

Foreword

WITHIN ECUMENICAL DISCUSSIONS, Lutheran theology often has been caricatured as being too complicit with regard to economic or political injustices, or reluctant to challenge such on theological grounds. Regrettably, there are too many examples that give credence to this, most notably from the German church under Nazism, as well as legacies of Lutheranism that were passed on through mission movements and that, even today, continue to shape the self-understandings and hamper the public witness of too many Lutheran churches around the world.

Since especially the 1970s, there have been crucial efforts to correct these inaccurate interpretations and applications of Lutheran theology, especially with regard to Luther's "two kingdoms" understandings. One of the authors here, Ulrich Duchrow, did the definitive work on this, on which many other theologians have built since then.¹ He also served as Director of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Commission on Studies during a time in which the LWF became much more engaged with social, economic, and political realities, including taking a *status confessionis* stance in the case of South Africa Lutheran churches under apartheid. Since then, theology that is more engaged with contextual social, economic, and political realities has been the starting point for much of the theology work carried out through the LWF, as well as in many other venues around the world.

Writings by the three theologians that are brought together in this book give in-depth attention to some of the strategic theological developments, insights, and implications of re-examining Luther's writings, especially in relation to the main dynamics and paradigms of neoliberalism dominating the world today.

Craig Nesson underscores through an examination of Latin American history that Latin American liberation theologies have been pivotal in giving preferential option to the poor and raising up economic and political oppression as central for theology and praxis for structural change. In response to Latin American critiques of Luther's two-kingdoms teaching, he proposes the re-conceptualization of Luther's political thought as God's two "strategies" for ruling the world. Furthermore, he analyzes the work of representative Lutheran and other theologians in the Americas and Europe who were

significantly influenced by these developments. Countless other examples, both female and male, could be added to those on whom he focuses.

Paul Chung, a U.S.-based theologian originally from Korea, creatively re-interprets Luther as “a theologian of economic justice” and explores the complex theological connections with economic and political realities not only of Luther’s day but also with regard to recent developments in South Korea and Asian culture in general. Chung retrieves a forgotten side of the relationship between the legacy of the Confessing Church and Asian *minjung* theological development. Here the Barmen Declaration is contextualized as a call to move forward emancipation and inculturation in terms of interfaith dialogue with socially engaged Buddhism. Thereby he lifts up some intriguing interfaith possibilities today in relation to Luther’s insights.

Ulrich Duchrow summarizes key biblical, historical, and theological work on which he has focused, especially in relation to ecumenical processes that challenge and call for resistance to neoliberalism, and compares this with Gandhi’s approach to such matters. He also summarizes a collaborative study on especially the psychological dynamics that hinder those in the middle class from moving toward greater solidarity with those exploited by these forces that must be resisted on the basis of faith.

Overall, this is an impressive corpus of substantial, complex theological chapters that together make an undisputed case that theology as inspired by Luther and others provides strong bases for resisting and developing alternatives to the forces that so massively oppress and exploit human beings and creation.

This book not only corrects some misperceptions of Lutheran theology but also makes a strong case for what such perspectives can contribute to the wider ecumenical movement as well as interfaith and civil society movements. The chapters here should be read mindful of the important work that other theologians also have been doing in recent decades, especially from feminist, indigenous, and other perspectives from around the world, and whose insights and approaches could be added to what is represented here. The interaction between these similar yet different perspectives is crucial for the sake of more trans-contextual Lutheran theology that can inspire and motivate greater engagement in the challenges discussed here, as has occurred, for example, in the LWF *Theology in the Life of the Church* program and publications.²

The major unmet challenge after reading any substantial volume, such as this, is how in actual practice the people most vulnerable or affected by these structural injustices can be empowered to resist and work for alternatives.

There are hints of that here, which others could build upon. In addition to theological-ethical statements, effective organizing and follow-through to make an actual difference in policies and practices is crucial.³

There is much here that others can draw from and develop further in relation to their own contexts—and thus expand the scope of what is covered here. We are indebted to the authors for the careful, in-depth work they have brought together in this volume. At points, readers may want to dispute or argue with, add to, or broaden what is written here, for the sake of furthering Lutheran engagement in ecumenical, interfaith, and civil society efforts to address these massive challenges.

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