of a liberal arts college education with courses in philosophy, history, and theology and a year of seminary study. As Gudina discovered, a dictionary is often of little help when trying to understand specialized theological and philosophical concepts, so every day he would ask me to explain terms he had run across in his reading or his classes. To this day I remember the expression on his face as he wrapped his mind around a new word and asked questions of clarification. The concepts we discussed were added to long lists of new words that he drew up. Whenever I awoke in the morning, he would be lying in bed, already awake, going through the lists, memorizing, reviewing, and expanding his vocabulary.

During Gudina's second year at Luther Seminary, I was on internship in a congregation in Washington, D.C. The following year we were both seniors. We lived in the same dormitory and ate in the same dining hall, but as seniors we had individual rooms. We both graduated together in the spring of 1966. Gudina's daughter Lensa has a picture of the two of us in our academic robes standing together outside of Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, the site of the Seminary's graduation ceremony.

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Throughout this paper I will make several observations about Gudina, the first of which is this. He was very bright, a quick learner. I remain impressed at how well he did in his courses, given the fact that he did not have the same college or university background as did the American students. When I read his writings, I am not surprised by what I find (that is, what is there sounds like Gudina), but I am impressed by his theological insights, his perceptive analysis of societal developments, and his wise understanding of human beings. As I will shortly explore, I see in his writings the echoes of the education we shared at Luther Seminary, but I also see an independent thinker, creatively thinking through the issues he faced. In fact, it is very difficult to determine how much of his mature theological outlook he brought with him from Ethiopia, how much he absorbed from his studies, or how much his insights were shaped by the experiences and responsibilities thrust on him after he graduated from Luther Seminary. So, when I discuss the experiences we shared, I am not claiming that these were somehow the most formative.

It was an exciting time to be a seminary student. For one thing, Vatican Council II was underway. It is difficult now to imagine how novel and how astonishing was the emerging new relationship with the Roman Catholics. The line separating the two communities had been so deep and so long-lasting, augmented as it had been in the Upper Midwest by ethnic differences.<sup>1</sup> While Gudina and I were on campus, the students from the area's five seminaries, two Catholic and three Protestant,<sup>2</sup> for the first time held regular theological dialogues. One of the Luther Seminary professors, Warren Quanbeck, was a Protestant observer at Vatican II and returned to campus to resume teaching during our senior year. As one sign of how things were changing, only a few years earlier, in 1960, the Seminary had received baskets full of angry letters after five professors issued a public statement that it was OK for a Lutheran to vote for a Roman Catholic president. By the time we were seniors this began to seem as if it had happened in a different era.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the transformation that occurred while Gudina was in the United States helped encourage him to reach out beyond the Protestant churches in Ethiopia, who already enjoyed good relations, to the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox and to do so against the wishes of the leaders of the foreign mission societies.<sup>3</sup> In any case, Paul Wee, who came to know Gudina through the Lutheran World Federation, confirms the importance of Vatican II, when he says, "I can say that when we met in Chile eight years later [1973], it was clear that he also had been caught up in the convulsive change that Vatican II brought, not only to the Roman Catholic Church, but also to society."<sup>4</sup>

Another reason our time at Luther Seminary was exciting was that the civil rights movement was in full swing. Although the movement had started in 1954, the March on Washington occurred in August of 1963, the Civil Rights Act was approved in 1964, and, in Selma, Alabama, the tragedy of "Bloody Sunday" occurred on March 7, 1965. Public reaction to this event made possible the passage of the Voting Rights Act in the summer of that same year. Some students from Luther Seminary traveled to the South to participate in the ongoing work of desegregation. On campus the civil rights struggle was frequently a topic of discussion. Everyone was aware of the leadership provided by Pastor Martin Luther King, Jr. and by other clergy. In fact, the ecumenical and civil rights movements intersected as clergy from several Christian denominations, along with Jewish leaders, marched together in support of the civil rights movement. Paul Wee reports that "I know from subsequent discussions with Gudina that this

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<sup>1</sup> In the Upper Midwest, the immigrants often settled where there were other immigrants from their home country, so one town and the surrounding countryside were predominately German Catholic or French Catholic while the next town down the road and its surrounding farms was solidly Norwegian Lutheran or German Lutheran. The ethnic differences reinforced the denominational divide. To some extent even major cities experienced this phenomenon. Though neither city was uniform, the identity of Minneapolis was originally influenced by its many Scandinavian Lutherans, while the identity of its sister city, St. Paul, was shaped more by a large number of Irish Catholics.

<sup>2</sup> The seminaries were Bethel Seminary, Luther Theological Seminary, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity (diocesan), and St. John's School of Theology (Benedictine).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Wee reports this opposition. See "Ecumenical Challenges: Working in Love, Transforming Lives: The Ecumenical Legacy of Gudina Tumsa," in *Ecumenical Challenges: Working in Love, Transforming Lives*. Journal of Gudina Tumsa Theological Forum (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Lutheran University Press, 2014), 3:18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Wee, "Ecumenical Challenges," 3:17.

movement for reform led by African-Americans affected him deeply." It affected "not only Gudina's understanding of the role of the church in society, but it also affected his understanding of ecumenism as well."<sup>5</sup>

Still another reason it was an exciting time to be at Luther was that a group of younger professors had joined the faculty, determined to enhance the academic quality of the education offered at Luther Seminary. They made theology engaging. In addition to lectures (which had been the primary method of teaching during their student years), they often divided their classes into smaller groups to discuss the readings for the week. A generation earlier, Luther Seminary was the scene of debates between Pietism and Lutheran Orthodoxy. This group of younger faculty members were, by and large, exponents of dialectical theology (which had its beginnings in Europe during and after World War I) and/or neo-orthodoxy (as it emerged in the 1930s and 40s and beyond). Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann were discussed regularly. The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr received a good deal of attention, and his thought created a bridge between the personal and the social dimensions of the faith. The works of the Lundensian theologians (Gustaf Aulén and Anders Nygren) were often assigned and/or discussed in class.<sup>6</sup> Gustaf Wingren spent six weeks on campus, giving lectures, living in a guest room in our dormitory, and eating with all of us single students. Some of the professors were in regular contact with European theologians<sup>7</sup>--in a few cases translating their works. Unlike today in the United States, there was at that time more of a theological consensus among mainline Protestants, or at least among our teachers—a shared outlook informed by dialectical and/or neo-orthodox theology. This theology focused on the gospel, underlined the importance of proclamation, critiqued earlier liberal theology for not taking sin and structural evil seriously enough, and emphasized the importance of historical context for interpreting both the Scriptures and the doctrinal traditions of the church. All this academic work was in the context of an education very much focused on parish ministry.

And, finally, there was an international dimension to our seminary experience. There were more than a dozen international students on campus, each from a different country in Africa, Asia, or South America. During the week, the overseas students ate with the unmarried American students in a cooperative "Boarding Club" that served lunch and dinner "family style." They were very much integrated into the conversations that took place there. By and large, however, the students from abroad were older than the other students living in the dormitories, and on weekends when the Americans would scatter for one reason or another, the international students tended to socialize together. This provided numerous opportunities for Gudina to find out about the church in other parts of the world at the same time as he was learning about the church in the United States.

The international dimension was not limited to social contacts. One of the younger faculty, who had just returned from teaching in India wove his experiences into his chapel talks and classes. Every student was required to take a course in world missions and another course in Lutheran missions. The man who taught those courses had an enormous number of contacts overseas. A stream of visitors described their experience serving in various parts of the world. The vocabulary was changing from "missions" to "younger churches," and students were all exposed to the international character of the church.

I mention all these aspects of our experience at Luther Seminary, because I think the "climate" I have been describing influenced Gudina's theological development in significant ways. I think he was influenced by the ecumenical excitement, by the quest for racial justice, by the engaging theological

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<sup>5</sup> Wee, "Ecumenical Challenges," 3:17.

<sup>6</sup> Everyone was assigned Aulén's *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1961). It is possible that Aulén's preference for the classical theory of the Atonement may have influenced Gudina. Unlike the satisfaction theory, which focuses on individual sin and guilt, the classical theory emphasizes liberation from bondage to sin, death, and the devil. Liberation from bondage is an image that more readily supports a holistic theology, because bondage includes sin, yes, but also economic enslavement, enslavement to spiritual forces, and political oppression.

<sup>7</sup> The then young German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg visited one of my classes as a guest of its professor.

discussions, by the combined attention to proclamation and historical context, and by the broader vision of the church. I am not suggesting that these were entirely new for him—only that in many ways they authorized, deepened, and extended important aspects of his theological outlook.<sup>8</sup> He was still the same person in 1966 that he had been in 1963, but he was more theologically articulate. Consequently, he was more adept at explaining his outlook to various segments of society and negotiating with the representatives of other churches, whether those churches were ecumenical or international.

Allow me to mention one viewpoint that was under scrutiny while we were at Luther Seminary. This scrutiny may have influenced his readiness to break with a “traditional” interpretation of the “two kingdoms.” Several commentators mention this shift. For example, Tasgara Hirpo<sup>9</sup> describes what Gudina overcame in the following way: “This tradition was based on the Pietistic doctrine of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was introduced by the missionaries from Europe and America. According to this doctrine, there are two kingdoms: the kingdom on the left-hand, where God rules the world through the law, and the kingdom on the right-hand, where God rules the world through grace. As a result of this doctrine, Christians belong in the kingdom on the right-hand and are under grace. This excluded them from taking part in worldly affairs.” To cite another example, Øyvind Eide observes that Gudina’s “statements [in a Pastoral Letter of 1975] can also be seen as a critique of a traditional interpretation of the two kingdoms doctrine in Lutheranism. If life and society are divided into two separate spheres, justice and human rights end up outside the sphere of the Gospel and become an entirely secular matter.”<sup>10</sup> What Hirpo calls a “Pietistic doctrine” and Eide calls “a traditional interpretation” postulated separate spheres. The church was in one and the government and the economy in the other. Consequently, the faith was considered to have little to say regarding political developments. I do not know to what extent this “traditional interpretation” was what Gudina was taught while he was in Ethiopia (and am not challenging Hirpo or Eide on this point), but, if so, it was challenged at Luther Seminary. The view they describe was very much under critique during our time there. In part, this critique was shaped by the way this version of the two kingdoms had been used by the church in Nazi Germany as an excuse not to oppose Nazism. And in part this critique grew out of the study of Luther himself that had been inspired by the Luther Renaissance. Luther’s understanding of the so-called two kingdoms turned out to be more of a distinction than a separation and had more to do with the mode of God’s action than with separate territories or spheres. For Luther, God’s influence in the world is exercised in two ways—in one case through social and political structures and in the other case through the transformative message of God-human reconciliation. In both cases, God has the same interest in human wellbeing and shalom—only the means differ. As a result, in contrast to the “traditional” view described by Hirpo and Eide, Luther himself showed no reluctance to voice harsh criticism of structures, princes, business owners, and others in authority and no reluctance to offer constructive proposals in the political sphere. He objected to a crusade, helped organize community chests to end begging, urged city councils to establish schools for all young men and young women, proposed new rules for and a new understanding of marriage, objected to usury and other business practices of his day, and the like. It is likely true, as Hirpo says, that “Right from the beginning he [Gudina] related theology to the actual life of the people he was serving and living with. In reality, people in the society of his time were economically exploited and oppressed, politically powerless, and victimized by policies tailored to benefit the powerful and well-organized interest

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible that some of Gudina’s ideas were clarified, not just by adopting but also by reacting against what he observed and learned. But I do not have any experience to indicate this was the case. And the loss of his notes and books while they were in route to Ethiopia gives us little written evidence to which we can appeal. In any case, if true, my point is not altered, because an outlook can be deepened by disagreeing with what one is taught or experiences as much as by adopting either.

<sup>9</sup> Tasgara Hirpo, “Rev. Gudina Tumsa’s Contribution to the Understanding of a National Church, Partnership and Interdependence in the Global Church, as Viewed in and Developed in the EECMY,” in *The Life and Ministry of Rev. Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus (EECMY)* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: The Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2003), 91.

<sup>10</sup> Øyvind Eide, “Integral Human Development: Rev. Gudina Tumsa’s Theology, with Special Reference to His Critique of Dominant Trends in Missiology and the Question of Human Rights,” in *The Life and Ministry of Rev. Gudina Tumsa*, 63.

groups.”<sup>11</sup> However, in my opinion, it is also likely true that Gudina's encounter with an updated understanding of Luther's views and with the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, both of which were commonplace at Luther Seminary, reinforced his own experience of the needs of his people and his commitment to a holistic ministry. Those encounters with Luther and Niebuhr, along with the civil rights movement, also encouraged his attention to the importance of social structures.

The years Gudina spent at Luther Seminary were years of the Cold War. The nature of Marxism was a topic of conversation. On the one hand, an opposition to communism pervaded American life and thought. On the other hand, we seminary students heard about the Christian-Marxist dialogue going on in Europe. I cannot say how much this affected Gudina (I don't remember ever having a conversation with him about it), but it is possible that some of these explorations into the nature of Marxism and exposure to alternative views about it helped prepare him for the seminars on Christianity and socialism that he organized in Ethiopia in 1975.

In what follows I will highlight some important features of Gudina's contributions to theology. In doing so, I will draw on his writings and my experience of him as a seminary student. This is, of course, a limited vision. In many ways, those who knew him and his service as a pastor in Ethiopia and as the General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus have a fuller portrait than mine. With this important qualification, I proceed.

## CENTRAL TO HIS THEOLOGY WAS HIS RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

Front and center in every aspect of Gudina's theology was the transforming message of Jesus the Christ. In his paper, "Stewardship of the Gospel," he acknowledges that the word "gospel" means "good news," but he goes on to say that the religious meaning of the term is more important. This religious meaning can be discerned in Paul's statement, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Romans 1:16). Gudina continues, "When the Gospel is defined as Paul does it as 'the power of God,' then we agree that it is nothing less than the presence of the living Jesus Christ, our Lord: 'Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand' (Romans 5:2)."<sup>12</sup> Presence and power are central ideas. And the basic image of the gospel, as he unpacked it, is relational. Yes, there is a message, but it is in service to the relational presence of Christ.

On one level, this observation about the centrality of the power and presence of Christ may seem trivial, because any theology that claims to be Christian reflects the religious importance of Jesus. But I mean by it something more significant. There are other theologians for whom the study of theology is academic, philosophical perhaps, and one step removed from faith. Or, to put it another way, for these theologians, theology is a "third person" affair, which sketches Christian teachings on a canvas that is "out there," independent of the thinker. For Gudina, theology was intensely grounded in his lived relationship with Jesus the Christ. To borrow a phrase from Martin Luther, his was a theology done "*coram Deo*" (that is, as one standing before God). It was a "first and second-person" theology. To put it still another way, he lived his theology, and it infused his life. As a result, thinking contextually likely was not difficult for him, because his theology was self-engaging and self-involving from beginning to end. To the degree he was shaped by and embodied elements of his context, his theological thinking was also shaped by and embodied elements of that context.

The intensity of his commitment was remarkable. One indication was his well-known, emphatically (even angrily) negative response to the news that asylum in Tanzania had been arranged.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hirpo, "Tumsa's Contribution," 80.

<sup>12</sup> Gudina Tumsa, "Stewardship of the Gospel," in *Witness and Discipleship: Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution: The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus 1929[sic]-1979* (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2003), 147.

<sup>13</sup> For Christian Krause's account of his reaction, see Øyvind Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth and Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church 1974-85* (Athens: Ohio: Ohio University Press and Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2000), 177.

His dedication to his work, as described by his wife, is another.<sup>14</sup> Or to cite an example from my time with him, when it was time to study, he took the picture of his family from the top of his desk and put it in a drawer. Otherwise, it made him so homesick that he was unable to do his work. And yet he continued to study, because it was part of his calling to serve the church and to serve his savior.

One word that I would use for Gudina is "grounded." So long as he perceived that the transformative power and presence of Christ was getting through and so long as he felt he had Scriptural support, he was ready to challenge and/or stand firm in the face of structures, authorities, and individuals. The pattern had been developed long before the Revolution occurred. It was there as early as his childhood and developed throughout his life, education, and experiences. Many, many things contributed to this grounded-ness, but the centrality of his relationship to God in Christ was certainly of key importance.

Why is this theological focus on the power and presence of Christ important? Because Gudina's life shows how powerful this kind of theological orientation can be. It turns out to be profoundly engaging, not just for the person who is doing the thinking, but also for others who are exposed to it. To the degree it connects deeply with one person's struggle, to that degree it creates a bridge to others. If I may again refer to Martin Luther, the reason his message of reform and his emphasis on the radicality of the gospel spoke so effectively to the people of his day was that his own struggles had not been unique. They reflected the struggle of many of his contemporaries. My perception is that the same is true for Gudina's thought. We would not be talking about it today, were it not that we sense its relevance to our own journey and the calling of the contemporary community of faith. His approach invites and challenges every theologian to be similarly grounded.

To return to the question, why is this theological focus on the power and presence of Christ important? Because it shaped not only his theology but also his identity. His theology and his identity were so in harmony that he exhibited unusual integrity. Comparing Gudina and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gerd Decke says, "Both were known for maintaining integrity between what they said and what they did, between what they represented as Christians and who they were as individual people; this rare integrity was part of their faithful witness until the end of their lives."<sup>15</sup> There was nothing "forced" about Gudina's theological thinking, decision making, or witnessing. He exhibited the kind of integrity to which almost everyone responded—whether an uneducated villager or my farmer father or the international church leaders with whom he interacted.<sup>16</sup>

Let me re-phrase this point. The most basic challenge Gudina's theology makes is this probing question: what level of commitment does "doing theology" demand? Is the vocation of a theologian an arm-chair endeavor? Or is the vocation of a theologian a radical call to discipleship—a call (as Bonhoeffer affirmed) to "come and die"?<sup>17</sup>

To make this very personal, in 1966 when we attended Luther Seminary graduation ceremonies, Gudina and I sat in the same pews at Central Lutheran Church. Was it because I was an American and he was an Ethiopian that our fates have been so different? Or was it because I kept quiet at times and places when a stronger witness to the presence and power of Christ was needed? The centrality of the transforming power of Christ in Gudina's theology is its most basic contribution and its most basic challenge.

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<sup>14</sup> See Tschay Tolessa as told to Aud Saeveras, "In the Fiery Furnace: The Story of Tschay Tolessa and Gudina Tumsa, the Assassinated General Secretary of the Mekane Yesus Church in Ethiopia," unpublished English translation by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson.

<sup>15</sup> Gerd Decke, "Gudina Tumsa and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Emerging Theological Praxis*, Journal of Gudina Tumsa Foundation (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 2:30.

<sup>16</sup> These responses were positive. The governmental leaders also responded, but in a much less positive way. For them, his integrity was a threat.

<sup>17</sup> In his "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society," Gudina put it this way: "As someone has said, when a person is called to follow Christ, that person is called to die. It means a redirection of the purpose of life, that is death to one's own wishes and personal desires." *Witness and Discipleship*, 11.

## HIS THEOLOGY WAS TRIUNE.

His emphasis on the power and presence of Christ was never a Christo-monism. It was triune to the core. God the creator, God the Son, and God the Spirit were all at work in the world. As Gudina emphasized,<sup>18</sup> his God was not a Deist figure uninvolved in the world, not an abstract philosophical unmoved mover. Gudina’s God was the biblical God who “is busy and active in this world, creating ever new. And Jesus, the Son of God, came with this same creative power.”<sup>19</sup> God’s providence “is constantly bringing good out of evil.”<sup>20</sup> While redeeming and transforming humans, God is still at work in all of creation.

In addition to an emphasis on the connection between God the creator and Christ the liberator, he also had an appreciation for the Spirit. “A Christian is a transformed person by believing the Gospel of Christ (justification) and is in constant process of being transformed (sanctification) by the power of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the Christian.”<sup>21</sup> According to Paul Hoffman, Gudina functioned as a mediator between the EECMY as a whole and those involved in the charismatic movement. He wanted to prevent the movement from becoming schismatic. He put the issue on the agenda of the 1973 General Assembly, asked T. Engelsen to present a paper on the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, and traveled to Nekemte to settle a dispute about this issue.<sup>22</sup>

Also characteristic of Gudina’s theology is his immersion in the Scriptures. His writings are full of biblical references. And these references are not just “proof texts” but evidence of a deep involvement in the overall trajectory of the biblical story and how each part fits into the whole. According to Christian Krause, speaking in 1991, “Gudina received all of his motivation from the Scriptures.”<sup>23</sup> During his first year at Luther Seminary, he enrolled in several biblical study courses, in part because here the vocabulary was the most accessible, making it a good entry-point for an English-language program in theology, but also because his advisors recognized that he had a reservoir of biblical knowledge upon which he could draw.<sup>24</sup>

As is well known, Gudina objected to any separation of the spiritual and the material. His reasons were theological, based on the incarnation and the goodness of creation. Precisely because God was so central in his life, he understood God to be connected to everything. The result was a holistic outlook that emphasized both freedom from bondage to sin and freedom from economic exploitation and political oppression.

This appreciation for the Trinity was important because it gave him a basis for his commitment to the transformation of all of life. When discussing the biblical and theological foundations for an African-oriented involvement in social affairs, Misgana Mathewos says this: for Gudina “the biblical teaching of the imminence of God prompts the Christians to involve themselves in social transformational activity and energize them to accomplish this task.”<sup>25</sup> Here is a place where I think his biblical orientation and his engagement with the Prophets joined with his exposure to Reinhold Niebuhr’s thinking to qualify some of the pietist theology to which he likely had been exposed prior to his stay at Luther Seminary. Pietism tended to focus on the personal and the Christological—or, if I may put it differently, on the concerns of

<sup>18</sup> For example, in his “Unbelief (‘Kairos’) from Historical Perspective” in *Witness and Discipleship*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Tumsa, “Unbelief,” 31.

<sup>20</sup> Tumsa, “Unbelief,” 32.

<sup>21</sup> Tumsa, “Role of a Christian,” 5.

<sup>22</sup> Paul E. Hoffman, “Gudina Tumsa’s Legacy: His Spirituality and Leadership,” in *The Life and Ministry of Rev. Gudina Tumsa*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Decke, “Tumsa and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 27.

<sup>24</sup> I do not know for sure who was teaching the courses he took during that first year (I have tried to gain access to a transcript of his courses, but without success), but sometime during his three years at Luther Seminary I expect he encountered one of the professors of Old Testament who combined a deep interest in the prophets, a deep appreciation for Reinhold Niebuhr, and a lively interest in politics (for example, he brought Eugene McCarthy, a philosophical Roman Catholic Senator, to campus to speak). This professor had a significant influence on me, as I suspect he did on Gudina. His interpretation of the Scriptures combined piety with a passion for social justice.

<sup>25</sup> Misgana Mathewos, “Gudina Tumsa’s Interpretations (Hermeneutic) of the Bible from a Global and Ethiopian/African Perspective,” in *Ecumenical Challenges*, p. 163.

the second article of the Creed. Its attention to second-article concerns compromised its ability to relate to creation, to matters of the first article. The strongly trinitarian orientation of Gudina’s theology gave it an expanded basis, and this allowed it to be remarkably and powerfully holistic.

To make explicit my claim: Gudina’s emphasis on the triune God is an important contribution to theology, which in the twentieth century so often seemed to neglect the activity of God in the world as it focused more narrowly on the activity of Jesus and the Spirit in the lives of individuals or, on the other hand, focused more narrowly on human capacity to the exclusion of Christ.

#### THEOLOGICAL THINKING INFORMED HIS DECISIONS.

Gudina’s commitment to the centrality of the triune God prompted him to approach every question theologically. For example, his argument against the proposed moratorium on Western aid to churches in Africa was theological, not pragmatic. Although he acknowledged that the maturity of the EECMY provided the first objection to a moratorium, he went on to say, “But issues as important as the proposal to stop all personnel and financial assistance should never be decided on grounds of self-pride or national feeling. We must think and argue theologically.”<sup>26</sup> He based his position on ecclesiology, on his understanding of the church. “The various parts of the universal church are and should be interdependent. Independence is a legitimate national aim; it can never be an acceptable theological aim for a church.”<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, his disagreements with the government were theological, not just pragmatic. That is, he supported some of the same goals regarding social change but objected vigorously to the atheistic stance of the official outlook of the military government. “The Biblical view of God demands an open understanding of the world and of man [sic]. . . . Man . . . has been created in the image of God (Genesis 1, 26-27). And human beings have freedom, creativity, honour, dignity, deriving from that image of God. To have a closed understanding of the world and a materialist understanding of man is to deny essential elements of science and human nature.”<sup>28</sup>

Yonas Deressa has said that Gudina told him that he developed two habits during his “second pastoral course” in 1955-58: “The first was reading theological books. The second is theological reflection on the factors that negatively affect the lives of the people.”<sup>29</sup> Both relate to what I am saying, but the second is the most germane, because his theological thinking was contextual. As Knud Jørgensen says, in addition to “self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating,” Gudina understood that a sustainable church must develop its own identity, and this requires “self-theologizing.”<sup>30</sup> African/Ethiopian self-theologizing was the kind of endeavor Gudina undertook.

After Øyvind Eide describes Gudina’s worry about a new emphasis on Christian service becoming as one-sided as the previous emphasis on saving souls, he has this to say, “The way the missions and agencies were approached reveals Qes Gudina’s extraordinary ability to analyze a situation in depth, formulate the crucial issues at stake and reflect theologically on them. This rare ability was again seen in his approach to the burning issues of the revolution.”<sup>31</sup>

Modeling decision-making based on this kind of deeply theological thinking is an important contribution, because spokespersons for Christianity—pastors, theologians, church leaders, are again and again tempted to make decisions about what to say and what to do on the basis of some program that they

<sup>26</sup> Gudina Tumsa and Paul E. Hoffman, “The Moratorium Debate and the EECMY,” In *Witness and Discipleship*, p. 48. The quotation is from the part of the joint document written by Gudina.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>28</sup> Gudina Tumsa, “Unbelief (‘Kairos’) from Historical Perspective,” in *Witness and Discipleship*, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Yonas Deressa, “The Rev. Gudina Tumsa—Early Life and Ministry,” in *The Life and Ministry of Rev. Gudina Tumsa*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> “Sustainability in a Missiological and Ethiopian Perspective: Assumptions and Concerns,” in *Revisiting the History, Theology, and Leadership Practice of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus*, the Journal of Gudina Tumsa Foundation (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2016), 4:139. Jørgensen is a lecturer at the Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo, Norway.

<sup>31</sup> Eide, “Integral Human Development,” 58.



find dear for a variety of non-theological reasons. I am not saying that there is no theological basis at all for the program they endorse, but once they are committed to it, they are reluctant to re-think that commitment and explore it theologically. Or, once they are committed, they are content with superficial connections to the Christian tradition rather than a radical (that is, reaching to the roots) rethinking. From what I can tell, Gudina not only examined the contextual impact of his recommendations but also routinely examined and re-examined their theological basis. This practice gave them their cogency.

Lest my emphasis on theological thinking be misunderstood, let me add three notes. The first is that Gudina's theology was pastoral. It was all about reaching out and extending the healing message of Christ. During his first year at Luther Seminary, I remember that he received a letter that encouraged him to become the General Secretary when he returned. It disturbed him greatly. What he wanted when he returned to Ethiopia, he explained, was to be a pastor, not an administrator. Though he eventually accepted the call to be General Secretary and filled it well, he was not motivated by any aspirations to ecclesiastical office. I expect that the combination of this reluctance and this sense of call contributed to the freedom of his decision-making and his readiness to risk innovative overtures—whether forming an alliance with the other churches in Ethiopia or challenging the funding arrangements of the European and American donor churches. He could risk because his identity was not tied to the office or to the social status it conveyed. He saw himself first and foremost as a pastor.

The second note is this. Central to Gudina's theology was what I would call wisdom—that is, an understanding of human beings and the dynamics of human communities—how individuals and communities function and what each needs to be whole. This wisdom comes from studying human history, from personal experience, from observing others, from the advice of mentors, from an immersion in the scriptural accounts of the people of God, and from a certain humility that does not put too much confidence in one's own priorities. Though informed by the widest possible sample of human experience, wisdom is always contextual. It gives priority to what is best for a particular people under these circumstances. This wisdom enhanced Gudina's pastoral ministry, his administrative work, and his interpretation of the Christian message.

The third note. Closely connected with this wisdom is a remarkable perceptivity. When it came to issues facing his church and his country, he was able to see the big picture, to understand the dynamics at work, and keep things in proper perspective. I am not entirely sure I can accurately identify the source of this remarkable perceptivity, but I think it comes in part from what mattered to him. People mattered. And this meant that the dynamics of society mattered. And he paid careful attention to both.

These last three comments about the pastoral character of his theology, his exercise of wisdom, and his perceptivity all contributed to the cogency of his theological insights. And they all help to define what I have in mind when I refer to the way theological thinking informed his decisions.

#### GUDINA'S THEOLOGY WAS ECUMENICAL.

Gudina helped lead the EECMY into the World Council of Churches. And he was instrumental in bringing together the churches in Ethiopia. In 1976, the Council for the Cooperation of Churches in Ethiopia was formed, with Gudina as its first chairman. At first this included the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches—a bold step, given the way the Protestants had been treated by the Orthodox.<sup>32</sup> In retrospect it was also politically risky. One reason the government considered him dangerous was because, even after the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox withdrew, he continued to lead the ongoing Council for Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia, which the government considered a potential rival for power and influence.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Debela Birri, "Rev. Gudina Tumsa and the Ecumenical Movement of the 1970s: The Ethiopian Case," in *The Life and Ministry of the Rev. Gudina Tumsa*, 135.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Wee says Gudina "was martyred, not only for his unwillingness to be a mouthpiece for the Derg's propaganda about 'religious freedom' in Ethiopia, but also because of his insistence that churches act together and speak with a united voice" ("Ecumenical Challenges," 3:39). Samuel Deressa writes. "Many scholars as well as his contemporaries agree that the main cause

One reason the ecumenical movement had gained momentum in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century was the recognition, based on the churches' experience with fascism and communism, that they could have a stronger influence on public affairs if they spoke with one voice. This clearly was the situation in the Ethiopia of the 1970s. Gudina foresaw the need for churches to work together. But for him the reasons for ecumenism were theological as well as practical. Ecumenism involved two or more churches working together to fulfill their common calling, which included offering grace, taking away the bitterness of sin, appropriating the blessings of God, and experiencing the joy of the Lord's forgiveness.<sup>34</sup> "When we are clear about the primary purpose of the Church and our ecumenical responsibilities for the unity of the Church of the Saviour, then whatever structure is chosen is of less significance."<sup>35</sup> Even though Gudina distinguished between the full oneness described in John 17 and the somewhat more modest goal of ecumenical cooperation, the latter was still a response to the nature of the church as outlined in the New Testament. So, one could say, a theology deeply shaped by the Bible (as was Gudina's) had and has theological reasons to be ecumenical.

Any theology today needs to be ecumenical, because to be healthy it needs to be reminded of its limited understanding of God's role in the world. A non-ecumenical theology tends to become an ideology—a set of ideas removed from people that can be imposed in ways that do not contribute to their liberation. In a non-ecumenical theology, beliefs tend to take priority over people. Such a theology moves away from the centrality of the transforming presence of Christ and from the legitimate role of wisdom in interpreting the biblical tradition.

Another reason theology should be ecumenical is that each ecclesial community has its own gifts. They can be shared without insisting on uniformity. While affirming and appreciating the gifts of its own traditions, each community is enriched by its interaction with other denominations, and the whole is enriched by the contributions of the various confessional communities. Conversation heightens our awareness of the fullness of what God has done, is doing, and will do.

And to return to the public sphere, even in societal conditions quite different from those Gudina faced, churches need to cooperate to have a credible voice in the corridors of government, because even a tolerant government is not likely to want to appear sectarian by endorsing the proposals of one branch of Christianity without the support of others. One reason Gudina's theology has significance today is that it was ecumenical.

## A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIETY.

Gerd Decke reports that he observed four possible responses to Marxism and socialism in various cultural contexts: withdrawal, conformity, opposition, or critical engagement. "Gudina Tumsa clearly chose the latter."<sup>36</sup> Decke goes on to cite from the Pastoral Letter of 1975<sup>37</sup> written by Gudina and H. E. Emmanuel Abraham, to identify those areas in which Gudina was willing to support the government and those areas where he withheld support. His stance exhibited "critical engagement."

The only point I want to make here is that, under most conditions, "critical engagement" is the best pattern for theology to follow. The Amish and the Hutterites have practiced a form of withdrawal that models an alternative social arrangement. In many ways their witness is admirable, even though its influence is limited. However, another more common version—namely, mere withdrawal from politics without developing an alternative—is simply a form of conformity. Its unintended effect is to endorse the status quo. Conformity, under any conditions, abandons the Christian witness by baptizing the always limited justice of the present system. Far too often, this has been the default model in Western

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for his execution was his success in forming an ecumenical alliance in Ethiopia," quoted from Wee's "Gudina Tumsa on Holistic Approach to Ecumenism: A Move Toward Ecumenical Harmony," in *Ecumenical Challenges*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Birri, "Tumsa and the Ecumenical Movement of the 1970s," 133, where he quotes from Gudina Tumsa, "The Responsibility of the EECMY towards Ecumenical Harmony," in *Witness and Discipleship*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Tumsa, "Responsibility of the EECMY," 16.

<sup>36</sup> Decke, "Tumsa and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 116.

<sup>37</sup> *Witness and Discipleship*, 77-80.

Christianity, leaving the poor and disadvantaged to suffer in isolation. And the remaining response, opposition, while sometimes called for, always threatens to make the church the instrument of a rival political ideology. So, under most conditions, critical engagement is the best option for theology. Theology needs to be willing to identify and celebrate whatever contributes to justice and human dignity and to name and call public attention to whatever undermines justice and human dignity. It needs to make space for politicians to act and to support those who do not capitalize on fear and seek non-ideological solutions to the social ills of their community.

#### GUDINA'S THEOLOGY EXHIBITED A SENSE OF HUMOR.

By a "sense of humor" I mean so appreciating the grace of God and the power of Christ as not to take anything else too seriously. A theological sense of humor allows a person not to take oneself too seriously, not to take one's accomplishments or one's failures too seriously, not to take one's own morality too seriously, not even to take one's theological opinions too seriously. I do not, of course, mean that any of these things are unimportant, only that they are not ultimate. Gudina was clear that his relationship with God was a product of God's generosity and that God's trustworthiness was the source of his hope. Nothing else was ultimate.<sup>38</sup>

Closely related to his theological sense of humor was a mistrust of ideologies. As he says, "Ideologies cannot be considered as absolute. Complete allegiance is due to God and God alone."<sup>39</sup> Theology for him was relational. What mattered was what effect an idea or a proposal would have on people and their relationships. In this regard, one can speak of him as theologically pragmatic. Alongside his clear sense of theological priorities, he exhibited a kind of pragmatic flexibility derived from an equally clear sense that neither the church nor its programs have a prescribed form. Wise judgment was needed to determine the practical implications of one's theological commitments. Note, for example, Staffan Grenstedt's observation that Gudina "had quite a pragmatic view of the FMS [Finnish Missionary Society] enterprise in the Kambata/Hadiya Region. Others were more concerned with ideology."<sup>40</sup> This absence of ideology did not, of course, mean that ideas were unimportant, because they can have enormous consequences for people and communities, but ideas were penultimate. Their adequacy had to be judged by what they do or do not contribute to "the care and redemption of all that" God has made (to quote a line from the communion liturgy in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*<sup>41</sup>).

Why is a theology with a sense of humor important? Because any overly zealous dedication to something penultimate winds up hurting people. I recently heard of the story of a man who, during World War II, registered with his draft board as a conscientious objector. His pastor and his home congregation were so opposed to his action that they censured and disowned him. In this case multiple penultimates, such as patriotism and a non-pacifist tradition and a sense of duty, all got in the way of understanding and "standing with" this young man as he made a difficult moral decision. It is as understandable as it is unfortunate that he never went back to church.

By emphasizing a theological sense of humor, I am only suggesting that what is penultimate should be treated as penultimate and never confused with what is ultimate.

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<sup>38</sup> Although it is not what I am discussing here, it is also true that Gudina did have a sense of humor in the ordinary sense of this phrase. In many ways, of course, he was serious and thoughtful. But he very much enjoyed any opportunity we had to joke with one another. His face would light up, and he would join in the fun.

<sup>39</sup> Tumsa "Pastoral Letter," in *Witness and Discipleship*, 79.

<sup>40</sup> Staffan Grenstedt, "The Ministry of Qes Gudina Tumsa in the Kambata/Hadiya Region," in *Ecumenical Challenges*, 203.

<sup>41</sup> *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 68.

## CONCLUSION

We have talked about the way Gudina's relationship to God was central to his theology, his theology was triune, theological thinking informed his decisions, his theology was ecumenical, he was critically engaged with society, and he exhibited a sense of humor. Why are all of these characteristics important? They are important because they are transferrable. In another time and place the outcomes will be different, but these characteristics make for a healthy theology even in another geographical, cultural, or historical setting. They contribute to theological integrity and courage.

To try to say this another way, Gudina's way of doing theology is important because it is both contextual and universal. The dynamics are universal, the focus on relationality is universal, the holistic emphasis is universal, while at the same time these dynamics intentionally take seriously the here and now of individuals and particular peoples and engage their specific social settings so seriously that the end result turns out to be deeply contextual--but contextual in a way that does not set one part of the church against another. There can still be a common witness to the centrality of the power and presence of Christ and the ongoing activity of God in the world.

The kind of theology Gudina practiced continues to be of great value for all who confess the Christian faith, today and on into the future. We honor him best by appreciating and learning from his theology.