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Resistance, Adaptation or Challenge: The Versatility of the Lutheran Code

Guillermo Hansen

What is the shape of Lutheran theology in a post-confessional, post-secular, post-foundational, postcolonial and post-patriarchal environment? Lutheran theology in its many locations and expressions has been deeply touched and reshaped by many of these currents.

There was a marked methodological and epistemological shift in Lutheran theology after the spirited debate around the doctrine of justification at the 1963 Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Helsinki, where the normative vision emerging from the German-Scandinavian axis was challenged for the first time.¹ After that, the notion of a uniform “center” was confronted, and methodological questions permeated the search for new and better ways to describe contexts where the text could be meaningfully decoded. The church’s praxis, mission and context became focal points in this. In turn, the increasing acceptance of the methodological shifts, as exemplified by liberation and feminist theologies, radically shaped the way in which theological matters began to be discussed.

The emergence of contextual and constructive Lutheran theologies has been an epochal event. In the wake of the modern decoupling of the social or cultural from specific religious views, and the globalization of churches and confessions,² new vistas were opened for contemporary theology, and universalistic and essentialist pretensions unmasked. Furthermore, these theologies revealed the shortcomings as well as the potential of the law/gospel methodology in terms of a new set of “grievances.” This reshaped the concrete content and structures of the law, and concomitantly gave a new spin to the promise of the gospel. Thus, the marks of the dominant

¹ The 1963 Assembly in Helsinki attempted to reexamine, reformulate and restate the doctrine of justification vis-à-vis the new reality signified by the experience of “modern man” in a secularized world. See Jens Holger Schjørring (ed.), *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 377.

² Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), p. 3.

script were slowly, but steadily, exposed as a prison enclosing the peoples from the global South (as well as those marginalized in the North) in a controlling logic of identity, where hierarchy was assumed, multiplicity and difference denied and transformation considered contrary to nature and doctrine. These were “anomalies” that classical interpretive schemes could not surmount.

In the ongoing process of LWF theological reflection³ after Helsinki, the traditional “sages” of Western academia, with their particular understanding of the human experience and the “Lutheran code,” while not entirely displaced, began to be considered as one among many voices. The notion of a “center” generating the normative theological discourse has faded, and a univocal normative understanding has been replaced by plural voices, ambiguity, fragmentariness and openness. From attempting to prove God’s existence and the “rightness” of the Lutheran tradition, contextual theologies have moved into the poetics and politics of God’s relation to the world, borrowing new scripts (critical theory, deconstructionism, postcolonial studies, popular religiosity, etc.) whose primary concern is to promote new healing ways of living.⁴

This decentering can be seen as a celebration of late modern plurality, as liberation from the chains of a colonial and patriarchal past. Yet, others see this as a descent into night, where everything is dark, or the emergence of new essentialisms of tribal, class or gender identities. While there are those who celebrate and embrace new discursive shifts, others seek to guard an ancient code. All of us inhabit the tension between these two dramatic forces, where we are being continually undone and remade, decentered and centered, disarticulated and redeployed, affirmed and denied. In the midst of such forces, theologically, what can maintain a common identity without canceling these creative forces? Are there any images that can translate the apparent cacophony into polyphony?

The question today is what makes this plurality “Lutheran”? To unravel this conundrum, I consider that Lutheran theology has to do with identity formation. We are socialized through religious narratives, which are constantly intertwined with other narratives. While roles are defined by

³ Cf. Vitor Westhelle, “And the Walls Come Tumbling Down: Globalization and Fragmentation in the LWF,” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 36/1 (Winter 1997). This pluralization of voices was not a theological whim; it followed in the wake of the cracks of the Western liberal consensus. See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Uncertainties of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), p. 77; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 343.

⁴ Cf. Rebecca Chopp and Mark Taylor, *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), pp. 1–24.

norms that are structured by institutions and organizations, identities are “sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation.”⁵ Identities involve social actors, who have thoroughly internalized meanings through the symbolic construction of certain types of skins, barriers and borders, from which the difference between “self and others,” or between “we and they,” are enacted.

In what he terms “the information age,” Manuel Castells proposes that two major forces shape our lives today: the restructuring of capital and labor under globalization, along with the information and communications technology revolution, and the surge of powerful expressions of collective identities.⁶ This reclaiming and/or creating of identities can be either proactive, such as feminism and environmentalism that seek to transform human relationships at a fundamental level, or reactive, entrenched resistance “on behalf of God, nation, ethnicity, family, locality or any other category of millennial existence now perceived to be threatened.”⁷ Most contemporary identities structured around religion, Castells argues, fall into this latter category.

In the wake of this, what type of identity does Lutheranism signify today? How can a theological and ecclesiological tradition, born almost five hundred years ago in a declining empire, shaped by a Germanic culture that was unappealing to the rest of the world, and carried around the globe by displaced and uprooted peasants and/or nonconformists, or by pietist missionaries who found “unconditional grace” to be as strange as the cultures they met—how can this Lutheran theological tradition serve as a code for structuring identities today?

I argue that the attractiveness of Lutheran theology is not grounded in the “authority” given to its Confessions, or those who presume to be custodians of it, but in the compelling and flexible quality of the web of belief that is formed by the codes that once were unraveled by Luther. In a way, much of Lutheran theology seems to be alive and well precisely because it does not look “Lutheran” from a classical perspective. Many anomalies and grievances have given new and different faces to the scripts of the Lutheran churches. Yet, amazingly, these anomalies and grievances have not challenged the basic structure of the Lutheran grammar, but

⁵ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. II (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

have expanded and strengthened it. It seems that the Lutheran “code” is versatile enough to connect the scriptural narrative with the narratives of our own lives, forging a “culture” that can only stay alive insofar as new and diverse environments are integrated into the web of belief that forms and builds a “tradition.”

We are now able to visualize a common terrain emerging amid the forces that both enclose and open up the code. Contextual and constructivist efforts, by and large, have not disparaged the classical Lutheran themes, but have recoded and rewired them within new semantic fields. Even more important, new networks of engaged actors have emerged and expanded the code. A plurality of interpretations has resulted, yet the network itself continues to be sustained by common codes, claimed by all, but owned by no one. Centers of ownership have faded. We all become custodians of a code that paradoxically can shine only as it changes in relation to the most pressing tensions that every culture faces—such as individuality vs collectivity, changing gender roles, etc. In sum, normative truths coexist with prophetic critique and hermeneutical suspicion. Together this forms a circularity essential for the organizational flow of a (cultural) system that constantly seeks new semiotic inputs from its environment.

Lutheranism as a cultural sign system

My first thesis is that Lutheranism is the discrete religious software of the church’s mind. It is a sign system, a culture with an historically transmitted pattern of meanings, encoded in symbols and embodied in a social organism, the church. As it brings forth a world through its discursive and non-discursive practices (mission), it shows its resilience as it engages the variables that bodies encoded by this mind have to confront.

If religion is a cultural sign language, promising a benefit in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality, then we should consider Lutheranism not simply as an historical artifact, but a complex cultural sign system through which a significant number of human beings inhabit the world. Second, Lutheran theology and its codes can never be abstracted from the actual sign systems that are embodied in and through their concrete social embodiments, the churches. They constitute the primary locus of the theological enterprise, for they embody this complex of myth, ritual and practices in which “codes” are embedded and motifs raised up. Third, because churches—and theologians—are living organisms interacting

with very specific and changing natural, social, economic and cultural environments, the original code or semiotic array is always under stress. This calls for innovation, change, reaction or resistance. Here is where the deep sense of dialectics sets in, for even though the religious code opens up a space that we inhabit religiously, this very space also impinges upon the code that opens up this space(s) in the first place. Fourth, only a religious code which is able to integrate new semiotic and/or structural innovations can continue to reproduce the code; otherwise, it is dead. Therefore, it can only carry on a religious identity by constantly negotiating with other types of identities.

We must ask ourselves to what extent Lutheranism—as a particular cultural linguistic system—creates an environment of stimuli that can bring forth and increasingly illuminate an habitable world. In other words, what are the symbols and codes that shape its ever novel semiotic field by evoking the power of a hidden reality that becomes visible, and, therefore, habitable? The task of theology, situated within a particular cultural semiotic construct, is to disclose the hidden connections with regard to the intra-systematic truth that a particular corpus reveals, as well as the world within which this truth is enacted.

Doctrines as “hinges” between texts and contexts

My second thesis is that doctrines function as rules within a larger semiotic tapestry mediated by a social body, the church. More specifically, doctrines function as “hinges” or connectors between a particular reading of foundational texts and the context in which the social bodies are immersed. Within this interplay between text and context, a theologically inflected world is brought forth.

George Lindbeck made an important breakthrough with regard to understanding how doctrines and theology operate.⁸ Religion, he states, is a cultural/linguistic framework or medium shaping the entirety of life and thought. It is not primarily an array of beliefs and ideas about the true and the good (although they always contain these), or a set of symbols that express attitudes, feelings or sentiments (although these are certainly always present). Like a culture, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes

⁸ See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 32ff.

the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It contains a vocabulary of discursive and non-discursive symbols, together with a logic or grammar through which this vocabulary is meaningfully deployed.

Lindbeck is also helpful in understanding religious and theological change and innovation.⁹ These do not result from new experiences or insights, but from the active interaction of cultural linguistic systems with changing situations. When religious interpretative schemes—embodied in practice and beliefs—develop anomalies in new and different contexts, then the system as a whole enters into a crisis. Sometimes, minor adjustments or reformulations here and there will stabilize it for a while. Most often, however, practices, beliefs and theories are gradually or suddenly abandoned because they prove unfruitful for new and different questions that intersect with the life of believer.

But what types of anomalies should be considered? How are they detected and from where do they come? The distinction between vocabulary and grammar seems critical here. As Lindbeck himself seems to assume, the cultural linguistic system is often taken either as a totality or as constituting an autonomous world. In this sense, to speak in a “Lutheran” mode would not only mean being guided by a set of rules, but with a common vocabulary that may be largely outdated and/or unintelligible. But what happens if the rules are seen as flexible enough to accommodate a wider vocabulary?

From the perspectives of linguistics, if grammar and vocabulary are considered an indivisible whole, not much stress can be accommodated. Grievances and anomalies slip in but without being able to assimilate new semantics. The rule is too tied up with an old lexicon and therefore unable to operate in new settings. Believers continue to go on with their lives in two separate semantic fields.

Here I want to point to doctrines as regulative principles embedded in a grammar, which shows its versatility only when it is able to encompass new semantic arrays through the engagement with different contexts. In his recent study of contextual Christologies,¹⁰ Volker Küster revamped Paulo Freire’s conception of generative themes in an intriguing and suggestive way. Every community lives within a network of generative themes, which

⁹ See *Ibid.*, pp. 39f.

¹⁰ See Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 33–35.

disclose the whole linguistic and thematic universe of a location in space and time. Slum, rain, land, water, housing, HIV and AIDS, food, banks, hospital, soldiers, etc., compose generative words which, once interlocked, reveal another dimension, in principle hidden to the participants. These are generative themes. Freire called this power of interlocking "hinged themes," that is, this dimension of culture that creates a mapping of a territory allowing for a new exploration (action) within familiar yet alien landscapes.

In the case of Christian communities, another hinged theme appears, not displacing the above, but interlocking them at a new level. Here the importance of theology emerges, bringing together two very different generative themes: that of the context and that of the text. Theology opens up the code for inhabiting new spaces that formerly were hidden from the religious imagination.

The Lutheran code is invaluable for a proactive identity that seeks to transform human relationships at the most fundamental level, and thus to provide a dynamic mapping for life. This identity is not based on being socialized into an ecclesiastical organization, but on the dynamic of law and gospel, and the new possibility this opens up to live truly and kenotically in the here and now. The Lutheran code has proven to be resilient, not because it is entrenched in a safer past, but because its code has an inner flexibility that allows us to confront and engage the anomalies of new contexts, and to assimilate them into a wider cultural linguistic universe. These new anomalies seem to cohere well with the grammatical code, even though lexically they may be far from classical Lutheran language.

Codes do morph, but they do so expansively in order to continue their appropriate task. As they are reproduced, circulated and transmitted, they are enriched and expanded by being embodied in local identities. New semiotic fields may subvert them, but they may also unlock reservoirs of meaning that previously were neglected, repressed or ignored. I propose that the latter is what is happening in and through the Lutheran code today.

The structuring codes of Lutheranism

My third thesis is that Lutheranism consists of three structuring codes or rules: cross as (dis)location, justification as relation and God's twofold "contesting" governances. These codes operate through the law/gospel meta-code, with an energy that is simultaneously decentering (law) and re-centering

(gospel). This transversal code also ensures that four sociocultural variables are theologically hinged: power–distance; individuality–collectivity; gender roles; and uncertainty–avoidance.

The question here is how codes and rules work hermeneutically within a system—interlocking a text with a context, and vice versa. Here the content of a rule is manifested, that is, the peculiar doctrinal import of a code. We should note that what is referred to here is not the propositional value of such a code, but how it functions within a semiotic field creating a difference that makes a difference. In sum, these codes—doctrines—hinge on an intra-systematic ordering of texts by constantly exposing them to the hermeneutics of a “con-text.”

As an example of how a doctrinal code can function as the hinged theme between “text” and “con-textual” generative themes, we can look at how the Lutheran code may function attending to both the stories presented in the biblical texts as well as the stories that map our present life. A reminder: codes establish a relationship that is at once intra-systematic as well as contextual, opening up spaces for living truly. In other words, they guide our attention by gathering impressions into a coherent whole, and linking those with actions by “pulling” the sacred into the profane.

The Lutheran codes, of course, are embedded within the larger scriptural and Christian tradition, and therefore they presuppose a structural congruence with God who is known through Jesus the Christ. This highlights that Christian discourse in general, and Lutheran discourse in particular, is bound to a specific body (Jesus) related to God and catalyzes a new set of structural couplings through the Holy Spirit. The Lutheran code does not deny the gap between Creator and creature, but within that, has an unconditionally salvific bent. In a sense, the Lutheran discourse is centered on a God who “falls” through this gap into the world, which, contrary to Gnostic views, is a “fall” that is salvific.¹¹

The cross as a Lutheran theme is the decisive code for deciphering the type of God Christians meet. From early on, it has been a code or rule for making distinctions in situations that are devoid of any hope or filled with alienating hopes. It is a subversive code that challenges all cultural and religious notions of what is considered transcendent or successful in life.

The cross as a code situates what is considered most important: God is available to us in what seems to be a gap devoid of any god. Although tied up with the lexicon of patristic and medieval theories of atonement, as a

¹¹ Cf. Žižek, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 87.

code, it always undermines these. And because it is a rule, it also expands beyond Luther's own understanding in order to incorporate our contemporary semiotic and social fields. This innovation brought by the code not only provides us with a better grasp of the tenor of biblical texts, but also with a hinge to draw into the text our present histories of living in this gap. The cross is the point where our current epistemes are questioned and destabilized,¹² making room for what is truly new and different.

In this sense, the most substantial Christian promise for the world—communion or kingdom of God—is heard in the struggle that occurs in space, devoid of God's luminosity and filled with an alien, imperial presence. This draws our attention to an "impotent" God who has fallen into our world, challenging our notions of power. In the midst of this tension between imperial potency and divine impotency, between the law and the end of the law, the cross appears as the center of a new gospel—sites of failure in history become the places where God abides. In this encoding, our attention is drawn to the cross as a sociopolitical event.

The law, as imperial sovereignty, does not exist without the negation of an "other." The cross is a verdict denouncing that something is fundamentally wrong with how the world is structured,¹³ and how it attempts to fill in the gaps. Golgotha is the mirror image of the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, the critical reflection of Octavian's imperial realized eschatology, the unmasking of Rome as the benefactor of all humanity.¹⁴ This God on a cross totally reverses values: God justifies the victims of public, legal and official imperial power, through the man Jesus, friend of sinners and prostitutes.¹⁵ A mysterious power of attraction is revealed in our midst: God "falls" for the victims of a law that constantly saps honor, self-esteem and lives. But the vindication of that cursed Jew reveals a God to whom impotent creatures are attracted. In Jesus the Christ, we see not just a novel adaptation of the creature to God, but also of God to the creature. It functions as a script for living truly, challenging those scripts that bring forth sinners, miserable ones, fools and the weak of this world as scapegoats of the perverse

¹² See Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 84.

¹³ Cf. John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering what Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 258.

¹⁴ See Helmut Koester, "Jesus the Victim," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111/1 (1992), pp. 3–15.

¹⁵ See John Dominic Crossan, "The Resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish Context," in *Neotestamentica* 37/1 (2003), pp. 29–57.

dynamics of exclusion. They become the preferential “attractors” of divine mercy and grace.

The cross, therefore, is a code that locates a God who transcends into our world not to condone sacrifice, but as the very Savior from the sacrifices that are always being exacted from us. Faith implies a mutation leading to new life. For that reason, this faith will determine the flow and ebb of behavior, emotion and imagination by means of which a human group interlocks with its environment and its final meaning.

Speaking this Word of God declares a reversal—justification—in the midst of all conditionalities that entrap us in life denying fields. The code is not only a verbal declaration (forensic) but also makes accessible to us the energies of life that are truly eternal. It grants permission to live truly, leaning toward an inexhaustible promise. As creatures, we lean away from God, holding our breath, conserving energy for ourselves, living without a horizon or boundaries. In justification, the “event horizon” of our lives is opened by a blast of the Spirit. God comes into the lives of persons sucked in by the margins—psychologically, spiritually, socially, economically. It radically redraws the boundaries of God’s domain in order to include those who hitherto were considered far away.

Justification implies not only being present at the many boundaries that divide humanity, but also discerning which ones need to be crossed, which ones dismantled and which ones simply named and made visible. The gospel narratives in which this crossing occurs are a vindication of the bodies that have been broken by the curse of the law in dark holes of debt, torture, imprisonment, despair and abandonment. Christians are called to participate in these “crossing movements,” in and out of the same love that has first crossed over to them. Nobody really is an insider; we live by grace, recognizing that we are all part of a *koinonia* of outsiders and marginalized.

Jesus’ proclamation of a kingdom for the nobodies and undesirables touched on the most pressing issues of the time: debt, daily bread, shame and impurity. Exorcisms and the healing of bodies and spirits broke the spell that bound and burdened colonized and “undesirable” people. When Jesus broke bread, he adopted the “degraded” position of women: he served, he was the hostess. With this practice, he witnessed to the righteousness God wills for creation, and communicated an egalitarian and un-brokered sharing of God’s goodness and mercy. In the same vein, Jesus’ crossing of different frontiers allowed individuals and groups to enter into an immediate physical and spiritual contact with God’s justice, and thus with one

another. As the gospels emphasize, Jesus crossed the traditional boundaries of family, honor and dishonor, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, sick and healthy, pure and impure, country and city, poor and rich. Bearing witness to the Father's mercy and coming reign, Jesus embodies a new space: the space of the Spirit. His body and his presence become the locus of a new narrative that is not only about God, but also about how God crosses over into the bodies and minds of those who never expected to be considered "somebodies." To draw frontiers is an act of disenfranchising power; to trespass is an act of divine imagination and love.¹⁶

This code, when unhinged from its forensic trappings, is the hinge for a new set of semantic fields. Liberation and political theologies, for example, have taught us to take a new look at the way in which the generative theme of sin operates.¹⁷ Sin is a power bent upon itself. It is always constructed by a set of polarities between perpetrators and victims, healthy and sick, rich and poor, men and women, righteous and unrighteous. Energies of life are sucked in, as in a vacuum, extracting from one pole to feed the other. Feminist theologians¹⁸ have taught us to see the self in relation to the patriarchal, cultural and linguistic frameworks that encrypt women's self as a prideful sinner, when in fact many women have been deprived of being able to experience a true sense of self. Overabundant male pride comes at the expense of that which feeds male egos. In both cases, there is a depiction of sin as the shattering of the self that is enacted by these relational fields—all worlds that have been brought forth by "somebodies" in power.

To be undone by the law in order to receive a new center of graced identity always involves decentering that which entraps the self in a diabolical dance. Justification unravels those scripts. The language of justification expresses a strategy of including the destitute, the marginal and the excluded into a new community in which social, spiritual and material goods are redistributed.¹⁹ This is what theologies stemming from India (Dalit), Africa

¹⁶ See Guillermo Hansen, "On Boundaries and Bridges: Lutheran Communion and Catholicity," in Wolfgang Greive (ed.), *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition*, LWF Documentation 47/2001 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001), pp. 87f.

¹⁷ Cf. Juan Luis Segundo, *El hombre de hoy ante Jesús de Nazaret*, vol. II/1, *Sinopticos y Pablo* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1982), pp. 129ff; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 125.

¹⁸ See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 62ff.

¹⁹ See this concept developed in Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods, 1519," in Helmut T. Lehman (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 45ff.

(*ubuntu*) and Latin America (liberation) have pressed upon the Lutheran code, ringing the same tones that we hear among feminist and critical theologies in the North.

Precisely because it allows us to live truly, we are able to engage the multiplicity of life's conflicting demands and identities. We do so with the hope that every aspect of life can be de- or recoded with a surplus of meaning that critiques as well as promises real fulfillment. Luther's understanding of God's twofold rule, which has often been applied with less than happy consequences, nonetheless continues to be a regulating code in the Lutheran grammar; it provides the plasticity to incorporate new sociocultural semiotic fields. Through this code, Lutheran theology manifests itself as a public theology, and, therefore, always in "con-tens[t]ion" within any con-text.

Since the social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships, the power in defining codes and unleashing the clout of symbols always has political and social effects. For individuals or communities, there may be a plurality of identities that become a source of stress and contradiction. Which ones will dominate? Which ones will catalyze others? I contend that Lutheranism possesses a grammar that can weave its religious code with a wide array of social and cultural forces that are not only secular marks of identity, but also places where the holy and a sense of wholeness is lived out. The basis for that is Luther's identification of "orders" within society as sacred places, where the specific religious code is not in competition, but acts as both a critique and an affirmation of these different fields.

Luther spoke of these orders as church, family/economy and secular authority.²⁰ Admittedly, he did so in a patriarchal tone that is unpalatable for us today. He also took for granted an hierarchical structuring of society that contemporary democratic sensitivities find objectionable. He fell short of affecting the codes of justification and cross in more explicitly transversal ways. He spoke of institutions and orders of what today we call civil society, which in a postmodern world do not have the power for constructing identity as they once had. But these problems are Luther's, not ours. The code, I believe, is still valid, because it relates the reality of Christian identity with those different areas of life that make claims through other rules and codes for structuring who we are. In short, he made secular borders transparent to the inflecting claim of the gospel without cancelling their provisional and necessary existence.

²⁰ See Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" (1528), Part III, in Timothy Lull (ed.), *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 64f.

In this sense, the dynamic Trinitarian concept of God and the twofold or multiple ruling of this God encourage a public and political theology. While grounded in an unconditional and absolute claim that comes from beyond us, this also recognizes the desirability and necessity of living within certain boundaries. In the worst case, these boundaries lose the malleability proper to any historical and cultural construction, as they did for many intelligent, “respectable” German theologians during the Nazi era. But in other cases, this can also lead to a deeper appreciation of the irreducible plurality that is an expression of a creative God who opens up spaces to live in. Feminism, indigenous movements, gays and lesbians, ecologists, Zapatistas, Barrios de pie, Dalits—all are expressing a desire to bring forth worlds in which they can live, and in so doing, are expressing what the First Article professes.

For this code to be publicly relevant, its metaphors must be woven with generative themes proper to other cultural linguistic fields. The Rousseauian concept of *volonté générale*, Montesquieu’s and Locke’s division of powers, Madison’s constitutional check and balances, Marx’s concept of social democracy, Foucault’s microphysics of power, Lacan’s conception of the repressed, as well as a myriad of local and non-Western traditions, all coalesce in a postmodern notion of radical democracy that grows as the living alternative through the networks spawned by empire. It is a new form of sovereignty based on communication, relationships and different ways of living that nonetheless have something in common. Democratic demands—although always imbued with particular and local interests—can be seen as the means through which the living God is continually creating. This fluid communication—rather than an hierarchical *Ordnung*—reflects the dynamism of a Trinitarian God.

And yet, as we weave these networks together, as we voice our demands, as we reach beyond our borders, we know that the Lutheran code contains a cautionary tone. The unconditional promise of the gospel is receiving in the midst of different kinds of (secular) identities. While the claiming of identities is essential for survival, for life, for societies, these claims always involve the distinction between a self and another, a “we” and “they” distinction, that limits our egos and super-egos. On the one hand, the reclaiming of identities is a cry for justice, for subverting a “new order” that satisfies very few; this is good and necessary, for without those boundaries life would continue to be siphoned off. On the other, identities can readily run afoul or become reactive, claiming to embody essential attributes accessible to none but themselves.

To be encrypted by a Lutheran code is to be aware that in the multiple worlds we bring forth, we live not only from the gospel. Yet, we cannot exercise a power that is incongruent with the values of this same gospel. Rather than falling into new dualisms, this Lutheran caution is the basis for critiquing any essentialist enthusiasms, or any form of power, which attempt to hide the violence of its demands under a putative *evangelium* of peace, progress or free market.

This is why the “two governances” code always implies a “con-ten[t]sion” with any and all forms of secular claims. The God of the crucified is always crossing the boundaries erected to dispossess others, and is always in “con-ten[t]sion” with those structures, systems and dynamics that promise self-gain at the expense of others. But, in the midst of this tension, another gap opens up—the gap that God inhabits as the crucified and risen One. It is still a gap, between God and God, between human and other humans, between humans and nature, and between human beings and their final fulfillment. To live truly is to learn how to carry this tension in ourselves.

A proactive identity

My fourth thesis is that the grammar signified by the Lutheran code points to a proactive rather than a reactive identity. This identity weaves together the diversity of our local frameworks, and is at odds with fundamentalisms, essentialisms and archaic confessionalisms of any type.

What are we here for? We are here to play—in the sense of performance. Our theologies play with codes, as instances of a performative dance. It is not that this playfulness suddenly changes our natures, but they display an identity as we perform in “dresses” that are not ours by right, but are given as a gift. Even the old forensic notion of imputed grace has its place here; after all, we are playing with the clothing and an identity that was given to us—an alien righteousness. We are all “drag queens,” wearing clothes that transform us with a new radiance that comes from beyond ourselves, making us truly alive. The fabric seems to become one with our flesh. Finnish Luther research had it right all along: we do not only partake, but we are partaken; we receive not only a favor, but are made participants in who God is.²¹

²¹ See Tuomo Mannermaa, “Why is Luther so Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research,” in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (eds), *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 1–20.

I believe that a cultural linguistic approach offers us the possibility of going beyond the 1963 Helsinki scenario with its push and pull between those who celebrated and embraced new discursive shifts, and those who saw themselves as guardians of an ancient code. Our generation has dwelt within the tension of these two dramatic forces, and it has learned to differentiate what belongs to a colonial project, and what are the codes that liberate. In this learning process, we are used to being continually undone and remade, disarticulated and redeployed, affirmed and denied. We no longer revere the ancient orthodox lexicon but we have not given up the code. We are very much aware that it is the task of theology to be situated within a particular cultural semiotic construct to disclose the hinge that holds our religious identity together with the generative themes of our environments. Theology is like alchemy, it imagines gold where other semiotic fields find only rust. Theology encrypts in order to irradiate, binds in order to free.

I also believe that the understanding of our tradition as a cultural linguistic system that we share helps us to realize the profound meaning of doing theology not only in the context of our particular churches, but of a global communion. We have come a long way since Budapest 1984. One of the outcomes of this ecclesiological shift—whose consequences are still looming on the horizon—is that we are gradually being “networked.” Belonging to a tradition that has been networked has led to this acute sense of plurality in the communion, yet we are also more aware of the versatility of our codes as they are inflected and therefore enriched through new contextual generative themes.

Lutheran theology is alive and well today, precisely because it is plural, chaotic and messy—different strategies of “structural couplings” with our diverse environments. This is the best indicator that our identity is not static, but always in a state of flux. Our web of belief is enriched when we have to deal with reverence for ancestors, speaking in tongues, healing practices, HIV and AIDS, sexuality or empire. To be networked in such a web implies that through these new demands under the law, we gain new and additional insights into the gospel.

Participation in this Lutheran web makes all of us not only custodians, but receivers. To be Lutheran is not only to “give” Lutheranism but to receive it also from those corners from where we least expect it. Perhaps we can all learn that in this world we are all marginal in some way. The Lutheran code, recognizable as it flows through the nodes of the network, always comes back to us in surprisingly new formulations, intertwined with

new local identities. We must learn to code, to give, but also to decode, to receive. This is where the consensus emerges as to what “Lutheran” is, with the task of always discerning what belongs to a colonial and patriarchal past, and what are the codes that liberate and ground our future.

This network is not limited to space, but also expands in time. This is the other side of being networked, where our forebears also join in an unending conversation and we discuss with them our issues as friends. And even when we are stuck, when the alleys are dark, when we may be a little lost, they appear as kind of psychopomps—not to correct our theologies, nor to deny them, but to give us this gentle push that reminds us not to fear as we face the gap.