

# Dogmatic Truth, Freedom of Conscience and Toleration

## Luther and His Contemporaries

Seminar Leader: John Tonkin

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The seminar was designed to explore the relationship between two key Reformation themes: the concern for dogmatic truth and the notion of freedom of conscience [and its practical counterpart, religious toleration]. The central focus throughout was on Martin Luther, but within a comparative perspective embracing a number of his contemporaries, including Erasmus of Rotterdam, Zwingli, Calvin and the Radicals. A handbook of key documentary sources had been circulated to participants prior to the Congress and these provided an opportunity for close textual study.

In the first session, the *seminar leader* initiated a wide ranging discussion on the theme of tolerance and intolerance in the Christian tradition from early Christian times to the sixteenth century. Topics covered included the notion of the historical uniqueness of Christianity and its claim to an exclusive truth, the long-term implications of the link between Christianity and political authority established in the fourth and fifth centuries, and the character of medieval Christianity as a «persecuting society», seen in its most extreme form in the activities of the Inquisition.

The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, by contrast, had seen the development of more liberal attitudes within the medieval Roman Church, especially through the influence of humanism, which promoted the view that truth was many sided and that Christianity was essentially in harmony with the best of pagan learning; and mysticism, which directed attention away from dogma towards piety and ethics and by so doing encouraged the idea that there were diverse pathways to God.

By focussing attention firmly on questions of doctrinal truth, the Reformation movements rekindled dogmatic controversy and helped to generate increasingly hard-line attitudes among the Roman authorities. A range of views was evident, however, on each side of the religious divide. On the Roman Catholic side, there was a world of difference between Erasmus and the Inquisition, and on the Reformation side, between «civic Protestantism» and Luther. Indeed, first impressions suggested that Zwingli and Calvin perpetuated – within Zürich and Geneva respectively – the traditional medieval patterns of religious coercion, while Luther, for all his commitment to dogmatic truth, appeared to maintain that faith should not and could not be coerced. The remaining sessions of the seminar were devoted to exploring the validity of these preliminary conclusions.

The second session was introduced with a paper by *David Lumpp* entitled: «Theological method, dogmatic priorities, and debatable questions in Luther», based on an eclectic reading of Luther but with an emphasis on the «Lectures on Galatians» of 1531 (published 1535) and «The bondage of the will» of 1525. Lumpp analysed Luther's theological method in terms of his distinction between the two kinds of righteousness which led the reformer to a Christocentric and eschatological reading of the scriptural Word of God. When read from this perspective, the whole Bible teaches justification as the «central article» according to which the rest of Scripture is to be understood. In keeping with the circumstances of his evangelical breakthrough, the distinction between the two kinds of righteousness, and his consistent affirmation

of justification as the center of Scripture, Luther's most distinctive way of describing the gospel was through the image of the »happy exchange«, in which God gives sinners the righteousness of Christ and gives his Son their sin. This »central article« integrates the entire body of doctrine, and in practice it does so as one properly distinguishes law and gospel.

These determinative insights for Luther led to a genuine »paradigm shift« in the history of theology. He understood doctrine in a holistic sense, in which everything taught in Scripture related in one way or another to the gospel. Therefore, doctrine could never be debated, compromised, or bargained away as a matter of political expediency. His steadfast refusal to compromise on anything he considered to be »doctrine« was not due to dogmatic maximalism or to an arrogant or stubborn personality. Instead, Luther was unable to see any article of faith as unrelated to the gospel. Stated positively, he was pushing his »what urges Christ« to its theological limits. Just as books of the Bible could be relegated to the periphery of the canon if they failed sufficiently to »urge Christ«, so nothing that did necessitate Christ or follow ineluctably from a holistic consideration of his work could ever be compromised. For Luther, revealed articles of faith did precisely that. However, he was more tolerant when it came to theological formulations, inevitable human sin, and the ritual expression of doctrine; nor would he countenance the use of force to further his reformatory agenda.

The remainder of the second session was devoted to the study of comparative texts, including Erasmus's letters to Jan Slechta (1519) and to the Town Council of Basel (1525); and his exchange with Luther in »The freedom of the will« and »The bondage of the will« (1524/25) where the two reformers clashed on the role of »assertions« within the Christian faith. Other Luther texts of importance considered were the »Defense and explanation of all articles« (1521); »Temporal authority: to what extent it should

be obeyed« (1523) with its exposition of the doctrine of the two kingdoms and its implications for the issue of coercion in the realm of faith; the »Commentary on Psalm 82« (1530) and the 1535 »Lectures on Galatians«.

Consideration of Calvin's commentary on Dt 13 and book 4 ch. 20 of the »Institutes« showed the Genevan reformer to be apparently untroubled by the maintenance of a regime of religious coercion. Luther, by contrast, strongly maintained that coercion was both inappropriate and unworkable, though the practical limits of this policy were marked out by his views on sedition and blasphemy. It was difficult in practice to distinguish between the mere expression of Anabaptist religious views and seditious behaviour, while the broad interpretation of blasphemy opened the way in practice to the suppression of divergent religious opinions.

The third session was introduced with a paper by Sognepræst *Bjarne Madsen* on »Luther and the position of the Jews and of Islam«. After sketching in briefly the relationship of the Jews with Christian Europe from the early medieval period through to the late 14th and 15th centuries when many expulsions of Jews took place from European cities, Madsen outlined the views of Erasmus, Calvin and Zwingli on the Jews, stressing that these views were not based on substantial contacts with contemporary Jews so much as attitudes to the Jews of the Bible.

A detailed survey followed of Luther's changing attitudes to the Jews from his positive assessments of the 1520s through to his harsh treatises of the 1540s. Central to Luther's thought were the issues of works-righteousness, the election of the Jews and the continuing promise to Abraham, and a strong sense of expectation in the conversion of the Jews to Christ. As with most of his contemporaries, his attitudes towards the Jews were seen to be determined not by contact with the Jews of his own time, but by his perception of the Jews of

the Bible, and his attitudes were governed throughout by his view of Scripture and of world affairs. The same proved to be true of his attitudes to Islam.

The fourth and final session retraced some of the ground already covered and expanded the field of discussion with a number of radical texts: Menno Simons's »A pathetic supplication to all magistrates« (1552), Thomas Müntzer's »Protestation or proposition« (1523) and Sebastian Castellio's »Concerning heretics« (1554), which presented sharply divergent perspectives on the issue of freedom of conscience. The »Defense of religious toleration« by the »unknown Nürnberger« was seen as a more consistent example of Luther's views than had been achieved by Luther himself, caught as he was in the practical dilemmas of leadership of the Reformation during such a turbulent pe-

riod. It was also suggested that Luther's continuing social and political responsibilities may have prevented him from realising the possibilities inherent in his »theology of the Cross« for breaking from medieval »triumphalism« and advancing the gospel through a strategy based on suffering love rather than on political dominance and social control.

Wide-ranging as the discussions had been, the participants in the seminar felt that at the end of the week they had barely scratched the surface of this complex topic and that much further work remained to be done. The seminar, nevertheless, proved highly beneficial both academically and in other ways: the presence within the seminar of scholars from every continent provided a most valuable opportunity to share information and insights about the current state of Luther research across the world.

## Melanchthon und seine Schüler

Seminarleiter: Simo Heininen

Berichterstatte: Simo Heininen

Sämtliche Referate lagen schon einen Monat vor dem Heidelberger Kongress vor und wurden den Teilnehmern zugeschickt, so daß es im Seminar nicht mehr nötig war, sie vorzulesen. Eine kurze Einführung genügte. Wir hatten also die Möglichkeit, unsere Fragen und Kommentare schon vor dem Kongress vorzubereiten.

Hellmut Zschoch bot in seinem Referat »Colamus has nostras scholasticas amicitias: Philipp Melanchthons Briefe an Matthaeus Collinus als Spiegel einer Lehrer-Schüler-Beziehung« eine Analyse der Korrespondenz zwischen Melanchthon und dem böhmischen Gelehrten Matthaeus Collinus (1516-1566). Nach dem

Studium in Wittenberg wirkte dieser von 1540 bis 1558 als Griechischlektor an der Prager Universität und wurde Mittelpunkt eines reformatorisch gesinnten Humanistenkreises. Er wurde auch der Mann Melanchthons in Prag, einer der ständigen Korrespondenten des Praeceptors. Von Melanchthons Briefen sind 55 erhalten, von denen des Collinus nur einer. Diese eingehende Analyse der Melanchthonbriefe an einen Adressaten versteht sich als eine Fallstudie; mit Hilfe der Regestenbände von MBW wird es möglich werden, das gesamte Korrespondenzenetz zu rekonstruieren und seine Strukturen und seinen Inhalt zu analysieren.