THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

Global Perspectives on the Reformation

Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics

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Preface

Kaisamari Hintikka

With a passion for the church and for the world—this is one of the visions driving The Lutheran World Federation. The commitment to serve both the church and the world has cut across the programs, study processes, events and conferences organized and initiated by the LWF within the framework of commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. The conference, "Global Perspectives on the Reformation: Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics," held from 28 October to 1 November 2015 in Windhoek, Namibia, was one of the main events to launch the three-year core period of the Reformation Anniversary, 2015–2017. The conference brought together over seventy scholars from all parts of the LWF communion, thus offering a truly global forum for discerning the impact of the Reformation on church and society. Discussing the interaction between theological thinking, politics and economics in the different twenty-first-century contexts was motivated by the question, How do we better serve the church and the world?

Through Bible studies, plenary presentations and workshops the discourse evolved from the distinction between church and state to an increasing emphasis on the role of the citizen. In close relationship to this, the cohesion between justification and justice was explored together with the question how understanding the deep meaning of justification can liberate people and empower them for service to the neighbor and to advocate against attitudes and policies that are incompatible with the gospel. Specific attention was paid to how the global economic system and its focus on the notion of a self-regulating market affect people's lives and planet earth. The discussions on sustainable and just societies and the "good life" included workshops on gender justice, interreligious relations and theological education.

The conference participants adopted a message which affirms that all three fields—theology, politics and economics—have potential for social transformation toward a world of abundant life for all (Jn 10:10). Four core features of transformative theology that inform and are informed by political and economic realities were identified: transformative theology should be contextual, critical, creative and concrete. In this sense, transformative theology requires and enables looking with new eyes at today's realities and questioning certainties in the light of the liberating Word of God.

This publication includes a selection of papers and Bible studies that were presented during the conference in Windhoek. Hopefully they will provide helpful insights into the interaction between theology, politics and economics and encourage discussions in churches and theological institutions as we journey on our way of on-going reformation.

Global Perspectives on the Reformation

Martin Junge

Introduction

When we began preparing for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation we pledged to observe three principles: we would emphasize the global nature and presence of the Reformation; we would observe ecumenical sensitivity in our approach by not revisiting old disputes as if nothing had changed in 500 years, but to acknowledge the fruits of our ecumenical engagement; and we would look forward, emphasizing the ongoing power of the gospel and its ongoing promise for this world.

How does the core message of the Lutheran Reformation, according to which it is not because of who we are and what we do, but because of who God is and what God does that we receive the gift of forgiveness, life and freedom, speak to us today? What transformation does it trigger? What wounds, injustices and oppression does it address?

Does the core message of the Reformation have any meaning today?

When discussing the fruits of the Reformation in today's world we have to be cautious with our approach and not to assume too much. The theme "Global Perspectives on the Reformation," and particularly its subtheme, "Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics," is ambitious. It presupposes that the theological insight of the Lutheran Reformation has implications far beyond the realm of the church and speaks to the political and economic realms.

Is it really so, or is this merely wishful thinking? The core message and cornerstone of Lutheran theology is the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and Luther's personal struggle to find a gracious God led him to rediscover God's grace. Yet, what do people wrestle with today? Do all people, all over the world, wrestle with the same issues at the same time? Do people in the same village or society wrestle with the same questions? Does a woman in a patriarchal society struggle with the same questions as a man in that society? Do indigenous populations deal with existential questions in the same way as other sections of the population? Do we really believe that young people have the same questions concerning life, joy, hope, death, fullness and transcendence as the generation born in the early 1960s? What unleashes existential anxiety today?

The doctrine of justification by faith alone was a theological insight that developed an immense dynamic and plunged an entire worldview into profound transformation. But what coordinates determine today's worldviews? Does a religious view matter at all in a secular society? Is there **one** prevailing system of coordinates that orders people's worldviews throughout the world? Are some of the conflicts and struggles today not precisely about the emergence of alternative coordinate systems and the attempt to overcome inherited coordinates, often experienced as alienating because they were imposed?

Finally, the sixteenth-century Reformation was readily accepted by many people in Europe at the time. Can that movement continue to retain its relevance in this "one world," with its huge complexities, its shifting centers of gravity, and its polycentric nature?

Affirming the intersections between theology, economics and politics

The sixteenth-century Lutheran Reformation can only be explained in light of the political and economic environment in Luther's time, to which his theological insight spoke so powerfully.

We need to be careful not to romanticize and idealize the Reformation as if it had been exclusively the struggle about theological ideas and principles, doctrines and dogmas. Undoubtedly, the Reformation's insight of justification by faith alone is a deeply theological issue. The power of that insight, however, and the wave of transformation it unleashed, can only be explained against the background of the immense, complex, and demanding changes in sixteenth-century western European societies, which were transiting into a capitalist economy. At the time, the political powers—ecclesial and earthly alike—were trapped in suffocating debts (how else can we explain the com-

merce with indulgences?). They had to deal with emerging national identities that were gaining strength and fragmenting the hegemonic agendas of the prevailing empire and cope with a New World, "discovered" only decades before and flooding the ruined western economies with tons of silver and gold, to the detriment of artisans, peasants and workers.

It was in this environment that the theological insights of the Reformation spoke, flourished and triggered change. The Reformation was a catalyst for the change that was in the air, an impulse to reassess the difficult question of the redistribution of power. In addition, the Lutheran Reformation did not always only serve as catalyst to process important social and political questions; it also became an instrument of these struggles for power. It is quite obvious that the horrific violence that disguised itself in religious clothing and virtually halved the western European population during the decades following the Reformation was not just about theology but about hegemonic powers in a fierce dispute over space and supremacy—and faith and religion became aligned with that dispute.

This fact is of particular importance today in view of understanding (a) what the issues are today; (b) the fact that once again we see so much "religious clothing" around disputes of power, resources and supremacy; and (c) throughout the programs and activities around the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation to maintain a non-triumphalist approach. The *simul iustus et peccator* of Lutheran theology needs to be applied to the overall process of Lutheran reformation—and as Lutherans we have the theological resources to do so. There should be no place for self-justification among churches that say they live from the gift of justification by faith alone.

The church in the public space

I would like to highlight another aspect before exploring some dimensions of the LWF theme and the sub-themes for the Reformation Anniversary, namely the assumption that the place of the church is in the public sphere.

It has been hard for me to understand the theological tradition that confines faith to the inner sphere of the individual. The anxiety in regard to the public space is difficult to understand in view of the fact that God, incarnated in Jesus Christ, mainly simply wandered around in the public sphere to bring the good news of salvation. How can we explain a withdrawal into the private sphere in light of the biblical account of the disciples overcoming their fear and introversion when they were visited by the risen Lord and how that encounter pushed them into the public realm?

The Lutheran Reformation was such a step into the public realm. Today scholars agree that Luther's key insight about justification by faith alone

had been discovered and articulated years before it unleashed its explosive power in 1517. Some scholars argue that already in Luther's lectures on the Psalms one can clearly identify this insight. Others date it later, during his lectures on the letter of Paul to the Romans. However, all agree that the Reformation's insight had been there for some years already, and that Luther may have already taught it to his students for several years without any major consequences, mass movements and social, political and religious upheaval, and that no authorities had related to it nor emperor dealt with it. What provoked the change? How did it develop its transformative power?

I believe it was Luther's pastoral and diaconal concern for people that made the difference. Indeed, while one may argue whether the Ninety-Five Theses were actually nailed to the Castle Church's door or not, it was clearly Luther's concern about ordinary people putting their trust in a financial transaction as a means to secure their eternal life (indulgences) that compelled him to go to the public, to protest, critique, and to advise on the basis of what he had recognized as the truth of the gospel. It was his agony about people being so fundamentally misled, to the point of putting their trust in a coin, which provoked him to speak out publicly. It was his prophetic anger about the church of his time bluntly turning something the Scriptures teach is a free gift into a commodity. It was Luther's diaconal concern that motivated him to offer his theological insight—developed in prayer life and academic research—to the noisy and messy world of the ordinary people. Luther saw these people—some of whom were extremly poor and marginalized—offering their small coins for a bit of peace in their hearts, at least for life after death, given that life on earth was just a torment and nightmare with no end in sight.

Academic research as a resource for ordinary people struggling with existential questions and the combination of rigorous scholarly work and compassionate witness—this is how I believe the balance between academia and the mission of the church to have been ideally struck during the Reformation. It is my hope that the vision for such a balance, which holds together and embraces the tension resulting from these two poles, will prevail in the many discussions among churches around the world today.

Some perspectives on the theological insights of the Reformation

How can we accomplish a contemporary approach to the Reformation Anniversary that unpacks the power of the Reformation's insights for today's world? In light of this question, the LWF came up with a thematic approach that helps to connect the Reformation insights with the current issues

and challenges that characterize many of our shared realities today. This thematic approach will hopefully be useful also beyond the Reformation Anniversary by inviting churches to reflect on themselves and on their contexts.

The LWF adopted "Liberated by God's Grace" as the main theme for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. The following three subthemes help to explicate different aspects of the main theme: Salvation—not for Sale; Human Beings—not for Sale; Creation—not for Sale

What "not for sale" means will probably be immediately clear. It relates to the prophetic opposition that Luther brought to public attention in the sixteenth century by posting his Ninety-Five Theses. At the time, he objected to a gift, offered by God for free, becoming a commodity controlled by the religious power of the time, the church.

This general protest has lost none of its vitality and pertinence: it is about opposing the marketing of gifts that by their very nature are non-marketable and must never become the object of monetary transactions. Luther's prophetic "No!" is then illustrated at three different levels: salvation, human beings and creation.

Against marketing faith and the church

The first sub-theme—"Salvation—not for Sale"—does not revisit the argument concerning indulgences that flared up in the sixteenth century. It does, however, revisit the question of the current commodification of redemption, prosperity and life in abundance because works righteousness and marketing the benefits of salvation have today taken on completely different, yet similarly dramatic, dimensions as in the sixteenth century.

What do we mean here? First of all, it is about self-critically examining to what extent churches in the Reformation tradition proclaim the priority of grace in their preaching and witness. Legalism creeps in time and again; preconditions are set for grace, for forgiveness and salvation which, according to Reformation theology, are unconditional. Time and again it sounds as though we do need to do something after all, or that we need to fulfill certain ontological criteria without which we will be damned, excluded or stigmatized. Human beings continue to have terrible trouble to put up with God's subversion of human feelings of what is right, whereby God offers human beings the gift of redemption and thus of liberation—by grace alone. That is the meaning of the cross of Christ, which is at the very center of Reformation theology.

However, this theme also covers the many, sometimes even comical, forms of mercantile mediation of salvation that one can encounter in more recent forms of church. The marketing of despair and deep-seated fears has

developed into a thriving business, as has the hope for prosperity. Under different headings, people are sold promises of salvation that are completely beyond any human power. The neoliberal market ideology is dragging the church, religion and faith onto the marketplace. It is not what is true that wins the day, but what sells and is successful. We need to contradict this in the spirit of a theology of the cross.

By daring to speak out in opposition to this, churches in the Reformation tradition make a significant contribution to taking responsibility for the one world that we share. The reason is that a world that never hears of or experiences grace must inevitably be graceless and will only seek its salvation in merciless competition, if not in a fight for survival that can only be won by a few. The one world will then very rapidly become the world of a few. Such a world is characterized by mechanisms of exclusion that leave their traces everywhere. This is confirmed by indigenous peoples, older people, children and young people, women, but by no means reflects the vision of the world's future revealed by God in Jesus Christ.

Human beings are inviolable

The second sub-theme, "Human Beings—not for Sale," is extremely pertinent: the migration of people from crisis areas to safe countries has resulted in gangs of smugglers unscrupulously turning refugees into commodities. This phenomenon is not at all new, but it now looms large in European public awareness. Similar manifestations of human trafficking exist in other areas: women channeled into prostitution networks; children and teenagers kidnapped and recruited for mercenary armies; people forced to sell their organs; young women and men working as cheap labor—if they are paid at all—in conditions of great drudgery, thereby guaranteeing the competitiveness of locations and industries or the implementation of major projects.

The extent to which Christian beliefs justify a fundamental rejection of these practices needs no further explanation. Every individual bears in themselves the *imago Dei*, the image of God, and their dignity and integrity are therefore inviolable. Being made in the image of God is a biblical motif of central importance for the way in which Christians understand what it means to be human.

Christians stand up for protecting the dignity of each and every person. There are also solid reasons for respecting human dignity in other religious and philosophical traditions. Humanity has developed political and legal instruments with which to express a claim to the universality of this consensus. These are the human rights covenants and conventions which, with the exception of very few non-signatory states, are binding on the international community.

The Reformation churches have an important part to play in that they distinguish between the domains in which God is active in the world (the "two kingdoms" doctrine). They therefore do not play off God's law against human law, or promote God's law in the sense of a theocracy. The distinction between the domains, in particular legitimizing a secular and thus public domain in dialectic tension with the spiritual domain, is one of the most important contributions of the Reformation to cultural history. Churches in the Reformation tradition can therefore certainly advocate for human rights and constantly call for them to be respected—they can even do so on the basis of their religious beliefs. Not because human rights are "holy scripture," but because the view of humankind expressed in them is in harmony with the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. Furthermore, human rights are an effective instrument for protecting human dignity as a global obligation.

Can our freedom be boundless?

The third sub-theme, "Creation—not for Sale," addresses a dimension that is probably one of the most enormous and threatening challenges of our times. The lifestyle of a part of global population is in the process of destroying the ecological balance. Human induced climate change will significantly impact humanity's chances of survival if nothing is done to stop it.

Climate change—similarly to the financial crisis—points to a basic problem in human behavior: people now live from resources that they have to borrow from future generations or from other groups. This, in turn, is an expression of an understanding of freedom that has reached its limit. Ever since the Cartesian paradigm established itself, the understanding of freedom has focused so strongly on the individual that it has lived out this freedom in a striking lack of relationships and thus a lack of responsibility. One generation today takes it upon itself to consume the next generation's resources; certain dominant societies take it upon themselves to use up the resources of other groups and people elsewhere. Can that be freedom?

The Reformation churches have an important contribution to make in this field in that they can make proposals for coping with the huge challenge of how humankind can balance its understanding of freedom against social and environmental awareness in order to guarantee a sustainable future.

The initial accusation brought against Lutheran theology was that the message of justification undermined any ethical and moral fabric, in that God's gift of grace allegedly rendered all ethical endeavors baseless. The response of Lutheran theology and practice to this critique is a stroke of genius. First, by not going back on its beliefs it did not eliminate either God's gift of grace or the resultant freedom for the justified individual. This

decision cannot be emphasized often enough. Churches in the Reformation tradition are churches of grace and freedom, both at the same time. Anyone in this tradition, who talks of justification by God's grace alone, will want to talk of freedom. Indeed, they are obliged to. Secondly, this freedom relates to the neighbor, specifically the suffering neighbor. Freedom, as given by God, is never autonomous or autistic—it is an essential element of Lutheran theology and practice; freedom, as given by God, finds its full expression in entering into—and protecting—relationships.

What Lutheran theology in the sixteenth century could not yet see, but what needs to be articulated more fully today in the spirit of an ongoing reformation, is the insight that human freedom, as given by God, will direct its relational commitment not only to the suffering neighbor but also to God's groaning creation. For that reason we absolutely need to move from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric theology, which sees God's saving work in the world as directed not only to human beings and their redemption but also to the whole of God's creation. This consistent and continued development of reformation theology is both a great challenge and a great gift.

Global narratives of being Lutheran

The Lutheran Reformation unfolded through Martin Luther in sixteenth-century western Europe. However the narratives of being churches in the tradition of Lutheran Reformation vary. Ethiopians speak of Onesimus, the first local missionary who took the trouble and faced huge challenges in order to establish churches in the Protestant tradition. They speak with great respect about the Swedish and North American missionaries who came to them. That, rather than Wittenberg, is what makes up their own history of being churches in the Reformation tradition.

In India, Lutherans speak about Tranquebar, the port where missionaries arrived and chose to sit with those with whom nobody was supposed to sit: the Dalits. Missionaries touched the untouchables, and the untouchables understood God's path of incarnation as God's own way of escaping from being untouchably to becoming fully human, and hence touchable. What a powerful alternative narrative of Christian theology altogether. Again, their reference point, their geographical reference to what it is to be churches in the tradition of Lutheran Reformation, is not in western Europe but in India.

In May 2015, the African LWF member churches met in Marangu, Tanzania, to commemorate sixty years since they held their first meeting. The theme of their meeting was "From Marangu to Wittenberg," hence turning historical facts upside down and putting experiential facts forward: