

Global perspectives on the Reformation

Opening presentation from the LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr. Martin Junge

Conference on Global Perspectives on the Reformation

Interactions between Theology – Politics and Economics

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1. Introduction

When we in the LWF began our preparations for the reformation anniversary we pledged to observe three principles: we would emphasize on the global nature and presence of the reformation; we would observe ecumenical sensitivity in our approach – not revisiting old disputes as if nothing had changed in 500 years, but acknowledging the fruits of our ecumenical engagements; and we would look forward, emphasizing on the ongoing power of the Gospel and its ongoing promises for this world.

What a joy to see all of this so beautifully embodied both in the composition, in the themes and in the agenda of this conference. You have come from all parts of the world, women and men, youth, lay and ordained to ask that key question: so what is it today then? How does this core message of Lutheran reformation, according to which it is not because of who we are and what we do, but because of who God is and God does that we receive the gift of forgiveness, life and freedom – how does this message speak today? What transformation does it trigger? What wounds, injustices and oppression does it address?

It is indeed a historic moment to have you all here, a beautiful anticipation of the forthcoming Assembly that will take place here, in this very place in 20 months from here. I look forward to our days ahead of us, which I believe will be in many ways an experience of Pentecost: understanding each other despite the vast variety of languages we will be using and the contexts out of which we will be speaking. Rejoicing over unity while we interact, and being fundamentally transformed by what we hear, observe and ponder in our hearts. Welcome, friends, to this conference!

2. Does this offer any meaning to contemporary issues?

With all the enthusiasm that we may have as we gather for this truly historic conference to discuss globally about the fruits of reformation in today's world, we are called to be cautious with our approaches and not to assume too much. In fact, the theme of the conference, and particularly its sub-themes is ambitious. It conveys the assumption that the theological insight of Lutheran Reformation would have implications far beyond the realm of the church and would even speak to the political and the economic realm.

But... is this so, or would this be rather the wishful thinking of us people in the church? Assuming that the core message and cornerstone of Lutheran theology is still the doctrine of the justification by faith alone – would that still be a contemporary issue? Let us remember: it was his own personal struggle to find a gracious God that led Martin Luther to rediscover God's grace. Yet, what do people wrestle with today? And would all people, all over the world, wrestle with the same issues at the same time? Would even people within a same village or society wrestle with the same questions? Does a woman in a society dominated by patriarchal domination, for instance, wrestle with the same questions like a man in that same society? Would indigenous populations deal with similar existential questions compared with the questions that other sections of that same society – white, or black people for instance – would be dealing with? Do we really believe that young people would

have the same questions about life, joy, hope, death, fullness and transcendence compared with the questions of – for instance – my generation, born in the early sixties? What is it that unleashes existential anxiety today?

Furthermore, it was a theological insight that developed such an immense dynamic and plunged a whole structured view of the world into a profound process of transformation. But what coordinates determine the worldviews of the present day? Would a religious view matter at all in many societies so much marked by secularism? And again, is there one prevailing system of coordinates that would order the view of the world of people throughout the world, or isn't some of the conflicts and struggles in today's time precisely about the emergence of alternative coordinate systems, the attempt to overcome inherited coordinates often experienced as alienating because of being imposed?

Finally, the Reformation of the sixteenth century found ready acceptance among many people in Europe at the time. Can that movement continue to retain its ongoing relevance in this One World, with its huge complexities, its shifting centers of gravity, its polycentric nature?

My request to you is that you are articulate in speaking out of your realities, and attentive to listen to the realities of others. My hope is that some of this vision of the LWF being polycentric, a living communion with many centers, connected and interacting, exchanging, will become a concrete experience during these days. I personally look forward to rejoicing over differentiated, diverse discourses masking up the beautiful symphony of contemporary Lutheran profiles. It is of much more value than an imposed uniformity of voices and the resulting boring monotony of a single voice dominating it all. That is not an option anymore in view of the global nature of Lutheran Reformation.

3. Affirming the intersections between theology, economics and politics

Yet, with all these questions calling us for cautious approaches, for attentive listening and for the courage to stand complexity – this latter one I really mean! – the title and the sub-title of our conference also offer a very liberating perspective exactly by establishing and articulating an explicit linkage between theology, economics and politics. That linkage captures a historic fact that lately has become increasingly important to me: Lutheran reformation in the 16th century could hardly be explained if dissociated from all those political and economic issues that were characterizing Luther's time, and to which his theological insight spoke so powerfully.

In fact, I believe that we need to be careful not to romanticize and idealize the reformation of the 16th century, as if the Reformation was exclusively the struggle about theological ideas and principles, of doctrines and dogmas. Indeed, the reformation's insight of justification by faith alone was a deeply theological issue, no doubt about it. The power of that insight, however, and the transformational tide it unleashed, can only be explained when it is seen against the background of immense, complex and demanding changes in contemporary societies of the sixteenth century in Western Europe. These societies were transiting into a capitalist economy, with political powers – ecclesial and earthly alike – trapped in suffocating debts with creditors (how else to explain the commerce with indulgences?). They were dealing with emerging national identities gaining strength and fragmenting the hegemonic agendas of the prevailing empire. They were coping with a New World "discovered" only decades before and flooding the ruined Western economy with tons of silver and gold – to the detriment of artisans, peasants, workers.

It was in this context that the theological insights of reformation spoke, flourished and triggered all the change that came thereafter. Reformation was a catalyst of a change that was in the air, an impulse to reassess the always difficult question of the redistribution of powers. But in addition – let's face this side too – Lutheran Reformation at times did not only serve as catalyst to process

these important questions; it also became an instrument of these struggles for power. Or would you really believe that the horrible violence that associated itself with religious clothing and almost halved the population in Western Europe during the decades following Reformation was just about theology? Of course not. It was about hegemonic powers in a fierce dispute for space and prevalence – and faith and religion got aligned into that dispute.

I believe this memory to be particularly important today. Both in view of understanding what the issues are today, and when we see again so much of religious clothing around disputes of power, resources and supremacy. And in view of sustaining throughout our programs and activities for the anniversary of the reformation a non-triumphalist approach. The *simul iustus et peccator* of Lutheran theology needs to be applied to the overall process of Lutheran Reformation – and as Lutherans we do have the theological resources to do so. There shouldn't be any place for self-justification among churches that say they live from the gift of justification by faith alone.

I hope for a conference that is both bold in naming contributions and gifts of reformation, and humble to admit and acknowledge its shortcomings and failures.

4. The church in the public space

There is still another aspect, which I would like to highlight before exploring some dimensions along the theme and the sub-themes of the Reformation anniversary. It is the implicit assumption in the conference's theme that the place for the church is in the public.

It has been actually so hard for me to understand the theological tradition which confines faith to the inner-spheres of the individual. What is the anxiety with the public space, in view of the fact that God incarnated in Jesus Christ didn't do much other than just roam around in the public space to bring the good news of salvation? How to explain this withdrawal into the private in view of the biblical accounts of the encounter of the disciples with the risen Lord as they retrieved into fearful confinement and how that encounter pushed them into the public?

Lutheran Reformation altogether was in fact such a step into the public. I have in other contexts referred already to a rather marginal, but very important observation in view of the case I want to make here: scholars confirm today that Luther's key insight about justification by faith alone had been both discovered and articulated years before it developed its explosive power in 1517. Some scholars argue that already during his lectures about the Psalms one can clearly identify this doctrine. Others date it later, during his lectures about the letter of Paul to the Romans. However, all are unanimous in stating that the reformation's insight had been there for some years already, and that Luther may have taught it to his students for several years already. With no major consequences, no mass movement, no social, political and religious convulsion, no authorities relating to it, no Emperors dealing with it.... What made the change? How did it develop all that power?

My interpretation: it was Luther's pastoral and diaconal concern for people that made the whole difference. Indeed, while one may argue whether the 95 thesis were actually nailed to the Castle Church's door or not, it still remains a fact that it was Luther's concern for ordinary people putting all their trust in a financial transaction as a means to secure their eternal life – the indulgencies - that pushed Luther to go to the public, to protest, critique and advise on the basis of what he had recognized as the truth of the Gospel. It was both his agony about people being so fundamentally misled, up to the point of putting their trust in a coin while actually being able to trust in God, which triggered his voice and brought it to the public. It was his prophetic anger about the church of his time so bluntly making a commodity out of something he understood by reasons of Scripture to be a free gift. It was Luther's diaconal concern that pushed him to offer his theological insight, developed in prayer life and academic research, to the noisy and messy world of the ordinary people: because Luther saw these people, some of them just terribly poor and marginalized, offering

their little coins for a bit of peace in their hearts – at least for the life after, given that the life before was just a torment and a nightmare with no end in sight.

This symbiosis of academic research becoming a resource to people struggling with existential questions, this combination of rigorous scholarly work and passionate witness for people – this is how I believe the balance between academia and mission of the church was ideally struck in times of reformation. It is my hope that the vision for such a balance that holds together and embraces the tension resulting from these two poles will prevail in the many discussions among churches around the world on how to describe and sustain theological education with an academic profile. It's not and either or. Once more, it is holding it together: academic work and compassionate participation in God's mission.

5. Some perspectives on the contemporary contributions of theological insights of the reformation

But now back to the question: what is it today? How to accomplish a contemporary approach to the reformation anniversary, which would unpack the power of reformation's insights for today's world?

This question kept us quite busy in the LWF while we were preparing for the anniversary. We came up with a thematic approach, which in my view helps to connect the insights of reformation with the current issues and challenges that characterize many of our shared realities today

Under the main heading "Liberated by God's grace" we developed three sub-themes, which are:

- Salvation – not for sale
- Human beings – not for sale
- Creation – not for sale

What "not for sale" means will probably be immediately clear. It links up with the prophetic opposition that Luther brought to public attention in the 16th century by posting his Ninety-five Theses. At that time he opposed and objected that a gift offered by God for free ended up becoming a commodity controlled by the religious power of that time, the church.

We felt that this general protest has not lost any of its vitality and pertinence, but that it has to be continued: it is about opposing the marketing of gifts that by their very nature are non-marketable and must never become the object of monetary transactions. Luther's prophetic "No!" is then illustrated at three different levels: redemption, human beings and creation.

5.1. Against marketing faith and the church

Naturally the first sub-theme – salvation – does not revisit the argument about indulgences that flared up in the 16th century. But it does revisit the question about the commodification of redemption, prosperity and life in abundance in today's times. Because works righteousness and marketing the benefits of salvation have today taken on completely different, yet similarly dramatic dimensions compared to the 16th century.

What do we mean here? First of all, it is about self-critically asking to what extent churches in the Reformation tradition proclaim the priority of grace in their preaching and witness. Legalism creeps in time and again; preconditions are set for grace, for forgiveness and salvation that Reformation theology states as being unconditional. Time and again it sounds as though we do need to do something after all, or we need to fulfill certain ontological criteria without which we will be damned, excluded or stigmatized. Human beings continue having terrible trouble putting up with God's subversion of the human beings feeling of what is right, whereby God offers them the gift of

redemption and thus of liberation – by grace alone. That is the meaning of the cross of Christ, which is not for nothing at the center of Reformation theology.

However, this theme also covers the many, sometimes comical forms of mercantile mediation of salvation that one can encounter in more recent forms of church. The marketing of despair and deep-seated fears has developed into a thriving business, as has the hope for prosperity. Under different headings, people are sold promises of salvation that are completely beyond any human powers of decision. The suction of a neoliberal market ideology is now dragging the church, religion and faith onto the marketplace. It is not what is true that wins the day, but what sells and is successful. We need to contradict this, also in the spirit of a theology of the cross.

By daring to speak out in opposition to this, churches in the Reformation tradition make an important contribution to taking responsibility for the one world which we share. The reason is that a world that never hears of, or experiences grace must of necessity be graceless and will only seek its salvation in merciless competition, if not in a fight for survival. Very few can survive such merciless competition and the struggle for survival. The One World will then very rapidly become the world of a few. Such a world is characterized by mechanisms of exclusion that leave their traces everywhere. This is confirmed by indigenous peoples, older people, children and young people, women... But it by no means reflects the vision of the world's future revealed by God in Jesus Christ.

5.2. Human beings are inviolable

The significance of the second sub-theme, human beings, has been brought home to us with new urgency recently: migration movements of people from crisis areas to safe countries have called forth gangs of smugglers who unscrupulously turn refugees into commodities. This phenomenon is not at all new, but it now looms large in European public awareness thanks to recent events. Similar manifestations of human trafficking exist in other areas: women channeled into prostitution networks; children and teenagers kidnapped and recruited for mercenary armies; people forced to sell their organs; young women and men working as cheap labor - if they are paid at all - in conditions of great drudgery, thereby guaranteeing the competitiveness of locations and industries or the implementing of major projects.

The extent to which Christian beliefs justify a fundamental rejection of these practices needs no further explanation. Every individual person bears in themselves the *imago Dei*, the image of God, and their dignity and integrity is therefore inviolable. Being made in the image of God is a biblical motif of central importance for the way Christians understand what it means to be human.

Christians stand up for protecting the dignity of each and every person. There are also strong reasons for justifying human dignity in other religious and philosophical traditions. Humanity has developed political and legal instruments with which it is able to express a claim to the universality of this consensus. These are the human rights covenants and conventions which, with the exception of very few non-signatory states, are binding on the international community.

Reformation churches have an important part to play in this respect, in that they distinguish between the domains in which God is active in the world (the "two kingdoms" doctrine). They therefore do not play off God's law against human law, or promote God's law in the way of a theocracy. The distinction between the domains and in particular legitimizing a secular and thus public domain, in a field of dialectic tension with the spiritual domain, is one of the most important contributions of the Reformation to cultural history. Churches in the Reformation tradition can therefore certainly advocate for human rights and constantly call for them to be respected – indeed, they can even do that on the basis of their religious beliefs. Not because human rights are "holy scripture", but because the view of humankind expressed in them is in harmony with the

fundamental tenets of Christian faith. Furthermore, human rights are an effective instrument for protecting human dignity as a global obligation.

5.3. Can our freedom be boundless?

The third sub-theme, that of creation, addresses a dimension that is probably one of the most enormous and also threatening challenges of our age. The lifestyle of the global population, or more precisely of a large part of it, is in the process of destroying the ecological balance in our world. Human-induced climate change will impact crucially on humanity's chances of survival if nothing is done to stop it.

Climate change - similarly to the financial crisis, by the way - points to a basic problem in human behavior: people are now living from resources that they have to borrow from future generations or from other groups. This, in turn, is an expression of an understanding of freedom that has reached its limit. Ever since the Cartesian paradigm established itself, this understanding of freedom has focused so strongly on the individual that it has lived out this freedom in a striking lack of relationships and thus a lack of responsibility. One generation today takes it upon itself to consume the resources of the next generation; certain dominant societies take it upon themselves to use up the resources of other groups. Can that be freedom?

Reformation churches also have a significant contribution to make in this field, in that they can make proposals for coping with the huge challenge of how humankind can balance its understanding of freedom with social and environmental awareness, in order to guarantee a sustainable future.

Lutheran theology was initially exposed to the charge that the message of justification undermined any ethical and moral fabric, in that God's gift of grace allegedly rendered all ethical endeavor baseless. The response of Lutheran theology and practice to this criticism is a stroke of genius. Firstly, because it did not go back on its beliefs and so eliminated neither God's gift of grace nor the resultant freedom for the justified individual. This decision cannot be recalled often enough. Churches in the Reformation tradition are churches of grace *and* freedom, both at the same time! Anyone in this tradition who talks of justification by God's grace alone will constantly and in the same breath want to talk of freedom – indeed, they will have to. Secondly, this freedom in the original outline of Lutheran theology relates to the neighbor, specifically the suffering neighbor. Freedom, as given by God, is never autonomous or autistic – that is an essential statement of Lutheran theology and practice; freedom, as given by God, finds its full expression in entering into – and protecting - relationships.

What Lutheran theology in the 16th century could not yet see, but what needs to be articulated more fully today in the spirit of an ongoing Reformation, is the insight that human freedom, as given by God, will direct its relational commitment not only to the suffering neighbor but also to God's groaning creation. For that reason we absolutely need to take the step from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric theology, which sees God's saving work in the world as directed not only to human beings and their redemption but also to the whole of God's creation. This consistent and continued development of Reformation theology is both a great challenge and a great gift that should be brought into the global debate. I very much hope that the 500th anniversary of reformation will give us this new impulse.

6. The global narratives of being Lutheran

Let me come to an end now and offer a final outlook for the years ahead of us. We in the LWF have been very adamant in saying that we will plan for the Reformation anniversary always with a firm look into November 1, 2017. Hence, we don't want to focus on October 31 as if that is the end of history somehow, but just the transition into a history that continues and that still lays ahead of us.

In line with this, I believe that the current conference is not just a culminating point of a lot of work and efforts undertaken by many in order for this conference to become a reality. It is also a starting point for something new that would lead us beyond 2017.

Let me explain what I mean here. I have been emphasizing a lot on Luther, the 16th century, and Western Europe as the geographical space where reformation unfolded first. Yet, I have become so clearly aware lately that narratives of being churches in the tradition of Lutheran Reformation vary a lot. Ethiopians would speak of Onesimus, the first local missionary who took huge pain and challenges upon himself in order to have churches in the Protestant tradition being established. They would speak with great respect about the Swedish and North American missionaries that came to them. That, and less Wittenberg, is what makes up their own history of being churches in the tradition of Reformation.

In India, Lutherans become wet eyes when they speak about Tranquebar, the port at which missionaries arrived and chose to sit with those, with whom nobody was supposed to sit: the Dalits. Missionaries touched the untouchables, and the untouchables understood God's path of incarnation of God's own way of escaping from untouchability to become fully human, and hence also touchable. What a powerful alternative narrative of Christian theology altogether. Again, their reference point, their geographical reference to what it is to be churches in the tradition of Lutheran reformation is not in Western Europe, but in India.

In May this year the African LWF member churches met in Marangu, Tanzania, commemorating the 60 years of their first meeting. They called their meeting "From Marangu to Wittenberg", hence putting historic facts upside down, but putting experiential facts straight forward: their key experience of recognizing each other as churches in the same theological tradition stems from that first time they met in the region. That's what shapes their identity in lasting ways.

Our member church in El Salvador would name its key identity markers as those stemming from their ministry during the war in the 80ies, and how that war called the church to the public space with valiant advocacy, Diaconia and proclamation.

Our member church in Russia would refer to the experience of holding fast to faith, celebrating clandestine worships in the woods, mostly led by brave, defiant women who passed on faith to younger generations even in times of harsh persecution.

You see, I am back to the polycentric nature of the LWF, which implies also the convergence of many theological narratives, which together make up for a global articulation of what it is to be churches in the tradition of Lutheran Reformation. I sense somehow that this conference will lay the ground for such an articulation to unfold in the years to come, probably beyond 2017. An articulation that would be inclusive of the many theological profiles that have evolved, that would attempt to connect all of them into that one symphony I spoke earlier in my presentation.

In this sense, let me finish by welcoming you all to a truly historic conference which I know will break the ground for Lutherans around the world as they continue responding to their vocation of living and working together for a just, peaceful and reconciled world.