

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

— Luther beyond Luther —

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The study of Luther is an intellectual enterprise fraught with risk, not least the risk that any approach may present an embarrassment to religious movements stamped with Luther's name. Someone investigating the "historical Luther" runs the risk of stepping on contemporary Lutheran denominational toes. Likewise, someone examining the "Catholic Luther" will bump up against strong commitments to a distinct Protestant identity, while yet another examining the "reformation Luther" may irritate Catholic sensibilities with stories of a rebel monk and his uncompromising idea of justification by Christ's work alone. The study of Luther may also raise the specter of Luther's anti-Judaism. Luther is associated, as perhaps no other Christian theologian, with the evil of the Holocaust. This association poses a challenge to Luther studies for addressing the stubborn anti-Semitism in Christianity's history and theology. The risk of religious dialogue today requires scholarly clarification of the historical issues at stake in Luther's own works and creativity in advocating for religious peace in today's global context.

Yet Luther remains, in spite of the risks, a theologian who provokes and challenges on topics from religion to spirituality, from Christian theology to economics. Luther himself was a theologian who wagered his life and vocation, even European Christendom, to test out ideas that changed the world. Those who study Luther should be asked to do the same, to take intellectual risks—sometimes even with personal and vocational consequences—and to

dare to promote energetic and dangerous ways to understand loving and just ways of construing self, world, and God today.

“The Reformer”

In his Psalm commentary of 1532, Martin Luther invokes the tradition of biblical interpretation that determines a proper name according to the genus that it represents.¹ Paul is acknowledged as “the Apostle,” for example, although the New Testament recognizes at least twelve other apostles. Aristotle is known throughout the entire middle ages as “the Philosopher,” a term that is attributed to many other thinkers in Western history. The identification of name with genus situates those so designated in the rarified company of figures who have transcended their contexts and become associated with intellectual, social, pedagogical, and political movements of global proportions.

So history has attributed to Martin Luther (1483–1546) the genus that he is reputed to have initiated, “the Reformer,” the title by which Luther is known around the world. Many other reformers were associated with the sixteenth-century Protestant reformation—John Calvin (1509–1564), Geneva’s reformer, for example, or Katharina Zell (1497/98–1562), Strasbourg’s reformer—and with other reformations vital to the Christian church’s historical development. “The Reformer” himself often recalled his spiritual predecessor John Hus (c. 1372–1415), the theologian who attempted to reform the church’s practice of distributing the sacraments in only one kind (the bread), for which he was burnt at the stake at the Council of Constance. Yet the name representing the genus “Reformation” is attributed to Luther alone. Any religious or political movement that aspires to the status and outcome of reform will appeal inevitably to Luther to authorize its ideas and to inscribe its story into the tradition of meanings and associations his name connotes. Most recently, “Luther” has been used to designate religious and political reformers in Islam.² And in the fall of 2008, the Chilean government instituted October 31 as a national holiday, provocatively celebrating Protestant churches in a country that is dominantly Roman Catholic.³ The worldwide call of Luther’s name still today highlights the global significance of his reforms in religious,

1. This strategy, technically known as “*antonomasia* . . . makes a proper noun out of a common noun, [so that] it is transferred to other things”: LW 12:82 (*Exposition of Psalm 2*; to verse 12; 1532).

2. Recently, Tariq Ramadan: see Paul Donnelly, “Tariq Ramadan: The Muslim Martin Luther?” (Feb. 15, 2002), <http://dir.salon.com/story/people/feature/2002/02/15/ramadan>.

3. See “HOLA, Luther,” from *The Economist* (Nov. 6, 2008).

cultural, historical, and political perspective. What “the Reformer” means globally transcends his distinct person and particular work.

This book aims to highlight Luther’s global impact, in particular those ideas and actions associated with “the Reformer” that circulate in contemporary discussions. Such a goal requires looking at a number of factors in order to underline the powerful potential of Luther for today. A methodological awareness is in order concerning the way Luther’s ideas have transcended their original context and taken on a life of their own. When questions are asked of Luther that pertain to contemporary issues—the matter of peace among global religions today is at the forefront of this book’s interest—a two-step methodology is required. First, such questions must be posed in ways that are conscious of the contentious and ambivalent history of Luther’s reception. Only after this may we turn to the creative appropriation of Luther’s theological repertoire for more productive conversations in the contemporary world. Sober historical study is the necessary complement to exploring the imaginative potential of Luther’s ideas for transforming thought and action.

Reading Luther in Context

Luther’s biography has functioned in the history of Western Christianity as more than the story of an individual life. It is taken as a paradigm of Christian experience. Luther’s dramatic experiential movement from a life lived under the accusing law to a life set free in its psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions by the gospel is the paradigm of conversion at the heart of the Christian religion. Christianity since its origins in the New Testament has been captivated by the experience of paradigm shift. The Christian religion has come to signify the shift from false gods to the true God, from unbelief to faith, from law to gospel. There are severe problems associated with the conversion model. It is linked directly to Christianity’s supersessionism and Christian anti-Semitism. It struggles to admit the tenacity of abusive behavior that persists after conversion. Luther persecuted the “heretics” even after personally experiencing the grace of Christ, as Augustine had done centuries before following his conversion. Any responsible retrieval of Luther must acknowledge these problems.

Yet the attraction of the conversion model persists, and it is Luther’s particular shaping of this model that rivets the imagination. The emotions of an epoch were concentrated in Luther’s fears of hell, of Christ the judge, and of the devil—or God hidden in nature—and in Luther’s abhorrence of a God who exacted love but set up creation in such a way that loving God was

an impossibility. The age's inner life is evident too in Luther's terrible anxiety about the human requirement to cooperate with divine grace. That era's hopes, in turn, were quickened by Luther's sudden, intimate glimpse into the Father's heavenly heart that calmed his soul. Luther's conversion from the old became the synecdoche for an era poised on the cusp of the new. Conversion's power fueled the hagiography, while historical and theological scholarship has worked hard to demythologize it. Luther's conversion was not instantaneous but the result of many years of intellectual and spiritual struggle in the monastery and of exercising critical thinking in the genre of the disputation. The Ninety-Five Theses did not catapult the German states to reformation but merely provided the occasion for an academic debate. Yet the legend of the solitary monk who spoke up for freedom against overwhelming odds still excites its audience. Even the academic theologian must acknowledge that Luther's globally imaginative impact is more interesting than dusty study of historical facts.

This book admits that Luther's person and work have great appeal: His ideas about justification, his theology of the cross, and his challenging, even dangerous, remarks about the hidden God have been the subject of fascination and speculation for five hundred years. These classic ideas from Luther cannot, however, be entirely chalked up to a reformation paradigm shift. Responsible historical scholarship looks at the complicated links of these ideas to the middle ages. The Luther known by his global impact must be contextualized as "Catholic," at least in some respects. The impact of Luther's liturgical "re-alignment" (to use Paul Helmer's phrase in this volume) and hymn compositions, for example, cannot be imagined without seriously considering his indebtedness to medieval musicological traditions. Luther's notion of universal priesthood must be taken, to use another example discussed by Allen Jorgenson, in continuity with medieval traditions of conciliarism. The "global Luther" invites interest in the "Catholic Luther," and this interest follows Heiko Oberman's famous lead in sketching continuities between late medieval philosophy and theology and Luther.⁴ Furthermore, a "global Catholic Luther" might help explain why Luther's thoughts about suffering and love (in the essays by Krista Duttonhaver and Antti Raunio) can appear strange but pose unique ways of addressing the cross of daily human life today. There is just one caveat: if the global Luther is also Catholic, then he might pose an embarrassment as well as a creative challenge to both Lutheran and Roman Catholic identities.

4. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

If Luther's relation to his catholicity is controversial, his dismissive relation to non-Christian religions must be rejected today. Luther is well known for his invective against Jews and Judaism. Although this attitude has been historically contextualized in medieval Christianity by scholars, its political appropriation by twentieth-century National Socialism in Luther's native Germany cannot present anything short of a horrific abomination. *Kristallnacht* was carried out on the eve of the anniversary of Luther's birthday, on Nov. 9, 1938, and motivated by the hate-filled polemic that Luther had articulated in 1543. Christian scholarship today, responsible to an age that counteracts religious violence with strong advocacy for interreligious dialogue, tolerance, and peace, has met Luther with critical evaluation. Munib Younan's paper, "Beyond Luther: Prophetic Interfaith Dialogue for Life," speaks precisely to the contemporary challenges to build bridges of peace and justice between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The move beyond Luther requires describing all aspects of being human, the psychological, political, rational, and emotional, as they are intertwined in complex and distorted ways. The task also includes prescribing ways to orient these aspects toward the good of individual and community. Luther's own biography witnesses to the interplay between all factors—his idea of justification has a psychological component that drives his complex religious outbursts. If this study is to contextualize the deep insights of Luther's ideas positively in the contemporary global situation, then it must take into consideration the human subject who engages—with varying degrees of distortion and wholeness—this task.

Reading Luther beyond Context

It is an academic impossibility to distinguish neatly between Luther as reformer in his historical context and the meaning of reformation as understood by different generations appealing to Luther as authority and inspiration. Luther is so decisively a figure that has transcended his past—in terms of meaning, authority, and inspiration for subsequent generations—that the task of representing and understanding Luther as he sought reformation in his own particular time is a perennial historical problem. Appeals to Luther to justify positions held long after the sixteenth century have overlaid his reformation with a surplus of meaning. It is not possible to strip this entirely away.

The historical dilemma presents a unique opportunity, however. Rather than studying the Reformer with the goal of finding the "historical Luther," Luther studies could begin instead with an appreciation for Luther as a legend with global status. Did his treatise on Christian freedom not contribute

significantly to the history of the modern West's quest for freedom and liberation, from Hegel to Martin Luther King Jr.? Did Luther's translation of the Bible not mark a linguistic turn for the German language that is analogous to the creative revolution that Shakespeare achieved for the English language? Did Luther's religious and theological focus on the individual *coram deo* ("before God") not lead to the modern preoccupation with subjectivity, exemplified by philosophers in the Lutheran tradition, preeminently Immanuel Kant and Søren Kierkegaard? And did not Luther's lonely stand against pope and emperor offer a powerful inspiration to those speaking truth to power?

When Luther's ideas are viewed in different times and places, they can be plumbed at a depth-dimension that he did not himself explore and for implications of which he was probably not aware. Luther was audacious in thinking through theological distinctions—for example, the justifying God and the sinful human—as well as theological identities—the unity of God and humanity in Christ. His reconceptualizations had a transformative impact in revising notions of priesthood and freedom, faith and truth, God's frightening hiddenness and God's eternal burning love. Luther's glimpses of the reality of self, world, and God have inspired centuries of interpretation in various religious, cultural, and political forums. But to solicit Luther as viable conversation partner for today's stormy discussions is also to acknowledge that his ideas have been fraught with danger, and that even in their all-too-human ambivalence, they have a visionary dimension of a truth that must be heard today.

The task of engaging Luther in contemporary dialogue also requires a flexibility of mind: if the history of the Protestant religious reformation is to have anything to say to social-cultural and political histories, or if Luther's own provocative contributions to discussions of sin and grace are to be understood by those who are not born into the Lutheran succession, these topics must be communicated in such a way that they are interesting and accessible to others. Conversely, psychological, musicological, literary-linguistic, and philosophical contributions to the study of Luther can open up new avenues in interpreting Luther's theology. Justification is not solely about the individual *coram deo*, for example; it refers to the transformation of the human person that engages all faculties of being human: emotion, reason, language, and community.

Contemporary interdisciplinary interest is testimony to Luther's own efforts in the sixteenth century. His education in the liberal arts served as the foundation for his own facility in extending theology into areas of music, language, philosophy, and psychology. Luther's prolific hymn composition presupposes his musical and musicological training that was later transmitted into the Protestant tradition of choral singing and organ preludes. Luther's striving

to make the Bible available to the literate population led to his commitment to words and their meanings that then became the subject for discussion in German departments and the history of hermeneutics. Luther's deep religious interests compelled him to explore history and philosophy, metaphysics and logic, as theologically appropriate tools to describe the religious realities he had experienced.

By orienting its focus to the global and sometimes Catholic Luther, this book goes beyond the Luther who has, for many centuries, been associated with Germany, and with its history and theology. The "German Luther" is undoubtedly the legacy given to the contemporary world to study and appropriate.⁵ The "Reformer" as he appears today bears the contours of interpretation in distinctly German Protestant categories—his neo-Kantianism, the insidious dualism that is highlighted as characteristic of his thinking, and the "word event" character of his theology are interpretations that are closely bound up with German intellectual history. Yet the last half-century has witnessed a rapidly growing global dimension to the study of Luther. The Finnish reception of Luther, to use one example, has paved a significant interpretative way to both Luther's philosophical-anthropological ideas of the human person as justified in the very depths of the soul and to the important ecumenical implications of this new insight. This volume addresses new forays beyond the "German Luther" as they are represented by scholars of Luther and scholars interested in Luther. It is intended to set a new trend in global scholarship that does justice to "the Reformer," as one who has truly succeeded in transcending his own person, his religion, and his nationality.

The Global Luther Project

The assumption behind Luther as "a theologian for modern times" is that theologians should and can speak to and intimately engage with their world. Luther found a language that fired up his contemporaries. He is admired as one of the most successful models of theological communication in the history of Christianity. This book highlights Luther's facility in engaging the pressing questions of his times in the context of themes that are driving the contemporary imagination. Life's opacity to rationality, reality's coldness, and God's mysterious silence are described alongside glimpses of God's undying love for human persons. *The Global Luther* is divided into particular themes

5. See the section entitled, "The American Luther's German Pedigree," in Christine Helmer, "The American Luther," *Dialog* 47/2 (Summer 2008): 118–20.

structuring five sections. Individual introductions are provided at the beginning of each distinct section.

The first section, "Luther's Global Impact," outlines the broad parameters of Luther's extraordinary impact. Luther's contributions to West and world are sketched in the areas of culture, intellectual history, and global religions. The history of modern language cannot be written without acknowledging his Bible translation and literary compositions, the history of freedom that encompasses Luther, Hegel, and Martin Luther King Jr., in its embrace, and the history of relations between global religions that have Luther to criticize and to overcome.

The title of section two, "Living in the Midst of Horrors," alludes to Luther's hymn, "In the Midst of Life We Are,"⁶ to give expression to the task, challenge, and despair of living in the world today. The primary interpretational matrix for focusing Luther's insights is the interplay between psychological, spiritual, religious, and theological factors. This interplay is becoming more and more a consensus in discussions of Luther that seek to develop a robust anthropology on the basis of Luther's understanding of the human person living simultaneously in the states of sin and grace. The continued interest in Luther's own complicated psychological history is fleshed out in a number of ways, including descriptions of his religious dispositions, spiritual distresses, and images of God inherited from his parental home that help explain his psychological fears, religious polemic, and theological tensions.

The third section, "Language, Emotion, and Reason," looks at an even more specific determination of the human person. The human person is not only one theologically determined by law and gospel before God, but lives an embodied life in relation to others. Hence this section focuses on human subjectivity as the interplay between faculties and capacities that express and structure human life. Language and emotions are constitutive of human subjectivity. If justification justifies the human truly, then language and emotions will express this transformation. Reason is also a significant part of Luther's anthropology, particularly as it shapes and relates the different spheres of thinking—music, metaphysics, mathematics, logic—with which Luther was intimately familiar.

The fourth section, "Luther's Theology for Today," highlights Luther's specific, distinctive ideas that have had a lasting impact in Lutheran traditions and beyond. Justification is without doubt the most famous. The doctrine of justification did, after all, lead to the Western schism that has only recently been addressed with the signing of the *Joint Declaration on Justification* in 1999. This

6. The first line continues: "... Aye in Death's embraces" (LW 53:275).

section treats the extension of justification into areas of justice, particularly the Lutheran ethics that are represented in the Nordic welfare states. A study of Luther's theological achievement would not be complete without mentioning his theology of the cross, and, in the context of building interreligious bridges, its constructive implications for a theology of religions.

The fifth section, "Politics and Power," addresses the ecclesial and political dimensions of human life in the world. Luther's insights in this regard have also had a powerful impact, particularly the idea of the priesthood of all believers and the liberative potential that this idea conveys. Yet this insight together with ideas concerning reformation of ecclesial and political structures is tempered by a disturbing ambivalence that is inscribed into Luther's rhetoric as well as into the reality of history. The realism of Luther's theology is its test of truth: as people and powers, religious believers and political folk are thrown together into the teeming struggles of history, they can only momentarily grasp the actuality of justification without ever really embodying it definitively and permanently. Perhaps in this realism lies Luther's potential for today. Human life is shot through with ambivalence and ambiguity; ideas and actions, even those of the Christian, are modeled after God's hiddenness on the cross.

I note the particular translations used in this book. The *New Revised Standard Version* of the Christian Bible is cited, except where otherwise indicated. All references to Luther in English are taken from Luther's Works—American Edition (LW), except where otherwise indicated. In the many cases where Luther's text has not yet been translated into English, references are made to the critical edition of Luther's works in the Weimarer Ausgabe (WA). Translations of the Weimarer Ausgabe are provided by the respective author, and significant discrepancies between LW translation and WA original are noted. Equivalent passages in the WA are given for the LW when possible. References to the English version of Luther's Small and Large Catechisms (1529) are taken from the recent edition published by Fortress Press of the *Book of Concord*.

The Global Luther also includes the medium of sound to highlight one of Luther's most important contributions to Western culture. The recording included in this volume demonstrates the musical development throughout the middle ages of the famous Latin Sequence *Victimae paschali laudes*. Luther's Easter hymn, *Christ lag in Todesbanden* ("Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands"),⁷ stands in the tradition of this musical trajectory, which culminates

7. The title in LW is "Death Held Our Lord in Prison" (53:255).

in the organ chorale prelude by J. S. Bach. The performance was recorded in the Charles Palmerston Anderson Chapel of Saint John the Divine at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, on November 19, 2008. The program was created by Paul Helmer. Andrew Lewis conducted the Bella Voce choir of Chicago, the chapel organ, and an early music ensemble composed of two cornetts and two sackbuts. Edward Hoke of Audiospark in Evanston, Illinois, was the sound engineer.