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The Luther Effect: What was the aim of the Reformer and what was the result?

Introduction¹

I begin our journey to Martin Luther's life² and work in a country which the reformer himself never visited. We are in the Pomerania of the year 1520, having dinner in the house of the pastor at St. Mary's Church in Trep-tow/Trzebiatów, Otto Slutow. He has the Latin version of Luther's *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* („Von der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche“). After a quick glance into the book, the headmaster of the local Latin school, Johannes Bugenhagen, describes it as an evil heresy, and its author as the worst heretic ever. Nevertheless, this book had aroused his interest and he took it home to study it carefully. A few days later he surprised his colleagues with the verdict: "What am I to tell you? The whole world is blinded and entangled in outermost darkness. This man alone sees the truth."³

What the Pomeranian scholar held in his hands still influences us today. It is “Luther-Time” in Germany and far beyond Germany. The most important German theologian is “man of the year”. Who was this man who did so much to change the world 500 years ago?

¹ This article is based on a lecture held on May 18th 2017 in Gdańsk. The style of presentation has been retained.

² Concerning the references to the biography of Martin Luther cf. the three volumes of the famous oeuvre of M. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, Stuttgart ³1990 or H. Schilling, *Martin Luther. Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs*, München ⁴2016.

³ H.-G. Leder, *Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus – Vom Reformator zum Reformer. Studien zur Biographie*, V. Gummelt (ed.), „Greifswalder Theologische Forschungen“ Bd. 4, Frankfurt 2002, s. 160.

Luther's way and Luther's will – The beginning of the Reformation

You may all be familiar with Luther's biography, but I should like to draw your attention to its development starting from the so-called 'reformatiorische Wende', the Reformation shift or turning point. It happened to Luther by reading the Bible. He read Romans 1:17: For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." This thought became central for Luther. Humans are not justified because of what they do, but because God justifies them. This is the core of the doctrine of the justification of the sinner by grace alone. This thought changed Luther's faith and religious practice fundamentally. Letters of indulgence were no longer valid in his eyes. The letters of indulgence were the culmination of the central problem of faith and the Church, namely the conception of being justified before God by money and one's own deeds.

But that was fundamentally wrong. Buying an indulgence for one's ancestors was quite impossible. Everyone stands before God individually. In intellectual history, this is seen as an impulse towards individualisation.⁴ Everyone is personally responsible before God. I cannot fall back on any church but exist in a direct relationship with God. In this way, Luther also attacked the Church which had previously served as a mediator between God and man.

Over a long period, this thought was going through his mind. And in the autumn of 1517 it burst out of him. The reason was that indulgence preachers had appeared in the vicinity of Wittenberg. Luther did not agree with this and argued with the advocates of indulgences. On October 31st 1517, he made his *95 theses against indulgences* public.⁵ It is not so important whether he himself nailed them to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg or if the caretaker of the university did so. Because this was the beginning of an academic process. It was Luther's invitation to an academic dispute about his ideas. No more and no less. Luther wanted to improve the church of that time but certainly not to split it. His will was directed to renewing the Church from its centre - namely, Jesus Christ and the Bible. Luther did not know what ball he had just set in motion. The vast reverberation of his *95 theses* is part of the Reformation miracle.

⁴ J. Lauster, *Die Verzauberung der Welt. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Christentums*, München 2014, s. 330.

⁵ B. Moeller, „Thesenanschlag“ und kein Ende, in: „Luther“ 85 (2014), s. 125-129.

The trial

The next five years were decisive for Luther. The years from 1517 to 1522 were the essential period of Luther's Reformation. What started as an academic dispute then reached the highest political level in the empire. Wittenberg became the 'hot spot' of the German university landscape. This was due to the sovereign who founded and financed the university, Frederick the Wise. Frederick succeeded in bringing Luther's case before the supreme legal body of the empire. Luther was summoned to the Reichstag of Worms in 1521. He was put under pressure to revoke his writings. But he did not bend his will. Luther asked for a night of reflection and then pronounced the famous sentences: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." („Da mein Gewissen in den Worten Gottes gefangen ist, kann und will ich nichts widerrufen, weil es gefährlich und unmöglich ist, etwas gegen das Gewissen zu tun. Gott helfe mir. Amen.“)⁶

The Emperor Charles V condemned him but assured him of safe escort. On his way home, Luther was abducted by Frederick's soldiers and taken to the Wartburg. Luther then lived there *incognito* under the name of Junker Jörg. In just eleven weeks, Luther translated the New Testament from Greek into German. It was printed and spread rapidly. It is estimated that one-third of all Germans who were able to read had a copy of Luther's New Testament.⁷

The Reformation becomes a movement

Now the Reformation was finally political. While Luther was in the Wartburg, his friends at home in Wittenberg over did their job. They celebrated the mass without wearing the classical tunic; they also gave the laity the sacrament in bread *and* wine, and they cast images, saints and altars out of the churches. The Reformation departed from its author, Luther, and became a broad movement.

For this reason, Luther needed friends who supported his plans. On the one hand, there was Philipp Melancthon, an excellent teacher and Greek scholar. Melancthon was the prototype of a reserved and diligent scholar. When you stand in Wittenberg's market square, you can see the statue of Martin Luther beside that of Philipp Melancthon. If you look closely, you will realise that there is still room for another statue. That space was reserved for Johannes Bugenhagen. Bugenhagen, who, reflecting his origin, called himself

⁶ H. Junghans (ed.), *Martin Luther. Glaube und Kirchenreform*, Martin Luther Taschenausgabe 2, Berlin 1984, s. 152.

⁷ B. Moeller, *Deutschland im Zeitalter der Reformation*, Göttingen 1981, s. 90.

Dr. Pommer, was the church organizer of the Reformation. In 1523, he became the priest of the town church in Wittenberg. Luther himself had arranged for this. Then Bugenhagen was not only Luther's pastor but also the one who united him and Katharina von Bora in matrimony in 1525.

Starting a family& Luther's later years

Luther's wedding was a political issue. He married Katharina von Bora who had just escaped from a nunnery. A monk marrying a nun. That was a scandal! At the same time, for Luther it was a sign. He was now ready to break with his old way of life. The Reformation had reached and transformed his personal life as well. His marriage was also a message to the outside world. It was a message of hope for a new life. The period when he married was apocalyptic, as many contemporaries thought. Shortly before, the peasants had revolted. It was precisely in Luther's old home area of Mansfeld that the Reverend Thomas Müntzer led the rebellion. The general uprising in society and in theology and faith mingled with the misery of the peasants. It is not easy to distinguish between theological and economic motives in Müntzer and the peasants. For Luther, this connection between faith and politics went too far. Before Christians began to attack with weapons, they had to suffer injustice. In addition, Luther recognised the rulers as the only authority that could ensure the establishment of the Reformation in their territories against the coalition of the pope and the emperor.

By this time, Luther was almost a living monument. He had implemented his will to revive the gospel and to change the church. Now he worked mainly as a pastor and academic teacher. Theologically, he continued to work on his maybe most important project, the translation of the Bible, and especially taught his pupils in Wittenberg. Luther's "table talks" were legendary. His popularity and perhaps some frustration may have led him to ill-considered utterances. Yet he was and remained a theological and spiritual authority with an impressive history of action.

Luther's effects

Martin Luther became a legend in his own lifetime. The followers of the Reformation were named 'lutherani' after him – something which he himself had always rejected. He understood himself primarily as a Christian. He had the firm conviction that his understanding of the Christian faith was the only possible understanding. With his life and his doctrine, he not only shaped the pastors of his time but the entire society, and with consequences that continue to this day.

The Reformation Church

Luther changed the church not least by his own life. The example of his wedding makes that clear. Since priests were then allowed to marry, the Protestant parsonage came into being. Luther's family was seen as the ideal pastoral family for centuries. On the one hand, there was the pastor as a teacher and preacher and, on the other hand, the pastor's wife was the resourceful manager of the family plus, of course, a large number of children. These often became pastors too, which led to the formation of entire dynasties of pastors. Through the outstanding position of the pastor in village society, the parsonage became the epitome of cultivated scholarship with a major commitment to the community. We can still see how wide the span of parsonages can be. Our Chancellor, Angela Merkel, comes from a parsonage, as did the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. With Luther's decision to marry, he laid the foundation stone for the parsonage which has deeply shaped German spiritual life and our society.

The Reformation Cities

The cities profited above all from the enormous educational programme initiated by the Reformation. Luther and the Reformers promoted the establishment of schools. The idea behind this was to educate really emancipated Christians. The boys and girls should be able to speak about their own faith. It did not always work out as Luther wanted. For example, his real wish was that the children themselves find answers to the questions that he posed in his *Small Catechism*. Luther's examples, however, were so clever, pointed and, at the same time, universally intelligible that catechism teaching during the centuries after the Reformation often meant that Luther's catechism was learnt by heart. Although it is good to carry this beautiful and faith-filled text in one's heart, Luther's real intention was to teach people to think and believe themselves. It is no wonder that Lutheran-influenced countries, in particular, have great school traditions. In the strongly Lutheran societies of Scandinavia, the pupils regularly have the best results in academic rankings. To move people to learn and to read - that was Luther's aim. Especially in the cities, this was implemented in a masterly way; the cities became the nucleus of intellectual renewal.

The Reformation Dukes

Luther had been accused in the meantime of a great deal of evil, and that he had become a servant of dukes and kings. The fact is that the dukes were happy to establish the Reformation in their territories, because they were able, on occasion, to confiscate ecclesiastical property and a large amount of land from the church. There is no doubt that many dukes did exactly that and thus

profited massively from the Reformation. Conversely, it meant that the Church had now become dependent on the weal and woe of the sovereign. However, it is often overlooked that this also entailed a liberation of the church. That led to the development of the doctrine of the two kingdoms in which Christians live. The Church concentrates on the promulgation of the Word of God; that is the kingdom ruled by God. Direct political activity is the responsibility of the authorities; that is the kingdom of the world. This has naturally never hindered the Church from reminding the dukes to rule according to God's standards. But this must be done without human violence by the Word alone. The idea of a distinction, not a separation, between the powers in the state was adopted in the Reformation context. Our modern constitutional state thus has part of its roots in the Reformation.

Conclusions

Luther changed the world. In 2017, the Protestant church is celebrating the 500th anniversary of Luther's *95 theses*. Every anniversary celebration of past centuries had its own emphasis. In this century, an attempt has been made to depict the abundant variety of the Reformation. This is already clear in the title. We are not celebrating a single 'Luther year', but rather a Reformation decade over ten years. We see Luther with his numerous aspects. We also believe that Luther said things with regard to Jews, peasants or witches that we do not share today and which are theologically untenable. Luther polarized – and still does today.

What now remains of Luther? Think about the experience of Johannes Bugenhagen in the year 1520 which I mentioned at the beginning. At that time, the world was still so ordered that the pope was the ultimate, decisive authority. The Church was unified under him. It was the mediator of salvation. The Church and the secular authorities were aligned with Rome in a closed system. They formed the *corpus christianum*, a legal and spiritual unity. This unity was broken by Luther. And, in 1520, Bugenhagen in Treptow sensed this fundamental disturbance of the world which had resulted from Luther.

In addition, the Reformation brought new developments on many different topics. Luther in many cases returned to the biblical foundations for building up the church, and provided many important impulses in specific areas which were first found in the newly formed Protestant churches and later even partly in the Roman Catholic Church. Services were held in the language of the people. New hymns were sung. Luther boosted spiritual choral poetry. The Bible was translated into German and became a much-read book. Each church member was responsible for the church, even though it was a long process to

implement the fundamental principles of the universal priesthood of all believers.

In addition, Luther gave rise to spiritual-historical effects, the consequences of which he had not foreseen. He gave a boost to individualisation and the conception of differentiation. He was a discoverer of conscience - 'Gewissen' in German - a word that he himself invented. The teaching about the two kingdoms led to a doctrine of the state which was a basis for modern government. Without a distinction between politics and religion, an enlightened state is inconceivable. The reorganisation of the school system and the care of the poor in Lutheran areas show the impact of the responsibility of each individual.

Nevertheless, Luther is an awkward but ingenious spirit. His language reveals a force that gave him wonderful thoughts, and perhaps even led him to overstep the mark many times. He has shaped my country, my culture, but most of all my hope and my faith.

That is why I would like to conclude my lecture with his last written words, which he wrote just before his death, and which reveal his faith, indeed, his deep humility before God and the Bible, in a beautiful and touching way: "No one can understand Virgil's *Bucolics* unless he has been a shepherd for five years. No one can understand Virgil's *Georgics* unless he has been a farmer for five years. No one can understand Cicero's *Letters* unless he has busied himself in the affairs of some prominent state for twenty-five years. Know that no one can have indulged in the Holy Scriptures sufficiently unless he has governed churches for a hundred years with the prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles. Do not assail this divine *Aeneid*; nay, rather prostrate revere the ground that it treads! We are beggars; that is true."⁸ („Die Hirtengedichte Vergils kann niemand verstehen, er sei denn fünf Jahre Hirte gewesen. Die Vergilschen Dichtungen über die Landwirtschaft kann niemand verstehen, er sei denn fünf Jahre Ackermann gewesen. Die Briefe Ciceros kann niemand verstehen, er habe denn 25 Jahre in einem großen Gemeinwesen sich bewegt. Die Heilige Schrift meine niemand genügsam geschmeckt zu haben, er habe denn hundert Jahre lang mit Propheten wie Elias und Elisa, Johannes dem Täufer, Christus und den Aposteln die Gemeinden regiert. Versuche nicht diese göttliche *Aeneis*, sondern neige dich tief anbetend vor ihren Spuren! Wir sind Bettler, das ist wahr.“)

⁸ Luther Werke, *Weimarer Ausgabe*, (*Bibel- und Bucheinzeichnungen; Nachträge zu Schriften, Predigten und Tischreden*), 48, 421.

Summary: The Luther Effect: What was the aim of the Reformer and what was the result?

The article presents the main ideas of the Lutheran Reformation. The Author asks about the “Luther Effect” – the sustained influence of the protestant theology on the European culture and civilisation. The text tries to describe a problem of Luther's way and Luther's will. The reason of Luther's writing of *95 Theses* in 1517 was that indulgence preachers had appeared in the vicinity of Wittenberg. After many events and coincidences the Reformation becomes a religious and political movement. The analysis describes following subjects: Luther's family life, the understanding of the Reformation Church, the role of the Reformation Cities and political significance of the Reformation Dukes. There is a conclusion at the end of the article that Luther changed the world and that's why in 2017, the Protestant church is celebrating the 500th anniversary of Luther's *95 theses*.

Keywords: Luther, Reformation, Luther Effect, Reformation Anniversary

Bp dr Hans Jürgen Abromeit, ur. 1954, duchowny Kościoła ewangelickiego Północnych Niemiec, biskup Diecezji Pomorskiej. Pełnił posługę duszpasterską w Heidelbergu, Jerozolimie, pracował naukowo na uniwersytecie w Münster, gdzie się doktoryzował z zakresu chrystologii Dietricha Bonhoeffera. W roku 2001 został wybrany biskupem Ewangelickiego Kościoła Pomorza. Przewodniczący „Jerusalemsvereins“, członek Zarządu „Bugenhagenstiftung“ oraz Niemieckiego Stowarzyszenia Biblijnego.