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Luther: Heroic Liberator or Oppressor?

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Reading the classics is coming back. It is important to position oneself in relation to tradition, not least in order to make conscious that which is unconscious. We can find both inspiration and resistance by allowing chords struck in the past to be heard again in relation to contemporary questions. My hope is that Luther's breakthrough on key theological issues will be given a hearing in contemporary debate, and that its occasionally discordant tones will serve as a reminder that all instruments need continual retuning. Some strings may need replacing.[1] What should be viewed as essential is largely determined by our present moment, given that we have limited access to Luther's era. Yet, no more than the self-evident truths of our own, the values of Luther's day should not be allowed to serve as criteria for what counts as good in the present moment. Greater awareness of what has been considered self-evident or "natural" can, however, lead to a critical conversation that asks questions of his historical context as well as ours. Cultural critique offers a way out of our present moment's self-absorption.

Mediating a tradition involves both relaying something and betraying it. Allowing Martin Luther's ideas to be heard in the background is—to adopt Michel Foucault's celebrated formulation—one way to change history in the present.[2] Anders Mogård uses the term "rework-

1. The term *theology* is here used in its literal sense as talk about God. But to talk about God is also to talk about humans and the world. It is related to experience and context. See Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*.

2. Poster, "Foucault, the Present and History," 105–21; Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

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ing tradition" to denote an "active, critical, and constructive approach" to tradition.[3] Mogård shows how Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931)—Swedish Nobel Prize laureate, archbishop, and professor—reads Luther, putting the latter and his ideas into historical context as a way to address important questions. In this way, Söderblom does something new with Luther. My view is that to some extent everyone does this, more or less consciously, by positioning themselves in relation to a strong tradition and a highly charismatic innovator. In joining this long succession of interpreters, including some pioneers, I do so consciously, as a woman with the advantage of often living close to extra-European perspectives.

Who Was This Luther, Then?

There are many images and readings of Luther. Some basic facts may nonetheless be in order. Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben in Saxony and died on February 18, 1546. His father, a leaseholder of mines, was ambitious and wanted his son to become a lawyer. In accordance with his father's wishes, he registered for a university law degree, only to abandon it for philosophy and theology. His decision to leave academia in order to become a monk is sometimes attributed to a thunderstorm on July 2, 1505. When a bolt of lightning struck nearby, he is supposed to have made a promise to take holy orders.

Whether a stormy night or an interest in theology led him to become an Augustinian monk need not detain us here. But he has gone down in history as the German priest, monk, and theologian who initiated the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, as professor of theology, he attacked the church in Rome in his famous Ninety-Five Theses. In them, he polemicized against the church's sale of indulgences, a kind of letter that enabled one to buy oneself free from God's punishment for sins committed. Luther's theses provoked violent reactions, but he refused to apologize for his writings. He was subsequently excommunicated by Pope Leo X. At the Diet of Worms in 1521 he was pronounced an outlaw. Luther claimed, at the risk of his own life, that no one is saved by good deeds but that salvation is a free gift of God, which can only be received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. He additionally argued that the Bible was the only source of divinely revealed knowledge. He also opposed the authority of the pope and the view that priests were intermediaries between

3. Mogård, *Förtröstans hermeneutik*.

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God and people. Until that point the Bible had been read in Latin. Luther now translated it from Hebrew and Greek into German. In the reformed territories, mass began to be celebrated in the vernacular instead of Latin. Luther himself composed many psalms and songs in German in order to make his teachings more accessible. So that everyone could read and understand, he introduced literacy teaching for everyone, regardless of gender or social status.

As a monk, Luther strove for righteousness. He mortified himself more severely than others, fasted, and prayed to meet a merciful God. After several years' struggle, he had a breakthrough that allowed him to believe himself forgiven. This was a powerful experience. It transformed his life. Rather than trying to reach the divine and to find forgiveness by means of the monastic life and asceticism, he began to see faith as a gift to be received freely, by grace.

He began to encourage monks and nuns to leave the cloister if they had not themselves chosen to enter. There are sensational accounts of him helping nuns to escape. While tales of using herring barrels to escape are probably apocryphal, an open cart was used on at least one occasion. Covered with a canvas, this cart was used for deliveries to the convent. The nuns were helped to escape from the convent in it.[4] One of those nuns on the run was Katharina von Bora. Her companions in the convent were married off, one after the other, until finally only she was left. She then proposed that, if she were to get married, it would have to be to Dr. Martin Luther himself. And so it turned out. Within three weeks they were married. This apparently pragmatic marriage seems to have been very happy. In the eyes of the law, however, marriage with a priest was considered concubinage. This meant that any offspring could not inherit. Despite this, Luther suggested that Katharina should be the trustee of their children after his death; his will was not followed. Only after Luther's death was the law revised in the duchy of Saxony so that marriage with a Protestant priest became legally valid.[5]

For Luther, marriage became the locus of sexuality, just as it had been for Augustine long ago. His rejection of monastic life's claim to be more spiritual led to him defending marriage and sexuality. Luther interpreted this as a "natural" life. This became a key battle-line against Rome. Marriage was no longer regarded as a sacrament but as a good regulation.

4. Stolt, *Luther själv*, 183.

5. Ibid., 185.

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However, Luther viewed marriage and the family as far more important than monastic life. In it lay people's vocation towards their fellow human beings. As he did not accept monastic life as a higher spiritual calling, the everyday became a mode of divine service.

Large Households for Support, Procreation, and Intimacy

In Luther's time, the large household provided economic support while meeting its members' needs for not merely accommodation but warmth, care, and intimacy. *Oeconomia* thus denotes both economics and family. Kekke Stadin has shown that households are erotically affirmative as well as controlling. Nonetheless, she argues that the "new, affirmative attitude towards sexuality" was not always apparent to the great mass of the people.[6] She points out that theological debate and the unconditional channeling of sexuality into marriage, which was governed by several different interests, only partially affected the legal and moral norms of society. All the "measures which were taken against extramarital sexuality—within the fields of ecclesiastical and temporal law alike—tended to overshadow the positive view of sexuality within marriage," she argues.[7] We will come back to these interpretations of sexuality and their significance. Just like sexuality and the body, the different estates can be interpreted as liberating, dynamic, and inclusive or as hierarchical, patriarchal, and exclusive.

The large household in Luther's day was a reproductive sphere that was responsible for economic support, procreation, and many of its members' physical and emotional needs. Sensuality occupied a prominent place. Within this sphere (*oeconomia*), intimacy had its place, while the political sphere (*politia*) was meant to maintain justice, peace, and order, and the sphere of the church (*ecclesia*) was expected to sustain people with words of forgiveness. While many scholars have written about the differing goal and logic of each estate, I am more interested in what unites them, since I see each of them as a sphere of promise intended to help people.[8]

6. Stadin, *Stånd och genus*, 44.

7. Ibid.

8. I have used the notion "spheres of promise" in several articles. See Gerle, "From Homogeneous Nations to Pluralism"; Gerle, "Eros, Ethics, and Politics"; Gerle, "Var dags."

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In the sixteenth century, the distinction between private and public was very different from today. Our conception of the private simply did not exist. Luther described a human being as both a person and an office, "Person und Amt." But even in this official capacity, Christ's love was expected to influence people's lives.[9] Even being a child or a parent was seen as an office, no less than being a teacher or a jurist. The lines of demarcation were completely different, in other words.

Katharina von Bora supported not just Martin Luther but also a growing family. This escaped nun, who had learned Latin in the monastery, seems to have been a talented businesswoman. Through her lodging house for students in Wittenberg and her brewing business, she made it possible for Dr. Martin to write Bible commentaries, pamphlets, and theological tracts. He was thus dependent on his wife, whom he loved and respected and did not wish to exchange for either France or Venice.[10] He affectionately called her his very own Letter to the Galatians.[11] This Pauline letter, which describes being redeemed by grace rather than deeds, was Luther's favorite text in the whole Bible. It may even imply that he saw Katharina as a grace, a gift he had received without effort on his part.

Luther had the means to marry, perhaps thanks to Katharina and her enterprise. However, many others had to wait for a long time before they could wed. Others could not or would not. What was it like for them when sexuality was so closely aligned with marriage and everyone was expected to live the everyday life of a good Christian? The transformation brought about by the Reformation was not for the good of everyone.

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Tradition and Freedom: Three Reasons to Reread Luther

There are at least three reasons to reread Luther. The first is that it is important for a general public who is interested in culture. Since the sixteenth century the Lutheran legacy has been influenced by its surroundings. From the vantage point of the present, it includes both good and bad patterns.

9. Hägglund, *Arvet från reformationen*, 136–42, 146.

10. WA TR 1, 17, (no. 49) 1531, "[10] Jch wolt mein Ketha nit vmb Frankreich noch vmb [11] Venedig dazu geben, zum ersten darumb, das mir sie Gott geschenkt hatt vnd [12] mich yhr geben hatt."

11. Stolt, *Luther själv,*185.

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Some elements must be rejected, above all the anti-Semitism and xenophobia that became part of the unitary Lutheran societies in which state and religion were closely tied. Anti-Semitism goes back to medieval traditions that began in the twelfth century. However, Luther articulates this with great venom in his 1543 treatise *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* (*On the Jews and Their Lies*). Luther's polemical and in places savage attack on the pope and, even more, on Jews and the invading "Turk" should be understood in its historical context and is something we must today distance ourselves from. Even in debates today, diatribes are routinely launched at Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, albeit from a secular perspective. There are, then, special reasons for Lutheran national churches to be aware of their history and to distance themselves from the tendency to categorically identify particular people as undemocratic and less reliable on the grounds of their religion or faith.[12]

However, other aspects of the Lutheran tradition are a source of pride. These include the fact that the reformed territories led the way in implementing mass literacy for people of all social backgrounds.[13] It was equally revolutionary in the sixteenth century that girls as well as boys were taught to read. Luther, of course, maintained that all were equal before God, regardless of birth or gender. Every human being also had direct access to God. Life, but also the Bible, were important guides. Everyone should therefore learn to read and write at least a little: learning one's catechism and being able to read the Bible oneself were emphasized. Why was this so important? In 1684, Sweden's ecclesiastical law stated that people should "see with their own eyes what God is offering and commanding in his holy word."[14] Laypeople, those not ordained, should be able to determine whether the priest is preaching true doctrine—namely, that human beings were redeemed by faith, not by deeds.

This did not mean, however, that people were seen as equal in society. Even so, equality before God gradually came to affect relationships between people, too. Literacy and a fundamental conviction of the equality of all before God became important steps towards democracy.

12. In the Nordic region, e.g., in Denmark and Sweden, the Reformation was part of nation building. One consequence was that only Lutherans were treated as reliable citizens. See Gerle, *Mångkulturalism*; Gerle, *Mänskliga rättigheter;* Gerle, "Nationalism, Reformation"; Gerle, *Farlig förenkling.*

13. See, e.g., Lindmark, *Alphabeta Varia.*

14. Tegborg, "Från kyrkolag," 42.

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Contemporary values can thus in part be shown to have deep roots in the Lutheran intellectual tradition.

Another reason to read Luther is that it is vital to identify different possible readings of what Martin Luther represented, not least for those who regard themselves as participants in an evangelical Lutheran tradition. Today, it is neither possible nor desirable to use Luther as a norm for what is right and wrong. Reading him in relation to what we are talking about now can both call into question and affirm contemporary values and attitudes. If one accepts the fact that traditions change, the question arises as to which narrative we should choose to tell. Using history consciously means trying to identify and reveal which history, which narratives and themes, we choose to emphasize and connect to in our tradition.

The concept "uses of history" is used widely among historians, among others, who grapple with the Reformation.[15] It is one way to indicate an awareness that there is no simple way to bridge the temporal and historical gap separating our era from that in which Martin Luther's texts were written. Even so, it can be argued, as Johanna Gustafsson Lundberg does, that for people's ability to live a good life it matters greatly whether only certain forms of historical memory are permitted, one particular version of history has a monopoly, or several forms of historical narrative are given a voice."[16] She contends that several kinds of historical narrative make possible a widening of perspective that can prevent the enshrining of a single approach.[17] I would also say that it not only affirms a liberal, pluralist multiplicity but makes it possible, in the cacophony of competing voices, to argue that some interpretations are more reasonable than others—and, above all, better for people and the world.

Thirdly, it is important for Christians from other traditions—such as the family of Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic church, and the Reformed churches and societies—to see what they share with the Lutherans as well as what divides them. Much of what Luther stood for is not unique, but is shared by Christians from different traditions. At the same time, there is in his experience and in the appeal it makes a freedom that has often been lost for long periods in Lutheran unitary societies.

15. See, e.g., Nordbäck, "Kyrkohistorisk historiebruksforskning."
16. Gustafsson Lundberg, *Medlem 2010*, 12.
17. Ibid.

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Many emphases that we today associate with Luther derive from his time and context. Moreover, they have been defined by how his message has been interpreted and used in different contexts.[18] This can seem passé or something that is shared by many others.

For me personally, all three of these tasks are vital. The writings of Luther and other reformers contain ideas that remain important. These include ideas about everyone being "equal" before God, the universal priesthood, and the belief that it is our fellow human beings, not God, who need our good works.[19]

Seeking Answers from the Perspective of a Wound, a Dilemma

Luther's method of taking his own and his contemporaries' questions seriously, and of seeking answers from new vantage points, is a source of inspiration. He is sometimes described as a situational ethicist. A situation can be described as an occasion when different issues, forces, and events in one's milieu come together and trigger a response.[20] A response can have different consequences and is therefore not the same thing as a cause. Many before Martin Luther had reacted to the decline of the church and to both existential and bodily poverty. What prompted Luther to initiate a reformation derived from his reading of the situation and from the forces and events around him. Creative thinking not infrequently takes place in the proximity of a wound, argues Mary McClintock Fulkerson.[21] When one experiences or recognizes a dilemma, it forcibly generates new ideas in relation to tradition. In the process, new patterns of insight and reality arise. Various kinds of liberation theology have arisen in precisely this way. When I read Luther, I do so through spectacles that are tinted by complex, overlapping, intersectional "wounds" that female scholars and theologians outside Europe have helped identify. Proceeding from wounds that do great harm to human bodies no less than to social bodies, I therefore approach Luther anew. Since our era gives special treatment to successful people with attractive bodies, a yearning is created in us to belong to precisely this group. Yet many are ending up outside and

18. See Blåder, *Lutheran Tradition as Heritage and Tool*.
19. WA 7, 12–38; cf. LW 31 "Von der Freiheit" (1520).
20. Fulkerson, "Interpreting a Situation," 38.
21. Ibid.

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becoming increasingly invisible. In tandem with this, there is a growing risk of being exploited. My point here is that Luther's conviction that our lives are given and not an achievement, or performance, represents a cultural critique. Perhaps it can help heal one of our era's wounds.

There is inspiration in Luther's existential attempt to relate to what Paul Tillich calls "the ultimate concern."[22] Even though his attitude endangered his position, his career, and even his life, he dared to stand up for what he thought was right. Nevertheless, daring to risk one's life is in itself not a criterion of good or evil. It is therefore important to ask: for what?

In Luther's Shadow, or Luther in the Shade

And so we return to the question of what to do with Luther. In his own writings a contradictory image appears. Not infrequently the Luther we meet there is sensual and physical, a million miles away from puritanism and prudishness. He has *joie de vivre* and appreciates the good things in life. Despite this, he seems not to have entirely shed his ambivalent feelings about sexual desire. He accepts sexuality and reproduction, but often associates powerful, almost uncontrollable sexual desire with the immense power of sin.[23] At the same time, in his letter *To Several Nuns* he describes sexual desire as something natural for both men and women.[24]

How he really views *eros* or eroticism is harder to pin down. By the time the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, around 300 BC, the word *eros* as a designation for love had come to be associated with the Greek god of love. This made it difficult to use within the context of a monotheistic worldview such as Judaism or Christianity.[25]

And yet there is more *eros* in Luther's texts and in his everyday life than we tend to imagine. Further investigation is needed here: we need to interpret not merely what remains unsaid but also what lies in the spaces between his words, sometimes in his praxis. I contend that the tension between *eros* and *agape* in Luther's writings is not as great or as cut-and-dried as Anders Nygren paints it.[26] When Luther takes human life as his

22. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 5.
23. WA 42, 53–54, "Genesisvorlesung" (1535–38); cf. WA 24:90–91.
24. WA Br 3, 327–28, (no. 766) "Luther an drei Klosterjungfrauen" (1524).
25. Jeanrond, "Kärlekens praxis," 231; cf. Rubenson, "Himmelsk åtrå," 231.
26. This will be analyzed in chapter 7.

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starting point for describing God, what recurs is the motif of a mother's love and of people's everyday care for each other. As Luther asks rhetorically, if people show this much love to one another, how great must God's love be?[27] Luther's Christ mystery contains powerful erotic elements. At the same time, there is more reciprocity in our relationship to God than has traditionally been argued.

Three issues are important for Lutheran theology, namely, the doctrine of justification, the universal priesthood, and the doctrine of vocation. Each is significant for the way Luther uses erotic imagery in order to foreground a paradoxical view of freedom and constraint in relationships. Just as he faced opposition on different fronts, the mediation of tradition today finds itself in a relationship with its surrounding society and differing views of life. In our time a respectful conversation that avoids alienating or distancing itself from its counterpart has much to gain from knowledge.

What inspires or attracts me in all this comes down to the way that Luther is paradoxical and contradictory while all the time struggling with existential questions. He finds himself in a period of transition and is sometimes regarded as one of the initiators of modernity by virtue of emphasizing the authoritative individual. It is also this that makes him so intriguing. "Luther wanted to speak directly to God as an individual and without awkwardness," argued Nietzsche, according to Erik Erikson.[28] Luther is sometimes seen as representing the struggle for a human being with her own religious authority. At the same time, he was, like many innovators, contradictory. Authority did not apply to all areas and could not be treated in any fashion. Luther's contradictory tendencies make him existentially interesting. This has an interest that extends far beyond the confessional groups who see themselves as part of an evangelical Lutheran tradition. Just as Luther chose to align himself with particular strands within his tradition, partly in order to reinterpret and break with that tradition, I contend that we are doing the same thing today. We take a stance on the tradition of which we are a part, consciously or otherwise. Those of us working within Lutheran theology and ethics today are saying both more and simultaneously less than Luther himself did.

27. Cf. WA TR 1, 189 (no. 437) "Tischreden" (1533).

28. Erikson, *Kulturkris och religion*, 137.

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Luther and Contemporary Voices: A Crossroads on Several Levels

In this book I am therefore discussing sensuality in a dialogue with Luther and our contemporaries, even if the latter are not easily identified. Present-day questions force us to interrogate history, partly in order to make visible our hidden cultural legacy, partly in order to gain some perspective on ourselves. One obvious starting point is that this cultural legacy comprises both good and bad.

Equally obvious is the fact that the unitary subject from which Lutheran theology has often proceeded does not exist, either in Luther's day or in the present.[29] People are not just male or female but more plural, with several overlapping identities in which gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and skin color interact. Some aspects of identity can reinforce exclusion and oppression while others confer status and belonging. A black lesbian is thus not only a woman. Her skin color and sexual orientation play a part in determining how she is perceived. Her place in society, which not infrequently is a marginalized one, is reinforced by the fact that she is a woman, black, and homosexual.

In corresponding fashion, it is still often the case that being male, white, and heterosexual confers greater advantages and a higher status. In contemporary scholarship, this is a way of describing people intersectionally, as bearers of many overlapping identities. The concept of intersectionality gestures towards the impossibility of analytically differentiating between certain categories, which instead work together in complex ways. Behind it lies an ambition to make visible specific situations of oppression that are created by the intersection of power relations based on race, gender, and class.[30] This can also provide a methodological perspective. It involves, then, new threads of the fabric becoming visible by virtue of overlapping with each other, but also catching a glimpse of what lies in the interstices, the cracks, and in that which remains unstated.

Historical Images

The year 2017 marks the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. It may therefore

29. The destabilized subject is often connected with the work of Judith Butler.

30. Reyes and Mulinari, *Intersektionalitet*, 18; Svalfors, *Andlighetens*, 14, 38–40f.

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be worth recalling how each era has chosen to see Luther as the solution to its greatest problems.

Various Reformation anniversaries have passed and each has been defined by its historical moment, writes Margot Käßman.[31] She cites historian Hartmut Lehmann, who showed how, in 1617, people celebrated Luther and confessional self-confidence. In 1717, the emphasis was on stylizing Luther as a pietistic and devout man, or as an early Enlightenment figure standing up to medieval superstition. In 1817, the anniversary was held as a national celebration for the memory of those slaughtered at the Battle of Leipzig four years earlier. Luther became a German national hero.

In 1883, the quartercentennial of Luther's birth, Luther was promoted to the founder of the German Empire, and in 1917, he finally became, together with Hindenburg, savior of the German identity in a time of dire adversity. In 1933, Luther was decked in the aura of the divinely sent Führer, or made the latter's harbinger. And in 1946, on the quartercentennial of Luther's death, he was cast as comforter of the German people at a time when comfort was desperately needed. In 1983, a dispute over the Lutheran legacy broke out between East and West Germany. In the German Democratic Republic, Luther was now no longer a servant of the sovereign but a representative of the proto-bourgeois revolution.

This simple history should serve as a humbling object lesson for any scholar who wants to interpret Luther. I therefore make limited claims for my own reading. By highlighting certain themes that have only rarely commanded attention, I wish to nuance our image of Luther, but also to offer a constructive re-examination and reinterpretation. When reading Luther, I want to exercise both empathy and critical distance.

The various images of Luther alternate with each other.[32] This is important to note for all those who in any way emphasize, or seek to dissociate themselves from, the Lutheran legacy as culture and theology. Discussing contemporary issues using the writings of a great reformer is not a way to trace the origin of those issues genetically, or to find the right answers. Rather, the questions being asked today determine which questions strike us as relevant. The recent renewal of interest in physicality and *ascesis*, in both its secular and religious forms, makes it relevant to discuss the body, sexuality, sensuality, and eroticism. I do so in a setting

31. Käßmann, *Schlag nach bei Luther,* preface.

32. Aurelius, *Luther i Sverige*.

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that is shaped by a discourse of deliberate uses of history. By this, I mean that we always use history in relation to the present and the future. I also believe that the historical other can shed light upon what we take for granted in the present.

The Whole World

The Reformation insisted that the whole world belonged to God. All people, not merely Christians or a chosen few, were seen as collaborators in an ongoing creation. Both the church and the world were viewed as God's creation, but also as a battlefield between God and the devil. Continual new creation stands against destruction, life against death.

And yet theological claims to let theology govern all of society run directly counter to Martin Luther's critique of subordinating everything to theology or to the rule of the church.[33] For him, the idea that God is at work within every station of society[34] represented a way to challenge the supremacy of Rome, but also to affirm a view of creation in which God works in different ways in different areas. Limitations of space prevent me from considering in greater detail what is known as the two kingdoms doctrine,[35] but I do want to refer to what is usually called the estates doctrine. The two kingdoms doctrine in our era risks being interpreted on the basis of the modern oppositions between private and public or between religious or secular, divisions that did not exist in Luther's time.

Luther's ideas about the two kingdoms—one spiritual and one worldly, running through everything, not only people's hearts but all institutions, ecclesiastical and temporal—have often served as a pretext for the church to care only about the spiritual. The nation-state's influence over the church did not result in a clear demarcation between church and state. It was rather the case that "subjects" were expected to belong to the "right church."[36] In the early stages of the Reformation, the church was anything but unpolitical. The division between state and church, law and gospel, often led to a passivity towards political and economic power so long as the latter did not interfere in the church's affairs and permitted it

33. This discussion will re-emerge in relation to Radical Orthodoxy.
34. B. Brock, "Why the Estates?," 179.
35. I analyze the Two Kingdom theory in "Lutheran Theology," 210–28.
36. Sigurdson, *Det postsekulära*, 350; cf. Gerle, "Kristna fristående," 70.

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to preach the gospel.[37] However, such an understanding of the two kingdoms doctrine misses Luther's dialectic, which is often a matter of simultaneity, not either/or. God acts in different ways in different spheres, simultaneously. Such binaries, which are at once separate and connected, are plentiful in Luther's writing, observes Margareta Brandby-Cöster.[38] Everyone is seen as requiring to give an account of themselves to God, regardless of whether they are active in the temporal or the ecclesiastical sphere. Despite having different tasks, they are all supposed to protect life and God's ongoing creation.

Luther did not only have ideas about different kingdoms, however. He drew on Aristotle's thinking about given social orders. From the reformist point of view, these so-called estates were supposed to protect life against evil. I would argue that they can therefore be regarded as realms of promises. The fact that Luther refers here to three estates—*politia*, *oeconomia*, and *ecclesia*—makes it easier to avoid a reading of the different kingdoms as a simple opposition between private and public or between church and state. However, the estates have often been defined by hierarchical concepts and theories of natural superiority and subordination, especially between man and woman.[39]

Changing Structures and Orders

Reading Luther through the filter of contemporary culture, we find much that is offensive. His worldview was filled with hierarchical notions. People related to each other as superiors and subordinates, in households as

37. As we know, several important Lutheran theologians adopted a passive or positive stance towards the Nazi regime in Germany by referring to the Two Kingdoms theory, whereas I claim that it is important to focus on the equal value of all human beings as created by God. This means not choosing the particular perspective where you react first when your own organization is threatened. During the Third Reich, this meant distancing yourself from the politics of separation that led to persecution of Jews, Romani people, and homosexuals. Cf. Lind, "Kristen," 30–42.

38. Margareta Brandby-Cöster comments, "Luther's *simul* is not about first being sinner and then righteous, but being both-and. For example, he refers to human beings as both sinners and righteous—simultaneously (*simul*) sinners and righteous. It is thus not a question of *first-then* but of *both-and*. (As a sinner, a human being is righteous because God makes both the sinner and the godless righteous.) You also find law and gospel, hidden and revealed God, God and devil, faith and deeds, etc. These are all opposites, both separated and held together." See Brandby-Cöster, "Sökvägar och ledtrådar," 55. When I refer to the dialectic in Luther I refer to this both-and, *simul*.

39. See, e.g., Thielecke, *Theologische Ethik*, 335f.

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well as in politics. This was something Martin Luther accepted and even emphasized. Since the breakthrough of democracy we imagine that our leaders and managers are responsible to their boards or to a political assembly. They can be removed if they are negligent. Being in charge, notes Brandby-Cöster, thus confers only a limited mandate in the present day.[40] Luther, by contrast, viewed authority as having been given its responsibility by God. This entailed being a model and setting a good example. For they were God's servants. On this view, the sovereign is not merely "someone with *the right to decide for others*" but "someone who has *a duty to serve others*." This also went for parents' relation to their children. It was about being responsible and showing concern, something that is bound up with our dependence upon each other. For Luther, this was tied to our double relationship—to God and to our fellow human beings. Today, argues Brandby-Cöster, we can still talk about our connection to each other as "employer-employee, care giver-care recipient, teacher-pupil."[41]

Nevertheless, it is clear that Luther's thinking bears the hallmarks of another time, one that was both patriarchal and hierarchical. Issues of gender equality, including the view of man and women as complementary, thus arise with full force. Scholarship in our own era speaks of several genders. The binary thinking found in Luther thus sits awkwardly with contemporary scholarship. But, as we will see, there are aspects of Luther's thinking that go beyond gender polarities.

In the case of sexuality, the question arises of its role in life. How do views of what belongs with reproduction, intimacy, community, and even reciprocity differ between the present and the past? Is sexuality between man and woman, or, more narrowly still, between husband and wife, the only kind that can be considered good? Our era exhibits a far greater variety of relationships. Perhaps contemporary scholarship on *eros* spirituality and homoeroticism can offer a healthy challenge to Lutheran theology. My view is that there are linguistic potentialities in Luther for different kinds of relationships, including gender-transgressing and queer, in which the genders are seen as less static. In several countries same-sex relationships have made their way into established forms, such as marriage, but the question of the forms of shared life needs continually to be kept alive. During their lifetime, modern people meet infinitely more people than was the case just a few generations ago. What is more,

40. Brandby-Cöster, "Sökvägar och ledtrådar," 70f.

41. Ibid., 71.

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most people live far longer and remain vital long after their reproductive capacity has ceased or dwindled. For many reasons, sexuality is associated not merely with reproduction but with intimacy and tenderness.

While prominent Lutheran theologians, long into the twentieth century, continued to defend divinely ordained hierarchies of creation, above all in the relationship between man and woman,[42] Lutheran theology also includes a strong critique of static orders. On this view, the latter are considered part of a simplistic idea of creation.

Lundensian theologian Gustaf Wingren is one of the most prominent representatives of a theology that challenged the traditional theology of orders as developed by Paul Althaus, Helmut Thielicke, Emil Brunner, and others during the first half of the twentieth century. Within the Lutheran tradition, one finds two different ways of interpreting creation: one in which created orders have been seen as a way of protecting what is given, and thereby becoming a bulwark of the existing state of things; the other as emphasizing continual new creation.[43] Wingren emphasizes the renewal and invokes Luther's notions of an ongoing creation, *creatio continua*. He argues that our starting point is not a book that refers to the creation (namely, the Old Testament) "but is in fact creation itself, i.e., the fact that man lives."[44] Wingren claims, then, that God is given with life itself.[45] As with Luther's lectures on Genesis, the starting point is that God is creating right now. For this kind of approach to creation, orders are also something that change, precisely because they exist to protect life against death.

As theologian Carl-Reinhold Bråkenhielm observes, the first of these two theological interpretations—that there is a given order of creation that finds expression in hierarchical social structures—has nonetheless exerted a tight grip over the theological and religious imagination. It can be found in the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers, particularly Augustine; it is systematized by Thomas of Aquinas and modified by the sixteenth-century reformers; it inspires the legal theoreticians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and it reappears in theology in the nineteenth century. At that point, Bråkenhielm notes,

42. See, e.g., Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik*, vol. 2, for his view on marriage.

43. Bråkenhielm, "Ethics and Ecclesiology," 30, 86–88.

44. Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 27.

45. Ibid., 27, 31. Here Wingren connects to Irenaeus from the Old Church, to Luther, and to the Danish theologians Grundtvig and Løgstrup.

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it takes the form of church opposition to new reproductive technologies and, above all, to homosexuality.[46]

Gustaf Wingren criticized the idea that moral orders were established by God in this way. He argued that one can discern God's will in creation, in both nature and society. But God's will is not expressed in particular, unchanging orders, common to all historical periods, cultures, and ages. God's law is moveable, not static.[47] Instead, God's laws reveal themselves as God's by virtue of their changeability.[48] According to Wingren, God is continually involved in new acts of creation precisely because destruction always arises in new forms.[49] Wingren thus emphasized creation as the continual re-creation of life, in a struggle against the new forms taken by destruction.[50] It was a matter of a battle between life and death.[51] For Wingren, Christianity was not about attaining a Christian *gnosis* but about life and death. Only God can create anew, he used to say, echoing Augustine. The devil can only demolish and destroy.

Luther's own interpretation of creation in his Small Catechism is entirely focused on the here and now, on God having "made me and all creatures; given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them; also richly and daily provides me with clothing and food, house and home"[52] The emphasis is on the existential, what it means today, for me. The signs of God's care are sensual and physical, here and now.[53] In this Christian understanding of life, observes Henry Cöster, there is "a faith that the worth and meaning of life are something freely given by God." This redemption or gospel message is fundamental for both church and individual, he argues, a foundation on which the church stands or falls. Since this reality, which is the basis for our capacity to face life, is threatened by dejection, we need a "language for encouraging life."[54] This faith that "the ultimate meaning of life consists not of what we do but of what we undeservedly

46. Bråkenhielm, "Ethics and Ecclesiology," 86.

47. Ibid., 88f.

48. Wingren, *Öppenhet och egenart*, 112.

49. Bråkenhielm, "Ethics and Ecclesiology," 89.

50. Wingren, *Växling kontinuitet*.

51. Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 2.

52. WA 30 I, 239–425, *Der kleine Catechismus* (1529); cf. LW 51, Small Catechism.

53. It is, however, not related to earthly success but rather experienced in the midst of difficulties.

54. Cöster, *Livsmodets språk*, 1–2.

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receive" means that life can be lived freely and frankly.[55] Naturally, this also has consequences for how we interpret external orders.

Beyond Unitary Lutheran Societies

Martin Luther represents a vanished epoch. His critique of Rome meant that other marginalized voices gained a hearing. His passionate involvement is said to derive in part from an anger at indulgences because they seemed to make it easier for the rich to be saved. When he was translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek, he liked to listen to how women in the street spoke so as to be able to render the Bible's nuance and tone in a way that everyone could understand. His pedagogical fervor was tireless.

Luther and other reformers retained much of the tradition from which they came but they rejected some parts. This can be described as a hybrid between the language of tradition and Luther's personal experiences and historical moment. Moreover, Finnish-American theologian Kirsi Stjerna has shown that women were very active during the first phase of the Reformation.[56] In the Nordic Lutheran countries, however, the writings of Luther and his fellow reformers became a new canon that determined who belonged and who did not. What was liberatory and innovative ossified into an orthodoxy, once again administered by men.

In these unitary societies, Luther was invoked against Jews, Catholics, and "the Turk." Indeed, for centuries Lutheranism was used in the construction of the nation as a way of distancing oneself from others.[57] Conservative Lutheran theology has not only used Luther to legitimize inequality between "people" and "people" but also between men and women. However, such readings have detached Luther's writings from their historical context and ignored his theological emphasis upon the radical equality of all people. The early women's movement was thus able to use Luther in order to promote demands for participation and democracy.[58]

In my reading of Luther's texts, I therefore naturally proceed from the insights provided by feminist theologians during the twentieth century. An emphasis upon experience, context, and body then became an

55. Ibid., 10.

56. See Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*.

57. See Gerle, "Nationalism, Reformation and the Other," 140–78.

58. See Hammar, *Emancipation och religion*.

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important resource with which to question patriarchal interpretations. One example of the importance of context is when women have analyzed how men with power have referred to pride and revolt as original sin, and instead emphasized humility. For women, it is more often a matter of daring to make one's voice heard, to become a moral subject possessed of responsibility.[59] Though nothing new, an awareness of different positions and starting points nonetheless forms part of my analysis. We have, perhaps, too quickly forgotten the importance of our own experiences, of context, and of the importance of interpreting experiences and calling into question self-explanatory discourses. Together with postcolonial theory, feminist theologians and historians provide a perspective that I draw on in a dialogue with Martin Luther. My hope is that it will convey something new.

In part, it involves listening to and learning from others; in part, speaking respectfully in a way that makes it possible to reply. Ethics then becomes, not a matter of knowledge, but a call to enter a relationship. To see ethics as an embrace, an act of love in which each party learns from the other, is not the same as choosing to speak for an oppressed group. It is an invitation to a relationship.[60]

Physicality and sensuality are the guiding lights of this book. Its object is the human body, a body not ecclesiastical or heavenly but earthly, one capable of marking itself off and living in a relationship, in the spaces between. A body that is both material and spiritual.

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59. See Keller, *From a Broken Web*.

60. Landry and MacLean, *Spivak Reader*, 4–5.

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