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Review of *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*

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Book Review of: *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, edited by Christine Helmer

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The 17 essays gathered here derive from a 2008 conference at Northwestern University, which featured a number of leading Luther scholars, as well as a diverse group of non-specialists willing to take up interesting themes in Luther's thought. The result is a work that suggests the many and surprising directions in which Luther's theological legacy might be appropriated "for modern times". The decision to set Luther free from the exclusive clutches of the Luther guild makes the book singularly suggestive of Luther's potential to contribute to theology today.

The editor helpfully provides both a general introduction and individual introductions to the book's five parts: "Luther's Global Impact"; "Living in the Midst of Horrors"; "Language, Emotion, and Reason"; "Luther's Theology for Today"; and "Politics and Power". In

what follows I offer notes and reaction to some of the chapters I found most interesting.

The lead essay in part one, Risto Saarinen's provocative "Luther the Urban Legend," expertly dismantles the traditional hagiography of Luther. The story of his conversion to monasticism during a thunderstorm, Saarinen observes, shows hagiographical development already in its earliest stages. From the beginning the Luther story was being interpreted, also by Luther himself as he told it to others. The shape of that story even in these earliest sources sets Luther's life and experience forth as a wonder, his conversion marked by a climactic natural event. Just so, it sets Luther's experience alongside that of Saint Augustine, and suggests even deeper connections that make Luther a "second Paul". Narrative reports are the stuff of history, Saarinen notes, but reports such as these are already interpretations. They mediate not the naked event behind the history, but the evolving story itself near the moment of its creation. The Luther legend, Saarinen points out, not only looks back to Paul and Augustine but forward as well, inviting readers' participation, even across diverse cultural contexts. Attempting to illustrate Luther's "global impact", Saarinen places Luther alongside William Shakespeare, Søren Kierkegaard, Immanuel Kant, and Charles Taylor, an interesting and illuminating cast indeed. This chapter underscores the intended effect of the volume as a whole, for it enables the reader to historicize the Luther story itself, and just so invites her join in the task as well.

In this same section, the constructive theologian Peter C. Hodgson takes up Luther as a conversation partner for the problem of freedom, and he criticizes Luther's understanding of human freedom in "cooperation" with God." Where Luther's *On Christian Freedom* (1520) tended to the subversion of the master-slave relationship, his *On Bound Choice* (1525) went the opposite direction and inscribed the slave-master mentality theologically, in the divine-human relationship. "Luther's God," so Hodgson, "is a totalitarian, an absolute monarch..." (38). Trapped in a "totalitarian paradigm", the Luther of *On Bound Choice* could only understand freedom human and divine freedom as irreconcilable. A better alternative, Hodgson argues, is to critique Luther through the lens of that great freedom fighter, Martin Luther

King, Jr., in order to see that freedom in God is the reality toward which Christian freedom, per Hegel, strives.

Similar themes are taken up in Part V of the volume by Peter J. Burghard, professor of German at Harvard. Like Hodgson, Burghard attends to Luther's political meaning. He examines first Luther's appeal *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520). For Burghard, the difficulty with this text is that Luther's rhetoric moves in two mutually exclusive directions at once, both fomenting democratic revolution and forbidding it. Luther's insistence that every Christian belongs to the "spiritual estate" (*geistlicher Stand*) suggests something like democratic equality, but elsewhere his use of the term "estate" (*Stand*) reverses course, for it denotes not equality but social class and hierarchy. Similarly, Burghard argues, in *On Christian Freedom* Luther sets out the paradox of Christian people free spiritually and in willing bondage bodily. The difficulty, as Burghard sees it, is Luther's dualistic bifurcation of the bodily from the spiritual. Luther loses control of his own rhetoric, with the result that the Christian is commanded to have faith; faith itself, therefore, becomes yet another external, bodily work, and the treatise as a whole ends in incoherence. The irony is thus all the greater when in 1525 the peasants take Luther at his word and rise up in the very rebellion he fomented, only to find the Wittenberger comfortably ensconced on the side of the princes and employing his rhetoric of violence against their cause.

Taken together, Hodgson's and Burghard's essays suggest something of the antipathy to Luther that prevails in some academic quarters today (Marxist, liberationist), especially with regard to his political theology. Hodgson's essay is somewhat predictable, but it epitomizes the kinds of criticisms one frequently hears about Luther from contextual theologians. Burghard's contribution, which puts one in mind of Friedrich Engels' description of Luther as the greatest bootlicker of the modern age, is powerful because it attends with care to the logic and structure of Luther's frequently bombastic rhetoric. Luther's manifest excesses notwithstanding, however, the problem of the relationship between equal human dignity and differing standings within the human community did not arise with Luther. The answer he gives to the question of the relationship between the "spiritual estate"

common to all Christians and the distinctive "estates" into which different Christians are called is at least as old as the New Testament (see I Cor. 12), so that Burghard's argument seems to be at least as much with the Christian tradition generally as it is with Martin Luther in particular. To that it really must be added that Luther was no dualist, whatever the rhetoric examined here may suggest.

Two essays take up the "global" question of Luther in relation to world religions. Jerusalem's Lutheran bishop, Munib Younan, now the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, examines Luther's potential to contribute to dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims. Luther demonized his opponents, Younan observes, the Jews and the "Turks" among them. This reflected Luther's apocalyptic outlook on history. This demonization has been rejected in contemporary Lutheranism, which, so Younan, has moved beyond its traditional subjective focus on the individual and justification to the reconciliation of diverse communities of peoples. For this task Younan finds helpful resources in Luther's doctrine of creation.

Elsewhere, Ronald Thiemann's subtle and important essay looks to Luther's "theology of the cross" for help with the dialogue between Christianity and other religions. The "theology of the cross", he says, denotes not so much a specific doctrinal commitment on Luther's part as a revolutionary set of theological practices that Thiemann labels "epistemological realism," one that "discourages metaphysical speculation and encourages a sober descriptive realism" (231). The counter-intuitive truth revealed in the passion of the Son of God is compatible, Thiemann argues, with a non-foundational theology that makes truth claims but does not yield to the temptation to absolutism. Thiemann sees liberal foundationalism at the root of religious exclusivism; the cure is a post-liberal theology that locates Christian beliefs within a dense nexus of particular communities and practices. In recognition that one's own beliefs reflect social/ecclesial location, one who follows Luther's "theology of the cross" will listen with openness to those from different locations and histories, willing to be surprised by yet another counter-intuitive insight into the ways of God in the world. Christian apophaticism, Thiemann observes, should foster modesty in the Christian, for the mystery of God infinitely surpasses all we can know or say.

This essay epitomizes a strategy common to some of the best chapters in this volume: take something from Luther and run with it. What to the historian might appear as a pillaging of the graveyard is to the theologian merely the productive borrowing of an idea. To be sure, Luther was not a post-liberal theologian, and he was not "open" to dialogue with other religions. Nevertheless, his insights can be harvested and put to work today. Thus, the essays gathered here suggest Luther's theological utility in the present when his voice is set free from prior historical or theological control.

If non-specialists are to be encouraged to engage Luther, then psycho-biography will become possible again. Since the outcry over Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* in 1962, psychologists have been loathe to step into the turbulent waters of Luther studies, even if few Luther scholars have been able to resist the odd opportunity to offer armchair psychological analyses of their own. James W. Jones's chapter on Luther and psychoanalysis suggests both the promise that psychological study of Luther holds out, as well as some of the pitfalls it faces. Jones applies relational theory to Luther rather than Freudian or Jungian analysis. He sees Luther as suffering from depression and a tormented conscience, but admires his psychological resilience in bringing divine mercy to the fore instead of wrath. Problematically, however, he sees Luther redirecting his anger away from himself and onto those he demonized: the Jews, Catholics, peasants, etc.

Similarly, Volker Leppin's chapter examines Luther's concept of God, arguing that Luther's fearful image of God originated at home, while the monastery showed him the God of love and mercy. Johannes von Staupitz, Luther's spiritual father, helped Luther overcome the fearful image of God he had received from his father Hans. Like Jones, Leppin sees Luther's former fear of God being transferred and projected onto his enemies, particularly the papal Antichrist. Beyond that, Leppin puzzles over the ambivalence in Luther's image of a God whose agency is so radically overwhelming that the hidden God seems to work against the God revealed in Christ. Luther's God both punishes and frees. But did Luther have to radicalize the dark void of God's hidden will in order to secure the gratuity of the word of grace and freedom?

In a related vein, Birgit Stolt's chapter looks at experience and emotion in Luther's understanding of faith. The religion of the heart is every bit Luther's religion, she shows, because faith itself presumes the heart as moved by the mercy of God. Stolt produces a great deal of evidence to support her case, both in Luther and in the subsequent Lutheran tradition. Her work also suggests the dynamic relationship between a Christian heart and the rhetoric of preaching. Paul Helmer's wide-ranging chapter on Luther and worship music nicely rounds out this section, emphasizing Luther's medieval understanding of the relationship between music, beauty, and truth.

Lastly I mention Theodor Dieter's fine chapter on justification, which poses the seemingly simple question what this doctrine can mean today. Dieter offers a series of answers to his question that are directed primarily to theologians. He notes, for example, that Luther famously held the Christian to be passive when she "suffers" her justification by God. What can this possibly mean today, with our notions of human freedom and agency? Does not the notion of passivity before God reflect just the "totalitarian paradigm" Hodgson and many others reject today? Perhaps, Dieter replies, this can be seen as an answer to the question of how one with no existential "feel" for religion can come to faith. The promise of the Gospel is "above reason" in Luther's thought, which means that the truth of this promise can be found only in the trustworthiness of the promise maker, i.e., the Holy Spirit. Spiritual activity, then, is not the means for the acquisition of faith. To the contrary, spiritual receptivity depends on the active passivity of one who hears God's word of promise, which effects the grounds for its own reception.

Taken as a whole, these and the many other fine essays collected here suggest Luther's continuing relevance for theology today. They show, moreover, that the settled results of Luther scholarship as it once seemed to have crystallized in the great syntheses of scholars like Gerhard Ebeling, Paul Althaus, and even, more recently, Oswald Bayer, are settled no more.