

# Liberating Lutheran Theology

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Freedom for Justice and Solidarity  
with Others in a Global Context

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## LIBERATING LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

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# Foreword

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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 theological 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 reconceptualization 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 reinterprets 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 that he has focused on, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

*Karen L. Bloomquist*

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# Introduction

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THIS BOOK IS an international collaborative effort to bring the resources of Lutheran theology to address the economic and cultural challenges of the twenty-first century. The authors come from three different continents (Asia, Europe, North America) and, as the chapters disclose, their theological interests connect with other contexts across the globe (Latin America, Africa). Each author operates from the perspective of Luther's theology, which originated in its own era of economic and cultural crisis. However, this Lutheran theology serves not as sedative for preserving prevailing economic (and theological!) interests. One of the great misinterpretations of Martin Luther has considered his heritage as fundamentally reactionary, seeking to preserve the status quo. Instead, set free by the Gospel, this is an interpretation of Luther's theology that engages the reality of poverty, hunger, and oppression as the most urgent theological issues in the contemporary world.

Part One, authored by Craig L. Nesson, engages the continuing significance of Latin American liberation theology for theologians and the church in other contexts. The opening chapter offers a comprehensive discussion of Latin American history from the perspective of liberation theology and pays particular attention to the ways the emergence of liberation theology has impacted recent Latin American history. Liberation theology, with its use of social analysis and insistence on praxis as the indispensable norm for theological engagement, has contributed an original element to the development of theological method. It has also challenged the global church to read the Bible and interpret the theological tradition from the perspective of the hungry poor in the cause of social justice.

Two chapters are devoted to the critique and reinterpretation of Luther's two kingdoms teaching. The tragic consequences of this particular aspect of Luther's theology, particularly in consideration of his stance in the peasants' revolt, have been severely criticized by many, including the liberation theologians Juan Luis Segundo and Walter Altmann. A constructive re-appropriation of Luther's two kingdoms thought as God's two "strategies" for engaging the world has developed (in conversation with the thought of Ulrich Duchrow), which demonstrates the ongoing significance of Luther's



thought for Christian activism in society for justice and solidarity with others. An earlier version of Chapter Two appeared in *Currents in Theology and Mission* and Chapter Three in *Lutheran Quarterly*. We are grateful to the editors of those journals for their permission to include revised versions in this book.

While many have trumpeted the “death” of liberation theology, the fourth chapter details how Latin American liberation theology has been appropriated by representative theologians in Europe and North America. Thereby the influence of liberation thought has been ongoing and significant for doing theology in many other global contexts. Latin American liberation theology is the first theological development from the Third World to have made such an international impact in the modern period, heralding a new era of global theology.

In Part Two, author Paul S. Chung argues that Asian Christian theology, whether evangelical or liberal-minded, has emerged from the Asian religious and cultural matrix and been formed and developed in an ever-changing context. The dynamism of God’s Word in action and Asian cultural assumptions resist a cultural expression of the Christian narrative as a *fait accompli*. The encounter of the subject matter of the Christian narrative with the horizon of other religions involves a dynamic and continuing process, rendering cultural exchange more amenable and relevant to the interpretation of the Christian narrative of the Gospel in an intercultural reframing.

Chung’s interpretation of Lutheran theology highlights the sociocritical and contextual dimensions of Luther’s theology in view of the requirement of economic justice and the recognition of religious others. Luther can be appreciated as one who was keenly aware of the need for socioeconomic justice in his time. This train of thought is vitally important in the present day reality of economic globalization. Luther’s model of two kingdoms is reinterpreted in this light to be most amenable to the public issue of justice and recognition of religious outsiders. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer’s legacy is carefully examined in relation to the theological emergence and development of Asian *minjung* theology. Emancipation and solidarity with people of other faiths are fundamental to Asian Christian theology. Therefore Bonhoeffer is appreciated as one theologian who encourages the Asian church and theology to adopt a prophetic stance for those who are marginalized and voiceless in the society, namely, the *massa perditionis*—*minjung*.

Lastly, Luther’s ecclesiology is actualized and contextualized as it encounters the Asian-Confucian mindset of filial piety. Drawing upon the prophetic legacy of Lutheran theology from the Confessing Church in Germany (Hans J. Iwand, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Helmut Gollwitzer, and F.W. Marquardt), Chung constructs a Lutheran *theologia publica* as he engages the sociopolitical

reality of the *massa perditionis*. Thereby—prompted by the irregularity of God’s speech event—he delves into the cultural life-world of ordinary people at the grassroots level, who are rooted in the Confucian and Mahayana Buddhist matrix of East Asia. Contextualizing Luther’s provocative and irregular insight into God’s Word in action, Chung articulates and proposes a sociocritical interest in the emancipation of the life-world from the process of global colonization under the empire, in order to underscore and promote a postcolonial spirit of resistance and recognition of religious outsiders.

In Part Three, Ulrich Duchrow draws upon the heritage of Scripture and the Reformers to analyze the contemporary phenomenon of globalization. Often we hear that our modern political economy is so different from biblical and Reformation times that these old texts have no relevance any more for finding solutions to our problems. However, this is not the case. Beginning in the eighth century B.C.E., a new economy was spreading throughout the ancient Near East, built on property, interest, and money. Moreover, this emerging economy had been linked to empire building since the Hellenistic times—a combination of factors that can be regarded as a precursor of modern imperial capitalism. Furthermore, it was in the period of early capitalism that Martin Luther developed his theology, highly critical of capital accumulation through taking interest, trade, monopoly building, and speculation. Consequently, the Hebrew Bible (particularly the prophets since Amos, the Torah, and the early Jewish apocalyptic literature), Jesus and the early church documents, and the heritage of Luther relate directly to their own political-economic context in the form of critique and constructive proposals in the spirit of the biblical God of justice.

At the present time of deep crisis, not only of financial imperial capitalism but Western modernity in all its dimensions, the critical alternative approaches of the Bible and Reformation are of utmost importance for shining light on our present situation. This is also true in particular non-Western cultures and faiths. For example, Buddha responded to the same socioeconomic context as did the prophetic and legal texts of the Hebrew Bible. Accordingly, engaged Buddhism of today unfolds a similar critical and alternative view of modern capitalism. Already Gandhi built on both Jesus and Buddha in developing nonviolent methods in order to overcome the Western praxis and worldview, which is characterized by possessive violence. There is much to learn from the expanding process of the ecumenical movement aiming at an “Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth” (AGAPE), as well as from faith communities and other social movements worldwide, particularly from Africa, Asia, and indigenous cultures (also reflected in Latin American liberation theology).

Even in Western sciences, like brain research and psychology, there are remarkable signs of a new paradigm developing, an emerging paradigm of relational thinking and acting—very much in line with biblical-theological and Buddhist thinking. We live in a very creative time when theology, building on its liberating ancient sources, can be a catalyst in interdisciplinary, intercultural efforts to create a new culture, economy, and politics of life. Against the neoliberal philosophy, which pretends there is no alternative (that is, TINA), an alliance of faith communities and social movements is already in the making to overcome the dominating, death-dealing Western system, while preserving the emancipative elements of modernity.

Part Four, the conclusion, is followed by two ecumenical documents from Africa and Asia that raise critical challenges to the present course of neoliberal globalization. Chapter Twelve links the work of the authors to the challenges posed by theologians from the South in recent global ecumenical work, focusing on two particular ecumenical statements. The emerging processes in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Lutheran World Federation, and the World Council of Churches invite representatives from diverse contexts across the globe to gather for reflection on urgent themes affecting theology, human well being, and the integrity of creation. In particular, the theological themes of the Lutheran World Federation, generated out of Luther's legacy, resonate with the trajectory of the earlier chapters. In this chapter the authors offer some introductory reflections on the importance for their own contexts of these ecumenical processes and their documents. Appendix A consists of the statement by the Changseong Consultation, "Transforming Theology and Life-Giving Civilization." Appendix B presents the *Dar es Salaam* Statement, "Linking Poverty, Wealth and Ecology in Africa." By incorporating the concerns raised about "life-giving civilization" and "poverty, wealth, and ecology" from the contexts of Africa and Asia, we arrive at a more holistic, cross-continental, and promising vision of the future on the way to the emergence of a more life-giving civilization.

This volume demonstrates the liberating possibilities of theology done out of a biblical and Lutheran perspective for the economic and cultural crises facing the church in the twenty-first century. As governments at present are responding to the deep crises of humanity and earth by trying to repair the dominating system, all forces working for alternatives are called to increase their efforts and build alliances. By embracing global perspectives and linking diverse contexts, theology can contribute constructively to this struggle, cooperating with God's project of an alternative domination-free and life-enhancing order, turning the crisis into an opportunity for conversion.