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## “Resistance, Adaptation or Challenge? A Cartography of Doctrine as Lived and Imaginative Constructs: Is there a Lutheran Code?”

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What are we here for? The general frame of this consultation, as I understand it, is to ask ourselves about the shape of Lutheran theology in a post-confessional, post-secular, post-foundational, post-colonial and post-patriarchal environment. It is a fact that Lutheran theology, in its diversity of locations and expressions, has been deeply touched and reshaped by many of the currents cited above. Not simply because theologians, in their professional mode, usually stand at the criss-crossing of every contemporary wind that must be harvested in order to stay alive in the competitive and grinding academic or seminary setting. There is another dimension that — sometimes at odds, sometimes complementary with the above—has proven critical in this reshaping as well. I am talking about a methodological and epistemological shift that, in the case of theology done in the context of the Lutheran churches of the LWF, gained ascendancy after the spirited debate around the doctrine of justification in Helsinki '63.<sup>1</sup> There we see for the first time — reflecting a wider debate in the ecumene and universities—a challenging of the normative vision emerging from the German-Scandinavian axis. The notion of a uniform “center” was confronted, and methodological questions dominated in a sizzling yet creative search for new and better mediations that sought to describe contexts where the Text could be meaningfully decoded. Church's praxis, mission and context became focal points in this methodological discussion that sought to resituate the primary context of theological discourse. In turn, the appearance and increasing acceptance of the methodological novelty signified by Liberation and Feminist theologies radically shaped the way in which theological matters came to be discussed, opening the door for the “masters and mistresses of suspicion” into the power struggle for expressing the “Lutheran code.”

The emergence of contextual and constructive theologies has been an epochal event. It was the corollary of the modern disengagement of particular social and cultural orders from a particular religious view resulting in the globalization of churches and confessions.<sup>2</sup> In this process, they not only brought new vistas to contemporary theology, but also unmasked universalistic and essentialist pretensions as just that, contextual pretentiousness. Furthermore, they showed also the shortcomings

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<sup>1</sup> The 1963 LWF Assembly in Helsinki, for instance, attempted to reexamine, reformulate and restate the doctrine of justification vis-à-vis the new reality signified by the experience of “modern man” (*sic*) in a secularized world. At that time the document N° 75, entitled “Christ Today,” was preceded and followed by a passionate debate that showed different interpretations of the doctrine of justification and its relevance for that time. This lively discussion, however, did not result in adoption of this document. Instead, it was *received* and sent to the Commission on Theology for further consideration, formulation and publication, which occurred a year later, under the title “Justification Today.” The whole study on justification was prompted by a previous study of the Commission on Theology directed by Vilmos Vajta, entitled “The Church and the Confessions: The Role of the Confessions in the Life and Doctrine of the Lutheran Churches.” The research questioned the relevance that the doctrine of justification had for the teaching and practice of the churches of the time. See Jens Holger Schjørring, ed., *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 377.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), p. 3.

as well as the potential of the law-gospel methodology to the extent that these theologies—by making visible a new set of “grievances”—reshaped the concrete content and structures of Law, and concomitantly gave a new spin to the promise of the Gospel. The marks of the dominant script were slowly but steadily exposed as a prison enclosing peoples from the Global south, women, and youth, in a controlling logic of identity where hierarchy was assumed, multiplicity and difference denied, and transformation and new becoming were contrary to nature and doctrine. These were “anomalies” that classical interpretive schemes could not surmount. After Helsinki, the traditional “sages” of Western academia, with their particular understanding of the human experience and the “Lutheran code,” while not entirely displaced, began to be considered as *one* voice among many in the ongoing process of LWF theological reflection.<sup>3</sup>

In the last fifty years numerous scripts have emerged, many affirming a common heritage, but also carving a place in a battle against languages that sought to encrypt the other in the familiar “envelopes” of tradition—too tight, too uncomfortable to really fit in. Within the “post” moods emerging from the 60s, sages gave room to the swarming multitude that we witness today. As it happened with the larger world of literature after the '70s, one could not speak any longer of great referents; the great authors are dead—literally and figuratively. The notion of a “center” generating the normative theological discourse has faded, and the orthodox-modern normative understanding with a univocal system of thought has been replaced by plurivocity, ambiguity, fragmentariness and openness. We have moved from attempting to prove God's existence and the rightness of Lutheran tradition into the poetics and politics of God's relation to the world, borrowing new scripts (critical theory, deconstructionism, post-colonial studies, popular religiosity, etc.) whose primary concern is to image new and healing ways of living. It was a time of envisioning new spaces for personal and communal flourishing by a boisterous denunciation of the anomalies to which inherited conceptual schemes were not able to respond.<sup>4</sup>

This pluralization of voices was not a theological whim; it followed in the wake of the cracks of the Western liberal consensus with discourses focused on a new, refreshing and demanding culture of entitlement, rights, and struggle in the pursuit of identity and fulfillment.<sup>5</sup> Within nation-states, attempts by groups to achieve inclusion as full citizens were the central focus of radical movements. First industrial workers came, who organized in unions and syndicates then sought political power. Then, beginning in the 1960s, those excluded from full participation and decision making—racial/ethnic minorities, women, sexual orientation minorities and oppressed majorities in colonies—voiced their anti-systemic claims. Decolonization, women's movements, youth culture and labor, vindication of difference and minorities, concern for the environment —these have unhinged the underpinnings of the capitalist world economy and exposed it to the full force of political and cultural shocks from which it had been hitherto sheltered. Cultural transformations

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Vitor Westhelle, “And the Walls Come Tumbling Down: Globalization and Fragmentation in the LWF, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 36/1 (Winter 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Rebecca Chopp and Mark Taylor, *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), pp. 1-24.

<sup>5</sup> See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Uncertainties of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), p. 77; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: a History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 343.

soon led to new self-esteem and socio-political demands, which in turn put new pressures on the system through the expansion of linear trends.

The result is that in the last decades we have witnessed an unprecedented explosion of new social actors vindicating not only a fairer share in the distribution of goods and resources, but a new encryption of repressed or imagined identities challenging dominant codes in all areas of human culture. In a network society, the liquid and global flow of meanings, codes, definitions and symbols, circulate within a network where all and none are the owners. Pluralities, pluralism, diversity, alternative views, are some of the watchwords signifying the web-like reality that we inhabit. And the life of churches, and the theologies that provide them with a symbolic skin, have not been an exception.

This decentering can be seen as a celebration of late-modern plurality, as liberation from the chains of a colonial and patriarchal past. Yet others see this as an irremediable decline into the undistinguishable night where everything is gray, or a new reissuing of essentialisms in term of tribal, class or gender identities. On the one hand stand those who celebrate and embrace new discursive shifts, on the other, those who see themselves as guardians of an ancient code. In a way all of us inhabit the pull of these two dramatic forces where we are being continually undone and remade, decentered and centered disarticulated and redeployed; affirmed and denied. In the midst of such forces, is there anything theologically significant that can maintain between us a common identity *without* canceling these creative forces? For there to be a genuine and constructive plurality, it must at least reckon that it is a plurality *of* something. In our contemporary, decentered and liquid conversation, are there any focal images that can translate the apparent cacophony into polyphony? Can a swarming multitude, perhaps at times erratic, reveal nonetheless a common grammar and a core set of values and metaphors that are constantly potentiated by the very circulation and outworking of the network? What is the “code” that articulates the conversation between the different nodes?

The question today is not so much whether this plurality of voices is good or bad. It simply is. Rather, the question is what makes this plurality a *Lutheran* one? It is clear to me that in the present scenario it is not so much denominational or confessional constituency that provides such an identity, but a commitment to a certain set of theological rules that gives a certain identity to such a network. When speaking of pluralism I have in mind not only the plurality of social settings, the first moment of the opening up of the code, but also the pluralities of cultures and gender that makes of our reality a multidimensional and overlapping spiral of conflicting and creative claims. This begs the question: how plural can plurality be? How open can the code be?

In order to unravel this conundrum one should not begin with theological claims as such. One must first place the theological problem within the forces that are shaping an epoch. Some of this is already carried out by the LWF’s Department of Studies under the rubric “theology in the life of the Lutheran churches.” It provides a very interesting set of snapshots as to how Lutheran theologians face some of these forces today—such as Empire, Pentecostalism, Neo-liberal Globalization, Indigenous spiritualities, Environment, HIV, Women’s movement, technology, etc. But in this case I want to move one notch further and place the problem of Lutheran theology on a different plane, perhaps a little bit more prosaic, yet critical for its very survival in the very competitive global market of religious ideas. The problem has to do with identity formation and the versatility—or lack thereof—of Lutheran theology in such a task. In face of such a question, the

question of identity, one must move outside our academic or ecclesiastical comfort zone and place ourselves in a wider and more complex scenario.

Of course, we are not only socialized and individuated through religious narratives—school, family, state, ideologies, as well as Hollywood and Bollywood, also possess incredible formative power. Religious views are constantly intertwined with other narratives, “background theories” and experiences, which in turn interact with religious stories. These contextual aspects can never be dismissed; pluralized scenarios already constitute a powerful enticement for reviewing identities and roles. But while roles are defined by norms structured by institutions and organizations, identities are “sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation.”<sup>6</sup> Identities are certainly a much more complex matter, for they involve social actors that have thoroughly internalized meanings through the symbolic construction of certain types of skins, barriers, borders, from which the difference between “self and others,” or between “we and they,” are enacted.

As I attempt to frame my proposed topic for today, I have chosen Manuel Castells’ voluminous study on the sociological, anthropological, economic and technological characteristics of what he terms “The Information Age.” In his second volume he poses clearly the two major forces that are shaping our lives today. On the one hand, globalization with the restructuring of Capital and labor coupled with the information and communications technology revolution. On the other, almost as a counter-force, he describes the surge of powerful expressions of *collective identities*, challenging globalization and indiscriminate cosmopolitanism “on behalf of cultural singularity and people’s control over their lives and environment.”<sup>7</sup>

This reclaiming and/or manufacturing of identities, in Castells’ description, can be either *proactive*, that is, seeking to “transform human relationships in their most fundamental level,” such as feminism and environmentalism, or *reactive*, building trenches of resistance “on behalf of God, nation, ethnicity, family, locality or any other category of millennial existence now perceived to be threatened.” Most contemporary identities structured around religion, he argues, falls into this latter category—reactive ones. Castells aptly describes our situation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a fearsome battle, competition and struggle for the hearts and minds of people, where religion takes a front seat.

I will like to pursue this line of inquiry, i.e., the type of identity that Lutheranism signifies in the verge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How can a theological and ecclesiological tradition born almost five hundred years ago in the periphery of a declining empire, shaped by Germanic cultures unappealing to the rest of the world, and catered around the globe by displaced and uprooted peasants and/or nonconformists, or by pietist missionary societies for whom the notion of “unconditional grace” was as strange as the cultures they met, become a center in our present world of significations? How can Lutheranism serve as a code for structuring identities in our present post-post-century? If so, who dominates the code and how is it shaped?

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<sup>6</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. II, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

My argument is that in spite of its historical serendipity, the attractiveness of Lutheran theology is grounded not in the “authority” given to a Confessional essence, nor in the reactive proposals of the custodians, but in the compelling quality of the web of belief that is formed by the codes that once were raveled *and* unraveled by Luther —more than a “wise sage” or “father” of orthodoxy, as a psychopomp and alchemist of words through the Word! In a way, it can be said that much of Lutheran theology seems to be alive and well precisely because it doesn’t look “Lutheran” at all from a classical point of view. Too many anomalies and grievances have given new and different faces to the scripts of Lutheran churches —that not even Luther, a master of imagination, could have ever imagined. Yet what is amazing is that those anomalies and grievances have not challenged the basic structure of the Lutheran grammar, but have expanded it and strengthened it. It seems that the Lutheran “code” is versatile enough to interconnect the scriptural narrative with the narratives of our own lives forging a “culture” that can only stay alive insofar as new and diverse “environments” are integrated within the web of belief that forms and builds a “tradition.”

After these fifty years, we are now able to visualize a common terrain that has emerged between, under, in and through the forces tending to enclose the code and those attempting to open it. Contextual and constructivist efforts, by and large, have not disparaged the classical Lutheran themes, but have recoded and rewired them within new semantic fields. Even more important, new networks have emerged, multiplying the code through usage and consensus between engaged actors. These web-type conversations constantly rehearse a plurality of interpretations that is proper to a network; yet the network itself is sustained by common codes that all claim as their own yet nobody owns. Centers of ownership have faded, and what is more, an awareness and practice have been installed where we only gain in our own theological understanding as the other declines the code in a different way. It is this epistemological means, the network, which also makes us all “custodians” of a code that paradoxically can only shine as it is “declined” or inflected through the most pressing issues that every culture faces —power-distance, individuality-collectivity, gender roles and uncertainty avoidance. In sum, “normative” truths coexist with the prophetic critic and hermeneutical suspicion. In fact, they compose a circularity essential for the organizational flow of a (cultural) system that constantly seeks new semiotic inputs from the environment.

1<sup>st</sup> Thesis. Lutheranism is a discrete religious software of the (church’s) mind. It is a sign system, a culture with a historically transmitted pattern of meanings encoded in symbols and embodied in a social organism, the church. As it brings forth a world through its discursive and nondiscursive practices (mission), its resilience is shown through the engaging of variables that bodies encoded by this mind have to confront.

In the ‘80s, in the midst of the debate regarding the relationship between theory and practice, the Brazilian theologian Clodovis Boff analyzed the role of religion —and church—in the condition of late peripheral modernity. Contrary to those who took a simplistic notion of praxis for granted, Boff spoke of both church and theology’s influence as one of the many “ideological apparatuses” which dispute a place within the cultural market of “symbolic goods.”<sup>8</sup> As ideology, the direct impact of theology and church’s mission is seen to be located upon consciousness, and indirectly, upon social structures —although social structures, in turn, also condition what consciousness is willing or able to assimilate and the form that a culture takes. In this fashion, Boff

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<sup>8</sup> See Clodovis Boff, *Comunidade eclesial, comunidade politica: Ensaio de eclesiologia politica* (Petropolis: Vozes, 1978), p. 67f.

situated the theological discussion within a larger anthropological framework, that of culture, even though this proposal remained largely non influential perhaps due to the “praxiological” urgency lived at that time, perhaps due to a one-sided Marxist conception of ideology.

This notion, however, has always intrigued me —the notion that as theologians we are really virtual explorers in an intangible world, fighting our way with other walkers that claim to have better insights to the complex world of ideas such as philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists and later, also scientists. Yet I always felt uncomfortable with too modern of a distinction between structure and superstructure, or object and subject, and therefore I will like to expand on this notion by picking up more recent understandings of religion in general, and theology in particular, that poses religious symbols as cultural artifacts that function as “software of the mind.”

In his study of cultures and organizations, Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede offers a postcolonial perspective linking patterns of thinking, feeling and acting with particular social environments.<sup>9</sup> This doesn’t mean, certainly, that we are programmed in the way in which, for example, computers are, or that there is a dualism between mind and body. As organized living entities we are always at the border of chaos (both physically as well as mentally), and it is precisely the constant human openness to chaos what brings the occasion for new and creative patterns of behavior. Yet, it is also true that we are indeed “programmed” through our inherited and/or learned cultural patterns to react, think and feel in different degrees of ordering, thereby surmounting crisis, or even provoking new crisis and transitions.

But if cultures function in forms analogous to software programs, can we ask ourselves if religion can qualify as a cultural pattern? Hofstede’s anthropological understanding has a limitation, for he conceives of cultures in close association to specific social and natural environments. As we know, religions relate to an “environment” that is transcendent, even though it may be said to be hidden, behind, underneath, above, revealed or expressed through the most immediate social and natural environments. Furthermore, religions tend to have a universal character, even though they are irremediably local both in its origin as well as expressions. This is why I move to the work of another anthropologist, the American Clifford Geertz, who provides another analogy for the understanding of cultures in general, and religions in particular, as intersubjective patterns of information. He posits that just as genes in a strand of DNA forms a coded program, a set of instructions or a recipe for the synthesis of structurally complex proteins which shape organic functioning, so too cultural patterns provide such programs “for the institution of the social and psychological processes which shape public behavior.”<sup>10</sup>

In this vein, he defines culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols,” by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitude toward life. Religion, far from being a cultural subsystem, is perhaps the best and more radical expression of culture, for it establishes powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations by dealing with the general order of existence under the mantle of a transcendental power.

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<sup>9</sup> Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 92.

The work of Geertz has proven to be a rich source for theological inquiries. In Biblical studies, for example, Gerd Theissen has approached the phenomenon of early Christianity as a sign language that comprises a system of myth, rites and ethics. Religion, he argues, consists of “a cultural sign language which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality.” As a semiotic reality, its signs and sign-systems do not impinge directly upon the reality signified (creatures, structures, human beings, God), but upon the cognitive, emotional and pragmatic relationship to it. In other words, it opens up domains of experience and establishes a set of *relationships* by guiding our attention, gathering impressions into a coherent whole, and linking those with actions. Only in an interpreted world, in a world that is brought forth, can we as human beings live and breathe. In this way, cognition is not a representation of an *independent* world *vis-à-vis* the organism, but the constant production or bringing forth of a world by the very process of living—which is always cognitive, emotional and volitional.

To better understand the dynamics that involve minds with their environments, it is appropriate to appraise the theory developed by the biologist Humberto Maturana through his notion of intelligent organisms. In a holistic or non-dualistic way, his theory helps to understand how life processes that are born of evolutionary dynamics are connected with the emergence of complex levels proper to *cultural* and *social* systems. This perspective locates the theme of (human) life in relation to the meta-field or ultimate environment that religious perception and behavior construct.<sup>11</sup>

Maturana argues that all living organisms are *structurally determined systems*. This means that everything that occurs with organisms happens by changes in their structures, that is to say, in the components and the relations among them. These changes are prompted either by their own internal structural dynamics, or by structural changes “triggered” or “caused” by their interactions with the environment. Thus, the behavior of a living being is adaptive when their structural changes happen in a fashion congruent with *the structural changes of the environment*. Living beings, in sum, are eddies of the production of components, where the substances taken from the environment participate transitorily in an uninterrupted exchange with the surroundings.

Secondly, all living beings can maintain their aliveness as long as the *organization* which defines them as living remains invariable. This is the “conservative” aspect of life. In this way, something maintains its identity only while the organization that defines its identity does not change. The organization of a system refers then to the *relations* between its components, conferring a certain class identity (chair, car, living being, society, etc.). Thus the *organization* of a system tends to invariability, whereas its *structure* is in constant mutation.<sup>12</sup> Any system disintegrates when its organization is not conserved in its structural changes.

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<sup>11</sup> See “Biología del fenómeno social,” *Delfin* (September 1985); “Reality: The Search for Objectivity or the Quest for a Compelling Argument,” *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, vol. 9/1 (1988), pp. 25-82; and with Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge*, and *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1980).

<sup>12</sup> “Structures” refers to the components that flow constituting a systemic unit. It must not be confused with the concept of “organization,” which denotes the *relations* that must exist between the components so that these have an identity and property of a certain class, species, etc.

Thirdly, living beings always belong to the system and environment where they interact. For that reason, an organism conserves its organization in its environment only if its structure and the structure of the environment are *congruent*. If this is not so, interactions with the medium will trigger structural changes in the living being that disintegrate it. This congruence or “structural coupling” between living beings and environment is called *adaptation*. The corollary is that living beings and environment always form a spontaneously congruent unit, always exist in a historical co-drift. The biosphere is a drift or historical front of co-evolving living systems.

Finally, the process of structural coupling between organism and environment implies an identification of *knowledge* with the event of living. The interaction of an organism with its surroundings constitutes a “mental” activity. This cognitive activity involves not only perception, but also emotion and behavior. But all cognitive acts are in turn conditioned by the structure of the organism. For that reason, a living being not only specifies its structural changes, but also “selects” the stimuli of the environment that will trigger these changes. In this way, cognition is not a representation of an *independent* world *vis-à-vis* the organism, but the constant production or *bringing forth of a world* by the very process of living. Every cognitive act occurs within the dynamic of structural couplings, establishing a particular “cognitive niche.” In sum, every observation and distinction made by an observer is a result of its operation and behavior in its environment.

This last point of Maturana’s theory marks an important transition towards the typically human plane of sociability, symbols, language, culture and religion. Human *conscience*—as structured by *language*—indicates a particular form of the cognitive process marked by its level of complexity. Human beings exist *in language* in the scope of structural couplings with the environment, conferring to humanity a particular identity. When operating and behaving *in language*, they manifest the form of being properly human in relation with the environment. The particularity of language is that it shapes a way to live, marked by a consensual *coordination* of behaviors which arise in the very event of constituting a social domain. Thus, language as a phenomenon of life belongs to the evolutionary history of human beings. Words do not indicate anything “exterior” to living beings, but they are symbols in the flow of the coordination of actions and emotions that happen in the human, coexisting in language. Maturana employs the expression “*linguaging*” to emphasize the dynamic and relational character of language, and “*conversations*” to refer to the interweaving of the consensual coordination of behaviors and emotion that happens through language.

The cultural domain therefore constitutes a world of meanings that human beings express in their actualization as living beings. This idea allows viewing behaviors and associations that culture expresses and fosters as vital at the moment of pondering on the evolutionary future of communities. Culture composes an organizational system that determines the interactions with the environment—with its consequent structural changes. At this point the possibility of contemplating the religious language as generating a particular “coordination of behaviors” arises.

The theories of Maturana lead to a better understanding of the dynamic link that binds organisms with their surroundings. It must be noted that Maturana leaves the door ajar in order to understand religion as a trans-dimensional realm coordinating behavior and emotions situated at different levels of human experience and knowledge. In other words, religion (and theology) can be understood as endeavors of living beings in their process to symbolize and “map” the environment with which they are structurally coupled. Thus, a narrow relation is established between values and

religious symbols, *and* the very praxis of living. To be religious or, as we would say it, living in faith, hope and love, is to live *truly*.

There are some partial conclusions that we can draw from the above. First, if religion is a cultural sign language which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality, then we should consider Lutheranism not simply as an historical artifact, a glitch which may or may have not started new denominations, but a complex-cultural sign system through which a significant number of human beings inhabit the world. Second, Lutheran theology and its codes, therefore, can never be abstracted from the actual “sign systems” that are embodied in and through their concrete social embodiments, the churches. They constitute the primary locus of the theological enterprise, for they embody this complex of myth, ritual and practices in which “codes” are embedded and motifs exalted. Third, yet precisely because churches—and theologians—are living organisms interacting with very specific and changing natural, social, economic and cultural environments, the original code or semiotic array is always under stress calling for innovation, change, reaction or resistance. Here is where the deep sense of dialectics sets in, for even though the religious code opens up a space that we inhabit religiously, this very space also impinges upon the code that opens up this space(s) in the first place. Fourth, only a religious code which is able to integrate new semiotic and/or structural innovations can continue to reproduce the code; otherwise, it is dead. Therefore, it can only carry on a religious identity by constantly negotiating with other types of identities.

When considering these perspectives in the light of our theme, we must ask ourselves to what extent a particular cultural-linguistic system, such as Lutheranism, creates an environment of stimuli that can bring forth not only a world to inhabit, but a world that constantly gains in luminosity. In other words, what are the symbols and codes that conforms it as a constantly novel semiotic field thanks to the evocative power of a hidden reality that becomes visible and, therefore, habitable? It may be suggested that only a religious system that holds in tension the hidden and the revealed could aspire to have any future. It is the task of theology situated within a particular cultural-semiotic construct to disclose the hidden connections both in regards to the intra-systematic truth revealed by a particular corpus, as well as in regards to the world within which this truth is enacted.

2<sup>nd</sup> thesis. Doctrines function as rules within a larger semiotic tapestry mediated by a social body, the church. More specifically, the role of doctrines for the particular religious grammar of a social body functions as a “hinging device” or attractor between a particular reading of the foundational (text) and the con-text in which the social bodies are immersed. Within this interplay between text and context we bring forth a world theologically inflected.

We have seen that in Theissen’s account doctrines and motifs function as grammatical rules within the religious sign language, but they are limited in scope due to their subordination to the systemic interplay between myth, ritual and action. That establishes a very important caveat for the theological enterprise: it is not only “environmentally” situated, but is always organically related to a social body, the church. Together the sign system comprises a language, which is guided by particular rules—just as a language is governed by grammar, whose rules we understand much later in life, after much “linguaging” and conversation. Theissen, however, limit the role of these grammatical rules to one side of the spectrum, that of a given “text,” without exploring further how this text in its location with a con-text finds a common linkage through a special function of the code, its *doctrinal* function.

George Lindbeck has provided a truly post-liberal orientation to this problem, signifying an important breakthrough for understanding how doctrines and theology operate.<sup>13</sup> Religion, he states, is a cultural/linguistic framework or medium shaping the entirety of life and thought. It is not primarily an array of beliefs and ideas about the true and the good (although they always contain these), or a symbolization expressive of attitudes, feelings or sentiments (although these are certainly always present). Like a culture, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It contains a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary is meaningfully deployed. That means that there are numberless thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have, and realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use and inhabit the appropriate symbol system. One becomes “religious” by interiorizing a set of skills, by practice and by training. One learns how to feel, act and think in conformity with a religious tradition through its rituals, institutions, symbols.

But Lindbeck also offers another insight that I consider extremely helpful, namely, how to understand religious and theological change and innovation.<sup>14</sup> These do not result from new experiences or sudden insights, but from the active interaction of cultural-linguistic systems with changing situations. When religious interpretative schemes—embodied in practice and beliefs—develop “anomalies” in new and different contexts, then the system as a whole enters into a crisis. Sometimes, minor adjustments or re-minting here and there will do the trick and stabilize it for a while. Most often, however, practices, beliefs and theories are gradually or suddenly abandoned because they prove unfruitful for new and different questions that intersect the life of believers.

But the question arises: what types of “anomalies” should we consider? How are these detected? Where do they come from? The distinction between lexicon (vocabulary) and grammar seems here to be critical. Often times—as Lindbeck himself seems to assume—the cultural-linguistic system is taken either as a totality (a specific grammar for a specific vocabulary and vice-versa), or as constituting an autonomous world. In this vein, for example, to speak in a “Lutheran” mode would mean not only to guide the syntactical structure by a set of rules, but to rehearse a common vocabulary that is largely outdated and/or unintelligible. Take a look at ourselves as ministers...half of our public leadership is consumed by making sense of a lexicon that is not there. But what happens if rules are seen as flexible enough to accommodate a wider set of lexical input? Take the example of English, the most versatile of western languages. One can speak in a Latin mode or a Germanic mode...yet the underlying grammar is always the old Anglo-Saxon code.

As the world of linguistics suggests, if grammar and lexicon are seen as an indivisible whole it will not resist much stress. Grievances and anomalies slip in, without any chance for assimilating a new semantic array. The rule is too tied up with an old lexicon, therefore unable to operate with the newcomers. Believers, however, continue with the task of living, so a set of possibilities arise: to separate the two semantic fields without letting the one impinge upon the other, collapsing the one on the other, or pretending that the new semantic field is just not there. All these experiments

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<sup>13</sup> See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 32ff.

<sup>14</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 39f.

happened in European Lutheranism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and continue to be part of our present day scenario.

It is at this point that I want to pick up the place of “doctrines” as regulative principles embedded in a grammar, which shows its versatility only when it is able to encompass a new semantic array resulting from our structural couplings with the environment. But in order to do so I must first suggest a way in which our structural cognitive couplings (the “linguaging” that defines a context) relates to a specific religious worldview (the “conversation” that interweaves behavior and emotions on a higher, imaginative plane). Volker Küster, in his recent study of contextual Christologies,<sup>15</sup> has revamped Paulo Freire’s conception of generative themes in a very intriguing and suggestive way. Every community lives within a network of “generative themes” which disclose the whole linguistic and thematic universe of a location in space and time. Slum, rain, land, water, housing, HIV, food, banks, hospital, soldiers, etc., compose generative words that, once interlocked, reveal another dimension, in principle hidden to the participants, namely, generative themes. Freire called this power of interlocking “hinged themes,” that is, this dimension of culture that creates a mapping of a territory allowing for a new exploration (action) within familiar yet alien landscapes. But in the case of Christian communities another “hinged theme” appears, not displacing the above, but interlocking them within a new level of conversation.

Here is where the importance of theology emerges, for the interlocking of themes is an imaginative task that must interlock two sets of very different generative themes: that of the con-texts with that of the “text.” A doctrine is precisely what conveys this interlocking by its inherent attractive dimension. And this is one of the points where the Lutheran code proves to be an invaluable tool—as in a different grammar, does nature-grace schemes of Roman Catholicism. The doing of theology as an imaginative task is opening up the code to inhabit new spaces, formerly hidden ones, for the human religious imagination. In other words, doctrines open up, or catalyze, lived, imaginative landscapes, which persons of faith inhabit and within which their Christian identity is shaped. Particular doctrinal terrain shapes the Christian identity of the persons who inhabit it.

I want to lift up a possible interpretation of the Lutheran code that proves to offer a valuable proactive identity, that is, seeking to “transform human relationships in their most fundamental level,” and thus provide a dynamic mapping for the task of living. The basis for identity is not here measured by the socialization into an ecclesiastical organization that legitimizes a previous identity through its tutorial grace, but by the dynamism that it sets between law and gospel, the critique that opens a new possibility for living truly, that is, the sipping of eternity within temporality—a kenotic move.

I will like to posit that the Lutheran code has proven to be resilient, not because it tried to entrench itself in a safer past (although this has been repeatedly exercised through the confessionalist movements stemming from the 19<sup>th</sup> century), but because its code contains an inner flexibility that permits not only to confronting the “anomalies” of new contexts, but actively engages them and assimilates them into a wider cultural-linguistic universe. In a strong sense, these new

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<sup>15</sup> See Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 33-35.

“anomalies” seem to cohere well with the grammatical code, even though lexically they may well be far from classical Lutheran language.

Yet when this happens, something else occurs: the code itself starts to morph. You can’t have everything, the cake and the candles. Anomalies also question the code, the “original” one. One can partially sympathize with many guardians of the old code for, sure enough, the results for much of these exchanges and concoctions lead indeed to creatures that cannot be recognize by either parent. But one should also be reminded of Maturana’s point: a living organism—and a religious cultural-linguistic system is one—must know how to maintain its organization in the midst of the structural-semiotic flow. It must be porous to stimuli and nutrients from the environment, but it must know what and when. When grammar and lexicon become entrenched in each other, you have orthodoxy and/or rationalism. A perfect recipe for a slow and agonizing death. When you have only nutrients flowing but no organizational structure to contain it, you have liberalism. A perfect recipe for a ghost: you are dead but you don’t know it yet.

Back to my point. Codes do morph, but they do so in order to continue the task that they are supposed to do. Codes are reproduced, circulated, transmitted, and in this ride, they are enriched, catapulted, expanded by their embodiment through local identities. New semiotic fields may subvert them, but they may also unlock reservoir of meanings that before were either neglected, repressed or ignored. I believe that the later is what is happening to the Lutheran network today.

3<sup>rd</sup> thesis. In my view Lutheranism consists basically of three structuring codes or rules: cross as location, justification as relation, and God’s twofold governances as con-ten[t]sion. These codes operate through the law-gospel transversal meta-code, ensuring that the above constellate a type of spiritual and social energy that is simultaneously de-centering (law) and re-centering (gospel). This transversal code also ensures that four socio-cultural variables are theologically hinged: Power distance, individuality-collectivity, gender roles, and uncertainty avoidance.

We have talked about rules and codes, but how do they work intrasystematically and hermeneutically, that is, interlocking a text with a context, and vice versa? Here is where the content of a rule is manifested, that is, the peculiar doctrinal import of a code. We should note that what is referred here is not the propositional value of such a code, but how it functions within a semiotic field creating a difference that makes a difference. In sum, these codes—doctrines—hinge an intrasystematic ordering of texts by constantly exposing them to the hermeneutics of a con-text.

As an example of how a doctrinal code can function as the “hinged” theme between “text” and “con-textual” generative themes, let’s take a look at how the Lutheran code may function attending to both the stories presented in the biblical texts as well as the stories that conform our present life. A reminder: codes establish a *relationship* that is at once intrasystematic as well as contextual, opening up spaces for living truly. In other words, they guide our attention, gathering impressions into a coherent whole, and linking those with actions by “pulling” the sacred into the profane.

The Lutheran codes, of course, are embedded within the larger Scriptural and Christian tradition, and therefore it presupposes that type of structural congruence with a transcendent reality referred as God, who is known through the history and fate of Jesus, the Christ. This point is critical for it highlights the fact that the Christian discourse in general, and the Lutheran one in particular, is bound to a specific structural coupling of a very specific body (Jesus) with a (formerly) tribal God,

catalyzing a new set of structural couplings taking hold of an ecumene (Holy Spirit). The Lutheran code does not deny the harrowing gap existing between Creator and creature, but curves in its midst an unconditional salvific bent. In brief, Lutheranism centers its discourse upon a God that “falls” through this gap into the world. Contrary to Gnostic views, this “fall” is salvific.<sup>16</sup>

1. Luther’s theme of the cross is not a theme at all. It is the decisive code for deciphering the type of God that Christians meet. It appeared early on as a code or rule for distinguishing the type of structural and semiotic coupling that allows for inhabiting landscapes devoid of any hope, or filled with alienating hopes, and within which Christian identity is shaped. It basically posits that the gain in life happens in the underside of those things that either appear or are imposed as fulfilling. In a way, it is a subversive code, that is, a challenge to all the ideations of cultures and religions regarding what is really transcendent, what is really a gain in life.

The cross is a code to situate that which is considered most important, God, as available to us in what surmounts to be a gap devoid of any God. Although tied up with the lexicon of patristic and medieval theories of atonement, as a code it always undermines even those. And because it is a rule, it also expands beyond Luther’s own understanding in order to incorporate our contemporary semiotic and social fields. This innovation brought by the code not only provides us with a better grasp of the tenor of biblical texts, but also with a hinge to draw into the text our present histories lived in this harrowing gap. The cross is the point where our current epistemes are questioned and destabilized,<sup>17</sup> giving room to what is new and different, truly.

In this vein the most substantial affirmation of Christianity is that the ultimate reality promised to our world—communion, Kingdom of God—is defined by the struggle between a space emptied of God’s luminosity and a space filled by an alien, imperial presence. It calls out our attention upon an *impotent* God that has fallen into our world. But because it is an impotent *God*, it erodes our notions of potencies by proclaiming that the ultimate mystery of love is to remain incomplete: only an imperfect, lacking being is truly capable of love and to love. In the midst of this joust between (imperial) potency and (divine) impotency, between the law and the end of the law, the cross appears as the center of a new gospel: the failure of history becomes God’s chosen abode. In this type of discursive encoding, the guiding of our attention upon the cross is *always* a sociopolitical event, for it reveals the use and abuse of the law—in this case, by the power of Empire—against the words and signs that addressed directly the suffering of people. Jesus’ cross was not an event marginal to imperial power, but rather expresses its very core, the center of Empire itself: the manifestation of its raw potency, of its mercilessness, its debauchery and its arrogance.

The law, as Imperial sovereignty, does not exist without the negation of an “other.” The cross is a verdict denouncing that something is fundamentally wrong with how the world is structured,<sup>18</sup> of how the world attempts to fill in the gaps. Golgotha is the mirror image of the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, the critical reflection of the Octavian imperial realized eschatology, the unmasking of

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Žižek, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> See Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 84.

<sup>18</sup> Cf., John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth Of Christianity: Discovering what Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 258.

Rome as the benefactor of all humanity.<sup>19</sup> The cross signals the end of the law as empire in a dual sense: as the end of its hidden goal, violence, as well as the end of its legitimacy. This fallen God on a cross is a total reversal of values, for in it God justifies the victim of the public, legal and official imperial power—the man Jesus, friend of sinners and destitutes.<sup>20</sup>

One can say that the staurological motive signals that a mysterious power of attraction is revealed in our midst. God “falls” for the victims of a law that constantly siphons honor, esteem, and lives. But the vindication of that cursed Jew that dies in Jerusalem shows a God *attracted* by impotent creatures. In Jesus, the Christ, we see not just a novel adaptation of the creature to God, but also of God to the creature. It functions as a script interlacing a call for living truly challenging those scripts that bring forth sinners, miserable ones, fools and the weak of this world as *scapegoats* of perverse dynamics of exclusion. Those are signaled as the preferential “attractors” of divine mercy and grace.

The cross, therefore, is a code that locates a God that transcends into our world not to condone sacrifice, but as the very savior from the sacrifices that are always extolled from us. The embracing of this script determines the rules that characterize a certain form of human cultural and social expression: the existence of *faith*. Faith not as a level that is added to another preexisting one, but a faith that implies a mutation that speaks of a new instance of adaptability to an environment which proclaims: *valita qum*. For that reason this faith will determine the flow and ebb of behaviors, emotions and imagination by means of which a human group interlocks with its environment and its final meaning.

2. Speaking the Word of this God declaring a reversal through an unconditional bestowal and assuring in the midst of all conditionalities that entrap us in life-denying fields was regulated by another code, justification. The code, in this case, functions not only as a verbal declaration (the forensic inflection), but as making accessible to us the energies of life that are truly eternal. It grants a permission to live truly by curving lives by an inexhaustible promise. As we are creatures curved in our own otherness from God, holding our breath, conserving energy for ourselves, we live without a horizon, without boundaries transparent enough, porous enough, for another breath. As a code, not necessarily tied up with the ancient forensic lexicon, justification refers to the space that in the “event horizon” of our lives, infinitely curved upon itself, is open by a blast that we call Spirit. For that reason, it refers to how God comes alive to persons sucked by the margins—psychologically, spiritually, socially, economically. It radically redraws the boundaries of God’s domain in order to *include* those who hitherto were considered far from it.

Justification implies not only to be present at the many boundaries that divide humanity, but also to discern which ones need to be crossed, which ones need to be dismantled and which ones need to be simply named and made visible. The gospel narratives about “crossing over” are a vindication of bodies that have been broken by black holes of debt, torture, enclosures, despair and abandonment—by the “curse” of the law. This is the particular sensitivity associated with God’s crossing movements, in which Christians participate in and out of the same love that has first crossed

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<sup>19</sup> See Helmut Koester, “Jesus the Victim,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111/1 (1992), pp. 3-15.

<sup>20</sup> See John Dominic Crossan, “The Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context,” in *Neotestamentica* 37/1 (2003), pp. 29-57.

over to them. This is why nobody is really an insider: to live by grace is the recognition that we are all part of a *koinonia* of outsiders and marginals of different degrees.

Jesus' proclamation of a kingdom for the nobodies and undesirables touched on the most pressing issues of the time: debt, bread, shame and impurity. Exorcisms and the healing of bodies and spirits broke the spell that bounded and burdened colonial and "undesirable" people. When Jesus broke bread, he adopted the "degraded" position of women: he served, he was the hostess. With this practice, he witnessed to the righteousness God willed for creation, and communicated an egalitarian and unbrokered sharing of God's goodness and mercy. In the same vein, Jesus' crossing of different frontiers allowed individuals and groups into an immediate physical and spiritual contact with God's justice, and thus, unmediated physical and spiritual contact with one another. As the gospel traditions emphasize, Jesus crossed the traditional boundaries of family, honor and dishonor, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, sick and healthy, pure and impure, country and city, poor and rich. Bearing witness to the Father's mercy and coming reign, Jesus embodies a new space: the space of the Spirit. His body, his presence, becomes the locus for a new narrative that is not only about God, but also about how God crosses over into the bodies and minds of those who never expected to be considered "somebodies." To draw frontiers is an act of disenfranchising power; to trespass is an act of divine imagination and love.<sup>21</sup>

Observe how this code, when unhinged from its forensic trappings, hinges a new set of semantic fields. Liberation and political theologies, for example, have taught us to take a new look at the way in which the generative theme of sin operates.<sup>22</sup> Sin is a field-force of power bent upon itself. It is always constructed by a set of polarities between perpetrators and victims, healthy and sick, rich and poor, men and women, righteous and unrighteous. Energies of life are sucked in, as in a vacuum, extracting from one pole to feed the other. When one sees this depiction, it is as eerie as the pictures that Hubble has revealed to us: ghastly black holes from where not even light can escape. Or take the case of feminist theologians,<sup>23</sup> who have taught us to see the self not in isolation from the patriarchal cultural-linguistic frames that encrypt women's self as a prideful sinner, when in fact she has been deprived of any containment, of any envelope and skin where she can truly experience a sense of self. Again, the overabundance of self for males (pride) have been sucked out from an

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<sup>21</sup> See Guillermo Hansen, "On Boundaries and Bridges: Lutheran *Communio* and Catholicity," in Wolfgang Greive (ed.), *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition. LWF Documentation 4/7/2001* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001), pp. 87f. The parables of Jesus present the drama of a plot that may well have a humorous or tragic ending. Reversals are a standard feature in the parables. In its **tragic** mode, this reversal signifies an exclusion of those who think that inclusion is their lot due to their righteousness. In the **humorous** plot, those marginalized and outcast, who had never been expected to be invited, paid in full, welcomed home, or rescued, are surprised by their sudden good fortune. Jesus' parables comprise a skillful social and cultural commentary on insiders and outsiders, subverting the code that establishes the boundaries of God's companionship. Outsiders were synonymous with "sinners," that is, lepers, the maimed, the blind, gentiles, Samaritans, petty tax officials, single women, destitute fishermen and misfits of every sort. See also See Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 192.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Juan Luis Segundo, *El hombre de hoy ante Jesús de Nazaret*, vol. II/1, *Sinopticos y Pablo* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1982), pp. 129ff; Juergen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: An Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 62ff.

"other" deprived and who only stands as other to the extent that it feeds male egos. In both cases, there is a depiction of sin as the shattering of the self that is enacted by these relational fields —all worlds that have been brought forth by somebodies in power.

To be "undone" by the law in order to receive a new center of graced identity, that is, to set things right, implies always a decentering of those fields that entrap our selves in a diabolical dance. Justification is the unraveling of those scripts in order to receive a self truly. The language of justification expresses a strategy of inclusion of the destitute, the marginal and the excluded, out of the logic of what exists, into a new redistributive community of social, spiritual and material goods.<sup>24</sup> This is something that theologies stemming from India (dalit), Africa (Ubuntu) and Latin America (Liberation) have pressed upon the Lutheran code, ringing the same tones that we hear among feminist and critical theologies in the North.

3. Precisely because it allow us to live truly, we are to engage the multiplicity of life's demands and conflicting identities, doing so with the hope that every aspect of human life is possible to be de- and recoded by a surplus of meaning that critiques as well as promises to it a different, true fulfillment . Luther's understanding of the twofold rule of God, which he and his followers often times applied with less than happy consequences, nonetheless continues to be a regulating code in the Lutheran grammar, and is what provides the plasticity to incorporate new socio-cultural semiotic fields that varies from context to context, epoch to epoch. Through this code, Lutheran theology manifests itself as a public theology and, therefore, always in con-tens[t]ion within a con-text.

I shall dispense here with a more direct socio-political approach in order to engage the problem draw for us by Castells at the beginning. There he set up the problem of *identity* and how materials from history, geography, biology, institutions, collective memory, personal fantasies and "religious revelations" are rearranged according to social determinations and cultural projects. Since the social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships, the power in defining codes and unleashing the clout of symbols always have political and social effects.

The fact is that the process of construction of those meanings is established on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is, giving priority over others' sources of meaning. For either an individual or a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities that always become a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation as well as social action. To be a living being is to be claimed by a plurality of semantic fields...but which one will dominate?, which one will catalyze the others? I contend that Lutheranism possesses a grammar that can weave its religious code with a wide array of social and cultural forces that are perceived not merely as secular vectors for identity, but places where the holy and a sense of glowing wholeness is lived out. The basis for that is Luther's identification of "orders" within society as sacred places, where the specific religious code is not in competition, but acts as both a critique yet also as an affirmation of these different fields.

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<sup>24</sup> See this concept developed in Luther's "Sermon on the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods," 1519, in Helmut T. Lehman (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 45 ff.

Luther spoke of these “orders” as church, family/economy, and secular authority.<sup>25</sup> True, he did so in a patriarchal tone that for us today is unpalatable. True, he also did so taking for granted a hierarchical structuring of society that our contemporary democratic experiences cannot digest. True, he may have failed many times inflecting properly the codes of justification and cross in a more explicit transversal way. And finally, it is also true that he spoke of institutions and orders of what today we call civil society, which in a postmodern world do not have the power for constructing identity as they once had. But these problems are Luther’s, not ours. The code, I believe, is still valid, because it hinges and relates the reality of Christian identity with those different arenas of life that make claims through other rules and codes for structuring who we are. In short, he made “secular” borders transparent to the inflecting claim of the Gospel without cancelling their provisional and necessary existence.<sup>26</sup>

In this vein, the very dynamic of the Trinitarian concept of God and the twofold or multiple ruling of this God encourages a public and political theology that while grounded in an unconditional and absolute claim that comes from beyond our borders, it also recognizes not only the desirability, but also the necessity to live within certain borders. In the worst cases, these borders lost the plasticity proper to any historical and cultural construction, as many intelligent and “respectable” theologians have shown in Germany during the Nazi experience. But in other cases—and I propose, this is our present case—it also leads to a deeper appreciation of an irreducible plurality that is also an expression of a creative God opening up spaces to live, and eventually, to live truly. Feminism, indigenous movements, gay and lesbians, ecologists, Zapatistas, Barrios de pie, Dalits, are all expressions of a desire to bring forth worlds that are livable, and in so doing, they are all expressions of the orthodoxy of the First Article.

But for this code to be publicly relevant, its metaphors must be woven with “generative themes” proper to other cultural-linguistic fields. The Roussonian concept of *volonté générale*, Montesquieu’s and Locke’s division of powers, Madison’s constitutional check and balances, Marx’s concept of social democracy, Foucault’s microphysics of power, Lacan’s conception of the repressed, as well as a myriad of local and non-western traditions, all coalesce in a post-modern notion of radical democracy that grows as the living alternative of the multitude through the network spawned by empire. It is a new form of sovereignty based on communication, relationships and different forms of life that nonetheless are able to find and discover what they have in common. For that reason, democratic demands—although always imbued with particular and local selfish interests—can be seen as the means through which the living God providentially holds creation in view of its final fulfillment. After all, this form of swarming communication—and not a hierarchical *Ordnung*—better reflects the dynamism proper to a Trinitarian God.

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<sup>25</sup> See Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528), Part III, in Timothy Lull, ed., Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings,” 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 64f.

<sup>26</sup> When Luther criticized the *Schwärmerer* for attempting to separate the Holy from the Word (both law and gospel), he was pointing to the need for the mediation of the majestic power of the sacred into the building of individual consciousness, sociability, community and the sustainability of creation. An elaborated hermeneutical mediation is critical for a sound psychological and social conformation—something that liberation theology has also stressed through the importance of the different levels of mediations: socio-analytical, hermeneutical, practical-political.

This Trinitarian understanding, inflected by the codes of cross and justification as seen above, gives a positive valuation of the new realities set off by the new democratic networks. They communicate middle axioms where participation and tolerance, peace and justice, appear as central values for social and political practice. Democratic participation and search for justice thus ground the minimal conditions for a lasting peace; a peace that is not merely the absence of violence and war, but the basic precondition for reason, imagination, desire, emotions, feelings and affections. Without tolerance, without participation, but above all, without peace, no cooperation, communication, forms of life and social relationships can emerge from the incredible potential of the swarming multitude. These are the “sacred orders” that signal the democratic critique of arms, launching a critique of the massive means of destruction at disposal of the core powers.

And yet, as we weave these networks, as we voice our demands, as we reach beyond our borders, we know as well that the Lutheran code contains a cautionary tone that ascertains the unconditional promise of the gospel in the midst of the different degrees of coercion, demands an exaction proper to all forms of (secular) identity. On the one hand, the claiming of identities is essential for survival, for life, for societies. On the other hand, these claims always involve the distinction between a “self and other,” a “we and they”; they enact a demand limiting our egos, and above all, our super-egos. On the one hand, the re-claiming of identities is a cry for justice, a call for subverting a “new order” that satisfy very few; this is good and necessary for without those boundaries the siphoning of life would continue unchecked. On the other hand, we know as well that identities can readily run afoul claiming to embody essential attributes accessible to none but themselves—what Castells denominate reactive identities.

To be encrypted by a Lutheran code is to be aware that in the multiple worlds that we bring forth, we do not *only* live from the mediations furnished by the gospel. But at the same time, it is also to know that we cannot exercise a power that is not *congruent* with the values of this same gospel. Far from falling into new dualisms, this Lutheran caution is the basis for the critique not only of any form of essentialist enthusiasms, always religiously constructed, but also of any form of imperial power which always attempts to hide the violence of its demands under a putative *evangelium* of peace, progress or free markets—different proposals to construct our selves.

This is why the code of the “two governances” always imply a con-ten[t]sion with any and all forms of secular claims, even though it does not equalize all the different attempts that seek a space for living and an identity. On the contrary, the code is smeared by a God attracted to the crucified(s) always crossing the boundaries erected to dispossess others. It is a God that is always in con-ten[t]sion with those structures, systems and dynamics that promise a gain of self at the expense of other selves. But in the midst of this tension, between self and other, us and them, another gap opens for the Christian. It is the same gap that God inhabits as the crucified and raised one. But it is still a gap, between God and God, between human and other humans, between humans and nature, and between human beings and their true, final self. To live truly, in a way, is learning to carry this tension in ourselves—without despair, with hopeful joy.

#### Conclusion

<sup>4</sup> thesis. The grammar signified by the Lutheran code points to a project-type of identity, not a reactionary-resistance one. This identity weaves the diversity of our local frameworks, and is at odds with fundamentalisms, essentialisms and archaic confessionalisms of any type.

I started this presentation by asking, what are we here for? I can now reach a conclusion: we are here to play. Playing not only in the ludic sense of the term —although this is good too— but in the performative one. Our theologies play with codes, they are instances of a performative dance. And certainly it is not that this playfulness will suddenly change our natures, but they display an identity as we perform with dresses that are not ours by right, but were given as a gift. Even the old forensic notion of an imputed grace has here a place: after all, we are playing with the clothing and an identity that was given to us —as an alien righteousness. We are all “drags.” And yet, clothing flares up as it is worn, as it is carried, transforming those who are dressed with a new radiance that comes from being alive, truly. This drag-game, you see, has a particular twist: its fabric have the property to become one with our skins, with our flesh, with the marrow of our bones. The Finns had it right all along: we do not only partake, but we are partaken; we receive not only a favor, but are made participant of God’s very properties as well.<sup>27</sup>

I believe that a cultural-linguistic approach offers us the possibility of going beyond the post-Helsinki scenario with its pull and tug between those who celebrated and embraced new discursive shifts and those who saw themselves as guardians of an ancient inflection of the code. Our generation has dwelt within the pull of these two dramatic forces, and it has learned to differentiate what belongs to a colonial project, and which are the codes that liberate. In this learning process we are used to being continually undone and remade, disarticulated and redeployed, affirmed and denied. We no longer revere the ancient orthodox lexicon but we have not given up the code. We are very much aware that it is the task of theology to be situated within a particular cultural-semiotic construct to disclose the hinge that holds our religious identity with the generative themes of our environments. Theology is like alchemy, it imagines gold were other semiotic fields find only rust. Theology encrypts in order to irradiate, bounds in order to free.

I also believe that the understanding of our tradition as a cultural-linguistic system that we share, helps us to realize the profound meaning of doing theology in the context not only of our particular churches, but in the context of a global communion. From Budapest ‘84 to Winnipeg ‘03 we have come a long way. One of the outcomes of this ecclesiological definition —whose consequences are still looming in the horizon— is that we are gradually being “networked.” Belonging to a tradition that has been networked has led to this acute sense of the plurality that we live, yet also has made us more aware of the versatility of our codes as they are inflected and therefore enriched through new contextual generative themes. Lutheran theology is today alive and well, precisely because it is plural, chaotic, and messy —different strategies of “structural couplings” with our diverse environments. This is the best indicator that our identity is not static, but always becoming. Our web of belief is enriched when we have to deal with ancestor devotion, speaking in tongues, healing practices, HIV, sex or Empire. And to be networked in such a web implies that through these new grasping of the “law,” we gain new and additional aspects of the gospel. Because it has to do with the gospel, it has to do with our whole communion.

Participation in this Lutheran web makes all of us not only custodians, but receptors. To be Lutheran is not only to “give” Lutheranism —whether in tablets or drops— but to receive it also from those corners from where we least expect it. Who knows? Perhaps we can all learn that in this world we are all marginals of some sort. The network flow of our new episteme makes the Lutheran

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<sup>27</sup> See Tuomo Mannermaa, “Why is Luther so Fascinating?: Modern Finnish Luther Research,” pp. 1-20, in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

code recognizable as it flows through the nodes, always coming back to us in surprisingly new formulations, intertwined with new local identities. One must learn to code, to give, but also to decode, to receive. This is where the consensus as to what “Lutheran” is emerges, with the task of always discerning what belongs to a colonial and patriarchal past, and what are the codes that liberate and ground our future.

Yet this network is not limited to space, but also expands in time. This is the other side of being networked, where our forebears also join in an unending conversation and we discuss with them our issues as friends. And even when we are stuck, when the alleys are dark, when we may be a little lost, they appear as psychopomps of sorts. Not to correct our theologies, neither to deny them, but to give us this gentle push that reminds us not to fear as we face the gap —both of and between our local identities, as well as our common Christian one.