Allowing the Other to be the Other: A Reading of Luther as a Theologian of Otherness

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Introduction

In the last decade or so, Lutheran theologians have begun the process of contextualizing Luther. This contextualizing process allows us to hear Luther's words anew as they reverberate in new environs. Two recent examples include *Transformative Lutheran Theologies* (Fortress, 2010), a collection of feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* interpretations of Luther and the Lutheran tradition, and Vítor Westhelle's *Transfiguring Luther* (Wipf and Stock, 2016), contrapunctual readings of Luther's theology that seek to subvert the dominant mode of Luther interpretation. Lutheran theologians are looking for new ways in which Luther's theology may speak to today's world.

This article offers one of those new ways. We will read Luther's theology as an aporia to the modern world. This effort joins with those who read Luther from the "postmodern" perspective However, this work is a slight variation on these treatments of Luther. Rather than arguing that Luther speaks to the postmodern condition, I argue that Luther's theology can provide resistance to the oppressive mechanisms of modernity. Rather than seeing Luther as a theologian who speaks abstractly to our cultural *Zeitgeist*, I argue that Luther's theology provides a foothold for those who push back against the dominant logic of our society. Luther should be viewed as a resource that protests against structures of domination, which include racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. As a white, straight male, I suggest neither that Luther was a proto-liberationist nor that Luther had all the theological answers. Luther was not and Luther did not. At the same time, when we contextualize Luther in the cultural logic of our day, we bring forth a new reading of Luther—one that gains resonance in the age of Donald Trump and the events that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the summer of 2017.

The article is organized in three parts. In the first part, I introduce my reading of modernity by referring to what the political philosopher Iris Marion Young identifies as "the logic of identity." In the second part, I substantiate the argument by evaluating three foci of Luther's theology: Luther's *theologia crucis,* his doctrine of justification, and his notion of the hiddenness of God. In evaluating these three foci, I argue that Luther's theology presents an aporia to the logic of modernity, which is symbolized by Young's "logic of identity." In the final part, I draw some conclusions about Luther's theology as a theology of otherness.

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Modernity and the logic of identity

In his book, *The Philosophy of Liberation,* the liberation theologian Enrique Dussel writes: "Before the *ego cogito* there is an *ego conquiro*; 'I conquer' is the practical foundation of "I think."[1] By quoting the *ego cogito,* Dussel calls attention to the fact that there was an epistemic structure that produced modernity, which modernity came to think of as its highest achievement: the use of Reason. The use of Reason, which had been championed throughout modernity, is also responsible for many of the abuses of modernity. In the latter half of the twentieth century, philosophers and literary critics began to question some of the norms and values of modernity. Among those characterized as "postmodern" or "postcolonial" theorists, philosophers (some from Europe and

1. Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 3.

North America, some from the Third World) turned their gaze back on modernity's own self-understanding. These theorists began to reveal what Dussel identified as the "underside of modernity."

One such theorist is the late political philosopher Iris Marion Young. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference,* Young outlines what she terms as "the logic of identity." Young builds off the work of post-structural theorists (namely Adorno, Irigaray, and Derrida) to characterize "the logic of identity" as a kind of totalizing instrumental logic that seeks to reduce "otherness" into "the same." In the logic of identity, that which is "other" is brought into "the same" by mechanisms of power and control, what Foucault called elements of power/knowledge. Young writes:

> The logic of identity expresses one construction of the meaning and operations of reason: an urge to think things together, to reduce them to unity. To give a rationale is to find the universal, the one principle, the law, covering the phenomena to be accounted for...The logic of identity tends to conceptualize entities in terms of substance rather than process or relation; substance is the self-same entity that underlies change, that can be identified, counted, measured.[2]

Different from "identity politics,"[3] Young describes the privileging of one "principle" or one "law" as essential to the mechanisms of the logic of identity.

The logic of identity functions by absolutizing one feature, and then evaluates or reduces phenomena to that one feature. In such societal processes, those who own the means of production can produce a feature or principle, which is absolutized. Young argues that the logic of identity is operative in processes of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia. In each of these cultural struggles, one identity is privileged as the principle over against its "other." In contemporary North American society, such dichotomies include rich/poor, white person/person of color, male/female, transgendered/cisgendered, and so on. Young argues that "these dichotomies in Western (modern) discourse are structured by the dichotomy good/bad, pure/impure. The first side of the dichotomy is elevated over the second because it designates the unified, the self-identical, whereas the second side lies outside...as the chaotic, unformed."[4]

For example, consider the production of whiteness in contemporary North American society, which is critical to the underlying logic of racism in our society. In contemporary North American society, "whiteness" is seen as a universal, as a transcendental norm, which seeks to reduce difference to otherness. Franz Fanon articulates the "logic of identity" when he famously recounted his experience of being pointed at by a white French boy in Paris. Upon hearing the boy point at Fanon and say, "Look! A Negro!" Fanon recounts his ontological reading of the event: "My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly, look a Negro."[5] Fanon continues: "The white world, the only decent one, was preventing me from participating. It demanded that a man behave like a man. It demanded of me that I behave like a black man—or at least like a Negro...The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed*."[6] Fanon wrote that the gaze of the young boy fixed his own identity. Young reads Fanon's experience as a function of the logic of identity. In taking the gaze of the white boy into account, we would say the white boy's understanding of identity is determined by whiteness. In Young's terminology, whiteness is the principle of the boy's logic of identity. Fanon, as a black man in a predominately white French society, does not fit into the boy's understanding of "normal" identity, which renders Fanon as "the Other."

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The "logic of identity" has functioned as an analytical tool that has led to the greatest social and cultural struggles of modernity.[7] Powerful critiques of the logic of identity have often come from those outside Europe and North America, who have the epistemological privilege to demonstrate the oppressive logics of modernity. These critiques have functioned as acts of political resistance. The aim of these critiques is to show the limits, contradictions, or ambivalences within the cultural project of

2. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference,* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 98.

3. I would describe "identity politics" as the coalescing of people into their own identity as a form of cultural solidarity or the accumulation of political power. Cultural solidarity, as an organizing principle, affirms the politics of difference. On the other hand, Young's conceptualization of "the logic of identity" privileges the identity of one group over against another group.

4. Young, 99.

5. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, Grove Press, 2008), 93.

6. Fanon, 94–95.

7. It is important to note that Young contrasts the logic of identity with the logic or the play of difference. In Young's words, "The logic of identity denies or represses difference. Difference, as I understand it, names the play of concrete events and the shifting differentiation on which signification depends. Reason, discourse, is always already inserted in a plural, heterogenous world that outruns totalizing comprehension" (Ibid., 98). Thus, Young argues for an understanding of justice that impedes the operations of the logic of identity by providing space for a politics of difference. In such a politics of difference, cultural difference is affirmed as "absolute otherness," which means that otherness is not brought back into any conventional schema.

modernity. Such critiques are powerful because they relativize the power of oppressive structures. This is where the theology of Martin Luther comes into our analysis. Luther's theology provides fertile ground for political resistance against the oppressive logics of modernity. In the next section, we turn our attention to three elements of Luther's theology: Luther's *theologia crucis,* his doctrine of justification, and his understanding of the hiddenness of God.

The theologian of the cross

In Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation,* Luther elucidates what he terms "the theologian of the cross" (*theologia crucis)* over against "the theologian of glory." Luther specifically outlines the identity of a theologian of the cross in theses 19 to 22:

> 19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things that have happened.
>
> 20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
>
> 21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the things what it actually is.
>
> 22. That wisdom that sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.[8]

Luther's *theologia crucis* is related both to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and the doctrine of justification. Luther believes that humans look for "the invisible things of God." Luther will expand on this thesis to argue that humans look for God in the "high places," meaning in the places of honor, power, and strength. By claiming that Lutherans should look for God "through suffering and the cross," Luther reiterates that God chooses to be known in the death of Jesus Christ, a convicted criminal in the outskirts of Empire. Luther's *theologia crucis* is also tied to the doctrine of justification. Just as humans look for God in the "high places," Luther notes that humans "puff themselves up" by trying to merit their own justification. The theologian of the cross understands that they are sinful human beings in need of God's grace. Instead of puffing themselves up, they acknowledge reality "as it actually is" to allow God's grace to empower them.

Before we address the aporia that emerges with Luther's *theologia crucis,* we extend our analysis of *theologia crucis* by summarizing it in three points. First, God reveals God's self indirectly or, as Luther puts it, under the opposite. The theologian of the cross is more precise about the nature of God's revelation by pointing to the cross. The theologian of the cross warns against the human tendency to envision God in their own image, which has a way of deifying or reifying the given social order. The Bible has a word for this tendency: idolatry. As a theologian of the cross, Luther remains vigilant against looking for God in the "invisible things." Luther instead refocuses our attention on the cross.

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Second, God is known in suffering. In Luther's explanation of the 21st thesis, Luther writes: "This is clear: Whoever does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore, they prefer works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil."[9] In his analysis, Luther instinctively connects the divine order with the human order: if we look for God in the suffering of Christ, we will find God in the suffering of the Other. The theologian of the cross, then, is called to look for God in the suffering of the poor and oppressed.

Third, God's revelation is a matter of faith. The theologian of the cross understands that God reveals God's self in a particular and hidden way. As Lutheran theologians note, God reveals God's self by hiding God's self. What this means is that God's revelation can be understood only through the experience of faith, which stands over against the experience of the world. For Luther, God's revelation, as an event of faith, comes to a head in contrast to the Roman Catholic use of human reason to grasp God's revelation. Luther believes God's revelation so upsets the norms and values of "the ways of the world" that it can only be learned in faith.

Luther's invocation that theologians should practice theology as theologians of the cross, rather than theologians of the glory, points to *theologia crucis* as a stumbling block to modernity's own self-understanding. The dominant logic of modernity is a logic of identity and competition, fueled by the spread of global capital. The currency of modernity is the production of desire. In the global marketplace, which is saturated by corporate advertisements and products, consumers desire what is the "highest" or the "best." Luther believes that *theologia crucis* extinguishes desire redefining value. Value is not determined by desire.[10] Instead, Luther argues

8. *Luther's Works* [Hereafter, *LW*] 31: 40–41.

9. *LW* 31: 53.

10. In the proof of Thesis 22 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther writes: "The desire for knowledge is not satisfied by acquisition of wisdom but is stimulated that much more. Likewise the desire for glory is not satisfied by the acquisition of glory, nor is the desire to rule satisfied by power and authority, nor is the desire for praise satisfied by praise…The remedy for curing desire lies not in satisfying it, but in extinguishing it" (*LW* 31: 54).

that desire is determined by the justice of God. Luther believes that a *theologia crucis* calls us to believe in God and not in things of the world. The theologian of the cross presents an aporia to modernity's own self-understanding.

The doctrine of justification

Luther maintains that the doctrine of justification is "the doctrine by which the church stands or falls." The contours of Luther's doctrine of justification are well-known: human beings, being captive to the power of sin, cannot justify themselves before God; therefore, they are justified by the promises of God's grace alone, which is given freely by virtue of Jesus' death on the cross. What is less well-known is that Luther also conceptualized the doctrine of justification as the "wonderful exchange." In conceptualizing the doctrine of justification as "the wonderful exchange," not only does Luther give a more precise rendering of the event of the cross, Luther also discloses a new way of understanding God's justice ("righteousness"), an understanding of justice that challenges modernity's own self-understanding. Before turning attention to the wonderful exchange, we first need to remind ourselves of the intellectual and ecclesiastical contexts in which Luther lived.

The dominant theological interpretation of Luther's day, namely the theological interpretation of the Roman Church, maintained that God gives God's grace to those who do "what is in them." This theological axiom (known in Latin as *facere quod in se est*) relied on the classic Aristotelian categories of justice; namely, that one becomes just by doing just things. This axiom made conventional "sense": individuals should be given what they are due. According to this logic, if one wanted to receive God's forgiveness, one must earn it by doing what is in them, by cooperating with God's grace in some way. As a monk who suffered from spiritual attacks, however, the idea that Luther should "do what is in him" frankly terrified him. Luther believed that he was "dung" compared to the power and majesty of God, which led him to doubt his own ability to merit God's grace.

Amid these struggles, Luther eventually rediscovers the message of God's grace through his lecturing on the Bible. In his commentary on Isaiah, he proposes the "wonderful exchange." In the "wonderful exchange," Christ stands in our place in order that we might receive the grace of God. As Luther puts it: "Note the wonderful exchange: One man sins, another pays the penalty; one deserves peace, the other has it. The one who should have peace has chastisement, while the one who should have chastisement has peace." In the very next lecture, Luther reiterates the wonderful exchange: "This is the supreme and chief article of faith, that our sins, placed on Christ, are not ours; again, that the peace is not Christ's but ours."[11] Luther's rediscovery of the Gospel message eased his troubled conscience because it affirms that humans do not have to work toward their own justification. The justification event is received in grace through faith, which is given in the baptismal promise. Luther quickly realized that this rediscovery

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of God's grace cut against the dominant theological interpretation of his day. Instead of having to cooperate with God's grace by doing "what is in them," God justifies the human sinner based on faith alone.

Luther argued that the Gospel message calls into question the normative logic of the Roman Church, an epistemological challenge that helped to galvanize Luther's reformation. Even more, Luther's rediscovery of the doctrine of justification presents an aporia to the modern sense of what it means to be human by presenting justification as a passive event. In modernity's self-understanding, an individual's sense of self is tied to production: *You are what you produce.* Vítor Westhelle notes that the Roman Church's model of justification was essentially an economic relationship: God gives grace in exchange for sinners doing what is in them. In that sense, Luther's doctrine of justification is a powerful critique of this "economic order." Westhelle writes: "The gift of grace subverts the economic order, it requires a passive (and passionate, therefore) relinquishment of any reliance on the rules of the trade."[12]

Luther understood the paradoxical nature of the doctrine of justification. In Luther's *Disputation Concerning Justification,* we read these three theses:

3. If a person is truly justified by works, he has glory before others, but not before God.
4. A person is truly justified by faith in the sight of God, even if he finds only disgrace before others and the self.
5. This is a mystery of God, who exalts God's saints, because it is not only impossible to comprehend for the godless, but marvelous and hard to believe even for the pious themselves.[13]

11. *LW* 17: 225.

12. Vítor Westhelle, *Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 48.

13. *LW* 34: 151.

The structure of these theses evokes Luther's recognition that the doctrine of justification was an aporia in his own day. The event of God's justification is a *mystery* because the message of grace provides a stumbling block to the dominant understanding of what it means to be a human being. This is even more true today in the age of global capital, in which one's value is determined by one's production. Luther's rediscovery of the doctrine of justification envisions a different understanding of what it means to be human.

The hiddenness of God

In "Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," the Reformed theologian B.A. Gerrish noted that Luther wrote about God's hiddenness in two ways. Luther's first manner of talking about the hiddenness of God is the way to which we have already referred: God hides God's self in Jesus' death on the cross. But Gerrish argues that Luther has another manner of talking about God's hiddenness: God also hides God's self beyond God's revelation. Gerrish writes: "The 'Hidden God' is the Unknown God of the ancient world, God beyond the reach of human intelligence: he belongs to the domain of Logos, but marks its boundary or limit. The 'God who hides himself' belongs to Mythos: he is the divinity who achieves his ends by disguising himself."[14] Gerrish, building off the work of Paul Althaus and Walther von Loewenich,[15] creates a typology for two manners of the hiddenness of God: "Hiddenness I" refers to God's hiddenness in the death of Christ (thus, the hiddenness about which theologians of the cross speak) and "Hiddenness II" refers to the God's hiddenness beyond God's self-disclosure.[16]

What do we make of the second manner of God's hiddenness? It is helpful to remember that the second manner of God's hiddenness has been tied to Moses' experience of God in the book of Exodus: first, in Exodus 3, when God reveals God's self as YHWH (which may be translated as "I am who I am") via the burning bush, and again, in Exodus 33, when God hides God's self from Moses. In both experiences, God shows a reluctance to reveal God's self completely, as if God's nature is too mysterious to be revealed fully. Luther writes about this manner of God's hiddenness most directly in his response to Erasmus in *The Bondage of the Will*:

> We have to argue in one way about God or the will of God as preached, revealed, offered, and worshiped, and in another way about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not offered, not worshiped. To the extent, therefore, that God hides God's self and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours.[17]

A few paragraphs later, Luther writes that there is a "distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God himself. God does many things that he does not disclose to us in God's word; God also wills many things which God does not disclose as God's willing in God's word."[18]

In treating Luther as a *figura*, whose meaning resounds anew as he is interpreted in new contexts, the onus is put upon Lutheran theologians to interpret Luther in new and creative ways. When we do so, we can see that the hiddenness of God provides an open space for political resistance to the status quo.

Luther argues that we must always remember that part of God's nature has not been revealed to us, even in the person of Christ. Elsewhere, Luther argues that this manner of God's hiddenness is 'no business of ours' precisely because we must have faith in God's revelation in the person of Christ and God's promises that are given in the sacraments.[19] Luther also argues that God cannot reveal God's self completely because of human sin; therefore, they must rely on faith rather than their own reason. This manner of God's hiddenness dovetails with Luther's constant concern about "human reason." Human reason cannot control God by knowing God fully. Humans must believe by the "light of grace."[20]

Some interpreters of Luther suggest that Luther's second manner of God's hiddenness should be interpreted as God "reifying" or "baptizing" the current social order. After all, Luther elucidates this form of God's hiddenness to suggest that we cannot know everything about God's nature, this as a means of pushing back against Erasmus's positing an analogical correspondence between human ethical action and God's promises. Luther's response is that we cannot understand God's promises, which might be understood as arguing for ethical or political quietism in response to political injustice. However, in treating Luther as a *figura*, whose meaning resounds anew as he is interpreted in new contexts, the onus is put upon Lutheran theologians to interpret Luther in new and creative ways. When we do so, we can see that the hiddenness of God provides an open space for political resistance to the status quo.

Luther's second form of God's hiddenness presents an *aporia* to the dominant logic of modernity, because it presents "breakdown" in the way modernity conceives of God and the world. The modern

14. Brian Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *Journal of Religion* 53, no. 3 (July 1973), 268.
15. See Westhelle, *The Scandalous God,* 55.
16. Gerrish, 268.
17. *LW* 33: 139.
18. *LW* 33: 140.
19. *LW* 12: 312.
20. See Luther on the "light of grace" in *LW* 33: 292.

world often conceives of the relationship between God and the world to be a relationship of ontological correspondence: the divine order and the created order, although separate, ontologically reinforce each other. To say something about the divine order is, *de facto,* to say something about the human order.[21] With Luther's articulation of the second manner of God's hiddenness, Luther breaks this understanding of the ontological correspondence between the divine and created order.

The second manner of God's hiddenness calls into question the "logic of identity," as articulated by Young. Because God cannot be fully grasped, God's nature cannot be fixed: God is indeed "wholly Other." But God's radical otherness lies not only in God's otherness to human thought and logic ("wholly other" in Barth's sense). God's radical otherness lies in the creation of space for otherness. Lutheran theologian, Paul Chung, writes: "God, the radical alterity, is the One who provides a space, place, and planet to us through Christ's reconciliation in protest to the global reality of lordless powers."[22] God's hiddenness provides space for otherness, not only within God's self but within our own selves. *Tout autre est tout autre.* "Every other is the wholly other, the wholly other is every other."[23] God's otherness opens up space for what Young refers to as a "politics of difference." In constructing a politics of difference, we open ourselves to the meaning of justice: to let the other be the Other.

Conclusion: Reading Luther's theology as a theology of otherness

In the immediate wake of Donald Trump's election to be the President of the United States in November 2016, a curious phrase entered the vernacular of civil protest and disobedience: "Not my President!" This phrase was shouted at protests in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles just as it was used by hundreds of people on Twitter as a hashtag. Some might dismiss "Not my President" as a millenium "temper tantrum" by those who did not support Trump. Yet, I believe that "Not my President" ought to be interpreted as a legitimate theological mode of resistance to any political regime, especially if it is uttered in protest. When the early church community referred to Jesus Christ as *kyrios,* which means "Lord," they were using it as a protest. Only Caesar, the lord of the Roman Empire, was to be called *kyrios.* By calling Jesus Christ *kyrios,* the early Christians were doing precisely what the protesters in November 2016 were doing: they were creating space for otherness, for an alternative vision of the world.

In the same way, Luther's theology creates space for otherness. This article has examined three foci of Luther's theology in which he creates space for otherness precisely by exposing the limits of the symbolic worldview in which he lived. In our reading of Luther's *theologia crucis,* we see that Luther articulates a theology that upsets the dominant view of God, which he termed the *theologia gloriae.* Luther's doctrine of justification likewise pushes back against the economic order of his day. Finally, Luther's articulation of God's hiddenness beyond God's revelation creates space for a politics of otherness. Through the interpretive lens of Iris Marion Young's "politics of identity" as the cultural logic of modernity, we are able to see how Luther's theology functions as a critique against the cultural logic of modernity. In line with Young's articulation of "a politics of difference," we can articulate Luther's theology as a theology of otherness.

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As a person, Luther did not always act ethically. We know that Luther's writings against people of Jewish descent and his comments about Muslims demonstrate that he was not always on the right side of justice. Further, Luther as a theologian regularly failed to take the side of the oppressed. At the same, as we read Luther against the backdrop of modernity, we take note of how Luther's theology may be read as a theology of otherness, a theology of alterity that creates space for cultural difference. In a world fraught with conflict and division, we must see how Luther's theology can help to blur the lines of division and allow us to let the Other come, always as the Other.

21. This is why James Cone's statement that "God is black" has so much political and emotional purchase. To say that "God is black" says something about the world in which we live.

22. Paul Chung, *Postcolonial Imagination: Archaeological Hermeneutics and Comparative Religious Theology* (Hong Kong: Chinese Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 2014), 234.

23. See Vítor Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 201.