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A Closer Look: How I Changed My Mind about Luther and the Reformation during the Last Decade

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The more you know about the past, the better prepared you are for the future
–Theodore Roosevelt

Even as a Catholic (!) theologian in Germany, one could not escape from Martin Luther over the last decade while Germany was preparing the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The reason for that is very simple; historical events that are so significant that they have become part of our collective cultural memory are always of a twofold character: as real history and as identity-shaping memory. Any event we choose to commemorate thus has perhaps an even stronger link to the present than it does to the past. And Luther still is a very significant figure in Germany's cultural identity—just think about his influence on the historical genesis of the German language.

But looking at the last decade, it has also became apparent that this mixture of historical reconstruction and current identity can lead to a presentation of history that totally obstructs the actual historical event. A case in point relates to some of the curiosities surrounding the Reformation anniversary. For example, there is the anachronistic narrative that modernity with all its achievements or failures can be linked straight back to Luther. Or that Reformation is supposed to be able to tell us why a secular, multicultural, and multireligious federation like the Federal Republic of Germany could somehow find its core values established in the Reformation. Behind these assertions one always find's Luther's theological genius as the mastermind.

No thanks!

Faced with the complex development of modernity—especially when we look at such central tenets as democracy, tolerance, and human rights, or when we understand how the plurality of our ways of living and thinking have shaped and are continuing to shape modernity—the case for its roots lying in the Reformation or Luther's extraordinary theological thinking seems more like a caricature than a sufficiently explanatory model.

But I am not here to complain. Instead, I wish to focus on an issue that is one of my professional specializations. As an expert in ecumenical theology, it

is the interdenominational relationships which I am interested. When it comes to remembering the Reformation and dealing with Luther and his theological impact it is not only the politics of history but also the politics of denominational identity that shape the stories that we tell.

Interestingly enough, a dispute as to who best can interpret the Reformation has mostly been carried out in the feature pages of German newspapers rather than in theological journals.[1] Here theological interpretations, historical deconstructions, and identity discourses of a (typically German?) cultural Protestantism, in the style of the nineteenth-century Luther Renaissance, clash against each other head-on. For some of the leading figures in the Evangelical Church in Germany, scholarly debate or discussion of these issues seems to threaten the fun and festive mood of anniversary festivities.[2]

The Roman Catholic Church, however, also faces some unique challenges. I am specifically not referring to the tearful laments of some Catholic circles whose members keep repeating that Catholics shouldn't really celebrate the schism of the Western Church. Such lamentations are hardly to the point if we want to understand "Luther and the Reformation" properly because they completely ignore the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has actually also been shaped by the Reformation, probably even more than those churches who proudly boast that they originate from and carry on the spirit of the Reformation. Therefore, whenever I gave a talk on Luther and the Reformation during the last years I used to ask my auditory: Are we Catholics willing to think positively about what our own church would look like were it not for the Reformation? A different church it would certainly be. A better church? Certainly not.

Sometimes the phrasing decides how we view an event and how important it is for us.[3] How should we then express in words the impact made by the history of the Reformation: Should we speak of Counter-Reformation, Catholic Reformation, Tridentine Reformation, Baroque Catholicism, or the age of confessionalization? In this instance, words don't come cheap because words define the significance we attribute to Luther and the Reformation, how we view and assess them. It was the nineteenth-century apologetic tendencies that implanted the concept of a Counter-Reformation in the cultural memory of Catholicism that survives today. Luther is now turned into a ruthless demagogue, a damnable splitter of the Church, and a notorious heretic prince: descriptions that remind us of the controversial theologian Johannes Cochläus, the first Catholic biographer of Luther, whose outrage even at his time made broader-minded Catholics blush with shame.

[1]E.g., Hartmut Lehmann, "Vom Helden zur Null?," *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (hereafter FAZ), 26 October 2014; Thomas Kaufmann, "Luthers kopernikanische Wende," FAZ, 27 October 2013; Udo Di Fabio, "Kompass für die Welt," FAZ, 21 April 2014; and Christian Geyer, "Martin Luther—Freiheitskämpfer oder Volksverhetzer?," FAZ, 19 November 2014.

[2]The federation of Lutheran, Reformed, and United regional churches.

[3]For the following, John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

This is a paradigm that shaped Catholic identity for a long time and that was reinforced in a particular case. In the nineteenth century, both the Reformation and the Council of Trent, whose reforms just barely brought the Catholic Church back on track, become the leitmotif of an antimodern self-staging of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church was the only saving "Ark in the Great Flood of Relativism and Laissez-faire," not to mention democracy and freedom (the plague of Americanism as is it been called by the Sacrum Officium). The actual adversaries, now, are no longer Luther and the Reformation but the freedom movements of the nineteenth century, which the pope-centered church, stuck in an apologetic mode, cannot relate to and merely sees as a threat. By retracting to an apologetic position, the Catholic Church leaves the field to (cultural) Protestantism to cover the topic, which in turn gives way to an anti-Catholic view of the Reformation and its theological concerns. The stereotypical outcomes of this usurpation have been rearing their ugly heads again in recent years.

It took us until the Second Vatican Council for Catholicism to turn the tables and to ask the question about its own identity in a new way: Who do we want to be as a Roman Catholic Church when carrying on the legacy of the Reformation as a (positive) mission? Thinking constructively about the theological concerns of Luther and the Reformation is more than just a way to come to terms with the past, then. It is rather an analysis of the present and, on that basis, a look into a future that makes for a challenging endeavor. The Second Vatican Council has just started a decisive phase in the Catholic impact history of the Reformation and a true Catholic reception of Luther's theology is yet to come.

I hardly think that I need to dig further into the fact that those concerned with remembering the Reformation are a long way from the state of mind that Johann Baptist Metz once described as "a dangerous memory," and that allows the past to challenge one's own identity. What would "dangerous memory" mean when we remember Luther and the Reformation? I want to emphasize two things here, that also made a deep impact on my interpretation of the Reformation and made me change my perspective on Luther: the question of the church and its renewal as the core question of Luther's theology and ecumenism as the very fruit of the Reformation.

The Need for Changing Perspectives

As I learned in particular from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, "Reformation" started long before Luther posted his theses in 1517.[4] It is an event in the European history of thought that transcends denominations and that is more than just a categorical change in the history of theology and religious piety resulting in a break-up of the ecclesial unity in the West and a plurality of denominations. Luther's answer gets to the heart of a dynamic change that started as early the

[4]Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 103

fifteenth century. In this dynamic, three important aspects come together. The first is the turn towards a more inward and more intensive form of piety. This means that piety is no longer a signature of the religious elite (i.e., members of the clergy or the monastic orders), but concerns everyone. The religious praxis of society as a whole intensifies, which means that everyone should become a good Christian, living convincingly according to his or her faith. The second aspect is a growing discontent with the ways that the church acts as a spiritual mediator, sometimes bordering on the realm of magic, and increasingly seen as distracting from the essentials. Thirdly, the idea of being saved through one's faith takes prominence, thus intensifying the relation to God, freeing from false anxieties and dependencies (since reverence is due to God alone) and turning the relationship with God into a personal and, to a certain extent, direct connection. Undoubtedly Luther's theology had a huge impact on this, but he and his theology likewise were shaped by this fundamental theological change. From this point of view, he is the opportunity but not the reason for this fundamental breakthrough.

Wherever faith becomes an individualized act, wherever we find various forms of piety, and wherever the question about God is answered primarily from an existential perspective, institutionalized piety finds itself fundamentally challenged. The institution must critically question its own standards, check whether its offer is still plausible, think about who it addresses, and thus rethink its own identity. Where faith, and the relation to God therein, is linked to an existential (i.e., an inner) dimension, the institutionalized form of faith becomes relative. What comes to the fore is the idea that every institution must essentially serve the individual's relation with God. From then on the idea of the church as an institutional locus where faith is practiced comes second. Never again can it hold the same undisputed status it had in the medieval world order, where it was regarded as the primary point of reference for faith. Therefore, the epochal change, this "great rift" in the faith landscape that we can perceive in these developments, cannot be undone. And the waves ensuing from that quake thoroughly shake the ship of the church, driving it onwards to this day.

From that central theological perspective we can then look at other changes that built up a considerable political, social, economical, medial, and cultural momentum, precisely because they all shared a religious signature. The complexly interwoven net of social changes is on the one hand intensified and propelled forward by its religious content. On the other hand, we find processes of detachment where social change is defined as opposition to religion. Whoever wants to define the Reformation as a religiously indifferent political myth, one that has no theological content whatsoever, clearly misunderstands its core. Therefore, theologians from all denominations face the same ecumenical challenge this year, namely to resist any staging of the Reformation that, from the point of view of historical theology, wants to neutralize the Reformation's theological core by trying to naturalize it as merely an event in cultural history. Such a misrepresentation would prevent us from seeing one very important thing.

Why We Have To Be Grateful for a Common Heritage

Without doubt, the taming of the denominations' potential for conflict marks the beginning of modern-day Europe. But at the same root, we also find the values of tolerance, of freedom of religion, of faith, and of conscience, which religious minorities fought for in the wake of the Reformation. This makes it quite obvious that the various denominations did not simply remain in a state of confessional opposition. First of all, they opposed, from the midst of their religious convictions, the political instrumentalization of their religious differences. Step-by-step, they then learned to leave their defensive apologetic positions and began to encounter one another, not in a derogatory but in an appreciative way. They learned to respect other positions, started a dialogue and also started to change themselves. This led them to understand that they can enrich each other, an understanding that promotes peace and tolerance. But such an insight could only come about as the result of a religious learning process unparalleled in history. In this learning process, a method developed that deals productively with different claims on truth. It not only respects the point of departure of the other but also understands the position of each partner in dialogue as mutually enriched by a joint witnessing. It is this constructive cooperation, and not an unconnected plurality of denominations, that is the legacy of the Reformation, which to this day fundamentally shapes European, and in all likelihood German, "identity." Thus, whoever talks about tolerance, freedom of faith and of conscience stands on a foundation that would not exist were it not for the unique and ecumenical impact history of the Reformation. This history is both a common gift and a common obligation. ❧