

Real progress has been made only if the “other” ceases to be an ontological category¹

Reflecting Reformation in a multi-religious world

by Claudia Jahnelt

Ranking “Otherness” in the legacy of the Reformation: a challenge to learn

The legacy of the Reformation in the 16th Century with regard to other religions is problematic. From the past, we have inherited highly pejorative comments and treatises on “the Jews” and on “the Turks”.² But Luther’s comments on “other” Christians, especially “the Papists”, the “Schwärmer” (enthusiasts) and the “Anabaptists”, are even more insulting. What we can observe here is a ranking of “the other” based on comparisons and certain criteria. When he speaks about the “Turkish belief”, for instance, Luther praises the spiritual and moral life of the Muslim religious leaders and comments that they were living “almost like angels”. But, in the last resort, this only leads him to conclude that the Christian monks and the Papists should learn from “the Turks”. The Turks, according to Luther, are the “scourges and the rod of God” that serve to punish the papal heresy. Comparisons like these created a ranking of differences.

With this critical view, I do not want to belittle the important achievements of the Reformation and of Reformation theology. But, when we speak about “Reflecting Reformation in a multi-religious world”, we are confronted with a history of constructions of “otherness” and discourses of “othering” right down to today and these have caused most barbarous acts. In Germany e.g. Luther’s pejorative comments on “the Jews” were used to legitimize the anti-Jewish policy and the stories about Jews as subhuman beings during the time of the Nazi regime. Up to today, anti-Judaist,

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “What a Difference Difference Makes,” *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Z. Smith (Chicago, London: University Of Chicago Press, 2004), 251–302, at 275.

² See the following writings by Martin Luther: “On War Against the Turk” (1529), *Luther’s Works (American Edition)*, Vol. 46, ed. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 155–205; “Heerpredigt wider den Türken” [“Sermon Preached to the Troops on the Eve of the Battle Against the Turk”] (1529), *D. Martin Luthers Werk: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 30/2 (*Martin Luthers Werke Weimarer Ausgabe [= WA 30/II]*) (Graz: H. Böhlau, 1964), 160–197; “Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks” (1541), *Luther’s Works (American Edition)*, Vol. 43, ed. Gustav K. Wiencke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 219–246.

Islamophobic and xenophobic discourses continue. This calls for self-critical scrutiny of how Reformation theology has contributed to the epistemology behind them.

The issues “the Reformation and ‘the other’ ” and “the Reformation in a multi-religious world” do not constitute a triumphant success story. On the contrary, they are a challenge to learn for today and to ask questions. What kind of interpretation has led to the existing constructions of difference and otherness that can be misused so easily? What is the pattern of logic behind this epistemology? How did the Reformation and Reformation theology contribute to this knowledge and its hegemonic position?

The deliberations at hand follow the insights of various cultural studies including postcolonial studies, cultural anthropology and religious studies. They scrutinize “othering” strategies as part of a powerful epistemological discourse. This discourse presumes a logic of dichotomy and constructs binary categories, marks otherness and identity, produces claims about representation and agency, and aims at exhibiting its own superiority. One of the foundational writings of the critical cultural and postcolonial theory is Edward Said’s publication “Orientalism” which has initiated a lively and controversial debate.³ The critical cultural approach can help to enlarge the understanding of the legacy of the Reformation with regard to the constructions of otherness and, in the final analysis, to the encounter and dialogue with other religions.

The thesis that guides my considerations is, firstly, that for living together peacefully in a multi-religious world an ethic of solidarity which is more than an ethic of tolerance is necessary. The latter might be seen as a “minimal disposition [to tolerate others], indispensable for the formation of the citizen’s will in a democratic regime”, as the Latin American philosopher, Enrique Dussel, states.⁴ Yet, an ethic of solidarity “goes beyond mere tolerance and implies responsibility for the Other – especially the victims of injustice”.⁵

My second thesis is that this ethic of solidarity depends on an alternative epistemology of “the other” that overcomes the binary logic and conceives of “the other” not as “something out there” but as part of “us”. This allows the “we” to speak about “the other” not apart from “ourselves” but in relation to “ourselves” – in the words of Jonathan Smith which precede the following paragraph.

“Real progress has been made only if the ‘other’ ceases to be an ontological category. A theory of the ‘other’ requires those complex political and linguistic projects necessary to enable us to think, to situate, and to speak about ‘others’ in relation to the way in which we think, situate, and speak about ourselves.”⁶

In the following, in the first two sections I will briefly sketch how the Reformation has contributed to “othering” discourses and their binary order which came to claim

3 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

4 Enrique Dussel, “Deconstruction of the Concept of ‘Tolerance’: From Intolerance to Solidarity,” *Constellations* 11, 3 (2004): 326–33, at 326.

5 Dussel 320.

6 Smith 275–276.

universal significance and truth and cultural hegemony. The third section will focus on "othering" strategies in contemporary populist right-wing movements and their rhetoric. Fourthly, I will consider alternative models of dealing with religious differences, models that see "the other" less as an ontological "other". Finally, I will sketch some conclusions for the field of interreligious dialogue.

1. The Turks – a Christian Heresy: the challenge of the "proximate other"⁷

There is a hierarchy of otherness ranging from the radically "other" to the less different "other". In the words of Jonathan Smith: "*The radically 'other' is merely 'other'; the proximate 'other' is problematic, and hence, of supreme interest*".⁸ Otherness is a term of interrelation; it is "not so much a matter of separation as it is a description of interaction."⁹

At the time of the Reformation, Islam was perceived as a "proximate other". Evidence of this is shown by Luther's use of the term "the Turks" or by the publishing of the Koran – up to the 18th Century – as "The Turkish Bible". Islam was assessed not as a religion in its own right but as a "Christian heresy" connected to a certain ethnic group – a group, though, which since the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in the year 1453 had been perceived as a political threat. The assessment of Islam as a "Christian heresy" implies an innate and close relationship between these "heretics" and the "orthodox" – Lutheran – tradition. As a "Christian heresy", Islam did not represent what Smith calls "radically other"; "the Turks" were not perceived as "barbarians", meaning those who "barbar" – a Greek expression for babbling and speaking in a way that cannot be understood so communication is not possible. The "radically other" is the other to whom the self relates with indifference because he is incomparable. A relationship does not exist. But the description of Islam as a "Christian heresy" demonstrates that it was perceived as a "proximate other", an "other" to which "Lutherans" and "Catholics" could respond and be compared. As a "Christian heresy", Islam was ALMOST-LIKE-US or even TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US. The reformers' harsh critique of Islam can be interpreted as a means to establish the difference between "them" and "us". When Luther calls "the Turks" liars, murderers and polygamists, a strong normative assessment becomes obvious: "we" are true and orthodox believers and therefore superior while "they" are heretics. This example affirms the dictum of Smith that difference is not an ontological category but a relative

⁷ For extended deliberations on these thoughts see: Claudia Janel, *The Irrational Other: Reflecting on Reformation and Religion in the Light of Western Reason and Its Hybrid Contestations*, in the upcoming publication „Fides et Ratio“, ed. Vitor Westhelle.

⁸ Smith 253.

⁹ Smith 253.

one. It has to do with who “we” are ourselves. Therefore, the act of stating difference is not an innocent endeavour but rather a political act, an act “in which one has a stake. Above all, it is a political matter.”¹⁰

2. Intersections of Dividing Lines

The Protestant Reformation was a movement that showed a high level of creativity in the production of difference and otherness. The dividing lines – meaning the criteria for difference – varied. Yet the various dividing lines were interconnected. In relation to “the Turks”, but also to “the Jews”, an important division marker was faith in Jesus Christ. The systematic theologian, Hans-Martin Barth, states that the “arcanum” of Luther’s theology was justification by God through faith.¹¹ Everyone who questioned this truth – be it the Pope, the Turks, or the Jews – sooner or later became the target of Luther’s criticism.

Another dividing line and criterion for orthodoxy that was encouraged by the Reformation was the acceptance – or rejection – of the theological legitimacy of political authority and the separation of church and state, religion and politics. Luther understood church and state as two different strategies, but both coming from God,¹² and disapproved of groups which mixed church and state.

Evidence of this is found in the reformers’ criticism of the Schwärmer (“enthusiasts”) and the Anabaptists whom Melanchthon called “fanaticus homo”. Both groups had, as William Cavanaugh puts it, “a desire to eliminate any interval between the city of God and the terrestrial city”.¹³ They thereby questioned the theological legitimacy of political authority and the separation of religion and politics.

Luther and his fellow reformers linked “religious fanaticism” to the question of the relation between religion and politics. For them, the fanatic was one who mingled religion with politics. This dividing line touches a question that is still relevant: to what degree is a religion allowed to mingle with politics?

10 Smith 252.

11 Hans Martin Barth, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers: Eine kritische Würdigung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009) 298.

12 Cf. Craig L. Nesson, “Christian Political Responsibility: Reappropriating Luther’s Two Kingdoms,” *Liberating Lutheran Theology: Freedom for Justice and Solidarity in Global Context*, eds. Paul S. Chaung, Ulrich Duchrow, and Craig L. Nesson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 46–52.

13 William T. Cavanaugh, “The Invention of Fanaticism”, *Faith, Rationality, and the Passions*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 29–40, at 32.

3. Master narratives of “the other” today: old and new proximities and similarities

I will stop discussing Luther and other reformers here and turn to our times. The dividing lines, the strategies and processes of “othering” with their related hierarchy of different “others” developed into master narratives in times of secularization, and continue to be pressing issues today.

The Hispanic US American religious sociologist, José Casanova, considers the assumption – that had already guided Luther and his fellow reformers – that religion and politics are two different spheres to be a “Western European narrative”. “Modern Europeans learned to separate religion, politics and science,” he states. “Most importantly, they learned to tame the religious passions and to dissipate obscurantist fanaticisms by banishing religion to a protected private sphere, while establishing an open, liberal, secular public sphere where freedom of expression and public reason dominate.”¹⁴

The most outstanding “other” today, the one which is associated with breaking with these rules of separating private religion and secular state, is probably Islam, at least in the so-called Western World. Whether Islam is called the “most irrational religion” among the other religions – as argued e.g. by the philosophical group “New Atheism” around Sam Harris;¹⁵ or whether George W. Bush links the “axis of evil” to countries with a Muslim majority; whether Samuel Huntington forecasts a clash of cultures, with the cultures influenced historically to a high degree by Christianity on one side and those influenced mainly by Islam on the other;¹⁶ or whether the German populist author, Thilo Sarrazin, calls Islam a fundamentalist, backward oriented religion,¹⁷ in many cases Islam is being generalized and understood as a closed entity without any hybrid contestation or negotiation. As such it has become the “Schwärmer” and the “Anabaptists”, “the fanatic” and the “irrational other” of our time.

Of course, there are also other religions and denominations or religious movements which are labelled “other” and “different” today. Mainline churches often view the new Pentecostal churches as “other”, especially those which promise prosperity. Obviously, Pentecostal churches are “proximate” others, as they share the same Protestant heritage. Therefore, it is no wonder that the discussion on Pentecostal

¹⁴ José Casanova, “The problem of religion and the anxieties of European secular democracy”, *Religion and Democracy in Contemporary Europe*, eds. Gabriel Motzkin and Yochi Fischer, (London: Alliance Publishing Trust, 2008), 63–74, at 64.

¹⁵ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton; Reprint edition, 2005).

¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁷ Thilo Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2010).

churches is heated and emotional while at the same time mainline churches adopt elements of Pentecostal worship and liturgy. The insistence of many new Pentecostal churches on the materialization of God's blessings here and now, in the world, in healing and prosperity, shows parallels to the Schwärmers' idea of realizing the kingdom of God on earth, eliminating any gap between the city of God and the terrestrial city. It seems that the faith traditions that had been excluded or marginalized by the Reformers and even sentenced by the political authorities of that time keep coming back. Like the Schwärmer in Luther's day, Pentecostal movements reject binary orders like that of an eschatology of now and not yet or the dichotomization of body and mind, and call for the materialization of divine blessings.

The "problem" that mainline churches worldwide have with neo-Pentecostal churches is not alterity but similarity. Pentecostal Christians' understanding of themselves as Christians, "proximate" and close to the self-understanding of adherents of mainline churches, challenges the mainline churches to define themselves. While " 'remoteness' guarantees [...] indifference"¹⁸, it is the existence of "other Christians" which engendered apologetic writings and intra-religious controversies from New Testament times onwards. Many religious conflicts are intra-religious because similarity and closeness question one's own identity far more than difference. Borders of identity become necessary the more the uniqueness of one's own identity is questioned.

With regard to Muslims and Jews, as we have seen, there are, on the one hand, historic reasons that constitute their "proximity" and, hence, have caused controversies and conflicts. On the other hand, today the character and attribution of proximity has slightly changed. Proximity has become "more a matter of territoriality than of thought".¹⁹ In the "age of migration", in which we witness a new quantity and quality of migration,²⁰ this "proximity" by territoriality poses a challenge. Last but not least, proximity has also become a matter of digital territoriality, and this entails new proximities of thought. For instance, the "confession" of Larossi Abballa, a French citizen with a Moroccan background, who killed a policeman and his wife in Paris in June 2016, provides evidence of these new proximities. He said, "The Internet has programmed me. It [the ISIS propaganda] touched me".²¹ The internet provides a new territoriality and a new proximity with new battles of otherness and difference taking place on this new battleground.

18 Smith 276

19 Smith 276.

20 Cf. Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).

21 Cf. Jared Cohen, the head of Google Ideas, who said: "The IS is the first terror group which controls a physical and digital territory", quoted from: Georg Mascolo, Nicolas Richter, *Krieg im Internet – Coole Zeiten in der Hölle*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 139, 18./19. Juni, S. 2.

4. "The other" as constitutive element of populist movements

Today we witness a revival of "othering" processes in the guise of Islamophobic, xenophobic, Christian-phobic, anti-Jewish, racist, nativist, fundamentalist or populist movements. Most if not all of these movements have a particularistic origin and an idealized vision of how to define what "the self", their own tradition or identity is. Yet, they claim universal significance and fight for the cultural hegemony of "their" cultural system and for a set of reliable values which they call the original "German", "Hungarian", "North-American", "Austrian" or "Turkish" values. In Germany e.g. in December 2014, the PEGIDA movement was founded. PEGIDA means "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident". It is a right-wing populist movement that organised anti-immigrant demonstrations first in Dresden and later in many other German cities, as well as using the social media to spread Islamophobic and xenophobic messages. Sometimes representatives of PEGIDA use the metaphor of a "Christian West" that is threatened by "the other" but the content of their "Christian West" is determined more by nationalist sentiments than by Christian values.

In order to understand the logic and dynamics behind movements like these, as well as behind the cultural conflicts which have multiplied in the 20th and 21st century, it is helpful to consider Ernesto Laclau's research on the phenomenon of populism.²² Populist movements in France, Germany, the USA, Austria or Hungary, Laclau states, are not an exception but the normal case in a democratic system. Like every project and discourse that strives for a hegemonic position, populist movements are based on a twofold logic, a logic of difference and a logic of equivalence, and gain their identity by demarcating difference: by defining the "radically other", the one who is "out" of their system of thought and norms. Paradoxically the "excluded other" is therefore constitutive for the self: "Islam" is constitutive as "the other" for right wing populist movements; Mexicans, gay and lesbian people are constitutive for conservative republicans in the United States; the automobile industry is the constitutive "other" for ecological activists, etc. "The other" stabilizes the self and needs to be invoked and brought into awareness constantly in order to support populist reasoning and power. "The other" guarantees the continuity of their hegemonic position.

Populist movements use the fragile moments in the development of a society, according to Laclau, and collect the people who are frustrated. By constructing a common "other", an "enemy" – be it the state, capitalism, the establishment or the foreigners – cohesion between the various groups can be constructed and hope for a better future nurtured. This is what Laclau calls the logic of equivalence.

Laclau confirms Jonathan Smith's thesis that "otherness" is not innocent but rather the product of an act in which one has an interest, most often a political one. One of the special insights Laclau's research adds is that, especially in contexts of change and

²² Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London/New York: Verso, 2005).

social or economic insecurity, “othering” discourses strive for hegemony and a transformation of society which fits the ideology and struggle for power of a specific group.

5. Counter-hegemonic discourses and discourses that do not essentialize “the other”

Cultural hegemonic discourses are most often accompanied by counter-hegemonic discourses, namely discourses that question the prevailing hegemony – discourses of resistance. These counter-discourses take different forms and can, for example, be very counter-essentialistic or reverse discourses, that stick to the same constructions of “others” but reverse their evaluation. They can take place in hidden transcripts; this means that they take place in public but are camouflaged so that the powerful cannot read them and do not recognise them as acts of resistance.²³

The question at hand is whether there are counter-hegemonic discourses that do not rate one or two or three lines of otherness as insurmountable barriers and do not see “the other” as an “ontological other”.

One example for a somewhat differentiated discourse which questions constructions of otherness is presented by the Malaysian Lutheran theologian, Sivin Kit, in his doctoral dissertation “Transforming Solidarity: Social Discourses Around the ‘Allah’ Controversy in Malaysian New Media (2007–2014)”.²⁴ The issue Kit’s thesis deals with is that “since 2007, both political and religious authorities have been prominent voices in the Malaysian public dispute over the Christian use of ‘Allah’ in Malay Bible and Christian religious material.”²⁵ What Kit shows is that, while the official political and religious position demanded that the word “Allah” be deleted from the Christian Bible and other Christian resources, in the public sphere of the social media many Muslim and non-Muslim actors questioned this official debate and logic. These voices in the social fora in the internet challenged the political and religious authorities and their ethno-religious centrism and called for inter-religious solidarity and cosmopolitan multiculturalism. Behind the official discourse, namely in the social media, there was a more unofficial discourse, and this discourse on the Allah controversy had been marked more by differentiation and solidarity and less by “ontologic othering”.

23 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1990).

24 Sivin Kit, *Transforming Solidarity: Social Discourses Around the ‘Allah’ Controversy in Malaysian New Media (2007–2014)*, Doctoral Dissertation at the University of Agder, 2014, unpublished.

25 Kit 5.

Kit summarises, "For those who supported the government, the controversy was framed as a 'disruption' of the Malay-Muslim majority's 'religious sensitivities' or the 'peace and harmony' of Malaysian society. As expected, in general the participants argued over religious doctrines and interests in Malaysian politics; however, the participants further engaged in debate to discuss themes such as equality, religious freedom, tolerance, and multiculturalism in Malaysia. Some Muslim and non-Muslim voices would speak of 'moderation' and 'interreligious' understanding; others offered a different emphasis: they 'interrupted' these discussions with explicit attention to 'justice' and 'solidarity'. The turn towards justice and solidarity by these voices suggests they show a shared resistance towards discourses of interreligious hostility. They also question a reductive understanding of multiculturalism often under the label of 'tolerance'; [...] While some voices expressed inclusionary dispositions, others expressed subjective and intersubjective conceptions of solidarity that account for the 'interruption from affected and excluded others'. It is important to highlight when the voices explicitly discussed the religious other as a victim affected by ethno-religious centric government policies and practices, their voices appear to show occasional interreligious solidary dispositions, cosmopolitan multiculturalism orientations, and a trans-modern imagination."²⁶

Kit's study shows the phenomenon of how dominant discourses and binary constructions of "the other" can be interrupted. Other values become more important, such as solidarity, justice, religious tolerance, multiculturalism and equality, and then "the other" is included. The sense and the actions of solidarity that Kit observes reveal a relationship between the various "others", a proximity which nevertheless does not entail a need to distance oneself again from the other. The joint "enemy", "the other" that binds the critical Muslim or Christian voices together, is the official religious and social policy. According to Laclau's theory, this is the logic of equivalence in the face of difference. What the critical voices share is that the government should promote religious tolerance, freedom and justice.

6. Freedom and solidarity – unconcluding remarks on the contribution of Lutheran Theology to interreligious co-existence

Reflecting Reformation in a multi-religious world means inquiring about the relevance of Lutheran theology in the midst of religious plurality, diversity and interreligious conflicts. What the deliberations on the power of "othering" discourses - from the time of the Reformation until today - have shown is, firstly, that the story of the Reformation with regard to "the other" is a role model almost exclusively "via negativa"; this im-

²⁶ Kit 294.

plies learning from its failures and scrutinizing the logic of “othering” that served to legitimize the superiority of this “young” Lutheran faith and belief which sought its identity by distancing itself from “others”.

These insights point, secondly, to the need of a theory of “the other” that sees “the other” not as “something out there”, something threatening and an “ontological other”, but as part of the self and as a relational category. The Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst and philosopher, Julia Kristeva, claims that, because “the other”, the stranger, is a part of the self, it is only by reconciling with and respecting this “other in us” that we come to respect “the other” in the world.²⁷ “The other”, on the other hand, is a relational category. Therefore to speak about “the other” means at the same time to speak about “ourselves”, because in speaking about “the other” the “I” and the “we” are always involved with their attitudes, emotions, knowledge and values.

The theological ground and source of this relational theory of “the other” is that, in the Christian tradition, God, faith and truth are relational categories. The discovery of the Reformation that man/woman is saved by God’s grace alone entails the idea of the freedom of the Christian. This cornerstone of Reformation theology is of crucial importance with regard to the relation to representatives of other religions because it involves the freedom from defining one’s own – Christian – identity in contrast to “the other”. Christian identity is defined by God and therefore any fear of losing that identity is groundless. Paradoxically, the identity of a Christian is marked by the fact that identity cannot be constructed but is a gift from God.

Nevertheless human beings never live without differences. The systematic theologian, Michael Welker, states that God’s Holy Spirit has caused not only “harmony, unanimity and unity among human beings”. God’s Spirit has rather stimulated an “energetic field that is sensitive with regard to differences, in which joy about the created empowering differences is nurtured, and unjust, weakening differences are dealt with in love, mercy and gentleness”.²⁸

In a multi-religious world, religions are sometimes misused in an irresponsible way to legitimize the exercise of violence and injustice for the sake of political or economic interests. Therefore unjust and weakening differences need to be dealt with also in solidarity with the victims, in fighting for the human rights of all and in ministries of healing and reconciliation. “The other” requires an ethic of solidarity and the responsibility to speak out against hatred.

Welker’s appeal for a differentiated view of differences is, in the final analysis, a call for education. Insistence on education is a main focus of the Protestant Reformation. More than other impulses, this idea was translated and transformed into institutions like schools and the catechism. In the Reformation tradition, faith should be a knowl-

27 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

28 Michael Welker, *Gottes Geist: Theologie des Heiligen Geistes*, 5th ed., (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag 2013), 231.

edgeable, reflective and differentiating faith. This priority of education calls for an ethic of differentiation in contrast to the claim to cultural hegemony and reductionist constructions of "the other", as well as to the "the self" that populist politics prioritize.

Otherness is a situational category, a transactional matter, an affair of the "in between." A theological metaphor for God that responds to the challenge posed by otherness today in a multi-religious world is the perception of God as the "Go-between-God", as the former Anglican bishop, John Taylor, described God.²⁹ God goes between human beings no matter of which religion. He also goes in between wherever necessary, where human rights are violated, where people have built barriers of religion, sexual orientation or race. Because the Holy Spirit is a "Go-between-God", the borders of the church and of theology are not an abyss but the bridge to "the other".

²⁹ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM 1972; New Edition, SCM Classics 2002).