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LUTHERAN THEOLOGY AND POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHY

Recently, Martin Luther and the Lutheran Reformation has received heavy criticism in various theological and philosophical circles. In many scholarly treatments of the history of western philosophy and culture, Reformation has been treated as one step on a trajectory from nominalist revolution to liberal Protestantism, atheistic secular modernism, and relativist postmodernism. The Reformers not only created a schism within the church, but they brought forth all the horrors of the modern age. Instead of providing a cure for the spiritual crisis of late medieval theology, they gave birth to a horrible epidemic.

To quote a few examples: Charles Taylor sees the Reformation as an agent of disenchantment with reality, which casts out the sacred from the world, and creates a dichotomy between the public secular reality and more private spiritual sphere.¹ Louis Dupré suggests that the Reformers were unable to escape the grip nominalist dualism where the nature and grace inhabited totally different spheres of reality. This affected ideas about the complete depravity of human nature and forensic justification, which ultimately left nature (and reason) unhealed.²

In similar vein, Michael Allen Gillespie sees Reformation's indebtedness to nominalism as the primary reason for a dualistic world where the faith and reason, church and society, Christians and pagans are separated and pitted against each other – with violent consequences.³ John Milbank has made similar claims.⁴ In his famous Regensburg address, Pope Benedict XVI claims:

Dehellenization first emerges in connection with the postulates of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Looking at the tradition of scholastic theology, the Reformers thought they were confronted with a faith system totally conditioned by philosophy, that is to say, an articulation of the faith based on an alien system of thought. As a

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 79, 733.

² Louis Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2008), 22-23.

³ Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 101-169.

⁴ See, e.g., John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 9. See also his 'Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi' in *Radical Orthodoxy*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999): 23.

result, faith no longer appeared as a living historical Word but as one element of an overarching philosophical system. The principle of *sola scriptura*, on the other hand, sought faith in its pure, primordial form, as originally found in the biblical Word. Metaphysics appeared as a premise derived from another source, from which faith had to be liberated in order to become once more fully itself. When Kant stated that he needed to set thinking aside in order to make room for faith, he carried this programme forward with a radicalism that the Reformers could never have foreseen. He thus anchored faith exclusively in practical reason, denying it access to reality as a whole.⁵

Even Richard Dawkins wants to have a piece of Luther! Dawkins uses Luther as an example of religious anti-rationalism in his *The God Delusion*.⁶ All in all, Luther's thinking is perceived as enforcing the ideas of individualism, fideism, and relativism that are commonly labeled as "postmodern." How should we think about such claims?

I begin with a very postmodern key, that is, by denying definite meanings of the concepts in my title. There is no such a thing as postmodern philosophy and there is no such a thing as Lutheran theology. By this denial, I mean to underline the nebulous nature of human institutions, movements, and thought patterns.

However, this move, also known as anti-essentialism, can have various degrees. I do not intend to say that we can label almost anything (or nothing) as postmodern or Lutheran. Postmodernists often take each other to task regarding the very nature of their way of thinking, and even more so, Lutherans are well-known for their eagerness to play king of the hill: who is the one that represents the genuine form of Lutheranism.⁷

Despite this vagueness, people generally are quite reliable in recognizing things either as postmodern or Lutheran. This is due to some general characteristics that these things often have. In the following, I have (in good Lutheran fashion) formulated some theses. The theses are split between the philosophical and the theological so that philosophical theses portray some broadly understood postmodern attitudes regarding various philosophical topics.

Then I will present the same theses with a theological twist so that they correlate with, again broadly understood, Lutheran sensibilities.⁸ I will offer a

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections* (2006). www.vatican.va (accessed 1 August 2010).

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Bantam, 2006), 190.

⁷ Because the both movements are so hard to pin down, I need to take a risk of oversimplifying and doing some interpretative violence to both of them. Nevertheless, I try to consider nuances as much as possible.

⁸ Lutheran theology, or Luther's theology to be exact, and postmodernism are sometimes coupled in ways that are not totally satisfactory. For example, Carl Raschke (*The Next Reformation. Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 208-209) claims that Luther "would have been regarded as a postmodernist by the standards of his day". The claim is surrounded by sound bites

short commentary of each topic and then make a few distinctions where the general sensibilities of postmodernism and Lutheranism, in my view, differ from each other.

THESES

PHILOSOPHICAL THESES

1. On language: Our understanding of the world is deeply dependent on language.
2. On metaphysics: There cannot be a neutral form of metaphysics that could serve as a starting point for rational enquiry.
3. On method: There is no *a priori* method that can help us in our enquiry.
4. On epistemology: Claims of truth and knowledge are viewed with suspicion.
5. On ethics: One should try to guide his or her actions so that they serve liberation.
6. On forgiveness: Forgiveness should be unconditional and free from all obligations. True forgiveness forgives the unforgivable.

THEOLOGICAL THESES

7. On language: the signified contains always something more that can be expressed by the means of language. In theological language, the signified is made present through the sign.
8. On metaphysics: The subject of theology cannot appropriately be approached through neutral metaphysics. Metaphysical models should be construed on the basis of salvation history.
9. On method: Theological method should not be decided *a priori* but based on the subject matter.
10. On epistemology: Human reason is both severely limited and tainted by sin. Theological knowledge is based on God's self-revelation, not in human achievement.
11. On ethics: The Golden rule and the Decalogue form the basis of ethical deliberation. Hierarchies can serve both good and bad ends.
12. On forgiveness: The aim of forgiveness is to establish a loving connection between persons, even after unforgivable acts.

COMMENTARY

ON LANGUAGE

If there is one central postmodern thesis, it is this one about language: Language exists between the world and us. Depending on the thinker, the

of which many are either historically false or misleading. For books that investigate the relation of Lutheran theology and postmodern philosophy in a more detail and from various angles, see e.g., Timothy Stanley, *Protestant Metaphysics after Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010); Paul R. Hinlicky, *Paths not Taken. Fates of Theology from Luther through Leibniz* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation. How Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012); Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth, ed, *The Devil's Whore. Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

thesis can be viewed in a strong or weak sense. In the former sense, it means that language hides the reality from us and prevents us from ever actually reaching it. We never get to things themselves and our dealings are always with words, which do not have fixed meanings. The weaker sense admits the mediating nature of language but does not see this as something that blocks our access to reality; instead it is language that grants us the access, or it gives us the reality.⁹

Now, it is easy to see how these ideas might overlap with Lutheran theology. Lutheran theology has traditionally been perceived as a theology that is very much interested in *words*.¹⁰ In Luther's own theology, we see special interest towards words and their metaphysical nature.

Namely, for Luther, theology starts with words and proceeds to metaphysics through language and historical events. The debate with theologians of Zwinglian bent demonstrated this clearly. For Zwinglians, the rules of logic and philosophical metaphysics were taken in a priori so that they would function as the norm for what reality is truly like; instead Luther wanted to start with the events and linguistic accounts of those events and form the philosophy so that it portrayed the essence of these events. Luther could go to extremes when defending this basic rule.

For example, his famous utterance about reason (*Vernunft*) as "the devil's whore" took place in the context of arguing against Karlstadt who wanted to hold on to the rule of *praedicatio identica* and which kept him from affirming the real presence of Christ's body in the Eucharist.¹¹ Obviously, Luther's basic point about language has some affinity with some postmodern sensibilities, especially those who wish to underline language as a way to access the world.¹²

However, there is a clear dissimilarity between Luther and even the weaker forms of postmodern thought on language. The difference lies in the way signification works in theological language compared to philosophy. Luther thinks that theological language makes present the things that are being referred in a special way.¹³ Therefore Christian faith and secular reason use and understand the nature of certain concepts in different ways.

⁹ James K.A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida. Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005), 16–46.

¹⁰ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology. Vol 2. The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 270–289. This can be seen in earliest systematic expositions of Lutheran thought, from Melancthon's *Loci Communes* to much larger and later *Loci*. The loci-method proceeds from the basic biblical concepts, such as sin, grace, and baptism offering a canonical interpretation of these concepts. In this perhaps a bit technical way, the basic ingredient of Lutheran theology is the word as a concept in its canonical context.

¹¹ WA 18, 164. See Theodor Dieter, "Martin Luther's Understanding of 'Reason'," *Lutheran Quarterly* XXV (2011), 249–278.

¹² For a similar account, see James K.A. Smith, *Speech and Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹³ Some postmodernists (Derrida, among others) like to argue that the meaning of the concepts is deferred endlessly so that we can never give exact account of what they are about.

In the normal philosophical use, concepts refer to absent objects, but in theology the concepts contain the essence to which they refer. Therefore, Luther insists on the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine as opposed to idealist and docetic interpretations because here especially the words “*hoc est*” indicate a special mode of presence.¹⁴

Secular philosophy (by which Luther means the way language is normally used in everyday contexts) cannot handle this kind of predication. In keeping with this, the same concepts used in philosophy and theology have their own meanings and uses within their respective spheres.¹⁵

This does not mean that the significance of the words in theology and philosophy are totally disconnected. Instead there is always a common signification between theological and philosophical use. When a concept of ordinary language is transferred to the theological realm, it goes through “metaphorical extension.” On the one hand, the meaning changes but on the other hand, it remains constant.

In the case of “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” the words “mighty fortress” have, to some extent, same meaning when used to refer to an actual fortress and God, but in the case of God, the meaning is extended. There is no radical break but rather a stretching of the meaning. The addition, however, cannot be figured out without revelation. By looking at a fortress, we do not come to understand that God is like that fortress if God himself does not reveal this resemblance.¹⁶

ON METAPHYSICS

Postmodernists typically claim that metaphysics is *violent*. This claim relates to the thesis on language. Human concepts (and metaphysics is done with the help of concepts) can never depict reality as it is; therefore, any attempt to define reality with the help of words must be an arrogant act.

Furthermore, speaking about God effectively means taking God captive. This claim is typically coupled with an accusation of “onto-theological error”: using the word “to be” (*esse*) in the same way of God and creatures. This, according to critics, makes God a being and a member of created order (even if the greatest being of all beings).¹⁷

There are, however, ways within postmodern philosophy to allow one to speak about metaphysics, but often this is just a way of referring to not-world,

¹⁴ See especially Luther’s *Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnis* (1528).

¹⁵ WA 39 I: 231, 1–3. “Secular” words must be cleansed or “baptized” in order to be used in theology. See also WA 39 I: 229, 16–19.

¹⁶ Dennis Bielfeld, “Luther on language”, *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 no. 2 (2002): 210.

¹⁷ For discussion, see D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God. Theology, Language and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), See also Marilyn McCord Adams’s refutation of general claims of onto-theology: “What Wrong With the Ontotheological Error?”, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (2014), 1–12.

of which we can speak only by denying that it is something ultimately different from the world.¹⁸

Lutheran theologians, since Luther himself, have been suspicious of grand metaphysical projects. Already in *The Heidelberg Disputation* (1519), Luther launches a critique of metaphysical theology that tries to climb a ladder from this world to transcendence: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1.20]." Luther's "Theology of the Cross" is often seen as a critique of metaphysics but this is clearly an overstatement.¹⁹ Instead, Luther offers a critique of particular kind of metaphysics that does not proceed from a properly Biblical basis (this was already discussed in relation to language).

This enterprise was intensified in later Lutheran generations, especially after Kant.²⁰ Someone could even claim that Lutheranism produced postmodern philosophy or at least created a seed-bed where it could grow.²¹ These claims are, to some extent, warranted although Luther and other magisterial reformers would quite likely abhor many things that are attributed to them. Even if there has been an anti-metaphysical trend in Lutheran theology and Luther scholarship, I take that this turn to be ultimately a wrong one.

Luther's criticism of a particular use of certain metaphysical traditions cannot be taken as a wholesale rejection of metaphysics but as a call to do metaphysics in a better way.²²

However, as one can imagine this issue is not a simple one. To a great extent, the discussion has shifted from Luther to Karl Barth's legacy (and his relation to Thomism) in recent years and there seems to be no end in sight in this debate.²³

ON METHOD

¹⁸ This is the case of Heidegger and his followers. S.J. McGrath, *Heidegger. A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 103; David Bentley Hart, "Philosopher in the Twilight", *First Things* 210 (2/2011) 44-51.

¹⁹ Kari Kopperi, "Theology of the Cross", in *Engaging Luther*, ed. by Olli-Pekka Vainio (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 155-172.

²⁰ Risto Saarinen, *Gottes Wirken Auf Uns. Die Transzendente Deutung des Gegenwart-Christi-Motivs in der Lutherforschung* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989).

²¹ Thus, e.g., Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*; Benedictus XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections". (online: www.vatican.va).

²² Erwin Metzke, *Sakrament und Metaphysik. Eine Lutherstudie über das Verhältnis des christlichen Denkens zum Leiblich-Materiell* (Kreuz: Stuttgart, 1948).

²³ For a good account, see Philip Cary, "Barth Wars", *First Things*, March 2015; Thomas White, "Introduction: Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth – An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue", in Bruce L. McCormack & Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (eds.), *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth. An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 1-42. See also Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics. The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); David Bentley Hart, "The Offering of Names: Metaphysics, Nihilism, and Analogy" in *Reason and the Reason of Faith*, Eds. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York: Continuum, 2005), 256.

Methodical anarchism is typical for postmodern thinkers. For example, Paul Feyerabend has argued against any universal rules that should be observed in scientific inquiry for (at least) two reasons. First, no one has been able to come up with these rules and, second, settling oneself with a particular set of rules would stifle the progress of science.²⁴

Feyerabend's anarchistic approach can be seen as a form of anti-positivism and anti-modernism. Postmodern theologians have typically embraced these proposals because this new climate allows theologians to pursue their own projects without the need to pay homage to scientists and one particular scientific method.²⁵

A moderate form of anti-modern turn in science is critical realism. Critical realists acknowledge the perspectival nature of knowledge, but they do not abandon the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Our knowledge of the world is always deficient, but it can get better little by little. Also, critical realists see the world as stratified, which results in methodological pluralism. For example, a tumor can have chemical, physical, sociological, psychological and theological effects in the human person. Employing just one method to understand what the tumor is would give us very thin view of the phenomenon.

The development of Lutheran theological method can be seen in relation to the medieval and late medieval development in theology. Since the rise of Aristotelianism in the 12th century there had been an on-going debate on the scientific nature of theology.²⁶ Simply put, Dominicans wanted to interpret theology as theoretical science, whereas Franciscans wanted to see theology as a practical science.

If in theoretical science one attempted to form true propositions with the help of syllogisms and proofs, in practical science the goal of knowledge was the correct conduct that helped to achieve the optimal form of human behavior. It is obvious that Luther was drawn towards the Franciscan form of doing theology.²⁷ This practical emphasis becomes apparent in Luther's pastoral style; he is not doing systematic theology, as he is more preacher than philosopher.²⁸

ON EPISTEMOLOGY

²⁴ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (New York: Verso, 2010).

²⁵ Thus, e.g., Jenson, *Systematic Theology*. Vol 2, 277; Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center. Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 192-225.

²⁶ Ulrich G. Leinsle, *Introduction to Scholastic Theology* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010); Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* Vol. I (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 202-203.

²⁷ Heiko A. Oberman, "Luther and the Via Moderna: The Philosophical Backdrop of the Reformation Breakthrough", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54, no. 4. (October 2003): 641-70. In Lutheran scholasticism, the same questions were re-introduced in the form of debate between analytic and synthetic method in theology. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 44-47.

²⁸ I do not mean that Luther does not have a philosophical bone in his body since he clearly engaged in deeply philosophical disputes during his career. But even in these disputes he sides with the practical ideals of science.

Postmodern thinking is generally suspicious against post-Enlightenment epistemological projects, which aim to achieve objective knowledge. Postmoderns typically deny the possibility of having neutral “God’s point of view” or “a view from nowhere” to things. Instead, our knowledge is perspectival; if we perceive x, we perceive x always from a particular angle. Moreover, we perceive things as they are going through change.²⁹

Lutherans have generally been suspicious toward natural theology since it has seen as a suspect attempt to rely on earthly wisdom, instead the wisdom of the cross. The knowledge of God cannot be attained through philosophical argument based on nature but only through God’s own self-giving and self-revelation.³⁰

Luther thinks that reason is no longer pure, but tainted by sin and concupiscence. Therefore, it can lead people astray. In this context, Luther distinguishes between reason and wisdom. Human beings can use their reason even in a state of corruption, but lack of wisdom means that reason can be used for evil purposes. The more the subject matter has to do with efficient and final causes, the more likely the absence of wisdom will have negative effects on reasoning.³¹

Luther understands reason in at least three different contexts.³² First, there is corrupted reason, which produces all kinds of evil. This reason is tainted with lust and a love of wrong things, so that it gives impure impulses to the will, making what is in fact immoral seem good and right. Second, there is natural or philosophical reason, which can detect at least some of the basic principles correctly, being virtually untouched by the Fall.

Without outside help, reason can know that God exists, that he is the creator of the world, all-powerful, and perfect in every way, that he is just, and that he is good. In addition, even corrupt people can have at least some knowledge of natural law. However, when philosophical reason looks at the central Christian claims, it does not know how to interpret them.³³

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Transl. by Ian Johnston. Arlington, VA: Richer Resources, 2010), III, 12.

³⁰ See, e.g., Jenson, *Systematic Theology. Vol 2*, 153-155; Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity. The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 1-2.

³¹ See especially Luther’s *Disputatio De Homine*, where he claims that unaided natural reason functions well when it reasons about material causes (of human being), starts to falter with formal causes and is completely clueless about efficient and final causes.

³² Theodor Dieter, “Martin Luther’s Understanding of “Reason”,” *Lutheran Quarterly* XXV (2011), 249–278; Denis Janz, “Whore or Handmaid? Luther and Aquinas on the Function of Reason in Theology,” in *The Devil’s Whore. Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. by Jennifer Hockenberry Dragseth (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 47–52; Bruce Marshall, “Faith and Reason Reconsidered: Aquinas and Luther on Deciding What Is True,” *The Thomist* 63 No. 1 (Jan. 1999), 1–49; Roland Chia, “Protestant Reflections on Pope Benedict XVI’s Faith, Reason and the University,” *Dialog* 46 No. 1. (Spring 2007), 66-77.

³³ Jerry K. Robbins, ‘Luther on Reason: A Reappraisal’, *Word & World* XIII no. 2. (Spring 1993): 197. Luther on proofs of God’s existence, see Siegbert W.

Third, there is purified reason, which is joined with faith and is thus able to produce accurate conclusions about the origins and *telos* of creation.³⁴ When Luther says that reason and philosophy cannot help theology in any way, and can even be disastrous to it, he clearly uses the word in the first sense.

The point where Luther diverges from postmodern masters of suspicion is in the topic of certainty.³⁵ A Christian needs to be sure about his or her status before God. In his *Commentary on Galatians* Luther even suggests that the believer should know himself as God knows him.³⁶

In *The Bondage of the Will*, he insists, "If you remove the certain assertion, you destroy the Christian Faith. The Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and it is not doubts and opinions that he has written on our hearts but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience."³⁷ However, the certainty that Luther speaks about here is no ordinary certainty that is linked to worldly knowledge. Theological certainty is even more certain than any knowledge about the things of this world because it is revealed to the believer by all-knowing God. Thus, it is not a product of our own making, but it is produced in us.

ON ETHICS

At the center of postmodern ethical thinking is suspicion against hierarchies and structures of power.³⁸ More precisely, it is the concern for justice and the fate of "excluded other" that concerns postmodern theorists the most. Surprisingly, it is possible for systems of justice to become oppressive, and this is where Derrida, amongst others, sticks his finger. Derrida argues that our concept of justice is necessarily limited and the worst results are often harvested when people think that they know what is just but they act only based on very limited sense of justice.³⁹ Furthermore, it is also typical for postmodernists to attempt to uncover hidden intentions and motives behind outward actions.

Moreover, postmodern ethics is oriented towards action, or practice, that seeks to change things for the better. Postmodernists often reduce religion to ethics, for example, John Caputo claims: "Religion is ethics; it is doing your

Becker, *Foolishness of God. Place of Reason in the theology of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House 1999), 24–36.

³⁴ WATr 3, 105, 2938: "Before we come to faith and the knowledge of God, our reason is darkness; in the believer, however, it is a most useful tool... Faith then is aided by reason, rhetoric, and language which were such great obstacles before we had faith. Enlightened Reason which is incorporated into faith receives gift from faith. ...Reason in godly men is something different since it does not fight with faith but rather aids it."

³⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol 3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 162-166.

³⁶ WA 40 I, 650, 21-32.

³⁷ LW 33:24.

³⁸ See, e.g., Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73–74.

³⁹ Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, 65–68. Derrida's claim "deconstruction is justice" means effectively weakening our trust on our judgments of justice.

duty where the voice of duty or conscience is taken as the voice of God."⁴⁰ Ethical duties are typically directed towards "the Other", who present us an obligation of unconditional and absolute demand of hospitality and love.⁴¹

The Lutheran Reformation is often depicted as a movement from captivity to freedom. Obviously, this was also Luther's own interpretation. For example, he started to sign his letters as "Eleutherius" (Greek *eleutheros*, free) soon after he had nailed the 95 theses on the Wittenberg church door, and he used the title of one his most famous books (*De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae*, 1520) to underscore the true nature of his previous masters.

However, freedom has always been a problem for Lutherans. The peasants and radical reformers thought that freedom is indeed good and it must be achieved by any means necessary, which Luther abhorred. As is often the case with reformers, they set the train in motion but they are unable to make it stop at their desired destination as it gains more speed.

Among others, Reinhard Hütter and David Yeago have examined in detail the problem of freedom in the Lutheran theology.⁴² According to Hütter's analysis, the post-Reformation Lutheran theology has been sliding towards notions of abstract, or formless, freedom where almost anything goes as long as it fulfils some vague notion of the good. In effect, this means that Lutheran ethics is reduced to general rules without particular definition.⁴³

Golden rule appears often as the summa of Lutheran thinking but as such it is vacuous: Am I really in the positions to assess what is my neighbor's best? Aren't our intentions and inclinations tainted by sin? How can they serve as the norm for the good? If this reduced version truly is what Lutheran ethics is about then there is very little that sets it apart from postmodern theorization,

⁴⁰ Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology*, 32. See also his, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2007).

⁴¹ Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, 76–79. It is perhaps worthwhile to point out one of the foundational ironies of postmodern thought. Postmodernism attempts to offer a safe space for every identity, and to reach this goal it draws heavily from philosophical anti-realism that has been favoured by several thinkers on the Left. However, anti-realism gives you very thin concept of persons, which is inadequate for robust ethical theorization. Even more puzzling is that it is nowadays often the Liberal Right that seeks to safeguard this goal, not the Left. Christopher Butler argues that postmodernists have been very effective in pointing out the problems in contemporary society but so far there have been very few constructive proposals how we should live after the old ways of thinking have been cast out. Often, in Butler's mind, it seems that postmodernism is a form of "passive conservatism": it just hopes that some forms of classical humanism will survive the end of metaphysics, and the person. Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism. A very short introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002.) See also John Haldane, "Rational and other animals", in John Haldane, *Reasonable Faith* (London: Routledge, 2010), 120–128.

⁴² Reinhard Hütter, *Bound to be Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 111–184; David Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology. Reflections on the Costs of a Construal", *Pro Ecclesia* Vol. II, No. 1. (1993), 37–49.

⁴³ See also Robert Benne, "Lutheran Ethics: Perennial Themes and Contemporary Challenges", in Karen L. Bloomqvist & John R. Stumme, eds., *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 11–30.

where individual autonomy and the independence of ethical subject are the supreme norm.

However, this reduced view is hard to bring in line with Luther's thought. For him, general rules are always given form through particular commandments, specifically in the form of the Decalogue and the commandments included in the New Testament canon.⁴⁴ Lutherans do not think that hierarchies are necessarily bad as some of them are divinely instituted. For example, Lutherans think that the ordained ministry is divinely instituted and not just a contingent way of organizing ecclesial life.

Luther's theology has two well-known special principles that have a hierarchical function. The Two Kingdoms doctrine was originally supposed to give the church its own space and set it out of reach of secular rulers.⁴⁵ The Three Estates (Church, household, state) set in similar fashion these three spheres apart from each other, and also in hierarchical order. The Church is the highest and it existed already in paradise. The household is a part of the good, original creation as well, but the state is needed only after the Fall to limit the evil inclinations of human beings.⁴⁶

The Lutheran Book of Concord lays out the basic rules on how to live with secular hierarchies (e.g. CA, XVI). The possibility to resist rulers remains but the conditions of revolt are clearly outlined. The rulers need to be obeyed as long as they do not ask one to commit sins. Lutherans also subscribe to the just war practice.⁴⁷

Finally, it must be noted that Lutheran theology and postmodern philosophy share a common emphasis on practice (*praxis*).⁴⁸ This is perhaps best seen in George Lindbeck's construal of the nature of doctrine as a cultural-linguistic practice that is not just mere reproduction of propositional content or mere

⁴⁴ In his *Catechisms*, Luther sets the Decalogue as the central element for daily mediation. See also WA 16, 431, 14ff; WA 39/1 47, 25–36.

⁴⁵ It is well-known that the doctrine became corrupted over the years and partly enabled the horrid events in the early 20th century Germany, when German Christians interpreted it so that God has a way of ruling the world through earthly rulers and Christians should obey them. This effectively led to a very nationalistic form of religiosity where it became increasingly difficult to criticise the earthly rulers (this idea was still a part of the original doctrine). Arne Rasmussen, "Historiography and Theology. Theology in the Weimar Republic and the Beginning of the Third Reich," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 20:1 (2007): 155–180.

⁴⁶ Oswald Bayer argues that the Estates are actually more important for Luther than the Two Kingdoms principle and paying more attention to how estates are structured would prevent one from making too simplistic categorizations (e.g., splitting the world between religious and secular spheres). Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 122–126.

⁴⁷ WA 39 II, 40. (Die Zirkulardisputation über das Recht des Widerstand des gegen den Kaiser (Mt. 19, 21)). For a critical view of Luther's political theology, see Andrew Bradstock, "The Reformation", in Peter Scott & William T. Cavanaugh, eds, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 62–66.

⁴⁸ For example, Miika Tolonen notes the affinity of Stanley Hauerwas praxis-oriented theology and Nordic Lutheran Christianity. See Miika Tolonen, *Witness is Presence. Reading Stanley Hauerwas in a Nordic Setting* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 4–5.

exposition of subjective emotions but a complex unity which joins theory and practice together.⁴⁹

As it was noted, Lutherans have never been very interested in the natural theology in Aristotelian sense. Instead for Lutherans, the proof is in the pudding. The preacher of the Gospel does not try to convince his listeners with the help of neutral proofs but by means of the Law and Gospel, which address the self-understanding of the person as an agent who lives his or her life in the tension of perfect ideal and suboptimal performance.⁵⁰

Moreover, the social aspect has always been central to Lutheran reformation. The focus in renewing the life of the church was not limited to just doctrinal issues but to the life of society in general. In fact, the difference between “dogmatics” and “ethics” would have been for this reason unthinkable for Luther. The doctrine of mercy addresses our ethical shortcomings, and ethical deliberation draws deeply from dogmatic sources.⁵¹

ON FORGIVENESS

The notion of “giving” has been one of the recurring themes in postmodern philosophy and theology.⁵² In the postmodern debate, the point of departure has been Nietzsche’s account of giving as a way to establish a power relation through economic change and consequent dependence.

Derrida goes to the other extreme and tries to depict “pure gift” as an inherently *disinterested* act. Because “normal” giving always establishes a structure of power, Derrida goes after something else. In the end, the pure gift is a gift given by nobody to nobody in particular without any particular intention.⁵³ Translated into theological language, a form of giving would be an act that has no ifs attached to it.

Lutherans typically cherish the idea of God’s free, unconditional and universal love.⁵⁴ But how does it compare with the idea of Derridean giving?

⁴⁹ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine. Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KN: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ This tendency is well depicted in Adolf Koeberle, *The Quest for Holiness. A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Investigation*. Transl. by John C. Mattes (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938). According to Koeberle, the human condition can be summarized with the help of following observations. In order for a deed to be genuinely good, it needs to proceed from pure motives. However, our motives are usually corrupt, and moreover, we are unable to atone our wrongdoings, to change our past, and reasonably believe that we can perform any better in the future.

⁵¹ Antti Raunio, *Summe des christlichen Lebens: Die “Goldene Regel” als Gesetz der Liebe in der Theologie Martin Luthers von 1510 – 1527* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2001).

⁵² John Caputo & Michael Scanlon, *God, Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington:

Indiana University Press, 1999).

Risto Saarinen, *God and the Gift: Ecumenical Theology of Giving* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005).

⁵³ For example, Jacques Derrida, *Given Time 1: Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992).

⁵⁴ One doctrinal point of departure from the medieval Catholicism was the heavy critique of the nominalist concept of merit, which functioned as the basis for justification. Instead, the person is justified without any preceding merits.

A standard analysis of giving includes four elements: the giver, the gift, the recipient, and the beneficiary. Observing these elements, we easily see that the gift exchange always involves a personal element. I cannot give a book to a bookshelf, and I cannot receive a gift from a bookshelf.

In the case of Christian faith, not only the giver and the recipient are personal, but the gift and the beneficiaries are also personal. In fact, we could say that only giving and receiving makes us persons in the first place. Moreover, in some Trinitarian models, we could even say that God is the giver, the gift, the recipient, and the beneficiary, all in one.

In contrast, the attempts of several postmodern thinkers to resist modernity and its reading of the world only reiterate the modern violence in a new form. The basic problem in both of these ways is to keep the *person* in the picture. In the Nietzschean case, the person has only instrumental value. In the Derridean case, the personhood disappears altogether.⁵⁵

Luther explains in his *Commentary on Galatians* how when the sinner looks at Christ, the sinner receives the form of Christ, or that his or her faith is *formed* by Christ.⁵⁶ Here the language of gift is central: Christ gives himself to the one who believes. Luther opposed the idea that the sinner receives only a new state of mind that enables her to perform better. The thing that gives form to the faith is not the person's own active love, or an idea about Christ, but Christ himself, who is Love personified. This means that we are made one with a person who is Love, not just with an idea about a person or something that refers to the person. And this should have some bearing on how we see ourselves and who we are, and how we relate to ourselves and the others around us.

A gift can be given only in the context of personhood and desire. A gift is a gift only if I am interested in the person to whom I give something and with whom I want to establish a relationship. Nietzsche and his allies may object that I am only seeking to establish a power relation, but why should I believe them? Why should I think that giving exposes the primordial will to power rather than the even more primordial will to love, to sacrifice one's own self and thereby establish a relationship where gifts are given and received without the fear of debt?

Contrariwise, the endless circle of critique *should* follow from post-Nietzschean notions of the gift, which are ultimately unable to guarantee the reality of love and existence of real personhood. From the Lutheran

⁵⁵ Along these lines, David Bentley Hart has argued that the Derridean notion "so exaggerates the selflessness of divine love as effectively to evacuate the image of God of all those qualities of delight, desire, jealousy, and regard that Scripture ascribes to him. Such a separation of loves receives perhaps its appropriate parody in the image of an endless and disinterested outpouring of nothing toward nothingness. But in what sense, precisely, is an *agape* purified of *eros* distinguishable from hate? Or utter indifference? ... Would there not be something demonic in a love without enchantment, without a desire for the other, a longing to dwell with and be recognized by the other?" David B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 264.

⁵⁶ WA 40 I, 228-229.

viewpoint, the postmodern notions of giving appear too monolithic, too interested in just one particular good.⁵⁷ Granted, Lutheran theology may also appear as monomaniac in its tendency to safeguard the idea of *sola gratia*. If the idea of grace is divorced from the personhood of believer and the personhood of Trinitarian giver, this can lead to obsessive preoccupation with philosophical principles that is removed from properly theological framework.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I think it has been sufficiently clear that I do not think that Lutheran theology can be taken simply as a pious form of postmodern philosophy.⁵⁸ There are clear philosophical, and theological, differences. Yet Lutheran thinking is obviously more postmodern than modern – if we mean by ‘postmodern’ the weaker version of postmodernism.⁵⁹ Lutheran thinking contains elements that make it hard to combine with scientific modes of rationality and consequently push it towards more romantic, subjectivistic and existentialist modes of thought.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Friedrich Nietzsche, Friedrich Jacob Jacobi, Johan Georg Hamann, Søren Kierkegaard and all the big names of existentialist religion from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Heidegger (yes, he was a Catholic, but heavily influenced by Luther) and Paul Tillich and have been Lutheran.

One might suppose that if Lutheran theology is so nicely resonant with postmodern sensibilities it should have enjoyed remarkable success in the contemporary Western world. However, this has not been the case. Lutherans in the West suffer from the same problems as every other mainline Protestant denomination: brain-drain, rapid decline of active members and severe financial problems.

Moreover, the particularly Lutheran ways of doing theology do not seem to be at the cutting edge of theological enquiry. They either draw attention of a small sphere of scholars (who are typically either very liberal or very conservative) or they are already geared towards ecumenical Christianity so that the Lutheran part appears as an ingredient that does not have a major role in the end product (I am thinking, for example, of the systematic theologies of Robert W. Jenson and Wolfhart Pannenberg).

⁵⁷ Smith (*Jacques Derrida*, 72) argues that Derrida’s notions of justice ends up in contradiction because it is unable to reconcile the pure ideal with the reality of earthly society.

⁵⁸ Some forms of postmodern thinking (even those who appear as atheistic) can be regarded as properly religious. See, e.g., Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche. Decadence and Dionysian Faith* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁵⁹ J.G. Hamann eccentric philosophical theology is perhaps worth mentioning here. Hamann was a contemporary and friend of Kant, who offered an alternative to Kant’s philosophy based on Lutheran theology of language as the mediator between the world and us. In a way, Hamann was a postmodern thinker long before the postmodern turn. Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent. J.G. Hamann as a Radical Enlightener* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); John Betz, *After Enlightenment. The Post-Secular Vision of J.G. Hamann* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

Pannenberg himself quipped some time ago that Lutheranism would quite likely sink into oblivion within next five decades. He might be right. Mainstream Lutheran church bodies do not show signs that could warrant positive predictions about their chances of survival in the long run, and non-mainstream Lutherans (who are not losing members as fast) do not seem to gather large masses in the Western world even if some of these communities are growing.

If Lutheranism survives somewhere in the form that is going to have a larger influence in the society, it will be in the Global South.⁶⁰ But at this point we have no clear picture of what kind of Lutheran theology the South will produce and who will be their main dialogue partners in philosophy and in other Christian communities.

⁶⁰ Perhaps it is the parts in “postmodern Lutheranism” that are *pre-modern* that give it the mileage it has. By pre-modern, I mean understanding philosophy as a way of wisdom and as a practical guide for living righteously. This would enable flourishing of Lutheran communities in contexts where these issues are still on the table.