LUTHERAN IDENTITY IN
A POST-CHRISTIAN CONTEXT[1]

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CHALLENGING TIMES

It is remarkable that with my person expressly the presenter from the German context is asked to speak about Lutheran identity in a post-Christian context. Is it really the case in Germany that the part of the world in which the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation had its center, in which Martin Luther worked, Johann Gerhard developed his theology, and Paul Gerhardt wrote his hymns, from which Christians with different motives emigrated to America, Africa, and Australia – that this country has now become post-Christian?

Yes, many things have changed. Two years ago, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation was celebrated in many places in Germany. At that time almost 45 million of the 83 million Germans belonged to one of the large Christian churches – at least still more than 50% of the whole population.

This year the two largest churches in Germany published scientific forecasts according to which in 2035 only 35 million, i.e., considerably less than half of all citizens, will belong to one of the two mainline churches. In 2060 only just under 23 million will belong to one of these large church bodies,

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which means that only a bit more than a quarter of the population will be part of these institutions[3].

Those who are not familiar with the German context must know that all other Christian denominations in Germany, apart from the two major churches, are statistically irrelevant. With the developments of *these two churches* – statistically – the development of *Christianity* in Germany is, in fact, also marked out. Now it is worthwhile to be cautious about statistical projections since developments can begin that we do not yet discover today. God's actions, which can and may give new beginnings, are to be considered. Yet – humanly speaking – we must deal with the developments that are outlined. Especially, since in the past, such prognoses were appropriate.

Unfortunately, it is also true that the trends which have emerged in the mainline churches have had a similar effect on the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church, too. There is no "Island of the Blessed" for confessional Lutheran Christians in Germany.

These are challenging times in which we as Lutheran Christians live and will live in Germany. My presentation is intended to enable us to talk about these circumstances, that we in Germany may learn from our partners of global confessional Lutheranism, and perhaps you too can benefit from these reflections if similar trends may emerge – perhaps with a time lag – in your context.

PHENOMENA OF MY POST-CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

However, formulations such as "post-Christian" may be used with caution. On the one hand, a situation seems to be described here that is not so clear at all. For it is not the case that in Germany, the last church has closed, and the last Christian has left the country. Post-Christian, then, must not be understood as if Christianity in Germany was only a phenomenon of the past. It is instead the case that *the framework conditions* under which Christian life takes place in Germany *have changed*. The Christian churches have lost authority. Other players have also entered the field. These are new parameters to which the Christian churches must adjust, and which shape the lives of the Christians.

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3 Langfristige Projektion der Kirchenmitglieder und des Kirchensteueraufkommens in Deutschland. Eine Studie des Forschungszentrums Generationenverträge an der Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg. <https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/projektion-2060-ekd-vdd-factsheet-2019.pdf> (Accessed: August 28th, 2019).

On the other hand, the term "post-Christian" refers one-sidedly to the past. It suggests that what shapes society in Germany today is above all, the loss of Christian influence. However, that is only one aspect. There are many other phenomena and formative powers of the present which partly have an influence on the decline of church ties or result from it, but partly also shape the present society as independent phenomena.

Therefore, above all, I would like to ask what characterizes the society in Germany today and what this means for the Christian churches and the faith, without reducing my considerations one-sidedly to the loss of church binding power. I would like to present three sociological observations in this context.

ACCELERATION: A SOCIETY "TOO FAST FOR GOD" (HARTMUT ROSA)

In the year 2017, a book of essays entitled "Too fast for God?" was published in which mainly Roman Catholic theologians dealt with the reflections of the sociologist Hartmut Rosa[4] He sees the peculiarity of a modern society in the fact that "it can only (still) *dynamically* stabilize itself, [...] it is thus systematically dependent on growth, innovation compression and acceleration in order to maintain and reproduce its structure"[5]. In this context, Rosa speaks of an "escalation dynamic":

> No matter how successful we have lived, worked and managed individually and collectively this year, next year we must become a little faster, more efficient, more innovative and better in order to maintain our place in the world – and in the following year the bar will be set a little higher (ROSA, 2016).

This observation, however, leads to the loss of what the human being is designed for. Rosa calls this "resonance" (ROSA, 2016). Even babies learn fundamentally from what they can read in their parents' faces, i.e. what they trigger in their primary caregivers. Satisfaction at work is in a similar way dependent on such resonance. Others experience resonances in nature

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4 Tobias Kläden/Michael Schüßler (Hg.), Zu schnell für Gott? Theologische Kontroversen zu Beschleunigung und Resonanz, QD 286, Freiburg i. Br. 2017.

5 Hartmut Rosa, Gelingendes Leben in der Beschleunigungsgesellschaft, in: Kläden/Schüßler, Zu schnell (as footnote 2), 18-51, 20 (highlighted in the original, my translation).

or culture. In this context Rosa can also count faith as "encounter with a constitutive *other*" (ROSA, 2016), among such resonance relationships. But thus, church and theology are also affected by the general pressure on such resonance spaces in society. Rosa formulates: "[...] fear, stress and time pressure prove to be 'resonance killers' par excellence: They force a dispositional closure against everything that is not purposeful in a predefined sense [...]" (ROSA, 2016).

Or, to put it more bluntly: Man no longer has times and spaces for areas that do not directly serve his function. However, this causes, as Rosa (2016) puts it, "experiences of alienation [...] continue to spread".

PATTERN: A DIGITALIZED SOCIETY (ARMIN NASSEHI)[6]

The fact that our society or our societies perceive themselves to be increasingly accelerating has to do with technology and digitization. Whereas only a few decades ago I had to wait several days until I had the corresponding reply letter in my hand, the exchange of information via email and other communication methods often only takes minutes, if not seconds. Besides, we human beings must compete with machines that are now extraordinarily powerful and very sophisticated in many areas.

In his latest book, Armin Nassehi asks the interesting question: What is the social challenge to which digitization is the answer? Nassehi finds the reason for the resounding success and rapid implementation of digitization in the fact that, in a world that has become entirely complex, it succeeds in uncovering patterns that make action possible.

To give one example: There is an unmanageable number of people in this world with very different interests. Moreover, on the other hand, there is an innumerable variety of products. It hardly seems possible, under such conditions, to bring to one person, what suits him, and what he is interested in. And yet this is precisely what is made possible by linking data within the framework of digitization. I don't get just *any* advertisement displayed on the computer, but the advertisement that suits *me*. And I will most likely buy it if it is essential for me or at least attracting me.

> This is exactly the reference problem of digitization as I
> have described it: the complex regularity of society and the

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6 Armin Nassehi, Muster. Theorie der digitalen Gesellschaft, München 2019.

non-randomness of individual behavior. It is the counterintuitive experience, so to speak, that the self-descriptions of actual individual behavior correspond more or less to abstract patterns and regularities of a social nature, but that this does not have to be transparent to the actors themselves (NASSEHI, 2019).

It is quite interesting how Nassehi describes the uniqueness of human beings in this setting. While machines become more and more fast, reliable and intelligent, he states: It "is probably the excellent privilege of man not only to make mistakes but also to be permitted to make mistakes" (NASSEHI, 2019).

This description can be linked to the creation narrative: Man is the only being called into responsibility by God, being the only creature, who possesses his *uniqueness* specifically in *that*, even if he fails at this point.

METAMORPHOSIS: RADICAL CHANGES IN THE WORLD (ULRICH BECK)

In his final, posthumously published book, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck no longer describes the developments in which we find ourselves as "change" but as "metamorphosis": "Change implies that many things change, while much remains the same [...]. The word 'metamorphosis' implies a far more radical change: the eternal certainties of modern societies break away, and something completely new appears on the scene" (BECK, 2017).

Beck illustrates this radical change with the example of parenthood. Within this framework there have always been changes in role models, but only the possibilities of artificial insemination have led to a metamorphosis of what parenthood could be. Here we are not only dealing with shifts, but with something completely new that, for example, also raises previously unknown and unexpected questions. For example: How to deal with the phenomenon of surrogate mothers? What about a Lesbian couple having a child, which also has a biological father?

That leads to new challenges: Consequences of human action and human inventions are difficult to predict. Local and global action can no longer be separated. Because of the speed of developments and changes, Beck acknowledges: "It is no disgrace to admit that we social scientists are also losing language in the face of the reality that is overrunning us" (BECK, 2017).

But at least one insight seems to have been established: "Those who orient their actions towards the Nation and shy away from crossing the national borders become losers in the cosmopolitan world" (BECK, 2017).

SUMMARY AND SUPPLEMENTS

Thus, we find ourselves in a rapidly changing world, in which resonance spaces also for the encounter with God – become scarce. Society is differentiating itself at a rapid pace that can only be handled by machine pattern recognition. Also, the unique character of man seems at best to consist in the fact that he can make mistakes and is responsible for them. The changes of the last years and decades represent more than a mere continuous change, but rather a "metamorphosis of the world".

The counter-movements have long since become apparent: the resurgence of national and nationalistic trends can and must cause concern. Communication breaks off because people in the respective "bubbles" and networks exchange ideas with their peers and mutually confirm each other. Different opinions are then immediately dismissed as threatening or downright absurd. And apparently at the center of this development is the human being, who finds himself in a position to reinvent himself again and again in the context of innumerable decision possibilities. How, then, can we describe Lutheran identity in such a setting?

IDENTITY

First, it should be noted that both, the concept and the question of identity, are relatively new phenomena. It was not until the 19th century that the term "identity" became more widely used in German. So, it is probably no coincidence that it occurs precisely in the historical period in which society was transformed and started to diversify itself more strongly than before.

The question of identity can thus always be understood as a crisis phenomenon.[7] Those who ask for identity are uncertain about their identity or at least see a need for clarification. A book like Hermann Sasse's "What does

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7 See Heinz Abels, Identität. Über die Entstehung des Gedankens, dass der Mensch ein Individuum ist, den nicht leicht zu verwirklichenden Anspruch auf Individualität und Kompetenzen in einer riskanten Moderne zu finden und zu wahren. 3., aktualisierte und erweiterte Auflage, Wiesbaden 2017, 9.

Lutheran mean?"[8] would have been downright absurd in the 17th century – not because all Germans would have known precisely what it meant to be Lutheran, but because it could hardly be a subject of discussion for the individual citizens whether they were Lutheran or not. Religions identity was given by citizenship of a defined territory.

Moreover, even the establishment of confessions in the 16th century is less to be understood as an act of forming a confessional identity in the *modern* sense but rather has to be understood as self-location within the framework of the one holy Christian church.

Only religious pluralism, with its possibilities of being able to choose or not to choose a particular denomination, and the transformations of confessional identity that occurred, for example, in the attempts to unite Lutheran and Reformed churches in the 19th century, raised the question of confessional identity.

Especially since we are here together as Lutheran theologians from different regions of the world, it must be pointed out that the question of confessional identity naturally also arises in a special way in view of globalization. Perceiving that Lutheran churches all over the world quite differently shape their worship life and organize their structures might let us ask what constitutes the Lutheran identity despite all the differences.

Identity always has to do with change. Let us take a single person as an example. He is changing in the course of his life and – at best – remains true to himself in all the changes and transformations between infancy and old age.

It is the same person who is identical with himself and recognizably different from others – and yet the 50-year-old differs from the 5-year-old and the 12-year-old from the 90-year-old.[9] It is as the apostle Paul says: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the childish ways behind me" (1 Cor 13,11 – NIV).

Identity is therefore never something fixed but is and remains a given task: "Identity is a never-ending design and thus means continuous identity work" (ABELS, footnote 16, 8). That in turn implies: "The individual is on his own, and he must fit between his ideas of himself and the expectations of

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8 Hermann Sasse, Was heißt lutherisch?, Zweite, vermehrte Auflage, München 1936.

9 See Christoph Barnbrock, Liturgie als Ausdruck kirchlicher Identität. Entwicklung und Gebrauch der Agenden im 19. Jahrhundert im Raum der (entstehenden) altlutherischen Kirche, in: Jürgen Kampmann/Werner Klän (Hg.), Preußische Union, lutherisches Bekenntnis und kirchliche Prägungen. Theologische Ortsbestimmungen im Ringen um Anspruch und Reichweite konfessioneller Bestimmtheit der Kirche, OUH.E 14, Göttingen 2014, 132-157, 157.

society on the one hand and between his ideas of himself in different identities on the other. Adaptation is the work of linking the flow of biographical and current experiences in the individual with the expectations and resources of his environment" (ABELS, 2016, footnote 16, 433, 2016).

And this applies similarly not only to individuals but also to churches and denominations.

LUTHERAN IDENTITY, DEFINED IDENTITY:
BOUND TO THE HOLY SCRIPTURES AND THE BOOK OF CONCORD

If someone asks for Lutheran identity nowadays then an answer on a formal level is quickly given. People and churches are "Lutheran" who believe and "proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of an unconditional commitment to the Holy Scriptures as the inspired and infallible Word of God and to the Lutheran Confessions contained in the Book of Concord as the true and faithful exposition of the Word of God".[10]

Churches which are particularly committed to the decisions of the Council of Trent or to the Reformed confessions have a recognizably different identity – and that already on a formal level. Accordingly, all attempts to create confessional hybrids, if for instance, a theologian understands himself as an "evangelical Catholic"[11] are to be taken with caution.

On the other hand, even with the mere proof of a binding written and confessional commitment, by no means everything is said. This proof is comparable to an identity card. It says *something* essential about me. However, those who have not yet met me will not *know* me just because I showed them my identity card. My identity is more complex than the letters on this card. Those who want to get to know me will inevitably have to talk to me and let me tell them who I am.

What matters to our identity as Lutherans is how we remember the history of our church, what we tell and what we omit, whether we glorify the past or also face dark sides of our history. Yet this process is not complete. Instead, even in the present, we are challenged to continually put the formal connection to Scripture and Confession into new words. What exactly do we appreciate about the Lutheran heritage that we have been entrusted with? In

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10 https://ilc-online.org/about-us/ (Accessed: September 27th, 2019).
11 Cf. Michael Schätzel, Der „evangelische Katholik" Augustinus Sander wurde zum Diakon geweiht, SELK.Info Nr. 282, November 2003, 5f.

what way does the reformatory message speak to the circumstances of our time and world? We may say with Werner Klän: "Confession [...] is not only recourse to doctrinal documents of bygone times, but confession wants to become loud at present. Confession is therefore first and foremost a *personal response* intended to enter into communication".[12]

LITURGICAL IDENTITY

Many church members perceive the Lutheran identity of our churches, especially in the design and celebration of worship services. I could name several people who, after a move or expulsion, attended a worship service at the new place. But then they realized the worship service of the local church congregation was foreign: 'This is different here. I do not recognize the Lutheran service I know.' So, they joined a congregation of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church. Yes, it was not by chance that the formation of Lutheran confessional churches in Germany in the 19th century also started with questions of worship. This shaped their identity.[13]

When I travel around the world, I perceive it as a great gift that I can participate in worship services on other continents in sister and partner churches that are very similar to the worship services in my home country.

What I perceive personally and on an emotional level as extraordinarily positive also makes me think at the same time. On the one hand, it is of great value that Lutheran worship services worldwide are rooted in the Western church tradition of the Mass, thus ensuring ecumenical unity. On the other hand, it is quite striking that the differences between the orders of worship in the various territories during the Reformation period seem in part to be larger than today between confessional Lutheran congregations in Europe and the USA, in South Africa and Australia.

Behind this observation tow aspects can be hidden: On the one hand it can be the high esteem not to carelessly gamble away the inherited liturgical heritage, not to sacrifice it on the altar of other theologies and to take away without good cause the spiritual homeland of quite a number of people. On

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12 Werner Klän, Einführung zum Symposium „Lutherische Identität in kirchlicher Verbindlichkeit", in: KLÄN, Werner (Hg.), Lutherische Identität in kirchlicher Verbindlichkeit. Erwägungen zum Weg lutherischer Kirchen in Europa nach der Milleniumswende, OUH.E 4, Göttingen 2007, 15–28, 17 (my translation, emphasized in the original).
13 See Barnbrock, Liturgie (as footnote 18), 157.

the other hand, however, forms may also have a stronger identity-building effect here than the contents. This could, however, call into question in practice precisely what CA VII states: that for the true unity of the church (we could also say: for the identity of the church) it is not necessary that everywhere the same forms of worship employed by people are used.[14]

To develop or further promote a diversity of forms which is rooted in the Reformation message and which is reflected in forms (which should not merely be copies other denominational services) seems to be significant in our strongly differentiated present. Especially learning from each other in a worldwide context seems to be of special importance at this point. For example, I would like to learn in future much more for example from South American, African or Asian Lutheran liturgy.

ECUMENICAL IDENTITY

Those thoughts lead me to the next consideration, namely that Lutheran identity can never be imagined without its ecumenical dimension. I understand ecumenicity to mean two things: firstly, the worldwide fellowship with Christians from the same denominational family as we experience it here in the area of the International Lutheran Council; the confession that with the early creeds the church can only be thought of as *one*.

The *one* holy Christian church does not end at the borders of our own denominational family, as little as it merely represents the addition of all existing denominations.

The times in which the identity as Lutheran Church could only be determined in one's own national context have already passed since the great migration movements of the 19th century started, but certainly definitely with the rise of the 21st century.[15]As Christians, as members of the body of Christ, we depend on each other. Conversation with one another can help us to let others illuminate blind spots which everyone has in his cultural context.

Thus, exchange among each other must not be limited to a transfer of

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14 See CA VII, Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche. Vollständige Neuedition. Hg. v. Irene Dingel im Auftrag der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, Göttingen 2014 [BSELK], 102, 13-15: „Und ist nicht not zu warer einigkeit der Christlichen kirchen, das allenthalben gleichformig Ceremonien, von menschen eingesatzt, gehalten werden […]".
15 Cf. for example Christoph Barnbrock, Die Predigten C. F. W. Walthers im Kontext deutscher Auswanderer in den USA. Hintergründe – Analysen – Perspektiven, Schriften zur Praktischen Theologie 2, Hamburg 2002

money and knowledge from the more significant and more affluent churches in our midst to the smaller and financially poorer ones. However, it is time that the older churches learn from the growing, so-called young churches worldwide and take critical inquiries from their midst seriously.[16] Ulrich Beck has sharply stated: "Only the *cosmopolitan framework* makes *local action* successful [...]" (BECK, 2017, p.25).

I believe the same applies to our churches. We can only develop a Lutheran identity for our times if we overcome the own cultural limitations of our respective contexts and enter dialogue with one another by mutual understanding.

The differences in form, organization, and focus nevertheless should not give way to a church which looks uniform in all areas of the world. But it is worthwhile to appreciate the dispute, the debate about opinions that are different, as a gift, to rediscover the struggle for the best argument – and thus escape the bubbles of permanent self-affirmation. For these are nothing else but the medial representation of the *homo incurvatus in se ipsum*.

CHRIST: CENTER OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

It is precisely this description by Martin Luther of the self-curved man that Hartmut Rosa takes up to describe how the the modern man lives in an accelerated world in which resonance relationships break away:

> Consequently, in (Protestant) theology the state of 'sin' (in the sense of *superbia*) is then conceptualized as a counterpart to this attitude [sc. of resonance, CB], namely as an attitude which believes that no answer is needed and which Martin Luther, therefore, tries to grasp with the image of the 'soul bent in itself' (and thus being no longer related) (ROSA, 2016).

The general conditions of our time support people in perceiving themselves in the same way. In the digital age, according to Nassehi, people are perceived by the public primarily as "information carriers" (NASSEHI, 2019).

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16 Cf. for example David Tswaedi, Apartheid in South Africa. Its Impact on the Lutheran Church in Mission und Apartheid. In: KLÄN, Werner and SILVA, Gilberto da (Hg.), Mission und Apartheid. Ein unentrinnbares Erbe Aufarbeitung durch lutherische Kirchen im südlichen Afrika, OUH.E 13, Göttingen 2013, 80-95(96), especially 90-95.

In modern everyday life, people are always taken into account with regard to certain information-processing rules in very different systems – as payers, consumers or employees in the economic system, as voters or strong speakers in the political system […] (NASSEHI).

In Lutheran theology, however, man is not reduced to his function in a certain system or his efficiency but perceived as the counterpart in a God-human network of speech and action. God created *me*. Jesus Christ redeemed *me*. The Holy Spirit called *me* (LUTHER, Small Catehism). I come into view as a person, as an addressed and wanted creature. In faithful listening to the Word, I receive what God's words say, as Luther puts it in his Small Catechism:

Certainly not just eating and drinking do these [sc. great, CB] things, but the words written here: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' These words, along with the bodily eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament. Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: 'forgiveness of sins'.

At this point the distinction of God's modes of speaking as law and gospel plays a crucial role. This always refers to a communication process of God – on the one hand the words of God, which tear people out of their aimless circling around themselves, on the other hand the words of God, which give people what they need in terms of justice and grace. This leads to an entirely new relationship to oneself, to the world and to God, in which people meet each other not only as a carriers of function and information but as creatures of God, as people being redeemed by Jesus Christ.

It is interesting to note that in the competition with machines, the aspect of responsibility and the ability to fail is precisely a feature of individual character, or to put it in a nutshell, even of human dignity. It seems to me that the question of human responsibility and how man can find grace and justice will experience a renaissance, not least in industrial societies.

The talk of divine judgment and divine grace, of God's love on the cross and of man's self-knowledge, which arises from the cross, exceeds our everyday perceptions, even expands our perceptual horizon in a salutary way, but also gives room to experiences of affliction, as my colleague Christian Neddens describes it:

The theology of the cross means a different, new perception of things. This is liberating, but also shocking: for I feel something of exposure to the force of suffering, of my own and others, of exposure to human violence, of exposure to rational denial of God. Perhaps you can sense how much Luther's experience of affliction lies behind this theology of the cross.[17]

ORATIO, MEDITATIO, TENTATIO: A CIRCLE OF RESONANCES

If this perspective on life remains at first a foreign view, the question arises how this Lutheran identity finds its precise position in life. Martin Luther answered this question by referring to the basic principles of prayer, scripture meditation, and affliction. Johann Gerhard[18] and as his successor, C. F. W. Walther[19] have tried to grasp these three practices as means of attaining a theological habitus, which nevertheless remains a gift of God and thus beyond all human feasibility.

Pierre Bourdieu has closely interwoven the concept of habitus with the question of one's own identity (ABELS, 2016). Heinz Abels describes the context of Bourdieu in this way:

> Habitus repeatedly generates the forms of practice that are appropriate for social space. And it also generates the framework in which the individuals must see themselves. By having totally internalized it, it automatically functions as a constantly new assignment of the individual to the right place (ABELS, 2016, 362). The habitus produces as schema [...] not only specific forms of practice but also 'patterns of perception and judgement' (BOURDIEU, 1979, p.279). This in turn generates a social practice in which a social identity is expressed, recognized, and accepted as the only one (ABELS, 2016, p.366).

Through prayer, reading of the Scriptures, and the probation of what has been heard and believed in everyday life, one could state according to Bourdieu, that a specific world view and forms of action arise for Lutherans

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17 Christian Neddens, Die Verrücktheit der Welt und die Schönheit der Sünder. Luther als Denker in der Spätmoderne (unveröffentlichtes Manuskript), 10 (my translation).
18 Cf. Glenn K. Fluegge, Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) and the Conceptualization of Theologia at the Treshold of the »Age of Orthodoxy«. The Making of the Theologian, OUH.E 21, Göttingen 2018.
19 Cf. C. F. W. Walther, Americanisch=Lutherische Pastoraltheologie, St. Louis, 1906, 6-10.

which they never set out from themselves, but which nevertheless shape their identity.

The never-ending circle of prayer, meditation, and affliction can also be understood in such a way that resonance spaces are kept open for the work of God. In all three areas (prayer, meditation, and affliction) one's own experience is consciously related to God's action or God's action to one's own experience so that resonances become perceptible in one's own life.

It is the strength of the concept of a "habitus θεόσδοτος" that it does not blind out human realms of action and experience, but at the same time escapes any form of synergism. It becomes clear how vital a *praxis pietatis* is for a Lutheran identity *formation* and *preservation* in the 21st century. Recent surveys in Germany confirm this by demonstrating a clear correlation between an experienced or lacking religious formation and an existing or non-existent religiosity in adulthood.[20]

LUTHERAN IDENTITY AS A COMPLEX IDENTITY

If in our time and world the surge of pluralization is indeed one of the defining characteristics and, as Nassehi claims, digitization shows its efficiency not least in the fact that it uncovers patterns in the seemingly unmanageable diversity that enable orientation and action, then it is obvious to rediscover the mode of order in the theological field as well.

Whoever looks at Lutheran theology, however, will quickly notice that the solutions it offers are often more complex than those of its theological competitors. Let us take the example of the Lord's Supper. Both the Roman Catholic and Zwingli's doctrines of the Lord's Supper are easier to understand than the Lutheran one. To put it somewhat simply, the Roman Catholic idea of transubstantiation remains entirely in the system of medieval substance ontology and is therefore quite reasonable, at least for the educated. Zwingli's understanding of the Lord's Supper with a spiritualization of the idea of presence is easily comprehensible even or especially for contemporaries after the era of Enlightenment.

On the other hand, the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper remains

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20 Bertelsmann-Stiftung, Religionsmonitor – verstehen, was verbindet. Religiosität und Zusammenhalt in Deutschland, Gütersloh 2013, 15f. (https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/GP_Religionsmonitor_verstehen_was_verbindet_Religioesitaet_und_Zusammenhalt_in_Deutschland.pdf – Accessed: September 28th, 2019).

with its adherence to the word in an interspace in which not all questions can be clarified rationally. The same could be said about the on the first sight weird idea of *simul iustus et peccator,* about the intertwining of the visible and hidden church, about the determination of the relationship between *Deus absconditus and Deus revelatus*. It seems to be almost a peculiarity of Lutheran theology not to dissolve complex facts simply, but to hold together what seems to be in tension or even contradictory.

I see a risk in betraying Lutheran identity at this very point by dissolving such complexities in favor of simple answers. Thomas Bauer speaks of the trend towards the "clarification and simplification [Vereindeutigung] of the world".[21] This leads in the area of religion either to a secularization, because the coexistence of the divine and the human is unilaterally dissolved in favor of the human.

Alternatively, the trend towards fundamentalism arises because complex questions are answered with apparently simple religious answers. In both cases, the ability to hold together complex and seemingly tense interrelations is not or only to a small extent pronounced. Bauer speaks here of "dwindling ambiguity tolerance" (BAUER, 2018, p.40).

It seems to me that this could represent precisely one strength of Lutheran theology in the 21st century, that it proves to be tolerant of ambiguity, that it helps to perceive complex contexts in their tension and to leave them as they are, and by that remaining credible.[22]

FREEDOM AND BONDAGE, TRUST IN GOD AND IDENTITY

Among Luther's writings, one that makes the complexity of a spiritual reality in interplay with every day's predisposition particularly apparent is his writing "On the Freedom of a Christian".[23] The double description of man as "free Lord" and "serving Servant" seems to be at least paradoxical.

But here again the efficiency of Lutheran theology shows itself. Luther escapes, on the one hand, a narrow-mindedness which, out of sheer fear of

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21 Thomas Bauer, Die Vereindeutigung der Welt. Über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt, Ditzingen 2018 (my translation).

22 Cf. Jobst Schöne, Die Irrlehre des Fundamentalismus im Gegensatz zum lutherischen Schriftverständnis (1994), in: SCHÖNE, Jobst, Botschafter an Christi Statt. Versuche, Groß Oesingen 1996, 83–93.

23 WA 7, 20-38. Cf. Robert Kolb, Befreit, um gebunden zu sein. Luthers Summa des christlichen Lebens im historischen Zusammenhang, LuThK 43 (2019), 28-48.

antinomism, ends up again in legality. On the other hand, he does not fall into the trap of defining freedom as arbitrariness which in the end is nothing more than that man curves back again into himself, yet now with a clear conscience.

The permanent change of perspective is holding two parts together: the freedom won in Christ and the service to one's neighbor.

It is precisely at this point that Oswald Bayer sets a decisive course for the question of one's own identity: "In faith, he [sc. the Christian, CB] lives outside himself: in God – liberated from having to seek his identity and to realize it himself. Therefore, he can afford to become the servant of all" (BAYER, 2003, p.262-263).

This combination of faith and external identity formation is a considerable strength of Lutheran theology, especially in our time. At the end of his reflections on the theme of identity, Heinz Abels also looks at the phenomenon that at the end of their lives people draw often a "self-critical balance" and surrender to the "danger of resignation". He opposes this with trust as strength, "which in result and in form [...] is above all trust in oneself" (ABELS, 2016, p.438-439).

I doubt whether this invitation to self-affirmation does endure in situations of resignation and self-criticism. Here Lutheran theology offers a different form of identity foundation, whose fundament is precisely not self-confidence, but trust in God.

FACING CHANGES WITH CONFIDENCE IN GOD

The bigger the changes, the bigger the danger of anxiously withdrawing and wishing oneself back into supposedly better times long past and seeking one's identity exclusively in those golden days.

This is plausible in human terms, but ultimately it follows a simple pattern, according to which the state of church and world continues to decline. But this does not correspond to Jesus' promise to be with his church every day until the end of the world and to send the Holy Spirit as counselor and consoler. Again and again, there have been salutary spiritual awakenings, especially in times in which the condition of the church was downright disastrous, as at the turn to the 19th century. We should not think too small of God and exclude this idea for the present or the future without ignoring the considerable challenges we face.

The welfare and woe of Lutheran churches depend less on our ability to

lead this church than on whether we trust in Christ as the Lord of the church – even against all trends that are emerging.

The fact that we are not only dealing with slight changes, but actually with metamorphoses, has not only been mentioned by Ulrich Beck, but also by David Scaer who described and criticized metamorphoses on different levels in the Lutheran churches more than ten years ago[24] even though he uses the term somewhat differently from Beck.

Beck himself also comes up with surprising ideas in his reflections, namely that developments are never merely one-line developments. What has a catastrophic effect in one place can open new possibilities and opportunities in another. He uses the following example: "The drought that he [sc. climate change. CB] is causing in one area may lead to a boom in wine-growing elsewhere (BECK, 2017, p.35).

Of course, one phenomenon does not outweigh the other, but it does open the eyes to the fact that changes are very rarely only negative or only positive, but that even in the case of threatening developments, opportunities arise that are worth taking advantage of.

This seems to me also true for the question of Lutheran churches and Lutheran theology in the 21st century. Many trends stand – from a human perspective – against what we as Lutheran theologians stand for. But at the same time also new areas of action arise, some of which I have indicated with this presentation.

The rich heritage of Lutheran theology of the past centuries will be our blessing. Yet we are challenged to reconsider and rethink the challenges of our time. One of the bishops of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church, Jobst Schöne, once summed it up as follows: "One cannot find the answers only by falling back on tradition, for it is new challenges that we face".[25]

Thus, the task to shape Lutheran identity is never completed, but remains "permanent work" (ABELS, 2016, p.432). At the same time, we may know that our identity as children of God and brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ no longer has to be worked out, but is given with baptism and remains the decisive point of reference for our identity throughout our lives. All work on ecclesial and denominational identity is then secondary, without becoming obsolete. But who we really are and how we are identified at the end of our lives is shaped by Christ alone.

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24 David Scaer, The Metamorphosis of Confessional Lutheranism, *CTQ* 71 (2007), 203-217.

25 Jobst Schöne, Überlegungen und Gedanken zu Fragen von Kirche und Kirchengemeinschaft, in: Klän, Identität (as footnote 24), 29-45, 43 (my translation).

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