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Martin Luther's Contribution to Public Ethics Today

David G. A. Pfrimmer

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I n March 1967 on the 450th anniversary of the posting of Luther's ninety-five theses on the Castle Church doors in Wittenberg, one of Lucas Cranach's well-known woodcut portraits of Martin Luther graced the cover of Time Magazine. The editors took a look at the rise of Protestantism as asked; "whether religion in the 1960s needed a new Luther to intervene." (Rothman, n.d.) Time recognized that,

> So large is Luther that every age has been able to find in him a religious hero to its own liking. ... Luther defies easy characterization, however, since his life and work add up to a complex of paradoxes. An authentic spiritual revolutionary, he was at the same time a social and political conservative, wedded to the ideals of feudal society. A limpid preacher of God's majesty and transcendence, he was capable of a four-letter grossness of language. He was the archetype of individual Christian assertion, yet he could be brutally intolerant of dissent, and acquiesced in the suppression of those he considered heretics. Prayerful and beer-loving, sensual and austere, he was the least saintly, but most human, of saints. (Rothman, n.d.)

In his time Luther rose from obscurity to the status of a public "celebrity, and a German national hero ... Town burghers and rural peasants alike saw him as an icon of resistance to judicial and economic oppression by agents of the Church." (Marshall, 2009, 17) This article will focus on Luther's Reformation as a *public* event. Sixteenth century Germany and twenty-first century North America share the similarity of an unraveling dysfunctional guiding worldview. Luther's movement in his day named and addressed the central life issue for people - a right relationship with God. Today, the central life issue is how to live responsibly in Creation with other people. Luther was a master of *publicity.* He gathered individuals into *publics* to pursue a shared collective purpose, to address the faltering medieval worldview that failed to address their question adequately. Today's ethic of individualism, consumerism, and celebrity provides a crippled worldview that fails to address our central life question. How might convening new publics rekindle in people a sense of belonging as friends, citizens, and co-creators of a community much larger than themselves? This is the task of public ethics. What might we learn from Luther's movement for public life and public ethics today?

An Unraveling Worldview Then

Luther lived in a late medieval time when the dominant divinely-ordered worldview was maintained and defended by the Church and the Papacy and upheld the ruling classes. By the sixteenth century, this worldview (*Weltanschauung)* was unraveling and losing credibility. It was a time of great piety and religious orthodoxy. Nevertheless, the Church's

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perspective was failing to address people's deepest questions and fears. Some have suggested, "there was widespread and morbid 'salvation anxiety'" while others pointed to the "'guiltification' of late medieval Christianity" with the seemingly endless ecclesiastical expectations for the veneration of the saints, attendance at masses, pilgrimages, and indulgences (Marshall, 2009, 43). People's daily lives of crushing poverty, plagues, and wars must have felt like God's indictment upon them. People were seeking assurances of salvation and were not finding credible answers, certainly not from their ecclesiastical institutions.

This theological skepticism and uncertainty were exacerbated by a popular suspicion of a Church "that seemed more corrupt, especially in respect of its higher officials, at that time more than any period since the tenth century" (Green, 1982, 110). There was such a widespread recognition for the need for reform, "no one defended the state of the papacy." (Hanns Lilje, 1967, 36) Luther was not alone in his criticism of these realities and abuses. Calls for reform and change were afoot throughout Europe. Peter Marshall reminds us that we might do well think of the "plural reformations: multiple theological and political movements with their own directions and agendas" and "the Lutheran movement in Germany – was only one part of a much greater whole" (Marshall, 2009, 5). While others called for change, it would be Luther's action that lit the match sparking his and subsequent reformations not just as theological and doctrinal debates but as wider *public* events with consequences.

Military, economic, political and social realities played an important role in conspiring to undermine the sixteenth century rigid ecclesiastical medieval worldview. In the east, Constantinople had fallen to the Turks in 1453 (Hanns Lilje, 1967, 65). Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent conquered most of the Balkans, defeating the King of Hungary in 1526, capturing Buda in 1541, and was at the gates of Vienna by September 1529 (Marshall, 2009, 116 and Green, 1982, 367). Emperor Charles V faced a serious military threat from the Ottoman Turks. Clashes with Muslims continued in Spain and the south. Marshall notes, African pirates were active throughout the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic coast. "It is a remarkable statistic that around one million Western European Christians were captured and enslaved between about 1530 and 1640," a large number converting to Islam (Marshall, 2009, 116). Luther's Reformation would be followed by a hundred years of conflict including the Thirty Years War, numerous peasant revolts and a host of other military conflicts. The treaties brought many of these conflicts to an end by establishing the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This would give rise to a new political order and the evolution of the modern nation-state. However at this point, a new order had not been articulated and the political status quo was unclear.

European economies were no longer "static" but in the process of changing. There was increasing urbanization and cities were growing. Craft Guilds were on the rise in many centres. New technologies, like the printing industry, were arising. There had been a "steady dissolution of the feudal economy" and "widespread economic depression" during the later fifteenth century that had "resulted in the "emancipation of the peasantry." While many continued to live in rural communities, governed by their traditional overlords, many could now own property, raise "cash crops" and even move to cities. Hans Luther, Luther's father, was a farmer's son but had left farming to become a miner and open a copper smelter in Mansfeld.

In 1492, Columbus made contact with the Americas that allowed Spain to loot the gold of the Americas. This was the beginning of European colonialism. "Mercantilism," the

globalization of its day, was a transitional stage between feudalism and "laissez-faire" (liberal) capitalism. (Robert Heilbroner, 1968, 66-68) The sixteenth century was also marked by a "price revolution." Prices, mainly for food, increased more than real wages did. This was a source of real and growing social tension. Mercantilism did have an impact on this "price revolution." Greatly expanding trade and increasing "the velocity of the circulation money" exacerbated many of the economic and political pressures. (H.G. Koenigsberger & George L. Mosse, 1968, 45). By 1530, this disparity was too "stark to be missed" (H.G. Koenigsberger & George L. Mosse, 1968, 37). This led to growing discontent and various uprisings by the peasants, the most notable these being the Peasants Revolt in 1524-25.

The early sixteenth century was also a time of change to social and cultural values. The Renaissance had introduced a set of values that were inconsistent with the medieval worldview. The "Renaissance made (the person) the measure of things and allowed for (their) full development, not beyond the world as medieval theologians taught, but within the world." (Green, 1982, 23). Whereas previously the community was where you found yourself, these new values raised the possibility of changing your situation and your community.

In summary "civilization in the fifteenth century was suffering from spiritual and political debility" with a worldview that was unraveling and no longer worked (Green, 1982, 15). At least four factors set the stage for the Reformations to come.

(1) Religious leaders and institutions no longer spoke to the central existential questions of meaning of people and communities
(2) The emergence of a dynamic new expanding economy that led to growing disparities
(3) An aging and vulnerable political order lacked order and direction
(4) Changed values focusing human possibilities in this world versus salvation in the world-to-come

As Harry Loewen observed, "There seems little doubt that after 1500 the old European institutions, especially social and religious institutions, were changing, often radically, heralding the end of the medieval age and the beginning of modern times." (Loewen, 2015, 2)

An Unraveling Worldview Now

Janice Stein at the Munk Centre in Toronto has described the challenge facing the international order today, "We are at one of the *hinge moments* (my emphasis) that come quite rarely. In major parts of the world right now, the old order is breaking down and no new order is yet in sight. These moments in history are dangerous." (Griffiths, 2015). The dominant life question of the sixteenth century was *theological,* seeking an authoritative truth to assure people of their salvation and right relationship with God. The dominant life question in the twenty-first century is *ethical,* seeking the ways to right living and right relationships with others and Creation.

Luther's reformation took place on the doorstep of modernity with its assumptions about human identity, progress, and social organization. The unraveling current worldview today has post-modernists debating modernity's assumptions. They see our world as a post-enlightenment world, more eclectic, less rational, more flexible, without universal principles, or grand meta-narratives or absolute truths. Craig Bartholomew notes historically, "Two

world wars, the decidedly negative effects of communism, the holocaust, and large-scale environmental destructions created the context for a radical questioning of modernity." (Craig G. Bartholomew, 2009, 95)

More recently, liberalism and economic globalization have been two central hallmarks of this modern worldview. Liberalism expects competing interests in the public square to define the common good. Such competition requires fairness. Liberalism holds up individual rights, equality, the rule of law and democratic participation as core values to maintain fairness. Liberalism believes in a neutral secular public square particularly when it comes to religion. In this view, governments are necessary to protect individual freedoms and to safeguard fairness between competing interests.

Globalization, on the other hand, provides a driving imperative, viewing all personal and social choices through "an economic prism." (Craig G. Bartholomew, 2009, 95) Globalization is a process of integrating the global economy that began with colonization. It has been a project that "has accelerated over the past quarter century with the explosion of computer technology, the dismantling of trade barriers and the expanding political and economic power of multinational corporations." (Ellwood, 2003, 12). This liberal globalized post-modern worldview has primarily arisen within financial, business and academic institutions in the Global North. It has often been imposed on the Global South as well as the unwilling within advanced economies. Francis Fukuyama would describe how in liberal democracy and in free markets humanity had reached the zenith of its' social development or "the end of history" (Francis Fukuyama, 1989) Later, he would qualify his enthusiasm.

The post-modern liberal globalized worldview represents the triumph of the private over the public. However, Jennifer Walsh in her 2016 CBC Massey Lectures points out in that history is back! "On a global scale, 'the end of history' thesis also appears at first glance, rather convincing ... But if we zoom out a bit further, the picture looks different. In fact, it seems that history has returned." (Welsh, 2016, 22-23) Welsh goes on to argue that "history is both banging against the door of liberal democracies - in the form of those fleeing violence and poverty - and threatening to destabilize them from within, through extreme inequality and angry populist politics, as well as through foreign-inspired acts of terrorism in Western cities." (Welsh, 2016, 39) The liberal globalizing post-modern worldview is losing credibility.

As it lost credibility the professional class made even stronger re-assertions and insisted that it was working but there were some things, like growing inequality, climate change, and democratic deficits that just needed fixing. Yet, as it continues to falter "nations have been willing to resort to the use of force and coercion to pursue their economic interests." (Pfrimmer, David, 2017, 27) International relations have become increasingly militarized. Diplomacy has seemed to have a diminished role. Terrorism, where non-state actors resort to using violence against civilians for political objectives, justifies increasing new security measures that impact rights and freedoms. The post-war "Pax Americana" project is collapsing further exposing this faltering liberal globalized worldview.

At the same time, the culture and values of society have been changing too. Religion no longer plays a dominant role in Western societies as it did in the sixteenth century. Douglas John Hall has pointed to the "disestablishment" of the churches. "Although some semblance of Christendom may find a new home in Africa, Asia, and Latin America," Hall points out, "its period of Western dominance is over." (Hall, 2002, 2) Yale law professor Stephen Carter has described our societies in the Global North as afflicted by a "culture of disbelief." (Carter, 1993, 22) Religion, particularly in the Global North is not always welcome

in a secularized public square with the possible exception of the United States. While religious institutions have lost public credibility, nevertheless, as I have noted elsewhere, to "a large and often unexamined degree, faith is deeply embedded in the multiplicity of narratives that give meaning and substance to our public life." (Pfrimmer, 2013)

Peter Newman describes the "Canadian Revolution" that took place during the decade of the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s when Canadians moved from deference to authority to defiance of authority. Newman points out,

> The nation's defining institutions first lost their credibility, then their authority and finally their followers. Nothing and was sacred anymore. With few ideas to command their loyalty or their service, Canadians abandon their traditional sense of duty and feelings of trust. (Newman, 1995, 69)

In essence, Newman argues, Canadians have lost "common cause" with their defining institutions.

That is what happens when a worldview fails or falters. A worldview provides a fundamental orientation or a hermeneutical lens with a horizon of meaning to understand and interpret the world in which we live. In Luther's sixteenth century world questionable religious leadership, a changing economy, a vulnerable political order and a more humanist orientation toward individuals meant the old lens was cracked or worse, shattered. Today in an entertainment culture of individualism, consumerism, and celebrity (e.g. everyone gets fifteen minutes of fame), institutions that have lost common cause with the people, economic disparity, a loss of confidence in politics, and the disestablishment of religious communities are symptoms of a fathering worldview. It is in this context that we might learn something from Luther and his movement. So what does Luther offer us?

Luther's Contribution to Public Life

The zeitgeist of the sixteenth century and the twenty-first century were similar but also very different. As we have noted, in Luther's time there "was a widespread 'salvation anxiety' ... manifested in an intense hyperactive, performance of piety." (Green, 1982, 43) People were concerned about how to assure their place in the heaven. In the twenty-first century, we face a crisis of meaning for the affluent and a crisis of misery for the vulnerable. Both reflect deeper questions concerning human belonging and life's flourishing that a new worldview must address. If the sixteenth century question was *principally theological* with *ethical* implications, then the twenty-first century question may be *principally ethical* with *theological* implications. This is why we ask the question, what is Luther's contribution to public ethics today?

Worldviews are hammered out in the rough and tumble in what I have described as the "*public commons.*" This public commons is where "economic, governmental, civil society organizations and faith community actors engage one another in pursuit of the common good." (David Pfrimmer, 2017, 29) The public commons is made up of multiple and diverse publics that comprise the body politic. As publics engage one another they articulate, enunciate, and enact the common good or the public purpose.

I use the term "*public(s)*" to mean those voluntary associations of individuals who come together around an idea or cause. In the process, these individuals are changed and together, in turn, can effect change. I use the singular and plural forms of public(s) because

the public(s) is complicated. There are in fact many publics in a community and yet we also refer to a singular public at times to represent a broader but not necessary uniform grouping or consensus (e.g. "the Canadian public", "public opinion," etc.). It is worth noting that not all publics are necessarily noble or desirable. For example, fans of a sports team or musician may be publics. There are other racist publics that are highly offensive and repugnant.

Publicity as we have said is defined as the process of convening, nurturing and empowering groups of individuals around and idea or purpose or conversely in opposition to another public's idea or purpose. In this process, as individuals come together they are changed in the process of seeking to effect change. *Publicizing* is the process of mutual public engagement by these individuals gathered into various publics, ideally in the service of some good. Publicity of necessity involves relationships but it also enlists the symbols, narratives, and myths of a group, movement, community or nation. Karen Armstrong writes, a "myth is essentially a guide; it tells us what we must do to live more richly ... As our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently." (Armstrong, 2006, 10-11) Publicity thereby involves the creation of publics that serve or publicize a public purpose and in so doing help us to change or tell our stories differently.

Lastly, *public ethics* takes place in the public commons by the various publics that engage each other. I have argued public ethics,

> creates 'public(s)' that encourage a community-based process of moral engagement to addresses a compelling personal and social ethical dilemma(s) or paradox(s) that enlists our ultimate convictions and deepest values as global citizens to address or resolve an issue or life question(s) in our world. (Pfrimmer, David, 2015)

Luther and his colleagues were engaged in the late Medieval and very Catholic public commons of his time. Nevertheless, they were particularly adept at *publicity* and *publicizing* their reformation. Their movement had an important impact on the sense of public purpose and changed the story Europeans were telling about themselves (e.g. the rise of the nation-state, secularism, etc.)

Luther made at least six contributions to public life and public ethics:

(1) Discovering public(s) is important to a reformation
(2) A private person of conscience is a public person foundational for a public(s)
(3) A public person, regardless of religious belief, is a private person subject to the same civil law
(4) A public person is a private person in a community expressing love/justice for the neighbour
(5) A public person is a private person with a public dilemma -vulnerability or power
(6) A public person is a private person with an authoritative public truth to tell

Discovering Publics are important to reformation

The launch of Reformation is normally linked to Luther's posting of 95 Theses against the widely criticized "indulgence system' that he believed was scandalous and exploitive. As Martin Marty notes, in "the autumn of 1517, still thinking he could work with the official church system Luther "wrote to Archbishop Albrecht and attached a document that "became the ninety-five Theses." (Marty, 2008, 31-2) As an aside, it was in this correspondence to the

Archbishop, "Martinus Ludher" or "Luder" signed the letter "Luther" giving "himself a name that meant 'the free one.'" (Marty, 2008, 32) The evidence that he actually posted them on the doors of the Castle Church is largely circumstantial. Regardless, Marty goes on to observe, "As theses of this sort were unfinished products, designed to provoke debate, Luther asked for and scheduled an academic disputation. Not a single person showed up for it." (Marty, 2008, 33)

Luther and his ninety-five theses might well have been lost to the dust heap of history's had it not been for Johann Tetzel's response, the Archbishop's indulgence salesman. Pettegree points out "In a demonstration of support for their Dominican brother, a series of theses were developed in defense of indulgences, to be debated by Tetzel." (Pettegree, 2015, 78) 800 copies were brought to Wittenberg to be distributed but we confiscated and burned by students. Luther realized that he needed to reply to Tetzel. Luther made a significant decision about his response. Pettegree continues, Luther "would make it not in Latin, the language of scholarly debate, but *in German.*"(emphasis added) (Pettegree, 2015, 79) In March 1518 Luther published "The Sermon on Indulgences and Grace" in German. It was "an instant publishing sensation... In this way, Luther swiftly made his way into the homes of thousands of his fellow citizens ... The decision to address a wider public had been his own; but it was print that had made him a national figure." (Pettegree, 2015, 81) Luther and the reformers had discovered the important role of *publicity* and *publicizing* in the process of reform and social change.

Luther quickly understood that to secure the gains of his reformation, he needed a public(s). This was not unique to Luther. It was true of other reformers too. Luther helped convene various groups of people to address various practical and theological aspects of his reformation movement. Luther's *sola fide* (i.e. justification by grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ) was a *theological* insight and a perspective that many people found very attractive and meaningful. Princes, peasants, scholars, civic leaders, artisans, craftsmen, families and other coalesced in groups and organizations to support Luther's movement. This is not to suggest that Luther was some kind of super "community organizer" but he did bring people together intentionally and unintentionally. Peter Marshall notes, "All the evidence suggests that early sixteenth century Germany was a pious and orthodox Catholic society. But national and anti-clerical resentments abounded, and they found their voice in Luther." (Marshall, 2009, 13) In such a context, Martin Luther went *public* and made his Reformation a *public* movement.

What were some of Luther's "publics"? Three examples may serve to illustrate what I mean by Luther's publics; his academic public, his publishing public, and most importantly his political public. There were others but we will look briefly at these illustrations. Luther was part of a faculty at Wittenberg's university, his academic public. Philip Melanchthon was "the principal, essential collaborator of his life's work" and his other colleagues wrote and defended the Reformer's ideas. (Pettegree, 2015, 173-5) Luther's began his translation of the Bible (1521) at the Wartburg. But he later attracted a team of scholars producing successive installments until the full Wittenberg Bible was completed in 1534. Luther's Bible was valued in every home and contributed to creating an educated, literate, reading public in Germany. (Mat Schulze, 2017)

The Economist magazine in 2011 described how Luther "went viral" five centuries before Facebook with the then-new social media of his day, the printing press. ("How Luther Went Viral," 2011) The huge success of Luther's "The Sermon on Indulgences and Grace"

captured the attention of publishers. The printing press had been around for seventy years but it was Luther who would transform a printing industry into a publishing industry. As Pettegree points to the paradox, "...printing was crucial to the creation of Martin Luther, but Luther was also a determining, shaping force in the German printing industry." (Pettegree, 2015, 338) Luther was the "most successful author since the invention of printing," exponentially out-publishing his opponents. He created a German publishing industry and the German reading public. Following Luther's death, publishers realized there was a continuing appetite for news and information in the reading public. Eventually, the idea of the newspaper was born. (Pettegree, 2015, 338)

It was Luther's political public that provided the vital constituency for the survival and successes of his Reformation movement. (Pettegree, 2015, 127) As Peter Marshall points out "... the first regional rulers to show real enthusiasm for the Reformation were not the established national monarchs, but the wannabes: princelings who under the nominal suzerainty of the emperor, governed German territories that were not quite kingdoms in scale or substance." (Marshall, 2009, 63) German princes had much to gain both financially and politically.

The princes, however, lacked a theological rationale by which take power away from Rome. Luther provided one and at a particularly crucial juncture as many of them were preparing for the Imperial Diet. In his populist treatise, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" (1520), Luther argues against "papal malpractice and the pope's extravagant claims to temporal power." (Marty, 2008, 59) Luther argued, "all Christians are truly of a spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office." (Luther & Porter, 1974, 40) Luther's idea of the "priesthood of all believers" while theological in substance, provided a prince-friendly leveling rationale for limiting the power of Rome.

In Luther's movement, we recognize the importance of public-making to the reconstruction of a meaningful and functional worldview. If the twenty-first century's zeitgeist is how to build life-enhancing communities where people feel they belong, then we will have to take seriously the ability and capacity for convening, animating and empowering publics where people feel they are part of some greater than just themselves that matters in the big picture of society. Public making may be a test of leadership. Luther and his colleagues managed to understand that in their time.

The private person of conscience is a public person foundational for publics

In 1520, Luther wrote *The Freedom of the Christian*. Luther felt human efforts were futile in trying "fulfill the demands of the Old Testament laws" to overcome sin. (Loewen, 2015, 19) After all, Luther himself had tried unsuccessfully as an Augustinian monk. For Luther, the "evangelical" function of the law (e.g. second use), as opposed to the civil use (e.g. first use) that we will address later - was to confront and humble people with the reality of their sin. It is in justification by grace through faith alone (*sola fide*) that people are liberated from their relentless and futile pursuit of sufficient goodness to be free of sin. Sin is humanity's great equalizer! (e.g., Romans 3:23-25) Sin is the self-curved inward on itself (*incurvatus in se*) that leads to separation or alienation from God, from family, and from community. Sin's capacity for estrangement can be built into the very structures of a society and institutions. Luther would write, "... commandments show us what we ought to do but

do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man (sic) to know himself that through them he recognizes his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability." (Luther & Porter, 1974, 29) People are confronted with the horrible truth. They are not as good as they thought they were.

Salvation for Luther was no longer the destination for people but the starting point of their new journey together with a loving God. Loewen writes, "As far as a Christian's relationship to God is concerned, only faith matters. But as far as a Christian's relationship to other people goes, faith must express itself in love, that is, good deeds toward others.' (Loewen, 19) The beginning of that journey for Luther is baptism. Loewen continues, "Baptism, according to Luther, makes all believers equal before God, thus minimizing the sacerdotal function of the clergy." (Loewen, 2015, 133) Sin, in essence, makes us all the same before God. There are no longer any priestly gatekeepers necessary to access God's grace or the Christian life.

In *Freedom of the Christian* Luther argues the seemingly contradictory propositions, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none" in their inner life. "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" in their outward life. (Luther & Porter, 1974, 25) Luther's distinguishes between the *private* "justified" believer (*persona privata* or *coram Deo*) and the *public* person (*persona publica* or *coram hominibus*) who stands before the world mindful of their social responsibilities. The private person stands before God's judgment as an unworthy sinner in need of God's unmerited forgiveness, mercy, and love and receives grace through Jesus Christ. The character of the inner person who has been made righteous by God in Christ now has the moral character to support the outer public person serving their neighbours and contributing as citizens. Luther writes, "Faith redeems, corrects, and preserves our consciences so that we know that righteousness does not consist in works, although works neither can nor ought to be wanting..." (Luther & Porter, 1974, 35) Luther's belief that this inner moral conscience is the basis for outer good works is an important theme throughout his writings. Luther would appear before the Imperial Diet at Worms in 1521 and appeal to his inner moral conscience as a defense of his controversial views.

The distinction between the private person and the public person is an important contribution from Luther to our concept of publicity. In essence, public persons make the convening of publics possible. The exercise of individual conscience becomes important for the idea of religious tolerance. Sadly Luther in his later years would not always live up to this high standard. Nevertheless, Luther made freedom of conscience an important public virtue that would eventually be enshrined in foundational national charters and political conventions. Lutherans and churches would ultimately become more involved in issues of human rights. One of the first actions of the organizing assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 was to pass a declaration on "religious liberty and freedom of conscience" which laid the foundation for its work on human rights. (Erich Weingartner, 2002, 550) "The religious freedom clause in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was formulated largely through the efforts of its exponent, Frederick Nolde," a former professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and the first Director of the WCC's Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. (O. Frederick Nolde, 1970) Most importantly for our purposes here, publicity requires freedom of conscience to allow those voluntary associations committed to particular ideas and important causes to come together and work passionately together.

A public person, regardless of religious belief, is a private person subject to the same civil law.

Luther makes another important contribution to public life in providing a theological justification for the civil use of the law being applied to all people regardless of their religious beliefs. The late medieval social order was an integrated system within the broader framework of "... the "*societas christianorum*, the fraternity of Christians ... (H)uman beings were defined by their relationships to others and by their place within social structures of various kinds." (Marshall, 2009, 76) There was a Christian confessional quality to social order. By Luther's time, this system was coming into question.

Luther's understanding of the law provided a foundation for the creation of a public commons. Luther distinguishes between the "civil use of the law" and the "evangelical use of the law" we mentioned earlier. The civil use is a political use to curb crimes, lawlessness, incivility, and selfishness and restrain evil in order to preserve an orderly and peaceful society. This use of the law applies to all people regardless of the religious convictions. David Lose sums up the effect of Luther's two approaches this way, "For Luther, God's law establishes our responsibility toward neighbor (what we should do) and, along with the gospel, establishes our identity in relation to God (who we are)." (David J. Lose, 2001, 253) Luther provides a theological justification for the equal application of the civil use of the law.

As well, Luther develops a public framework in his distinction between civil righteousness and a Christian righteousness. William Lazareth helps us understand the important distinction,

> (W)e clearly distinguish this twofold human righteousness that corresponds to the two-fold rule of God within the two kingdoms of redemption and creation: (1) Christian righteousness is the piety generated by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of renewed Christians in the form of faith active in love; (2) civil righteousness is the morality of which all God's rational creatures are capable – Christians included –in the form of law-abiding social justice. (Lazareth, 2001, 165)

Civil righteousness in Luther's understanding is important because it can provide a basis for doing public ethics together. With civil righteousness you do not necessarily need to share the same religious conviction with others to pursue justice and the common good. In a pluralistic and multifaith world this has allowed Lutherans to work with diverse groups of people in the pursuit of the same ends such as ending apartheid, alleviating poverty or ending homeless.

In promoting this civil use of the law and the idea of civil righteousness, Luther sets that stage for what we may see as the religiously neutral or secular public commons, what in France and Quebec is often referred to as laïcité. As we noted, it provides a basis for doing public ethics. The Lutheran World Federation underscores this perspective, "Religious communities articulate how their distinct faith narrative envisages a shared public space while listening to and being fully aware of the perspectives of other religious and non-religious convictions." (A Study Document of the Lutheran World Federation, 2016, 8) Publics need a place to come together to name the public purpose, rewrite their social narratives, and enact their future. When that space is dominated by only an economic, a political, or a religious perspective, publics cannot function and their contribution is diminished or frustrated. Luther provides an avenue for the creation of a neutral public

commons where participation was not dependent of religious conviction. After the conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many people felt that religious neutrality safeguarded by the state was necessary. Today, the situation may be different. In addition to religious neutrality, restoring civility and a meaningful pursuit of the common good may require safeguards for ideological neutrality.

A public person is a private person in a community expressing love/justice for the neighbour.

Luther also provides a focus and direction for the public purpose. For Luther, the private person who stands before God (*coram Deo*) is passive and receptive of God's grace. The public person who stands before their neighbours (*coram hominibus*) is a Christian whose faith is active in love for others. Vitor Westhelle reminds us ""God does not work without us but through human instruments and masks" (Vitor Westhelle, 2009, 292) For Luther, "we become the hands and feet of Christ, for the healing of the world." (Moe-Lobeda, 2004, 24)

Neighbor-love involves more than just our individual actions. Klaus Nürnberger suggests while Luther "emphasized the dignity, freedom, and responsibility of the individual" it was a "communal individualism" (Nürnberger, 2005, 129) For the Reformer, neighbour-love is realized through social structures or what Luther calls "the estates" or "orders of creation." Luther challenges the medieval hierarchical understanding of ecclesia (church), Oikos (household), and polis (public order). For Luther, these were the means through which God worked. As Westhelle writes,

> For the Reformer, the church is an instrument for the Word of God to be announced to the whole of creation and for human response to be expressed. The household or economy was instituted to provide sustenance and nourishment, which civil government was instituted for the sake social order, defense, and protection. Luther calls these institutions the masks (*larvae*) through and by which God works. (Vitor Westhelle, 2009, 288)

Neighbour-love becomes the guiding standard of human work and actions in the economic and political order. Humans cooperate with God (*cooperator Dei*) in the care of others and of Creation. (Vitor Westhelle, 2009, 297) Luther understood the importance of this "hidden work" of God, carried out by Christian's neighbour-love "within their societal vocations, callings, offices, stations and walks of life." (Lazareth, 2001, 165) Lazareth describes the "priesthood of the baptized where, "the laity's primary duty is not worship leadership, but societal service, that is ... as ethical priests." (Lazareth, 2001, 217)

Neighbour-love also becomes a central imperative in public life. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda describes the "three dimensions" of "neighbour-love" as the "norm for public life," with "at least three dimensions:

- love manifest in service to neighbor, even if it may bring greater danger to self and family
- love manifest in disclosing and theologically denouncing oppression or exploitation of those who are vulnerable, where it is perceived, and

- love manifest in ways of living that counter prevailing cultural norms where those norms exploit the vulnerable of defy God in some other way." (Moe-Lobeda, 2004, 24)

The public purpose of the household (economy) and politics is neighbour-love that furthers human flourishing and Creation's life. In the twenty-first century where individualism, consumerism, and celebrity are driving impulses of our common life, Luther's "neighbour-love" provides a clear practical and a moral direction for the public life.

A public person is a private person with a public dilemma -vulnerability or power?

Another of Luther's important contributions to public life was his enlistment of paradox to articulate the dilemma and questions people face in an imperfect world. "Luther's 'theology of paradox,'" according to historian Charles Andersen Andersen involves, "no … logical, straight-line connection between our categories, our way of thinking and God's way of dealing with us and the rest of Creation. Even the figure of Jesus reveals the paradoxical nature of God who works in terms of law and gospel, wrath and grace; he is hidden (*absconditus*) and revealed (*revelatus*)." (Regin Prenter, n.d., vi) Luther has famously described Christians as simultaneously saints and sinner (*simul justus et peccator*) or as we have noted previously, inwardly "free lord of all" and at the same time, outwardly "dutiful servant of all."

This theology of paradox is nowhere more evident than in Luther's "theology of the cross" (*theologia crucis*). As Luther would write, "all good things are hidden in and under the cross." (Regin Prenter, n.d., vi) A *theologia crucis* takes the scandal of an executed Jesus with utmost seriousness. For Luther, the cross is not just central to theology, it is the totality of Christian theology. As a divine paradox, it remains a disturbing "riddle." The Apostle Paul in writing to the church at Corinth captures this conundrum, "the message of the cross is foolish to those who are perishing, to us who are being saved it is the power of God … God has made foolish the wisdom of the world. For God's foolishness is wider than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) A *theologia crucis* Douglas Hall observes "takes the compassion of God more seriously that God's alleged 'power'" (Hall, 1986, 15)

In contrast to a *theologia crucis* is what Luther described as a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). A theology of glory celebrates human domination, hubris, and triumphalism. It gives priority to human power. Westhelle writes, "Theology of glory – *Theologia gloriae* – in turn was to surrender theology to the canons of rationality prevalent in the judicial, political, economic and ecclesial world." (Vitor Westhelle, 2009, 53) Modern societies do not do well with ambiguity arising from public dilemmas. "The Western achievement relied on the triumph of the pragmatic, scientific spirit. Efficiency was the new watchword. Everything had to work." (Armstrong, 2006, 121)

A *theologia crucis* provides a means to understand the usefulness of dilemmas and paradoxes in elucidating the actual life questions facing people and their communities. As Westhelle makes clear, it is a way of "doing theology" by disrupting our convenient assumptions by "recognizing the other and hidden side of history, the margins, the excluded,

the stranded ones, the "crucified people" (Ignacio Ellacurí), the "nonpersons" (Gustavo Gutiérrez) as the privileged space of God's revelation." (Vitor Westhelle, 2009, 110)

Luther's theology of the cross opens another means for people to embrace life's ambiguity for making sense of our world and for making human choices when the choices themselves are ambiguous. Real dilemmas and paradoxes provided an *ethical moment* or a means to (1) *name the questions* people face, (2) for engaging in effective *social analysis* of the questions and issues, (3) to *bring to bear the values* of Jesus (4) in order for citizens to *exercise their discipleship* in the service of others. In short, Luther "theology of paradox" is a way of doing theology. Today it may also be an important way of doing ethics.

Luther's descendants have found a *theologia crusis* worldview helpful. In the early 1980s when I was working in our denominational office in Toronto, we received a delegation from the Committee for Peace and Disarmament of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church. Most of the delegation was Hibakusha, survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Theirs was a powerful testimony. Their stories pointed to the "absurdity" of nuclear arms and in *theologia crucis* fashion, they linked their witness to peace to the crucified Christ. "We cannot let the Lord's painful cross experience be in vain. We cannot let Hiroshima and Nagasaki's painful experiences be in vain." (Suguru Matsuki, 1984, VII) More recently in 2002, the Commission of International Affairs of the Church of Norway published a very interesting document post 9/11 entitled "Vulnerability and Security." (Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, 2002) Rather than taking a conventional view of *collective* security that relies on strength and military power, their document argued for *human* security based on human vulnerability and mutual dependence. It received quite a good reception by many government delegations at the meetings I attended at the United Nations precisely because it disrupted the more conventional state security analysis. In the end, the Norwegians concluded; "religions can play an important role in reminding us of the limitations of power and the paradoxical strength of vulnerability." (Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, 2002, 49) As a worldview, Luther's *theologia crusis* by disrupting and inverting conventional thinking supports a new approach for doing public ethics in our common life.

A public person is a private person with an authoritative public truth to tell

As voluntary associations of individuals engage in public ethics they often have a word of public truth to speak to the principalities and powers. Such public truths regardless of their utility make a claim to have some authentic source of authority. Leslie Newbigin helps us understand this idea of public truth suggesting in "a society that has no public doctrine about the purpose for which all things and all persons exist, there is no basis for adjudicating between *needs* and *wants*" and the responsibilities for insuring needs are met. (Newbigin, 1991, 78) In short, a public's truth is measured by the degree to which it encourages the flourishing of life. In this sense, Newbigin believes the "Church affirms the Gospel as public truth." (Newbigin, 1991, 13)

However, as the Lutheran World Federation points out, "Religious Communities articulate how their distinct faith narrative envisages a shared public space while listening to and being fully aware of the perspective of other religious and non-religious convictions." (The Lutheran World Federation, 2016) Today we have come to understand this public truth

as arising from an ongoing dialogue even debate with others and with our own theological history.

We have been discussing the contributions to public ethics *based on* Luther's theological insights but we also need to confront contributions to public ethics *because of* Luther conflicted record. The Germans have a word for this, "Vegangenheitsbewältigung," which is "a process of coming to terms with the past." ("Vegangenheitsbewältigung," n.d.) A major public question for the Reformer's descendants is to come to terms with Luther's polarizing, dreadful, and malevolent statements and writings.

Luther's Reformation was a messy, sordid, and conflicted affair often fraught with misunderstanding and miscommunication. There were more serious problems too. Luther was not just searching for an authoritative public truth but one marked by absolute *certainty*. (Cary, Phillip, n.d.) For Luther, justification by faith was true, "no ifs, ands or buts." On issues of a person's outward morality or views, Luther could be less rigid even kindly. On the veracity of justification of the inner private conscience of a person, however, there was no compromise. As Loewen points out, "For Luther, the doctrine of justification was of such importance that not to accept it was to blaspheme God and to repudiate the Christian religion." (Loewen, 2015, 284). Phil Cary points out that Luther's attacks were not about personalities, but what he saw as threats to the Gospel by the devil. (Cary, Phillip, n.d.) Those Luther suspected of seeking to undermine the absolute certain truth of justification would be met with an intolerant, harsh, unforgiving, vulgar, abusive, malicious and at times violent responses.

Luther's incendiary and polarizing public disposition led to some repugnant, abhorrent, and even diabolical outbursts that scandalized his colleagues and continue to appall his theological descendants. These darker Luther moments are important warnings about the dangers posed when public leaders fail to interrogate their own views and remain captive to prejudicial ideologies. Historian Hans J. Hildebrand maintains Christianity, particularly with respect to the Shoah (Holocaust) too easily "surrenders to the prevailing political and intellectual structures." (Egil Grislis, 2001, 74) This might well be said of Luther too. Hildebrand notes a further irony that it was Luther himself who made repeated warnings "against the falsification of the gospel." (Egil Grislis, 2001, 74)

Luther had a vivid demonology (i.e. sense of the devil) that over time became more insidiously applied to some of those who differed with him. In demonizing his opponents, Luther would project onto others the very evil he was doing to them. (Cary, Phillip, n.d.) At the Wittenberg dump in December 1529, Luther burned representative "texts from the old church," copies of canon law and the papal bull which represented a formal break with Rome. (Pettegree, 2015, 78) He began referring to the papal office as the "anti-Christ" (i.e. the devil).

Luther initially appealed for peace and noted the injustices against the peasants by their overlords. But when the Peasant Revolt became a war and they used his theology as a justification, Luther was merciless in calling "upon all nobles who can to stab, beat and strangle the peasants." (Loewen, 2015, 77) Tragically they did.

Luther sanctioned the persecution of Anabaptists. Most Anabaptists were pacifists and even agreed with some key elements of Luther's theology. But Luther's "saw nothing but evil in *all* Anabaptists" after the "fanatical Anabaptists" who sought to erect by force "their kingdom in Münster, Westphalia (1534-35)." (Loewen, 2015, 149) Estimates are 3000 Anabaptists were killed and many were tortured.

In 1523, Luther wrote a somewhat promising tract "That Jesus was born a Jew." However by 1543, three years before his death, his views had changed. In was then Luther wrote his most infamous tract, "On the Jews and Their Lies" where he called for the burning of Jewish synagogues, homes, and schools and driving them out of the land." (Kenneth G. Appold, 2006, 176-7) Even some princes censored this publication in their jurisdictions. As Egil Grislis points out "While the modern thesis "from Luther to Hitler" is difficult to prove, it is undeniable that National Socialist propaganda made extensive use of Luther." Not solely because of Luther, Lutheran leaders have been quick - maybe not always quick enough - to denounce anti-Semitism and racism.

One cannot excuse Luther for these wicked views toward the peasants, the Jews, or the Anabaptists as well as others not mentioned here in detail. We rightly have problems with flawed heroes, particularly when their flaws are deadly. Luther was flawed to be sure. He was captive to the prejudices of his day and to the very conflicted context of his time. An emerging Lutheran imperative over time has been to redress this flawed Luther. For example, the Lutheran Dialogue with Roman Catholics has resulted in the Joint Declaration on Justification (1999), the lifting of mutual condemnations, and critical scholarship that has resulted in new ways of recounting the events of the reformation that are acceptable to both parties. (Baum, Gregory, 2017). Lutherans have advocated for economic justice. In Latin America, for example, "Lutheran liberation theologians reread the Lutheran tradition to support their solidarity with the excluded and affirm the liberating power of justification." (Gregory Baum, 2001, 4). In July 2010 the Lutheran World Federation Assembly unanimously asked "the Anabaptist-Mennonites for forgiveness for past persecutions." ("Lutheran Take Historic Step in Asking for Forgiveness from Mennonites," 2010) Most importantly, Lutherans have categorically rejected Luther's "violent invective" in his anti-Jewish writings, expressed their "deep and abiding sorrow at it tragic effects on later generation of Jews, and deplored "the appropriation of Luther's words by Anti-Semites." (Adopted at Fifth Biennial Convention of ELCIC, 1995)

There is something to be learned here from Luther's wicked and sinister bombasts for our understanding of publicity and publics. Publics do not always do the good, the right or the honourable. Publics and their leaders can be held captive to ideologies that they do not or will not question. The sixteenth century Reformation was possibly the first ideological conflict, albeit a religious one. In part because of Luther and this recurring failure throughout history, we recognize that individuals and their publics need to confront and challenge those ideas, principles, doctrines, myths symbols and narratives of ideologies coursing through peoples and cultures.

There is an acceptance now among religious leaders for a prophetic role for the faith communities in the public commons. Such a role serves two purposes. First, these religious publics *interrogate the dominant ideologies* shaping their societies in order to limit their claims to authority as public truth and their assertions of inevitability. Second, religious publics can lead by engaging in *deconstructive criticism of a society's dominant narratives*, the story we tell our self about ourselves, including religious narratives. Deconstructive criticism is the hard and painful work of critically unpacking the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves that continually shape who we are, what we do, and the directions we take.

Paul Tillich describes this process of self-interrogation and deconstructive criticism as the "Protestant Principle." It is "the spiritual law that all finite expressions of (human) experience of God must be negated if they are not to become idolatrous distortions, and only

in this way can they be affirmations of God." (Ame Unhjem, 1966, 118) The Protestant principle disrupts the rise of ideologies that can metastasize into governing idolatries. Because of Luther, the Reformation principle 'Ecclesia semper reformanda est' ('the church must always be reformed') must not only apply to the church but equally and more compellingly to all publics that make a claim to offer a public truth for our societies.

The Ethics of Publics -Luther's Evangelical Catholic Realism

In 1967, Time aptly described Luther in the article's title as, "Protestants: Obedient Rebel" and went on to ask, does religion need another Reformation? ("Protestants," 1967) This may be where Luther's 16th-century need diverges from our 21st-century need for a new worldview. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity (2013) in their report *From Conflict to Communion* offers the reminder that the Latin noun "reformatio" is about "changing a bad present situation by returning to the good and better times of the past." (*From Conflict to Communion Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration*, 2013, 23)

This may be a clue to a *reformation paradox* today. For Luther in the 16th-century, it was about reformation, returning to the past of a more faithfully authentic Church. Today humanity is faced with many existential questions about interdependence and interconnectedness in a fragile world where "no one is anyone without everyone else or Creation itself." (D. Pfrimmer). The sixteenth century's faltering discredited theological worldview was tinder waiting for Luther's spark. Karen Armstrong describes this period as the "Great Western Transformation (c.1500 to 2000). (Armstrong, 2006, 119ff) Her description may be more helpful to our consideration than the idea of reformation. The challenge is not to go back. It is to go forward. It is not about another religious reformation, but rather welcoming the next great transformation that offers an alternative life-giving global future.

Ethical questions - how we can live with each other and sustain Creation - may be a gateway to a new transformative worldview, to theological insights about faith, and to wisdom necessary for our discipleship as global citizens. There just may be an openness to such an approach. In a 2017 Angus Reid survey on Spirituality, fifty-two percent of Canadians said their "faith and/or religious beliefs" were important to how they thought about public issues and problems and forty-seven percent thought that the best approach to life is "being concerned about helping others." (Ian Holliday, 2017) This transformation may have already begun in the public commons as some voices from vulnerable communities, religious communities and civil society reawaken a dangerous memory that "Another World is Possible" than the one on offer.

Such an ethical project can take the form of *personal ethics* based upon our own individual moral agency. Or it takes the form of *social ethics* that "focuses on the societal structures and processes and how particular contexts shape morality." (Grenz & Smith, 2003, 110) But today as our worldview falters and no system seems evident, this is the very time when *public ethics* is needed. (David Pfrimmer, 2015, 2) Public ethics as we noted convenes voluntary associations of individuals around a shared purpose of effecting the positive social changes of rebuilding a worldview (*Weltanschauung)* of ideas, values, principles, doctrines, myths symbols and narratives to give life to a system and institutions that pursue justice, peace and preserve creation.

Luther would be surprised by the modern world and it might have confirmed his worst fears. But there is much to learn from Luther about the enterprise of public ethics

today. Luther and his movement had an intuitive capacity for publicity and publicizing in his historical moment. Whether or not he wanted to articulate a new modern worldview, Luther launched a public process that did. Luther understood the importance of publics. His anthropology gave us a more egalitarian and realistic view of flawed people. Luther argued for freedom of conscience of the inward private person that enabled the outward public person to be a responsible Christians and citizen. His practical support for civil law and civil righteousness provided a neutral basis for a secular public commons where publics can coalesce, organize, and ethically collaborate on the public purpose. Luther's *theologia crucis* provides a helpful insight into the usefulness of the ambiguity of public life, vulnerability versus power. Lastly, Luther's own corrupted nature and prejudicial views with its inexcusable diatribes toward the Jews, the peasants and the Anabaptists point to the public necessity of the Protestant principle for self-interrogating our personal beliefs and self-critically deconstructing our collective ideologies and communal narratives.

How might we sum up Luther's contributions to public life and public ethics today? The term *evangelical catholic realism* might be a good start. Luther in his pastoral practice of his theology took a very pragmatic approach to ethics and life's issues. Douglas John Hall has suggested one might describe Luther in the tradition of Reinhold Niebuhr as a "Christian realist." Hall continues by noting that realism "means that doctrine has always to be submitted to the test of life." (Hall, 2003, 28) Public ethics will need to adopt an evangelical catholic realism rooted in the transformative power of the Gospel (evangelical), summoned to reunite humanity as global citizens one to another (catholicity), and anchored in practices "submitted to the test of life" (realism).

Of course, the perfect can be an obstacle to the good in doing public ethics. Realism understands the messiness, incompleteness and the unintended consequences of doing ethics. As William Lazareth rightly reminds us, "In a fallen and sinful world, ethics must be satisfied with an imperfect second best." (Lazareth, 2001, 168) Politics has been described as the art of the possible. Evangelical catholic realism transforms politics by seeking to make the necessary possible. Liberal economics is based on scarcity. Evangelical catholic realism transforms the dismal science by pressing for an economics of enough for all. Cultures are often used to exaggerate what separates or divides. Evangelical catholic realism holds up difference as a means to a more authentic and mutually dependent sense of our humanity. Healing the breach of the sixteenth century has often been about the restoration of the lost unity of the Church. As the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission has observed, "How Christians deal with differences among themselves can reveal something about their faith to people of other religions." (*From Conflict to Communion Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration*, 2013, 15) Evangelical catholic realism celebrates Christian unity already realized in Jesus Christ and shared with other faiths in our collective public ethical project of serving others.

If public ethics is needed today, there is a lesson for voluntary groups and churches today that serve as "communities of moral deliberation" or communities "of ethical discourse willing to face the challenge to define the good and the right in a host of circumstances." (Ron Duty, 2006 and Childs, 2006, 107) Simply, your publics matter! What your publics do matters! Publics help the future matter. Maybe this is the real "Audacity to Hope" that Jeremiah Wright preached about and so inspired Barak Obama. (Wright, Jeremiah, 2008)

As heirs of a Reformation, churches and faith communities will have a role to play in this publicly driven transformation. They have some experience in convening, nurturing and motivating publics as well as grounding them in ultimate convictions and values. However, it will require a new more humble orientation that takes seriously the pluralism and the multifaith realities of our world. Unlike the sixteenth century, it will require the necessary mutual respect and civility to build bridges not barriers between publics and their communities. Importantly, it will require a common commitment to that most uncertain of journeys the rabbis describe as *Tikkun Olam*, "repairing our world" together. (Lerner, 2011, 9)

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