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A table of contents for *European Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_european-journal-theology_01.php

Editorial: Reflections on Celebrating the Reformation in a Secular Age and Some Tasks Ahead for European Theology

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In Germany, preparations for the Reformation jubilee in 2017 are well under way in churches, in the media and elsewhere. Many reprinted and new publications on various aspects are appearing on a weekly basis, primarily on Martin Luther.¹ The jubilee itself, its focus on Luther, the way in which Luther himself as the main German protagonist should be remembered adequately, and comparisons with other recent jubilees have triggered an intense scholarly and popular debate.² In what follows, I offer some reflections on the situation in Germany. I do so as a non-specialist regarding the Reformation, the tradition of celebrating its centenary or other significant events,³ and regarding the preparation of major jubilees with their strategies and attempts of appropriating the past for the present. Obviously there are many aspects and each assessment will differ.

One issue worth reflecting upon is the concentration on Luther as if the research of the past 50 years had not indicated that he was not the solitary figure that he was previously made out to be, but that he had many predecessors, contemporaries and successors. Some of this narrow focus on Luther is understandable in view of other forthcoming Reformation-related jubilees, which will keep us and the next generation busy for most of the first half of the 21st century. (For us in Germany it will probably end in 2055 with celebrations of the *Augsburger Religionsfriede* of 1555⁴ or with the completion of the Lutheran creeds in 1580.) It would indeed be difficult to identify one event or year that would do justice to the complex phenomenon of what can only be summarised as an era of Reformation and changes of many kinds.⁵

It is also worth noting what contents are associated or not associated with the Reformation. I heard that the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*

approached a major German advertisement and marketing enterprise, seeking advice on a marketing and communication strategy for the coming celebrations. When asked by the advertising specialists what contents the church would want them to present to the public, the answers were allegedly meagre. There was a sense of helplessness as the church representatives tried to answer a question that should not have come as a surprise. Probably the answer was so clear for them that they had never thought of presenting it in a short, comprehensible summary. What actually is the content of the Reformation that the church and its adherents would wish or should wish to convey in the 21st century, and which should be centre-stage in 2017?

Many answers are of the ‘Reformation and something’ type: Reformation and various national and/or social issues; Reformation and the development of democracy, individuality or other issues of society; Reformation and language or educational issues; Reformation and economic aspects, etc. This also becomes apparent from the titles of recent and forthcoming publications. Most of this discussion is stimulating and indicates to what extent the Reformation and its legacies have helped to shape the Europe we know today: there is a lot to be thankful for – and also some issues that need correction.

But what did and what does the Reformation mean in more restricted terms, in view of humanity’s relationship to God? After all, it was first of all a religious movement in a deeply religious age. Its key concerns addressed and emphasised Christ, faith, grace, the Gospel and the Scriptures over problematic developments in the late medieval Western church. It took a while before a more balanced, less apologetic and less polemic understanding of the Gospel was reached.

Some of the current vagueness and helplessness in summarising the Reformation becomes apparent when one searches popular sources for descriptions and interpretations of the key term justification (Rechtfertigung). The impression that one gains is that it can be interpreted to say just about anything an author wants it to say. The predominant notion is an affirmation that humans are just fine the way they are.⁶ There is nothing they need to do nor can do to be acceptable to themselves, to their fellow human beings – and occasionally to a higher being, even a personal God. Unless one knows that some of the statements come from church representatives and somehow are related to Luther, many of them could just as well come from psychotherapists writing for a popular psychology magazine or the psychology column of a newspaper.⁷ However, this is not what the reformers meant when they spoke about a new understanding of justification. The word has a clear content and in relation to the Reformation, it cannot and must not be twisted and turned to mean just about anything. For example, I quote at some length from Christiane Tietz's entry 'Justification' from the multi-volume dictionary *Religion Past and Present*:

What is at stake in the doctrine of justification is the subject of theology, *homo reus et perditus* and *deus iustificans vel salvator* ... – in other words, who we are and who God is. God's righteousness and justice is not *iustitia activa*, distributive justice that punishes the sinner, but *iustitia passiva*, in which God makes the sinner righteous. ... Human beings do not possess free will that would enable them to turn to God. In their total being, they are in the power of original sin, from which sinful acts emerge like bad fruit. It is unbelief, which fails to trust God and thus robs him of his deity. In 'unbelief we refuse to let God be there for us and turn in upon ourselves'. ... Only Christ can set us free from sin. He took our place that we might live. Through his death, in which not simply a human being but God himself died, Jesus Christ slew death, the consequence of our sin. There is no other mediator of salvation. According to Luther justification takes place *solo verbo*, because the word of God, which raised Jesus from the dead, in turn absolves the sinner. Its creative power effectually declares sinners righteous, calling them out of themselves and opening them to externality – a move that can be performed only in faith. Only extrinsically, from without, can

sinners be justified ...; therefore the extrinsic reliance of Christians is essential to their entire existence. ... As trust in God's goodness, faith is assurance (*certitudo*, not *securitas*) of salvation. According to Luther, a Christian is *simul iustus et peccator* ...⁸

In addition to the challenge of defining and summarising justification or the spiritual rediscoveries and gains of the Reformation, other questions need to be raised. To name only some: how does Luther's comprehensive understanding of justification (which for him served as an umbrella term) relate to other elements of New Testament soteriology, in particular to Pauline theology, which at times were neglected in the centuries after Luther?⁹ For example, while for Luther Christians are and remain in a state of *simul iustus et peccator*, this can hardly be argued for Paul. And there is the larger question of how helpful and legitimate it is to focus almost exclusively (at least when it comes to the reception history) on one of the concepts used in the New Testament to explain the benefits of the death of Jesus. What happens when soteriology is reduced to justification with its legal associations? What does that imply for God, for the work of Christ and humanity? What about the other aspects of the work of Jesus like atonement, redemption, reconciliation, peace with God and forgiveness of sins?¹⁰ What about the relationship of justification (as understood in the Lutheran tradition) and sanctification?¹¹

In the discussions of the so-called 'New Perspective on Paul' and the soteriology of early Judaism, many scholars have questioned the legitimacy of Luther's understanding of Paul.¹² While there is by and large agreement that Luther presented a congenial application of Paul's theology to the questions and issues of his own day (challenging late medieval Catholic concepts), many argue that Luther misread Paul by reading his own agenda into Paul's theology. Others have defended Luther and the Lutheran Paul over against his critics. While the debate has lost its vibrancy and moved on into discussion of minute details, it has left many doubtful about Luther's reading of Paul, however powerful it was in his own day and age.

Other questions could be asked, but the key problem is deeper and more comprehensive. Let me continue with the personal assessment of an insider. Regarding the imminent jubilee, a well-informed and concerned Lutheran pastor expressed his worries in a recent letter as follows:

- The heroic appreciation of Luther no longer applies, because many people only emphasise his mistakes in the public debate;
- the propitiating, atoning death of Jesus becomes negotiable or arbitrary;
- the concept of justification only appears with regard to political and social debates and discussions about justice;
- the Bible is no longer read as the authoritative word of God as was the case in the Reformation.
- For these reasons serious questions arise about what could and should be celebrated in 2017. The leadership of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* seems to celebrate itself. All this happens two decades before the foreseeable demographic demise of the *Evangelische Kirche* and on its steep path downhill into insignificance.

Let me comment on one of these issues. That some scholars now focus on Luther's deficiencies and mistakes should not come as a surprise (although, obviously, this should not be done in a one-sided manner). For long periods of time there was no critical assessment of Luther within the Lutheran tradition. One of the disputed issues is his negative stance towards the Jews of his time.¹³ Even the positive statements on Jews in his early writings occur within the larger medieval anti-Jewish paradigm. It would be interesting to examine how Luther's assessment of the Jews is related to his one-sided and at times radical and reductionist understanding of the Old Testament.¹⁴ In view of this and other discussions – which were both foreseeable and unavoidable – it was unwise to identify the Reformation jubilee so exclusively with Luther.

To return to the beginning, it is relatively easy to summarise – in the language of historical and systematic theology – what Luther and others of his day meant by justification and other key terms. Christiane Tietz has done so with acumen in the entry quoted above. But it is far more difficult to explain this beyond the confines of academic theology or a well-instructed wider Christian audience (an entity that is threatened with extinction). Perhaps the insecure response of the church representatives to the secular marketing specialists is more telling regarding all theologians than we would wish it to be. Evangelical theologians would also have been able to provide a summary of justification and other spiritual concerns and results of the Reformation in theological language, perhaps with different emphases. But even then the secular

marketing specialists and their audiences still would not understand their relevance to themselves and society at large. What is this 'Reformation-thing' all about?

Theologians and Christians in general are faced with the challenge of communicating this and other theological contents in a secular age without familiarity with the basic contents of historic Christianity.¹⁵ Too few have attempted to analyse current developments and to address the challenges of communicating the Gospel in a thoroughly secular age. However, two articles in this issue of the *European Journal of Theology* interact with Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, the inspiring contribution to the current academic discussion of this theme which has triggered further studies, such as *Working with A Secular Age: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Charles Taylor's Master Narrative*.¹⁶

A few years ago, a prominent evangelical North American New Testament scholar and member of the Evangelical Theological Society (www.etsjets.org) attended the Facharbeitsgruppe Neues Testament of the Arbeitskreis für evangelikale Theologie (www.afet.de), which is held annually in Marburg, Germany. This colleague mentioned to me that some North American evangelicals expect that, due to their training and cultural background, their European colleagues are better equipped to deal with the challenges of secularism. He came to learn from us. But is this really the case? Can we not only summarise 'justification' but also communicate its biblical and theological content to secular people so that they understand what it means, why it is of significance to them, and why and how they should embrace it? Can we communicate with people who do not believe in a personal God; who do not see themselves responsible before him; who are not convinced of their inherent evilness and who do not suffer under their guilt; who are not searching for the means for being right with God and for receiving his mercy; and who do not attempt to achieve their own righteousness through the Old Testament Law or other means as was the case with many people in Luther's day? (The obvious difficulties of its proper communication today must not detract from the significance and the beauty of the biblical and Reformation doctrine of justification, particularly when it is understood as an umbrella term for soteriology.)

Perhaps I am painting a sombre picture, but I am convinced that these are areas that European evangelical theologians need to address seriously if they are to communicate the Gospel to secular

Europeans and if they are to help other Christians, in Europe or elsewhere, to do so. Only few of the people with whom I speak about the Gospel are aggressively opposed to it. There is even a sense of longing for a God or the God who was lost in transition somewhere along the way to modernity and the secular age. Most secular Europeans feel that Christianity simply does not make sense to them or fails to address their needs. We present the Gospel as a solution to people who do not have or see the problems and plights that it addresses.

I trust that the present issue of the *European Journal of Theology* will be helpful to address these challenges; responses and further contributions along these lines would be most welcome. This journal would be an ideal interdisciplinary and international platform to discuss such matters from a European perspective and in European context.

The jubilee of the Reformation and the challenges of secularisation raise issues that we need to address urgently. If the jubilee alerts and inspires us, then the efforts of preparing and celebrating will have been worthwhile.

The biennial conference of the Fellowship of Evangelical Theologians (FEET) in Wittenberg, Germany is now past (26-30 August 2016). Under the theme, The Reformation – its Theology and its Legacy, the conference addressed several aspects of the Reformation and its relevance for today. The conference papers will be edited by Pierre Berthoud and Pieter Lalleman, and appear in book-form early in 2017, published by Wipf and Stock.

Endnotes

- 1 For summaries see www.luther2017.de and <https://r2017.org> (an official website of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*). Under the heading, *Lutherdekade*, the years since 2010 have been devoted to various aspects of the Reformation (for a survey see www.luthertour.eu/de/themenjahre-der-lutherdekade.html):
2010 Reformation und Bildung (Philipp-Melanchthon-Jahr)
2011 Reformation und Freiheit
2012 Reformation und Musik (800 Jahre Thomanerchor Leipzig)
2013 Reformation und Toleranz (450 Jahre Heidelberger Katechismus)
2014 Reformation und Politik
2015 Reformation – Bild und Bibel (500 Jahre Lucas Cranach)
2016 Reformation und die Eine-Welt
- 2 See, for example, Udo di Fabio's assessment in www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/die-gegenwart/udo-di-fabio-kompass-fuer-die-welt-12904004.html; for a comparison with the jubilee in 1992 of the 1492 European discovery of what came to be called America see his article www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/die-gegenwart/reformationsjubilaum-2017-vom-helden-zur-null-13230882.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2.
- 3 On the jubilee in 1917 see e.g. Hartmut Lehmann, *Protestantisches Christentum im Prozess der Säkularisierung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001) and his *Luthergedächtnis 1817 bis 2017*, *Refo500 Academic Studies* 8 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).
- 4 See M. Heckel, 'Augsburger Religionsfriede', *RGG I* (4th edn, 1998) 957-958.
- 5 See G. Sebaß, 'Reformation', *TRE* 28 (1997) 386-404. The focus on Luther is also understandable as, with the exception of P. Melanchthon, all other reformers in Germany were and remained only of regional significance. Even the particular form of reformation introduced by M. Bucer had a significant impact for only 20 to 30 years before it eventually became Lutheran. J. Calvin belongs to a later generation and cannot be related to the year 1517.
- 6 A striking example comes from the recent debate on official wedding ceremonies for homosexual couples in the church. A leader of the *Evangelische Kirche in Berlin-Brandenburg – schlesische Oberlausitz* (EKBO) in favour of such ceremonies, recently argued that the 'Versagung des ermutigenden Zuspruches und Beistands Gottes (sc. für homosexuelle Paare), die Versagung eben jenes verdichteten Zuspruchs im Segen, in dem Liebe und Vergebung an ihren göttlichen Grund erinnert und dadurch erneuert werden (...)' could 'in der Tat den Glauben an die Rechtfertigung des Sünders verdunkeln', quoted from C. Meißner, "Zum jüngsten Beschluss der Landessynode der EKBO zur Trauung Homosexueller", *Evangelische Verantwortung* 5/6, 2016, 10; see www.ekbo.de/denken/positionen.html. In view of the proximity of Romans 3:21-31 (the most detailed NT explication of justification) to Romans 1:24-27, such arguments are blatantly misleading or at best naïve.
- 7 See the survey of G. Sauter, 'Rechtfertigung VI. Das 19. und 20. Jahrhundert', *TRE* 28 (1997) 336-352; noteworthy are Sauter's headings 'Die Rechtfertigungslehre – ein Anachronismus?' (341-344) and 'Die Rechtfertigungslehre – ein kulturelles Relikt?' (346-352).
- 8 'Justification III. History of Doctrine 3. Reformation and Protestant orthodoxy', vol. 7 (2010), (119-123) 120; see also G. Sauter, 'Rechtfertigung IV. Das 16. Jahrhundert', *TRE* 28 (1997) 315-328.
- 9 See Ferdinand Hahn, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments I: Die Vielfalt des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd

- edn (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 202–322.
- 10 For a fuller discussion of the various concepts see the excellent survey of J. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986).
 - 11 Are things as easy and obvious regarding sanctification as Tietz summarises on p.121?
 - 12 For a survey see D.A. Carson, P.T. O'Brien and M.A. Seifrid (eds), *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume I: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, WUNT II.140 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); D.A. Carson, P.T. O'Brien and M.A. Seifrid (eds), *Justification and Variegated Nomism II: The Paradoxes of Paul*, WUNT II, 181 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); S. Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: the 'Lutheran' Paul and his Critics* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2004) and S. Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).
 - 13 See e.g. T. Kaufmann, *Luthers 'Judenschriften': Ein Beitrag zu ihrer historischen Kontextualisierung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011; see my review in *JET* 28 (2014) 290–292) and H. Oelke, W. Kraus, G. Schneider-Ludorff et al. (eds), *Martin Luthers 'Judenschriften': Die Rezeption im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Arbeiten zur kirchlichen Zeitgeschichte B 64 (Göttingen: V + R Academic, 2016). In view of this development it is also interesting to examine Luther's stance regarding 'the Turks', who played a significant role in the reformer's world view; for a detailed study see Johannes Ehmann, *Luther, Türken und Islam: Eine Untersuchung zum Türken- und Islambild Martin Luthers (1515–1546)*, 2nd edn, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte* 80 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2015).
 - 14 This is again a large and disputed field as Luther's stance towards the Old Testament is complex (summarised in a nutshell in his *Vorrede zum Alten Testament*, see H. Bornkamm, ed., *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel*, 3rd edn [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989] 41–59); see H.G. Reventlow, *Epochen der Bibelauslegung III: Renaissance, Reformation, Humanismus* (München: Beck, 1997) 68–90 and T. Wengert, 'Biblical Interpretation in the Works of Martin Luther', in A. Hauser and D.F. Watson (eds), *A History of Biblical Interpretation II: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009) 299–318.
 - 15 For a brief survey see T.M. Schmidt and A. Pitschmann (eds), *Religion und Säkularisierung: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2014).
 - 16 Eds F. Zemmin, C. Jager and G. Vanheeswijck (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016); for a brief assessment see M. Kühnlein, 'Immanente Ausdeutung und religiöse Option: Zur Expressivität des säkularen Zeitalters (Taylor)', in Schmidt & Pitschmann, *Religion*, 127–139.