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**Different cultures, different problems. Is a common theological perspective possible?**

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The Lutheran World Federation numbers 140 member churches, 10 recognized churches and congregations and one recognized council, spanning 79 countries. Almost 70 million people belong to the Lutheran World Federation.

What holds such a federation of churches together, which defines itself as a “communion” of churches? Surely it is reductive, when I say, that there are three obvious binding elements: tradition, theology and finances.

Here I shall speak on the integrative possibilities of theology (and a bit of tradition) for the formation and the deepening of the communion of Lutheran churches.

My main question is: Is a common theological perspective possible within Lutheran theology and the communion of Lutheran churches worldwide on the basis of the very diverse cultural, political, economical and religious contexts Lutheran churches and Lutheran Christians live in?

Over the last years there has been some effort within the Lutheran World Federation to define what the role and relevance is of theology in the life of the church. What do the churches - be it church governing bodies, the pastors and teachers, or be it the parishioners in their congregations expect from theology? How far do they understand their Christian life - in the various levels of church life - as participating itself in theology? And looking on this relation from the other side: What can theology contribute to the life of the church? And what kind of theology do we have in mind, when we ask these questions? What kind of theology is helpful for the life of the church and enriches the life of the church?

To all these questions I want to present some considerations, which may help us to get into this conference and to start with our discussion, which will be the proof, whether there is a common theological perspective among Lutheran theologians despite their coming from very different cultural, political and economical contexts.

1. Nowadays it is almost a common place that theology, which we do and produce, is contextual. At least this is the case, if theology aims for understanding the Christian faith in the light of the present time. Necessarily contextuality is limited in historical theology, which includes at least partly exegesis as well. But in dogmatics, ethics or pastoral theology the contexts of the churches and the contexts of the theologians, who are doing theology, and the contexts of their audience and their fellow people, necessarily have to be taken into consideration. Because pastoral

theology is about the best way of presenting the gospel in the present time at the various places in the world and organizing the church in a way most adequate to the Gospel and fitting best to society. And this is because dogmatics and ethics are not the repetition of old doctrines, but the endeavor to bring the old doctrines of Christian faith into discussion with the mind set of nowadays people and the problems and challenges of the present time. Take for example the doctrine of justification. Surely we all agree that the triune God justifies a sinner through faith alone, because of the redeeming and saving work of Jesus Christ. But to understand this truth and to explain this truth to oneself and to our contemporaries, we have to go deep into our respective cultural heritage and use the symbolic resources of our societies and cultures. Therefore we have this massive production of theological books in the past, which all tried to make intellectual sense of the Christian faith and to explain Christian faith for the contemporaries.

And therefore we need more and more new theological books and articles in all parts of the world, which bring Christian faith into discussion with the various cultures, with the intellectual trends in our societies and the political and economical problems which people face nowadays.

2. The study program so far on “Theology in the Life of the Church” confirmed again the differences between the various contexts, of which Lutheran churches are part of.

The question is: How deep is the diversity between churches and theologies caused by the cultural, religious, political and economical conditions of the various contexts? In emphasizing the differences between the contexts, how much common ground can we still identify between the many Lutheran and Protestant churches and their theologies all over the world?

In fact, in the LWF study program on “Theology in the Life of the Church” one can observe, that the contexts of the various Lutheran churches are characterized by a very interesting mixture of global and specific local or regional elements. On the one hand, more or less everywhere in the world people face some similar problems. On the other hand, there are specific problems in each of the various regions or countries of the world.

Take for example the problem of climate change, which is a global problem, although the symptoms and effects of this problem are not everywhere the same, but vary from context to context. Or take for example economy: for many goods we have a world market and a similar price all over the world. But the same global phenomenon has very different effects and consequences in the various parts of the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These two examples - more could be added easily - reveal a tendency how we define a “context”. In fact, every Lutheran church belongs to more than one context. Here in Augsburg, we have the Evangelical-Lutheran church in Bavaria. Her context is Bavaria, but as well it is Germany and Western Europe, and the West in general, and the Northern hemisphere.

If we look back on the previous conferences in the program “Theology in the Life of the Church” - you can see this in the books documenting the outcomes of these conferences - , one can observe this mixture of global and local and regional elements, which characterizes the situation of the various Lutheran churches.

In the conference on “Being church amidst the Empire” the focus was on the political, military and economical dominance mainly of the United States of America, and of some other states as well, almost all over the world. Colleagues described the effects of the American dominance on the situations in their countries and churches. Although these situations vary a lot, the analyses showed some common global features. It is the general experience made all over the world, that the history of political, military, economic and - I add - cultural and linguistic dominance is still going on. There seem to be a few offensive actors - not only the United States of America, but some others as well - and many victims. But a closer look on a few of these situations revealed more complexity. The theme of dominance in politics, military, economy and culture is not only one between states and countries, but can be found almost everywhere in the world *within* the states and people.

Despite very different contexts in respect of politics, economy and culture there seems to be a general question for Lutheran theology, how to think about political, economic or cultural, inclusive ethnic, dominance - be it of a few over many, or be it of a majority over minorities? Formulated in a positive sense the question is, how Lutheran theology thinks about the participation of all people in politics, economy and culture?

This is a serious challenge for Lutheran theology and Lutheran churches as well. The complexity of the situation within most countries and internationally, which I mentioned, is analyzed by sociologists as an expression of the declining accountability of the state.<sup>2</sup> Lutheran theology has to resist that tendency intellectually, because a decline in the state’s accountability influences negatively the effectiveness and authority of the polity. Lutheran theology has to resist on the level of ideas and the mind set of people all attempts to adapt to any form of favoritism and nepotism and instead insist on a dominance of the law and its just execution.

It is very clear, that Lutheran theology nowadays has developed an universal point of view

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We can define the context of churches as well in more social categories which transcends geographical or political areas.

Quite often are contexts defined from outside. They are quite often a result of sociologists or of international organizations. Sometimes these definitions of contexts are taken up as well from the people living in the respective contexts. Images produced by others become images of oneself!

<sup>2</sup> See f. ex.: Identity, Culture and Globalization, ed. by Eliezer Ben-Rafael with Yitzhak Sternberg, Leiden/Boston (Brill) 2002; espec. see the table on p. 16f.

concerning the question of empire and all forms of massive one-sided cultural, political, and economical dominance. Participation of all people in politics, economy and culture is one of the key elements of Lutheran ethics in present times. In practical terms it is one of the goals of many programs of Lutheran churches to empower Christians for this participation and to take active part in the shaping of their societies.

In the conference on “Being church amidst other religions” there were contributions from many different countries, especially from Asia, which showed a great diversity of the religious situations Lutheran churches live in. It is different for the relation to other religions to be a Protestant church in India, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, mainland China of Japan. Not to compare it with countries in other continents in the Southern hemisphere. Nevertheless there are some common features. All these churches are in a situation of minority and they have only a relative short history as independent organizations. The relations to churches from abroad or to a world organization like LWF are very important for them. With the religions, who are in majority, they have to arrange or seek improvement of their situation through dialogue. But sometimes confrontation seems unavoidable.

This is a global element of Lutheran theology: most Lutheran churches are in a situation of minority in their societies. But not everywhere this is the case. Here, in Europe, in some countries Lutherans are a clear majority - like in the Scandinavian countries. In Germany, Protestant Christians are equal in numbers with Catholic Christians. About 75 % of the population in Germany are members of these two Christian churches. But in Europe we find as well many Lutheran churches, which are in a clear minority situation.

It makes a difference for Protestant theology and its dealing with other religions, if Christians are in a situation of majority or minority. And it makes a big difference for Lutheran theology, if Christians in a country belong to an ethnic or social minority, which is politically oppressed, or if Christians participate fully in the political, economic and cultural life in a country.

In the conference on “Lutheran responses to Pentecostalism”, which concentrated mainly on the situation of African churches, the reports revealed as well some differences between the situation of the churches. But all of them face the same challenge by new Pentecostal and charismatic groups. Again, the responses of Lutheran churches to this challenge vary. But the questions, which arise from this challenge are the same for all Lutheran churches and for Lutheran theology: How shall Lutheran churches understand the activity of the Holy Spirit and give place for it in their life?

There is a more sociological question with theological implications, which challenges Lutheran theology as well. Pentecostal groups give a lot of attention to the situation of the individual participant, even to his or her economical well-being. And these groups are reflecting

more than other Christian churches an one-world-culture, for example by singing almost only songs in English. How do Lutheran churches and their theology respond to the emphasis of Pentecostals on the individual person, his or her salvation, his or her well-being and blessing? And how do Lutheran churches respond to the attractiveness of a generalizing global one-world-culture, which reduces dramatically the manifold traditions and the varieties in the life of the churches, for example in their liturgies?

As well, there is the common question, how faithful Lutheran churches and Lutheran theology should be to the Lutheran tradition. Pentecostal and charismatic Christian groups have an overall more flexible form of organization. They seem to represent a more modern type of organized Christian life than the traditional churches. Lutheran churches normally are using the liturgy of the Lutheran mass; they are educating the youth with Luther's Small Catechism; they have a certain repertoire of traditional Lutheran hymns; they define the church as a structured organization binding together a number of local parishes, directed by synods, bishops or presidents. Pentecostal and charismatic groups challenge these traditional forms and practices. Should they be adapted to the present time? In the light of the discussion on contextualism it seems theoretically to be no problem, to change liturgy, catechism or the church organization, because they are European traditions - and are not representing specific African, Asian, Australian or American cultures. But would the new forms be really better?

3. In fact, such adaptations of liturgy, Christian education or organization to the respective contexts and the present time in the Lutheran churches all over the world, would not be opposed by European theologians, because we Protestant theologian in Europe are aware of our contextuality. In fact, we are working hard to relate even better to our cultural and intellectual, to our political and economical surrounding here in Europe. Therefore we are in intensive discussion and cooperation with philosophers, with social scientists or with natural scientists, et cetera. We try to keep our teaching of Christian doctrine or Pastoral theology up to date with the knowledge in other fields and subject. Because we want the Gospel to be heard in the present time here in Europe and because we want the European culture to be influenced by the Christian faith.

European Protestant theology has developed a deep awareness for the fact, that there is not *the* one theology for all places in the world and for all times in history. At the end of the 1970ies the biggest meeting of Protestant theologians in Europe, the "Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie", discussed the subject of theology and context. At least since then there is a widespread acknowledgement within European Protestant theology, especially within the academic theology at the universities, that it is *European* theology: a result of the European history of mind and related

to certain constellations and challenges Christian theology and churches faces in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Already one hundred years ago the at his time prominent German theologian Ernst Troeltsch had used the word "Europeanism". Europeanism is "the historical context of theology where 'European' theology is understood only as one, and no longer the universally valid case for the formation of the church and Christianity in the future, where others attempt to give themselves their own form in relation to this."<sup>4</sup>

So attention was directed to the particular character of 'European' theology which characterizes it beyond and independently of the universalizing of European culture. In the view of the well known Lutheran theologian Trutz Rendtorff from Munich, 'European' theology does not include the way in which the history of Europe became universal, but the way in which this happened to "its principles, capacities and orientations" – and thus also to the academic scholarly style on the basis of which European Protestant theology is not located only in the context of the church but also in the universities, and carries on its recognitions and reflections against the horizon of reason. In Rendtorff's view another mark of European theology is the way of individualization, for which the historical relativisation of 'European' theology is already itself an indicator. The formation of so-called contextual theologies is accordingly a fruit of 'European' Protestant theology: the universal extension of a European Christian culture understood as Protestant aims not at a worldwide cultural unification but at "cultural circles individually shaped by the Christian faith.

To take serious the local and regional culture and society is characteristic for European Protestant theology. Therefore here in this country, in Germany, Protestant theology is involved in intensive discussions with all the other fields of the intellectual and academic world; and the Protestant churches contribute to the public debates on the major questions and challenges of this society.<sup>5</sup>

4. Looking on Lutheran theology in the Southern hemisphere, the contextual conditions of theological work are different from the European situation. In my opinion the Lutheran

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<sup>3</sup> The *Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)* had a study project on the question, how far *Europe* has been a subject of reflection in the past within European Protestant theology. See: *Theology for Europe. Perspectives of Protestant Churches*, eds. by Martin Friedrich, Hans Jürgen Luibl and Christine-Ruth Müller, Frankfurt am Main (Verlag Otto Lembeck) 2006.

<sup>4</sup> T. Rendtorff, *Europäismus als geschichtlicher Kontext der Theologie. Bemerkungen zur heutigen Kritik an "europäischer" Theologie im Lichte von Ernst Troeltsch*, in *Europäische Theologie* (n. 5), 165-79: 175.

<sup>5</sup> To exemplify this with my own work: at my university, the university of Münster in the Northern part of Germany, I am part of a huge research project on "Religions and Politics", in which I collaborate with fellow professors from the faculties of history, politics, law, philosophy, social sciences and colleagues from Catholic theology as well. Such a cooperation with researchers from other subjects is part of the European context.

theologians in the South and in the East should take serious their contexts as the Europeans take serious their regional context. Everybody of us has to take serious in our theological work the respective culture he or she lives in. In my opinion, nowadays it should be part of this encounter to overcome Post-Colonialism. Post-colonial theology still is oriented to theology from somewhere else, be it from Europe or North America. Instead we have to enter into a time of Post-Postcolonialism. I do not propose this, because I want to avoid the discussion about the injustice caused by colonialism. This discussion has to go on. But my proposal aims at a theology in the South and East, which develops more in discourse with the culture of the own societies and people than in dependence on theological production from somewhere else. Post-colonial theology is still in the grip of colonialism. Nowadays Lutheran theology should go beyond this difference. In every country and region theologian should develop Lutheran theology which reflects the questions, problems and challenges, which the Christian faith in the triune God faces in the various countries and regions of the world. It is the responsibility of each of us theologians, to reflect the Christian faith in the light of the life of people and the discussions of the time.

5. As I said already, the assertion, that all theology is contextual, is nowadays almost a common place. But what exactly do we mean, when we talk about the necessity of theology being contextual? What role have the various contexts and the different cultures we belong to for our doing theology?

Theology is in first instance about God. Learning from Martin Luther, we can put this more precisely: Theology is about the guilty and lost human being and the justifying and saving God.<sup>6</sup> Theology is about God relating to human beings. God is justifying and saving all over the world. God's activities are not limited to certain contexts. As Christians we believe that it is the same God, who acts in the same way in all contexts.

As well we presuppose that in all contexts human beings are characterized similar in respect of God, when Luther speaks of the guilty and lost human being.

What it means and how it is expressed in the concrete life to be guilty and lost, varies from context to context, from culture to culture. This is part of theology, to find words, expressions, images and concepts for the universal truth about human beings, that in respect to God every human being is lost and guilty.

Similar it is part of theology to find words, expressions, images and concepts for the universal truth, that God is relating to human beings in such a way, that God is justifying and

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<sup>6</sup> "... proprie sit subiectum Theologiae homo reus et perditus et deus iustificans vel salvator".

(*M. Luther*, Enarratio des 51. Psalmes. 1532. WA 40/II, 328,1f.). Cf. *Luthers Works*, Vol. 12, 311.

redeeming and saving human beings. What this means, might be conceived and expressed in various ways, depending from the cultural conditions to find expressions for such a belief.

The context is the concrete situation, in which the living triune God is acting in concrete ways to save and redeem the guilty and lost human beings, and to redeem a suffering creation.

It is the same God, we believe in, who is acting everywhere on earth and at all times. But the living God is sensible for the concrete life: this is the deepest reason, why theology is contextual. Theology is about God, and about God relating to the world and to human beings.

Do the various contexts people are living in reveal God? Can we learn something about God from the cultural, religious and political contexts we live in?

Surely we can find traces of the God, we know from the Old and New Testament, in the contexts we live in, as we can find traces of the triune God in our individual lives. But the context itself does not reveal God. We only can see God at work in the culture and society and people we belong to, the God, who is revealed in the history of the Jewish people and in Jesus Christ and whose revelation is witnessed in the Holy Scripture.

The only source and norm of the Christian knowledge of God for Lutherans is the witness of the Holy Scripture.

If we would take the various contexts, people live in around the world, as a source and norm of our knowledge of God, we would end up with a number of Gods. Because the differences between the contexts are too deep. In each context, in each culture and tradition, in each society, we could create an own God, which sums up the present experience of people and as well the values people are striving for. In fact, because of the social differences within a society, we necessarily would end up in a polytheism within each society: the God of the powerful, rich and successful would be different from the God of the powerless, poor and unsuccessful

But it is the one God, who is revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the God of all of us, despite the many differences between our lives and personalities, between our cultures and contexts we live in.

6. Surely every culture and every context has specific questions and challenges for Lutheran theology. But as well there are some common questions and challenges. Not necessarily there have to be common answers to these common questions. In the worldwide horizon of Lutheran theology we rather experience an intensified diversity. The contexts vary in many respects: differences in culture, language, politics, economy, religions, history. And we are aware of this.

But what holds Lutheran theology and Lutheran theologians all over the world together

despite the differences between the contexts they live in. Is a common Lutheran theological perspective possible in view of the diversity of cultures we live in and belong to?

I want to argue, that perhaps there is not *the one* Lutheran perspective all over the world, but that there is *one* theological endeavor which binds and holds Lutherans together all over the world. There is a common way of dealing theologically with the problems and to encounter with the respective culture.

7. What is common in the theological work among Lutherans? I want to mention some common elements, which in my opinion are characteristic for Lutheran theology. Surely I have not to emphasize, that such a characteristic of Lutheran theology is generalizing and therefore you might add some more elements or see things differently.

a) Lutheran theology is strictly related to the witness of the Holy Scriptures, which are the only source and norm of all theological knowledge, which is affirmed as truth. The reference to the witness of the Holy Scriptures is the basis for Lutheran theology to be critical. To be critical means, not to be satisfied with the obvious and what *seems* to be true, but to put one's own life, the life of one's own congregation and one's own church and all what surrounds us in the light of the Gospel - and to make our judgements about everything which is and happens around us in this light.

In general, Lutheran theology is committed to truth. This applies at least in two respects: in respect to our knowledge in general and in respect to our veracity. The second is a question of our personal qualities; the first respect concerns our dealing with the natural and social world. As Jesus advised the disciples, when he sent them out: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10,16). As Lutheran theologians we have to strive to know as much as possible, not only in the field of theology, but in other fields as well - be it about the traditions and the culture of our own people, but as well about the present knowledge of the social and natural sciences. Lutheran theology strives to be informed on the best level. Therefore a solid theological and general education is necessary for Lutheran theologians. Informed theology is the contrary of ideological theology, which ignores in the end reality. Therefore Lutheran theology seeks to be on the highest informed and intellectual level, to be prepared for the dialogue at universities and in society with all the wise people from other subjects.

"Be wise as serpents" but as well be "innocent as doves". The second part of this advise of Jesus to his disciples is essential as well. Purity of heart should be a characteristic of Lutheran theologians. No other intentions should direct our theological work than to do it for the glory of God and the service of our neighbors. With this intention Lutheran theologians are reliable partners to everybody else in our respective societies who are of good intentions as well. But no arrangement is possible for Lutheran theology and Lutherans in general with untruth. Lies can not be tolerated. For Lutheran theology lying is the most fundamental form of sin, which has to be

opposed firmly. "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" - this could be a motto for every Lutheran theologian.

b) Lutheran theology emphasizes the life renewing and justifying power of the Word of God. Lutheran theology is about the life renewing and creative God, who acts through God's word. Lutheran theology is not like a cow, who ruminates again and again the same old teaching material. Rather Lutheran theology is using the old theological material to be creative in the present time. In fact, the Word of God is the inspiring power for all theological work. And our theological work has to reflect this inspirations in a world, which lacks inspirations in its permanent crisis and therefore does not find new solutions and ways for all its problems. We all should reflect God's creativity in our theological work by doing creative theology.

We Lutheran theologians in Europe are struggling with European churches, who have become weary, who have become tired in their mission. It might be that at present the European Protestant churches are in their wintertime. Instead of proclaiming rapid, burning and highlighted the gospel of God, the churches only watch anxiously on preserving their present status. Too little spiritual force can often be perceived in European Lutheran churches, and their missionary force too seems long to have departed from them. The critical and sobering approach of Protestantism to worldly success in live has apparently completely defeated Protestant faith in God and led to a spiritual pessimism. But if the triune God is no longer trusted, where can faith and hope and love come from? In this way Christian life loses its future, becomes self-satisfied and wants only to cope with the present. Accordingly churches and theology are provincial and self-satisfied. But after wintertime comes springtime! And we are looking forward to this next season, which surely will come to Europe again. And some European theologians are working hard to contribute their part for ending wintertime.<sup>7</sup>

c) Lutheran theology is based on experience. Theology will always continue and develop as long as the story of God's relationship with human beings continues. It is an ongoing exploration process. Theology arises out of a lived faith which is tested time and again. In Luther's understanding it is essential that an individual's faith should be challenged if he or she is to be a theologian. In the introduction to "The Freedom of a Christian" Luther writes about Christian faith: "*It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a man when trials oppress him*" (LW 31, 343).

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hans-Peter Grosshans, *Making the Gospel Attractive. The German-language Protestant Churches and their Contribution to the Unity and Freedom of Europe*, in: *Theology for Europe - Perspectives of Protestant Churches*, mandated by the Executive Committee of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe - Leuenberg Church Fellowship, ed. by Martin Friedrich, Hans Jürgen Luibl and Christine-Ruth Müller, Frankfurt a. Main (Verlag Otto Lembeck) 2006, 280-290.

For Luther no one can be a theologian who is not related existentially to God, and whose faith has not been tested by the fact that his or her faith does not appear to correspond to his or her experiences in the world. When a person, in a concrete situation, finds themselves unable to trust in the gospel and promises of God, Luther considers this to be a trial of their faith and their relation to God. The same happens when God's love and grace remain hidden for people in their concrete experiences of life. Then God may be experienced as distant from a person or even as rejecting that person. But for Luther such trials of faith are necessary on the journey of faith, and will continue throughout one's whole life, and doubts and uncertainties are bound to occur. The only way out of trial is to turn to God, to argue with and complain to God, and to remind God of the promises given in God's word. In particular, a glance to Jesus Christ in his fear of death in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42), which was the great trial of the Son of God, will help someone not to lapse into despair. In Luther's understanding trials are part of a living relationship with God, which cause people to argue with God and by that to intensify their relation to God.

d) Lutheran theologians like Lutherans in general are open minded in respect of everything going on in the world. They are curious about everything in the world. Lutheran theology is devoted to the world and its well-being. It knows about the responsibility of Christians for the development of the world to the better and for the resistance against the evil in the world.

Lutheran theology does not restrict itself on the sacred as a separate religious space in the world, because the old difference between "sacred" (or holy) and "profane" is irrelevant for the living out of Christian faith in Lutheran understanding. Sacred is the triune God alone. Within our world there are no sacred places, sacred times or sacred activities, distinguished from profane places, times or activities. In Lutheran understanding the place of a Christian life is the world. This is relevant for the church as well, who sees her place not outside the world in a separate sacred place, but amidst the world as part of the world. As it is for the individual Christian, who serves God particularly in his or her daily business and in his or her daily occupation. Our shaping of the world has a religious dimension, because Christians want to change life in the world with love. In individual ethics we can observe the consequences the best: because Lutherans reduce their striving for their own egoistic self-fulfillment for the benefit of the loving service for the neighbor, they are characterized by a typical Protestant ascetic and rationally organized life.

To exist and live amidst the world does in no way mean assimilation to the present formation of the world. In fact, it means cultural work in the world, to change the world in direction to a mankind which lives reconciled with God and with each other.

This critical dimension of Protestant faith in relation to the world is preserved by its consequent reference to Jesus Christ. The reference of faith to Jesus Christ is no escapism, but deepens our relation to and our involvement with the world. This includes a better and better cognition and understanding of the world, but as well an effort to change life in the world in

direction to the reconciliation of all human beings with God and with each other, which in Christ already is realized.

e) Lutheran theology has a twofold attitude to reason - as to all faculties of the human soul.

In line with Martin Luther's concept of reason it gives no penny on reason in divine and spiritual things. On the other hand Lutheran theology - again in line with Martin Luther - praises high reason in all earthly affairs and in realizing human responsibility in the world.

We find in Luther's theology a surprisingly modern and inspiring understanding of reason and its role in public and private life. Luther thought very highly of human reason in almost all earthly affairs. He considered reason as the god-given means to *explore* the psychic, social, and physical reality, and to *shape* the natural, social, and moral world.

In spite of his high estimation of reason, it is Luther's criticism of reason that has received much more attention. Reason, for Luther, is a faculty of the human soul and is therefore a part of nature. It is bound to the created world, to time and space. When it respects its own limitations, it fulfills its god-given vocation. Yet when it overextends itself beyond the empirical world, reason gets it wrong. Reason is woefully inadequate, even stubbornly sinful, in religious and spiritual matters. For Luther, reason deployed in religion always misses the true God and ends up constructing idols of its own fabrication. Luther's sharp criticism of reason as it relates to true religion and the true God is famously behind his condemnation of reason as "whore" who sells itself to anyone—and every religious endeavor—who pays well.

Because of this critique of reason Luther's praise of reason as the best gift of God to order life on earth was often overlooked.

In the history of Europe reason became attractive centuries ago, when Europe suffered from many wars, a lot of injustices, and terrible diseases. Almost nobody was safe at that time in Europe. Reason was called on to establish peace among previously warring religious and political groups, and it did so by providing ways to articulate the universal common good in the midst of competing particular interests. But the first—and probably best—example of reason's potential to establish truthful consensus is Socrates in Greek antiquity. Socrates dedicated his life to striving for the good of society on the basis of reason, and his vision contained an implicit criticism of his own particular culture and morality that precipitated his death sentence.

Today, the intellectual current is similar to Socrates's own time. The local is favored when it comes to solving problems of cultural, religious, political, and legal differences; the particular, not the universal, dictates the rules according to which people should live their lives. Current problems tend to be solved by referring to traditional answers from the past. This look to the past

may be safer in terms of preserving group identity. Yet the result of underlining identity is that real communication between groups is not fostered. By placing various cultures, traditions, and contexts next to each other, real interaction between them is avoided.

My question is: how should we proceed when past traditions and ways of life do not provide solutions to current problems? This question is particularly pertinent in today's context of radical global change.

Lutheran theology and Lutheran churches are an universal network, which exercises universal theological communication about the problems we face in our various contexts. It is by theological discourse and by listening to each other that we as Lutheran theologians try go beyond our respective cultures and to work in a common effort for an improvement of our common world.