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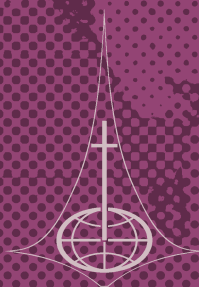
## Theological practices that matter

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THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH Vol. 5

# Theological Practices That Matter



The Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches



# **Theological Practices that Matter**

Karen L. Bloomquist, Editor

on behalf of  
The Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches

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## **Theology in the Life of the Church series**

*Being the Church in the Midst of Empire. Trinitarian Reflections*, Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.)

*Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths*, Simone Sinn (ed.)

*Identity, Survival Witness. Reconfiguring Theological Agendas*, Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.)

*Lutherans Respond to Pentecostalism*, Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.)

*Theological Practices that Matter*, Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.)

*Transformative Theological Perspectives*, Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.)

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Theology in the Life of the Church, vol. 5

Karen L. Bloomquist, Editor

on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation

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# Introduction

Karen L. Bloomquist

From the beginning, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) program, “Theology in the Life of the Church,” (TLC) has concentrated on key challenges facing Lutheran churches, especially in those parts of the world where Lutheran churches are growing the most and/or in contexts that are vastly different from those where Lutheran theology has been refined over some centuries.

Thus, based on a 2004 survey, the four initial “tracks” of TLC were focused on what it means to confess and live out faith in the Triune God in the face of (1) death and injustice; (2) interfaith realities; (3) Pentecostal and charismatic influences; and (4) moral differences that threaten church unity. The focus has not been on the challenges themselves but rather on the call to pursue critical and constructive theological work in relation to these realities. Through this methodology, the program has attempted to address the gap between theology and the life of the church—by carrying out constructive theological reflection that responds to the challenges facing Lutheran churches.

In collaboration with different institutions or LWF-related events, the six seminars were held in various geographical locations and involved over 150 theologians. The first took place at the conclusion of a major African consultation on poverty and the mission of the church, organized by the LWF Department for Mission and Development, and provided a basis for lively, creative theological discussion and interchange.<sup>1</sup> Participants at the second seminar, held in Germany on the campus of a mission society, identified ways of responding theologically to the rising interfaith challenges in Europe.<sup>2</sup> At the third consultation, convened in Sweden immediately prior to a global gathering of Lutheran church leaders, participants discussed “fundamentals” of Lutheran theology and practice that need to be seen as alternatives to the fundamentalism surrounding and sometimes in Lutheran churches themselves, especially in relation to ethical issues. At a large Lutheran seminary in the USA, the fourth consultation gathered

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<sup>1</sup> See articles in Karen L. Bloomquist and Musa Pantu Filibus (eds), *So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth*, LWF Studies 1/2007 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Simone Sinn (ed.), *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths*, Theology in the Life of the Church series, vol. 2 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2008).

mostly theologians from the USA, who intentionally focused theologically on what it means to be the church in the midst of empire.<sup>3</sup> The fifth seminar met in Asia (in Hong Kong, also at a seminary) in the face of different kinds of religious resurgence, where matters of identity and survival set the table for theological discussions.<sup>4</sup> At the sixth and final seminar, held at a Lutheran conference center in South Africa, the agenda was set by the rise and increasing influence of neo-Pentecostalism, and participants considered how Lutheran theological emphases and practices need to be developed in relation to this.<sup>5</sup>

Each of the six regional seminars included a few participants from outside that respective regional context. They often contributed some of the most provocative questions and deep insights, confirming the realization that those from outside a given context may be able to see, speak to, analyze or critique what those from within that context are unable or hesitant to name. It became evident that not only contextual but also theological work across contexts is crucial today. Although discernment within a given context is needed, this is not sufficient. Those voices or perspectives that come from outside our own contexts help us to see what we would rather not see, often because this would imply the need for change. Others can stir up the need to repent and to be open to being transformed. This occurs through the power of God's Spirit, who moves through those who are different from ourselves, when they take us seriously, encounter us, even confront us. Yet, this critique from outside a context must be done in ways cognizant of and sensitive to the power inequities that inevitably are present.

Unless this intentionally cross-contextual theological work occurs to a greater extent—interrogating and reconfiguring inherited theological positions with a rigor and persuasiveness that move across cultural boundaries—then presumably universal theological understandings will continue to claim an authoritative hold, even if they are no longer what liberates people, that is, are no longer gospel for them. Here “gospel” is not a fixed, unchanging formula of truth but, as Douglas John Hall puts it, “news” ex-

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<sup>3</sup> Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire: Trinitarian Reflections*, Theology in the Life of the Church series, vol. 1 (Geneva and Minneapolis: The Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran University Press, 2007), including two articles from the prior Lund seminar on fundamentalisms.

<sup>4</sup> Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Identity, Survival, Witness: Reconfiguring Theological Agendas*, Theology in the Life of the Church series, vol. 3 (Geneva and Minneapolis: The Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Lutherans Respond to Pentecostalism*, Theology in the Life of the Church series, vol. 4 (Geneva and Minneapolis: The Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran University Press, 2009).

pressed in a way that we have not quite heard before and that is addressed to our situation in such a way that it becomes “good news.”<sup>6</sup> It speaks to what is happening in a given context and alters what is oppressive and predictable, bringing in a sense of surprise, wonder and gratitude, rather than being something predictable, formulaic or rote.

Trans-contextual theological work was what especially began to occur at the 2009 concluding consultation in Augsburg, Germany,<sup>7</sup> held in conjunction with the faculty of Protestant theology of the University of Augsburg. With over 120 theologians from about thirty countries participating, this event was probably the largest and certainly most diverse gathering of theologians that the LWF has ever convened.

The amazing diversity of theological contexts and perspectives became especially evident to participants as they continually interacted with one another, as well as the need to attend carefully to each others’ very different assumptions and realities. As one participant put it, “How difficult it is actually to do theology in a global context—it takes time, patience and the right language for communicating.” When attempts to understand one another became exhausting, those who broke out in song or dance reminded all those present that the faith we confess and live out is far more than a cerebral matter.

Probably everyone’s more limited perspectives were challenged or transformed in some way at this dynamic historic gathering. Comments such as the following were made:

- Theology must be contextually grounded, tackling people’s real problems and concerns.
- Have we in the North become too specialized in our theological work? What difference does it make for our churches?
- I was surprised at how strongly traditional Western approaches to theology were challenged by those from other parts of the world.
- I was really struck by how the various cultures discuss theological issues differently.

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas John Hall, “What is Theology?,” in *Cross Currents* (Summer 2003), p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> “Theology in the Life of the Church: Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today,” 25–31 March 2009 (hereafter, “Augsburg 2009”).

- Lutheran theology's strength is in its pluriformity and interdependence.
- Lutheran dogmatic formulas are open to contextualization.

In all of the TLC events, it became apparent how difficult it is to do this kind of theological work. Learning to think (much less to write) theologically, in ways that not only appropriate but creatively rethink or reconfigure theological understandings in the face of contextual challenges, remains largely an underdeveloped competence of theologians in all parts of the world.

For many in the global South, theological understandings that have been passed on through the mission movements continue to be repeated rather than subjected to the scrutiny of postcolonial critique that is common in much academic discourse today, not to mention the reconstruction needed after that. It would be tempting to depict the situation as one of a deep gap between theologians of the global North and those of the global South, but it is more complex than that. Many kinds of hybridity are present among Lutheran theologians globally.

Regardless of context, the challenge is to engage theologically the actual questions and realities of people in local settings. An example of this was what some participants in the Hong Kong seminar identified as the theological urgency to discuss “blessings” and “communicating with dead ancestors,”<sup>8</sup> or pondering whether God's anger is what is being expressed through disruptive climate changes.<sup>9</sup> Such questions arise in situations where basic survival is at stake. These are the contexts in which Lutheran churches actually are growing the fastest, but not the ones usually presupposed in high-level theological discourse. This does not mean that the latter kind of theological work is no longer needed—its critical perspectives are important—but it must become accessible to and engage with the questions people in other parts of the world are raising. There must be more mutual interaction between different theological points of departure—to get at the appropriate questions before moving on to the possible answers. It is not that one side has the questions, and the other the ready-made answers,

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<sup>8</sup> See articles in *op. cit.* (note 4).

<sup>9</sup> See Karen L. Bloomquist with Rolita Machila, *God, Creation and Climate Change: A Resource for Reflection and Discussion* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009). Online at [www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/Dts/Programs/DTS-Church-Social\\_Issues.html](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/Dts/Programs/DTS-Church-Social_Issues.html).

but there needs to be joint inquiry as to whether a given theological “key” actually does unlock what is holding people captive today.<sup>10</sup>

Permeating all these events was the presence of multiple realities of power. Power realities, whether perceived or actual, often become hindrances to the critical theological work that is necessary, so that the dynamic of the gospel might transform situations, including some of the inherited theologies and practices that hold people in bondage. Unless theological work can more honestly and helpfully address these realities, it may remain only an élitist exercise, from which many will continue to be excluded. This would be in contradiction to the Lutheran premise that all of the baptized are called to reflect theologically and not just be passive recipients of “answers” others provide.

### **Theological practices that matter**

From the beginning of the TLC program, practices of the church, especially those related to Word and sacrament and other worship practices, emerged as points of departure for theological reflection. At the first seminar, attention was given to the importance of lament<sup>11</sup> and, in subsequent seminars, it was repeatedly noted that worship must engage people’s actual concerns and needs in lively, meaningful and participatory ways. Theological practices related to worship are foundational. Not surprisingly, the daily experiences of worship were among the highlights of Augsburg 2009. Participants were together before God in worship, despite the differences they had encountered during the other sessions.

This volume contains some of the papers presented and discussed at Augsburg 2009. They were selected for publication here because of the ways in which they give attention to certain Christian practices, related to central Lutheran theological understandings in varied contexts, and suggest further work that could be done in other contexts. Such practices also become the points of departure for reappropriating or rethinking some traditional theological understandings.

The focus on “practices” indicates that theology is not just a cerebral or intellectual matter but must become real, tangible, public—a living real-

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<sup>10</sup> See Vitor Westhelle, “Transfiguring Lutheranism: Being Lutheran in New Contexts,” in *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 19–20.

ity that relates to people's lives in the church and the world. Theology is not usually evaluated in terms of how it relates to the practices and life of churches in their respective contexts. However, not only do such practices matter, but they need to be grounded in, guided by and critiqued when they are inconsistent with basic theological understandings. In this sense, through practices we realize that theology does matter.

"Practices are essentially belief-shaped and beliefs are essentially practice-shaped."<sup>12</sup> Baptism and Eucharist are central Christian practices that in turn provide the grounding for other practices. God's practices in the world constitute the normative moment for Christian life. Beliefs and practices are mutually implicated ways of knowing and responding to God's active presence for the life of the world.<sup>13</sup> This also necessitates critical thinking when basic practices are inconsistent with these beliefs.

This attention to practices as points of departure for serious, in-depth theological reflection is a promising shift toward a theology that more directly engages the life of the church, especially as the priesthood of all believers in their vocations in the world, and in relation to the wider society. This engagement occurs at the front end of serious theological reflection, rather than at a later stage of application. For the multitudes of Christians around the world, who may feel intimidated by or be skeptical about abstract, theoretical theology, this opens up possibilities for theological reflection that can truly make a difference in the life of the church, both in a normative and a critical sense.

Incarnational theology "takes flesh" in the life of the church, in practices and in the lives of Christians in the world. It is incarnated at those moments when the gathered community is inspired and empowered with meaning and purpose, in light of God's ongoing creative, redeeming and consummating activity. Whereas this might also be thought of as theology becoming more contextual or inculturated, the point is that such theology more deeply engages with people's experiential realities and social contexts, as did Luther's theology from the beginning.

We can regard Martin Luther as one who inspired what is central in theological practices today. He was not a systematic theologian (and did not look kindly on those who were wedded to philosophical systems of the day), but was committed to the gospel of God's grace being communicated,

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<sup>12</sup> Miroslav Volf, in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (eds), *Practicing Theology; Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 254.

<sup>13</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, in *ibid.*, p. 35.

in word and action, in relation to the existential and social realities facing people in his day. This was at the heart of Luther's theological intent.

Important in this regard have been those recent interpreters of Luther's theology who have shown how the social conditions under which Luther lived were not merely coincidental but determinative of the core of his theological insights. For example, his attack on usury can be interpreted as challenging a system (economic and ecclesial) that subjected those in need to a lifetime of impoverishment, and the system of indulgences linked salvation to one's social and economic status.<sup>14</sup> The eschatological dimension in his theology was unmistakable, as was his insistence that the Christian faith makes real worldly differences, especially for the sake of those who are poor; in his own immediate context, this probably included the majority of the population. Theology that is "normed" by a theology of the cross insists on these kinds of starting points and accountabilities, which leads to the need for critique and reconstruction of inherited understandings and practices; in quite different contexts they might convey something quite different from their original intention.

### **In this book**

Margot Kässmann, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, welcomed the Augsburg 2009 participants to Germany and set the tone for getting back to the basics of the Reformation: reading and knowing the Bible, praying and confessing the faith. These foundational practices in the life of Lutheran churches orient and profile Lutherans ecumenically.

Trained as a biblical scholar, Fidon Mwombeki provocatively asks whether critical approaches to biblical interpretation are what believing communities in Africa and elsewhere really need or want. Mwombeki, a Tanzanian currently serving as general secretary of the United Evangelical Mission (UEM), proposes instead an hermeneutic that resonates with that which is familiar to people.

Luther's context was hardly intercultural in the way we think of such today. Yet, Jens Wolff, a church historian teaching at Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg in Germany, looks at a treatise in which Luther provides a possible opening for more multilingual and thus intercultural

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Torvend, *Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), pp. 107–17.

approaches to worship. Furthermore, Wolff refers to the importance of a child's experience of faith in worship, which has implications for the later article by Kenneth Mtata.

Dirk Lange, who spent many years as a Taizé brother and now teaches worship at Luther Seminary in the USA, turns to the Lutheran Confessions for an ecumenical, even charismatic, sense of worship, which he interprets through trauma theory as the Christ event. On this basis, he challenges tendencies to make certain ethnic embodiments of worship normative, rather than being open to the irruption of the Holy Spirit in each and every context.

Writing in relation to the postmodern context of California, where she teaches at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Martha Ellen Stortz seeks an embodied spirituality centered on communal practices, and focuses in particular on the stigmata of St Francis, whom she finds similar to Luther. As Christians, we are "marked" people who engage in embodied practices as the body of Christ in the world.

Resonating strongly with her paper, Lisandro Orlov, who has long ministered in Argentina among people living with HIV and AIDS, movingly describes his own experience of embracing those most vulnerable and stigmatized, as we see in Christ.

From her experience in teaching pastoral care at Makumira University College in Tanzania, Elieshi Mungure breaks through the silence and taboos that typically surround sexuality in Africa, and names in particular the ways in which women suffer because of how their sexuality is viewed. Her hope is that by drawing on biblical narratives and people's stories, churches in Africa might become places where the gospel message becomes liberating and empowering.

Many in the global South are suspicious of received theological legacies because of how foreign they are to the worldviews, cultural values and practices in their own indigenous contexts. Certain aspects of these legacies may need to be retrieved and/or adapted. This position is represented here by Ramathate Dolamo, who teaches systematic theology and ethics at the University of South Africa (UNISA, Pretoria).

Somewhat different is the approach of Kenneth Mtata, a Zimbabwean at the University of Natal, South Africa. Mtata critiques how African theologians have idealized and relied on a communal understanding of personhood, which overlooks how hierarchically African societies actually function, to the detriment of not only women, but also of children, who on this basis are excluded from the Eucharist.

Alex Mkumbo, who teaches at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Kiomboi, Tanzania, analyzes the practices of church discipline in his diocese, particularly the ways in which they prohibit those who have committed certain sins from receiving the sacrament. He charges that this is inconsistent with central Lutheran understandings of justification and forgiveness, and thus contradicts the heart of the gospel. The three articles above exemplify somewhat different approaches to theological work that seeks to connect with and examine critically actual practices in African churches.

Both Kristin Graff-Kallevåg and Teresa Swan Tuite draw extensively on the Finnish school of Luther research, which focuses on how Christ is present in the believer through faith. Graff-Kallevåg, from the Norwegian School of Theology at Oslo, uses this as the basis for critiquing how her church's proposed new liturgy of baptism hardly mentions the forgiveness of sin. She contends that in a "union with Christ" emphasis, in distinction to a forensic view of justification, forgiveness is not a condition for but follows from the believer's union with God in Christ.

Swan Tuite, who recently taught at Bates College, USA, argues that a logical implication of the Finnish approach is to go beyond an exclusively auditory way of relating to God to a more embodied tactual or multisensory approach. Potentially this opens up space for theological reflection in cultures and societies that may not be highly conceptual and verbal, but which readily express their relationship with God in ways that need to be as valued as have been the more auditory types of theological discourse.

Dorothee Arnold, who pastors a congregation in Celle, Germany, and has provided spiritual care as part of a palliative care team, makes the theological importance of a more holistic approach to the practice of spiritual care in that context more apparent.

Theological practices are not limited to the personal or community spheres. Within a Lutheran framework, they extend into the public arena, where Christians are called to speak out and engage in advocacy. Paul John Isaak, currently teaching at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland, reviews the Lutheran confessional basis for this engagement, especially in relation to his Namibian context.

Gary Simpson, who teaches at Luther Seminary, USA, considers how Luther's critical theology of political authority today inspires and provokes Lutherans around the world to take more seriously their vocation in global civil society.

Finally, Norma Cook Everist, who teaches at Wartburg Seminary, USA, gives attention to more integrative methodologies and pedagogies that

draw upon people's experiences in daily life in order to do theology more inductively and collaboratively, for the sake of ministry in the world.

The sampling of articles in this book, and the different kinds of theological practices they exemplify, will hopefully encourage readers to give theological attention to other practices in their contexts. A second book of articles from Augsburg 2009 (TLC series, vol. 6) expands upon and further develops some hermeneutical and systematic perspectives for living out the Christian faith in an increasingly interreligious and threatened world.

# Bible, Prayer and Confession: En Route to the Reformation Jubilee

Margot Kässmann

*Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*: Who have we become at the beginning of the millennium? What is the Lutheran churches' message to those who live in sorrow, who question the meaning of life and are anxious about their future? What is the Reformation churches' message in a world of injustice, where millions of people die of starvation every year?

The year 2017 will mark a very special anniversary, which not only our churches in Germany and abroad but also the state authorities are looking forward to. The Reformation's immense cultural, religious and political significance, including its national and international consequences, has been underlined and it has been said that the Reformation was the precondition for the development of a new, enlightened view of the world.

In his solemn speech at the celebration marking the opening of the Luther Decade on 21 September 2008, Bishop Wolfgang Huber said:

As much as we appreciate Luther's contribution to German culture, especially the power with which he shaped the German language, we have little reason to repeat the gestures of superiority, with which Martin Luther and an alleged "German essence" have been fused.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, Germans, at home and abroad, making reference to Luther, have been seduced to confuse patriotism with nationalism. It is therefore important that this jubilee be viewed critically, and that there be no "Luther cult," as was proposed by one national newspaper. I am convinced that the Reformation churches in Germany, as well as worldwide, are strong enough not to turn a blind eye to the darker sides of their great founder. This is not only with regard to nationalism, but also to how Luther viewed people of the Jewish faith and refused to be in solidarity with the rebelling peasants. Luther sometimes legitimized violence in a way that is horrifying for us

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<sup>1</sup> At [www.ekd.de/vortraege/huber/080921\\_huber\\_wittenberg.html](http://www.ekd.de/vortraege/huber/080921_huber_wittenberg.html), author's own translation.

today. For example, in his 1519 sermon against usury he ranted that those who charge excessive interest are “not human,” but “murderers and thieves, “as evil as the devil” and that they should be “tortured” and “beheaded.”<sup>2</sup>

It is my hope that in 2017, after we have critically reflected on Luther’s heritage, we can clarify our specific profile while discovering Luther as a protagonist of the ecumenical movement. Although Luther struggled against the pope, he was still a Catholic Christian. Is it possible to discover Luther as an ecumenical character and role model and to appreciate that which we have in common while reflecting on our separate identities?

## **Bible**

The Bible is the focal point the Reformation. Through studying the Bible, Luther developed his reformatory discovery. I have frequently been asked which book I would take with me to a desert island, and have been almost embarrassed to respond, “the Bible.” When a bishop gives this response, it sounds like a work related reflex. But, as a Christian, I am firmly convinced that the book of books will never be exhausted. Repeatedly I discover new passages that I had not noticed before, such as Shiphrah and Puah (Ex 1:15), the two midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh’s order. By chance, I discovered that Joseph and his eleven brothers also had a sister, Dinah (Gen 34). For a long time I had overlooked the little verse mentioning Pilate’s wife (Mt 27:19). Time and again, I find the different emphases of the four Gospels to be surprising, and while preparing a presentation on Paul’s travels, I discovered that in a sense he was the first promoter of globalization.

We experience familiar texts in the Bible differently depending on what we experience in our lives. The words of Psalm 23 have brought comfort and encouragement to many people in extremely different situations, while others may feel deep internal resistance when they hear, “your rod and your staff—they comfort me” (Ps 23:4). These words may evoke memories of violent punishment in the family, of having been struck with a rod, which allegedly was good for one.

Frequently I have noticed how texts speak freshly into new, constantly changing contexts. Such events as the 2004 tsunami, the 2006 Football World Cup, or the 2008 global financial crisis impact those who preach and those who listen. A biblical text is a record of an experience of faith,

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “Kleiner Sermon vom Wucher, 1519,” in *WA* 6:3–5.

which enters into dialogue with the faithful and their contexts. The reading of the text is never exhaustive, but always fresh and new in that dialogue. Recounted experiences with God converge with experiences of God today. God, human beings and context are all related as the biblical text is reflected on anew.

In the 2004 film about Luther, this became apparent in a wonderful way. Starring Joseph Fiennis, Luther did not fit our mental image of him based on the famous portrait by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Fiennis showed how Luther did not depend on others, did not rely on traditions, but rather studied the Bible himself, trying to understand for himself and struggling for truth and insight. When he realized that nothing and nobody had the power to separate him from Christ—no teaching, no priest, no tradition and no pope—this meant liberation for him. From this point onward, he completely relied on the fact that faith is a free gift to human beings, and that therefore we can completely live by God's mercy, liberated from fear. He was no longer afraid and because of his faith, courageously took responsibility in the world. How much we would need this today!

For Lutherans, the Bible is of prime importance; it orientates us. Indeed, the entire Reformation unfolded as a result of Luther's study of the Bible. In the film, when Luther's fatherly teacher, Johann von Staupitz, is about to send him to study at the University of Wittenberg, he asks, "Have you ever read the Bible?" The monk Luther responds, "The gospel? No." We can sense that momentous change is imminent. Only a few years later Luther will translate the Bible at the Wartburg Castle at Eisenach. In the film, he hands the translation to Frederick III, Elector of Saxony, also known as Frederick the Wise. While this is historically not quite accurate, the scene makes clear what a gift and challenge it was for the people to be able to read the Bible in their own language. Translating the Bible into German was revolutionary.

It is quite common to hear people say that Christianity is not interesting. When I ask what in the Bible they have read, it often becomes apparent that they have not themselves read it. This is tragic. The entire Bible has been translated into 392 languages, and the New Testament into 1012 languages. For many people in the world it vital that they have the chance to read it in their own language, while in Germany many do not know the Bible.

When a German public television channel announced the ten best books, it was hoped that the Bible would be among them. A journalist asked me to advocate for the Bible by responding to three questions: Could you describe in one sentence what this book is all about? Would you recommend the Bible for holiday reading? Do you think that the Bible belongs to world literature?

Afterwards the young man asked me whether he should look into the Bible even though he had no interest in the church. “Of course,” I replied. “Also those who are not Christians have to know what is in the Bible. It is a question of general knowledge. Take common metaphors and idioms such as ‘the wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ or ‘to hide one’s light under a bushel’—many of these originated in the Bible!” “What a cool book!” he said.

The Bible is the basis of our Christian faith, the supporting pillar, the central point of reference. At international church conferences, I am often fascinated by the fact that it is so simple to agree on certain questions. Everybody knows the book of Jonah or knows what is meant by the Beatitudes, or has an idea about Gethsemane. The Bible is a key to reaching agreement across cultural and national boundaries. It is a testimony and source of faith. German Protestants are very familiar with Luther’s translation. The power of his language has proven its value for over almost 500 years, with only minor revisions.

It is my hope that as we prepare for the Reformation jubilee we will seek fresh orientation from the Bible and find a common language as Christians in Europe. The concept of *sola scriptura* remains a burning issue. We have to discuss our issues and concerns, the faith in Jesus Christ, the fact that God has created the world, that the earth belongs to God and that we are called to be stewards who cultivate and protect it. Whereas many Christians remain silent, our times call for finding a renewed capacity to dialogue in order to be able to enter into conversation with other religions. Finding our specific language that enables us to relate faith to reason, science and theology, presents us with a huge challenge.

Witnessing in an individualistic and secularized society about my faith, my convictions and about what is sustaining me, remains vital. The Bible and other expressions of personal faith are convincing even today if we were only to learn from Luther’s powerful language. Luther knew how to articulate the biblical message for his time. This is a challenge every generation needs to rediscover. In his famous reflections, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

It is not for us to prophesy the day (though the day will come) when men [*sic*] will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed [...] It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming—as was Jesus’ language.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 105.

For me, the most beautiful language of faith is poetry. Poetic texts in the Bible, from Psalms to 1 Corinthians 13, have always touched people's hearts. In our times, when we often suffer from too many words, poetry can reach the heart and touch the soul. On our way to the Reformation jubilee, let us rediscover the Bible and recognize poetry as a language of faith.

## Prayer

Praying is at the “heart of Christian spirituality.” At the same time, it seems to be the easiest access to spirituality, for it does not require a lengthy introduction. Prayer works by itself, and we should not make it too complicated. In 1535, Luther wrote a brief treatise, “A Simple Way to Pray,” for his barber and friend and encouraged him simply to join in the Lord's Prayer. There is no need to make much fuss, because in prayer everything is included. Luther writes, “Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation. [...] What else is it but tempting God when your mouth babbles and the mind wanders to other thoughts”?<sup>4</sup>

Yes, praying is an exercise in concentration. It is helpful to have a certain place and time for prayer. There is common prayer during worship service as well as private prayer during the course of the day. Furthermore, prayer is an exercise to attain a certain spiritual routine in life. By prayer, our conversation with God can become a fixed point in our everyday lives, a part of our daily routine, when at home or on holiday, in times of crisis or exuberant happiness.

According to Luther, it is important that the “Amen” is pronounced powerfully so as to allay our doubts and to stand firmly with our faith. To me it is important that Luther never swept his doubts under the carpet. Nobody stands so firmly in their faith that they never waver. When we see or experience suffering, we might question if God really does exist, and if so, how can God allow this to happen? Has my prayer not been heard?

I am impressed by how our mothers' and fathers' experiences were included in their prayers. There is the story of pious Jews sitting in judgment over God. Given the awful condition of the world, they conclude that God no longer exists because there is too much injustice and suffering in the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, Foreword by Marjorie J. Thompson (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 30; 33.

After stating this, one of them said, “Now let us go and pray to God.” This story explains the tension between faith and doubt. We repeatedly have to confront questions such as, Was it really God who created the world? Was he actually raised from the dead? These doubts and questions can all be included in our conversations with God. The practice of prayer makes us believe in God’s existence.

Important to me is Luther’s emphasis on the fact that we never pray alone but together with people around the world. We are in an orbit of conversation with God, and God is present in every place on earth. As we intercede for one another around the globe, we are placed within a worldwide community. I know that in some parishes and monasteries of my own church, people regularly pray for me as their bishop. This touches me deeply. Knowing that someone is praying for you can offer comfort and distribute personal burdens on many shoulders. Praying for someone grants people courage in difficult times, because they are affirmed. People feel strengthened by intercession, as they become aware that they are not alone, not forgotten and that their suffering matters. We could say that prayer already has an effect through our appeal to God and through our solidarity with others.

Fulbert Steffensky writes,

God is the first one to pray since he utters the first word of desire. Who are we when we pray, what is our prayer? Prayer is not a means to gain something. Rather it is a surrendering of oneself to the mystery of life. In prayer, we are who we are supposed to be [...]. We recognize our own beauty and dignity in the eyes of God [...]. Prayer is supreme passivity, the abnegation of self-love and self-admiration.<sup>5</sup>

This is a decisive experience of a person in prayer. By letting go, I entrust myself to someone else. With this, praying becomes the practiced teaching of justification. I enter into a conversation with God, who is more than I understand, whose reign is higher, wider and deeper than I can imagine. This kenosis, this letting go, shapes a lifestyle. I feel released from the pressure that is on me. Some of the matters that are discussed with God lose their power, they no longer frighten us. Problems do not disappear through

<sup>5</sup> Fulbert Steffensky, “Die Schwachheit und die Kraft des Betens,” in Norbert Dennerlein and Udo Hahn (eds), *Das Beten. Herzstück der Spiritualität* (Hannover: Lutherisches Kirchenamt, 2005), pp. 12–13, at [www.velkd.de/downloads/Das\\_Beten.pdf](http://www.velkd.de/downloads/Das_Beten.pdf), author’s own translation.

prayer. The burdens in our hearts and the fears that harass and haunt us do not simply vanish, but become manageable through prayer.

Prayer effects change. In 1989, Germans experienced how prayers and candles overcame fear and marked the dawn of a peaceful revolution that overthrew a dictatorship. When anxious, threatened and endangered people no longer know where to turn, common prayer is an invitation to hope for change. Here I have in mind the peace prayers or the circles of silent prayer for the women who had been raped and violated in the former Yugoslavia. Or, 11 September 2001, when people in their deep uncertainty swarmed into the churches, lit candles and appreciated the words from centuries-old traditions.

In this way, private and common prayer, my prayer to God and my prayer together with others, are what mold the Reformation movement. Prayer will be central on the way to the Reformation jubilee as we rediscover our Lutheran spirituality.

## **Confession of faith**

When we think of the confession of faith, the Apostles' Creed is what springs to mind first. For nearly two thousand years, this Creed has been professed as the summary of our faith. Frequently I receive proposals about how to bring it up to date, for instance by changing the Virgin Mary to a young woman Maria, or changing the wording to "lead us through temptation" because God never leads us "into" temptation. Such changes are not always improvements, and I think that we can simply rely on the old words of our fathers and mothers in the faith, without examining every sentence as to how it relates to us today.

For Lutherans, the *Confessio Augustana* is among the authoritative confessional writings and has the power to provide us orientation for today.

Article VII reads,

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.

For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies,

instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere. As Paul says in Ephesians 4 [:4–5]: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”<sup>6</sup>

Until today, this remains an excellent description of the Lutheran understanding of ecumenism. The church is where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are celebrated. We are church. Others may have different definitions, but we do not need uniform ceremonies. Instead, we understand unity from the point of view of the gospel, in all cheerful plurality, which today is typically Protestant. This vision has been concretized in the 1973 Leuenberg Agreement of Protestants here in Europe. Therefore, it is my hope, also for the future, that in the wider ecumenical community, including with the Roman Catholic Church, a way will emerge toward an understanding of unity that is open to variety.

The confession of faith provides us orientation, even as we discern how to celebrate the Reformation jubilee. When I initially argued that we should discover the ecumenical Luther, I meant that we can discover the *Confessio Augustana* not as a means of limiting but rather of broadening our horizons. Lutheran freedom can be recognized in an understanding of ecumenism that has its foundation in Scripture and sacrament and declares all other issues secondary. Therefore, we can recognize others as churches and invite all baptized Christians to the Lord’s Table, even if they are members of other churches and denominations. This fundamental conviction drives our engagement in the ecumenical movement. There is only one church of Jesus Christ and that is hidden behind different ecclesiological structures. What is decisive is that Jesus Christ is proclaimed, *solus Christus*; that everything depends on God’s grace alone, *sola gratia*; that the faith is being passed on to others, *sola fide*. All other differences were invented by human beings. As we approach the Reformation jubilee, the confession of our faith can provide us decisive orientation, as it has done throughout the years.

## Concluding remarks

What does this mean for us as we prepare for the Reformation jubilee? Perhaps we should prepare fewer papers on reforms but ask ourselves,

<sup>6</sup> “The Augsburg Confession—German Text—Article VII: Concerning the Church,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 42.

Where and when do people long for the good news of the gospel? In what situations do they need to hear the affirmation of mercy? How do we witness to the gospel in a world where wars rage and injustice flourishes? How can we explain Lutheran responsibility for the world as a consequence to be drawn from our confession?

Let us be serene as we prepare for the jubilee. Concentration and planning are necessary, as are inner freedom, and the ability to entrust some things to God. Luther once said that the gospel can only be proclaimed with a sense of humor. As Werner Thiede from Regensburg recently wrote, "In Luther's humor we are not confronted with a world transcending, serene smile, but with laughter that occasionally came from a lust and spirit for fighting, as it was unavoidable in light of the confrontations during the Reformation."<sup>7</sup> This is not the sense of humor as we know it from TV talk shows, nor a raucous laughter, but rather a serenity of faith, which comes from deep inside. We believe in the Resurrected One, not in a dead man. Already Nietzsche said that if only Christians were to look a little more redeemed, they might perhaps come closer to the center. Thus, let us emanate some more from our certainty of justification, from our being redeemed, from God's mercy. I can only agree with Thiede, who concludes, "Christians are students of a faith which is founded on humor. They are allowed already here and now to exercise eschatological laughter [...]."<sup>8</sup>

If we talk seriously about theology in our churches let us not forget that it is not eternity we shape. We take responsibility in this world, we reflect the biblical message in our context, we practice spirituality in prayer and other dimensions, we confess and we plan, but we should not forget the eschatological future that is in God's hands alone.

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<sup>7</sup> Werner Thiede, "Luthers Humor," in *Nachrichten der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Bayern* (11/2008), pp. 321–7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



# The Hermeneutic of Resonance: Making Biblical Theology Relevant Today

Fidon R. Mwombeki

## **Introduction**

Some years ago, I attended a workshop in Austria whose aim was to prepare resource material for German-speaking Protestant congregations in Europe for use during the usually poorly attended “Bible Week.” On the first full day, a professor of Old Testament showed us with surgical precision the editorial inconsistencies in the book of Jeremiah. His “postmortem” left us with findings to be used as we wanted. After listening to him for hours, I decided to go out and take a walk.

Later, a German colleague approached me. “Sorry that you had to go out. I think all this was too new and difficult for you. You do not learn this in Africa, I guess,” he said. I responded that in fact I did have to learn all those things in Tanzania (von Rad, Bultmann, Dibelius, Käsemann, etc.), that my PhD in Scripture came from the USA and that several of my professors had been graduates of the renowned German theological faculties of Heidelberg and Tübingen.

I assured him that none of this was new to me, but that I had gone out because I thought that we were wasting too much time on what was irrelevant for our purpose here. We were to prepare study materials for the congregations, not to listen to endless, irrelevant theories nobody can prove.

I asked him what of that which he had heard that day was going to be included in the study material we were going to prepare. “That was only meant for us. We cannot include any of that in our materials for the congregations,” he answered and I said to myself, “Here we go again: biblical scholars wasting their time and money on interesting but irrelevant theoretical exercises.”

In his review of *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective*,<sup>1</sup> the Australian Fergus King<sup>2</sup> reveals what African and other non-Western scholars have to endure in seeking to make biblical interpretations relevant. After briefly mentioning the issues addressed by the authors, he concludes that “[t]his collection of essays provides an important apologetic for African biblical scholarship, and will appeal especially to those who are convinced of the importance of African biblical scholarship and its need to be taken seriously.”<sup>3</sup> The remainder of the review is devoted to dismissive criticism of the book. The review lacks substance and focuses instead on typographical errors and issues of grammar, claiming that these errors strengthen “the prejudices of those already disposed to look down their noses at African biblical scholarship.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite such dismissive attitudes, many Africans do not find the so-called “scientific” historical-critical approaches to the Bible to be honest, accurate, or even scientific. Many biblical scholars have adopted these approaches and teach them at their seminaries in the Southern hemisphere. Nonetheless, since they boast of being “academic,” they are presumably expected to distance themselves from the church.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1990s, the Northwestern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) launched an ambitious theological education by extension program (TEE) in its congregations. Many people were enthusiastic and joined the program after an introductory course. For the course on Old Testament theology, Leonidas Kalugila’s introduction to the theology of the Old Testament was used.<sup>6</sup> Within a matter of weeks, most participants withdrew from the course because of the book, which

<sup>1</sup> David Tuesday Adamo, *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Fergus King, *Mission Studies*, vol. 24 no. 2 (2007), pp. 353–4f.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>5</sup> Grant LeMarquand, “Siblings or Antagonists? The Ethos of Biblical Scholarship from North Atlantic and African Worlds,” in Adamo, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 62ff. LeMarquand sketches the development of critical biblical scholarship in the North Atlantic, especially represented by William Wrede, up until the time when assumptions underlying this approach were questioned. Critical scholarship distanced itself from ecclesiastical constraints, therefore having little to do with church life, i.e., sacraments, worship or prayer. Biblical interpretation was thought to be neutral, value-free. Biblical scholars were expected to be experts, telling others what texts meant when they were written, and others should then take the interpretation and use it however they wanted, including systematic theologians. The academic should only uncover the past and remain there. Therefore, for today’s life, the biblical scholar is irrelevant, especially if those who are expected to accept the “diagnosis” and use it, ignore it.

<sup>6</sup> Leonidas Kalugila, *Utangulizi wa Theologia ya Agano la Kale* (Dodoma: Central Tanganyika Press, 1991).

had been based on the “Scandinavian School” of the 1970s. People felt that the course lacked relevance and was in opposition to their belief in the Bible as the Word of God. The program was stopped.

Admittedly, critical approaches to biblical interpretation have probably served certain purposes in certain places in the West at certain times, but they are not static scientific principles that are globally applicable. Every generation must ask what the biblical message says to them as they struggle to hear it faithfully. In church contexts, “reading the Bible engages people in ongoing reflection about what it means for their lives.”<sup>7</sup> Christians in the West must determine whether their scholars’ critical assumptions and approaches have actually helped their church better to understand and use the Bible. This has probably worked in Western post-enlightenment society, since the “social, political, religious and cultural location of the scholar will inevitably have an impact on the shape of the scholarship produced.”<sup>8</sup> If the Western church regards these methods as the way in which the Bible will be more appreciated and read by Christians, then they should continue using them, but should not view them as being universally applicable.

Every people, nation and generation must continue to interpret the Bible in order for it to remain relevant. As LeMarquand states,

there is no universal hermeneutics which is ready-made and applicable to every country or situation in the world. Instead every hermeneutics is concretely rooted in and influenced by the specific context out of which it arises and for which it is devised. Every hermeneutics struggles to let the text and the Christian tradition be interpreted so that the Christian propaganda is not re-stated altogether in other lands, but is let to be interpreted with a deep awareness of the specific situation in which it operates.<sup>9</sup>

For Africans, states Ukachukwu Chris Manus, “the Bible may be ‘read’ as the ‘Word of God’ addressed to African peoples, who must personally receive its message and encounter it in their own idioms.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, he laments,

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Koester, *A Beginners Guide to Reading the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1991), p. 14; see also LeMarquand, op. cit. (note 5), p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> LeMarquand, op. cit. (note 5), p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Ukachukwu Chris Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

African theological discourse on issues such as eschatology, salvation and ecclesiology have tended to remain perpetually foreign, and neo-colonialist in thought, language and expression—and quite often, irrelevant to the contemporary African contexts [...]. Must we still keep on living in the European mind-set represented by people like Friedrich von Hegel who had stated “that Africans were incapable of self-perception and self-description and had to be ‘civilized’ by Europeans who had supposedly attained a ‘higher’ level of cultural consciousness [...]?”<sup>11</sup>

In Oduyoye’s words, African Christianity does not need “to justify itself before the courts of European and American judges.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, African biblical interpretation is not relevant simply because it is not Western. African interpretation can also be irrelevant if nobody today can understand what type of African it is addressed to. Perhaps it addresses the African who lives in the bush, is naked, illiterate and has never been exposed to the globalized world. This would therefore be just as irrelevant to a modern African whose world is that of the mobile phone, Coca Cola, Heineken, satellite TV, the World Cup, and all things “Made in China”—all of which make the African part of the global fabric.

## The position of the Bible in Africa

Why do people read the Bible? What is its purpose? More people in Africa own the Bible than any other book. It has been translated into more languages than any other book in the world,<sup>13</sup> including languages in which nothing besides the Bible has been published.

The Bible serves many different purposes.<sup>14</sup> According to Maluleke, the Bible is the

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., partly quoting Jesse Mugambi, “Missiological Research in the Context of Globalization,” in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, vol. 86, no. 4 (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Biblical Interpretation and the Social Location of the Interpreter,” in Fernando Segovia and May Ann Tolbert (eds), *Reading from this Place*, vol. 2, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> I was told in 2000 that the new translation of the Bible was the number one bestseller in Sweden and the reaction to the new German translation of the Bible, *Die Bibel in Gerechter Sprache* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), has been astounding!

<sup>14</sup> While translating the whole Bible into my own mother tongue, Ruhaya, there was a serious debate about what type of language should be used. Most committee members preferred the “original” Ruhaya, which unfortunately not many young people understand today. For the elderly, the Bible was supposed to be the

[m]ost accessible basic vernacular literature text, a storybook, a compilation of novels and short stories, a book of prose and poetry, a book of spiritual devotion (i.e., “Word of God”) as well as a “science” book that explains the origins of all creatures. In some parts of Africa, the dead are buried with the Bible on their chests, and the Bible is buried into concrete foundations on which new houses are to be built. In many African Independent Churches it is the physical contact between the sick and the Bible that is believed to hasten healing.<sup>15</sup>

In Africa, as in the West, there are different objectives for reading the Bible. As Craig Koester points out, “[t]he same book can be a source of inspiration and personal guidance (like in devout Bible studies), a source of truth and authority (like in taking oaths), a literary classic (used in literature classrooms), and more.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, “The Bible has been a source of spiritual strength, comfort, and guidance for countless people over the centuries. They have looked to it because of what it has to say about God, about human beings, and about our daily lives.”<sup>17</sup>

The Bible is often used as a religious symbol, or even a fetish. Many people believe it to symbolize divine authority, even divine presence and assurance of protection, as did the Ark of the Covenant in the wilderness. African Christians use it in place of other objects in specific rituals. There is rarely a Christian wedding where the couple does not receive a Bible, inscribed by the parents with some words about God’s protection. The Bible is seen as forming the foundation of the new family: it is to be read every day to empower and direct them in life. In Africa, most people who go to church carry their Bibles with them.<sup>18</sup> They like to follow the reading in church and read it during the sermon, or simply have it in their hands without reading it. In the African context, the Bible is very visible and obviously a symbol.

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custodian of the real Ruhaya, something I personally found misguided.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Gerald West, “The Bible in South African Black Theology: The Bible as *Bola* and Other Forms of African Biblical Interpretation,” in Adamo, op. cit. (note 1), p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Koester, op. cit. (note 7), p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> I have observed in Germany that in many churches, especially of the Reformed or United traditions, there is only one Bible, lying open on the table (altar) and never touched during the service. It is not uncommon that the preacher does not carry the Bible to the pulpit because the sermon is already prepared and some lectors even use their own computer printouts. The symbolism is not necessary and nobody carries the Bible to church. They are very good listeners.

The Bible is widely read, and there is a very high degree of Bible literacy among ordinary Christians in Africa. They read the Bible in times of sorrow and trouble for comfort; in times of hopelessness for encouragement; in times of struggles for inspiration and assurance. When somebody does something wrong, the community or the person themselves use the Bible as a source of admonition. African readings of the Bible “point to practical implications of the biblical text that North Atlantic scholars often bracket out.”<sup>19</sup>

Most of the time, the purpose of reading is not to gain rational knowledge. Complicated texts are read simply for their mysterious inexplicability, with which the reader interacts emotionally and spiritually. Religious language is supposed to be mysterious and difficult; it is the language of faith.

However, not everyone is satisfied with this experiential or mystical reading of the Bible; they also want to understand it. Here inquisitive readers encounter problems when they find the Bible to be inconsistent, illogical and therefore problematic. Those who are educated or opponents of Christianity are eager to point to contradictions in the Bible in order to prove that it is wrong. They want answers that cannot be provided easily.

## The hermeneutic of resonance

In order to make biblical scholarship relevant in our contexts, I argue for an hermeneutic of resonance. This hermeneutic “juxtaposes NT conceptions with key elements and key figures in African traditional religion.”<sup>20</sup> African Traditional Religion resonates especially with the Hebrew Bible, emphasizing the transcendent in all spheres of life, a preponderance of rites, rituals and traditions, as well as the centrality of group loyalty. Key concepts also include the role of ancestors, reality of spirits, the healers in community, priests and magicians, etc. In my PhD thesis I take this concept further<sup>21</sup> by broadening the scope of “resonance” beyond traditional religions. I identify four aspects of the hermeneutic of resonance.

<sup>19</sup> LeMarquand, op. cit. (note 5), p. 68. This is not limited to African readers only. There are many in the North Atlantic region who share this view.

<sup>20</sup> John Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, “Global Perspectives on New Testament Interpretations,” in Joel B. Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 339.

<sup>21</sup> Fidon R. Mwombeki, “Biblical Interpretation in a Current African Situation: The Case of Blood,” unpublished PhD dissertation, Luther Seminary, 1997.

***Textual–canonical resonance:*** The starting point of any hermeneutic is the biblical text itself. That means that people need to read the biblical text itself. This may sound obvious but, as is well known, theologians often read more books about the Bible than the Bible itself. The Bible is read as one book, a book of divine counsel. Here the insight from canonical criticism could be very helpful. While it may be important for those accustomed to literary critique to distinguish different sections of the Bible, many believers take the Bible as one book, from which no part can be separated or taken out. No individual book of the Bible is more important than the others. The search for different theologies of different books or authors in the Bible is quite strange in cultures where the question of who wrote which book is considered irrelevant. No matter who wrote the individual books, we have the Bible as one book and we should try as much as possible to read it as such. So the reading of the biblical text should be part of the whole canon.

For the ordinary reader, the division between Old and New Testament, as emphasized by theologians, is very strange. As already mentioned above, African Christians have a special affinity to the Old Testament since in cultural terms it resonates well with their own situation. Stories of land, water, tribal conflict, war, the presence and influence of the divine in ordinary lives, the value of elders, the reality of miracles as well as the powers of the world of spirits are vivid and resonate well. The miracles in the New Testament, the powers of Jesus, the questions of eschatology also resonate with African contexts—be it the sophisticated intellectual or the illiterate villager.

No theologian in the ELCT has commanded more authority in biblical interpretation than Christopher Mwakasege, a popular lay Lutheran preacher with an independent teaching ministry in Lutheran and other Protestant churches.<sup>22</sup> He demonstrates biblical literacy, relevance and simplicity and has an astounding knowledge of biblical texts and a sense for how different parts of the Bible can be brought together.

***Theological resonance:*** The question here is how much our biblical interpretation contributes to the church's theological discourse. The interpreter does not approach the Bible without certain preconceptions. If the interpreter is a believer, they are most likely to have absorbed a lot of theology already in childhood. Reading the Bible raises many questions related to what has

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<sup>22</sup> At [www.mwakasege.org](http://www.mwakasege.org), accessed October 2009.

already been internalized. The Confessions, for example, form a foundation for our basic assumptions even before we pick up the Bible to read it. I was amazed to discover that in Germany these theological foundations have remained at the core of centuries of denominational divisions.<sup>23</sup> Our interpretations obviously are not free from these convictions. As Lutherans we interpret the Bible from the perspective of our confessional convictions. We are sometimes tempted to put words into Luther's mouth, or to force him to address issues that would have never occurred to him (i.e., globalization, homosexuality, etc.). Any interpretation that does not resonate in some way with the theology of the believing community today is simply ignored.

One of the most fundamental theological convictions of believers, especially in Africa, is that the Bible is the Word of God: God speaks through it, and people want to hear what God is saying. Its divine inspiration is taken for granted. The Bible is considered an inexhaustible source of timely wisdom and guidance. The same passage or verse speaks differently every day depending on the occasion. Reading it simply as an historical literary text does not resonate with African Christians, for whom the Bible is active today.

"The classroom is a context" and, as Richard Nysse says, "If Christ is risen, then He's in the classroom. And so it's appropriate to ask, 'what has God done here in the last 50 minutes?'" Nysse wants his students to understand that the interpretation of Scripture is never a mere academic exercise. "Every time they pick up Scripture to work on interpretation, they are in the presence of the living God."<sup>24</sup>

***Ecclesial resonance:*** Relevant biblical scholarship must be "pro-ecclesia."<sup>25</sup> Many people, including non-Christians, read and interpret the Bible. In Africa and Asia, many Muslim clerics read the Bible extensively these days. Academics, politicians and business people read the Bible with different

<sup>23</sup> The debates, disagreements and open antagonism between people of the Lutheran, Reformed or United confession are simply unbelievable. There are still places where in the same city congregations of the same territorial church are identified as either Lutheran or Reformed, and in those congregations even the election of elders becomes very problematic. No one is willing to forgo that which they hold so central in their faith.

<sup>24</sup> At [www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac\\_profile.asp?contact\\_id=rnyss](http://www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac_profile.asp?contact_id=rnyss), accessed October 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph A. Burgess, "Lutheran Interpretation of Scripture," in Kenneth Hagen, *The Bible in the Churches: How Various Christians Interpret the Scriptures* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1994), p. 116. Burgess says that one of the five principles of Lutheran biblical interpretation is that "interpretation can only be done within the church." The other four are: the NT interprets the OT; the clearer interprets the unclear; Scripture interprets itself; and what necessitates Christ.

motives. Some want to prove Christianity wrong, others want to justify their political decisions and actions and there are those who want to prove their academic acumen. But the hermeneutics of the church's theologians must be in resonance with the believing community, i.e., with the aim of helping the church to grow and sustain itself, to improve its self-understanding and self-confidence, to illuminate its identity, etc. The moment a theologian interprets the Bible in a way that does not resonate with the church's self-understanding, the believing community dismisses the interpreter. Since the Bible is a book of faith and for faith, it is difficult to convince anyone if the interpretation does not address issues confronting the community of faith. An interpretation that does not promote the church's welfare breaks away from the church and is therefore self-defeating: if there is no church, then theologians are not needed. According to Arland Hultgren, the church's welfare is the paramount focus of biblical scholarship. He "considers himself first and foremost a pastor of the Lutheran church. This attitude shapes his work. 'I cannot be a scripture specialist without keeping the church, its needs and its ministry in view,' he says."<sup>26</sup> As Sarah Heinrichs, another New Testament scholar, points out, "At Luther, we focus on reading and interpreting the Bible for the sake of the mission of the Church."<sup>27</sup>

The moment that theologians do not keep the church's needs and ministry in mind, they are ignored and people rely instead on untrained readers of the Bible, who become their authority. The concerns of the church should form the basis of the interpretation, not the questions raised by those who intentionally stand outside or against the faith community.

**Sociocultural resonance:** Relevant biblical scholarship must resonate with the situation familiar to the reader. This, for example, is the foundation of Justin Ukpong's "Inculturation Hermeneutics."<sup>28</sup>

In February 2009, I watched a TV program aired by the evangelist *Mzee wa Upako* (master of anointment). The evangelist announced that "the Lord had put in his heart" the problem of "bad luck." In his recorded prayer service, he paraded in front of his audience a great number of people who had allegedly experienced miracles, including healing, job promotions, etc.

<sup>26</sup> At [www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac\\_profile.asp?contact\\_id=ahultgre](http://www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac_profile.asp?contact_id=ahultgre), accessed February 2009.

<sup>27</sup> At [www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac\\_profile.asp?contact\\_id=shenrich](http://www.luthersem.edu/faculty/fac_profile.asp?contact_id=shenrich), accessed February 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Justin Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995). For a brief synopsis, see LeMarquand, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 70–78.

When presenting the problem of bad luck, he expressed his deep concern regarding the many “demons” that enslave people. He tried to explain that many in the audience were experiencing hardships because of bad luck: their businesses are not profitable enough; they are poor even though they work hard; some are unable to conceive children; others have the “demons” of high-blood pressure and diabetes. He even knew the names of these “demons” that bring specific illnesses and bad luck and enter communities, sometimes even killing people.

At the time, there was a nationwide campaign against the killing of people with a certain skin disorder (albinism), whose body parts were said to be used in superstitious rites to bring “good luck” to those mining gold and tanzanite. I was dismayed to read about albino children being hacked to death in front of their mothers, schoolchildren being kidnapped and killed on the way to school, and old people strangled to death. Some were being left for dead, but survived to tell their agonizing stories of torture and having been left without feet or hands. This insanity was being carried out by educated people with mobile phones and BMWs in twenty-first-century Tanzania.

As I watched the thirty-minute program of this evangelist, who invited people with “bad luck” to come to his “prayer ministry,” it became clear to me that his message was resonating with what was going on in society. He had a theological explanation for what was happening and of which most people in the audience were afraid. Of course, I consider his theology absurd, exploitative, ridiculous and totally unacceptable. Indeed, many are disappointed because the promises that deny reality—such as the realities of HIV and AIDS—are not fulfilled. However, he manages to capture so many people because his message resonates with the fears and current realities in society. He takes peoples’ physical and spiritual concerns seriously. He talks about witchcraft as a reality and identifies with their fears. The problem with most mainline biblical scholars is that they do not address the issues of concern to people, but evade them because they do not fit into their “scientific” framework.

In 2008, in the Tanzanian parliament, someone reportedly sprayed something superstitious on some members’ seats and parliament had to be adjourned. We may be living in the twenty-first century, but many Tanzanians still believe in witchcraft and are superstitious. If biblical interpreters deny this reality, they will simply be ignored. After all, the Bible is full of such references. A biblical scholar, trained in the hermeneutics of suspicion, who comes to explain away the miracles in the Bible, would become a laugh-

ing stock. Time spent trying to explain who actually wrote the letter to Ephesians would be considered a waste of time, or nonsense. People want to know what God says in the face of their concrete situations.

I doubt that in the West it is so different. Questions such as where the dead are and whether or not they have any influence on our lives, are relevant and must be addressed. Why do people go to cemeteries on Sunday morning after or instead of worship service? I am more than ever convinced that the spiritual questions are abundant in the West as well, only that they are not being publicly addressed.

I wonder whether the nature of biblical elaborations in European churches have driven people away from church services. Indeed, the Bible is central in the churches there, and the sermon is at the core of everything. But why are people not interested in listening to these sermons? Has anyone checked whether the sermons resonate with the social, spiritual and cultural situations of listeners today? Is it because they do not have time? Why are people not interested in listening to long sermons, while they flock to much longer public lectures? Have sermons become too abstract and impersonal? I am still looking for the answers.

The Bible is a book of faith. It must be read from faith and for faith. For proper biblical interpretation, we need good biblical scholars. Nevertheless, biblical scholarship can be relevant only if it resonates with the text, with the Confessions, with the aspirations and identity of the church, as well as with the sociocultural situation of the readers. Otherwise, we are wasting our time and resources on an education that nobody in the believing community wants or needs.



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# Worship as the Heart of Theology: Luther's Intercultural Approach

Jens Wolff

Today, many academic disciplines are pursuing intercultural studies. A recent interdisciplinary publication on the subject situates Martin Luther “between cultures.”<sup>1</sup> Luther, as well as the Wittenberg Reformation with its institutional and international repercussions, became events of global significance. Today, some 140 member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (68 million Lutherans), spread over seventy-nine countries, understand themselves in continuity, or sometimes even discontinuity, with the Wittenberg Reformation. The ecclesiastical implications of Luther and his theology continue to have an impact throughout the world, also on other denominations.

Nonetheless, to a certain extent, the ubiquitous presence of Lutheran churches around the world today is still related to a minute theological detail at the very beginning: the new discovery of the Word of God. This Word was discovered anew by an unknown monk and young professor while interpreting the Bible together with a few students. These beginnings were not a significant moment in world history, as some Reformation scholarship in the historicist tradition of Leopold von Ranke would have us believe.<sup>2</sup> Such a static and nationalist perspective identifies the events of German history with global history, without taking into account that the discovery of the Word of God only later led to religious transformations of global significance. Rather than following a neo-historicist path and inventing the figure of an allegedly global Luther, contemporary Lutheran thinking should focus on the global Word of God, next to *theologia crucis*, one of its central theological assertions.<sup>3</sup> Rediscovering the Word of God was also

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Medick and Peer Schmidt (eds), *Luther zwischen den Kulturen. Zeitgenossenschaft—Weltwirkung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Carl Hinrichs, “Rankes Lutherfragment von 1817 und der Ursprung seiner universalhistorischen Anschauung,” in Richard Nürnberger (ed.), *Festschrift für Gerhard Ritter zu seinem 60. Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1950), pp. 299–321.

<sup>3</sup> Until today, there exists no intercultural concept which connects the passion of Christ with Christian and non-Christian culture. See Christoph Schwöbel, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus. Studien zu einer*

the discovery that it is realized in contingent ways. As Luther puts it, “The Word of God and mercy are like a travelling cloudburst which does not return to where it once was.”<sup>4</sup> This oral contingency is connected to God’s Word universally addressing not only Christians, but all of humankind in the global South or global North. This Word occurs in multifunctional and multicultural ways.<sup>5</sup> I am convinced that the adaptability of Lutheran theology and its translational and transformative character have facilitated the spreading of Lutheran congregations in various cultures in the global North or global South. Therefore, we must be wary of a Eurocentric perspective on Luther, which is still all too common among most European church historians.<sup>6</sup> There are good theological reasons for transforming the limited European perspective into a broader view of post-Lutheran history, and of the changes Lutheran theology of the Word has undergone in various regions of the world—like a travelling cloudburst which globally changes the earth.

### Luther’s experience of worship

Since I am a church historian with an interest in systematic theology, I will consider Luther’s concept of worship with reference to an historical text. Using an intercultural approach, I will analyze a 1526 text by Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Service.” Although not unknown, this text has not often been closely considered. Here, Luther deliberately emphasizes that God addresses everyone, Christians and non-Christians (*status ecclesiasticus*). He radically points out that an “order of service” is not necessary for those who already are Christians but for those who will become Christians or deeper Christians. A Christian does not need the

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*Theologie der Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003); Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1956). For an extensive analysis of passion, see Jens Wolff, *Metapher und Kreuz. Studien zu Luthers Christusbild* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005), pp. 590–3.

<sup>4</sup> *WA* 15; 32,7f. Here and in the following, author’s own translations of Luther.

<sup>5</sup> See “Cartigny Statement on Worship and Culture: Biblical and Historical Foundations,” in Anita S. Stauffer (ed.), *Worship and Culture in Dialogue*, LWF Studies (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1994), pp. 129–35; “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities,” in Anita S. Stauffer (ed.), *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, LWF Studies (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1996), pp. 23–28.

<sup>6</sup> Often “international” does not mean “intercultural” but “Eurocentric.” See Volker Leppin, “Die Wittenberger Reformation und der Prozess der Transformation kultureller zu institutionellen Polaritäten,” in *Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig—Philosophisch-historische Klasse* 140,4 (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 2008), pp. 26–45.

Word and the sacraments as a Christian but as a sinner. The aim is to address lay Christians and especially youth all over the world. It is all for the sake of the youth: reading, writing, singing, preaching, ringing all bells, whistling with all organs, etc.<sup>7</sup>

Here Luther focuses on two universal aspects of worship of intercultural significance: (1) language reaches Christians and non-Christians; and (2) music is immediately accessible to anyone. Through music, people can be called to God with or without words. In many cultures, the dynamic of Lutheran faith depends on these theological convictions, which put music and the Word of God at the center of the service for the sake of the common people and the youth. Both allow one to experience the presence of God.

### **Interculturality and freedom**

Luther closely connects his liturgical and homiletical suggestions with his earlier text, "The Freedom of a Christian, 1520." Using a new theological and rhetorical style, he begins with a request: "that you not make a law out of my order lest you ensnare somebody's conscience."<sup>8</sup> Every preacher or pastor should follow Christian freedom; the order of service is free. Concerning worship, Luther reduces his theological authority: he does not want to control, to master or to govern anybody with laws. At the same time, he emphasizes that most people use Christian liberty for their own advantage, not for improving the neighbor or glorifying God. Therefore, "The German Mass and Order of Service," develops a dialectical concept of freedom with two criteria: to be a servant of love and a servant of the neighbor. Worship should not lead to annoying the participants regarding some liturgical or homiletical practice. Worshipping is a religious as well as a social practice, and thus requires certain social, ethical and theological standards which facilitate the experience of God's presence. Luther comes to the radical conclusion that any external order of worship has nothing to do with the conscience of the believer before God. But it may be helpful to have a certain order for the participants in worship. Worship grounded in the freedom of a Christian, consists of a mixture of uniformity and diversity or particularity. Luther respects various orders of worship in different congregations, not requiring them to accept the particular order of the

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<sup>7</sup> *WA* 19:73, 14–25.

<sup>8</sup> *WA* 19:72, 18–20.

Wittenberg movement. Although he does not use the term “intercultural,” Luther apparently is capable of perceiving other cultures of worship and other cultural practices as well as viewing his own culture critically, making intercultural remarks. Germans, he writes, are “wild, raw and raging people who only change their manners in case of highest emergency.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Worship is multilingual**

In looking at worship from the perspective of different languages, Luther *avant la lettre* appears to use methodologies from comparative literature and hermeneutics. He differentiates between the Latin mass, which was common in the Middle Ages, worship in the vernacular and private services in Christian homes. His discussion focuses mainly on the Latin mass. Like Pope Benedict XVI, Luther does not favor abolishing Latin from the service. This is not for nostalgic reasons but for the sake of improving the education of the young. Deeply rooted in the humanist tradition, Luther regretted that at the time Greek and Hebrew were not as common as Latin and that these two languages do not offer as many chants and music as Latin.

This is a critical perception of his own humanist tradition and schooling. The priority of Latin within European universities had led to an almost homogeneous culture. Luther opposed a worldview centered on one language because this can lead to despising other languages.<sup>10</sup> Giving priority to Latin leads to an unhelpful uniformity. Luther’s creative idea is that on Sunday we should worship in four languages: German, Latin, Greek and Hebrew.<sup>11</sup> This multilingual proposal is educational and practical, as well as theological: “I want to educate young people who can be of use to Christ in foreign countries and talk to the people.”<sup>12</sup> Theological education should widen the intercultural horizon of future pastors, preachers and Christians. It is always a problem if communities are isolated because of their language. This also means a captivity of their faith. The limits of people’s language expose the limits of their world.

Theologically, the coming of the Holy Spirit did not wait until everyone in the early church had learned Hebrew, but the Holy Spirit gave a plural-

<sup>9</sup> *WA* 19:75, 18–20.

<sup>10</sup> *WA* 19:74, 10f.

<sup>11</sup> *WA* 19:74, 8f.

<sup>12</sup> *WA* 19: 74, 11–13.

ity of languages for preaching so that the apostles could preach wherever they were sent. Although Luther has often rightly been critiqued for his nationalistic views, his argument here is not ethnocentric but multilingual. As a theological humanist, he knew four languages and worked with them daily. And he believed that knowing several languages improves the communication of the Word of God. While the first half of the title "The German Mass and Order of Service" designates a relationship to a particular community with its vernacular, the German title indicates that the "Order of Service" does not specify a certain community or language.

### **Places of worship and God's Children**

"The German Mass and Order of Service" offers a detailed plan for the liturgy, not only for Sunday worship but also for other times and other places, such as gathering in homes to pray, read and even celebrate the sacraments. Faith is not only publicly practiced in the Sunday service. At a first glance, Luther's suggestions here are very cautious: nobody can command the people to gather in their houses for worship. If there were more people who wanted to be serious Christians it would be easy to make an order for private gatherings. Since, at present, there is a lack of such people, it is not necessary to establish an order.

Luther stressed the close connection between public services and private houses and suggested that the catechism is what joins the public and private spheres. The church, like the home, is a place of learning. Years before the catechism was published, Luther was already developing the idea of an elementary teaching in the church and in the home, which would include the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer.

God's children should understand and learn the gospel "by heart." Memorization, common in Latin elementary schooling, is the best way of internalizing the gospel. There are too many things written in books but not in the heart. The biblical message only consists of two elements or "sacks": faith and love.<sup>13</sup> The sack of faith has two little bags: one into which we put our conviction that we are sinners, and the second into which we put our conviction that we are redeemed through Jesus Christ. The sack of love also has two little bags: one where we place our being servant to our neighbors and the other where we put our suffering and experiencing

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<sup>13</sup> There is an analogy to the ending of "The Freedom of a Christian, 1520."

evil.<sup>14</sup> Luther admonishes that nobody should despise this game for little children. We too should become like children. When Christ wanted to elevate human beings, he had to become a human being himself. The idea of condescendence is fundamental for this concept of child theology.

### **Children at the heart of a theology of worship**

Understanding worship as the heart of theology is not limited to Sunday. This experience is a daily event. According to this understanding and experiencing of worship, theology starts with the weakest, with children. Learning, experiencing and living one's faith begins as a child. This is when basic confidence (*Urvertrauen*) develops against the forces of fear and evil. Childhood functions as a rhetorical and, at the same time, realistic model of being close to God at a time of life when there are none of the intellectual or cognitive barriers that prevent grown-ups from believing. This is an exciting insight into the character of faith as it is already developed in the Old Testament. Apart from a few theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Marcia Bunge,<sup>15</sup> this central element of Lutheran theology has been neglected by systematic theology. By understanding and experiencing oneself as God's child in daily life and on Sundays, adults learn together with children in a learning community.

The high value placed on memorization helps the children of God to believe in and know the gospel "by heart." This idiom perfectly expresses the affective relation of believers with the gospel. In its affective and emotional dimension, the heart of the believer clings to the Word of God, also communicated through baptism, the Lord's Supper and music. Those are centers of worship.

### **Learning a new language for the intercultural gospel**

Becoming a Christian is like learning a new language. The believer must practice this daily. Therefore, it is important not to limit worshipping God to the Sunday liturgy. Our whole life shall be a service. Therefore, Luther

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<sup>14</sup> *WA* 19:77, 15–22.

<sup>15</sup> See Marcia Bunge (ed.), *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

not only offers detailed plans for Sunday liturgy, but also has distinct suggestions for how a Christian should spend the rest of the week. On Monday and Tuesday, the focus is on the catechism; on Wednesday, a chapter from Matthew's Gospel; on Thursday and Friday, the Pastoral Epistles; and on Saturday, the Gospel of John.

The Sunday service is a particularly intercultural event. Luther encourages Christians to experience this with open ears and hearts. Its various components stem from different cultures: the Kyrie Eleison from Greek culture, Halleluiah is a revitalization of the Hebrew, etc. The Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah, had already preached the universal meaning of the Word of God.

The gospel itself has intercultural and truly global meaning. Not only the communication of the gospel itself but in the sacraments and throughout the Bible, there are many intercultural traditions, practices and encounters—also between religions and worldviews. Luther's dealing with these traditions can be called "intercultural," since he not only lived and worked between different languages and religious cultures, but was inspired by them when working on his theology. Although, for most of his life, he stayed in a small city in Germany, his Wittenberg sojourn can be characterized as at least a bilingual situation (German and Latin)—in addition to the biblical worlds of the Greek and Hebrew cultures.

Living and speaking in a bilingual and "multicentric" situation meant that Luther was not simply "ethnocentric." He was in the sense that his mother tongue would make it possible for his own people to understand and experience the law and gospel in different situations. But this was directed toward the good of the people, rather than to colonize them through an homogeneous language. The variety of languages Luther was able to use had theological significance. Already in one language (German) Luther frequently appreciated the voice of the other: the sinner's voice as both the other's voice and one's own voice for communicating the Word of God and communicating with one another. This theological concept carries a strong sense of alterity, reflecting both the interruption and disruption of communication.<sup>16</sup> The rhetorical and theological appreciation of the voice of the other within the theological concept of worship and justification were factors that enabled the Reformation movement to spread widely. These basic elements of Luther's experience of worship should not be overlooked

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<sup>16</sup> For alterity, see Emmanuel Lévinas, "Das Andere bei Proust," in Felix Philipp Ingold (ed.), *Eigennamen: Meditationen über Sprache und Literatur. Edition Akzente* (München/Wien: Hanser, 1988), pp. 93–100.

today, especially in the face of numerous fundamentalist movements, many of which are inspired by Christianity.

Since the times of the prophet Ezekiel (see Ezek 18:23), the Word of God has been a truly global and intercultural event that crosses and breaks down borders that still divide not only Christianity but also the world—in religious, economic, anthropological and social terms. The Word of God as law and gospel has a worldwide dynamic quality. The world and creation need the blessing and the promise of this Word. The Aaronic blessing is a convincing example of interculturality: translated from Hebrew into other languages it transports the original sense of the Hebrew into the new language: “The Lord’s face shine upon you, and be gracious to you!” The shining of the Lord’s face is a Hebrew expression put into a new vernacular. Using the vernacular, we have to learn a new meaning in our mother tongue which stems from the Hebrew. In sum: the Word of God itself has transcultural meaning; it is always able to cross borders and languages.

# Confessions, Ecumenism, Ethnicity: A Lutheran Charism

Dirk G. Lange

## **Context of the question**

Despite the often universalizing tendency of the churches in North America or their authoritative way of proposing their forms and questions (both ritual and theological) to the global church, a considerable degree of myopia has reigned within their own borders. Speaking from within the context of North American Lutheranism, ethnic loyalties and ethnically embodied confession curiously and surprisingly still rule both hearts and minds. Lutheranism on the East Coast of the USA, with its multiple points of origin in both German pietism and German orthodoxy, is noticeably different from mid-western Lutheranism, with its far-reaching and deep roots spreading from Swedish orthodoxy to Norwegian pietism (and everything in between).

These sundry ethnic origins of Lutheranism in North America, no matter how diluted today (very few people, for example, speak the “mother tongue” let alone worship in it), still maintain considerable spiritual and theological control, sometimes conscious but mostly unconscious, over both worship and theology in parishes, at the seminaries and in church-wide discussions. Though there is an interest in the “global church” and things global (for example, “global music”), our own deeply ethnic expressions of worship and theology remain unnoticed. It is from the midst of these often unnamed ethnic tensions and expressions that I write the following reflection on worship as it is presented in the Lutheran Confessions.

Surprisingly contextual in its origins, the Lutheran Confessions propose an agenda for worship that is ecumenical and, I want to argue, charismatic. The specificity of the Reformers’ Confession in the city of Augsburg almost 500 years ago, transgresses many boundaries that were subsequently placed particularly on worship and ritual interpretation. In order to highlight the way in which boundaries are broken within the text of the Confessions themselves, I turn to trauma theory. This turn also places this study squarely in a North American context with its deep interest in understanding the

movement of the human psyche and the relation of the human person to history. Trauma theory, however, will allow me to point to the particular provisional characteristic of worship that lies behind the vocabulary of the Lutheran Confessions and that allows the specificity and contextual nature of what the Confessions propose to engender a dynamism of the Holy Spirit.

### Trauma theory and the Lutheran Confessions

According to trauma theory, the “thing” that is unceasingly repeated—the traumatic event—is not the event itself but that which made the event traumatic in the first place. What is repeated is the fact that the traumatic event was not known or not fully experienced in its happening. The traumatic event is experienced as a shock of survival—why did I survive? Or, as Cathy Caruth states, it is an awakening one moment too late. “Trauma [...] does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned.”<sup>1</sup>

The event that I name as traumatic is the Christ event.<sup>2</sup> If a traumatic event is one that we cannot fully grasp, an event that is only “registered” as a force of experience, a force that continually returns, how then is the Christ event a traumatic event? How is this traumatic event remembered, repeated and ritualized? A reading of the Christ event through the lens of trauma theory suggests that the repetition or ritualization is not a remembering at a facile level. Remembering is not simply physically or conceptually representing a past event. It is not a “recalling to mind” because the event itself is inaccessible to the mind. Rather, the Christ event returns as a force that continually disrupts our usual forms of remembering and ritualizing. When Martin Luther asks the question, How do we remember this event? he is pushed to find a language for this force of a return which he finds specifically in the eucharistic liturgy.<sup>3</sup>

In worship and particularly in the sacraments, the force of a return—that which cannot be captured, known, represented, memorialized by ritual—is not some abstract notion of grace or forgiveness of sins or other theological construct, but is the irruption of the Holy Spirit as “other,” as body, as that

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Dirk G. Lange, *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, see chapter 5.

which resists all human attempts at control, manipulation and mastery. Worship, and particularly the eucharistic celebration, confronts us with a failure of meaning—with the failure of the individual self to define meaning. The Word, in worship, through the sacrament, reveals to us the depth of our need. At the heart of worship is this action of the Holy Spirit: a body continually returns, the body of Christ, the body of our suffering neighbor.

## Devotion

Recognizing that all worship is, in a sense, “failed” worship, frees the participants to “hear” the Holy Spirit, to encounter the Holy Spirit who comes as it wills. This freedom does not mean that practices of worship are unimportant. There are worship practices that communicate an unhelpful “works righteousness” theology (for example, forms of confession and forgiveness that emphasize the contrition of the believer as condition for rather than result of God’s grace). The recognized “failure” of worship frees the participant from the obligation of worship as a “work.”

This is one of the most surprising legacies of the Augsburg Confession and one which, in the parish and in ecumenical relations, is difficult to embody. Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti has highlighted this difficulty. She writes:

Parish council members feel the high responsibility of offering the right kind of worship to their congregation. If they did not achieve this the loss of church members could be the consequence. Here the right liturgy, serving people’s tastes as well as possible, becomes the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. The right action on behalf of the parish worship will save the church [...] or further her decline.<sup>4</sup>

Many are the reasons for being concerned about “right” liturgy, though none of them, as Haspelmath-Finatti points out, have much to do with justification by faith alone.

Yet, freed from the obligation to find a perfect form of memorial or remembrance for the Christ event, and freed from the temptation to immortalize a particular ethnic or cultural representation of worship, the “ceremonies and rites” (of liturgy) can be that place where the Holy

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti, “Theologia Prima—Liturgical Theology as an Ecumenical Challenge to Lutheran Worship Practice.” Unpublished paper presented at Augsburg, p. 1.

Spirit continually returns or irrupts to reveal both human need (terrified or troubled conscience) and comfort. Article XXI of the Augsburg Confession, “Concerning the Mass,” begins with a short but succinct statement: “Our people have been unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. But it is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents.”<sup>5</sup> The statement that the parishes/communities of the Reformation celebrate liturgy “with greater devotion and earnestness” opens up for us today the possibility of discussing worship, not from the perspective of specific, well-controlled or maintained rituals, but from the perspective of the work of the Holy Spirit within different worshipping traditions and ethnicities.

How are we to understand “great devotion and earnestness”?<sup>6</sup> Is devotion not an expression of human piety? Does it not depend on human investment, human reverence, human seriousness, human prayerfulness and human discipline in accomplishing its task of sanctification? Do we not risk turning “devotion” into acts “that justify”?<sup>7</sup> Obviously, this cannot be the case for the Reformers.

Devotion or piety, viewed from the angle of the “old person,” is only emotional investment in a particular form as if that form were itself salvific. Emotional investment, without guidance or instruction, remains in its own arena. It simply uses forms to reassure the self and reproduce the desired effect, the desired emotional outcome. Such “devotion” can be the perpetuation of a particular cultural or ethnic insight as if the original intent behind the reforming insight—the original response to a particular gospel crisis—demanded being encapsulated for eternity. The mere repetition of a form out of a desire “to be faithful” to a particular reforming insight ends up being nothing else than wishful thinking or nostalgia. This desire “to be faithful” to a particular form of worship (i.e., that practiced by our ancestors in the faith or practiced by the community that brought us to faith) leads only to stagnation not to devotion.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “The Augsburg Confession—German Text—Article XXIV: Concerning the Mass,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> In the German *grosserer Andacht und Ernst*, and in the Latin text, stated slightly differently, *summa reverentia celebrator*.

<sup>7</sup> “Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVII: Monastic Vows,” in Kolb and Wengert, op. cit. (note 5), p. 281.

<sup>8</sup> In many conversations during the LWF global consultation on “Theology in the Life of the Church,” I was struck by the questions of my sisters and brothers from the global South. These questions had to deal with “permission.” Is it permissible in worship to [...] dance, clap hands, use a local symbol, etc.?

Isn't this normalization of a particular ethnic embodiment (i.e., German pietism or Norwegian free church) as if it were universally applicable, the object of the Reformers' critique of *ex opere operato*? By the mere performance of the rite or ceremony, it was argued, people receive its benefit. By the mere repetition of a form of worship, the desired "effect" is achieved, whether emotional or intellectual satisfaction. An original, Spirit-filled insight, a pneumatic moment, is captured, controlled, "put in a box," fossilized. Form, in this scenario, whether ethnic or other, trumps gospel.

Devotion as a human activity, as emotion, is turned in on itself. Unfortunately, it is with this understanding of devotion that much of Christianity has been "exported." How then are we to understand "devotion" (*Andacht*, *Ernst*, *reverentia*) in Article XXIV? The vast majority of references to "devotion" (or *Andacht*) in the Confessions are precisely references to failed human works. What is different in this article? If devotion is not a human activity or self-nurtured piety, what is it?

In the preface to the Large Catechism, Luther himself defines devotion as the work of the Holy Spirit. Admonishing pastors, Luther writes that they can never study the Catechism enough—it is a lifelong activity. In that study, in "such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion, so that it tastes better and better and is digested [...]."<sup>9</sup> Light and devotion are bestowed; they are a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is through the practice of reading, conversation and meditation, through immersion into the Word, that the Holy Spirit accomplishes its work of driving the devil, the world, the flesh and all evil thoughts away and conforming the believer ever more fully into Jesus Christ.

In Article XXIV, the mass itself is a practice through which the Holy Spirit does its work. But now the mass is celebrated, not as rote ritualization, *ex opere operato*, but rather as something that the Holy Spirit is working on in the community of believers. To use the language of trauma theory, something "returns" in worship that disrupts subject and context, revealing human need and human inability. Devotion, as the work of the Holy Spirit, is the revelation of human need. Devotion, as work of the Holy Spirit, is the

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These questions arose because of the way in which a particular European model of worship was imposed as normative. And yet, today, in Europe and North America, we have come to realize the ritual poverty and narrowness of these forms of worship. Renewal is continually required and hopefully occurring.

<sup>9</sup> "The Large [German] Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther. Martin Luther's Preface," in Kolb and Wengert, op. cit. (note 5), p. 381.

revelation that we, as human beings, can do nothing. We are brought to a place of utter nakedness where faith alone is given.

This is the place where we are marked by the cross. As Martha Ellen Stortz has observed in her article on the marks of the church, the marks (or stigmata) “belong to the whole church, to all believers. Christians live as ‘marked’ women and men. Luther shared that late medieval longing to be marked with Christ’s suffering. He simply extends the stigmata to all Christians.”<sup>10</sup> We are marked by Christ’s suffering. They become our own as we listen and commit ourselves to the suffering in the world. The cross, as mark, however is not our possession. Rather, we are possessed by it. “Yet, the holiness of ‘the Christian holy people’ is not something they achieve; their holiness resides in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

Melanchthon underlines this charismatic activity in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, even though the Spirit is not specifically named. “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies.”<sup>12</sup> Worship will be about learning Scripture but this learning is not an end in itself. The learning is catechesis; it is an admonishment “by the Word.” The Word, through the ceremonies and rites, impacts the participants, disrupting their piety, disrupting their invented self, disrupting their imagined devotion, revealing human need, so that they come to or experience (*concupiant*—take in, absorb) “faith and fear.” This experience of faith and fear of God then leads (finally) to prayer. Through worship, we are becoming Christians.<sup>13</sup> Prayer itself is now conceived, in Pauline fashion, not as our work but as the work of the Holy Spirit within us (Rom 8).

The ceremonies and rites that constitute worship are continually “reformed,” so that they draw the people into an experience of the Word (through participation and instruction),<sup>14</sup> so that they speak the Word, so that the Word admonishes through them, so that “we do not ‘do’ Christian

<sup>10</sup> Martha Ellen Stortz, “Marked by the Body of Christ: A Lutheran Approach to Practices,” in this publication, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> “Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV: The Mass,” in Kolb and Wengert, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 258.

<sup>13</sup> “But such orders [of worship] are needed for those who are not yet Christians so that they may make Christians out of us.” Martin Luther, “Preface to the German Mass and Order of Service, 1526,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> This point about “instruction” is important but cannot be developed in the current form of this paper.

rite. We receive it. We can witness God's work upon us."<sup>15</sup> The "devotion" of the Augsburg Confession is not a superior or supreme human piety, but a "being marked" by the cross, by the sufferings of Christ.

## **Authenticity**

Lurking behind the question about devotion is a question about authenticity. Part of the argument in Article XXIV concerns the valuation of worship in the churches already subscribing to reform (Latin text) or among our people (German text). What is authentic worship? This question certainly does not come as a surprise. It sounds very familiar!

In Article XXIV, the Augsburg Confession approaches the question of authenticity through the lens of devotion. Though initially that would seem to be a rather subjective manner in which to consider authenticity, I have shown how devotion is, for the Reformers, not a human work but the impact or irruption of the Holy Spirit, revealing human need and comforting the terrified conscience. The Augsburg Confession pushes worshippers (and those who study and write about worship) away from a modernist, totalizing understanding of the "authentic." In the Augsburg Confession, authentic worship is not defined as faithfulness to a model, to a particular ethnic embodiment of worship, as if there were an ideal form of (Lutheran) worship. Authentic worship is related to the quality and purpose of devotion.

In the particular case of the Confessions, the ceremonies and rites of the Roman Mass had remained basically unchanged. Melancthon goes to some length to point this out and underline it in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession.<sup>16</sup> The argument for authenticity, however, is not found in this simple maintenance of a form or model or tradition. Authenticity is found in the way in which the form is put to use and how the Word is experienced.

The tone of the word "authentic" shifts from its usual alignment in contemporary speech with "right" or "correct" or even "only" way. That which is "authentic" is now much less tangible and therefore also much less controllable. Authenticity is not established by imitating a preestablished model. Authenticity, to use the language of trauma theory, is the force of an impact, the force of something that returns and that cannot be captured or

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<sup>15</sup> Haspelmath-Finatti, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Kolb and Wengert, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 258.

controlled. Authenticity is the work of the Holy Spirit, disrupting models rather than blindly imitating them.

The consequences of this understanding of authenticity can be stated very simply: one particular (ethnic, for example) ritual embodiment of faith can never impose itself as the only true way for worshipping God. The truth of any particular embodiment is, as always with the work of the Holy Spirit, a provisional embodiment. This is what renders it dynamic, even “authentic.”

The initial suggestion of Article XXIV is radical. Authentic worship has nothing to do with “form” but with devotion. Authenticity is not about the imitation but about the work of the Holy Spirit, about the irruption of the Spirit at a particular time and place. The challenge presented to worship by this reformulation of “authentic” is the arduous task of continually adapting form so that the Holy Spirit can always do its work. It is the challenge of remaining within the “provisional” of the Spirit rather than in the “firmly established” of human tradition.

## **Confessions and charism**

Submitting to the trauma of the Christ event, worship embodies that force that can never be purely and definitively repeated. Ceremonies and rites are handed down from generation to generation, from tradition to tradition, but require that continual work of pastoral discernment so that they allow the Spirit to irrupt in every context, in every heart, leading to faith and fear and finally to prayer.

The particular charism of worship, as understood in the Lutheran Confessions, is precisely that authenticity is not found in any one particular form or manifestation but in the failure of all forms. Every culture is then challenged to translate that which is un-translatable. Every culture, every ethnicity is challenged to remember and repeat that which defies repetition—the Christ event. The mark of authenticity is not found in any one particular representation, but in that continual disruption of all our forms, all our styles, all our traditions by the Holy Spirit, who comes to us as the other, as a body.

This by no means implies an elimination of forms or ceremonies and rites. The confessions continually insist that they “keep” the mass; they keep the form but with greater devotion. We can now understand “devotion” not as our work or “right” attitude but as a sort of disposition that allows the

Holy Spirit to do its work. We can now understand “form” as practice that continually critiques itself, that continually directs us to another.

The assembly of believers is instructed in the form and invited into participation. But again, this instruction and invitation are not by compulsion, as if we had the perfect ceremony to which all must adhere, as if it were a law that must be fulfilled. The form—the ceremonies and rites—do not “represent” the Christ event. Worship is always a failed enactment of that event but, in its own failure, it translates that event so that believers come to recognize their need, their hunger, their poverty. In this sense, “charismatic” worship publicly proclaims God’s goodness, resists cultural models of making meaning and is able to name human need.

When during a plenary session at Augsburg, I asked Gary Simpson, “Isn’t worship the primary place of public theology, of ‘God’s publicity’?,” he responded affirmatively by referring to the role of intercessory prayer in worship.

Worship is the church’s first, primordial public (and thereby primordial for public church and public theology). When, during the intercessions we name people by name who among other things are unemployed and underemployed, who suffer from addictions, depression or other mental illnesses, then we will know that in our public communion as church we are resisting and overcoming the temptations to accommodate to our captivity to economic class etiquette.

When worship is this recognition and naming of human need, when worship is resistance to cultural norms (even religious norms), when worship is public theology, that place where the Holy Spirit arouses “faith and fear,” then the people will come “without our law,”<sup>17</sup> they will be “drawn to Communion and the Mass,”<sup>18</sup> they will be drawn to the sacrament as “real fellowship.”<sup>19</sup> They will be drawn to the sacrament that is now not a bridge between the secular and the sacred, not a “peephole” into God’s reality, not an escape into some heavenly height or the perfect repetition of some ethnically defined order of service, but an encounter of God’s grace through and in our need and the world’s need. In that encounter, life, community, worship and finally human need are reoriented. Practices become transformative and prayer becomes possible.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” in Kolb and Wengert, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 350.

<sup>18</sup> Kolb and Wengert, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods, 1519,” in Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 50–51.

## Postscript

Though ecumenism is in the title of this article, it has not been thoroughly developed. I have focused primarily on the charismatic characteristic of Lutheran worship and its subsequent ethnically specific embodiment as assumed/described in the Lutheran Confessions. But I hesitate to remove “ecumenism” from the title because its reference here points to the paradoxical nature of worship that is both a local and an ecumenical reality. Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti makes an ecumenical proposal about worship that I find particularly intriguing.

In my experience ecumenical worship is a good place to find the dynamics of *theologia prima*. In ecumenical contexts no single church can determine an entire service. Here we have to let others “do.” We can receive what is the wealth of a different tradition. [...] We can receive the Word of our God out of other hands.<sup>20</sup>

Haspelmath-Finatti does not propose a set pattern but suggests that the very practice of ecumenical worship “trains us” for continually receiving God’s gift. The practice of gathering together is in itself a crucial piece in nurturing a broader vision. Ecumenical worship rather than being a burden that we must carry once or twice a year (during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, for example) becomes a place where we encounter God and the gift of grace through our neighbor. Here, the Holy Spirit is at work again, continually breaking our self-imposed boundaries leading us into ever-deeper devotion.

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<sup>20</sup> Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti, op. cit. (note 4), p. 2.

# Marked by the Body of Christ: A Lutheran Approach to Practices

Martha Ellen Stortz

## A postmodern context for “spiritual, but not religious”

A woman came up to me after a lecture. “I’m not at all religious,” she said, “but I am a very spiritual person.” No longer a member of a congregation, she had assembled a mix of practices from a variety of traditions, which she did on a daily basis: journaling, Za-zen meditation, centering prayer, yoga and various self-help techniques. I asked her why she had left the congregation of her childhood and she replied, “It wasn’t doing anything for me anymore.” She considered herself a “recovering Lutheran.”

“Spiritual, but not religious”: this woman is not an isolated example. In the USA, the phenomenon fascinates scholars and worries church leaders. In his book, *After Heaven*, the sociologist of religion, Robert Wuthnow, chronicles the shifts in popular spirituality over the last five decades in the USA. He sees a movement from spiritualities focused on “roots,” deeply traditioned, place based and congregationally centered, to spiritualities with “wings,” his term for the more fluid, eclectic, “seeker-style” spiritualities, which reigned between the 1960s and 1980s, to a present fascination with practices and embodied spiritual disciplines that have both “roots and wings.”<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Fuller argues that the “spiritual, but not religious” phenomenon has a long history in the USA, calling on several centuries of religious experimentation and spiritual alchemy.<sup>2</sup> Is this the “religionless Christianity” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of from his prison cell?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Fuller sees Unitarianism, Transcendentalism and various utopian movements as forerunners of this postmodern turn to the “synagogues of Barnes & Noble.”

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge, transl. by Reginald Fuller, Frank Clark et al. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976). “If we don’t want to do all that,

Bonhoeffer's question haunts me—and makes me more sympathetic to the desire for an embodied spirituality. In this article, I suggest that the postmodern phenomenon in the USA may have some interesting similarities and differences to sixteenth-century Germany, as Luther reframed late medieval spirituality to create an embodied spirituality that was not dependent on pope, place, or institution, but centered on embodied, communal practices. Those practices define, identify and locate the church in the world: they tell Christians “what, where and who” the church is in the world. Just as Christ's crucified body was marked by his passion, so Christians live as “marked” women and men through these embodied practices. As I explore Luther's unique contribution against the backdrop of my own context, I hope the collision of worlds creates a new angle of vision on Lutheran spirituality.

### **Another context for “spiritual, but not religious”: Luther and late medieval spirituality**

Generalizing somewhat, it can be said that medieval spirituality devoted itself to Christ's humanity. Yet, there were significant shifts in popular spirituality during those centuries. In religious iconography, images of an infant Jesus nursing at his mother's breast gradually gave way to images of a crucified Jesus, bloodied and hanging from a cross.<sup>4</sup> Medieval historian and Bonaventure scholar, Ewert Cousins, comments on the transition, “As the Middle Ages progressed, the passion of Christ permeated more deeply the religious psyche of Western Christendom. In the lives of the saints there were many accounts of the intensity of this devotion, even of a morbid

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if our final judgment must be that the western form of Christianity, too, was only a preliminary stage to a complete absence of religion, what kind of situation emerges for us, for the church? How can Christ become the Lord of the religionless as well? Are there religionless Christians? If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is a religionless Christianity? [...] How do we speak of God—without religion, i.e., without the temporally conditions presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on? How do we speak (or perhaps we cannot now even 'speak' as we used to) in a 'secular' way about 'God'? In what way are we 'religionless-secular' Christians, in what way are we the ec-clesia, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world? In that case Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world. But what does that mean? What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation?,” pp. 280–1.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret R. Miles comments on this shift in her evocative book, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). See her article, “God's Love, Mother's Milk: An Image of Salvation,” in *The Christian Century Magazine* (January 29, 2008), at [www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=4272](http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=4272), accessed August 2009.

fascination with pain and humiliation.”<sup>5</sup> He points to a single icon that captures this cult of suffering: the stigmatization of Francis of Assisi.

In September 1224, Francis took several companions on a retreat atop the isolated Mount La Verna in Tuscany. One night on or near the feast of Corpus Christi, when he was lost in deep prayer, Francis experienced a vision of the crucified Christ borne by a six-winged seraph. Meditating on this vision, Francis understood that he would imitate Christ in his passion. Though he had long hoped that martyrdom would be the vehicle of this transformation, Francis instead experienced fire in his soul and wounds on his body, one on his side, one on each hand and foot. The marks came to be called the stigmata, recalling the apostle Paul’s words to the community at Galatia: “I carry the marks [stigmata] of Jesus branded on my body” (Gal 6:17). Initially, Francis tried to hide the wounds, but friends found them when he later fell sick. Giving in to their questions, he related the story of his seraphic vision. Francis tried to keep the wounds covered; yet, by the time of his death in 1226, more than fifty brothers, Clare and a number of lay followers had seen them.

The story of Francis receiving the stigmata captured the imagination of medieval Christians. Giotto di Bondone (c. 1267–1337) painted it for cathedrals in Florence, Pisa and Assisi (the Upper Church). The Flemish painter, Jan Van Eyck (1395–1441), moved the entire scene to a northern European landscape. Indeed, if you believe Van Eyck’s backgrounds, the crucifixion happened in rural Belgium. Mystical theologian and general of the Franciscan order, Bonaventure (1217–1274), spiritualized the vision in his classic treatise, “The Mind’s Road to God” (*Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*), moving the stigmata from the body into the mind. Catherine of Sienna (1347–1380) and Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510) both received the stigmata; and in her spiritual classic, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich (1343–1416) prayed to receive “three wounds” from Christ:

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<sup>5</sup> Ewert Cousins, “The Humanity and the Passion of Christ,” in Jill Raitt (ed.), *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 387. Cousins finds this a difficult phenomenon at best: “From a psychological point of view, this late medieval devotion for the passion of Christ is one of the most problematic phenomena in the history of Christian spirituality. It is also problematic from a doctrinal and spiritual point of view. For attraction to the suffering and death of Christ became so intense in some cases that Christians lost sight of the other aspects of the Christian mysteries and of their organic interrelatedness. Emphasis on the passion led to forgetfulness of the resurrection. Focus on the suffering humanity of Christ overshadowed the Trinity and its outpouring of divine love in creation. The concentration on Christ’s suffering in itself distracted the Christian from discerning the role of the passion in the scheme of cosmic redemption and in the personal and collective spiritual journey.”

true contrition, genuine compassion and the sincere longing for God.<sup>6</sup> For late medieval Christians, following Christ meant following the crucified Christ—and following the crucified Christ meant bearing the marks of his passion. Medieval Christians were familiar with being “wounded” by Christ’s passion. Luther both received and revised this movement in late medieval spirituality.

**Receiving the tradition:** On the one hand, Luther admired Francis. Although three centuries apart, the two reformers shared a devotion to the crucified Christ, and images of Francis’s seraphic vision of the crucified Christ could have illustrated Luther’s *theologia crucis*. For both reformers, the cross was the paradigm for the Christian life. Luther spoke often of the role that suffering (*tentatio* and *Anfechtung*) played in his own life, in the work of a theologian and at the heart of prayer.<sup>7</sup> Luther respected Francis as one of the early reformers who was “driven under the power of the Holy Spirit and in complete faith and consuming love.”<sup>8</sup> He regarded him specifically as “a most admirable man of fervent spirit,” who “wisely said that his rule was the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

**Revising the tradition:** Yet, on the other hand, Luther also found that the Franciscan movement had devolved into a kind of spiritual élitism. Francis and his followers restricted the gospel to a spiritual élite: “they did not consider whose gospel it was and to whom it pertained.”<sup>10</sup> He countered sharply: the “universal gospel” is possessed by all Christians, not just a few. The blessings and the claims of the gospel applied to all Christians, lay, cleric and religious alike.

Luther treated the stigmatization of Francis in his 1535 “Commentary on Galatians,” specifically in the context of Paul’s stigmatization. There

<sup>6</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love: Ch. 2* (Long Text), transl. by Clifton Walters (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Martin Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings, 1539,” in Timothy F. Lull (ed.), *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 67; Martha Ellen Stortz, “Practicing Christians: Prayer as Formation,” in Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (eds), *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 63–67.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, “Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows, 1521,” in Helmut T. Lehman, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 268.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268. Cf. William J. Cork, “*Theologia Crucis*: Luther and Francis in Convergence,” at [www.wquercus.com/faith/crucis.htm](http://www.wquercus.com/faith/crucis.htm), accessed August 2009.

he makes clear his familiarity with images of Francis's encounter with the crucified Christ. He questions whether Francis was marked "on account of Christ"—or on account of some "foolish devotion or [...] vainglory."

But even if Francis did bear stigmata on his body, *as he is portrayed*, they were not printed on him on account of Christ. He printed them on himself by some sort of foolish devotion or, more likely, vainglory, by which he was able to flatter himself into believing that he was so dear to Christ that He had even printed His wounds on his body.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, Luther presents the apostle Paul as someone who bore the stigmata on account of Christ. These marks showed the world whose servant he was.

But Luther does not leave the phenomenon of receiving the stigmata in the historical past, regardless of on whose account they appear. He then draws an analogy between Paul and the present-day church. Just as Paul bore the marks of the wounded Lord on his body, so all Christians are marked by Christ's passion. These marks show the world whose servant Christians are. Just as the gospel is the possession of all Christians, so the wounds of Christ are the possession of all Christians. All Christians bear these marks on their bodies, not just an elect few.

These are the true stigmata, that is, imprinted marks, about which the apostle is speaking here; we, too, by the grace of God, bear them on our body today on account of Christ. For the world persecutes and slays us; false brethren hate us bitterly; and Satan terrifies us inwardly in our hearts with his flaming darts (Eph. 6:16)—all this for no other reason than that we teach that Christ is our righteousness and life. We do not choose these stigmata because of some sweet devotion, nor do we enjoy suffering. But because the world and Satan inflict them on us against our will, on account of Christ, we are compelled to endure them. In the Spirit, who is always wholesome and who glories and rejoices, we glory with Paul that we bear them on our body; for they are a seal and a sure evidence of true doctrine and faith.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 6:17, 1535," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 27 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 142. Author's own emphasis: Luther here reveals his familiarity with the images of Francis receiving the stigmata.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143–4.

It is important to note that Luther neither doubts nor dismisses the phenomenon of the stigmata; he simply widens and democratizes their range. He does not doubt that Paul, possibly even Francis, bore on their bodies marks of their wounded Lord. He simply wants to make sure the stigmata are not the possession of the spiritual élite. Rather, they belong to the whole church, to all believers. Christians live as “marked” women and men. Luther shared that late medieval longing to be marked with Christ’s suffering. He simply extends the stigmata to all Christians.

Did Luther go far enough? In a response that is both powerful and provocative, Lisandro Orlov implies that he did not, and Orlov extends the stigmata to the community of people literally “marked” by HIV/AIDS.<sup>13</sup> Far from being seen as

bearers of the “marks” of their wounded Lord, these people are “stigmatized,” i.e., shunned for their disease. We could extend the embrace of Luther’s insight to all who are “marked” by tragedy, disease, or affliction, and thereby “stigmatized” by others.<sup>14</sup>

*A positive view of the “marks”:* Yet, I wonder if suffering is the only outcome of this deeply embodied phenomenon. I want to argue that Luther elaborates a more positive and deeply somatic or embodied interpretation of the stigmata in his rich treatise on ecclesiology, “On the Councils and the Church.”<sup>15</sup> In his concluding constructive section of the treatise (III), Luther proposes to discuss the definition, identity and location of the church, as he puts it “what, who and where” the church is.<sup>16</sup> He presents seven “marks”

<sup>13</sup> Lisandro Orlov, “Response to ‘Marks of the Church; Marked by the Body of Christ,’” in this publication, pp. 67ff.

<sup>14</sup> In a powerful essay entitled “The Love of God and Affliction,” Simone Weil combines physical pain, social marginalization and the feeling of spiritual abandonment in the phenomenon of affliction. She points out that affliction replicates the situation of the crucified Christ. Cf. “The Love of God and Affliction,” in George A. Panichas (ed.), *Simone Weil Reader* (Mt Kisco, New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), p. 441. Like Orlov she captures the “stigmatization” in bearing the stigmata, and she notes that people who are “accursed” internalize their rejection: “In the case of someone in affliction, all the contempt, revulsion, and hatred are turned inwards; they penetrate to the centre of his soul and from there they color the whole universe with their poisoned light [...] Christ [...] being made a curse for us. It was not only the body of Christ, hanging on the wood, which was accursed, it was his whole soul also. In the same way every innocent being in his affliction feels himself accursed.” p. 443.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church, 1539,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 9–178. Section III of the treatise is reprinted, in Lull op. cit. (note 7), pp. 539–75.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

of the church: the preaching and hearing of the Word; baptism; the Lord's Supper; the office of the keys; ordination, prayer/praise/catechism; and the way of the cross or Christian discipleship. We usually read these somewhat abstractly as rites, practices, or spiritual disciplines. Yet, against the backdrop of late medieval spirituality, its fascination with suffering—and with the stigmata in particular, these must also be seen as physical markings, even wounds. The discussion captures Luther's own take on being "spiritual, but not religious."

***What/who the church is:*** What is the church? Who comprises it? Luther quickly collapses questions about the church's definition and identity into one. "What" the church is becomes "who" comprises it. The definition of the church is its identity, for the church is an assembly of people who comprise the body of Christ in the world, nothing more—and certainly nothing less. The church is neither place nor papacy nor institution; rather, the church is a "who;" it is the body of Christ in the world, specifically "the Christian holy people."<sup>17</sup> Luther acknowledges traditional ecclesiology by drawing on the words of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in [...] the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints [...]." The church is this communion, this assembly, "the Christian holy people."

Yet, the holiness of "the Christian holy people" is not something they achieve; their holiness resides in the Holy Spirit. These marks are emphatically the Spirit's gifts. They could be called "spiritual, but not religious," in the sense that they proceed from "the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies them daily."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, through the Spirit, Christians are "enabled and obliged" to lead a holy life "abounding in all kinds of good works."<sup>19</sup> Language of empowerment comes bound together with language of requirement. The Spirit of Christ and the law work in tandem here, ensuring that the Christian holy people know what God requires—and are empowered by the Spirit to do it. There is nothing of self-chosen works in this.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>20</sup> The Spirit empowers Christians to what is required; the Ten Commandments require the works the Spirit enables. Luther later explains that Christ "lives, works, and rules," in the Christian holy people *per redemptionem*, through grace and the remission of sin," and the Holy Spirit works in the Christian holy people *per vivificationem et sanctificationem*, "through daily purging of sin and renewal of life." Through the Holy Spirit, then, Christians are "enabled and obliged to lead a new life, abounding in all kinds of good works." Ibid.

The Ten Commandments specify these as “good works.” According to the First Table, the Holy Spirit infuses the soul with knowledge of God, bestowing upon Christians the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity. According to the Second Table, the Holy Spirit empowers the body with the capacity to do what the law requires. As Luther rolls through the requirements of the Second Table of the law, he turns the prohibitions into prescriptions; “thou shalt not” commandments become “thou shalt” commandments. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christians are empowered to fulfill these commandments, not simply by not lying or not stealing, not coveting or not committing adultery, but by being patient, friendly, obliging, brotherly, loving, chaste, pure, honest, generous, helpful, truthful, faithful and trustworthy. In the face of a two-story morality that regarded the positive commandments and “counsels of perfection” as higher standards of conduct reserved for a spiritual elite (priests, nuns and clerics), Luther turns the negative commandments into positive commandments—and applies them equally to everyone.<sup>21</sup> This is “what” the church is: the “what” has become a “who,” the Christian holy people. And this is how the Spirit enables “the Christian holy people” to be holy.

***Where the church is to be found:*** Luther asks: “But how will or how can a poor confused person tell where such Christian holy people are in this world?”<sup>22</sup> After defining what the church is and turning that “what” into a “who,” Luther shows where the church can be found. And the church is to be found where the Christian holy people are doing these things: preaching and hearing the Word; baptizing; breaking bread together as their Lord instructed; calling out leaders; forgiving one another; praying/praising/catechizing new members; and walking the path of discipleship. He defines the marks, not somatically but kinetically: they are actions. People are in motion. As he maps out the location of the church in the world, Luther demonstrates that he knows something that a postmodern “spiritual, but not religious” generation does not: there are a lot of “spirits” out there, not all of them benevolent ones. Luther makes clear that the Spirit orienting this

<sup>21</sup> Luther makes the same move, turning proscriptions into prescriptions, “thou shalt not” commandments into “thou shalt” commandments, in his explanation of the Ten Commandments in “The Small Catechism” and “The Large Catechism,” and his “Treatise on Good Works, 1520,” which essentially elaborates the Ten Commandments. Cf. Helmut T. Lehman (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 15–114. Cf. Karl Holl, *The Reconstruction of Morality*, ed. by James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense, transl. by Fred W. Meuser and Walter R. Wietzke (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), pp. 36–37.

<sup>22</sup> Luther, op. cit. (note 15), p. 148.

embodied spirituality is the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus. These practices, gifts of Christ's Spirit, mark the church in the world.

According to John's Gospel, the apostle Thomas would not believe that he was in the presence of Christ until he could touch these wounds. Luther does not expect the disciples of his time to do any better than Thomas.<sup>23</sup> They too needed to touch the marks on the body to know that they were in the presence of the risen Lord. That reassurance is given. The marks on the body of Christ in the world are a series of embodied spiritual practices. These God-given gifts locate the church in the world.

Chief among them is the preaching and hearing of the Word: "if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God's Word cannot be without God's people, and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's word."<sup>24</sup> All other practices revolve around this orienting practice like planets around the sun: baptism; the Lord's Supper; the office of the keys; ordination; prayer/prayer/thanksgiving; and, finally, the way of the cross. All are oriented around the preaching and hearing of the Word—and, as Orlov reminds us, the Word is a person, not a book, someone, not something.<sup>25</sup>

As Luther elaborates them, the practices roll out like the ancient liturgical chant associated with the mass since early Christianity: *ubi caritas et amor, ibi deus est*, "Where love and charity are, God is there." His description of the marks of the church could almost be set to music: where you find people preaching and hearing the Word, there you find the church. Where you find people baptizing, there you find the church. Where you find people sharing in the Lord's Supper, there you find the church. Christians could have no better map.

Luther describes each practice dynamically:

- ***Preaching and hearing the Word:*** "[...] wherever you hear or see this word preached, believed, professed, and lived, do not doubt that the

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<sup>23</sup> The late Robert H. Smith argued that Thomas should not be regarded as "doubting," but "believing," so convinced was he that the resurrected Christ still bore marks of suffering on his body. Thomas's need to see them reassured him—and us!—of the reality of incarnation. Smith's last book reads the gospel backwards, i.e., through the eyes of Thomas. Cf. Robert H. Smith, *Wounded Lord: Reading John Through the Eyes of Thomas* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books/ Wipf and Stock, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Luther, op. cit. (note 15), p. 150.

<sup>25</sup> Orlov, op. cit. (note 13).

true *ecclesia sancta catholica*, ‘a Christian holy people’ must be there [...].”<sup>26</sup>

- **Baptizing:** “[...] wherever you see this sign you may know that the church or the holy Christian people, must surely be present [...].”<sup>27</sup>
- **Sharing in the Lord’s Supper:** “[...] wherever you see this sacrament properly administered, there you may be assured of the presence of God’s people [...].”; “[...] wherever God’s word is, there the church must be; likewise, wherever baptism and the sacrament are, God’s people must be [...].”<sup>28</sup>
- **Forgiving sins:** “[...] where you see sins forgiven or reproved in some persons [...], you may know that God’s people are there [...].”<sup>29</sup>
- **Calling out ministers:** “[...] wherever you see this done, be assured that God’s people, the holy Christian people, are present [...].”<sup>30</sup>
- **Praying/praising/catechizing:** “[...] where you see and hear the Lord’s Prayer prayed and taught; or psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and the true faith; also the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism used in public, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present [...].”<sup>31</sup>
- **Following in the way of the cross:** “[...] wherever you see or hear this, you may know that the holy Christian church is there [...].”<sup>32</sup>

These thoroughly embodied practices point toward the body of Christ in the world—then and now.

<sup>26</sup> Luther, op. cit. (note 15), p. 150.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

## **Conclusion: “Spiritual, but not religious” and Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity?”**

So, where does this argument leave my “recovering Lutheran,” the post-modern version of being “spiritual, but not religious?” It relieves her of the burden of a do-it-yourself spirituality, cobbled together from a variety of traditions. It reminds her that there are a lot of “spirits” out there, not all of them benign and it points her toward the “Spirit of God in Christ Jesus.” It challenges her to realize that neither religion nor spirituality does something for you; they both do something to you. And they do something to you by directing attention to the God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Both religion and spirituality are finally about God. Lastly, it gives this “spiritual, but not religious” seeker a much more crowded world. Two communities in particular swim into view: a community of people who lived as “marked women and men,” engaging these embodied practices as a way of being the body of Christ in the world. And it gives her another community as well: those who, like Thomas, long to touch that body and know they are in the presence of something more powerful, more mysterious than themselves. Made into the body of Christ, Christians are that body they long to touch.

Yet, Bonhoeffer reminds me how easily the practice of any religion loses its heart when it loses its bearings. Without its orienting Spirit, these life-giving, God-given gifts become empty actions, soulless and disembodied. People will find meaning elsewhere. For that longing to be marked, and in being marked belong to something not locked in the thirteenth, the sixteenth, or even the twentieth century. I see it in the piercings and tattoos so abundantly displayed on so many young people in my country. With family, church and government in flux around them, these young people react with a cynicism born of despair. They lay claim to the only “still point of the turning world,” their own bodies.<sup>33</sup> Christians can offer another alternative: Christ’s marked body. We are it.

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<sup>33</sup> The line is an internal rhyme from T. S. Eliot’s, “Burnt Norton,” in his *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), pp. 15, 18.



# A Response to “Marked by the Body of Christ”

Lisandro Orlov

I feel that one of the best ways of doing theology is by abandoning theory and instead sharing our lives in a spirit of confession. Martha Ellen Stortz’s presentation has unleashed in me the memories of for many years walking together with people living with HIV or AIDS.

In that context, the word “stigma” has a deep and new personal meaning for me. It is not something that happens to others, to communities or institutions, but it is part of one’s personal experience. Stigma is key for interpreting this epidemic. I am moved to action and to communion not by the weak strength of a virus, similar to many other viruses, but I am moved by seeing and living with the stigma and discrimination under which my sisters and brothers live. This stigma has shown me that, for the church, HIV is not merely a medical issue, but a reality that challenges theology, confessional identity and pastoral action. In the context of this epidemic, it became a new hermeneutical tool, illuminating a new way of understanding the Scriptures, Lutheran identity and ecclesiology, in search of radical inclusiveness.

This new reading of the gospel helped me to discover that the stigmata, the marks of all crosses taken on by Jesus of Nazareth, are his calling card, his ID, his way of revealing himself to the disciples. The resurrected Christ is always the crucified Christ. Stigmata are his identity. Consequently, the simple presence here and now of a person or a group living under stigmata imposed by society as well as faith communities, alerts me to the mysterious presence of the One who took on all the stigmata and is revealed to me in the faces and lives of the people we do not want to see.

These stigmata are not merely decoration, but the consequence of previous provocations, challenging us to carry on in Jesus’ ministry. Stigmata are consequences of communion and rupture, challenges and proposals. Tables shared with those who are excluded, impure and suspicious have been the path to the cross and the stigmata. They are the cost of our being in communion with the margins of history, and critique centers of power, both political and religious. Jesus’ communion table is full of stigmatized people, of those considered politically and theologically incorrect. From

the moment of his baptism, Jesus of Nazareth was drawn toward those with stigmata. His dialogue with those who were vulnerable made him vulnerable.

The name of St Francis of Assisi evokes for me the dynamics of a discipleship lived in God's amazing grace. The physical stigmata on his body are the consequence of painful and dangerous options. The kiss and the embrace of the solitary leper, who appeared along the way of that young man at the beginning of his life of discipleship, had an unexpected effect, not so much for the leper but for Francis himself—overcoming one's own fears, other people's silences, multiple complicities and changing our lives. We have no clue about what happened to that anonymous leper, but we know very well what happens when we are ready to embrace and to kiss, in a radically inclusive and unconditional way, someone who is considered liturgically impure, socially excluded and pastorally marginalized. When we embrace the margins of our stigmata, we are changing our way of being a community because we open ourselves, in all our vulnerability, to the one who is different, strange and foreign.

Stigmata are related to the theology of the cross, the only possible theology and only alternative to the theology of glory. In it we recognize that the centrality of vulnerability, initiated by the incarnation, where Christ left behind all privileges of power, abandoned his divine condition, took on human nature, put himself in the place of the oppressed slave and died the death of one who is subversive, opposing all oppressive systems. In the cross, we have a God who is always revealed in a paradoxical way, never in temples or palaces. Rather, God chooses to reveal Godself at the margins, there where we have put all those who are imperfect and victims of stigmatization. It is in communion with those in such places where the One who sends Jesus of Nazareth is paradoxically revealed, and where God dares to become radically vulnerable in building an unconditionally inclusive body.

In my pastoral accompaniment of people who live with HIV or AIDS, I have had to strip myself, against my will, and I hope that this can also be practiced by the faith community. In my approach to those living with HIV or AIDS, I cannot not be opportunistic, exploiting situations of vulnerability in order to proselytize. I have had to strip myself of the clerical collar, because people and groups affected by HIV or AIDS often have had very bad relationships with the churches, and clerical clothes are regarded as a sign of power. I have had to strip myself of my pastoral title, because this quasi protective fence could be interpreted as showing that I

was different. It was only once the Spirit had thrown me down from my self-righteous feelings that I was able to start walking, in equitable and respectful recognition of all persons. Only then was I able to be a pastor, counselor and friend.

As a faithful follower of the One who invites us to take him as "the way," Francis also stripped himself of his dignity. He sat amidst the beggars and alienated in order to experience reality from their reality, and from there to have a new image of God, the church and our communities. In order to be faithful to his baptism, he chose to do theology from the margins. The process of receiving Christ's stigmata always has a previous, silent and hidden start. Those spaces at the side of those who are vulnerable because of the stigmata, are the spaces to which the HIV epidemic and a theology of the cross call us. In going there, we renew our understanding of the Scriptures, of Lutheran identity and of pastoral action.

Through baptism, each one of us has received the imprint of Christ's stigmata. We are the people of the stigmata because of who we spend time with, and in leaving behind our silences and complicities. Baptism and stigmata go together. The sign of the cross, which is the sign of the stigmata, is the first mark that the church places on a person who is baptized.

The community that celebrates stigmata in order to end all stigmata, also has five wounds from which life springs, as in the incarnated body of Christ. In "On the Councils and the Church,"<sup>1</sup> Luther reminds us about the marks or stigmata that reveal the communion with the One who, in the moment where he was most vulnerable, transformed creation. The first stigma or mark is the proclamation of the Word. We remember always that the Word of God is a person and not a book. I have to confess that I do not believe in the Bible, that I consider it to be an historical record of the experiences of the people of God in relation to the Creator. I believe in the person to whom the Scriptures bear testimony. The way, the truth and the life are always a person who became vulnerable for me and for us, and who invites us also to be vulnerable in order to end all vulnerabilities.

That prophetic proclamation of the real presence of a crucified and resurrected One in the midst of our assemblies leads us to two marks or stigmata. That proclamation creates tables of communion and inclusiveness with all those who are stigmatized by political and religious systems. Those celebrations happen in the context of absolution, which is another of the

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church, 1539," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

marks of the mystical body of Christ. Only absolution that becomes visible in the sharing of peace allows us to be a reconciled community in the diversity that reflects the Trinity. Proclamation, sacraments and absolution need servants. For this, the community of those who are set apart becomes an instrument of those marks.

I take as my hermeneutical tool Luther's warning that we not confuse Jesus with Moses, the gospel with the law. Moses commands and orders; Jesus suggests and advises. We Lutherans look at reality with two lenses. We distinguish, without separating, Word and spirit, law and gospel, deeds and faith, sinners and the righteous—in each case, both at the same time.

We have a new commandment for our life, which occupies the Second Table. The new commandment is to love one another as the One who loved us up to the cross. In the new creation, only love on the cross is a commandment. From the cross of communion and the unconditional inclusiveness, with a diversity of identities, comes a voice from the depths of the heavens announcing that they are the beloved children of God. That love is our main stigma because the world has to be surprised by how we, who are different and diverse, love one another.

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# Narratives of Sexuality and Hope: An African Woman's Perspective

Elieshi Mungure

In the course I teach on marriage and family counseling, I asked my students, all of whom are ordained pastors enrolled in a Master Program in pastoral theology and HIV and AIDS, what they considered to be the most frequently discussed issues in pastoral care and counseling in congregations. They answered that they spent most of their time counseling and talking about disciplinary issues related to money mismanagement and sexual misconduct. They reported “high rates of marital separation and divorce, pregnancies out of wedlock, concubinage (*nyumba ndogo* in Kiswahili), marital unfaithfulness, etc.”<sup>1</sup>

While issues related to human sexuality are frequently being discussed in congregational pastoral care, this is seldom reflected in the texts that are preached about in sermons. Even in cases where the text focuses on these issues, the message tends to be vague and difficult to comprehend for the different age groups in the worshipping congregation.

Stories of rape, incest and other acts of sexual violence continue to be shared only in secret because often the culprits are “respected” adults and it is shameful to talk about such matters in public. Although such matters are considered a “curse” on the family, I feel it is more of a curse when these incidents are kept secret because there is no room for the healing of the individual in the congregation. We still hear stories of pastors who have affairs with their congregants, or of those who provide premarital counseling for the couple but then coerce the young woman to have a sexual relationship with them. Further, there are those cases where women will not get employment or advancement without providing sexual favors to their employers or supervisors.

When we do not talk about sexuality, we reinforce media images of it as separate from spirituality. The gap between sexuality and spirituality is a place where

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<sup>1</sup> Classroom discussions at Makumira University, 2008.

shame grows [...]. Sexuality and spirituality need to be taught in the same curriculum [...].<sup>2</sup>

### **Breaking the silence surrounding human sexuality in Africa**

In Africa, there is considerable ignorance and silence with regard to human sexuality. Very little correct information is conveyed to church members. Misinformation and confused values contribute to sexual misconduct. In African societies, human sexuality is surrounded by taboos and seldom spoken of openly. Since time immemorial, sexuality and related issues have been understood by way of various sayings, proverbs, songs, poems, riddles and metaphors. In a culture in which traditions are preserved in the form of narratives, it thus was easy to communicate indirectly about sexual matters. Nonetheless, in light of the changes brought about by modernization and formal education, informal education, which relied mainly on oral methodologies, has not been adequately replaced. The understanding of human sexuality has undergone significant cultural and socioeconomic changes, but some practices and attitudes have not changed and continue to be pursued in the name of religion, tradition and culture.

Most African societies are patriarchal; male supremacy is vividly evident. That women and men should relate equitably, especially in matters of sexuality, is neither taught nor encouraged. There is a need to look at what various traditions and teachings, including the Bible, have to say about human sexuality.

Continuing biblical and theological studies show that much of our understandings of the Bible has been shaped by generations of translators and interpreters who were distorted in their perspectives because of male dominated forms of thinking and perceiving.<sup>3</sup>

As Kimilike adds, “The plight women suffer is from complex, multi-faceted oppression: biblical and cultural abuses, negative effects of globalization

<sup>2</sup> Karen A. MacClintock, *Sexual Shame: An Urgent Call to Healing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> William V. Arnold, *Pastoral Responses to Sexual Issues* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 100.

and imperialism, and social injustices that include gender-based violence [...].”<sup>4</sup>

In Africa, it is believed that human sexuality is sacred; sexual organs were not referred to by their biological names, but euphemisms were used instead. “Talking openly about sex and naming the sexual organs was a taboo. Sexual activity took place but it was not talked about.”<sup>5</sup> Sexuality, which cannot be talked about, has been veiled by shame.

The norm for male and female sexual relationships is marriage. It is assumed that people marry in order to procreate and that all human beings are heterosexual. There is no specific place or word for singlehood; it is an unaccepted lifestyle, even if it is chosen for biological or faith reasons. In the sanctity of the marital bond, a couple procreates in fulfillment of God's will.

All African societies, without exception, held sex as a sacred tool for the purpose of procreation only; through it life began and life was sacred. To an African, sex is more than sexual intercourse. Apart from procreation, it was the means of sustaining, maintaining and extending the clan and society. Sexual intercourse is to take place only in marriage.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, all extramarital relationships are prohibited and considered deviant sexual behavior. The punitive and restorative measures taken for such sexual deviance vary from society to society. For example, among the Wameru of northern Tanzania, adultery was punished severely. Violators were made to lie down as if they were having sexual intercourse. Then they were pinned to the ground by a wooden spear and left there for several days until they died. This was used as a warning to others in society not to indulge in such misbehavior.

Religious and socioeconomic ritual performances related to a person's life cycle are important. Sexuality and gender are surrounded by beliefs and ritual practices, beginning with the birth of a child as either male or female. This continues through what are separate puberty initiation rites for males and females. From this point on, young people are expected to live

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<sup>4</sup> Lechion Kimilke, “Developing Resources of Hope to Eradicate Violence Against Women in African Context,” in *African Theological Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2008), p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Kimani W. Chege, “Sexuality and Marriage in Africa,” in J. Bryson Arthur, *A Theology of Sexuality and Marriage* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1998), p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

according to the basic sexual and gender roles and relations in their family, clan or ethnic group. This is reinforced through various rituals, celebrations and taboos, some of which need to be critically reflected on.

### **Taboos related to sexuality**

In African societies, there are taboos related to childbirth, initiation, sexual activity and even death. Taboos play a significant role in the ethical duty of transmitting and preserving life; breaching them endangers the health and well-being of society.

There are taboos and laws regarding fornication, adultery, incest and sexual intercourse. Women are victimized far more often than men. They are crushed more often, and most often the ones who are punished. They have to undergo restorative rituals more often than men. In most societies, women are forbidden to touch the male sexual organ or even to mention it verbally.

A menstruating woman is generally considered unclean and is kept away from men, including her husband, chiefs, men going to hunt, those offering sacrifices or partaking in any kind of worship. Among the Kinga ethnic group of southern Tanzania, a menstruating woman or a woman after childbirth is kept in a hut, away from other members of the family, until she “dries up.” She eats from separate dishes and her food is prepared separately by other female relatives. She may not even be allowed to prepare food for her husband or any other man. There is also the fear that the supernatural power acting through a menstruating woman might adversely affect business. “Mostly the women are relegated to an outside hut or asked to keep away from areas where men are. In areas where gold is mined they are restricted from going near the mines, as this would affect the mining activities [...]”<sup>7</sup> Together with the menstrual blood, both sperm and vaginal secretion during sexual intercourse are considered sacred and life giving, and hence involve further taboos.

Most of these practices have been misunderstood and misinterpreted and have remained unchanged for centuries. Furthermore, when Christianity was introduced in Africa, attention was not given to how such practices and taboos are inconsistent with the gospel and hinder the full liberation

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<sup>7</sup> Lloyd Fanuse, “Sexuality and Women in African Culture,” in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (eds), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 143.

of both men and women. Instead, for women, Christianity meant further male domination and the imposition of more rules. Unless a contextually interpreted theology of love, equity and justice is preached and practiced, the gospel of liberation remains an illusion

## Rereading Scripture

Over the last few decades, women have been rereading and reinterpreting the Scripture, and have rediscovered its potential for transforming traditional practices and taboos. Frustrations, pains and wounds have also been uncovered, caused by injustices perpetuated by misinterpreting the Scriptures through the systemic oppressive structures and cultures in our societies. Interpretation is needed that can bring equality, justice, liberation, hope, healing and restoration.

Andrew Lester shows how narrative relates to identity: “[...] human personality is storied. Human beings do not simply tell a story or illustrate their lives with story telling. We construct our sense of identity out of stories, both conscious stories and those we suppress.”<sup>8</sup> Any individual's narrative process (including language, imagery and symbols) is affected by the narrative structuring of their culture and the meanings attached to gender, politics and ethnic heritage.<sup>9</sup> While communities continue to construct narratives of their individuals, it is fairly important to consider their outcomes and how they would affect them and then start to reconstruct the meta-narratives of our societies.

Like most women in Africa today, Rahab (Josh 2:1–16) played her prescribed gender role as the family caretaker. She was raised learning how to welcome and show hospitality to strangers (here the spies). Living in a patriarchal society, Rahab feels torn between the competing powers of male supremacy. She is in charge of her father's house and answerable to the king of Jericho for the unknown male guests she brings into her house. As a prostitute in a shame and honor society, she was not honored for what she was doing, namely, selling her body for the welfare of her family. However, she could later be honored for saving her family from death and destruction when the land was conquered.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

This is the dilemma facing most women in the churches and communities in Africa. There are stories of many women in our cities who are victims of prostitution and are chased by police officers for breaking the law. Society looks down on them as “social misfits” and they end up being victimized in various ways. Many have been condemned by society and called by all kinds of names because of what they do to earn a living for their families. But what or who is pushing them into prostitution? How can these factors be addressed? Above all, how can people see such a person for who she is rather than for what she is doing? Rahab was God’s child, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–28), long before she became a prostitute. While a woman is condemned for being a prostitute, no one focuses on the men who have sex with her; at least in Africa, there is no name for a man who has multiple sexual partners.

The primary systemic reason that leads many women and young girls into prostitution is poverty. In a poverty-stricken community, life is always precarious and a constant struggle, ranging from direct threats to life to being able to procure enough food, medical care and clothing. In Tanzania, for example, many families earn less than one dollar a day. More than eighty percent of all Tanzanians live as subsistence farmers, who depend on a hand hoe and a small piece of land of about one to two acres. A few are engaged in small businesses that yield just enough in order to buy food for survival.

The second reason for prostitution is related to how roles and responsibilities in the family are assigned according to gender. Men are expected to be the breadwinners but, due to poverty, they often are unable to fulfill this responsibility. As a result, women are the ones to carry the extra burden of caring for the family and earning a wage so that the family can survive. Circumstances are often difficult and women face the danger of being abused and sexually violated. In accordance with the patriarchal mindset, women do not enjoy equal rights, especially in terms of managing the family income, and men and women do not plan together how to support the family.

The fact that families are often large is another factor contributing to poverty and the need to resort to prostitution. Some men run away from their families because they cannot take care of them. Again, the workload falls on women. Poverty, gender expectations and large families bring challenges that may result in prostitution, unfaithfulness and corruption.

## **How can this silence be broken and these double standards ended?**

Like leaving slavery through the Exodus, we need to move into the freedom and liberation announced through the gospel's "abundant life." We need facilitators such as Rahab, who would ease the transition, with the promise of safety and security. The story of Rahab can be retold as a story of empowerment and strength, a story of a heroine of faith. Surprisingly, she is mentioned again in the New Testament, as among the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah (cf. Mt 1:5; Heb 11: 31). Rahab is a woman God could use like many other heroes and heroines of faith. This is one of the reasons to live with hope and to work hard to nurture that hope.

For about two decades, the Circle of the Concerned African Women Theologians have been writing on matters such as the ones discussed here.<sup>10</sup> However, very few churches have picked up on these themes and incorporated them into congregational and classroom discussions. Therefore, there is a need for persistent voices of women and men to keep on reminding the church and the wider community to work hard toward transformation, and to do so in hope. "Hope is a here and now experience that contains both pledge of things to come and 'first fruits' that can be tasted now."<sup>11</sup> God is continuously shaping and transforming the world through our own communities of believers as we continue gathering and reinterpreting the core narratives of our stories that shape our identities as children of God, both individually and communally.

Theology is the interpretation of what belief in God means. For centuries, theology in Lutheran churches has focused primarily on the spirituality and intellect of its members, without dealing with all aspects of what it means to be restored as whole persons, including with regard to our sexuality. In theological reflection on human sexuality, the church needs to ask, Who defines our sexuality? What is the source of our teaching on sexuality? Who teaches our children, youth and adults about sexuality. Integrating our bodies, minds and souls with a more adequate theology of sexuality helps us better to deal with such questions as, Who are we? Is our body good or evil? How can we feel good about our bodies and ourselves? This will help us to overcome the dualism of the body being considered evil and the spirit good.

<sup>10</sup> Among many other books, see Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *op. cit.* (note 7).

<sup>11</sup> Lester, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 69.

In light of God's forgiveness and the community's care and love, talking about sexuality in healthy, respectful, dialogical conversation can lead to healing the wounds from our past experiences and relationships. This can lead toward churches in Africa becoming places where the gospel message becomes nurturing, caring, liberating and empowering. It is the hope of African women that the church community would strive for equality and integrity of humanity and join in persistent voices that seek to reinterpret the Bible in relation to our contexts and realities today.

# Indigenizing the Church in Africa

Ramathate Dolamo

Although indigenization and inculturation are often seen as being synonymous, I believe that the indigenization of the church in Africa deals with such matters as ritual, religion, myth, liturgy, prayer and worship, while inculturation involves culture, morality, ethos, taboos, theology and praxis.

Starting with creation stories, every country, ethnic group and clan in Africa has creation stories and myths to account for the origins of humanity and its destiny. The Umhlanga creation story, as told by the Nguni speaking people, particularly the amaZulu, asserts that humans emerged out of a bed of reeds.<sup>1</sup> The Sesotho speaking people, particularly the Batswana, believe that humanity came out of a hole in the ground.<sup>2</sup> John Mbiti has studied creation myths across Africa, all of which point to the belief that humans, male and female, were created by God to take care of God's creation, that they were made perfect and that God's intention was for them to live forever.<sup>3</sup>

Why then did God withdraw this immortality? There are various explanations. At the beginning there was a close connection between God and humans by means of a ladder, rope or road but, through some accident caused by humans, that connection was broken. According to many creation myths, God withdrew from the world because humans disobeyed God. Nevertheless, because God is neither vengeful nor vindictive, God lessened the harshness of the punishment by giving humans the skills, knowledge and codes of behaviour in order to survive.<sup>4</sup>

In African Religion, ancestors are accorded a specific status. Since ancestors lived among us and entered God's sacred territory, they are regarded as beings

<sup>1</sup> Gabriel M Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 5; John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), pp. 161–70.

<sup>3</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1991), pp. 82–84.

<sup>4</sup> Mbiti, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 171–7; Mbiti, *ibid.*, pp. 85–86, Setiloane, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 38–39.

who have assumed a degree of divinity. Because they know our plight they are best suited to act as (inter)mediaries between God and us. They are revered and respected but not worshipped.<sup>5</sup> There are also other human intermediaries such as medicine people; elders; priests; mediums; isangoma; izinyanga; and traditional Zulu healers. All of these mediate between humans and ancestors, and are highly prized and much respected.<sup>6</sup> Non-human divinities and spirits can also mediate in this sense.<sup>7</sup>

Africans have always attributed some sacredness to certain geographical locations such as mountains, caves, valleys, rivers, waterfalls, as well as to some animals and plants. Those objects were not regarded as deities to be worshipped, but rather as representations of God.<sup>8</sup> This is totemism, not animism. Johannes Christaller concluded that people who were presumed to be polytheists should rather be described as monotheists, because they apply the term for God only to one supreme being. In the same vein, following Alexis Kagame,<sup>9</sup> I propose that we stop using terms such as ancestor cult, ancestor olatory, or ancestor divination.

Rituals play a crucial role in African Religion and culture. Since humans had disturbed the harmony that existed between themselves and God, it became necessary for them to engage in elaborate rituals and taboos in order to restore harmony. Ancestors had to be venerated and God worshipped through rituals such as making sacrifices and offerings. These rituals aimed to correct wrong things, to restore harmony, and to enhance the general quality of life.<sup>10</sup> Rituals are performed from the womb to the ancestral world, that is, once a woman becomes aware that she is pregnant, rituals would be performed for the unborn baby through birth and to its grave.<sup>11</sup> Rituals and taboos work hand in hand in order to strengthen the moral fabric of society. This is why I believe that in African Religion, rituals cannot be

<sup>5</sup> Setiloane, *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Nyameko Barney Pityana, "The Renewal of African Moral Values," in Malegapuru William Makgoba (ed.), *African Renaissance. The New Struggle* (Sandton: Mafube Publishers Ltd., 1999), p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> Mbiti, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 220–43; Mbiti, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 68–69.

<sup>8</sup> Mbiti, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 9–157.

<sup>9</sup> Alexis Kagame, "The Trail of an African Theology," in Bénédet Bujo and Juvénal Ilunga Muya (eds), *African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 193–243.

<sup>11</sup> Mbiti, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 87–152; Magesa, *ibid.*, pp. 77–159.

regarded as superstition, magic, or fetishes. They have to do with African socio-religious history, ethics and morality.

What then should be the relationship between African religious beliefs and Christianity? According to Lesiba Teffo, “God is the centre of African religions.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, when the missionaries arrived on the continent, they were unable to accept the fact that African Religion was a religion in its own right and not just a superstition. God as a supreme being had been worshipped in Africa since the beginnings of humanity. Instead of making African Religion and God the point of entry, the opposite happened. African Religion was ignored at best and demonized at worst.

Africans have called God by different names. Missionaries deliberately changed God’s indigenous names in order to prove that there was no point of contact between the Christian God and the African God. The Sepedi name for God is Kgobe and the missionaries talked of Modimo. The AmaZulu called God Umvelinqane, and the missionaries changed it to Unkulunkulu. The AmaXhosa called God Qamatha, and the missionaries called God, Thixo and later Ndikhoyo.<sup>13</sup> Converted Africans either had their names changed or new ones added. Acquiring a Christian name was compulsory. New converts were named after the saints of the church and other biblical figures.

The African drum was used across Africa as a medium of communication. It was used to call people to the royal kraal, as a basic dance instrument and also as an object to invoke the presence of ancestral spirits. Together with other instruments, the drum, used for ritual and recreational purposes, was banned by the missionaries. Today, the African Initiated Churches and other mainline churches have reintroduced the drum and other musical instruments, as well as dancing and the clapping of hands to recapture the African rhythm.

Most rituals in Africa include the use of incense, what Africans call impepho, to expel evil spirits and invite positive energies during particular rituals or rites. In addition, impepho has a calming effect both emotionally and spiritually. In Europe, Roman Catholics and Anglicans use incense, but there where incense was used in churches in Africa, Western incense was used, because according to the missionaries, impepho was tainted by paganism. Sacred or holy objects are used by Africans as a visible sign of

<sup>12</sup> Lesiba Teffo, “Moral Renewal and African Experience(s),” in Makgoba, op. cit (note 6), p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Peter T. Mtuze, *Bishop Dr S. Dwane and the Rise of Xhosa Spirituality in the Ethiopian Episcopal Church* (formerly the Order of Ethiopia), DTh thesis at UNISA, 2008, p. 113.

God's protection against evil forces. All these were discouraged and discarded by churches that were not Anglican or Roman Catholic.

Africans are practical people and introducing some of the so-called fetishes can contribute to making the African churches truly authentic. Relics, crosses, crucifixes, holy water, segwasha and similar objects have been introduced in African Initiated Churches. It is high time that the other mainline churches, such as the Lutheran church, follow suit. God's protective power is concretized in those holy objects because for Africans these are not merely pieces of art.

In spite of the fact that many African scholars have rejected the notion that Africans worshipped ancestors, there are those who insist otherwise. Africans regard ancestors as an integral part of their religious and cultural worldview. For any church to be truly African, it cannot ignore the role that ancestors play in the broader scheme of things. Respecting one's parents does not end when they pass on. A number of testimonies attest to the notion that ancestors are alive in one form or another in most cultures in the world. The dead are always with us. Mbiti<sup>14</sup> calls them "the living dead." Both Testaments of the Bible are full of stories about the departed; Paul refers to "those who are asleep." On the instruction of King Saul, Samuel was returned from the dead by a diviner, even though he protested vigorously about having been disturbed from his deep and peaceful sleep.

Buthi Tlhagale<sup>15</sup> refuses to bestow sainthood on ancestors, but as guardians of African morality, why should they not be accorded the status of sainthood? As (inter)mediaries between God and humans, should they not be regarded as God's messengers or as guardian angels? The Roman Catholic Church venerates Mary, the mother of God, and has many other patron saints. Why can ancestor veneration not be indigenized without the fear of syncretism? Ancestors cannot take the place of Christ in African Christianity; they know their place. Revering and honouring ancestors is already been done inter-denominationally on a designated day when different churches congregate at graveyards. Some churches celebrate All Saints' Day, St Michael's and All Angels' Day every year. Those days can also be used to honour African ancestors as God's messengers.

The same attention should be given to African mediums such as izan-goma, prophets, prophetesses, izinyanga, etc., who are links between the

<sup>14</sup> Mbiti, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 125.

<sup>15</sup> Buthi Tlhagale, "Inculturation: Bringing the African Culture into the Church," in E. M. Conradie (ed.), *African Christian Theologies in Transformation* (South Africa: EFSA Institute, 2004), pp. 43–67, here p. 47.

living and the ancestors. These people have tremendous power over and hold on Africans in all spheres of life. Often they are either ignored or denounced as being possessed by evil and satanic spirits. Might not the Holy Spirit be using them in society? African Initiated Churches are far ahead in recognizing the counselling and therapeutic roles these mediums and diviners play in society. Prominent South Africans, including whites, have come forward to declare that they are izangoma.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the challenge is how to distinguish a true from a false medium. In spite of Africa being mostly patriarchal, more women than men are among those who are healers and diviners. Ecologically these people help conserve animal and plant life through various taboos against abusing certain medicinal herbs and animals. Most of these are totemic and must therefore be protected against abuse.

Under African leadership, the theological errors made by the missionaries due to their ignorance of African Religion and culture must be corrected. In a more Africanized church, Africans will more readily identify with the church. The foreign garment (i.e., Western culture) that the gospel has been wrapped in should be removed and, with necessary alterations, an African garment be put on instead.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 21 September 2008, p. 33.



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# A Critique of African Theology's Anthropology: Why are Children Excluded from the Table?

Kenneth Mtata

## Introduction

This article seeks to show that the exclusion of children from the Eucharist in most African Lutheran churches is a result of the social position children have occupied in the hierarchy of the construction of personhood in African thought. It will be suggested here that the communitarian construction of personhood, upon which African theological reflection has traditionally been based, is inadequate with regard to children and other people at the margins. As Gwinyai Muzorewa put it,

[t]he concept of humanity, which has largely determined all other African cosmological concepts, is central in traditional religion. How African humanity has traditionally perceived itself is of primary importance to a developing African theology.<sup>1</sup>

Claiming that the African person is communitarian conceals the hierarchical construction of personhood, which reduces children to less than full persons and results in their being excluded from the Eucharist. This is contrary to the basic tenets of the Lutheran Confessions that teach that we receive salvation through the means of grace and not because we qualify for them.

In other words, a faulty anthropology produces a faulty theology, and a faulty theology produces a skewed anthropology. There prevails an uncritical assumption that African personhood, upon which African theol-

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<sup>1</sup> Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), p. 16; cf. John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (New York: Praeger, 1975), p. 77.

ogy is built, is communitarian. This assumption is inaccurate and distorts African theology.

### **The absence of children in African theological reflection**

It is neither possible, nor necessary, to give a detailed overview of African theology here. My purpose here is to show that the absence of children in African theological reflection was (and still is) a result of the fact that in African theology the person is presupposed as object rather than subject. In agreement with many other African and non-African theologians, Tinyiko S. Maluleke observed the “dynamism and innovation” in African Christian practice and theological reflection.<sup>2</sup> Although he conflates “African Christianity and African theology,” using the two terms “interchangeably,” I still think he is correct in the creativity he observes in both African Christianity and theology.<sup>3</sup> Although Maluleke is one of the few African critics of the nostalgic embrace of African culture, he has not questioned the construction of African personhood as a faulty base on which to build African theology. A brief investigation into the genealogy of African theology will support this assertion.

### **The first generation of African theology**

Josiah U. Young’s categorization of the phases of African theology offers some important insights,<sup>4</sup> even though some important aspects of it have been challenged.<sup>5</sup> The first generation of African theologians emerged in the early days of independence from colonial rule. Muzorewa suggests that the formalization of African theology dates back to the “inauguration of

<sup>2</sup> Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-first Century,” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997), pp. 4–23, here p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> It is appropriate to think of African theology as an academic reflection on African Christian practices in dialogue with existing theological categories whether or not from Western theology. See also Mika Vähäkangas, *In Search of Foundations for African Catholicism: Charles Nyamiti’s Theological Methodology* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 10–14. This debate is not the focus of this paper, but the relevant issue for this discussion is the point of creativity in African theology that Maluleke raises.

<sup>4</sup> The categorization used here is critically borrowed from Josiah U. Young III, *African Theology: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography* (London: Greenwood Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Maluleke, op. cit. (note 2), p. 6.

the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)” in Kampala.<sup>6</sup> This first phase was presided over by an African élite, who had been educated in “mission schools and often pursued their higher education abroad.”<sup>7</sup> Theology produced by this generation of African theologians resonated with the Pan-African discourse in its affirmation of the African person as a cultural person. Such theologians as Edward Blyden, Bolaji Idowu and Kwesi Dickson focused more on the discovery of the “African personality,” a perspective that sought to redeem African personhood from the “savage” representations of derogatory colonial narratives. Driven by the “cultural nationalism that owed more to Westernization than to popular culture,” this generation of African scholars were more “focused on religio-cultural analysis, with little, if any, social analysis.”<sup>8</sup>

One leading figure promoting African religious and cultural tradition was John Mbiti, whose project centered on recovering those aspects of African cosmology and culture that were in continuity with the worldview of the gospel.<sup>9</sup> Mbiti constructed an African ethno-philosophy of time that contradicted Western appropriations of the Christian faith and could be at home in Africa. Though criticized for essentializing and de-regionalizing African culture, Mbiti’s contribution became the basis for most African theological reflection. One of Mbiti’s major contributions, was his claim that the African was communitarian in his [*sic*] personhood.<sup>10</sup>

While this generation of African theologians affirmed African cultural identities, it did very little to deconstruct African culture. There was a glaring absence of a clear critique of the oppressive nature of the culture upon which this generation’s theological reflection has been built. Apart from its insensitivity to the plight of African women, this theological project ignored children, since in many African cultures children are not considered to be full persons. The theology focused on adult males, both living and dead. Children were only mentioned in relation to the taboos of barrenness and infertility in African thought.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the first

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<sup>6</sup> Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Young, op. cit. (note 4), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), pp. 108–9. Note that gender was not central to Mbiti’s theology.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 142–3.

phase of African theology was designed by adult males, for adult males. This, however, did not go unnoticed and unchallenged.

### **The second generation of African theology**

While in 1963 the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), the formal context for the first phase of African theology, was dominated by theologians north of the Limpopo, the 1976 meeting of the Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians (EATWOT) ushered in a new phase of African theology.<sup>12</sup> This second phase was influenced by elements from South African Liberation Theology, African Black Theology and African Womanist Theology. According to Young, this “new guard,” sought a “new Africa, not a neo-colonial one where old contradictions persist in pernicious guise.”<sup>13</sup> The ethos of this new theology is summed up in EATWOT’s “Final Statement”:

We call for an active commitment to the promotion of justice and the prevention of exploitation, the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, discrimination, and dehumanisation.<sup>14</sup>

As Young further points out, through further dialogue, this new generation of African theologians sharpened their “liberation” emphasis and their commitment “to the underside of history,” aware of the fact that since its independence from Western domination, Africa had not progressed but “regressed.”<sup>15</sup>

This second phase of “emerging theologies”<sup>16</sup> was committed to socio- and religio-cultural analysis,<sup>17</sup> and highlighted the significant contribution of African resources, which traditionally had barely been taken into consideration. These included the contribution of the African Interdependent Churches (AICs), seen as “accomplishing the task of bridging Western

<sup>12</sup> Young, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 25; Maluleke, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Young, *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>16</sup> Maluleke, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Young, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 3.

mainline traditions and the world of African traditional religion.”<sup>18</sup> This phase of African theology still saw the African as a communitarian being, although other aspects of African culture were put under severe scrutiny. A good example is how personhood played itself out in African women's theologies.

### **The absence of children in African womanist theology**

One major thrust of this second phase was the elevation of the status of the African woman with the emergence of African womanist theologies. Many male African theologians were convinced by their female counterparts that they had neglected women's concerns in their earlier work.<sup>19</sup> At different stages of this development, African women theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, Nyambura Njoroge and Isabel Phiri emerged as leading figures in this movement. Phiri shows how the emergence of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the “Circle”) highlighted the marginalization of women within African theology and opened a space for doing theology as women in Africa.<sup>20</sup> The methodology of African women theologians involved appropriating African culture, “upholding” it where it was of value and changing it where it was oppressive. “This means that whatever things uphold women's and men's humanity in the Bible, in African Traditional Religion, and in African culture are sources for this theology.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, African personhood meant taking the concerns of African women more seriously.

While this perspective makes sense in a context where women are marginalized by men and society, it does not raise the pertinent concern of the marginalization of children within that same society. Even when Phiri addresses the “initiation of girls,” she quickly moves on to women, most of whom are now “able to identify positive elements which give African women

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<sup>18</sup> Cornel du Toit, “Issues in the Reconstruction of African Theology: African Hermeneutics as Key to Understanding the Dynamics of African Theology,” in Joanne Marie Greer and David O. Moberg (eds), *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 38. Maluleke, op. cit. (note 2), p. 14. See in particular, Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> See Sanneh, *ibid.*, pp. 22–26, and also Maluleke, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 20–22.

<sup>20</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, “Doing Theology in Community: The Case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s,” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 99 (November 1997), pp. 68–76.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

their cultural identity.”<sup>22</sup> As a result, the plight of girls and boys only became an entrance into the discussion about African theology for adults.

Nyambura Njoroge helps us to see why children are among the missing voices in African Christian thought.<sup>23</sup> Njoroge points to the fact that for almost three decades, African theology was articulated solely by men. She therefore praises the pioneering female voices of such luminaries as Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who was among the first to point to the lack of prominence women in the biblical and ecclesial traditions. Njoroge accuses African male theologians of having tried to develop an African theology “without taking into account women’s lived experience,” and concludes that such a project was “gender blind.”<sup>24</sup> Culture and patriarchy have perpetuated the subjugation of women. The construction of personhood is primarily gendered. She does not, however, go on to name the absence of children in African theological reflection.

For a number of reasons, the emergence of African womanist theology could have led to the emergence of child sensitive African theological reflection. First, African women theologians claimed that their contributions were comprehensive and inclusive, seeking to ensure that African theology “would be allowed to fly with two wings.”<sup>25</sup> Even though their aim had been to promote “African women’s theologies,”<sup>26</sup> they did not seek to isolate themselves from their male counterparts. In her opening words at the 1989 Accra conference of African women theologians, Oduyoye challenged African women theologians to make vital contributions to truly African theological expressions.<sup>27</sup> The book, *Women Hold Up Half The Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa*, captures this spirit well.<sup>28</sup> By unearthing the role women played in the history of the Anglican Church in South Africa,

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> Nyambura Jane Njoroge, “The Mission Voice: African Women Doing Theology,” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 77–83.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> A metaphor coined by Oduyoye that refers to the developing partnership between African female and male theologians forging a common and comprehensive African theological expression, Nyambura Jane Njoroge, “N. J. Talitha Cum! To the New Millennium: A Conclusion,” in Nyambura Jane Njoroge and Musa W. Dube (eds), *Talitha Cum: Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001), p. 247.

<sup>26</sup> Phiri, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 152, 154.

<sup>27</sup> Moiseracle Prince Dibeela, “A Setswana Perspective on Genesis 1:1-10,” in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (eds), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Denise Ackermann, Jonathan A. Draper and Emma Mashinini (eds), *Women Hold Up Half The Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991).

their contribution to life was being affirmed. The fact that men and women contributed to the book revived the complementary and communitarian dream. This conciliatory atmosphere was consistent with the ideals of a traditional communitarian ethos upon which earlier African theological reflection built. The aim was to see African men and women together in community. But African community cannot be without children.

The "Circle," as utilized by African women theologians, is a multifaceted and potent symbol of self-understanding with its roots in traditional African religious thought. The emerging network became the "Circle" as a way of describing "African women theologians in various contexts, methods and concerns, who work together for the empowerment of women and the recognition of human dignity." Its "interconnectedness" signified "life as a continuous flowing force."<sup>29</sup> This was the original communitarian understanding of personhood upon which earlier male African theologians had based their work. Whether or not African women theologians were aware of this is unclear. I surmise that they found the communitarian ideal in harmony with their project and did not question its reality as descriptive of the African person.

Secondly, African women's theology, like other feminist theologies, could have adopted the children's agenda as its own without compromising its own concerns. I here risk being chided for suggesting that African womanist theology mimics Western feminist theological trends, which it had already partly rejected.<sup>30</sup> However, African women theologians are committed to "speaking up on issues that diminish life."<sup>31</sup> One would have hoped that with such pointed cultural "re-visioning" of African theology, the plight of children would have come to the fore. Elsewhere some feminist theologians have focused more on children.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Phiri, *op. cit.* (note 20), p. 155. A closer reading of this expression resonates fully with the earlier description of the African communitarian ethos by Placide Tempels on whom early African scholars had extensively drawn.

<sup>30</sup> Western feminist theology provided the earlier working tools for African women theologians. Even though they reclaimed their own space of struggle as defined by the postcolonial, economic and social conditions in Africa, the struggles of most African womanist theologians are not the same as other more marginalized African women. They also need to take seriously the indigenous means African women use in their struggles against oppression.

<sup>31</sup> Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," in Njoroge and Dube, *op. cit.* (note 25), p. 176.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "'Let the Children Come' Revisited: Contemporary Feminist Theologians on Children," in Marcia JoAnn Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 446.

Some African women theologians do mention children in relation to women's concerns.<sup>33</sup> At first sight, Musa Dube's chapter title, "Little Girl, Get Up,"<sup>34</sup> gives the impression that it has to do with children, i.e., girls. This view is especially implied in the subtitle, "The Girl Child." Yet, what begins as a potential engagement with the plight of the girls changes after seven short sentences to a focus on women.

By no means do I want to trivialize the focus on gender in doing African theology. Gender remains an important cultural challenge in many aspects of the development of Africa. My contention, however, is that gender concerns are only a part of the wider problem in the construal of the African person. The communitarian construction of the African person, which African womanist theologians have apparently appropriated uncritically, seems counterproductive. The fact that communitarianism pervades African idealism in African philosophy, sociology and theology does not change this contention. African communitarianism needs to be more nuanced if it is to be a useful category of analysis.

### **Communitarian conceptions of African personhood**

Although many aspects that previously characterized the traditional African outlook on life's "community and wholeness" are disintegrating, the presupposition still holds that African societies are communitarian.<sup>35</sup> The communitarian thesis has persisted even in recent African theological reflection. For example, in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, one can clearly see how the communitarian understanding seems to pervade the African understanding of what it means to be a person in Africa. Justin Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics (also used by African women theologians) are based on the basic African conceptions of reality,

the unitive view of reality whereby reality is seen not as composed of matter and spirit, sacred and profane but as a unity with visible and invisible aspects, the divine origin of the universe and the interconnectedness between God,

<sup>33</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 61.

<sup>34</sup> Musa Dube, "Little Girl, Get Up," in Njoroge and Dube, op. cit. (note 25), pp. 1–24.

<sup>35</sup> See, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 33; Jan Hermlink, "The New Africa and an Old Imperative," in *Lutheran World* 5, no. 4 (1959), p. 350.

humanity and the cosmos, and the sense of community whereby a person's identity is defined in terms of belonging to a community.<sup>36</sup>

In the same volume, Solomon Avotri sees "aspects of the New Testament, such as emphasis on community, which resonate with African culture."<sup>37</sup> Reading Genesis 1:1–10 from the Setswana perspective, Dibeela is categorical and almost nostalgic about African communitarian cosmology.

The approach [to land ownership] was of communal ownership. As a result it was regarded as anathema for an individual or group or individuals to claim sole ownership of land to the exclusion of others [...]. I believe Setswana religious believe [*sic*] has an even richer understanding of the concept of land. Batswana believe that the land is the abode of the Living Dead of the Ancestors. As such, it must not be desecrated. We desecrate our land by spilling blood onto it. Such irreligious behaviour results in infertility of land, veld fires, drought and other calamities. To restore our relationship to the earth would normally require a ritual which would involve a cleansing of the community [...]. Such cleansing restores broken relations between peoples within the community, between human community and the environment as well as between creation and the divine.<sup>38</sup>

Another scholar from Botswana, Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe, emphasizes the communitarian view.

In socially interdependent society of the Batswana, the survival of the whole community is, therefore, endangered by individual antisocial behaviour [...]. According to Setswana beliefs, the greatest good for all can be achieved if all live according to the basic virtue of harmony, between people and nature, ancestors and Modimo.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in West and Dube, op. cit. (note 27), p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Solomon K. Avotri, "The Vernacularisation of Scripture and African Beliefs: The Story of the Gerasene Demoniac among the Ewe of West Africa," in West and Dube, *ibid.*, pp. 315–6.

<sup>38</sup> Moiseraele Prince Dibeela, "A Setswana Perspective on Genesis 1:1–10," in West and Dube, *ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>39</sup> Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe, "*Ngaka* and Jesus as Liberators: A Comparative Reading," in West and Dube, *ibid.*, p. 500; cf. Temba L. J. Mafico, "The Biblical God of the Fathers and the African Ancestors," in West and Dube, *ibid.*, p. 488.

In this construction, the “notions of consciousness begin with an holistic understanding of the human condition.”<sup>40</sup> These can be articulated in three categories: (1) the spiritual nature of human beings; (2) the interconnectedness of all things; and (3) oneness of mind, body and spirit. While this is usually represented in the familiar African adage *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person because of other people), this construction sees individuals only in relationship to the entire community and the world of nature. According to Mbiti, a prominent proponent of the communitarian ethos,

[i]n traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He [*sic*] owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He [*sic*] is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group [...]. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am.” This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man [*sic*].<sup>41</sup>

It is from this perspective of community that an individual becomes a person. As suggested by Nhlanhla Mkhize and others, “apart from” community “personhood is almost inconceivable.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, communitarian life guarantees one’s attainment of personhood. Theo Sundermeier suggests that this notion developed from the various myths of origins that understand particular communities as originating from the same source.<sup>43</sup> Thus, for example, the Zulu myth understands all Zulu people as emerging from a single reed or *uhlanga* and thereby belonging to an *uhlanga* collective. The African communitarian ethos thus determines the basic understanding of the person. Other extreme versions of this understanding hold that individualism “and self-seeking [are] ruled out [...]. The personal pronoun ‘I’

<sup>40</sup> Roy Moodley and William West, *Integrating Traditional Healing Practices into Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers, 2005), p. 212.

<sup>41</sup> Mbiti, *op. cit.* (note 10), pp. 108–9.

<sup>42</sup> Nhlanhla Mkhize, “Psychology: An African Perspective,” in Derek Hook (ed.), *Critical Psychology* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2004), p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> Theo Sundermeier, *The Individual and Community in African Traditional Religions* (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1998), pp. 17–18.

[is] used very rarely in public assemblies. The spirit of collectivism [is] (so) much ingrained in the minds of the African people.”<sup>44</sup>

Accordingly, there is an interdependence and harmony where “people, animals, and environment exchange their strength, and are in relationship of osmosis.”<sup>45</sup> Here the natural world is seen as the “extension” of the African self. In this “African worldview, there is no gap between the self and the phenomenal world. One is simply an extension of the other.”<sup>46</sup> Community is thus not only between humans but also between humans and the world of nature in which they live. Citing Dixon, Harding states that in the African worldview, there is

[a] narrowing of perceived conceptual distance between the observer and the observed. The observed is perceived to be placed so close to the individual that it obscures what lies beyond it, and so that the observer cannot escape responding to it. The individual also appears to view the “field” as itself responding to him; i.e., although it may be completely objective and inanimate to others, because it demands response it is accorded a kind of life of its own.<sup>47</sup>

According to Geoffrey Parrinder, the “material and spiritual are intertwined, the former as a vehicle of the latter.”<sup>48</sup> Harding concludes that once the relationship between the person and nature is disturbed, the well-being of the person is also disturbed. This creates a balance which must be maintained since any “disequilibrium may result in troubles such as human illness, drought, or social disruption.”<sup>49</sup> Humans must find ways of tapping into the world of nature of which they are part. According to this understanding, when people interact with the spirit world they are not trying to bridge the gap between humankind and nature, but firmly to connect with the vitality of this nature to which they have an ongoing

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<sup>44</sup> Kenyatta cited in Kwame Gyekye, “Person and Community in African Thought,” in Pieter Hendrik Coetzee and Abraham P. J. Roux (eds), *The African Philosophy Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 298.

<sup>45</sup> Theo Sundermeier, *op. cit.* (note 43), p. 18; Oduyoye, *op. cit.* (note 35), p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> Sandra Harding, “The Curious Coincidence of Feminine and African Moralities,” in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *African Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 368.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: SPCK, 1968), p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> Harding, *op. cit.* (note 46), p. 363.

relationship. This “universe is not static, inanimate, or ‘dead’; it is dynamic, animate, living, and powerful universe.”<sup>50</sup>

The weakness of this understanding lies in the assumption that Africans live in an egalitarian and harmonious community with one another, living or dead, and with the world of nature and gods, even though many African theologians who hold to this claim lead very individualistic lives. Their interaction with African tradition is like cultural tourism. They have lived or live in Europe and North America and rarely live in harmony with nature. They have become consumerist Westerners with African skins. Why, therefore, this fascination with the communitarian understanding? Before answering this question, we need to trace the origins of the communitarian African person. While the notion of communitarian personhood draws heavily on Mbiti and other first-generation African theologians, a deeper investigation will reveal that it did not originate with Africans.

### **The inadequacy of the communitarian ethos**

In order to appreciate the insufficiency of the communitarian ethos as descriptive of all people in Africa, one must first look at how personhood is attained and maintained. In Africa, personhood is attained through particular, predetermined challenges. Individual agency and ingenuity outside one’s socially determined space is not encouraged, although it cannot be completely controlled. From the communitarian perspective, children—especially those who have not yet reached adolescence—are unable to meet these challenges, and thus are not recognized as persons in their own right. It is worth noting that in referring to the communitarian ethos, Oduyoye classifies children together with the “aged, strangers, the sick and the needy, widows, disabled and others,” in other words, members of the African community needing “help.”<sup>51</sup> This view is patently unhelpful.

One African scholar who has related African childhood to African cosmology, especially in Ghana, is Stephan Miescher.<sup>52</sup> He notes that, as children grow up, one of their major tasks is to learn about the centrality

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Oduyoye, *op. cit.* (note 35), p. 34.

<sup>52</sup> Stephan F. Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). Interestingly, there are few, if any, African theologians attempting such work.

of adults and their role in advising and guiding the child.<sup>53</sup> Children are closer to their grandparents who tell them stories which reinforce obedience.<sup>54</sup> This marginalization of children in the African communitarian ethos is sometimes rationalized by using the language of “care” and “protection,” while the real value of childhood is not recognized.<sup>55</sup> It is not surprising then that during a lecture I heard one gender activist say that, “women are not children; they are also people.” At a subconscious level, the African construal of personhood denigrates childhood to a subnormal class, albeit a subnormality we should live with. African theology has followed a similar trend, whereby its early proponents viewed community in Africa as being more “Christian” than Western individualism. The marginalization of children in the church, for example in the Eucharist, demonstrates that children are thought of as not being human enough to receive this sacrament. Such practices reveal an hierarchical rather than a communitarian personhood in Africa. People and nature in community form a pyramid, rather than a circle.

### **Why such fascination with communitarian personhood?**

Why is this ideal of communitarian personhood so important for African theologians? Early African theologians teamed up with Western missionaries to defend how African culture had been disparaged through colonialism. But apart from these good intentions, Western missionaries were also looking for new theological frontiers, having come from a context where Christianity was being challenged by the Enlightenment and emerging secularism. The African frontier was fascinating because it still possessed the vestiges of primal religion, which constituted the earlier life of the now “civilized” Westerners. The first generation of African theologians served as field workers for Western theologians. So, while communitarian personhood gave Westerners a glimpse of their own lost past, the community with nature confirmed their assumption that early religious expressions were animistic. Western theologians in the form of missionaries would

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 17–18. Children are closer to their grandparents because they are not yet full beings and grandparents are about to attain the highest personhood (ancestorhood), which hopefully can rub off on the children.

<sup>55</sup> Pieter Hendrik Coetzee, *The African Philosophy Reader: A Text with Readings* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 325.

produce an African ethno-theology and African theologians would echo it by providing concrete examples from their own community. In so doing, African theologians would be employable in Western universities where they would continue to echo the Westerners' perception of the African.

For the present generation of African theologians, the concept of communitarian personhood provides an advantage for competing in global theological discourse. Communitarian personhood is offered as that which makes the African different, in fact superior, to the individualistic and lonely Westerner. This is simply a way of redefining and redrawing the boundaries of the discourse. In an era where Westerners are guilty of individualistic practices that threaten the sustainability of life on the planet, the African who has an harmonious relationship with nature and lives in community with other persons is the ideal person, albeit in "underdeveloped" situations. The Africans can be admired for the primal existence they have maintained, but are to be pitied for being "underdeveloped" by Western standards. Western donors support many research projects purporting to use African approaches to restoring the planet.

All this is an illusion because Africans are no longer communitarian, if ever they were. If the African was communitarian before, that community was not the one used by African theologians to do African theology. The African person was and is an hierarchical person.

## **Hierarchical constructions of personhood in Africa**

Personhood is understood to refer to those "attributes, capacities, and signs [...] of what it means 'properly' to be a social person in a particular society."<sup>56</sup> Herdt points out that such constructions are ideological in that these "attributes, capacities, and signs" "may be imposed (or denied), in whole or in part, not only on particular human actors but also categories of collectivities of human actors or nonhuman entities."<sup>57</sup> As has already been shown, early African personhood construction was predominantly male dominated and thus denied full personhood to women. Herdt thus shows that in many patriarchal societies, only males are considered to have the capacity to "attain complete personhood," the ultimate sign of personhood

<sup>56</sup> Gilbert H. Herdt (ed.), *Rituals of Manhood: Male Initiation in Papua New Guinea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 103.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

being the attainment of male ancestorhood. In this hierarchical construction, personhood

[is] acquired along an evolution undertaken over an entire lifetime, of which ancestorhood represents the culmination. It is not attained at birth, but through the fulfillment of a number of requirements which include procreation in marriage, and reproduction through the procreation of one's own children.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to procreation, full personhood is attained by discharging one's duties to one's immediate family, "the senior generations and the deceased forebears." Arlette Ottino observes that

the progression of the individual to the state of personhood is a common feature of hierarchically ordered societies, in which identity cannot be separated from the attributes attached to the position and the functions of the person within society, at successive stages in life.<sup>59</sup>

The hierarchical conception that persists in many African societies today seems to be more descriptive of African personhood. As this personhood encountered Western influence, it adapted itself to Western individualism so that the networks were maintained in an hierarchy of persons, where individuals would seek individual gains through various forms of patronage.<sup>60</sup> This construction of the African person is the result of the marginalization of women, children and other persons or non-persons at the lower level of the pyramid structure.

It is this construction of personhood that informs African theological reflection, which excluded not only women and children, but all those considered as not being fully human, such as the physically or mentally disabled or those considered "different." This construction influences how African theology engages with current ethical debates on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. When President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe said that homosexuals are worse than dogs, he was using the scale of personhood

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<sup>58</sup> Arlette Ottino, *The Universe Within a Balinese Village Through its Ritual Practices* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), p. 274.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>60</sup> The full scale of this can be seen today in various corrupt engagements between African élites and their Western counterparts. The cultural roots of this practice that has largely contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa need to be more fully explored.

value prevalent in African thought and practice where certain animals are at the bottom and certain persons at the top.

According to Geneva Smitherman, the African hierarchy of existence permeates the structuring of the entire universe, constituted as it is by the hierarchy of “nature, with God at the head of the hierarchy, followed by lesser deities, the ‘living dead’ (ancestral spirits), people, animals, places.”<sup>61</sup> What Smitherman does not include in his analysis is that also among the “living dead” there is an hierarchy. Not identifying such sub-hierarchies misses important nuances in the African construction of personhood that make children lesser persons since in this construction no human being attains their full personhood at birth. Rather, people attain their personhood over time, especially as they “prove” their worth with age. As Mkhize rightly states, “Personhood does not follow automatically simply because one is born of human seed. Rather it must be earned.”<sup>62</sup> As Gyekye notes, an individual’s social status is measured by

[a] person’s sense of responsibility, expressed, in turn, through her/his responsiveness as sensitivity to the needs and demands of the group; what a person has been able to achieve though his/her own exertions—physical, intellectual, moral; the extent to which a person fulfills certain social norms such as having a marital life and bringing up children.<sup>63</sup>

While such persons have their value in an hierarchy whose apex is the spiritual state of being (ancestorhood), children are at the lowest level of personhood. In African society, children are not classified as “persons” until they undergo various rites that introduce them to the ancestors, the highest level of personhood attainment. Even then, the child remains a potential person until reaching adulthood as determined by society. One can trace the conception and development of attaining personhood from

<sup>61</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1977), p. 75; see Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), pp. 144–5. Godfrey Mwakikagile claims that there was no hierarchical structure among the Kikuyu. This position is based on Mwakikagile’s overly positive presentation of African culture against the disturbances brought by colonial rule. See Godfrey Mwakikagile, *Africa and the West* (New York: Nova, 2000).

<sup>62</sup> Mkhize, op. cit. (note 42), p. 49. See also, Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” in Richard A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Washington: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 171–82; cf. E. A. Ruch and K. C. Anyanwu, *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1981).

<sup>63</sup> Gyekye, op. cit. (note 44), pp. 304–5.

the “it” status of the child to maturity of adult personhood. To move from the “it” status, the child must undergo some rituals, while the mother who was defiled by this “thing” coming out of her, must also undergo a ritual of cleansing to purify her from the contaminations of the non-person that she has produced. I am informed that in Xhosa culture, once a child dies they cannot be buried in the home since they have no chance of advancing to ancestorhood, the highest level of personhood attainment in the African construction of personhood.<sup>64</sup>

### **Conclusion**<sup>65</sup>

The issues raised here should be considered exploratory and hence require further investigation. At various stages of its development, African theological reflection has been based on faulty assumptions of what constituted the African person, leading to the neglect of children in African theological reflection and their exclusion from the Eucharist. The communitarian proposition ignores the reality of those who are marginalized because they are considered lesser beings. Children can, therefore, not be allowed access to all the means of grace within the church because they are considered less than fully human beings. This is contrary to the Lutheran understanding that it is not the person's comprehension but God's grace that assures people of salvation through the means of grace. Only once African theology has come to terms with this reality of the hierarchical construction of the African person will it start effectively to address the needs of children and other marginalized persons in the African church.

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<sup>64</sup> Not included in this study but dealt with in detail in my forthcoming major study, are the rituals of personhood attainment that include initiation and circumcision.

<sup>65</sup> Some of these conclusion are intentionally tentative as they come from a man and must therefore be revised through the future contribution of women and children to this project.



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# Church Discipline that is Inconsistent with the Gospel

Alex Mkumbo

If Lutheran theology is to assess church practices in terms of whether or not they “point to Christ,” then it is important to analyze whether or not these practices do so in their actual context. In the following, I will examine how the Central Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) exercises church discipline with regard to whether or not their practices are consistent with the central doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

Many ELCT pastors’ and congregations’ practices follow a pattern whereby a person is reinstated into full communion with the church only after accomplishing the prescribed deeds for being reinstated. This approach is evident in the way in which church discipline is exercised during the Sunday liturgy. Some Christians are denied Holy Communion, even though they have taken part in the liturgy of corporate confession and absolution. Instead, the church demands that they accomplish the deeds prescribed before being offered total forgiveness for their sins and allowed full access to Holy Communion.

This is contrary to Luther’s teaching that forgiveness of sins is freely offered to us upon hearing and accepting the assurance of God’s grace through the gospel, no matter how terrible our sins or unworthiness. This practice contradicts the doctrine of salvation through justification by faith in Jesus Christ. The way in which church discipline emphasizes the law ends up undermining the gospel. In commenting on Galatians 2:14, Luther argued that Peter, Barnabas and other Jews preached the gospel, but in the course of the spreading of the gospel, they established the law and, as a result, the gospel was eliminated.<sup>1</sup> When justification by grace rather than works is lost, the gospel too is lost.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, transl. by Erasmus Middleton and ed. by John Prince Fal-lowes (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), p. 61.

God forgives the whole person, *totus homo*, and does not wait until the demands of the law have been fulfilled. Luther points out that we are sinners not because of the particular sins we commit, but because we are first of all sinners.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, a person can stand before God's judgment only through God's gracious forgiveness and because of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Hence, as Luther put it, every Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously a righteous person and a sinner.

### The disciplinary process

Many congregants still report to an elder, evangelist or pastor that a church member has committed a particular sin. The person is then placed under church discipline and no longer allowed to partake of Holy Communion. At other times, the Christian goes to the church of their own accord to ask for absolution before the council of elders. Once a person has confessed their sin, they are placed under church discipline.<sup>3</sup> Occasionally when a woman has committed a sin, especially when becoming pregnant by breaking the Sixth Commandment, she will voluntarily stop participating in Holy Communion or even attending worship services.

When the council of elders meets, those under church discipline, such as unwed mothers and members who have stopped attending worship, appear before the council. One at a time, they are interrogated to determine whether they have truly repented. If the council members are satisfied with the answers, then the person seeking forgiveness is released from the ban. If not, they are turned back without absolution. For example, if a member was making and selling local beer and now seeks absolution and reinstatement, and members of the council are not satisfied with the answers given, they may put the person on probation to determine whether they have actually stopped making, selling and drinking local beer.<sup>4</sup> In the case of an unwed mother seeking absolution, the members of the council may ask her to have

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "Psalm 51," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 12 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 348.

<sup>3</sup> See minutes of Kinampana Parish of 20.7.1993; 22.7.1993; 24.8.1993; 10.3.1994; 6.9.1994. Christians were put under church discipline by the church elders' council after confessing to having committed adultery and having children out of wedlock. See also minutes of the same parish of 20.7.1993 and 6.10.1994. Christians were put under church discipline by the church elders' council after confessing that they used to make and drink millet beer.

<sup>4</sup> See minutes of Kinampana Parish of 6.10.1994.

her marriage blessed in the church before being reinstated.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes a woman is asked to appear before the council with the father of the child, or to separate from him.<sup>6</sup> In these cases, forgiveness is offered conditionally and the person who is asking for absolution is required to undergo certain changes before being reinstated.

When women or young girls who have fallen pregnant outside wedlock confess to having committed adultery, they are put under church discipline on the spot. They are denied Holy Communion, suspended from singing in the choir or other roles in the congregation, and sometimes the child is refused baptism until the mother undergoes certain penitential acts. The woman goes to the church to ask for forgiveness so that her conscience might be set free. Instead of being set free, certain works are demanded of her before she is liberated

This is a far cry from evangelical freedom, one which liberates the conscience from works. Is not the conscience more imprisoned and thereby forced to trust in completing certain works, instead of relying on Christ's mercy alone, as Luther taught?<sup>7</sup>

In the Northwestern Diocese, Kafunzile lists the seven steps which must be followed in order for an unwed mother to receive absolution: (1) the woman must take the matter to a church elder; (2) the church elder takes the matter to the parish pastor; (3) the pastor calls the members of the parish committee to meet with the woman; (4) she asks for forgiveness; (5) if her request is accepted, her punishment is to do manual work in and around the church; (6) she must confess her sin before the congregation during a Sunday service; and (7) the pastor will publicly grant her absolution.<sup>8</sup>

Where is Christ's mercy in this process? Christ forgives us freely and unconditionally. The statement "if her case is accepted," implies that sometimes the request of unwed mothers for absolution can be denied by members of

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<sup>5</sup> See minutes of Ulemo Parish of 11.7.1999 and 19.7.2000; minutes of Kiomboi Parish of 12.3.2003.

<sup>6</sup> See for example minutes of Kinampanda Parish of 6.9.1993 and 26.3.1994.

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Luther, "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows, 1521," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 298.

<sup>8</sup> Sylvester Kafunzile, *Shame and its Effects among the Haya Women in Northwestern Tanzania*, PhD Thesis, Luther Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota (2001), p. 88. Kafunzile states that traditional Haya culture did not allow for a single woman to be impregnated and bear a child while she was still in her parent's home. If the young woman was impregnated out of wedlock, this woman has conceived an illegitimate child in the family. The unwed mother has shamed herself, the family, the clan and the ancestral spirits. She was supposed to be killed, or forsaken by her family, because bearing a child while still in her father's house was a taboo, See *ibid.*, p. 81.

the parish committee who act as judges. This goes against the heart of the gospel, in which forgiveness is offered freely to those who confess.

### **The practice of church discipline in the liturgy**

The ELCT's Sunday liturgy begins with the confession of sins. In this public confession, every participant is expected to recall their sins committed in thought, word and deed. This comprehensive nature of confession is in line with Luther, who, in his treatise "A Discussion on How Confession Should Be Made, 1520," advises that the confession be made in the most general terms, covering sins both known and unknown.<sup>9</sup> After confession, absolution is announced. The person as a whole is forgiven. There is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). Thus, the significance of the confession does not depend on the confession itself, but on our reliance on Christ's promise. According to Luther, the persons who confess do not put their trust in the confession but in the gracious promise of God. We are to rejoice not because we confess, but because God has promised forgiveness to those who confess. In confessing we call on God to fulfill what God has promised. Our confession is nothing unless the promise of God stands firm; forgiveness cannot be acquired by any righteousness on our part.

In the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon states:

[...] those who have sinned after baptism obtain forgiveness of sins whenever they come to repentance and that absolution should not be denied them by the church. Now properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace [...]. Rejected [...] are those who teach that whoever has once become righteous cannot fall again.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, "A Discussion on How Confession Should Be Made, 1520," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 39 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> "The Augsburg Confession—German Text—Article XII: Repentance," in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 44.

When we confess our sins and the minister announces absolution, we believe that all those worshipping have received forgiveness through their faith in Christ. No one can decide who believes and who does not, except Christ himself. Our responsibility is to “take hold of Christ like a wedding ring,”—a common saying of Luther’s—, and to trust God’s promise of the forgiveness of our sins. We cannot receive absolution and become righteous before God on account of our own value, deeds, or accomplishments. This happens by grace, through faith alone, for Christ’s sake, when we believe that Christ suffered for us, and that for his sake, our sin is absolved and righteousness and everlasting life are offered to us.<sup>11</sup>

The way in which the ELCT exercises church discipline is contrary to Lutheran theology. It seems as if some Christians are assured of forgiveness while others are denied access to it. For instance, women who bear children out of wedlock, those who are divorced, those whose marriages were not solemnized in the church or have not received a church blessing and those who are alcoholics. Despite this, most of them continue to attend Sunday worship regularly, where they participate in the confession and with the rest of the congregation are assured the forgiveness of their sins. Yet, even after this, they are denied the right to partake of the Lord’s Supper or to have their children blessed.

The constitution of the ELCT’s Northern Diocese openly states that it blesses Christian mothers, whose marriages are recognized by the diocese, on the day of the baptism of their newborn children.<sup>12</sup> It does not specify what kind of marriage is recognized, but in the Northwestern Diocese only marriages solemnized in the church are recognized. Thus, Christians whose marriages are contracted through customary rites, secular law or elopements are placed under church discipline.<sup>13</sup>

After being baptized, the children, parents and sponsors gather before the altar. Only those parents whose marriages have been solemnized or blessed in the church are allowed to remain with the baptized children to receive the church’s blessings. Others must return to their places. By denying a blessing to the parents, who have just had their children baptized, on the grounds of their marriage not having been solemnized or blessed

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<sup>11</sup> “The Augsburg Confession—German Text—Article IV: Justification,” in *ibid.*, pp. 38–40.

<sup>12</sup> *Kanuni na Sheria na Maongozi ya Sharika. ELCT Northern Diocese Constitution* (Nairobi: Act Print Limited, 1986), III, 2(h), p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson Jonathan Lugayana, “The Practice of Church Discipline and its Challenges to Mission in the ELCT Northwestern Diocese,” MTh Thesis, Tumaini University, Makumira University College (2006), pp. 62–63.

in the church, and by denying the sacrament to other Christians who are under church discipline, the church contradicts itself and the heart of the gospel.

During the time of the missionaries, Christians under church discipline who attended worship had to sit at the back of the church. They were not allowed to participate in the liturgy and were denied the sacrament. Since the missionaries did not want to contradict themselves or to ignore the fact that forgiveness is granted through corporate confession, they prohibited anyone under church discipline to participate in the liturgy.

It is good for Christians to have their marriage solemnized in church or for the church to offer a blessing. Nevertheless, from a Lutheran perspective, asking God's blessing does not make a marriage sacred. According to Lutheran understanding, marital and ethical issues in general fall under the worldly realm (two kingdoms). Nevertheless, the gospel rules the spiritual realm, and the core message of the gospel is salvation in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by grace through faith alone.

The means of grace are God's gracious gift to the church through which divine love reaches people and establishes fellowship.<sup>14</sup> The grace of God embraces all people, of all epochs and circumstances. The baptism of infants expresses most clearly the very nature of the gospel. The basic meaning of grace is that God comes to the people. God takes the initiative to redeem, and salvation is a free gift to all and for all. The sacrament of baptism is the open arms of the heavenly Father, whose unlimited love embraces the child and brings him or her into fellowship with God and all the saints.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the church should accept the child and baptize them without putting any restrictions on the parents or demanding of them or the guardians that they first have true faith before the church can accept and baptize the child. As Luther argues, it is not their faith that makes baptism effective: God deals with the child directly.

In most parishes of the Central Diocese, Holy Communion is celebrated once a month. Those who intend to commune should first register with the evangelist. This is intended to ascertain how many will partake of the sacrament and to provide an opportunity for those in authority to exercise church discipline. Those who seem "unworthy" are told not to participate. Those who do not register are not permitted to partake, and may be re-

<sup>14</sup> Eric H. Wahlstrom, "The Means of Grace," in Emmer Engberg, Conrad Bergendoff and Edgar M. Carlson (eds), *Centennial Essays: Augustana Lutheran Church 1860-1960* (Illinois: Augustana Press, 1960), pp. 51-69, here p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

moved from or bypassed at the Communion Table.<sup>16</sup> This is more common in rural parishes because people know one another. In large urban areas, church discipline is usually not imposed as strictly. Consequently, parishes in urban areas more rarely deny Holy Communion to Christians who are under church discipline. In some rural parishes, those judged unworthy or unrighteous are dismissed before the Holy Communion part of the service begins. Only those regarded holy and righteous are allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the church is made up of people who are *simul iustus et peccator*, a *communio peccatorum*, where each and every Christian is made holy through the divine sanctification given to us by the grace of Christ. Luther emphasizes that the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments does not make us holy. We are all sinners. We are imperfect and depend on the God's forgiving grace to make us truly and actually a *communio sanctorum*. The church should not deny Christians Holy Communion. Instead, let them be guided by their own conscience about whether or not to partake in Holy Communion. God accepts us through God's gracious mercy on account of our faith in Jesus Christ. The manner in which the church restricts Holy Communion, judging other Christians unworthy to partake until they demonstrate a holy life and right preparation, has led many to view the Lord's Table as a judgment table rather than a table of grace. As a consequence, some Christians decline to commune because they cannot believe that God will receive them because of their sins.

Instead, the question should be whether or not we accept the invitation to receive the gift offered freely, and not about judging who is and who is not worthy of partaking. For through the means of grace we all expect to receive Christ's mercy and to be strengthened and comforted in our hearts.

## In conclusion

The way in which church discipline is practiced in the ELCT is rooted in African Traditional Religion as well as in the Lutheran missionaries' practice of church discipline. Both traditional African discipline and the missionaries' church discipline indicated that salvation is based on works and

<sup>16</sup> See also Ronilick Mchami, "Paul, the Law and the Lutherans of Tanzania: Paul's Use of the Mosaic Law and how this is Understood by the Lutherans of Tanzania," PhD dissertation, Tumaini University, Makumira University College (2005), p. 273.

<sup>17</sup> See also Kafunzile, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 96.

moral achievement, which conflicts with Luther's teaching on justification. The Anilamba people have accepted the way in which church discipline is practiced in the Central Diocese because it agrees with their own cultural traditions. Thus, confronting this is a formidable challenge.

The contradiction between the practice of church discipline and justification by grace through faith alone must be confronted and changed. People must be helped to see the difference between what the gospel promises and traditional African practices that depend on fulfilling moral laws and cultural values. In granting absolution, while at the same time judging other Christians as unworthy of receiving the blessings of the church or partaking of Holy Communion, the church shows itself unfaithful to God's promise and in conflict with God's free forgiveness of sins. We have to learn from our Savior Jesus Christ, whose practice was characterized by extraordinary grace, mercy and understanding for human failings.

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# United with Christ in Baptism

Kristin Graff-Kallevåg

The Church of Norway's liturgy of baptism is currently being revised. It is striking that in the new proposal the forgiveness of sin is hardly mentioned. This begs the question why the liturgy of baptism has been proposed in this way? I suspect that the main reason for this is the fact that traditional Lutheran teaching and preaching have connected the notion of forgiveness too strongly to a forensic understanding of justification. As I will argue here, this connection causes some problems with regard to relating forgiveness to the child who is being baptized. The declaration of the forgiveness of sin, however, is a crucial aspect of a Lutheran theology of baptism, and can indeed bring change and hope for people today. Therefore, we are challenged to rethink how a theology of forgiveness, as it relates to baptism, can be articulated meaningfully today.

Since the mid-1970s, the so-called "new Finnish school," founded by Prof. Tuomo Mannermaa of the University of Helsinki, has contributed a pioneering interpretation of Luther's teaching on justification to Luther studies.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation critiques the traditional Lutheran focus on the forensic aspect of justification. I shall argue that this interpretation offers new possibilities for communicating the relevance of forgiveness and for articulating a theology of forgiveness in baptism. It does so by indicating a distinction in the notion of forgiveness as a condition for the believer's union with God, which is significant for communicating a theology of baptism in contemporary contexts. In this way, the Finnish interpretation is potentially transformative for theology in the life of the church.

## **Union with Christ and the forgiveness of sin**

Risto Saarinen argues that in traditional Lutheran theology the concept of Christ being present in faith has been understood in terms of a neo-Kantian

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<sup>1</sup> A good introduction to this interpretation is Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

epistemology.<sup>2</sup> Christ's presence in the believer has been connected with how God's will affects the soul. The believer's union with Christ has not been understood ontologically, but as a union of will. Crucial here is the assertion that Luther describes Christ as ontologically present in faith, and that this means real participation in God. Mannermaa claims that this idea is at the core of Luther's theology, which is close to the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* or divinization.<sup>3</sup>

How does Luther understand Christ as ontologically present in faith?<sup>4</sup> Mannermaa underlines that although Luther uses philosophical terms, his ontology is primarily theological.<sup>5</sup> Luther understands God's essence as being inseparable from God's attributes for effecting salvation. When believers receive God's Word and God's love, they receive God as a gift. Further, it is characteristic of God's divinity that God gives. What God gives, ultimately, is God's self. God is the giving of Godself in Christ, the Word:

God is in relation to himself [*sic*] in the movement of the Word [...] at the same time that he [*sic*] is this movement of the Word [...] In Christ the inner-trinitarian Word, which is the being of God, becomes incarnate. The presence of Christ's word and the word about Christ in faith are the presence of God himself [*sic*].<sup>6</sup>

In this way, God's being is relational. Based on this theological ontology, Luther understands Christ as ontologically present in faith, a presence that means real participation in God. By faith, the believer is concretely united with God in Christ.

Christ as the true God is God giving Godself to the believer. Mannermaa refers to Luther's concept of Christ as the "only sinner." As a "collective

<sup>2</sup> See Tuomo Mannermaa's presentation of Saarinen's research, in Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why Is Luther So Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research," in *ibid.*, pp. 5ff. According to neo-Kantian philosophy, as in the philosophy of Herman Lotze, we cannot say anything about the being of a thing, but only about this thing's effect upon us. It is argued that the philosopher Herman Lotze and the theologians Albrecht Ritschl, Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Holl, and even Karl Barth and Ernst Wolf represent this neo-Kantian way of thinking.

<sup>3</sup> Tuomo Mannermaa, "Justification and Theosis in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," in *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> This paragraph refers to Mannermaa, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 10ff., and Simo Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift (Donum): The Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification," in *ibid.*, pp. 49f.

<sup>5</sup> Mark this theological understanding of Christ as ontologically present in faith, in contrast to the "physical" understanding of ontology, which neo-Kantian critique of ontology presupposes.

<sup>6</sup> Mannermaa, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 12.

person,” Christ took upon himself humanity’s sin and, therefore, is the “greatest sinner” and the “only sinner.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Christ is perfect righteousness and life, and has won the battle between righteousness and sin “in himself.” Participation in Christ therefore means participating in the victory over sin and death. Moreover, since God is identified with God’s attributes which effect salvation, the believer participates in Christ in “the institution of ‘blessing, righteousness and life.’”<sup>8</sup> Hence, forgiveness of sin is understood as logically following the believer’s union with God in Christ, and not *visa versa*. Mannermaa emphasizes that Luther does not separate the person of Christ from his work. The Christian is justified by faith alone, because “in faith itself Christ is present, and so the whole of salvation.”<sup>9</sup> Here we see the doctrine of justification by faith alone being interpreted from the perspective of divinization.

In Christ, present in faith, the grace of God (God’s friendly attitude toward a sinner, which includes declaring the sinner righteous) and the gift of God (which brings a real renewal of the sinner) are present in the believer.<sup>10</sup> Hence, justification is understood as grace and gift, given to the believer through the union with God in Christ.<sup>11</sup> Because grace and gift follow the indwelling of Christ, these two aspects of justification are not sequential but together.

Mannermaa and his colleagues argue that traditional Lutheran theology has emphasized the forensic aspect of justification to a degree that is foreign to, even contradicts, Luther’s theology. This they exemplify by comparing the notion of justification in the Formula of Concord to Luther’s writings.<sup>12</sup> In the Formula of Concord, justification by faith alone is understood in purely forensic terms. Justification is denoted as the forgiveness of sin “imputed” to the believer, because of Christ’s perfect obedience and merit. Christ’s

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<sup>7</sup> Mannermaa, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 29ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Mannermaa, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 14f.

<sup>10</sup> Peura, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 42ff. Here “grace” is understood as God’s friendly and favorable attitude toward a sinner “by which he is disposed to pour Christ and the Holy Spirit with his gifts into us.” “Gift” is understood as the internal good in the believer through participating in the love of God that opposes sin, removes sin and increasingly transforms the sinner into Christlikeness.

<sup>11</sup> Mannermaa, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 28, 38. This interpretation questions a traditional description of the Lutheran notion of justification as forensic in opposition to the Orthodox teaching on divinization and the Catholic emphasis on the effective aspect of justification.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27f.

indwelling in the believer is seen as logically following this imputed and declared righteousness. Simo Peura concludes that,

[a]ccording to the Formula of Concord, the indwelling of God is not that righteousness by which we are declared righteous. The indwelling of God follows that antecedent justification by faith. This means that God is not really present in a Christian who is declared to be righteous through faith for Christ's sake.<sup>13</sup>

Mannermaa claims that practically all Lutheran theology after the Formula of Concord has followed this view of justification. Peura argues that this view has been strengthened under the impact of neo-Kantian philosophy and theology.<sup>14</sup>

### **Baptized into union with God in Christ**

According to Luther, the main purpose of baptism is to save.<sup>15</sup> Luther describes both the forgiveness of sin and the union with God in Christ as pivotal gifts that baptism brings.<sup>16</sup> I will now consider what new possibilities the new Finnish interpretation of Luther offers for articulating the relation between these two gifts.

#### *Union with God logically precedes the forgiveness of sin*

According to the new Finnish interpretation of Luther, the forgiveness of sin logically follows the believer's union with God in Christ. Does this mean that the forgiveness of sin is not considered as a condition for the believer's union with God?

On the one hand, the answer must be yes. Mannermaa strongly criticizes a forensic view of justification, where the forgiveness of sin is understood as logically preceding the union with God in Christ. Mannermaa's point of departure is Luther's argument that if the person of Christ and the person of the believer are separated from each other in the locus of justification,

<sup>13</sup> Peura, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44ff., and Mannermaa, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> See the "Large Catechism (1529)," in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 459.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 461f.

then salvation is seen within the framework of the order of the law.<sup>17</sup> In the Formula of Concord's forensic approach to justification, the believer is declared righteous on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience and merit. The indwelling of Christ follows this declared and imputed righteousness. Mannermaa argues that in this respect practically all Lutheran theology has followed the forensic view of justification in the Formula of Concord. Mannermaa daringly proposes that

[o]ne must ask here whether what Luther considers damning for the believer to think is exactly what the Formula of Concord calls sound doctrine: in the locus of justification the divine person of Christ is separated from the person of the believer, because justification is only a forensic imputation and does not presuppose the divine presence of Christ in faith.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, Mannermaa is aware that Luther regards the forgiveness of sin as necessary for salvation. Mannermaa states that, according to Luther, justification as the indwelling of Christ and justification as forgiveness must not be divided.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, within the framework of the Finnish interpretation of Luther, the forgiveness of sin is understood as a condition for the believer's union with God in Christ, but only in the sense that this forgiveness is inseparable from the person of Christ and the essence of God. Logically, it follows the divine indwelling in the believer.

Both in the Formula of Concord and in *Union with Christ*, forgiveness is seen as a necessary condition for the believer's union with God. In both places, forgiveness is seen as an expression of God's love, and the doctrine of justification by faith alone is emphasized. Hence, both views are connected to pivotal Lutheran concepts. So, what is the difference? In brief, the difference is that, according to the Finnish interpretation forgiveness logically follows the believer's union with God in Christ, while according to the forensic view, forgiveness logically precedes this union. I will argue that the logic in *Union with Christ* coheres better with some pivotal Lutheran ideas and offers better possibilities for communicating a theology of forgiveness in baptism in the life of the church.

In line with traditional Lutheran theology, Peura points out that Luther is convinced that human beings are not intended to find in themselves

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<sup>17</sup> Mannermaa, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 38f.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

what is needed to love purely; God is the giver of the love God demands.<sup>20</sup> When the Formula of Concord argues that forgiveness has to precede divine indwelling, it presupposes that moral righteousness has to precede divine indwelling. This idea is not easily collated with the idea of God as the giver of all good. A solution is offered to this problem of coherence; through the union with Christ, the believer receives both grace and gift, is declared righteous and given the power to love. God is the giver of unconditional grace and the love God demands. I think this coheres very well with Luther's definition of what it is to have a god and what God is: "A "god" is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart."<sup>21</sup>

According to this view of God as the giver of all good, God equips us with the power to love, forgives and destroys sin and conquers its negative effects. This is consistent with a perspective of God's love as unconditional. Moreover, it indicates a view of God not tolerating sin, in the sense that God totally conquers it. The thought of God as immune to sin or transcendent above sin is impossible within this frame of thought.<sup>22</sup> The forensic notion of justification indicates that God must be protected against sin, since God's declaration of the righteousness of the believer must precede the believer's union with God. It is, however, difficult to understand why God needs the believer's purity in order to let the believer into God's communion, if God is the purifier. I propose that this view implies that the love in the communion of God is not unconditional, but conditioned by moral righteousness, effected by the declaration of forgiveness.

It can be argued that the notion of forgiveness as following the believer's union with Christ, rather than preceding this union, coheres better to the idea of Christ as the righteousness of the believer. According to a forensic perspective on justification, the declaration of forgiveness, on the basis of Christ's merit, makes the believer righteous. Hence, Christ is only indirectly the righteousness of the believer. It is the effects on the soul of what Christ has done that are present in the believer, and not Christ himself. The Finnish interpretation understands Christ as the righteousness of the

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<sup>20</sup> Simo Peura, "What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation," in Braaten and Jenson, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 78f.; 84f.

<sup>21</sup> See Luther's comments on the Ten Commandments, in Kolb and Wengert, *op. cit.* (note 15), p. 386.

<sup>22</sup> Peura actually argues that God in Jesus became the greatest sinner of all.

believer, because the righteous Christ is ontologically present in the believer. This provides a more Christocentric way of articulating justification. Mannermaa refers to Luther saying, “Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the Christian righteousness [...]. Here there is no work of the Law, no love; but there is an entirely different kind of righteousness.”<sup>23</sup>

Mannermaa expands on this view of righteousness, by referring to Luther who said that the human being was never meant to be made righteous through works, but rather was created in order to be redeemed:

We have often enough said that through faith we must be born as God’s children and gods, lords and kings, just as Christ is born in eternity a true God of the Father [...] And just as Christ did not earn his divinity beforehand through works or achieve it by becoming man, but rather had this divinity from birth without any works and before he became man, so also we have not through works of love earned being God’s children, by which our sins are forgiven and death and hell cannot harm us, but rather have received this out of grace through faith in the gospel, without works and before love.<sup>24</sup>

I have argued above that according to this interpretation, the believer’s union with God in Christ logically precedes the forgiveness of sin. The quotation above illustrates how this concept is connected to the idea that the believer is born again as a child of God. The believer is born to be God’s child, by which the believer receives the forgiveness of sin. Discussing Luther’s understanding of God as self-giving love, Peura quotes Luther: “He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us.”<sup>25</sup> In the following, I shall turn to the question of which new possibilities this interpretation of Luther offers for a Lutheran theology of baptism.

### *Baptism as an outwardly means to union with God*

Simo Peura shows how Luther’s notion of justification is closely connected to his understanding of baptism.<sup>26</sup> Luther distinguishes between salvation as

<sup>23</sup> Mannermaa, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 37f.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 40. See also Mannermaa, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 13f. and Peura, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 84, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Peura, *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> Simo Peura, “Baptism, Justification, and the Joint Declaration,” in Niels Henrik Gregersen et al. (eds), *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 117ff.,

“inwardly” true and “outwardly” provided. Salvation is inwardly true when a Christian participates in God through faith and receives God’s gift and grace. By emphasizing baptism as a means of salvation, Luther sees the external side of salvation as prior to the internal side. This, Peura argues, is based on Luther’s idea that God saves by giving Godself and God’s gifts, in Christ and by the Spirit, to the believer: “When this idea is applied to baptism, it means that God through his [*sic*] Word includes in the baptismal water the treasure, that is, his [*sic*] honor and name, what he [*sic*] is, and what he [*sic*] does.”<sup>27</sup> Believing this, the baptized participate in the treasure that the water contains, which is God and God’s gift: “The core of the matter is that the meaning of baptism, the death of sin and the resurrection of the new person, become effective in the baptized person because God unites himself [*sic*] with the sinner both through the sacramental act and through faith.”<sup>28</sup> Corresponding to the interpretation of Luther’s doctrine of justification, Peura argues that the basic notion in Luther’s theology of baptism is that God unites Godself with the sinner in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

We have seen how this perspective critiques a narrow view of justification as the declaration of the forgiveness of sin. In her article, Teresa Swan Tuite takes this one step further by arguing that the Finns fail to see Luther’s use of the tactual metaphor in his theology of the union between Christ and the believer.<sup>30</sup> In line with traditional modern Lutheran theology, they instead use exclusively auditory and visual metaphors. Understanding justification foremost as a declaration of forgiveness is linked to an exclusive use of the auditory metaphor. Swan Tuite’s critique of Mannermaa is therefore in strong continuity with Mannermaa’s own critique of a narrow notion of justification. What does this mean for understanding baptism? Crucial for the Finns is the assertion that since God is the giving of Godself and God’s gifts to the believer, to receive God’s gifts is to participate in God. According to Swan Tuite’s interpretation of Luther, this should include the perspective of God giving grace by touching. I think this offers a new

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and Peura, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 53f.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> Peura, *op. cit.* (note 4) p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53f.

<sup>30</sup> Teresa Swan Tuite, “Toward a Multi-Sensory Metaphorics of Grace—Luther’s Tactual Itinerary,” in this publication, pp. 125f.

insight into how baptism is the starting point for the union between Christ and the believer.<sup>31</sup>

*Union with God and the forgiveness of sin in baptism*

What then are the implications of the Finnish interpretation of Luther for how to relate the forgiveness of sin and becoming united with God in Christ in baptism? According to this interpretation, the main content of salvation, mediated in baptism, is the believer's union with God in Christ. Through this union, the believer participates in God, since God is giving of God's self in Christ. Being united with Christ, the believer shares Christ's righteousness. Moreover, God is the giver of all good. This means that the believer is united with the source of unconditional grace, and receives the forgiveness of sin. This also means that the believer is transformed into Christlikeness through participating in God's love and is empowered to love. The baptized do not have to be cleaned before being permitted access to God. God embraces the entire person, also their sinful selves, and includes them in a community of blessing and love. Hence, the forgiveness of sin can only be understood as a condition for being included in the righteous communion with God in baptism, when forgiveness is seen as something that belongs to this communion related to the being of God and the purpose of the human being.

Compared to a forensic approach to justification, this understanding of the relation between union and forgiveness might make more sense to a parent. Children do not need forgiveness in order to be allowed access to communion with their parents, but receive forgiveness as a consequence of the love from their parents with whom they already have a loving relationship.

Further, the human being was created to be a recipient of God's grace and love. Through baptism, as a real means of salvation, God gives God's loving and redeeming communion as a gift and the believer receives it in faith. This understanding of God's purpose offers a new possibility to understand baptism as completing the first birth, and is pivotal in constituting Christian identity. It offers an interesting possibility for articulating the

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<sup>31</sup> Since bodily relating, as described in the tactual, is more basic than cognitive relating, as described in the auditory and the visual, Swan Tuite prefers the tactual as a starting point for a multisensory approach to elucidating justification. "More basic than hearing the Word through the ear and grasping it with the mind is hearing the Word through the flesh and being grasped therein." *Ibid.*, p. 135.

break between the old and the new life, with continuity between the old and the new life.

## Reflections on a new liturgy of baptism

In September 2008, the Church Council of the Church of Norway invited comments on a proposal for a new liturgy of baptism. Here I discuss this proposal in light of the above analysis. The proposal's vision is to develop a liturgy that "attends to creation, salvation, and Christlikeness and that interacts with humans' experiences of life."<sup>32</sup> A crucial question is whether this proposal succeeds in relating baptism to experience and expressing it as a means to salvation.

### *Baptism as union with Christ*<sup>33</sup>

It is noticeable that in the proposed liturgy the idea of union with Christ is not at all prominent.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the proposal is marked by an effort to communicate the comprehensiveness of salvation and the communal aspect of belief, which corresponds to the need for community in contemporary Norwegian culture.<sup>35</sup> Why is the idea of union with Christ, which is a pivotal Lutheran concept, almost avoided? The proposal seeks to provide meaning in contemporary culture. Being "born to new life in Christ" or

<sup>32</sup> Den Norske kirke og Kirkerådet, *Dåpsliturgi Og Høringsdokument: Saksutredning, Forslag Til Dåpsliturgi for Den Norske Kirke—2008* (Bergen: Eide forl., 2008), p. 6, author's own translation.

<sup>33</sup> Here, "Union with Christ" is understood in line with traditional Lutheran theology and not as a "ontological union with Christ."

<sup>34</sup> The Trinitarian formula "baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" is present several places, but this formula does not explicitly express the idea of union with Christ. It is actually possible to perform the liturgy with only two clear references to the idea of union with Christ (if one chooses between alternatives in a certain way). Especially noteworthy is the possibility not to include this idea in the introduction, which explains what baptism is, and in the words that are said over the baptismal water. It is also noteworthy that this idea is neither reflected in the prayer before the act of baptism, nor in the recommended reading from the Bible. Only in one place is the explicit idea of union with Christ not optional. At the beginning of the act of baptism it is said: "We are humans under the condition of sin and death, but in baptism we are united with the risen Christ." This formulation has, however, been added after the first proposal for a new liturgy was rejected. Op. cit. (note 32), pp. 9, 16. This strengthens the impression that the idea of union with Christ has not been important to the committee for the new liturgy. The other place, where this idea is not optional, is at the end of the liturgy, where it is said that the baptized shall "belong to" Christ.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Otto Krogseth et al., *Pluralisme Og Identitet: Kulturanalytiske Perspektiver På Nordiske Nasjonalkirker I Møte Med Religios Og Moralsk Pluralisme* (Oslo: Gyldendal akademisk, 2001).

“united with Christ,” is not immediately understandable to the majority of church members in a post-Christian context, whereas “God,” “salvation” and “gifts of God” are more familiar and understandable. I argue, however, that in a post-Christian context it is especially important to articulate a specific Christian theology of baptism. In a multi-religious society it is important to articulate that we are baptized into Christ, because this is what characterizes Christian belief.

### *Baptism for the forgiveness of sin*

The proposal for the new liturgy of baptism reflects a reluctance to talk about sin and forgiveness. Yet, the forgiveness of sin is mentioned explicitly in the creed. Additionally, forgiveness, as implied in the statement, can also be understood by persons unfamiliar with Christian semantics, “We are humans under the condition of sin and death, but in baptism we are united with the risen Christ.”<sup>36</sup> The proposal focuses on God’s care and love, which according to Lutheran belief include the forgiveness of sin. This is, however, not fully transparent in a post-Christian culture.

Why this reluctance to talk about sin and the forgiveness of sin? One reason might be that traditional Lutheran theology strongly, and sometimes one-sidedly, has focused on the forensic aspect of justification. This has been at the expense of emphasizing other central aspects of salvation. By communicating the comprehensiveness of salvation, the new liturgy might be seen as an effort to compensate for this. In this connection, it is interesting to note that forensic language is totally avoided.

Another reason might be that the term “sin” is often associated with falling short of moral norms connected with a certain Christian tradition. Disagreement with these norms can result in downplaying the focus on sin and forgiveness. This moral notion of sin also causes problems when relating sin to infant baptism.

A third possible reason is that a strong emphasis on the forensic aspect of justification is difficult to collate with viewing God as pure love.<sup>37</sup> This can lead to the misunderstanding that before baptism the child is viewed as evil and not pleasing to God. The new liturgy, unlike the old, is marked by an effort to communicate thanks for the child, and that the child, created in

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<sup>36</sup> As mentioned in footnote 34, this sentence was added only after the first proposal for a new liturgy had been rejected.

<sup>37</sup> See my argument above.

the image of God, is an object of God's love and concern.<sup>38</sup> It also avoids the phrase "born again as a child of God," because of the problematic question as to when a person becomes a child of God.<sup>39</sup> The proposal could be seen as emphasizing God's love and concern at the expense of the emphasis on the forgiveness of sin in baptism, and baptism as a new birth.

It is indeed problematic that the proposal does not clearly communicate sin as a condition of life and forgiveness as a gift from God. If the church wants to speak honestly about human life, it cannot avoid emphasizing sin and forgiveness. Because of sin we are not only unable to love perfectly, but also unable to trust God completely. The experience of being unable to love and trust is not limited to Christians. Likewise, feelings of guilt and shame are common human experiences. Sin is a part of the human condition, even though this is not what people want to be reminded of in relation to a newborn baby. By describing sin as a condition of life, the church can contribute a language to express human failing.

Theology is both above and within culture. Being "above" culture challenges theology to offer new interpretations of experiences of life, and not necessarily agree with the commonly held interpretations. It is not that experiences are to be ignored; rather, they should be reinterpreted in such a way that helps people to understand their lives more fully.

In Norwegian culture, failing is often explained as a result of circumstances, and the one who fails is often described as being a victim rather than a sinner. In this context, a theology of sin and guilt might help people understand their experiences of failing in a new way. To take sin and guilt seriously can be a burden. But to deal with sin and guilt within the framework of being in communion with God can lighten this burden and bring change and hope. By taking sin seriously, God takes the person and those the person offends seriously. At the same time, God is pure love and grace and raises the sinner through union with Christ. The Lutheran theology of forgiveness is a resource for life. To avoid talking about sin and forgiveness is not only to neglect pivotal Lutheran concepts, but also to miss communicating how the Christian faith is related to life experiences.

Hence, the solution for the church is not to avoid talking about sin and forgiveness, but to rethink how it does so. The proposal for a new liturgy of baptism in the Church of Norway seems reluctant to talk about sin and forgiveness. I have argued that a traditional, strong and one-sided emphasis

<sup>38</sup> *Op. cit.* (note 32), p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

on the forensic aspect of justification might be one reason for this reluctance. The Finnish interpretation of Luther, however, offers an alternative way of thinking about forgiveness. Here, forgiveness is not a condition for being allowed access to the union with God. Rather, it logically follows the believer's union with God in Christ. Through union with God, the Giver of all good, the believer receives both forgiveness and the power to love. This view of forgiveness offers new possibilities for articulating how the forgiveness in baptism is an expression of God's love and care. The proposal aims at relating baptism to experience and to express baptism as a means to salvation. The Finnish interpretation of Luther offers new resources to rethink how this can be done. In this way, this interpretation is potentially transformative for the theology in the life of the Church of Norway.



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# “Toward a Multi-Sensory Metaphorics of Grace—Luther’s Tactual Itinerary”

Teresa Swan Tuite

In this article, I consider the limits of the late modern use of the auditory as the singular sensory metaphorics for imagining God’s relating in justification and, in light of these limitations, argue for a multi-sensory metaphorics in its stead. Just as visual metaphors provided resources for imagining liberation from tradition and the powers of reason in early modern thought, so too, auditory metaphors provided resources for imagining divine sovereignty and human limitation at the end of modernity. But, once established as the singular sense through which to imagine divine-human relating, the auditory tended toward some of the very same theologically problematic conclusions attributed to the visual, or so I aim to show.

In general, the modern use of a single sense as the metaphor through which to construe divine–human relating is problematic for two reasons. It is problematic, first, because it disregards the bodily integrity of human persons by identifying one sense as universally more significant for relating with God than any other sense. The elevation of this single sense, whether seeing or hearing, inevitably also entails an identification of this sense with the mind over and against the body. The modern use of a single sense for imagining divine–human relating is problematic, second, because it inevitably domesticates God by circumscribing God’s modes of relating within a single sensory logic. This problematic conclusion is particularly difficult to explain with regard to the auditory, since it was turned to precisely in an effort to reassert divine transcendence. It is partly in light of this problematic that I apply the term “metaphorics” to the modern use of sensory metaphors in discussions of divine–human relating.

“Metaphorics” are metaphorical expressions that serve as pointers toward a broad set of epistemological and ontological commitments. Generally speaking, metaphorics may be described as metaphysical conjectures that do not achieve a fixed form.<sup>1</sup> In late modern use, however, the metaphorics

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth,” in David Michael Levin (ed.), *Modernity and the*

of audition become fixed in binary opposition to the metaphors of vision. It is precisely this that I intend to disrupt by arguing for the tactual as basic to a multi-sensory metaphors.

### **The turn to the auditory in late modern theology**

Responding to Tuomo Mannermaa on the Finnish reading of Luther, Robert Jenson praises Mannermaa's ability to resist modern tendencies in justification talk. As Jenson notes, Mannermaa rightly recognizes that Luther scholars regularly distort Luther's theological claims, especially justification, by reading Luther as, of all things, a Kantian. Against this modern distortion, Mannermaa's interpretation is more in keeping with Luther's own teachings. According to Jenson, Mannermaa offers a fitting interpretation of Luther by organizing Luther's disparate claims on justification through the auditory metaphor. "To be, according to Luther according to Mannermaa, is to give oneself to another, by speaking."<sup>2</sup>

Focusing on Mannermaa's claim that justification is deification, Jenson turns to Luther's treatise, "On the Freedom of a Christian, 1520," to illustrate the complexity of Luther's view. In this treatise alone, Luther describes faith as making one righteous in several ways. First, faith makes righteous because "believing what God says fulfills the first and great commandment." Second, faith makes us righteous because "the soul that hearkens to the word becomes what the word is, holy and right." Third, faith makes righteous because "in faith the soul is united with Christ as a bride with the groom, to be 'one body' with him and so possess his righteousness."<sup>3</sup> Curiously, Jenson again claims that the meaning of these various claims becomes clear when organized through auditory metaphors.

One sees how all this works together only when one notices the astonishing switch that Luther has pulled on the Greeks' ontology and epistemology. In their [the Greeks'] doctrine, the specific character of personal beings, "souls," is that their being is determined by what they, as perfect eyes, see. Luther switched that; for him the specific character of personal being is that we are

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*Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 30–62.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Jenson, "Response to Tuomo Mannermaa, 'Why Is Luther So Fascinating?'" in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (eds), *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

what, as perfect ears, we hear. Moreover, if for the Greeks "to be" generally is to perdure, to hang on to oneself, for Luther "to be" is to share oneself by speaking: thus for Christ "to be" is to share himself in his word.<sup>4</sup>

According to Jenson, the distinctive character of Luther's thought stems from his turn to the auditory, which stands in opposition to the ontology and epistemology of the Greeks, rooted, as he implies, in a metaphorics of vision. It is worth noting how Jenson's elevation of the auditory resonates with Luther's own privileging of the ear over the eye.<sup>5</sup>

As Margaret Miles shows in her study of Luther's theological anthropology, Luther identifies the ear rather than the eye as the most direct access to the heart.<sup>6</sup> Luther's emphasis on the auditory is significant for at least two reasons. First, it imagines the human subject as passive in relation to the active Word. Whereas the classical model of vision presumes activity on the part of the seeing subject as well as the object seen, hearing presumes a passive subject who is accosted by the auditory effects of an object. Second, Luther's juxtaposition of hearing to seeing expresses Luther's sense of the relation between the reality of faith and present experience. The reality of faith—justification—is given as a promise in the Word alone. As Luther puts it, "A right faith goes right on with its eyes closed," which is to say that the visual might actually distort and inhibit faith. Right faith simply "clings to God's Word."<sup>7</sup> So, Luther does elevate the ear over the eye and in so doing points toward an alternative set of theological commitments than those expressed by the visually saturated discourse of his contemporaries.

Even so, the contrast Jenson draws between Luther's use of auditory metaphors and the thinking of the Greeks cannot be adequately understood in terms of Luther's work. Rather, it must be set against the backdrop of the turn to hearing in modern theology.

Since the publication of Adolf Harnack's *History of Dogma*, the auditory has been used to express and symbolize true religion. Breaking with scholarly custom, Harnack asserted an opposition between genuine Christianity, identified with Hebraism, and the thinking of the Greeks.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Miles, "The Rope Breaks When It Is Tightest": Luther on the Body, Consciousness, and the Word," in *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 77, no. 3/4 (1984), pp. 239–58.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 248. Although Miles offers this quotation as evidence for Luther's elevation of the ear over the eye, it seems to me that here Luther mixes the auditory with the tactual such that the appropriate posture before the Word is figured as clinging.

He registered the contrast between these two ways of thinking under the rubrics of hearing versus seeing. According to Harnack, genuine Christian theology is organized in “dynamic auditive” terms as opposed to the “visual, contemplative” terms of Greek thought.<sup>8</sup>

It is not until the publication of Karl Barth’s *The Epistle to the Romans*, however, that this visual/auditive binary emerges as a framework for constructive theology. For Barth, modern visual theology is a series of efforts at “natural theology”; it assumes some “point of contact” between God and human beings that enables some measure of theological understanding apart from revelation. In this way, modern theology collapses the “infinite qualitative distinction” between God and humanity. In failing to appreciate the distinction between God and humanity, modern discourses about justification tend to imagine divine–human relating as something more akin to moral or even ontological participation between divine and human subjects. Morally, it asserts agency on the part of both God and human persons. Ontologically, it claims relationship based in some common likeness between God and humanity. By turning to the auditory, theologians like Barth and Jenson are taking aim at precisely these features of modern theology.

It is clear from Luther’s own work that auditory metaphors provide a theologically useful alternative to visual metaphors, setting critical limits and generating constructive possibilities. As the singular sensory logic for construing divine–human relating, however, the auditory has several limits. First, it tends toward the conclusion that certain features of human persons—their bodies—are inherently more sinful than other features—their minds. This conclusion stems from the assumption that the value of the auditory metaphor stems from the sense that hearing is less dependent on the body than the other senses. As Jonathan Ree puts it, “considered physically or metaphysically, light may or may not be less material than sound; but considered as an experience, hearing is decidedly less materialistic than seeing.”<sup>9</sup>

It is this feature of hearing that features, for example, in Barth’s comments on Romans 1:23, where he relies on auditory metaphors to correct the human propensity to collapse the infinite qualitative distinction between God and creation through appeal to vision or, worse yet, touch.

<sup>8</sup> Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Ree, *I See a Voice: A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness and the Senses* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 44.

They changed the glory of the incorruptible—for an image of the corruptible [...]. They had lost their knowledge of the crevasse, the polar zone, the desert barrier, which must be crossed if men [*sic*] are really to advance from corruption to incorruption [...]. Once the eye, which can perceive this distinction has been blinded, there arises in the midst, between here and there, between us and the “Wholly Other,” a mist or concoction of religion in which, by a whole series of skillful assimilations and mixings more or less strongly flavored with sexuality, sometimes the behavior of men [*sic*] or of animals is exalted to be an experience of God, sometimes the Being and Existence of God is “enjoyed” as a human or animal experience. In all this mist the prime factor is provided by the illusion that it is possible for men [*sic*] to hold communication with God or, at least, to enter into a covenant relationship with Him [*sic*] without miracle—vertical and from above, without the dissolution of all things, and apart from THE truth which lies beyond birth and death.<sup>10</sup>

The auditory stands apart because it is less corrupted than either vision or touch, precisely because it is less dependent upon the body. On the basis of this feature of auditory experience, Barth calls upon hearing as a way of imagining a mode of relating to God that transcends the sinful limits imposed by our bodies.

Second, an auditory metaphorics tends toward the problematic conclusion that human beings are wholly passive before God. As noted above, Luther usefully draws on metaphors of hearing to emphasize the priority of God’s activity in the justifying event. Using hearing as the singular sense through which divine–human relating is understood, however, suggests that radical passivity defines every aspect of human relating with God when, in fact, our creaturely status alone depends on some degree of agency.<sup>11</sup>

It is perhaps in response to this problematic that in its late modern form the metaphorics of hearing has come to entail activity of a very particular sort. As Ree points out, “the idea that auditory perception is passive compared with seeing and looking seems to forget, however, that hearing and listening may also, in their way, be means of active inquiry, and methods of orienting one in the world.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps more significantly,

<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Oxford, 1968), pp. 49–50.

<sup>11</sup> On this point, see David Kelsey, “Two Theologies of Death: Anthropological Gleanings,” in *Modern Theology*, vol. 13 (December 2002), pp. 347–70.

<sup>12</sup> Ree, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 53.

it is not only active listening but also the use of the voice that informs the modern metaphoric of hearing.

This pairing of hearing and voice has been significant since the nineteenth century, when it was used to illustrate “the idea that perceptions enter into the body and pass through it on their way into the soul, whilst actions push past them in the opposite direction heading out into the objective world.”<sup>13</sup> What this pairing then suggests is that hearing’s vulnerability to the world is overcome by the powers of reason and will, which act upon the world through vocalization. In theological conversations, the auditory enables the claim that understanding and assent are the proper activities of the faithful believer. So, an exclusively auditory metaphoric comprehends Barth’s view that justification depends on an absolutely free and gracious act of God as well as the free rational response of human agents.

The logic of this decidedly modern use of the auditory is poignantly expressed in Barth’s argument for believer’s baptism as put forward in his lecture, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*. Here, Barth contends that infant baptism simply cannot be made sense of within a Protestant dogmatics that claims faith is necessary for salvation. For faith, which comes through hearing, is nothing if not conscious acknowledgement of and assent to the work of God in Christ.<sup>14</sup>

This way of using the auditory metaphor gives lie to the assumption that elevating the auditory over and against the visual provides a genuine alternative to the problematic course of modern theology. For here the auditory falls prey to some of the very same problems evidenced by the visual.

### **A third way: The tactual as a route to a multi-sensory metaphoric**

Having demonstrated some of the shortcomings of a single-sensory approach to construing divine–human relating, here I sketch what I refer to as a multi-sensory approach to divine–human relating. A multi-sensory approach draws upon multiple senses to describe divine–human relating in an effort to destabilize the essentialistic tendencies of single sensory metaphoric, while at the same time presupposing the tactual body as basic

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, transl. by Ernest Payne (London: SCM Press, 1948), pp. 45–47.

to any sensory metaphors.<sup>15</sup> In order to fill out this multi-sensory approach, I would like to return briefly to Mannermaa's discussion of justification before turning, in conclusion, to Luther on infant baptism.

I began with a brief set of comments on Jenson's auditory reading of Mannermaa on justification as *theosis*. Here I argue that Jenson's focus on the auditory fails to appreciate a significant facet of Mannermaa's work, namely the disruption of the Hellenism/Hebraism binary and with it the dismantling of an exclusively auditory reading of Luther's work.

Let me briefly review Mannermaa's central claims before turning to this facet of his work.<sup>16</sup> According to Mannermaa, justification is a real participation in God analogous to the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.<sup>17</sup> At the heart of *theosis* is the presupposition that "a human being can participate in the fullness of life that is in God."<sup>18</sup> This participation consists of the real presence of Christ in the life of the believer. Although the later theology of Lutheranism defined justification in an entirely forensic manner, Luther maintains the inseparability of justification and the real presence of Christ in faith. According to Mannermaa, Christ is both "the favor (*favor*) of God (i.e., the forgiveness of sins and removal of God's wrath) and the 'gift' of God (*donum*, God himself [*sic*], present in the fullness of his essence)."<sup>19</sup> It is precisely the present Christ who mediates salvation.<sup>20</sup>

In an effort to explain the sort of presence Luther has in mind, Mannermaa highlights Luther's use of Aristotelian analogies that operate with a classical realist epistemology. For Mannermaa, this classical epistemology provides an hermeneutical key for unlocking Luther's notion of union with Christ. "Whatever Luther's stance on nominalism may be, in his theology, at least, he follows this classical epistemology quite explicitly from beginning to end."<sup>21</sup> According to this classical epistemology, there is an identity between knowing subject and the object known.

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<sup>15</sup> Although touch is commonly referred to as one of the five senses, it is more appropriately described not as one among the senses but as basic to all of the senses as each of the other senses depends upon the tactual. For more on this point, see Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> For a more in depth discussion of Mannermaa's doctrinal claims regarding justification, see Kristin Graff-Kallefvåg, "United with Christ in Baptism," in this publication, pp. 111ff.

<sup>17</sup> Mannermaa, "Justification and *Theosis*," in Braaten and Jenson, op. cit. (note 2), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Mannermaa, "Why Is Luther So Fascinating?," in Braaten and Jenson, op. cit. (note 2), p. 6

Significantly, vision provides the primary model for this classical epistemology. In classical understanding, vision involves a quasi physical ray that flows out from the viewer to touch the object viewed. The form of the object then returns along the ray to the mind of the viewer, uniting subject and object in one continuous act.<sup>22</sup> As David Chidester shows in his study of sight and sound in religious discourse, it is from this basic Greek understanding of vision that subsequent Christian thinkers “could derive certain basic associations that attended the process of seeing: continuity, connection, presence, similarity, immediacy, and even the union between seer and seen.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Mannermaa situates Luther in a long line of Christian thinkers, both East and West, who draw upon the metaphors of vision associated with Greek thought in order to illustrate and explain union with God. In the broadest terms, union with Christ entails a real participation of the believer in Christ on account of the knowledge of faith.

Mannermaa’s visual reading of Luther is illustrated by his discussion of Christ as the form of faith. “The core of [Luther’s] program of Reformation itself can be formulated by saying that the form (i.e., the living reality) of faith is not divinely elevated human love [...] but is in reality Christ himself.” Against the scholastic view of faith as an “uncertain knowledge” or mere speculation, Luther argues that faith “contains the divine reality (*forma*) which is Christ himself, who is present in faith.”<sup>24</sup> According to Mannermaa, Luther’s understanding of Christ as the form of faith is made clear in his “Lectures on Galatians”:

Faith takes hold of Christ [...]. He is the form that adorns and informs faith as color does the wall. Therefore Christian faith is not an idle quality or an empty husk in the heart [...]. It is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in faith itself. Thus, faith is a sort of knowledge or darkness that nothing can see. Yet the Christ of whom faith takes hold is sitting in this darkness as God sat in the midst of darkness on Sinai and in the temple. Therefore our “formal righteousness” is not a love that informs faith; but it is faith itself, a cloud in our hearts, that is,

<sup>22</sup> Margaret R. Miles, “Seeing (As If) With Our Own Eyes,” in Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 68. For a more extensive discussion of classical theories of vision and audition, see David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing and Religious Discourse* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), pp. 2–8.

<sup>23</sup> Chidester, *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Mannermaa, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 36.

trust in a thing we do not see, in Christ, who is present especially when He cannot be seen.

Therefore faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ. But how He is present—this is beyond our thought; for there is darkness, as I have said. Where the confidence of the heart is present, therefore, there Christ is present in that very cloud of faith [...]. It is Christ who forms and trains faith or who is the form of faith. Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life.<sup>25</sup>

Mannermaa summarizes the meaning of this text with five words, "*In ipsa fide Christus adest.*" First, the statement "Christ is the object of faith, or rather [...] in the faith itself Christ is present." And second, the statement "faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ." Even if Mannermaa's summary interpretation is not a literal translation of these statements,<sup>26</sup> I argue that his interpretation aptly renders the meaning of these claims in light of the visual metaphorics at play in this passage. In the first case, Mannermaa's reading moves from the claim that "in the faith itself Christ is present" to the analogy that precedes it: "Christ informs faith as color informs a wall." With this analogy in mind, Luther suggests that faith is an active power that takes hold of and is transformed by Christ. In the second case, Mannermaa's reading recalls the Latin sense of the term *apprehendit*. "Faith justifies because it takes hold of (*apprehendit*) and possesses (*possidet*) this treasure, the present Christ."<sup>27</sup> In Mannermaa's interpretation, the term *possidet* reinforces the term *apprehendit* and *apprehendit* is translated as "apprehend." Here, Mannermaa's conclusion that Christ is the form of faith follows a classical understanding, which assumes that "for the soul to 'apprehend' something is for it to acquire the 'form' of what it sees."<sup>28</sup>

Once the visual metaphorics at play are acknowledged, however, I further suggest that it is precisely because Luther is working out of a visual

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), pp. 129–30.

<sup>26</sup> James M. Kittelson, "To the Finland Station: A Review Essay," in *Dialogue*, vol. 38, no. 3 (Summer 1999), p. 235. Kittelson goes on to note that the exact phrase does not appear in the critical text which reads, *Ideo iustificat fides, dicimus, quia habet illum thesaurum, quia Christus adest; quo modo non est cogitabile [...]. Iustificat ergo fides, quia apprehendit et possidet istum thesaurum, scilicet Christum praesentem. Sed quo modo praesens sit, non est cogitabile, quia sunt tenebrae, ut dixi. WA 40, I, 229–30.*

<sup>27</sup> Kittelson, *ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>28</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "Response to Mark Seifrid, Paul Metzger and Carl Trueman," in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65 (2003), p. 247.

metaphorics that, in both instances, he goes on to disrupt the logic of the visual. “Faith is a sort of knowledge or darkness that nothing can see” and “how He is present—this is beyond our thought; for there is darkness.”<sup>29</sup> Significantly, it is in the wake of these disruptions that Luther turns from the visual to the tactual, employing multiple senses to imagine union with Christ. In both instances, faith is described as darkness that may yet be identified with knowledge. The knowledge that faith has of Christ is the knowledge that comes from having “taken hold” (*apprehendit*) of Christ. In light of Luther’s explicit disruption of the visual metaphorics in which the soul “apprehends” Christ, it seems that the English rendering usefully captures the tactual alternative. Touch provides knowledge that something is present but does not provide an indication of how. In this way, Luther directly cautions against metaphysical explanations, while simultaneously gesturing toward an alternative way of imagining the real presence of Christ. Like the presence of God in the temple, Christ’s presence palpably pervades faith. This relating is no less intimate than the relating associated with vision, yet it entails ontological difference. Touch depends for its relating upon the distinction between bodies touching and touched.

With this suggestive reading of Galatians in mind, let me conclude by turning briefly to Luther on infant baptism as a means of further elaborating on his use of the tactual as resource for a multi-sensory metaphorics.<sup>30</sup> From early on, Luther insists that faith is essential to the efficacy of baptism. His earliest position is that the faith of the sponsors stands in for and so makes efficacious the baptism of the child. By 1522, however, Luther becomes dissatisfied with this faith by proxy view and insists on the necessity of personal faith. At first glance, Luther’s abandonment of faith by proxy seems to culminate in a cognitive assent view of faith. He writes,

Baptism helps no one and is to be administered to no one unless he believes for himself. No one who does not personally believe is to be baptized [...]. Faith must be present either before or in baptism itself, otherwise the child is not freed from the devil and his sins.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Luther, *op. cit.* (note 25), p. 130.

<sup>30</sup> For the theological implications of this reading of Luther on baptism, see Graff-Kallevåg, *op. cit.* (note 16).

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Paul Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 364.

But Luther does not settle with a cognitive assent view. Instead, he offers a theory of infant faith that teaches that children believe when they are baptized. Luther never abandons the idea of infant faith, always also insisting that it is not faith but the Word and work of God that are decisive for justification.<sup>32</sup>

In the only full-length treatise concerning infant baptism, Luther provides a coherent picture of his mature view. Written in response to two pastors on the question of rebaptism, Luther reiterates his earlier teachings about infant baptism and infant faith but ultimately rests his argument on the divine covenant. Where some interpreters have argued that this represents a shift away from the significance of infant faith in Luther's thought, I would argue that Luther's emphasis on divine activity only makes more explicit the nature of infant faith. By claiming a logical priority for God's action while insisting on the necessity of faith, Luther suggests that faith is not something that comes either before or after God acts upon us in the Word, but is part and parcel of being related to by God.

As a gift from God, faith does not depend on our cognitive understanding and assent. Faith is first and foremost a participation in God's grace. This notion of faith as a participation in God's grace is illustrated by children because, as Luther puts it in a Lenten sermon from 1525, children hear the Word, not as adults who "grasp it with their ears and their reason but often without faith," but who "hear it through their ears without reason and with faith."<sup>33</sup> Having disrupted the notion of faith as cognitive assent, Luther goes on to disrupt the metaphorics of hearing, stating that children hear the Word through baptism itself. Their hearing consists in this: "Christ, who has commanded that they be brought, takes them into his arms."<sup>34</sup>

As with his discussion of faith in Galatians, so here Luther moves to the tactual. More basic than hearing the Word through the ear and grasping it with the mind is hearing the Word through the flesh and being grasped therein. Just as Luther imagined justifying faith tactually, so here he offers a tactual image of baptismal grace. The images work in tandem: taken into

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<sup>32</sup> In his discussion of Luther's defense of infant baptism, Jaroslav Pelikan identifies the formal outlines of Luther's position in this way: "Faith and the Word are inseparably interrelated, even and also in the means of grace, and moreover, then even and also in the means of grace 'faith builds and is founded on the Word of God rather than God's Word on faith.'" Jaroslav Pelikan, "Luther's Defense of Infant Baptism," in Carl S. Meyer (ed.), *Luther for an Ecumenical Age: Essays in Commemoration of the 450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 203.

<sup>33</sup> Althaus, *op. cit.* (note 31), p. 366.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

the arms of Christ in baptism, the believer takes hold of Christ by faith. In contrast to Luther's use of the auditory, which figures the human person as wholly passive before God, these tactual images assume both divine and human agency. The tactual relation is one in which both parties engage and are engaged, both approach and are approached.

To describe justification tactually does not mean that human agency is of the same quality as that of God. It does suggest, however, that justification entails a dynamic form of relating in which both God and human persons participate. This relating does not depend on profession and assent. As Luther's image suggests, this relating is like the relating between a parent and newborn child. This relating involves both parties personally and intimately, but it does not depend on profession and assent. It is this quality of tactual relating that Luther falls back on in his theology of justification.

I have said enough here to show, at least, that Luther's use of sensory metaphors, whether auditory or visual, presupposes the tactual. Rather than view this use of the tactual as suggestive of a metaphors unto itself, I suggest, following Luther, that it may be more useful to view the tactual as basic to every sensory metaphors.

# Spiritual Care in Palliative Care

Dorothee Arnold

Palliative care is the integral care of patients at the end of their lives. It is based on the work of a multi-disciplinary team comprised of medical, social, psychological and spiritual counselors.<sup>1</sup> In Germany, palliative care is included in the national health care system, and pastoral care workers are an integral part of the palliative care team and thus structurally included in the health care system.

## The practice of spiritual care

Activities in such pastoral care include listening, caring, rituals, *memoria*<sup>2</sup> and attending to patients' spiritual needs. This not only involves caring for patients who are dying, but also attending to fundamental questions that arise in the tension between the "no longer" and "not yet" that palliative patients face before they reach the final stages of dying. These include such questions as, What have I done in and with my life? What do I still want to do? What am I still able to do? This can involve reviewing the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the WHO's definition of palliative care:

"Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problem associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual. Palliative care:

- provides relief from pain and other distressing symptoms;
- affirms life and regards dying as a normal process;
- intends neither to hasten or postpone death;
- integrates the psychological and spiritual aspects of patient care;
- offers a support system to help patients live as actively as possible until death;
- offers a support system to help the family cope during the patients illness and in their own bereavement;
- uses a team approach to address the needs of patients and their families, including bereavement counselling, if indicated;
- will enhance quality of life, and may also positively influence the course of illness;
- is applicable early in the course of illness, in conjunction with other therapies that are intended to prolong life, such as chemotherapy or radiation therapy, and includes those investigations needed to better understand and manage distressing clinical complications." At [www.who.int/cancer/palliative/definition/en/](http://www.who.int/cancer/palliative/definition/en/), accessed September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> A monastic term that involves praying for and remembering the dead.

past as well as considering new possibilities in the present.<sup>3</sup> Palliative care suggests a “journey” into the country of death, as well as perhaps also the actual wish to depart from the present situation, possibly for the last time.<sup>4</sup> Physical conditions determine temporal possibilities: What am I able to do and when? Which longings or dreams might never be fulfilled? Which places will I never see?

On a summer’s day, I sit with a patient in the common room. The sun is shining through the window, we are listening to the murmur of the aquarium. The patient recalls, maybe a bit nostalgically, how she and her family had spent their holidays at the seaside. She misses the wideness, the tranquility, the beach, the air and the water. Will she go there another time? I asked her to tell me about her holidays and her favorite places. She starts talking, describing things so clearly that one can smell the fish and feel the sand under one’s feet. Shining with joyful memories she recalls the moment when she saw the sea for the first time, and the little hotel where she and her husband used to stay. Suddenly she adds, “Maybe we could go there again, if only for a couple of days. Why not?” When I say good-bye, I thank her for what she has shared with me. She smiles and says, “This time, it was me giving something.”<sup>5</sup>

Here “journey” expresses the possibility of organizing one’s life and even opening a new possibility in the present. That possibility begins with the patient’s recognition that she can “give something” and not only be the one who needs or receives something. But the idea of such a “journey” can also be connected to unfulfilled wishes.

A patient reports that she has raised six daughters. After German reunification in 1990, she and her husband rebuilt the house. Shortly after she fell ill and “then there was no time to enjoy it any longer.” There were many things she would have liked to do, but time was running out. Above all, she would have liked to travel but her husband did not want to. She would have especially liked to go to Bavaria to see a pasture in the Alps.

<sup>3</sup> Wilfried Steiger and Fred Salomon, “Seelsorgerliche Begleitung in der Palliativmedizin,” in Eberhard Aulbert and Detlev Zech (eds.), *Lehrbuch der Palliativmedizin* (Stuttgart: Schattauer Verlag, 1997), pp. 879–91, here pp. 882ff.

<sup>4</sup> See Hans-Christoph Piper, *Gespräche mit Sterbenden* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), p. 161. Many of his interview partners were planning a journey shortly before they died.

<sup>5</sup> This and the following example derive from my work in the palliative care unit of the Klinik für Palliativmedizin (Luise-Henrietten-Stift des Evangelischen Diakonissenhauses, Berlin Teltow Lehnin), Kloster Lehnin (Brandenburg, Germany). I thank the patients, Rev. Johannes Albrecht, Dr Jürgen Pfitzner and the whole staff for their trust and the possibility to work there.

Now she is praying and starts crying. After a while she says, “I have never told this to anyone before.”

Palliative spiritual care creates a platform from where one can argue with the realities of life and death. It addresses patients, their relatives and the palliative care team, concentrating on such practices as caring and listening as well as creating certain rituals.

### **Rituals of spiritual care**

Rituals are an important part of palliative care, such as bidding farewell to someone after they have died, sharing a common meal with the palliative care team, sometimes after a patient has died, with the understanding that the deceased is also “present.”<sup>6</sup> Rituals interrupt daily routines and create a distinct community.

*Memoria*: Spiritual care includes *memoria*, a monastic term I use to describe the various rituals of remembering that occur in palliative care. *Memoria* includes individual and group practices of commemoration, including such gestures as sending sympathy cards or a monthly ritual with the palliative care team. By calling out the name of the deceased in the Christian community, that person is seen and placed within the context of the Christian hope of resurrection (see Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15).

*Blessing*: The following example indicates the importance of a blessing ritual.

I visit a patient on the day of her death. “You have come,” she says. She hardly looks at me; she stares into the corner behind me. She seems to be pleased to have a visitor—but is it me? Again and again she repeats the sentence, “you have come,” adding some sentences I cannot understand. Occasionally, she stops talking and glances from me at the corner of the room and then back at me again. Before leaving, I ask her if I might bless her. She nods instantly as if this is what she has been waiting for. I put my hands on her head. As I speak the Trinitarian blessing she starts crying. I wipe away her tears and stand beside

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eberhard Hauschildt, “Was ist ein Ritual? Versuch einer Definition und Typologie in konstruktivem Anschluß an die Theorie des Alltags,” in *Wege zum Menschen* 45 (1993), pp. 24–35, here pp. 32f.; Erhard Weiher, “Spirituelle Begleitung in der palliativen Betreuung,” in Cornelia Knipping (ed.), *Lehrbuch Palliative Care* (Berlin: Huber Hans, 2007), pp. 438–53, here pp. 448f.

her bed for a while, silent. We look at each other. “All is well,” I say; later, I cannot remember why I said this. She smiles, nods and confirms that “all is well.” I leave, as she is still staring into the corner of the room.<sup>7</sup>

I believe the patient came to realize that she was being comforted by something “wholly other”: she found herself placed in the presence of God. Her life was being taken up into God’s, which was being acknowledged by God and symbolized Christologically by the sign of the cross. Her tears and her confirming my statement that “all is well” show that blessing can be a concrete sign of redemption. Afterwards, she seemed to be relieved. Something had been completed. I could leave—and so could she.

***Blessing at the deathbed:*** This is an important spiritual element in palliative care. I have been working in palliative care near Berlin (Germany), where only the minority of the population is churched, yet where every patient is blessed after their death. The pastoral care worker discusses this in advance with the relatives, often having to deal with the sensitivities of using Christian language and “Godtalk.” A certain pattern is followed in the ritual, with different prayers, but always finishing with a blessing. The complete palliative care team is present: physicians, nurses, the social worker, the psychologist, the physiotherapist and even the housekeeper of the unit. Thus, all team members have the opportunity to “take leave” of the patient and their relatives. The blessing at the deathbed is of great importance for the entire team.

### **Pastoral care as “spiritual care”**

As an integral part of palliative care in general, pastoral care as spiritual care aims at integrated care that includes the patient’s environment, their circumstances, family and friends. While palliative care is systemic in approach—all those involved are part of a system—it brings together multiple perspectives, focuses resources, highlights charismata/gifts and abilities and searches for future solutions.<sup>8</sup> Because of the tension between the “no longer” and the “not yet,” this spiritual care aspect of palliative care often

<sup>7</sup> This example stems from my work in the palliative care unit in the Communal Hospital in Winsen/Luhe, Germany.

<sup>8</sup> See Günther Emlein, “Seelsorge in systemischer Praxis. Grundlagen für eine systemische Konzeption der Seelsorge,” in *Wege zum Menschen* 53 (2001), pp. 158–78, here p. 160.

encourages and develops perspectives for the future, precisely by starting with what is at hand in the present. What then does “spiritual care” add to the common practices already in place as part of pastoral care in these institutional settings?

“Spiritual care” as a part of the practice of Protestant pastoral care, has to be understood on the basis of Protestant spirituality. Protestant spirituality begins by approaching God in distinction from human beings, yet this God has already revealed Godself in Jesus Christ. Thus, God can be experienced in daily life. Protestant spirituality connects justifying faith, piety and daily life. These three elements constitute a spirit-filled life. This spirituality becomes concrete in the attitude toward and practice of pastoral care and affects the palliative team, the patient and the relatives. It allows others to access their own spiritual resources, as well as opening up those resources for the community.

Even if traditional pastoral care includes caring for the staff and the patients’ relatives, it is usually placed outside the structures of the treatment and not integrated in the other aspects of patient care. Instead, this spiritual care structurally integrates pastoral care into palliative care through a distinctively Protestant spirituality. This becomes evident in personal meetings and in the structure of the palliative care team, where those providing pastoral care make their spirituality available as a resource.<sup>9</sup> Such expressions of Protestant spirituality are gaining significance, especially in increasingly secular contexts.

Does the Christian tradition of caring for the suffering and dying justify a general integration of pastoral care as spiritual care in palliative care?<sup>10</sup> What does it mean to have spiritual care integrated into the national health care system? Such spiritual care has led to noticeable improvements during the course of an illness and a more peaceful death for those who receive such care.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Eckhard Frick, “Glauben ist keine Wunderdroge. Hilft Spiritualität bei der Bewältigung schwerer Krankheit?,” in *Herder Korrespondenz* 56,1 (2002), pp. 41–46.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Michael Klessmann, “Von der Krankenseelsorge zur Krankenhausseelsorge—historische Streiflichter,” in Michael Klessmann (ed.), *Handbuch der Krankenhauseselsorge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), pp. 40–48, here pp. 40–44.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Renate Ebeling, “Spiritualität im Krankenhaus,” in *Wege zum Menschen* 46 (1994), pp. 390–7. Frick points out that there are obviously forms of spirituality which effect an improvement of health. See Frick, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 45.

Today, in Germany, most people die in institutions.<sup>12</sup> Even though “death and dying” are continually being discussed in the media, the dying themselves often are not noticed at all. As a result, many dying people have to face the fear of dying all by themselves.

Spiritual care responds to this situation by caring for all those involved, and appreciating and interpreting a person’s life and history in the context of the Christian faith. Further, spiritual care has social meaning and reflects social responsibility: it represents solidarity and community with dying people, acts on their behalf and publicly recognizes death and dying. Spiritual care deserves a place in palliative care for one simple but important reason. “It would be fatal if, in searching for hope and meaning, Christian spirituality would remain excluded instead of developing its own critical potential.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In large cities, up to ninety percent of the departed have died in institutions. Cf. S. Borck, “Seelsorge in der Palliativmedizin,” in *Bundesgesundheitsblatt-Gesundheitsforschung-Gesundheitsschutz* 11 (2006), pp. 1122–31, here p. 1122.

<sup>13</sup> Frick, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 45.

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# The Church's Prophetic Witness: Social, Economic, and Political Engagement

Paul John Isaak

In ecumenical and evangelical churches today, there seems to be some confusion as to the working relationship between the church and the government or state. For example, when does the church have to retain its autonomy and its right to make its own decisions without government interference, or when does it have to maintain its integrity and be what it is called to say and do?

## **The nature of the church**

The nature of the church is best expressed in light of various biblical references, such as to be the people of God (Jer 31:33), the body of Christ (Eph 1:23), the temple of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4), and *koinonia*/communion (Hos 2:18–23 and Rev 21).<sup>1</sup>

The church as the people of God means that Christians are called to express in their lives the fact that they have been designated a “royal priesthood” and “holy nation.” In Christ, who offered himself, Christians offer their whole being “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). Every member participates in the priesthood of the whole church. No one exercises that priesthood apart from the unique priesthood of Christ, and not in isolation from the other members of the body. As a prophetic and royal people, Christians seek to witness to God’s will and to influence the course of events in the world. Throughout the ages, the church of God continues on its pilgrimage to the eternal rest prepared for it (cf. Heb 4:9–11). It is a prophetic sign of the fulfillment that God will bring about through Christ by the power of the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Here we are closely following the main ideas, in The World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), at [www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO2005\\_198\\_en.pdf](http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO2005_198_en.pdf), accessed September 2009.

Through faith, baptism and the Holy Spirit, human beings become members of the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:3–13). Through participation in the Lord’s Supper, this is renewed time and again (cf. 1 Cor 10:16). The same Holy Spirit confers manifold gifts on the members of the body (cf. 1 Cor 12:4; 7–11) and brings forth their unity (cf. 1 Cor 12:12). All members of Christ are given gifts for building up the body (cf. Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:4–30). The diversity and specific nature of these gifts enrich the church’s life, and enable it to serve the Lord in its vocation, as a sign of the furthering of God’s kingdom in this world.

Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, the church is God’s household, a holy temple in which the Holy Spirit lives and acts. By the power of the Holy Spirit, believers grow into “a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21–22), into a “spiritual house” (1 Pet 2:5). Filled with the Holy Spirit, they witness (cf. Acts 1:8), pray, love, work and serve, leading a life worthy of their calling, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (cf. Eph 4:1–3).

The biblical notion of *koinonia/communio* has become central in the quest for a common understanding of the nature of the church and its visible unity. The term *koinonia* (communion, participation, fellowship, sharing) is not only found in the New Testament but also later, especially in patristic and Reformation writings which describe the church. Today, it is being reclaimed as a key to understanding the nature and mission of the church. Due to its richness of meaning, it is also ecumenically useful in appreciating the various forms of and extent to which communion is already being enjoyed by the churches.

The basic verbal form from which the noun *koinonia* derives means to have something in common, to share, to participate, to have a part in, to act together, or to be in a contractual relationship involving obligations of mutual accountability. The word *koinonia* appears in significant passages, such as the sharing in the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Cor 10:16), the reconciliation of Paul with Peter, James and John (cf. Gal 2:9), the collection for the poor (cf. Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:3–4) and the experience and witness of the church (cf. Acts 2:42–45).

Furthermore, in exercising its mission, the church cannot be true to itself without witnessing (*martyria*) to God’s will for the salvation and transformation of the world. That is why from its beginning it preached the Word and bore witness to God’s great deeds, inviting everyone to repentance (*metanoia*), baptism (cf. Acts 2:37–38) and the fuller life enjoyed by followers of Jesus (cf. Jn 10:10). These activities, along with diakonia, have been essential dimensions of its identity. In these ways, the church signifies, participates in and anticipates the

new humanity God intends, and witnesses to God's grace in human situations of need until Christ comes in glory (cf. Mt 25:31).

The church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all through advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalized. This entails critically analyzing and exposing unjust structures and working for their transformation. The church is called to proclaim the gospel's hope and comfort through works of compassion and mercy (cf. Lk. 4:18–19). This faithful witness may result in Christians suffering for the sake of the gospel. The church is called to heal and reconcile broken human relationships and to be God's instrument in bringing reconciliation in situations of human division and hatred (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18–21). Together with all people of goodwill, it is also called to care for the integrity of God's creation, addressing its abuse and destruction and participating in how God is healing broken relationships between humanity and the rest of creation. In short, the church has the freedom to witness and the moral necessity to express its inner convictions, even when this runs counter to political expediency.

Today, we need to discuss these matters because it is unacceptable for the church either to conflate religion and politics, or to keep them totally separate. We propose instead that critical participation in transforming social, economic and political realities is essential to the church's prophetic witness and service.

## **The Augsburg Confession (1530) and beyond**

As Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession states:

Concerning public order and secular government it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God and that Christians may without sin exercise political authority; be princes and judges; pass sentences and administer justice according to imperial and other existing laws; punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers; buy and sell; take required oaths; possess property; be married; etc.

Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things indicated above is Christian. Also condemned are those who teach that Christian perfection means physically leaving house and home, spouse and child, and refraining from the above-mentioned activities. In fact, the only true perfection is true fear of God and true faith in God. For the gospel teaches an internal, eternal reality and righteousness

of the heart, not an external, temporal one. The gospel does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage but instead intends that a person keep all this as a true order of God and demonstrate in these walks of life Christian love and true good works according to each person's calling. Christians, therefore, are obliged to be subject to political authority and to obey its commands and laws in all that may be done without sin. But if a command of the political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings (Acts 5[:29]).<sup>2</sup>

In certain historical contexts, Christianity has many times been seen and used as a weapon for breaking down (as a tool of colonialism, oppression or suppression) or breaking through (as a tool of liberation, transformation or reconciliation) in the process of Christianization, humanization and nation building. Yet, since the days of the Augsburg Confession, the issue of the alliance of throne and altar has been very strong. In the spring of 1530, the young Emperor Charles V of Germany was ready to call together the leading Lutheran theologians to prepare a defense brief on two issues: a military issue (war against the Turks and, by implication, Muslims) and a religious controversy (Christian unity, particularly in the light of the Peasants' War). Charles V was eager for such a meeting to take place, following his military and political victories over the King of France and the Roman Pope in the 1520s.<sup>3</sup>

Just before this meeting of theologians and politicians, Melancthon, a colleague, comrade and friend of Luther's,<sup>4</sup> held secret negotiations with Charles V's chancellor, Alfonso de Valdés, to reach a quick and peaceful solution on the question of war and unity by compromising on issues such as allowing the government to use coercive means to get people to take part in evangelical worship services, receive Holy Communion by means of both bread and wine and abandon a number of traditional religious practices in favor of the new ecclesiastical order and rites (see Articles XIV and XV of the Augsburg Confession).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "The Augsburg Confession—German Text—Article XVI: Concerning Public Order and Secular Government," in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 48–50.

<sup>3</sup> George Forell, *The Augsburg Confession* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), pp. 5–6.

<sup>4</sup> Luther disavowed any responsibility for the Augsburg Confession and believed that Melancthon treated the issues softly and lightly. Despite Luther's disclaimer, the Augsburg Confession fundamentally expresses the essentials of his concerns. Furthermore, Luther's criticism has to do with the lack of sharpness against the opponents of the Augsburg Confession, and not with its contents.

<sup>5</sup> "The Augsburg Confession," op. cit. (note 2), p. 48.

It is worth noting that the same process was repeated in Africa, Asia and the Americas with the arrival of colonialism and mission.<sup>6</sup> According to the United Evangelical Mission, the Rhenish missionaries, who came to Namibia in 1840s, suffered under “two-sided loyalties” of standing up “for the interests of the indigenous population” and “working with colonial authorities.”<sup>7</sup> However, one cannot maintain neutrality in times of theological and ethical crisis. Furthermore, one can detect that the double-mindedness of throne and altar was based on racial tendencies. The alliance of throne and altar during the age of the Reformation was explained by Julius Richter, the German historian of missions, as

[...] the universal vocation to bring Christianity to all humanity [...]. In this sense it would perhaps not be going too far to say that Protestant Germany is the evangelist among the nations [...]. With this truly German gift the national element comes into its own.<sup>8</sup>

Although the history of the origin of the double-mindedness of throne and altar is complicated, it can be said that the Lutheran confessional heritage started with theologians and politicians working together on the same basis—the Augsburg Confession and, in the process, they agreed on a theology and politics to “punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers.”<sup>9</sup> With this idea, the foundation was laid for the development of what became known as the doctrine of the two kingdoms.

In his treatise, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” Martin Luther summarizes this doctrine of the two realms:

For God has established two kinds of government among men. The one is spiritual; it has no sword, but it has the word, by means of which men are to become good and righteous, so that with this righteousness they may attain eternal life. He administers this righteousness through the word, which he has committed to preachers. The other kind is worldly government, which works through the

<sup>6</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), pp. 226–30.

<sup>7</sup> Paul John Isaak, *The Influences of Missionary Work in Namibia* (Windhoek: Macmillan Namibia, 2007), pp. 23–25.

<sup>8</sup> See the issue of the Western European notions on religious and cultural superiority in Bosch, op. cit. (note 6), pp. 291–8. See also United Evangelical Mission, Jochen Motte (ed.), *100 Jahre Beginn des antkolonialen Befreiungskrieges in Namibia: Beiträge zu einer Gedenkveranstaltung im Januar 2004*. Katalog zur Ausstellung “Erinnert Namibia!” (Wuppertal: Foedus-Verlag, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> “The Augsburg Confession,” op. cit. (note 2), p. 48.

sword so that those who do not want to be good and righteous to eternal life may *be forced* to become good and righteous in the eyes of the world. He administers this righteousness through the sword. And although God will not reward this kind of righteousness with eternal life, He still wishes peace to be maintained among men and rewards them with temporal blessings.<sup>10</sup>

According to Lukas de Vries, a Namibian who completed his doctoral studies on the theme of mission and colonialism in Namibia, mission theology “lacks a theological understanding of the relationship between mission and the existing powers,” and “idealize[s] the fatherland’s imperialism.” Consequently, the “twisted conception of the Two Kingdoms teaching prevented an answer” to the following two questions: “[T]o what extent is the church really obliged to be obedient to the state,” and “what is understood by the concept ‘passive resistance,’ or to what extent may violence be used for the sake of bringing justice to the oppressed and wronged?”<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the further development of the relationship between church and state in Lutheran lands, especially in Germany, one must concede, “that Luther’s basic viewpoints did not prevail in actual practice. Princely rule over the church government emerged victorious over all efforts to hold the spiritual and secular kingdoms apart from each other.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the apostolic rule “to obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29)<sup>13</sup> was not contextually applied.

## The prophetic witness of the church today

On the basis of this historical background, we focus on the prophetic witness of churches today. In particular, we ask why Lutherans, with their powerful theology and the strong emphasis on justification by grace through faith, have often been weak in how this is practiced. As we have seen above, the Augsburg Confession opposes those who believe that the perfection of the gospel consists of renouncing the world, followed by some evangelical perspectives on civil life. Thus, it is ironic that Lutherans, who

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved, 1526,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Work*, vol. 46 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), author’s own italics.

<sup>11</sup> Lukas de Vries, *Mission and Colonialism in Namibia* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978), p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession. A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), p. 177.

<sup>13</sup> “The Augsburg Confession,” op. cit. (note 2), p. 48.

in their central confessional document condemn others for being apolitical and quietistic, themselves became largely apolitical and quietistic in actual practice. We now turn to these two aspects.

I view such confessional writings as an open rather than a closed tradition. A closed tradition holds a particular statement of beliefs to be adequate for all times and places. An open tradition anticipates more to come as times and circumstances change. These contemporary confessions are also extraordinarily important for the church's integrity, identity and faithfulness. This "occasional" nature of a confession is simultaneously a reminder that statements of faith are always subordinate in authority to Scripture. In sum, the Protestant tradition—itsself a wide river with many currents—affirms that God, through the Holy Spirit, calls the church from time to time to say what it believes and to act accordingly.

Various settings have always posed the need for the church's prophetic calling to be expressed in fresh ways. These may be in relation to matters of heresy or unity, or in *status confessionis* situations, where a clear sense emerges that the church can no longer be the church of Jesus Christ, unless it takes a risky but firm stand on what must be affirmed or what must be opposed in the church or the world. There are times and situations when the church must confess its faith anew against ideologies that subvert its proclamation.

Two cases exemplify this. In the German Church Struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) of the 1930s, a moment of decision occurred in which ongoing disputes in church and theology suddenly stopped and changed into a situation of confession because of what the state was doing. In such a situation, the church would find itself in a *status confessionis*. The state had violated its God-given responsibility to maintain equality, freedom, peace and justice for all its citizens. Consequently, the Confessing Church had to express itself prophetically against the state and in solidarity with those being discriminated against by a racial restriction on who could be a member of the church.

Likewise, the Lutheran World Federation's Sixth Assembly in 1977 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, took the following resolution on apartheid:

Under normal circumstances Christians may have different opinions in political questions. However, political and social systems may become so perverted and oppressive that it is consistent with the confession to reject them and to work for changes. We especially appeal to our white member churches in southern Africa to recognize that the situation in southern Africa constitutes a *status*

*confessionis*. This means that, on the basis of faith and in order to manifest the unity of the church, churches would publicly and unequivocally reject the existing apartheid system.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the activities of the church are to be the watchdog—not a lapdog—in church–state relations or, in the words of Martin Luther, we ought to make a crucial distinction between mission and propaganda,<sup>15</sup> and reject triumphalism in the form of imposing patterns of Christendom on other people or exalting our own religious superiority. In David Bosch’s words, the mission activities of the church are to be carried out in bold humility, “not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure salespersons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Jesus.”<sup>16</sup> Faithfulness to the Servant Jesus and crucified Christ here come as expressions of our faith, along with the conviction of *simul iustus et peccator* as the foundation for such witness in a spirit of Christian humility.

### **The case of the church in Namibia**

Namibia is a large, sparsely populated country on the Atlantic Ocean in southwestern Africa. The Khoekhoegowab word, *Namibia* means “the enclosure”: the country is enclosed by two deserts: in the west by the Namib and in the east by the Kalahari. The people of Namibia consist of various ethnic groups such as the Afrikaners, the British, the Caprivians, the Coloreds (people of mixed race), the Damaras, the Germans, the Hereros, the Kavangos, the Namas, the Owambos, the Portuguese, the San and the Tswanas.

Namibia has one of the world’s biggest deposits of gemstones and diamonds, with large quantities of copper, zinc, uranium and salt, not to mention the vast tracts of land ideal for cattle farming and sea waters abundant with fish. Such richness made Namibia an extremely valuable asset, and through German and South African policies, it was extensively settled by Europeans. Such policies made the settlers ever richer and, until

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<sup>14</sup> James Scherer, *That the Gospel may be Sincerely Preached Throughout the World: A Lutheran Perspective on Mission and Evangelism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Geneva/Stuttgart: Lutheran World Federation/Kreuz Verlag, 1982), pp. 50–51.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

<sup>16</sup> Bosch, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 489.

today, have left the indigenous people poor. Any challenge to colonial rule was tantamount to disparaging national honor and grandeur.

During the years of colonialism and oppression, especially the black Namibian churches essentially rejected any kind of cooperation with the South African regime. It was very easy to galvanize people into action against the evils of political, economic, racial and gender exploitation. The objective was straightforward: opposition to apartheid and colonialism in Africa. The task of the church was not that difficult because there was a commonly identified enemy. Arm-in-arm with different religious leaders, Muslims, Jews and other religions, as well as with atheists, we marched against the evils of apartheid, sexism and colonialism.

Consequently, Namibia gained independence on 21 March 1990. On that day, the age began of needing to say both "yes" and/or "no" to the government. The churches did not know when to affirm or oppose policies and it was not clear that the prophetic "no" under the new situation must also include the prophetic "yes" to options for sociopolitical and economic renewal. In other words, the church's task in an independent and democratic state is to learn when to say "no" as it remains vigilant to the continuing dangers of political power when it serves its own interests rather than the common good. Thus, the prophetic struggle against injustice must continue. Often this leads to further tension and conflict, mutual reprimands and bitter debate, to resolve the differences or to bring to light inconsistencies. Changes sometimes occur very slowly and through much labor, as when a baby is being born. The new life is there, but often brought out only with much pain. The struggle for the truth and telling the truth is never just a simple matter; it is a never fulfilled task and does not end on Independence Day.

In any political situation, the church's most important task is simply to tell the truth. At the same time, the church should say a resounding and clear "yes" to the state and give full support to those initiatives that may lead to a new, more just social order. In other words, the church must become an active agent in the reconstruction of the nation, while at the same time bearing witness to values that are transcendent and critical of any misuse of power or patriotism.

How far has the church succeeded in maintaining its critical prophetic ministry in independent Namibia? Many Namibians feel that during the first years of independence, the religious communities, member churches of the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) and other non-member churches neglected the prophetic role of being the barometer of the people's conscience. During the years of struggle against apartheid, church members had been challenged to adopt a position of critical solidarity with the

liberation movements. Now that the liberation movements have become political parties the situation has changed. What is needed now is not critical solidarity with political parties, but critical solidarity with the poor and critical participation in the ongoing process of building a more democratic society through engagement at the local, regional, national and global levels. It is not enough to think globally and act locally. Today we have to think and act locally and globally.

## **Conclusion**

The church's social ministry should not be restricted to charitable activities, which seek to put a plaster on the wounds of society's victims. It should actively participate in the shaping of policies and practices in society. Churches provide direct assistance to relieve human need through counseling, job training, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and by caring for those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Nonetheless, they must also work toward changing social, economic and political structures, policies and attitudes so that they become more consistent with the values of the kingdom of God.

The church's prophetic witness means critical solidarity with the poor and critical participation in transformation. We look forward to the church's mission and prophetic witness being shaped by critical reflection, truth telling through word and deed, participating and serving in society for the sake of peace, justice, forgiveness and building reconciled and healing communities.

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# Retrieving Martin Luther's Critical Public Theology of Political Authority for Global Civil Society Today

Gary M. Simpson

Ah, you who are wise in their own eyes,  
shrewd in their own sight!  
Isaiah 5:21

Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!  
Psalm 82:8

I will also speak of your decrees before kings and shall not be put to shame.  
Psalm 119:46

## Introduction

Two key aspects of global civil society are solidarity and publicity. In this article, I concentrate on publicity, which should not be mistaken for public relations that aim to manage and manufacture public perceptions of someone or something. Rather, “publicity” refers to making something transparent, accessible and accountable to the wider public. Eleanor Roosevelt, for instance, used the term precisely in this sense when, in 1948, she guided the nations of the world to discern, fashion and underwrite the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

My contention is that Martin Luther's critical theology of political authority can provide the dynamic for theologically imagining publicity in relation to the churches' vocation of being public companions with God in today's global civil society. Luther is deeply interested in how God holds political authority accountable. This we might call “God's publicity.” This leaves us with the problem of how to engage Luther on these questions in light of Ernst Troeltsch's and Reinhold Niebuhr's still often cited interpre-

tation of Luther that has rendered Luther useless, even counterproductive, for the kind of theological exploration needed today with regard to global civil society.

In the following, I shall review first the core of the Troeltsch–Niebuhr interpretation of Luther’s approach to political authority; second, key aspects of Luther’s critical theology of political authority; third, Luther’s constructive reflections on God’s publicity in the Western imperial situation of the sixteenth century. On this basis, I contend that the Troeltsch–Niebuhr interpretation of Luther is erroneous, and will briefly suggest how Luther’s theology of God’s publicity might ignite our public vocation and imagination in global civil society.

### **The Troeltsch–Niebuhr legacy of Luther interpretation**

Reinhold Niebuhr associated Luther’s political thinking with Thomas Hobbes, viewing them as fathers of “anti-democratic theory.”<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr’s critique of the traditional liberal bias of democracy, in order to vindicate democracy, is persuasive. He staked his claim on the maxim: “Man’s [*sic*] capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s [*sic*] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”<sup>2</sup> While liberalism is “too consistently optimistic” to anchor democracy in the long run, Luther and Hobbes are portrayed in the opposite way. According to Niebuhr, their “error was due to their too consistent pessimism.”<sup>3</sup> In their “purely pessimistic analysis of man’s [*sic*] nature human desires are regarded as inherently inordinate, and human character is believed to be practically devoid of inner checks upon expansive desires.” Therefore, they “assigned only the negative task of suppression to government; and they failed to provide any checks upon the inordinate ambitions which the community as such, or its rulers, might conceive and thereby imperil the rights and interests of the individual.” Their “pure pessimism” “reveals the moral naïveté of every form of absolutistic political theory.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Scribner, 1941), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

I have no quarrel with the portrayal of Hobbes, but Niebuhr is wrong on Luther. Luther does not, of course, know a democratizing ethos as we have come to know it. His theological reflections on God's publicity, however, offer one key to a contemporary critical theory of democratization, with global civil society as a key component.

As is well known, Niebuhr was drawing on Ernst Troeltsch's interpretation of Luther. Troeltsch claimed that Luther "glorifies power for its own sake."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, "all order and welfare depend upon unconditional obedience towards the authorities which have come into being in the course of the historical process[...]. [and] therefore glorifies whatever authority may be dominant at any given time."<sup>6</sup> "In this glorification of authority," continued Troeltsch, "there were certain resemblances to the doctrine of Machiavelli, which the early Lutherans had already noted [in Luther]."<sup>7</sup>

Troeltsch was rightly fighting the mid-nineteenth-century Lutheran absolute monarchists. "The main features of the conservative doctrine of the State and of Society have been foreshadowed in Luther's theory," said Troeltsch. Unfortunately, Troeltsch far too readily accepted the Lutheran absolutists' interpretation of Luther. In fact, when he did find something in Luther that went against absolutism, as he did in Luther's turn toward resistance theory, he chalked it up to "foreign influence ... [that] did not harmonize either with Luther's [usual] opinions or with his logic."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, "Wherever the Christian-Social ethic and social policy strikes out in another direction [than absolutism] we may be sure that other influences are at work than those of genuine Lutheranism. As a rule these influences are due to Calvinism [...]."<sup>9</sup>

Both Niebuhr and Troeltsch were wrong. Luther was more complex than they gave him credit for. He did, however, also change his mind on things and not always in the right direction, most notoriously in the case of the Jewish people.

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<sup>5</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1931, 1992), p. 529.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 532.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. For an analysis of the development of Luther's resistance theory, see Gary M. Simpson, "Toward a Lutheran 'Delight in the Law of the Lord': Church and State in the Context of Civil Society," in John R. Stumme and Robert W. Tuttle (eds), *Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 20–50.

<sup>9</sup> Troeltsch, op. cit. (note 5), p. 576.

## Key aspects of Luther's critical public theology

We can portray Luther's critical public theology of political authority around thirteen themes, aspects, or components, with divine publicity as the twelfth component. Many of these themes are well known and well contested, and will not be discussed here. Some of these are regularly misconstrued because they are not integrated into a more comprehensive whole. This partially explains why Luther is sometimes classified with Machiavelli or Hobbes.<sup>10</sup> Also, the occasional nature and situated character of Luther's writings could lend themselves to that kind of one-sided interpretation.

The first six aspects are the best known: (1) law–gospel hermeneutics; (2) the two kingdoms; (3) political authority within creation and law; (4) humanity created in image of God as fallen yet preserved; (5) God's worldly immanence through *larvae Dei*, the masks of God; and (6) the sword of political authority.

First, Luther dealt with God's Word and work by considering the question of the distinction and coordination of law and gospel, or more precisely, law and promise. Second, this leads to Luther's well-known and contested "both kingdoms" teaching regarding God's two ways to rule the one world. Third, political authority comes within the scope of God's left-hand rule of the world and is tethered to God's creative work and the law. Fourth, God creates humans as embodied in the image of God but as sinners we subsequently inherit Adam and Eve's inclination to distrust their Creator. Fifth, Luther had a lively imagination for God's immanence in the world through *larvae Dei*, resulting in ordinances, estates, offices and vocations. His eloquent discussion of Psalm 127 is also reflected in his discussion of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism.

The sixth aspect of Luther's public theology of earthly sovereignty is the sword as one created ordinance and office, and thus a legitimate candidate for Christian vocation. The heart of Luther's reflections on this matter came in 1523, in response to a request from John the Steadfast, who was about to become his prince. Many, but not all, of the key features of Luther's reflections on earthly sovereignty come to the foreground in "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed."<sup>11</sup> When this is the only

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 543, n. 257; also see John Figgis, *Studies of Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1931, second edition).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, 1523," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), pp. 57–129.

text that is read on this topic, however, people get an incomplete portrayal of Luther's overall critical public theology.

Luther considered only those features that were necessary to address John the Steadfast's anxieties, now that he had committed himself to the evangelical cause. Luther took up his two-fold critique of vocation, which on the one hand had become captive to monasticism and, on the other, to the Anabaptist tendencies toward moral purity. Subtly, yet significantly, Luther evoked Acts 5:29, in which Peter declares that in the face of conflicting obediences, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." Hence, Luther's subtitle, "To What Extent It [Temporal Authority] Should Be Obeyed." According to Luther, there is no "unconditional obedience" to earthly sovereignty. Though he regularly gave the benefit of the doubt to temporal authority, it is not absolute. This is precisely the point of Luther's theology of divine publicity. An example of this is Luther's exhorting selective conscientious objection to an unjust war.<sup>12</sup>

In a poignant way, Paul John Isaak examines the place of Acts 5:29 within the Augsburg Confession and brings important Lutheran confessional insights to bear on the ongoing contemporary task of forming a postcolonial Nambia.<sup>13</sup> He charts a path for the church between a "politicized church," which conflates religion and religion on the one hand, and the church as a "privatized business," which completely separates religion and politics, on the other. In Isaak's analysis, Lutheran insights will take the church into "critical solidarity with the poor and critical participation in the ongoing process of building a more democratic society." The church's prophetic witness, therefore, is "simply to tell the truth."<sup>14</sup>

Luther, of course, followed medieval Christianity and referred to earthly sovereignty with the synecdoche of "the sword." Being the rhetorician that he was, Luther invoked this part—the sword—for the whole. But as is the case with synecdoche, and as Luther very well knew, the part is never merely the whole, nor the whole the part. Today it is far too easy to confuse part and whole in a literalistic way when reading Luther's rhetorical style here.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, "Treatise on Good Works, 1520," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> Paul John Isaak, "The Church's Prophetic Witness: Social, Economic, and Political Engagement by the Churches," in this publication, pp. 143ff.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151–2.

The last seven components of Luther's critical public theology of political authority are less well known and therefore deserve more attention, namely: (1) the scepter of political authority; (2) earthly peace through civic friendship and enjoyment; (3) natural law; (4) reason and wisdom; (5) legitimate resistance of lower magistrates to tyranny; (6) divine publicity; and (7) penultimate pessimism and the question of earthly progress.

The seventh aspect of Luther's public theology of earthly sovereignty is the scepter,<sup>15</sup> or to use Luther's synecdoche from the fourth petition in the Large Catechism, the bread loaf. He notes, there, that it would be "fitting if the coat of arms of every upright prince were emblazoned with a loaf of bread instead of a lion or a wreath of rue, or if a loaf of bread were stamped on coins."<sup>16</sup> The scepter as the synecdoche for the authority of distributive justice takes its place alongside the sword, as can be seen in Psalm 45. Unfortunately, in Western Christendom, the scepter has usually given way to the sword as the chief synecdoche for political authority. This accounts for why Niebuhr, for instance, thinks that Luther assigned only the negative task of suppression to government. Luther contributed to this low esteem for the scepter within God's law when he summarized the law as only a dike against sin.

Still, Luther undeniably assigned government the positive task of promoting the commonwealth:

The second virtue of a prince [after allowing free course for proclaiming the gospel] is to help the poor, the orphans, and the widows to justice, and to further their cause. But, again, who can tell all the virtues that follow from this one? For this virtue includes all the works of righteousness [...].<sup>17</sup>

He used the image of a great hospital, which provides both palliative and preventive care, to talk about distributive justice and the prince as just peacemaker.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 45," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 12 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), pp. 236–47; also see Martin Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 82," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 13 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), pp. 54–55.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), p. 450.

<sup>17</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 13, op. cit. (note 15), p. 53.

[It is to be] a general, true, princely, indeed, a heavenly and divine hospital. [It will serve] especially the really poor ... [though] it preserves rich or poor, his living and his goods for everyone, so that he does not have to become a beggar or a poor man.<sup>18</sup>

[T]here are many who are not beggars and do not become beggars. For them the overlord is providing in this hospital. For so to help a man that he does not need to become a beggar is just as much of a good work and a virtue and an alms as to give to a man and to help a man who has already become a beggar.<sup>19</sup>

Luther often addressed those in political authority regarding their responsibilities for distributive justice. Here, the bread loaf better symbolizes that ruler's vocation, within which the sword still has a rightful, necessary place. Without an encircling bread loaf, the sword, too, readily is tempted by wantonness, tyranny and totalitarianism. The tradition of just war reflection, for instance, seeks to keep just war within the wider circumference of a vigorous and vigilant just peacemaking ethos. The larger arc of just peacemaking guards against just war reflection from degenerating into a more imperial war realism, which happened under the Bush doctrine after 9/11.<sup>20</sup>

The eighth aspect continues to remain a far too hidden gem in Luther. He considered earthly peace in relation to civic friendship, solidarity and enjoyment. As he developed the conditions for earthly peace, he approvingly referred to Terence and then Aristotle. "Whoever thinks that a dominion is better maintained by force than by friendship is sadly in error [...]. [For] whatever is maintained by force cannot last."<sup>21</sup>

Luther raised the question of enjoyment throughout his work; he focused on this especially in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism.<sup>22</sup> He always coupled the use of daily bread with its enjoyment.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, *The Political Thought of Martin Luther* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Press, 1984); Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and Samuel Torvend, *Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). For the relationship of just peacemaking and just war tradition, see Gary M. Simpson, *War, Peace and God: Rethinking the Just War Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 147," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 14 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 118.

<sup>22</sup> "The Large Catechism," op. cit. (note 16), pp. 449–52.

What God hath joined together let no one rend asunder, which Luther applied even to his great teacher Augustine. Augustine contrasted use and enjoyment (*uti et frui*). Therefore, “the peace which we enjoy in this life [...] is rather the solace of our misery than the positive enjoyment of felicity.”<sup>23</sup> Luther decisively went against Augustine and the effects of his thought, which also colored how he understood earthly sovereignty.

The ninth, tenth and eleventh components of Luther’s public theology of earthly sovereignty are natural law, reason and wisdom, and political resistance. I offer only a brief glimpse into Luther on natural reason:

God is a gentle and wealthy Lord. He casts much gold, silver, wealth, dominions, and kingdoms among the godless, as though it were chaff or sand. Thus He casts great intelligence, wisdom, languages, and oratorical ability among them, too, so that His dear Christians look like mere children, fools, and beggars by comparison [...].<sup>24</sup>

The relationship between critical reason and natural law remains a crucial ongoing task for contemporary Lutheran theological ethics for the twenty-first century, and for the practice of prophetic resistance. Over the last two decades of his life, Luther’s ethical thinking about the political resistance of lesser magistrates, over and against higher political authorities, developed in three stages. This deserves attention for the development of prophetic witness. These ninth, tenth, and eleventh components also bear on the thirteenth aspect of his critical public theology, his penultimate pessimism and the question of earthly progress.

### **Political authority and God’s publicity**

The twelfth component of Luther’s critical theology of political authority is God’s publicity. God’s publicity is key in the face of empire and for the development of a Lutheran theological theory of global civil society, with an ethic of deliberative democracy, universal human rights and global governance. Luther took up the question of political publicity in his spring 1530

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 19.27, at [www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm).

<sup>24</sup> *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13, op. cit. (note 15), p. 198. For a glimpse of the importance of natural law to Luther, see Martin Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses, 1525,” in Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 161–74.

“Commentary on Psalm 82,” just as the Diet of Augsburg was convening.<sup>25</sup> He wrote this commentary as a “mirror of the prince”—*speculum principii*—a familiar genre in Western civilization. He wrote this in light of his recent return from the Saxon Visitations and just prior to his departure for the Coburg Castle, where he waited out the Diet. Luther's reflections in the commentary have their theological place within the orbit of Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession. Indeed, it is conceivable to consider Psalm 82 as the middle term between Romans 13:1–4 and Acts 5:29, which serve as the biblical bookends of Augustana's Article XVI.

In a *speculum principii*, a wise and respected person like a theologian would write a treatise for a prince or other political official. Upon rising each morning, the prince was to recall the treatise, that is, to gaze on this “mirror” to discern what a righteous prince was to be like, and then go and do likewise. Both Erasmus and Machiavelli wrote mirrors for the prince during this same period, although Luther's mirror was not for any particular prince. Verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 82 read: “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: ‘How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?’”

First of all, like others before him, Luther interpreted the first verse to refer to earthly sovereignty in the polis. The gods are all the offices of government, which stand under God's ordinance, as Paul notes in Romans 13. The “congregation of God” is the earthly city, not the congregation gathered around Word and sacrament. Luther stressed that earthly cities are “God's own” and God “accepts them as God's own work.” Interestingly, Luther's example is wicked Nineveh. He is lyrical about God's creativity and care for the city, thus heightening the urgency for good government. “For this ‘congregation of God,’” says Luther, “is a precious word.”

For He has made, and makes, all communities. He still brings them together, feeds them, lets them grow, blesses and preserves them, gives them fields and meadows, cattle, water, air, sun and moon, and everything they have, even body and life, as it is written (Gen. 1:29). For what have we, and what has all the world, that does not come unceasingly from Him? <sup>26</sup>

Such communities are God's work, which He daily creates, supports, and increases, so that they can sit at home and beget children and educate them.

<sup>25</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 13, op. cit. (note 15), pp. 41–72.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 46.

Therefore this word is, in the first place, a great and pleasant comfort to all those who find themselves situated in such a community. It assures them that God accepts them as His work and His creation, cares for them and protects and supports them, as we can, in fact, see with our own eyes.<sup>27</sup>

After noting that the purpose of law and sword is to “keep down the disorder of the rabble,” Luther stressed that God also “keeps down the rulers, so that they do not abuse His majesty and power according to their own self-will but use them for that peace for which He has appointed and preserves them.”<sup>28</sup> In this regard, Luther, along with Calvin, combined the Romans 13 text with 2 Chronicles 19:6–7. “Now, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes.” Here King Jehoshaphat warns the officials under him to be sure to judge rightly because they are the earthly masks or media of God’s judging. They will exercise wise and just judgment to the degree that they live within the fear of the Lord. This is the hallmark of all biblical wisdom literature: “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The biblical “fear of the Lord” emphasizes accountability to God and is thus the biblical trope for divine publicity, the third structural pillar along with the scepter and the sword for nations and for a civic international order.

Luther, of course, did not have in mind what we associate today with democratic citizenship or the consent of the governed. Nevertheless, he did recognize the problem of the accountability of political authority, which itself is significant. He upbraided princes who “will not allow [anyone] to rebuke their wickedness and self-will.” Such princes have “now discovered a new device, and declare that whoever rebukes them is seditious, rebels against the authority ordained by God, and defames their honor.” Their “ultimate desire is to be able to do whatever they wish, without hindrance or rebuke, without shame or fear, and with honor and glory, so that they become that noble, praiseworthy folk” described in 2 Peter “who live according to their own self-will and do what they please.” “Against these squires the psalm is written.”<sup>29</sup>

Luther went on to note that princes are not gods in the polis

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

[...] in such a way that they have this position all to themselves and can do as they like. Not so! God Himself is there also. He will judge, punish and correct them; and if they do not obey, they will not escape. "He stands in His congregation," for the congregation is also His; and "He judges the gods," for the rulers, too, are His. And because both [the polis and the rulers] are His, it is right for Him to take the part of both.<sup>30</sup>

### Psalms 82 is

[...] a terrible and threatening word against the wicked and self-willed gods or rulers [...] when they think that no one is to judge them or rebuke them without being called a rebel, a little peg is driven into them, and a club is laid beside the dog. Thus they are properly rebuked, boldly spoken to, and threatened sharply and hard, as this psalm does. For it says here: "God stands in His congregation and judges the gods"; that is, He rebukes them.<sup>31</sup>

Luther was quite clear about the necessity for publicity, and he certainly did not tolerate political absolutism. He was also equally clear that God is the ultimate source of publicity. He was convinced that, while publicity's rebuke comes from God, God does not work immediately, but rather through earthly means. God rebukes "mediatedly." In this sense, publicity is the vehicle that instills the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom and wise politics.

Luther, therefore, asked quite bluntly, "Where, then, is God? Or how do we become sure that there is a God who thus rebukes?"<sup>32</sup> As he scanned the late medieval landscape there were not many good options for earthly agents. One possible agent that he considered already back in 1523 were the commoners, the peasants.

The common man is learning to think [...]. Men will not, men cannot, men refuse to endure your [princely] tyranny and wantonness much longer[...]. The world is no longer what it once was, when you hunted and drove the people like game.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 45–46.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 47–48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>33</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, op. cit. (note 11), p. 116.

Note how Luther used political and moral categories—“tyranny” and “wantonness”—to characterize commoners’ critical reflection on the aristocratic ethos. Still, he could not imagine commoners having an office and calling for the emerging public use of their reason. Drawing on Psalm 107:40, he designated their emerging critical reflection as the *contemptum super principes*—God’s scourge of the princes. While Luther originally took up the just cause of the peasants, he later thought of them as an instance of God using one scoundrel to discipline another scoundrel. The disastrous slaughter of the peasants took place under Luther’s urging. Tragically, in 1523, he had not yet developed an adequate theory of resistance.<sup>34</sup>

Luther’s search for earthly agents of God’s publicity took a turn in the early 1530s, when he began looking toward the lesser magistrates to hold at least the emperor accountable to standards of justice. At this time, he also noted a third kind of earthly agent of God’s publicity. God raises up special stars, extraordinary leaders and prophetic heroes of justice, not merely within Christendom but also among those he referred to as “the heathen.”<sup>35</sup>

In Luther’s 1530 mirror of the prince, he identified a fourth earthly agent: preachers. For there in the city, God “has His appointed priests and preachers, to whom He has committed the duty of teaching, exhorting, rebuking, comforting, in a word, of preaching the Word of God.” During the Saxon Visitations, Luther had been amazed how miserably the preachers and bishops understood and exercised their office. He thereby exhorted them.

Observe, however, that a preacher by whom God rebukes the gods is to “stand in the congregation.” He is to “stand”: that is, he is to be firm and confident and deal uprightly and honestly with it; and “in the congregation,” that is, openly and boldly before God and people.<sup>36</sup>

In October 1530, just six months after his Psalm 82 mirror and on the occasion of the failure of the Diet of Augsburg, Luther wrote “Dr Martin Luther’s Warning to My Dear German People,” which deepened and ex-

<sup>34</sup> See Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia, 1525,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 3–44; “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, 1525,” in *ibid.*, pp. 45–56; “An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants, 1525,” in *ibid.*, pp. 57–86.

<sup>35</sup> *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13, op. cit. (note 15), pp. 154–75.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

panded his notion of publicity with its open, bold and vigilant transparency, accessibility and accountability. Here publicity takes the form of a critical theology of confessing. This critical theology of confessing would eventually take Lutheran confessional shape in 1577 as Article X of the Formula of Concord. From there, times for confessing—*tempus confessionis*—would eventually become the heart and center of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thinking and life.<sup>37</sup> Luther himself had already suggested the biblical text that heads up the Augsburg Confession, Psalm 119:46, "I will also speak of your decrees before kings and shall not be put to shame."

Returning to Luther's Psalm 82 mirror of the prince, when preachers stand up boldly and openly before God and all people—*coram Deo, coram hominibus*—this is to prevent the sins of unfaithfulness and of backbiting. At this point, Luther is both brilliant as a theological and political ethicist and just plain fun as a rhetorician. In the art of rhetoric, unfaithfulness goes to the character—the *ethos*—of the pastoral office. The positive side of this is that preachers and bishops are called "to stand up." In addressing backbiting, Luther dealt with the audience and their emotions—with *pathos*. Positioned between *ethos* and *pathos* is *logos*: a persuasive appeal using logical or reasonable argument. Here, Luther appealed to the Psalm's rationale about the substance of the prince's office, which focuses on distributive justice for the most vulnerable, and for all of us in our vulnerability.

Luther used emotionally charged language, relevant to both princes and pastors, because he imagined a multilayered audience. Here we quote him at length, first, regarding unfaithfulness:

There are many bishops and preachers in this ministry, but they do not "stand" and serve God faithfully. On the contrary, they lie down or otherwise play with their office. These are the lazy and worthless preachers who do not tell the princes and lords their sins. They lie down and snore in their office and do nothing that pertains to it except that, like swine, they take up room where good preachers should stand. These form the great majority. Others, however, play the hypocrite and flatter the wicked gods and strengthen them in their self-will [...]. Still others fear for their skins and are afraid that they must lose life and goods. All these do not "stand" and are not faithful to Christ.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Robert W. Bertram, *A Time for Confessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 13, op. cit. (note 15), p. 49.

Luther's critique of the sin of backbiting is particularly crucial for a theological theory of publicity and global civil society. Backbiting is the privatized opposite of standing up in public.

The whole world is full in every corner of preachers and laymen who bandy evil words about their gods, i.e., princes and lords, curse them, and call them names, though not boldly in the open, but in corners and in their own sects. But this accomplishes nothing except to make the evil worse [...]. If you are in the ministry and you are not willing to rebuke your gods openly and publicly, as your office demands, at least leave off your private backbiting, calling of names, criticizing, and complaining, or go hang [yourself]! [...]

So, then, this first verse teaches that to rebuke rulers is not seditious, provided that it is done in the way here described: namely, by the office to which God has committed that duty, and through God's Word spoken publicly, boldly, and honestly. To rebuke rulers in this way is, on the contrary a praiseworthy, noble, and rare virtue, and a particularly great service to God, as the psalm here proves. It would be far more seditious if a preacher did not rebuke the sins of rulers; for then he makes people angry and sullen, strengthens the wickedness of rulers, becomes a partaker in it, and bears responsibility for it.<sup>39</sup>

Luther did glorify power but, quite contrary to Troeltsch and Niebuhr, not "for its own sake" or "on its own." First, Luther tethered power tightly to distributive justice—the bread loaf—for the common good and especially for the well-being of the vulnerable. Within this, power was also tied to retributive justice—the sword. Secondly, Luther imagined that, through earthly "offices" of publicity, God holds rulers accountable for maintaining this tight tether between power and justice. The majesty or prestige of the ruler then is doubly dependent on connecting power and justice. Because bold and open rebuke is such a "rare virtue" in individual preachers and bishops, as Luther noted, this makes it even more necessary to develop possibilities for publicity in and among nations. That is precisely what the emergence of global civil society is all about, and its connection with democratization.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp., 49–50. This can be seen as support for what Paul Isaak in his article proposes as "critical participation in transforming social, economic and political realities is essential to the church's prophetic witness and service" within a postcolonial Namibia. Isaak, op. cit. (note 13), p. 145.

<sup>40</sup> For a theological and sociological account of global civil society, see Gary M. Simpson, "God in Global Civil Society: Vocational Imagination, Spiritual Presence, and Ecclesial Discernment," in Gary M.

### One final rhetorical flourish from Luther.

In a word, after the Gospel or the ministry, there is on earth no better jewel, no greater treasure, nor richer alms, no fairer endowment, no finer possession than a ruler who makes and preserves just laws. Such people are rightly called gods. These are the virtues, the profit, the fruits, and the good works that God appointed to this rank in life. It is not for nothing that He has called them gods; and it is not His will that it shall be a lazy, empty, idle estate, in which men seek only honor, power, luxury, selfish profit, and self-will. He would have them full of great, innumerable, unspeakable good works, so that they may be partakers of His divine majesty and help Him to do divine and superhuman works.<sup>41</sup>

### A concluding proposal

Publicity together with solidarity form the core dynamic of the emerging age of global civil society and its democratizing ethos relative to both the political state and the market economy. According to the social philosopher, Anthony Giddens, "The emergence of a global civil society is perhaps one of the most momentous developments taking place in the world today, and its exploration one of the major challenges for the social sciences in the years to come"<sup>42</sup>

Luther's critical public theology of God's publicity might just help us today to imagine global civil society as God's preferential arena for prophetic speech, sapiential reflection and pacific action, and for the church's public vocation to be public companions with God in global civil society. Will Lutherans around the world, each in their particular God-given location, take up Giddens's challenge to explore this new reality within God's ongoing creating of the world?

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Simpson (ed.), *Missional Church and Global Civil Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

<sup>41</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 13, op. cit. (note 15), pp. 54–55.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Giddens, "Foreword," in Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius and Mary Kaldor (eds), *Global Civil Society: 2001 Yearbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. iii.



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# Integrative Theological Formation

Norma Cook Everist

Gwayanweng Kiki, a pastor and teacher in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea (ELPNG), seeks to return to an indigenous epistemology, a “Wokabout Karikulum: A Community Praxis.” He believes the ELPNG’s current theological educational system has adopted a wealth of Western educational philosophies on knowing, learning and teaching but comparatively few on indigenous ways of knowing. A recent PhD graduate and now teaching at Martin Luther Seminary in Lae, he provides contextual methods that are deeply rooted within dynamically living communities.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps we have come full circle. Jesus walked about with his disciples. This is not to dismiss classical methods; the problem emerges when they dominate, overshadow and diminish local ways of knowing so that we cannot see the churches and theological implications and methods right in front of us.

Abigail Schumacher, a diaconal ministry candidate, lives with spina bifida and uses a wheelchair. In our class, “Diaconal Ministry Theology and Formation,” she took her turn to lead a biblical devotion as we worked our way through Luke. Her text was Luke 5:17–26, the familiar story of a few men carrying a paralyzed man to the place where Jesus was teaching. Trying to lay him before Jesus, but finding no way because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles and into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

The issue here is who has the authority to say, “your sins are forgiven.” I asked Abigail what she saw in the text. I thought she might say, “stand up and walk,” but rather she said, “it was about the friends,” the friends who cared enough to bring their friend through the inaccessible barriers to Jesus. Embodied theology. I had heard the text many times, but when Abigail embodied the text, I heard it in an entirely new way.

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<sup>1</sup> Kiki’s thesis has recently been published. Gwayanweng Kiki, *Wokabout Karikulum. A Community Praxis Training in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea* (Cologne: Lambert Academic Press, 2009).

## Thinking theologically in integrative formation

We can think about integrative theological approaches in a number of ways:

**Contextual theology:** Gwayanweng Kiki does not reject his own culture but begins there in relevant terms, concepts and experiences. In doing contextual theology—not just about people but with people—participants are not merely spectator or audience; all are subject, not object.

**Embodied theology:** Abigail embodies her theology. Actually, so does everyone; some people simply are not aware that they do. The Creator God made us to live in bodies, not simply abstractly. The incarnate Christ put on flesh and dwelled among us, the body of Christ, as the church and individual members of it.

**Inductive theology:** we begin with mission and ministry, issues in the lives of people, churches and society. Thinking theologically from the practice of ministry leads us to biblical, systematic and historical theology. Learning leads to mission leads to learning leads to mission. Doing theology from all directions, we return to Christ, the center.

**Theology in the vernacular:** when people can think and talk about God in their own language, not just Swahili or French or English, but also “languages” of farming, medicine, computers, or parenting, they never stop doing theology. Theology students do well to retain the languages they used before seminary. In the parish, pastors need to listen well and to learn how people think theologically about the human predicament, grace, salvation, church and vocation.<sup>2</sup>

**Translating and transforming theology:** theology is an ongoing translating experience. How does Luther’s question, What does this mean? intersect with the daily life question, What in the world does this mean? What, then, do law and gospel, theology of the cross and resurrection, a Lutheran

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<sup>2</sup> See Norma Cook Everist, “Transformed for Daily Life: Ministry of the Baptized,” in Norma Cook Everist and Craig Nesson, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), pp. 198–212; Norma Cook Everist, “Learn to Share Christ in the Languages of People’s Daily Lives,” in Norma Cook Everist (ed.), *Christian Education as Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), pp. 122–33.

hermeneutic of biblical interpretation, mean in the languages of the *laos* (the people)? How does being able to translate doctrinal language into the vernacular transform people's lives?

***Relational, dialogical, interactive theology:*** we will not go too far with dialogue if we continue to go more deeply and listen ever more carefully, while not forgetting the Lutheran and other theological tenets that ground us. Dialogical, interactive theology sharpens the mind, as Joas Kahesi of Tanzania says, "building relationships where they don't exist, healing them when they are broken, and deepening them when they are weak."<sup>3</sup>

***Constructive theology:*** this does not mean simply making theology up. Quite the contrary, it is about taking what one has learned through the classical disciplines and integrating that learning with the ministry God has called us to do. Through this integration, we develop new constructs and grow in theology and ministerial leadership.

***Trinitarian theology:*** theology is rooted in the Trinity. Called by God, we are creating in ways that connect theologically not only with our minds, but with our hands and our hearts. The liberating God, Christ Jesus, is present in all parts of life that need to be set free. The empowering Spirit strengthens and connects us as churches that serve.

As we think theologically in these integrative ways, we need to (1) identify issues in our churches and society; (2) develop and use a variety of theological approaches; and (3) do inductive theology collaboratively.

## **Identifying issues in our churches and society**

John Hernandez Vera from Colombia believes that issues that seem academic in one context are matters of life and death in another. One does not read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's works dispassionately when one lives in a society steeped in so much violence that there seems no way to speak about it and the price of life is small. One cannot simply make a list of societal issues when violence hides other problems such as HIV and AIDS.

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<sup>3</sup> Kahesi's words as well as subsequent global voices in this article are those of participants at the Augsburg 2009 event as well as from subsequent e-mail correspondence.

Simply acquiring and applying theology to the practice of ministry is inadequate. We must see the potential in thinking about ecclesial and missional issues theologically in ways that are both connectional and transformative. The goal is to learn from one another, each in relation to their own range of contextual issues around which we are called to reflect theologically. No one individual, church, or nation possesses an hierarchy of knowledge. Biblical and confessional theology transcends time and space, and yet is always local, contextual. Faith communities and their leaders need to minister faithfully among the people where they serve, and to pursue theology inductively in the midst of that ministry.

How do congregations identify the issues in their own church and broader society? A number of congregations in the USA are becoming “yoked” together in order to share pastors and other staff. From a financial perspective, this may make sense. But the deeper, usually unstated, theological question is, Can we be a congregation if we do not have “our own” pastor? Embedded in that question are issues of the office of ministry and ecclesiology. Likewise, an economic crisis is a societal issue affecting everyone. It is a matter of personal job losses and cutbacks. It is also about unregulated greed and the theological question, In whom or in what do we place our trust? Is it in debt that we have trusted? What do we believe about the protecting and providing God? How does the global recession increase disparities between the rich and the poor?

Simple methods for doing theology by beginning with contextual issues is matched by the profundity of their potential. A teacher might be tempted to hear people’s concerns and say, “Now that you have told me your issue, I will tell you the answer.” But, of course, one cannot do that because people are the source of knowledge in their own contexts, whether that be the context of a nation, neighborhood, or parish, or the lives they bring to the classroom. Yet, there still is an important role for teachers. Were we to glean all the issues and theological questions identified in a particular context, we would have a curriculum for a year or even five years. Our teaching is crucial and becomes an engaging communal calling.

Our curriculum needs to be communal because we need one another in this global learning community. The Lutheran church in Colombia is small; therefore they know they need the solidarity of other churches in the global Lutheran communion. And large churches with a greater voice and power also need the smaller ones.

## Using integrative theological approaches

How can a seminary or theological college learn from congregations, strengthening the connection between theology and the life of the churches, as we worship and learn, engage in diakonia and pursue justice? Each faith community has its own ways of doing theology. Some have not reflected on the theological implications of the methods they are using. We do well to afford the opportunity for such reflection, for sharing these approaches with one another and, together, growing in effective formation in the faith. Participatory engagement increases motivation for shared learning. It is important that everyone speak and that no one voice dominate. The invitation needs to be open-ended. Participants are encouraged to take notes on one another, not just on what the teacher says, as together we read the “books” that are the people of God.

Case studies have been used for many years in many professional schools, e.g., business, medical as well as theological. Although there are books of such case studies, I have long preferred to have students write their own case studies from their field placement or internship experiences. Significant learning occurs as they reflect on praxis and write a narrative (this is different from writing a verbatim). In over thirty years of using the case study method in teaching hundreds of students, I have never read an inadequate case. I ask them to (1) write in the third person, including themselves sparsely and only as one of the characters; (2) introduce the complexity of issues and personalities; (3) let the situation unfold; and (4) stop before disclosing the outcome.

The teacher’s role is not to correct the paper, but to edit, ever so slightly, simply for clarity. The papers are returned to the students to do some rewriting, and then shared in small groups. The author listens as the group moves through a four-part discussion: (1) what they see as the issue; (2) getting “into the shoes” of the people involved; (3) identifying the theological concepts and challenges; and (4) the ministry options. The process could take an hour or longer, during which the author mainly listens, but in the end reveals the ending and reflects on what the others have said. This is a process for doing dialogical, interactive, constructive theology. Students begin inductively and, in the process, integrate their learning from various theological and biblical disciplines. Theological language is in the vernacular, with terminology emerging from the context of the case. Doing case studies in ways such as this is a highly disciplined academic exercise and transformative for ministerial leadership.

A few years ago, Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, USA, had a project in which faculty visited their graduates for a weekend during their third year serving in a parish. The purpose was not to check up on them, but to learn from them and from the congregations they were serving. Each professor went out with a different set of ears, depending on their teaching discipline. Upon returning, faculty engaged in dialogical, collaborative theological discussion, which in turn continues to shape the curriculum.

During the visit, the graduate walked or drove us around their “neighborhood” (however defined). We wanted to see their context, but more than that, we wanted to see what they were seeing in their context. The graduate gathered some local leaders for us to meet. Sometimes it was the mayor, or a member of the school board, librarian, or store owner. In one case, the pastor asked the waitress to sit down with us. We spent time around another meal with congregational leaders, listening as they spoke in the vernacular.<sup>4</sup> In such dialogues, we were already doing theology interactively. The learning was not for faculty alone, nor the graduate, but relational and communal learning within the context of the congregation.

On Sunday, when we attended worship and adult study, we did not preach or teach but worshipped with and learned from the congregation. We concluded our visit by having a potluck meal with members of the congregation after church, reflecting with them on what we had seen and heard about their mission and ministry, the human need for redemption and reconciliation and the transformative power of the gospel at work among them. The congregation inevitably thanked us for helping them learn from one another in their context. We then had a final conversation with the graduate. Our visit produced a surplus of meaning, from which we are still learning.

Through case study and visits to congregations we learn from one another not in competitive, judgmental ways, but in a spirit of openness. Using integrative approaches, people are informed and transformed in theological schools and churches. Such inductive, integrative approaches are being used in church bodies around the world. Elieshi Mungure of Tanzania describes doing integrative pastoral care in Africa using narratives. For her, ministry arises as a response to the experiences of people in a certain context; as they tell stories of both bitter and pleasant experiences, they are acknowledged

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<sup>4</sup> For a full description of the visit and questions asked, contact [ncookeverist@wartburgseminary.edu](mailto:ncookeverist@wartburgseminary.edu). Some stories of visits to congregations appear in Norma Cook Everist, *Open the Doors and See All the People: Stories of Congregational Identity and Vocation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005)

and valued as individuals. Whatever our context, our approaches need to be diverse, contextual, comprehensive and integrative.

### **Doing inductive theology collaboratively**

How do we begin where the people in our churches are? Full participatory conversation may seem simple, but it is not simplistic. We start with their daily lives. This is not to oppose beginning with the teachings of the church, confessions and lifelong Bible study, but sometimes it is helpful to begin from the other direction, pursuing theology that is embodied, incarnational and participatory.

For example, a few years ago I was working with a small group using the resource, *Connections: Faith and Life*,<sup>5</sup> which is centered on Luther's Large Catechism. Such groups met in the places of daily vocation of participants, and that evening we met at a firehouse. Our host, a fireman, said, "I don't have much to tell you about my faith where I work." Not much to say? Two and a half hours later, we were still talking.

That evening we were dealing with the petition, "Deliver us from evil." Throughout the ages, there have been thousands of unanswered philosophical and theological questions on the nature of evil. If we had been meeting in the church building, the fireman might have remained quiet, but when asked, What is evil? he responded in the language of his workplace: unnecessary death. He spoke of when one of his partners had been killed accidentally during a false alarm, and of a child's violent death. Through his sharing of what that petition meant to him, we gleaned a new depth of theological understanding.

As a global communion, we are unable to visit all the places where each one of us lives; but we can share with one another from across the globe in the companionship of accompaniment, and certainly within our own congregations. Some faith communities naturally participate in each other's daily lives all week, while for others this is a challenge. But, whatever the parish setting, intentionally making visits to places of people's vocations, and reflecting with them about their core beliefs bears much fruit for faithful living.

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<sup>5</sup> Norma Cook Everist and Nelvin Vos, *Connections: Faith and Life*, (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997). This four unit, six sessions each, adult curriculum, using Martin Luther's Large Catechism, included visits to places of vocation of the participants.

Even though we come from different contexts and speak different “daily languages,” each of us can think of what occurred on a day last week. We might simply ask, Where were you last Tuesday afternoon? What were you doing there? What was going on at a deeper level? What do you think God was doing there?

This may seem presumptuous, for as Hans-Peter Grosshans has pointed out, we cannot use our contexts or our experiences as the norm for knowledge of God because then we would end up with any number of gods. We cannot presume ever fully to know what God is doing in the world, but we know God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, and can seek to see God at work in our diverse experiences. Our norm is the revealed Word of God, the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ attested to in Scripture. Our Lutheran Confessions provide a lens. In order for the Scriptures to be transformative, they need to be embodied in the lives of individuals and faith communities. We need one another to help us reflect and discern the issues of the human predicament and discover again God’s grace (law/gospel). We need to uncover false gods and misleading beliefs. We need time for silence and time for prayer and time to study together.

Luther said that all Christians have stations (roles and relationships) and vocations. For Luther, *vocatio* is rooted in the freedom of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>6</sup> When we begin inductively, we need to give close attention to the certainties, questions and insights that have arisen about the nature of the Triune God. We need to be freed from our false gods. In order to be called to vocation time and again, we need conversation with brothers and sisters in Christ in the midst of our very different roles in life.

Listen to some voices from different parts of the world:

**Grace Siromony, India:** Last Thursday, one of my palliative care patients, a young girl of twenty, slowly started deteriorating. She was in severe pain. Her mother was beside her giving her an oil massage. It was difficult to see the girl suffering for I had been visiting her for almost a month. We held hands, praying with one mind for peace and love upon her. I also said a blessing. I believe that God was with me, giving me strength to help her; God was with her giving peace and comfort; God was with her mother, father and sister. She slept well that night, but the next day she developed breathing difficulty. I was with the family and I am sure God was in our midst strengthening us all. On Saturday morning, around 9.15 am, she died.

<sup>6</sup> Einar Billing, *Our Calling*, transl. by Conrad Bergendoff (Rock Island: Augustana Press, 1958), p. 5.

**Lois Moyo, Zimbabwe:** I was in a rural area at the offices of a partner organization in South Africa. With two colleagues, I had gone to interview caregivers for training to support orphaned and vulnerable children. We interviewed, among others, one young woman who was doing amazing work and wanted to be empowered to do her work better. Empowering her with her level of passion would mean contributing to the empowerment of the community.

However, the most senior work colleague among us declared that the candidates had to be dismissed as unqualified and unfit for training. I felt a jab of pain in my heart and began to say an earnest silent prayer. God was hearing the interview and observing the desire in my heart. As we stood up to leave my senior abruptly said, "Ok, maybe we should take her for training and see what happens." I was so excited I nearly jumped. I said in my heart, "Thank you God. Thank you Jesus. Thank you Holy Spirit." I was so grateful to God, the silent listener to our conversations and to our hearts' desires.

**Samuel Frouisou, Cameroon:** My flight from Cameroon to Germany had been delayed by seven hours. Three of us sat together at a table in the airport lounge in Douala: a young Jewish woman working on human rights who was traveling back to Tel Aviv, a retired French man who had worked at the French Embassy in Cameroon and I. The woman asked if I was a Muslim, which surprised me, seeing I was wearing a clerical shirt and a cross. People from my area of Cameroon are often falsely thought to be part of the majority Muslim population. When I said I was Christian, she asked why I had abandoned the religion of my fathers. She said she did not believe in God. She said she was born Jewish but is not a religious person, and that the Bible is only a good storybook. The French man was listening to our discussion. When I asked him, he indicated that he agreed with the woman, and that Christianity had been imposed on Africans. Once we arrived in Addis, the Jewish woman and I had a whole day to converse on issues of faith.

**Dirk Lange, USA:** Oh what a day last Tuesday was! I was teaching an extra load because my teaching partner was out of town, and I still had to finish my paper for this consultation. Plus there were complications in my daughter's school schedule. Everything seemed to fall on Monday and Tuesday. I was totally worn out, very nervous about what I would present and how I would present it when, all of a sudden, a student came up to me and simply told me how effective my teaching was! It was a moment of grace or a rush of the Spirit that kept me going through the rest of the day, through the writing of the lecture and through to the meeting. A conversation partner said that in the midst of a

stressful time we may not be able to see what God is doing because we are tied up in our own needs but “God was still using you to teach.”

There are many more voices and stories, if we but ask people to share them. Although contextually our lives may be literally and figuratively oceans apart, there also may be surprising ways in which our daily lives hold similar joys and fears. If one were to gather all the “last week” experiences, questions and challenges of people in a faith community, we would have a vital curriculum for doing integrative theology contextually, inductively and constructively, translating from the vernacular in embodied, relational, dialogical, interactive and transformative ways.

Theological issues that emerge could be organized in a Trinitarian manner around the three articles of the Creed. In his *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther says the First Article describes the nature, will and work of the Creator God. What kind of being is God? What does God do? How can we praise or portray or describe God in such a way as to make God known? The questions from daily life of these global voices might be, Why does God permit children to be orphaned? How does one portray God in an airport lounge to a man from the French embassy and a woman from Israel who are “no longer religious”? We confess that God preserves our bodies and souls, protects in time of danger, guards from every evil (Luther’s *Small Catechism*). But what does that mean in various Lutheran churches around the world? Can we trust God to be a protecting, providing God?

Christological questions arise daily. In Luther’s *Explanation to the Second Article of the Large Catechism* he taught that the entire gospel we preach depends on the proper understanding of this Article that is so rich and broad that we can never learn it fully. And so we must learn it anew every day, contextually. Ministering in Christ’s name, we are privileged to be with people as they die, even as we grieve, because after Christ suffered, died and was buried, he rose again, swallowed up and devoured death. Questions remain. Why does a woman die at age twenty? Why did she die now and not ten or twenty years from now? How do we grieve and minister at the same time? Theological and ministerial questions are there and they are real.

In the Third Article we confess that we believe in the Holy Spirit without whom we could not ever know anything of Christ or believe in him. This treasure is no longer hidden, buried, but now may be put to use and enjoyed (Luther’s *Large Catechism*). In the story of choosing the young people for training, we think of the Spirit, seeking and selecting. Who is

to determine who is fit or unfit? The questions are of discerning gifts and what ministry needs to be done. And in the midst of rush, stress and worry, the Spirit can still enlighten—teach others through us, even when we need a sister or brother in the faith to remind us that the Spirit is at work.

Although the Creed can help us to systematize issues concerning the Triune God, the experiences cannot be simply labeled, and thus separated by article. Doing theology inductively is not nice and neat. The “First Article” issue of the man from Cameroon portraying God in an airport lounge also raised a “Third Article” question of how we encounter those of different faiths, particularly when they may have false assumptions about us. How do we enter into brief or sustained dialogue? In these existential issues are significant theological questions and insights.

In working toward being a global learning community in ecumenical and interfaith settings, we sometimes make assumptions about each other. A woman from the global South commented, “I didn’t realize that people from the West talked about daily life in relation to their faith. I thought they always did theology from the top down.” A man from the global North acknowledged, “I’ve always been hesitant to share the mundane stresses of my life because our issues seem like nothing compared to the suffering others go through.” But, in doing embodied theology at a personal, contextual level, we are able to be the body of Christ at a new level with stronger connections, learning from one another across what otherwise might seem to be insurmountable barriers

Alan Lai, a Chinese Canadian, says,

There is an inseparable nature of theology and teaching methods. In my social context in multicultural Vancouver, people from all over the world meet. In order to engage a multicultural, international community in learning, we need to be attentive, to honor and recognize the diversity. Teaching and learning is not about applying whatever theologians have decided. How we relate (talk) to people who are different from us is itself a theology!

We need to continue to collaborate on integrative theological formation carefully, respectfully and accountably. In so doing we will continue and expand the Lutheran theological legacy with integrity and, by the power of the Spirit, people will be transformed for ministry in the world.





Attending to “practices” as points of departure for in-depth theological reflection is a promising shift toward theology that more directly engages the life of the church. These practices are vital; they need to be grounded in and guided by basic theological understandings, and critiqued if they are inconsistent with such understandings. In this sense, through practices we realize that theology does matter.

Some participants in the concluding consultation of the Theology in the Life of the Church program reflect theologically on such diverse practices as reading the Bible; worship; baptism; forgiveness of sin; church discipline; inclusion of children at the Eucharist; spiritual care of the dying; stigmata as marks of Christ; sexual taboos; engaging political powers; and theological formation in daily life.

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