

Luther and Liberation Theology

Seminar leader: Martin N. Dreher

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Session I

The goal of the seminar was to correlate thematic emphases – key themes of Luther's theology, such as *theologia crucis* (revelatio), ecclesiology (the Protestant principle), freedom (ethics and the two kingdoms »doctrine«) and the priesthood of all saints – as they are expressed in texts of Latin American theologians, with Luther's own writings examining the relevance and appropriateness of such projects. Eighteen persons, all males, participated in this seminar. They came from Asia, Africa, the Americas, Eastern Europe and Scandinavia.

Introducing the theme of the seminar, *Martin N. Dreher* presented his paper, »Theologie der Befreiung und Luther: Entstehung, Entwicklung, zwei Beispiele«. He sought to describe the historical context of the Latin American society and the churches as they began to speak of liberation theology, beginning in the final years of the 1960's situating therein the different phases of its beginning and development. It was emphasized how liberation theology became more and more a reflection on the praxis of the poor who organized themselves in communities and movements in order to resist a social environment marked by misery and oppression. Various members of the seminar group identified here a methodological contribution of the Latin American liberation theologians relevant to the study of Luther: the assumption, with all its consequences, that theology is done out of and for a determined context. Thus, the group assumed as one of its tasks to reflect on the question: How to read Luther in a context that cries for liberation.

Session II

An attempt to counterpoise the thought of Luther over against one of the Latin American theologians came from *Robert W. Bertram* who presented his article, »Liberation by faith: Segundo and Luther in mutual criticism« [Dialog 27 (1988), 268-276]. He began with the observation made by the Jesuit theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, that Roman Catholic theology especially after Vatican II has approached more and more the Lutheran concept of justification by faith. This is, according to Segundo, something lamentable since the doctrine of justification by faith, both in the Pauline writings and in Luther, restricts the sphere and the action of faith to the personal plane. For Bertram, however, Segundo is erroneously interpreting the »personal« aspect of justification in Paul and Luther, understanding it in the sense of private or apolitical. Although it cannot be denied that later tradition has in part assumed the concept criticized by Segundo, the reformer always understood faith as something that must be confessed, that manifests itself not only in the political-ecclesiastical realm, but also assumes an explosive character in a capitalistic economic establishment.

Vítor Westhelle contributed to the group's reflection presenting his paper »Looking people in the mouth: Luther, language, and oppression«. His intention was to argue, that there was a linguistic turn in Luther's theology that focused on the language of the people, offering the people a way of constructing their relationship to God, to everyday life, and to themselves. This controlled the access to the sacred, to life and to

themselves. In Luther's case, such liberation happen through the relativizing of institutional orders encoded in linguistic systems. For Westhelle, the point is not to know how the dogmatic content of Luther's theology can serve the cause of the oppressed peoples of the world, but how the principle by which Luther articulated his theological thought offered space for the people to articulate the language. The unsystematic nature of his writings cannot be dissociated from his theological program of looking people in the mouth and giving back to them authentic words that raised them out of silence and dissimulation.

Session III

With his paper »Wirtschaft und Götzendienst: zwei in der christlichen Tradition zusammengehörende Themen bei Luther und lateinamerikanischen Theologen« *Ricardo W. Rieth* endeavored to give a theological reflection comparing economic themes of Luther with those of the Latin American theologians, Franz Hinkelammert, Enrique Dussel, Pablo Richard, Hugo Assmann and Júlio de Santa Ana. Even with the enormous differences between the historical context of 16th century Europe and 20th century Latin America, he thought it was possible, thus comparing the way that Luther and these theologians approached the biblical texts and based on these, how they undertook to criticize the idolatry in the economic life. Even though Luther stresses more the anthropological aspect of idolatry-human greed – while the Latin American theologians emphasize the sociological aspect – economic injustice, the link of theological reflection to the biblical tradition (for example, in interpreting Ps 5, 10; 14, 4; E 5, 3-5; Mt 6, 24; Is 5, 8; Kol 3, 5; Gn 29-31; 1 Rg 10, 1-13) leads both Luther and the Latin American theologians to accentuate the intimate relation between idolatry and oppression, clearly

differentiating between legitimation and the practice of idolatry and denouncing the subversion of values which it promotes and which leads to death.

Igor Kišš presented a study of two passages in which Luther had treated paradise as really immanent (WA 31 I, 199, 31-34; 19, 644, 21-26). This is relevant if one considers that in the history of theology – and this is true also in many other texts of Luther – the concept of paradise has experienced a process of spiritualization. On the basis of this point of reflection, Kišš traces the motions of paradise in various theologians of this century.

Session IV

At the invitation of the seminar group *Walter Altmann*, author of »Luther and liberation: a Latin American perspective« (MP 1992) gave a presentation of his book and responded to questions from the participants. He called attention to the fact that in his treatise »Freedom of a Christian« (1520), Luther outlines his concept of freedom in two directions: one is in the human being's relation to God, in which the human being becomes free by means of the gratuitous action of God, who grants him freedom; the other is in the relationship with his fellow human being, which becomes characterized as unselfish service. The Christian, who in faith is free and is not subject to anyone, in love is servant to others and is subject to everyone. This is the concrete exercise of the gratuitous freedom which is received by grace, through faith. This second aspect has been much less considered in the interpretation of the theology of Luther. A theological reflection in the Latin American perspective could help overcome this lacuna.

Conclusions

The challenge proposed by liberation theology to the study of Luther is, before all else, methodological. Certainly there are many scholars who do not agree with a reading of Luther oriented to the context in which one lives. This, however, is not a motive to ignore and neglect this methodological possibility in the study of Luther.

More than anything, the context of oppression where one cries for liberation, wherever it is found, manifests a variety of themes – precisely themes such as, *theologia crucis* (revelatio), ec-

clesiology (the Protestant principle), freedom (ethics and the two kingdoms »doctrine«) and the priesthood of all saints – which directly lead one to Luther. The study of Luther, which is oriented by the context in which one finds oneself, must also take seriously the challenges that other religions represent to this reflection, and not only limiting itself to Western Christian tradition. Just as the Latin American setting challenges one to explore the themes of politics and economy in Luther, the religious context in Asia, for example, leads one to consider the soteriological themes in the works of the reformer.

Präsident des Achten Internationalen Kongresses für Lutherforschung war Dr. Gerhard Forde, Professor am Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul., Minn. Am Kongreß nahmen über 150 Forscher – einige mit Begleitpersonen – aus 23 Ländern teil. Er wurde am 8. August 1993 abends in der Chapel of the Incarnation im Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary eröffnet, in dessen Räumen die Vorträge und Seminarsitzungen stattfanden. Für eine Exkursion wurden Mall of America, Historic Fort Snelling und die City of St. Paul angeboten.

Der nächste Kongreß findet vom 17. bis zum 23. August 1997 in Heidelberg unter dem Thema »Glaube und Bildung / Faith and Culture« statt. Dieser Tagungsort wurde mit Rücksicht auf den 500. Geburtstag von Philipp Melancthon ausgewählt.