

INTRODUCTION

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Luther's theology remains so fascinating today in many different quarters precisely because it is being continually transformed. We – the editors of this collection and its contributors – mean this in two ways: to read Luther is to transform him with the contemporary questions brought to his theology; to read him is to risk the transformation of one's own perceptions, biases, and judgments. And this ongoing work on Luther, and in Reformation theology generally, has the potential, we believe, for the transformation of Christian theology itself. Just as Reformation theology has changed its form from the *loci communes* to a more systematic enterprise, so too is theology evolving, now including ethics, philosophy of religion, and cultural studies in its purview. This is the subtext of the volume: it is time for a transformation of Luther's theology, time to welcome participants from around the world in the ongoing discussion of Luther, and time to take a creative step towards new ways of doing theology in a global context.

One reason for the current timeliness of Luther is the historically contingent fact that the years between 2007 and 2017 are being touted by Luther and Reformation scholars and by Lutherans themselves as the »Luther decade«. The Luther decade looks forward to the five-hundredth-year anniversary of Luther's alleged Reformation breakthrough that took place when he nailed the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church on Oct. 31, 1517. With such a historic commemoration of one of the most momentous events in Western history there is bound to be much interest in Luther. Current conversations anticipate the anniversary of Wittenberg.

The fact of the approaching commemoration is a necessary reason for renewed interest in Luther, but not a sufficient one. Luther scholarship today is experiencing a burst of creative energy because of the particular questions being posed to it and the issues raised. The twentieth century – the century

that witnessed the significant impact of the *Lutherrenaissance* on the theology and culture of Europe – is over. The intellectual direction initiated by Karl Holl's lectures (1910) on Luther's *Lectures on Romans* lies one hundred years in the past.¹ Responsibility now rests with theologians working in the twenty-first century to critically appropriate the contributions to Luther scholarship inherited from the *Lutherrenaissance*. The present task is to move past, while not denying or minimizing – indeed, by contending anew with – the controversial and dangerous aspects of this legacy and to pursue new directions in articulating Luther's continuing relevance.

Scholarly concerns are in tension with other approaches and agendas. Luther is more than the originator of the Lutheran tradition; he is the controversial figure whose thought, writings, and ideas have been instrumental in shaping Western history, for better and for worse. Interdisciplinary interest has moved to the forefront of scholarly discussions of Luther's legacy. Luther's impact on music yes, but also on art, philosophy, language, literature is studied in theology and history and other disciplines. Furthermore, the interest is international. The makeup of scholars at conferences on and in publications about Luther is changing. English is spoken, alongside German, while bilingual publications are becoming the international rule. Scholars represent different age groups, include men and women, and hail from diverse countries. The increasing pluralism and the accompanying requirement of personal and professional accommodation of pluralism are becoming exigent as Luther discussions take on topics of contemporary global interest. The opportunity represented by this volume, then, is to document the transformation of Luther's theology at this exciting intersection of interdisciplinary, international, and contemporary interests.

Two crucial changes in contemporary scholarship on Luther and the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation warrant special mention. First, it seems that historical scholarship has moved away from theological questions and towards posing historical questions of *theology*. The number of historians of Christianity² who only study authoritative texts by canonical Reformers is in decline. Alternative, more social historically capacious ap-

proaches to Luther have proven useful both to contemporary constructive theology, such as Volker Leppin's work on Luther,³ and to historians of Christianity who are interested in fostering transdisciplinary discussions, for example, as evident in discussions in a recent volume of the American journal *Dialog* entitled, »The Future of Luther Studies«.⁴ But it is the case that historians interested in works by canonical Reformers who are also concerned with the broader theological and cultural issues are more the exception than the rule.

Second another shift seems to be taking place in the opposite direction, away from the purely historical to more constructive-theological questions. This tendency may be a reaction to the first trend, which is primarily preoccupied with historical questions. Luther scholars are venturing out beyond the narrow confines of the histories of particular Protestant traditions and into broader theological conversations that highlight culturally relevant topics such as pluralism, globalization, human dignity and rights, religion and violence. Gone are the days when a Luther scholar could offer a work of scholarship that historically isolated Luther »as he truly was in his own time«. Hermeneutical theory has revealed biases, ideologies, theories, and subjective dispositions shaping even the simplest historical question. Rather than studying the historical Luther for his own sake, current inquiry is viewing Luther in the interests of timely and crucial dialogue, and not least for critical reflection. The tradition of Luther scholarship in the twentieth century was powerful and dominant. Twenty-first-century interest in Luther is frequently marked by a critical questioning of this hegemonic tradition.

So we enter into dialogue with Luther about topics of religious and political urgency. Contemporary concerns, from the loss of community in Western societies to the radical individualization of post-capitalist formations of human existence, from the study of countries that have advanced policies on behalf of the poor and socially marginalized to issues in support of advancing peace and pluralism, have multiplied. Contexts in which Lutheran theology is studied are increasingly post-confessional; Lutheran societies characteristic of Northern Europe do not exist in their historical mono-cultural forms any longer. The Lutheran contribution to religion, politics, and society must be considered anew in these contexts. And if Luther cannot be productively and creatively reengaged to pose and deepen questions asked of human life today

¹ KARL HOLL: Die Rechtfertigungslehre in Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Frage der Heilsgewißheit, in: *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 20 (1910), 245–291. A revised version was included in GA I, 111–154.

² The German equivalent, *Kirchengeschichte*, does not easily map onto the English translation, *Church History*. In the English-speaking world, the term *Church History* is gradually being replaced by the designation *History of Christianity*.

³ VOLKER LEPPIN, *Martin Luther, Gestalten des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, Darmstadt 2006.

⁴ RISTO SAARINEN (guest ed.): *The Future of Luther Studies*, *Dialog* 47 (Summer 2008).

and of the human relationship with God, or to facilitate the production of honest solutions to these questions, then Luther should best be left to the annals of history. Yet Luther's person continues to fascinate those in search of truth in the face of power and his writings present a theological edginess and existential honesty – a move towards life in the midst of death. Furthermore the study of the impact of a Lutheran worldview on the formation of societies, especially the countries in Northern Europe, can lead to a theological analysis of the possible mirroring effect of divine grace on human social life.

The shift from merely historical to constructive-systematic work on Luther is evident in the current theological discussion of »gift«. The debate focuses on the concept of gift as a fundamental anthropological phenomenon. It thereby joins a discussion that has occupied cultural anthropologists and ethnologists for almost a century and that has reappeared in recent discussion as well.⁵ The phenomenology of the gift can be productively used to describe and analyze a number of different human responses, interactions, and actions. In particular there is the claim by French philosopher Jacques Derrida that gift-giving has the capacity to represent a radical and absolute alternative to the causally construed economy of exchange, as it has been uncovered in modern sociology and cultural anthropology. The primary difficulty with the gift is, as Derrida has argued, that it is annihilated in the process of giving. The giving of the gift obliges the giver in such a way that the gift is no longer constituted as merely and solely gift. The gift represents the impossible; it is withdrawn from worldly existence.

Hovering below the surface of Derrida's understanding of the gift are theological issues that both lie close to and directly oppose the central ideas in Luther's reform of the Lord's Supper in the early sixteenth century. The discussion precipitated by Derrida opens up creative ways of approaching topics from gift-giving to the nature of human intersubjectivity. But examinations of the gift, especially in English-speaking contexts, have taken place predominantly on the phenomenological terrain set by Derrida and Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. Yet Lutheran theologians, particularly in the Nordic countries, have contributed distinctly Lutheran perspectives to the theological discussion of gift. Bo Holm and Risto Saarinen, to name just two of a group of discussants, have addressed the concept of gift as conceptually advantageous for Luther studies in its reframing of doctrines classically held

⁵ For an introduction to this discussion in the context of Lutheran theology see the introduction in BO KRISTIAN HOLM / PETER WIDMANN (eds.): *Word – Gift – Being: Justification – Economy – Ontology*, RPT 37, Tübingen 2009, 1–16.

to be conceptually distinct. Gift unites the doctrines of justification, creation, and sanctification under one rubric, demonstrating how common features of God's gift-giving nature and activity as well as the human reception of divine gifts can be analyzed from the distinct contributions of gift questions. Luther, in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper (1528)* and his *Explanation to the Creed in the Large Catechism (1529)*, becomes a welcome conversation partner with his bold theological claims concerning divine self-giving as gift. His ideas can further propel the gift-discussion to deeper reflection about how the divine nature is to be understood, while other contributions to the discussion, notably the discussion of gift and human reciprocity, have challenged Luther scholars to look for ways to describe the »reception« of divine gifts in anthropologically more robust terms than the classic Lutheran account of *mere passive* or mere passive reception.⁶ There are further issues that can be raised concerning how Luther's theology can facilitate critical revisions of philosophical and theological theories about gift. Gift theology is one among many decisive examples marking the shift from an isolated historical interest in Luther to interest in Luther as major conversation partner in contemporary theological discussions, and at the same time offering a new approach to historical Luther research.

Alongside the new discussions taking place in theology, questions are being raised concerning current circumscriptions of theology as a discipline within the academy. If Luther's contribution to theology is an emphasis that Luther scholars are committed to making, then his contributions must be tailored in relation to the changes currently taking place in the discipline of theology.

The linguistic foundation of this challenge rests with a difference in terms. »Theology«, in the English sense of the term, is narrowly understood as equivalent to systematic and constructive theology, while the German *Theologie* is considered to cover the wider range of biblical, historical, dogmatic, and practical-theological fields. What is currently in flux is theology's designation as systematic theology. Theology as the systematic representation of Christian doctrine has begun to reorient its focus with the aim of building bridges to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that are conceptually and empirically necessary for theology to communicate its contri-

⁶ See the contribution by INGOLF U. DALFERTH: *Mere passive. Die Passivität der Gabe bei Luther*, in: HOLM/WIDMANN, *Word*, 42–72; as well as Holm's account of receptive reciprocity in this volume: BO KRISTIAN HOLM: *Justification and reciprocity. »Purified gift-exchange« in Luther and Milbank*, in: HOLM/WIDMANN, *Word*, 87–116.

butions in academic contexts. The change has been precipitated by a re-appropriation of Friedrich Schleiermacher's thought within Luther scholarship that brings both ethics and philosophy of religion (to use Schleiermacher's own terms) into theology's range. The intention to view fields such as ethics and philosophy of religion in closer proximity to theology is one of the primary motivations among theologians for contextualizing the subject matter of Christine doctrine in relation to other academic fields of inquiry. By doing so, theology can be better equipped to communicate its contributions to scholarship. Theology, if it is to represent a viable contribution to fields beyond its boundaries, must take care to communicate its insights to the common pursuit of knowledge.

The shifts underway in theology are also methodological. The broad academic discipline most closely bordering on theology, Religious Studies, may be called on to help change the way that theology is oriented to the empirical. The modern study of religion is decisively empirical, claiming historiography, ethnography, sociology, psychology, and even the natural sciences as its methodological pillars. Theology has traditionally taken on the task of a prescriptive, normative discipline – although Schleiermacher himself had envisioned dogmatic theology exclusively in historical terms – still, theology's relation to the field of Religious Studies is undergoing a revision of these aspirations. While Religious Studies proper describes and analyzes the religious dimension of human phenomena, such inquires can invite the more conceptual enterprises, theology and philosophy of religion for example, to help explain the metaphysical, fundamental ontological, and transcendental aspects of human reality. As religious studies seeks to better understand religion as it is lived and experienced, it can ask theology to consider embracing the empirical methods and questions of the study of religion. Such an embrace might facilitate a shift in theological discourse about its key concepts. Discussions of concepts, such as gift or justification, would be expanded to include empirical content in order to better make sense of the reality of gifts in intersubjective relations or of the reality of emotional, experiential, physical, and mental change taking place in justification. If theology is to look beyond an exclusive preoccupation with the system of Christian doctrines to the broader world of religion, then it must be able to integrate empirical questions into its conceptual focus.

So we believe that the most productive and generative way of anticipating the Luther celebration in 2017 is by engaging the new developments in the interconnections among academic disciplines and their methods. The book *Transformations in Luther's Theology* takes a particular step in this di-

rection. The first part, »Historical Transformations«, addresses the ways in which Luther scholarship and the study of Reformation theology have changed over the past one hundred years, over the long twentieth century that we understand as including the original *Lutherrenaissance* which catapulted Luther scholarship into the modern study of history. Contributors to Part One describe and analyze how the study of Luther was reciprocally related to changes in the fields of history, religion, philosophy, and how these changes have affected the way Luther and Lutheran theology have been viewed. Luther and the Lutheran tradition are received, transmitted, and interpreted through different conceptual frameworks that sometimes present Luther's accomplishments and failures in radically distinct ways. Furthermore, the way in which Luther can be read in a global context must take into account the reception history of Luther through the twenty-first century that has been predominantly shaped by German scholarship. The transformation of the past by historical inquiry then can provoke new questions for contemporary Luther scholarship to address.

Part Two of this book attends to the »Contemporary Transformations« of Luther's Reformation theology. Questions concerning the relation of Lutheran inheritances to modern social welfare states and political justice are rapidly setting the research agenda in ethics and political theology in Luther scholarship, particularly among Nordic Luther scholars. This view from the Nordic countries is inspiring scholars elsewhere to move beyond a traditional theological agenda and to radically place political questions at the heart of their research interests. Ethics and life, economics and politics, welfare and work/life balance are issues that bring Luther scholars closer to the questions taken up in political theology and philosophy. This shift is also opening up possibilities in the ecclesial realm to regard the rights and dignity of humans and environment as a good willed by God. A revision of Luther's theology would bring Luther's own »experiential theology« into conversation with contemporary questions concerning the political, economic, and social justice dimensions of life. This book is our proposal for this conversation; we look forward to others joining us.