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Liberating Aspects in Lutheran Theology for a Post-Gender Politics

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In this chapter, I will search out aspects in Lutheran theology, which have proven promising guidelines for a sustainable theology. As the title says, I am aiming at what I call a *post-gender politics*. By such a post-gender politics I aim at going beyond any specific gender theories and rather employ an approach of which *homo*, the human being, is the pre-eminent category from which I am arguing. Thus, *homo* in the sense of human equality and equal human dignity of all humanity in the widest sense will be my hermeneutical key for aspects from the past that can make the transition to the future. I will go back to basics and highlight aspects from a sixteenth century context I find promising, seen through the lenses of my context. One of my points will be that—despite all the faults and failures of the human being, the *homo*, Luther—it is possible to take out and highlight features of his theology that eventually, in all actuality, led to political and social improvements for the common people irrespective of sex, ethnicity, and social background. I acknowledge that different readers of the reformation will have very different reactions depending on their context. But that, in a Lutheran context, there is space for difference and for different perspectives, which are constantly tried out and debated without doctrinal anathemas, is in itself a basic liberating aspect.

In the genealogy of feminist studies since the 1960s, from the revisionist reconstruction of women's history and representation to gender studies in the 1990s, to the 2000s breakdown of the gender/sex distinction, focus

shifted to the categories of difference and intersection in continuation of a poststructuralist and postmodern gender approach. With a further focus on the local-global perspective, the now well-known concepts of hybridity, mixture and the in-between used in post-colonial studies were integrated in most feminist studies. Today it is close to a truism that gender, ethnicity, and social status are not fixed categories but something found in diverse and intersected forms. In contrast to essentialism, many feminist scholars have realized how utterly complex history, including Lutheran history, is. Pertaining to Luther studies, with the stress on diversification and difference Luther's legacy as a reformer has been brought into question. Some claim that whether scholars do feminist studies and whether they are negative or positive to Luther's legacy has to do with confessional and/or national biases.¹

When I choose *homo* as my hermeneutical key, it is to underline the significance of both the diversification of humanity and the individuality of each human being, yet simultaneously to claim some common ground for this diverse humanity. I find it important that we as theologians, feminist or not, do not simply translate a diversification into a value-free pluralist perception of theology, but that such a diversification take its point of departure on a firm and common ground from which the Lutheran gaze perceives. Hence, while recognizing the insights obtained by feminist, post-modernist and post-colonialist studies, I find the time mature to again speak from some sort of universal that goes beyond any form of gender, ethnicity or social setting. From this ground of a cosmic *homo*, without intending any anthropocentrism or speciesism, I will point to liberating ideas in Luther's theology that can make it for a democratic, post-gender politics of the twenty-first century.²

1. Wiesner-Hanks, "Women and the Reformations: Reflections on Recent Research," 1–27. Wiesner-Hanks postulates a split between particularly Lutheran church historians trained in Germany and social historians and literary scholars trained outside of Germany, arguing that women doing Luther studies in Germany are hindered in doing critical studies due to an old-fashioned confessionalism and a hostile attitude toward women's research. It is equally problematic though, if certain feminist scholars do not recognize colleagues who value certain Lutheran ideas positively and dismiss their studies as simply confessionalist, as Wiesner-Hanks seems to do.

2. The number of publications that search out Luther's reformatory ideas and how Luther's theology in general can be transformed to the twenty-first century global world is increasing, but let me point out two different types: Streufert, *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives; Feminist Theology & Lutheran Thought: Dialog* 49/3, 190–247; Wiberg Pedersen, "Disciplined Freedom, or Free versus Slave? Recuperating Luther for Feminist Theology in an Age of Terror," 284–88.

Before I embark on my journey into the liberating aspects of Lutheran theology for a post-gender politics I will take a detour to some preliminary reflections on method and perception in order to remind us all of the complexity of our past.

READING THE PAST

In these years up to the 500th anniversary of the reformation in 2017, the old dispute who owns the Protestant Reformation and who best interprets Luther and Lutheran theology has again surfaced. Therefore the hermeneutical question how we read and use the past should concern us. We need to consider what it means when for example very different texts without regard of their different contexts are compared, or when texts from the past are being judged as if they were written in our own context, measurable on our ideals. The questions I want to raise here are: How do we read and understand the past without arrogant and easy perditions? How do we as scholars discern what to remit as signs of the times, signs of very diverse strata of society and culture of that past, and what to transmit as signs pointing to the future? What reader's perspective do we employ? Do we read the text as an entity in itself, ignoring that it was written under specific circumstances and with a specific address—politically, socially, historically, and theologically? Or do we read the text as part of a larger context of specific political and social conditions, historical circumstances, and theological disputes and feuds? Do we judge it from our own perspective and ideals, or do we judge a given text with respect for its own reality? The crucial question here is how we read the Reformation and the sixteenth century reformer Martin Luther and his theology today? Do we make Luther a hero, almost a God, or a scoundrel, almost a devil? Or do we recognize Luther as a man and theologian living in a specific time with particular ecclesiastical problems, which gave him a cause that he struggled for with all the errors that inevitably occur in a human life? Do we recognize that this struggle was not costless, fought as it was in the tumultuous sixteenth century Europe?³

Luther was not living in a modern democracy such as Sweden, but in a complex empire under the rule of both emperor and pope, and he was—due to his cause—excommunicated by the pope already in 1520 and outlawed by the emperor shortly after in the beginning of 1521 due to his criticism of abuses of the papal church. I.e., Luther was, in political terms, an outlaw in the entire German-Roman Empire, and, in ecclesiastical terms, declared a heretic by the transnational empirical Roman church institution from 1520

3. Oberman, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* provides nuanced answers to such questions.

onwards. Most of his time as a reformer, he was an outcast in relation to the empirical establishment. These special circumstances together with his initiating actions and writings provide him with a unique legacy as a reformer. Hence, can we judge all his views from a modern democratic view point? Of course, we cannot, as little as we can uncritically adapt all his views to a modern democratic society or any other society and culture of today. As German linguist, Michael Giesecke, points out, each cultural period develops its own ways of triadic perception that involves thinking, acting and communicating.⁴

Despite important insights from theology of the subaltern about the importance of context, there has been a tendency to forget about context in recent years when reading Luther—both of time, culture, and geography. Without consideration of the complexity of the German context in which he lived and operated, he has been accused of having extremely vulgar and at times even violent views on the pope, Jews, Peasants, Clergy, Women, and Princes. Important as language is, this should also be contextualized in view of specific semantic and rhetorical strategies in different cultural settings. Thus, Richard Glenn Cole, emeritus Professor of History, inspired by post-modern reading strategies has suggested to understand Luther's rhetorical intent in the context of early modern German culture and to read especially his satirical pamphlets as a "rhetorical use of 'masks' as metaphors."⁵ When perceived in their historical-cultural context, it becomes obvious that Luther is writing political satire. His brusque vocabulary for Jews as "whores," violent peasants as "mad dogs," and bishops as "genitals" and "asses" should not be understood literally, but is a communicative strategy that was common in public debate and discourse from the Athenian Agora of Ancient Greece onwards⁶ and still operative in Europe at least. Luther, who employed multiple styles and genres in his vast corpus, chiefly employed the classical political satire in the pamphlets. The problem is, according to Cole, that this genre is no longer accessible to twenty-first century academic readers. Besides, people tend to forget that Luther was also more sophisticated than that. Like his predecessors of the Middle Ages and his contemporaries, including his opponents, he wrote in all the diverse genres: satirical texts, sermons, letters, commentaries, lectures, and treatises that have each their address, particular style and semantics, though they would also compose hybrid forms. But his pamphlets, which became so widespread due to the

4. Giesecke, *Die Entdeckung der kommunikativen Welt: Studien zur Kulturvergleichenden Mediengeschichte*.

5. Cole, "Martin Luther's Use of Rhetorical masks for Jews, Princes, Clerics, and other Enemies," 309–10.

6. Ibid., 310.

new printing press, are primarily satirical texts composed according to the style of the genre and written in the context of actual feuds taking place, not to be mistaken as academic or normative texts that we today in any way should adopt.

READING THE PAST THROUGH THE PRESENT FOR THE FUTURE: A POST-GENDER KEY

One of the liberating principles of Reformation theology that are of immense significance, and which in many ways reflects the different interpretations I have henceforth touched upon, is that the reformed church should always be in a process of reform (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*). This principle calls for theological interpretations that combine past and present. Interpretation is the new in light of the old, letting the present influence the understanding of the past, taking ever new phenomena that did not exist when the historical or normative texts were written (for instance a developed understanding of human equality and democracy) and combine them with the universe or core message that is expressed in the texts.

Gadamer understood this well. According to Gadamer, it is at the intersection between past and present that the “productive role” of interpretation arises as a fusion of horizons. Interpretation is a process where the interpreter puts his or her presuppositions into play, and in which phenomena and themes, considered to have a central and particularly important value, are sorted out and accentuated. Gadamer stresses the inevitable “distance between time periods, cultures, classes, races and even between persons” that can only be overcome by language: “The interpreter and the text each possesses his, her or its own horizon and every moment of understanding represents a fusion of these horizons.”⁷ In this process, arbitrary and subjective prejudices do not count. Rather, history delivers central points that become and remain part of theology’s self-understanding. But history also delivers points that are not central of a theological self-understanding, and which may even become detrimental to the theological core.

For Lutherans, the core of unity or oneness of the church is guided by the central message of justification for all in Jesus Christ by grace through faith alone (CA 4). Having this core enables Lutherans to positively articulate unity in diversity in a global perspective and to constantly rethink and interpret Scripture and tradition in new ways that are adequate and timely. Even though we can easily find texts where Luther reflects thoughts and rhetoric of traditional exegesis inherited from Augustine and Augustinian tradition, his *sola scriptura* principle in fact goes against a totalitarian

7. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 45.

traditional way of reading scripture. Thus, the bible humanists' maxim of going to the sources, *ad fontes*, is at the bottom of the *sola scriptura* principle and points to an empowering of every person to read it and see what scripture says, understood as gospel not as a law book, as Luther explains in his introduction to his German translation of the New Testament.⁸

Concurrently, inasmuch as the extremely important *vernacularization of scripture* is indicative of the empowering of the common people, enabled as they are to read and interpret bible texts on their own, it is imperative that we as Lutheran theologians take serious the sound humanist principle of going back to the sources. It is not bible texts alone that may be "lost in translation," misinterpreted and distorted through translation and rendered in very different, at times dubious, versions. This is also true of Luther's texts. If we do not constantly go back to the sources, we are prone to uncritically adopt and render misrepresentations and distortions, deliberate or not, and run the risk of being unable to develop a Lutheran theology in its own right.

On this ground I shall try to sort out what I see as liberating aspects for human beings and politics in Lutheran theology. I will in this undertaking either leave out Luther's various ambivalences toward women or integrate them as self-contradictions of his higher ideals, exactly as we tend to do when we treat of the fathers of enlightenment and human rights.⁹

A HUMAN ECONOMY: THE THESES AGAINST ABUSE AND INDULGENCES

With his Ninety-Five Theses from 1517 Luther took up the fight against abuse of the common people and called for helping the poor and the needy (e.g. theses 43) instead of paying for the forgiveness of sins that Christ already paid for all humanity irrespective of class, sex, education, etc. Luther's critique of the church hierarchy is together with his *sola gratia* and *sola fide* principles a very strong signal of an egalitarian and inclusive view of humans: if you believe, you already have. With these ideals Lutheran theology evaluates the common people and the everyday life of each and every one as already graced and redeemed. But particularly, Luther's theses can be lifted up against any form of corruption and exploitation, as he was actually also fighting the new fiscal economy with its interest (usury) and speculations

8. Luther, *Eyn klein Unterricht, was man ynn den Euangeliis suchen und gewarten soll*, WA 10.I, 1:8–18.

9. For a more detailed treatment of Luther's ambiguities and ambivalences (compared with Thomas Jefferson), see Wiberg Pedersen, "A Man Caught Between Bad Anthropology and Good Theology? Martin Luther's View of Women Generally and of Mary Specifically," 190–200.

that the Roman church with the potentials of the new colonies took advantage of.¹⁰ All resonated in the financial crisis that started in 2008 as a consequence of massive exploitation of common people by banks and tycoons.

THE HUMAN REALITY: THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

This is a very risky aspect to highlight in this context, since it has been so vehemently critiqued from feminists and others.¹¹ But I take the risk, because I see humanizing features in it: From his basis of critique of the hierarchical church and papal sacramentality/sacral priesthood, Luther opposed a theology of glory and called for the true theologian who could identify with suffering and the cross.¹²

Besides addressing the abuse of indulgences and of the cross as a relic that was sold as wood taken from the historical cross of Christ, Luther called theologians to identify with real suffering and the real cross of Christ who suffered for all humanity, not with arbitrary merits. His calling should not be taken as a calling to seek suffering as a redeeming factor, but to see human life in its fullness of joys and sorrows as divinely embraced. The theologian of the cross envisages reality and real life, “calling a thing what it is,” and does not explain away suffering. Directed toward the scholastics’ rational and abstract explanations of divine mathematics, Luther’s theology of the cross (as also his concept of *Deus absconditus*) is a non-explanation of real human life. God and the God-created life are not part of any petty human logic, but are completely theo-logic and as such highly complex. Luther’s message is that life should not be rationalized, but accepted, experienced and lived in its fullness. Only when humans call suffering what it is and see what it does to the other, can they identify with this other in empathy, i.e. enter the *pathos*, the suffering, of others as did Christ on the cross.

Luther could not only identify with those in doubt from his own *Anfechtunge*, but as banned by both church and empire also with the excluded and marginalized, and as a father who lost some of his children with those in deep distress. As he stated when his beloved daughter, Elisabeth, died at 14 years old, he suffered “almost with a female spirit” (*animum paene*

10. For example Luther, *Sermon von dem Wucher*, WA 6, 1–8.

11. The theology of the cross has been one of the most debated themes in feminist theology during the past two decades because it has sometimes been abused in the victimization of women. But there are Lutheran feminists who have underlined the positive and constructive aspects of the theology of the cross, e.g. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross*; Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and the Cross*; Guðmundsdóttir, *Meeting God on the Cross: Christ, the Cross, and the Feminist Critique*.

12. Luther, *Disputatio Heidelbergae habitat*, theses 19–20, WA 1, 354, 361–62.

muliebre).¹³ But he did not seek suffering or sacrifice. As he spells it out in his *Sermon on the New Testament*, the only sacrifice people should make is to “believe that Christ is a priest for them in Heaven” and thank him in prayer for the sacrifice he made for them. In that respect “all are equally priests for God,” “all Christian men and women are priests, whether they are old or young, female and male masters of the house or female or male servants, learned or lay. Here is no difference—unless faith should not be the same for all.”¹⁴

HUMANIZATION OF MINISTRY: THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

Theologically Luther can but emphasize the equality of all human beings, women and men of faith. Everything else would contradict the substance of his reformation theology. This becomes particularly concrete in the texts where he explicates his idea of the priesthood of all believers: that all baptized as their priestly obligations have “to teach, preach and proclaim the word of God, baptize, consecrate and administer the Lord’s supper, bind and solve from sins, pray for others, sacrifice oneself and judge all teachers and spirits,”¹⁵ or as he states in a letter to Spalatin, referring to 1 Peter 2:10: “The apostle Peter drives me strongly when he says that we are all priests (*sacerdotes*),”¹⁶ concluding that all are equal in the ministry of the word and sacrament and in human state. Luther’s idea of the priesthood as a responsibility toward the neighbor and his rejection of an ontological distinction between lay and ordained in this letter as in writings from 1520 such as *To the Nobility* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* opened avenues to common people, including women. Although nothing happened overnight because the Protestant churches were integrated in patriarchal states and principalities, we should not discard the fact that the potential of the idea—even spelt out in Luther’s ambiguous-ambivalent statements in *On Councils and the Church*, in which he exempts women (and children) from his principle of the task and not the person doing the task being the issue¹⁷—did

13. Luther, *Luther an Nikolaus Hausmann*, WABr 4, 511 (Letter 1303).

14. Luther, *Ein Sermon von dem neuen Testament*, WA 6, 370.

15. Luther, *De instituendis ministris ecclesiae*, WA 12, 180. Cf. *De Captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium*, WA 6, 484–573.

16. Luther, *Luther an Spalatin*, WABr 1, 595 (Letter 231).

17. Luther, *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*, WA 50, 633. Three things should be noted here: (1) Luther formulates his understanding of ministry in a universal way, before seemingly absolving this universality by stating that the Holy Spirit has exempted women (and children) from the ministry, except when in need. (2) Luther does not say, that it is not allowed women to be ministers. Instead he calls upon the Holy Spirit

not stay *in spe*, but eventually came out *in re* and still do so. In a fusion of horizons, Lutherans have aptly interpreted Luther against himself when it came to such ambivalences, which contradicted his own high ideals. It cannot be overstated that when Luther propounds his central theological principles, he always employs the generic term *homo* (or in German: *Mensch*), a human being, not the gender term *vir* (or in German: *Mann*), a (male) man. Thus, it is more than proper to free Luther from his Roman captivity in his ambivalence toward women and bind the ministry to the general liberating principles for all humans.

The texts propound the equality of believers in Christ through baptism, as in Luther's treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, in which Luther, however, makes a significant differentiation within the priesthood of all believers.¹⁸ Everyone is spiritual and a priest through baptism and faith in Christ, but to the ministry of the word (*ministerium verbi*; i.e. servant of the word) only some are called. For Luther the difference lies in the calling, which is not a secret inner calling but a public calling by the community of believers. Likewise, he clearly rejects a sacramental understanding of ordination as well as any special *character indelebilis* attached to such an ordination and the priesthood (of only males). An extremely liberating factor is also that simultaneously with perceiving the pastoral office as instituted by God, Luther humanizes it.¹⁹ No pastor is more than a human being and no less a sinner than any member of the calling community.

Whereas the Catholic understanding of ministry is based on an ordination tied to a hierarchy of especially sacral males (*officium sacerdos*), Luther's understanding of ministry is based on baptism, the true ordination sacrament, and tied to the equality of all baptized believers. The minister is a follower (*successor*) of the gospel and as such a servant of the word (*ministerium verbi*). While the Catholic *vicarius Christi* is a representation of Christ's divine nature, the Lutheran *ministerium verbi* is a representation of the incarnate Christ, the in-fleshed *Logos*. In Luther's perception, God wanted to be known in Christ in his humanity, as a human being, spelled out in *The Freedom of a Christian* as Christ's *similitudo hominis*, his likeness

to state an unclear exemption from his rule. (3) Text critically, the exemption in lines 12–24 stands as an interruptive interpolation parallel to Paul's in 1 Cor 14:34–35. It is in discord with the main discourse and immediately again absolved by Luther's statement that the efficacy of the ministry is independent on how and who the person in ministry is.

18. Luther, *De libertate christiana*, WA 7, 20–28.

19. Luther, *In epistolam S Pauli ad Galatas Commentarius*, WA 40.I, 59, here commenting on Gal 1:1 thus: "ministri sunt ex nobis electi (. . .) Deus vocat nos omnes ad ministerium vocatione per hominem estque divina vocatio."

to a human being. Therefore, the external word should be proclaimed orally “by humans, like by you and me.”²⁰ The pastor must in all aspects be a human being, which is also the backdrop against which Luther’s critique of celibacy and of monastic life as a *status perfectionis* should be perceived. All in all, Luther could be said to in fact secularize ministry and, quite adversary to its prior segregation from an ordinary life, place it in the midst of what he saw as a normal everyday life.

In my view, it is particularly liberating that this de-sacralization of ministry goes hand in hand with an actual sacralization of the everyday life of common people, as it comes to the fore in Luther’s catechisms from 1529. In both the small and the large catechism, life is seen as part of a creational grace and sacredness that should never be suspended.²¹

THE COMMON HUMAN: *SIMUL IUSTUS ET PECCATOR*

In the same vein I suggest we understand the principle of every human being at once just and a sinner. It is important that both aspects are reflected in the right order: first just in the face of God, *coram Deo*, then sinner in the face of other humans, *coram hominibus*. The *simul* thus expresses Luther’s understanding of the human being as a relational being in a dual perspective. In the eyes of God (*coram Deo*), the human being is already just due to both the creational grace and Christ’s justifying act. In the eyes of other humans, the human being is always a sinner due to the fact that we constantly fail, even when trying to do good works. Luther does not speak ontologically as did Augustine, but relationally. He completely transforms Augustine’s ontological concept to a relational concept: sin is no longer pride and desire, but unbelief. To be just is to believe in God’s promises and forgiveness, to be a sinner is to not believe. Grace and sin are not substances gradually poured into the human like in a container as in Augustine’s teaching, but two total perspectives—*coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*—denoting that humans are relational beings, always living in relation to other human beings and God as two simultaneous, yet different relationships. However, the *simul* also denotes that both are embraced by God’s relation to the human, for God’s grace as a favor and the justification of the sinner in Christ come first and are always present as a promise waiting to be received in faith as a gift.

20. Luther, *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*, WA 50, 629.

21. Cf. Luther’s exposition of the first of the Ten Commandments in *Der Grosse Katechismus*, WA 30.I, 132–39. Luther calls upon God’s commandment to every human, irrespective of her position, to do good to her neighbor, for in the same way as a mother has been given breasts and milk to feed her child every creature is God’s hand, channel, and means (136).

Hence, the *simul* is asymmetrical in that God's grace is so much greater than human sin.²²

Negative as particularly the last part of the *simul* principle sounds to some, reflecting a pessimistic anthropology, I have come to see it as an utterly liberating aspect pertaining to human life. What Luther is actually saying is that sin is a condition under which all creatures are living and that no creature can do anything to alter this condition. Sin is a human *conditio sine qua non*, for as humans we all fail in our inter-human enterprises. Sin is not bound to the body or sexuality, but to being human. This entails that no one human is more perfect or more sinful than others, the *simul justus et peccator* principle thus providing us with immense reconciliatory aspects. The principle says that humans as God's creatures are embraced by God's grace despite sin. The human deficit is divinely embraced, without anyone having to do special actions or pay special dues in order to be graced.

SHAPING THE HUMAN: THE EDUCATION OF ALL

Luther has been accused of reducing the educational options for girls and career options for women due to his stark criticism of monastic life. However, Luther's criticism should be seen against the backdrop of his own experience as an Augustinian friar and his understanding of human freedom as a gift of God that does not set divides between humans *coram Deo*, only different charismata to be lived out in service of the common faith.²³ Because monastic life claims to be an elite ranking higher than other estates, with celibacy as a *status perfectionis*, it is against evangelical freedom in Luther's perception. Only in one respect does the monastic life live out evangelical freedom, namely in the monastic schools that offered children of both sexes an education. But different from the monastic elite schools for the children of nobility and the affluent bourgeoisie, Luther emphasizes the importance of free Christian schools for boys and girls for the sake of a well-educated worldly regime with humanist standards. His advice is: "to establish the very best schools for both boys and girls at all places because in order to maintain its worldly estate outwardly the world must have good and capable men and women."²⁴ It is possible to interpret Luther's text as if he advises more schooling of boys than of girls regarding worldly ministries,²⁵ though this

22. Luther, *Rationis Latomianae confutatio*, WA 8, 103–15.

23. Luther, *De votis monastici iudicium*, WA 8, 612.

24. Luther, *An die RATHERREN aller Städte deutsches Lands, dass sie christliche Schulen aufrichten und erhalten sollen*, WA 15, 44. Cf. Luther, *De votis monastici iudicium*, WA 8, 615: "et puellae quoque erudiebantur."

25. E.g., Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women*, 10.

is not at the heart of his message. Actually, Luther only explicitly requests more education pertaining to spiritual ministries and without making sex divides. His argument is that those who are to serve in the spiritual regime, such as male and female teachers, should learn more than others because they should be instrumental in elevating the cultural standard of the entire people. Hence, Luther recommends that those amongst capable people, both male and female, who are expected to hold spiritual ministries, “lerer und lereryn, prediger und andern geistlichen emptern,” should be given more education.²⁶ Thus, Luther invited educated women to teach the little girls publicly and show their work as an example for others.²⁷

By his call, Luther evoked a surge of building girls’ schools in Protestant areas. The impact of this aspect of democratizing education, making it free for everyone, has been studied by e.g. social economists who found that a larger share of Protestants in Prussia in the nineteenth century decreased the gender gap in basic education (1816) as well as in literacy among the adult population (1871).²⁸ Limited as such a study may be, it points to the liberating and emancipating aspects of giving all children some education in common schools and not just the elite in convent schools. Besides, we know that the common school system has been a constitutive factor in the development of democratic societies.

HUMAN—NOT DIVINE: SEEING THE WORLD FROM BELOW

Luther has also been criticized for devaluating Mary and thereby discharging a female figure from the divine power center. But this is a huge misunderstanding of his eminent transformation of the role of Mary as supernatural being to a human being. Although he remains faithful to the confessing to Mary as virgin and the sinless Mother of God,²⁹ his most coherent and comprehensive interpretation of Mary’s role is based on the lowly and poor maiden of Luke 1, who by her earthly humanity subverts inhuman earthly powers.³⁰ Luther utilizes his commentary on the *Magnificat* in his reforma-

26. Luther, *An die Retherren aller Städte deutsches Lands, dass sie christliche Schulen aufrichten und erhalten sollen*, WA 15, 47; 15, 9–53.

27. Luther, *Luther an Else von Kanitz*, WABr 4, 236 (Letter 1133), a letter from 1527 in which he asks “the honorable and virtuous Maiden Else von Kanitz” to come and instruct the little girls in Wittenberg.

28. Becker, “Luther and the Girls: Religious Denomination and the Female Education Gap in Nineteenth-Century Prussia,” 777–805.

29. E.g., Luther, *Epistel am Sonntag nach dem Christtage*, Gal. 1–7, WA 10.I, 352–69.

30. Luther, *Das Magnificat verdeutschet und ausgelegt*, WA 7, 538–604.

tion program by addressing it to his supporter, Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony, as a “Fürstenspiegel” written in the vernacular for laypeople.

Luther’s choice of Mary’s hymn to God is not arbitrary. It stems from a tradition in primarily the prophetic literature of the Old Testament called “the poor of Jahve,” in which poverty is perceived the collective sin of a society unable to create justice in accordance with the purpose of God’s creation. The *Magnificat* links the understanding of the history of Israel as God’s history with his people and the message about Christ who liberates and saves all people, and it tells about real experiences of richness versus poverty and real hopes directed toward the savior of the wretched, thus weaving the ecclesiological experiences of God’s people together with their eschatological hopes.

Luther takes this line of tradition and elaborates it. Furthermore, as the vernacularization of scripture is an important aspect to his church political purpose, he translates it from Greek into German. Thus, in his return to the German John Frederick’s interest in the cause of the Reformation Luther combines his understanding of God’s saving practice with his view on justice and princely power, contrasting the rich and powerful prince with the poor and powerless girl.³¹ Luther is indeed writing about real and concrete poverty that cannot be beautified in any way in his reminder of how to employ worldly power rightly. Explicating the depth and reality of Mary’s poverty, disgrace, and lowliness, Luther presents her hymn as a paradigm of God’s just ruling from which the prince should learn: “God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones.” In Luther’s perception, God does his salutary work by subverting the ungodly social architecture, by healing the broken, and even breaking what is whole. This Mary has learned from the Holy Spirit and honors God for it, and Luther expects the prince to learn the same from Mary’s God.

Hence, Luther employs *Magnificat* as a “program” for his ecclesio-political goals: to cleanse the God relationship from devotional amends that function as mere plaster without healing what is broken. Also a lord and ruler must love his subjects and have for his chief concern not how to live at ease but how to uplift and improve his people, or he rules only for the perdition of his soul. Such an understanding of government or governing propagated as the very creational and salutary program designed by God opens windows to a democratization program.

31. For a fuller exposition of this in contrast with a Mariology of glory, see Wiberg Pedersen, “‘The Holy Spirit shall come upon you.’ Mary—the Human ‘Locus’ for the Holy Spirit,” 23–41. I am drawing on this earlier article here.

How Luther liberates his whole argumentation from any kind of ecclesial piety or sacramentality can hardly be overemphasized. His argument is theological. No doubt, the text will gain by being read intertextually with Luther's address to the nobility and related to his idea of the two realms. But the main point here is that Luther reminds those who are in rule that they have a special responsibility in taking care of God's creation. Mary represents the real human being as part of God's creation. Luther breaks with tradition by pulling down Mary from all pedestals and presents her—*sola scriptura*—as someone ordinary: "a poor and plain citizen's daughter." Mary is an ordinary woman who possesses the human characteristics, which enable her to experience divine grace and justice and to bear Christ.

Mary's lowly state is of immense importance in Luther's exposition not only as a contrast to elite worldly powers but also as a contrast to elite monastic and devotional piety. Hence, he makes a point of translating the Greek term for humility, *tapeinōsin teis douleis* (Luke 1:48), into "lowly estate" in a social sense "as that of human beings who are poor, sick, hungry, thirsty, in prison, suffering, and dying." Humility is not some deed that frees people of sin and perdition in the sight of God. Luther's focus is human beings living an ordinary and responsible human life together with other human beings. In that respect one might say that Luther is in fact propounding an everyday theology centered round the human being as God's graced creation.

Luther does not denigrate Mary but translates her role into liberating aspects that point toward a humanization and a democratization of the worldly regime.

CONCLUSION

However we study Luther's vast text corpus we get a multifaceted picture of a man who on his view of women (and so many other things) is torn between his own more modern ideas and the conventions and traditions of his time.³² We should not be surprised that the texts and views of Luther reflect ambivalence or self-contradiction but use it constructively as deliberations from a (hu)man (being) whose own approach to theology was constructive and under process as in "reformation," not fixed and absolute. Luther's *opera omnia*, totaling more than 100 volumes in the *Weimar Edition* and encompassing such different genres as treatises, lectures, commentaries, sermons and letters (besides the table talks recorded by others), is evidence of a differentiating approach to theology and politics, including view of gender, ethnicity and social status. Hence, it is possible to constructively sort out the

32. Wiberg Pedersen, "A Man Caught Between Bad Anthropology and Good Theology," 190–200.

liberating aspects in Luther's theology that point forward to the future for us as humans in our post-secular global world. One must constantly return to the sources and simultaneously be aware of context and such hermeneutical questions as genre, rhetoric, addressee, situation and purpose.

I have here proposed what one could also label an ecumenical approach, namely that of taking as my point of departure a common ground for all humans by way of the category *homo*, and in this endeavor perceive Luther's ambivalences and self-contradictions, e.g. the ambivalence toward women and his own maleness (*Männlichkeit*) as a mode of *adiaphora*, the indifferent difference, or indifferent hybridity. I contend that by combining (or confronting) Luther's ambivalences with his clear cut good theology of justice and grace in which *homo*, the human being, is the central constitutive category, it is possible to lift up aspects that point to the future. When I suggest a post-gender politics, it is because there is a need for human beings to again search out a common ground beyond all the conflicts and differences that have become spiraling, hegemonic powers. From the cosmic *homo* as a common ground, we can then maintain our many differences, but as *adiaphora*, indifferent differences.

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