

»Extra ecclesiam nulla salus« and the Reformers

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Lindberg and Rajashekar introduced the seminar theme by tracing the history of the use of the phrase »extra ecclesiam nulla salus« from the church fathers through its extreme formulation by Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303).

Rajashekar referred to the claim of the Dutch missiologist, Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965 – »Religion and the Christian Faith«), that the Protestant Reformers shifted the medieval interest in the philosophy of religion to a theology of religions. The theological perspective on religions created a number of issues for the Reformers: Luther perceived pagan virtues (Augustine termed them »splendid vices«) under the rubric of the law, whereas Erasmus and Zwingli attributed salvific status to them; Judaism presented a specific problem in terms of law and gospel; Islam, in the form of the Ottoman Turks, continued to be seen by some in medieval terms as a heresy, although Luther more than any other Reformer attempted to understand and refute Islam on the basis of the Qur'an; Roman Catholic conquest and missions in the Americas both used and questioned the patristic formula to justify and oppose oppression: the »Requerimiento« and Bartolomeo de las Casas (1474-1566), et al. And Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) developed the option of inculturation. The Protestant Reformers' central theological loci such as »revelation«, »law«, »divine election«, »the will«, etc., played the central role in their understanding of the possibility of salvation outside the church as well as their respective »conversations« with other religions. Lively discussion throughout the entire seminar maintained the tension between the historical-theological context of the Reformers and present day intra-religious concerns.

Robert Bertram's paper, »Extra ecclesiam nulla salus? Which salus? Some theses on Luther's »De servo arbitrio« (read by Edward Schroeder due to Bertram's unavoidable absence) focused on Luther's use of Romans 3:22-23 against Erasmus which presents »salus« as »the glory of God«; not as an attribute of deity but as something humans are meant to do: To glory in how pleased God is with them. Not even Erasmus' »optimism« could imagine, indeed condone, humans doing *that*. All the less so in face of a God who »saves so few and damns so many«. Bertram argued that the only defensible reason for counting anyone »extra ecclesiam« is that he or she prefers a *less* inclusive God, than the God in Christ; that is, he or she prefers the »Deus absconditus« rather than the »Deus praedicatus« of revelation. The seminar participants concluded that Luther clearly emphasized that outside the church there is no salvation, but agreed that »extra ecclesiam nulla salus« means »extra praedicationem Evangelii nulla salus« (cf. Albrecht Peters: *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*. Bd. 2: *Der Glaube*. GÖ 1991, 236).

In the second session of the seminar, Kurt Hendel's paper, »There is no salvation outside the church from the perspective of »Deus revelatus« and »Deus absconditus«, echoed some of these same motifs by focusing on both the »Heidelberg Disputation« and »The bondage of the will«. Hendel suggested that Luther's explication of double predestination against Erasmus led him to ignore his own emphasis upon the theology of the cross and to slip into a theology of glory. In doing so Luther abandoned his own theological method, failed to leave the hidden God alone, and asserted that God saves

so few and damns so many. Hendel argued that contemporary evangelical theologians should be more consistent with Luther's theology than the Reformer was himself in »The bondage of the will«. They should remain theologians of the cross, focus on Christ and thereby recognize God's will to save. They should leave God's hidden will alone and not speculate about God's intentions regarding those who are not members of the church. While evangelical theology requires the proclamation of Christ and the affirmation that there is salvation within the church, it does not necessitate the assertion that there is no salvation outside the church. The fate of those outside the community of faith is in God's hands, and in Christ God has revealed the will to save. God's revealed and hidden wills are to be distinguished, but they must not be separated, nor should evangelical theologians assume that the hidden will contradicts God's revealed will. It was also affirmed that Luther understood predestination primarily in terms of its use in pastoral care for assurance of God's revealed will to save, rather than as the explanation of the mind of God. In this context reference was made to one of our assigned texts (»Ein Sendbrief über die Frage, ob auch jemand, ohne Glauben verstorben, selig werden möge an Hans von Rechenberg« von 1522; WA 10 II, [318] 322-326) where Luther emphasized that no one is saved without faith and that to suggest otherwise falsifies the gospel and all preaching. At the same time, Luther posited that no one may doubt that God may give faith in or after death, but this possibility remains unprovable.

The second session also took up *Edward Schroeder's* paper, »Luther's commentary on the Third article as a clue to his theology of other religions«. Schroeder cited Luther's explanation to the Apostles' Creed in the Large Catechism that those outside the church »even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be

confident of his love and blessing. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.« Thus all people everywhere may have a »first article« knowledge of God and experience the grace of creation, but are unable to fulfill the obligations incurred by these gifts *coram Deo*. Luther's »no« to Erasmus is therefore also a negation of any universalism in contemporary missiology and theology of religions. The implication of Luther's position for contemporary missiology includes respectful listening to »first article« experience, and conversation that witnesses to Christ.

Kjell Nilsson – unable to contribute a paper due to his son's recent cancer – emphasized in relation to the above papers the importance of maintaining both the christological and the trinitarian aspects of Luther's interpretation of the »extra ecclesiam«. Luther's idea of the »happy exchange« as well as his understanding of the »communicatio idiomatum« (cf. the classical theology of »perichoresis«, »theosis«, »conformitas Christi«) means the Christian participates in the characteristics of Christ, in »forma Christi« as a »donum Dei«. But a too narrow christological perspective does not do justice to Luther's strong trinitarian orientation, in particular his theology of creation. The transformation into the image of Christ takes place in creation, in daily life. Here we also find the key to Luther's dialectical relationship of law and gospel, and his understanding of the God who is hidden and revealed.

The third session took up the papers of *Miikka Ruokanen*, »Can Non-Christians be saved?: Catholic teaching on Non-Christian religions«, and *Ralph Quere*, »Extra ecclesiam non est salus: God's efficacious presence in baptism in the gathering of the elect, according to Melancthon's later *Loci*«. Ruokanen highlighted the nature-grace continuum in Roman Catholic theology in contrast to the discontinuity in Luther's theology, a motif that

had also been raised by Hendel's presentation. Quere's detailed presentation of Melanchthon's editions of the *Loci* placed the question of salvation outside the church within the doctrine of justification. Reference to Melanchthon's ecclesiological distinction between the »invisible« elect believers and the true visible church of word and sacrament stimulated a discussion on the correlation »invisible – visible« and »hidden – revealed« and the significance of these terms to ecclesiology. The discussion of Melanchthon's understanding of infant baptism which disallowed grace to infants outside the church was contrasted to Luther's more pastoral orientation as expressed for example in his »Comfort for women who have had a miscarriage« (1542).

The fourth session focused on presentations by *William Russell*, »Prayer as a mark of the church: toward Luther's understanding of ›Ecclesia‹ in the phrase ›extra ecclesiam nulla salus est‹«, and *Gregory Miller*, »Theodore Bibliander and Reformation writings on the Turks«. The discussion of Russell's paper highlighted prayer and liturgy in Luther's ecclesiology as well as the abiding importance of the Psalms, especially Psalm 51 (»The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the justifier and savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject, is error and poison« [Am 12, 311]), to Luther's theology. The discussion cautioned that an undue emphasis upon prayer as a mark of the church is open to the distortion of some contemporary ecclesiologies which identify the

church by the character of the assembly of believers – a form of ecclesiastical donatism. The discussion noted that prayer as a mark of the church must not displace Luther's extra nos emphasis on word and sacraments. The discussion was aided by Gerhard Ebeling's earlier lecture on prayer. It would be of interest to study the biblical models Luther used for his understanding of prayer. Miller presented an overview of the Reformers' understanding of Islam, the importance of the contemporary print media, and the interest in the Turk as an exotic »other«. The period retained significant continuity with the medieval understanding of Islam as a schismatic movement within biblical religion, yet also contains the beginnings of the modern understanding of Islam as another religion. The 1543 publication of the Latin Qur'an was particularly important because its introductions and marginal comments refuting Islam shaped the next century of interpretation. Bibliander (1504?-1564), who shared responsibility with Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) for the continuation of the reform in Zurich following the death of Zwingli 1531, was especially concerned about mission to the Turks. Bibliander's opposition to the doctrine of predestination, developed in conjunction with his thinking on Islam, led to a late-life conflict with Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500-1562) and forced Bibliander's early retirement.

Our seminar discussions were enhanced by the remarkable dovetailing of our theme with the plenary lectures.