

Luther and Islam at the Tenth International Congress for Luther Research, August 4-9, 2002 in Copenhagen

Colleagues,

From Sunday to Friday in the first full week of August 155 participants from 21 countries met in Copenhagen for the Tenth International Congress for Luther Research. 54 Americans and 51 Germans constituted 2/3 of the assembly. The remaining 50 participants came from elsewhere in Europe and from such far away places as Nigeria, Namibia, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Japan, Taiwan, China (4!), and South Korea. The theme was "Luther after 1530: Theology, Church and Politics." Morning plenary presentations by top echelon Luther scholars examined continuities and changes on major themes during the final 15 years of Luther's life: Ecclesiology, Justification, Anthropology, Church Order and Political Reality.

In the afternoons ten thematic seminars worked through specific Luther texts from the period. My seminar was on "Luther and the Turks." We examined 3 of Luther's major essays on the Turks (= Islam) from the period. Although Luther himself speaks of mission to Muslims rarely in these texts, my presentation proposed using Luther's concept of *deus absconditus* [the hidden God] as a fruitful basis for religious conversation between Muslims and Christians.

I. MY PROPOSAL

In Islam the deity remains very hidden indeed. Allah's "otherness" bodes no "image" in any reality encountered in

human worldly experience. In contrast to current missiological scholarship that looks for common “grace experiences” as a basis for inter-religious dialogue [see last week’s ThTh 220] I proposed Luther as resource for the exact opposite. Namely, dialogue based on common human experience of God’s hiddenness, even God’s absence, in those segments of life that are not grace-ful at all: sickness, oppression, helplessness, death. Starting from that common base of negative lived experience, subsequent dialogue about grace-encounters in one’s own religious world, I argued, are rooted in reality, have more promise. For Luther too the Gospel is not generic “good news,” but is always linked to specific “bad news” in human lived experience—at its deepest level “bad news” in our encounters with God.

II. DEUS ABSCONDITUS. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Luther came upon the notion of deus absconditus – God hidden – straight from the Bible. In Job, the Psalms and especially Isaiah God regularly “hides his face [or] hides himself.” And it is not good news. It is God’s “strange deed,” his “alien work.” (Is. 28:21) Isaiah says it pointblank: “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.” (45:15) Luther speaks of God’s hiddenness with several different nuances. In all of them, however, God’s hiddenness does not mean that there is no evidence of God at all. Deus absconditus IS a revealer. God’s strange deeds and alien works are everywhere at hand. Theistic evidence abounds. But in that abundant evidence a fundamental aspect of God remains un-revealed – specifically the God-data needed “for us and for our salvation.” **Three nuances**

- a. God’s work in creation proceeds via “God’s masks,” [Latin: larvae dei]. God’s creatures are the masks, with God hiding behind the masks. That is already a

“mercy” on God’s part, for if sinners were to confront God unmasked, deus nudus [God naked], they would die on the spot.

- b. Yet even though it is a “mercy” on God’s part to stay behind creation’s masks, that much mercy does not yet redeem anything in creation, least of all humans. Even more “hidden” in God’s left-hand working in creation is God’s mercy that does redeem, God’s mercy toward sinners. That mercy, the “favor dei” [God’s favor], comes as deus revelatus [God revealed]. That term for Luther is not just any “pulling back the veil” on God’s part, but God exposing a merciful heart to sinners – both in its promissory format in the Old Testament and its fulfilled format in the crucified and risen Messiah.
- c. Yet even here in the mercy actions of deus revelatus, another sort of hiddenness surfaces. God’s mercy in Christ comes “sub cruce tecta” [covered under a cross], not so much “hidden” so that it is not visible at all, but “covered” under what looks like the opposite [sub contrario objectu = under its contrary opposite]. The most bizarre contrary opposite, of course, is the cross itself, both Christ’s own and our own. Yet Christ’s cross is manifold mercy. By his stripes we are healed. And taking up our own cross to follow him conforms us to God’s same mercy-management “for us and for our salvation.”

I propose Luther’s first two meanings of “hidden God” above – God hiding behind creation’s masks, which leaves God’s saving mercy still hidden – as a planet-wide common denominator for building a Lutheran mission theology. Both the person witnessing to Christ and the conversation partner not (yet) enjoying “the merits and benefits of

Christ” have this broad base of common experience of deus absconditus. Granted, that’s not yet Gospel, not yet redemptive, but it is a common starting point, where there are common places for conversation—and finally for the question: “How do you cope in your encounters with hidden God? You tell me how you cope, and I’ll tell you how I do.” That is a much more “Lutheran” question to focus on than “What do you believe about God? You tell me and I’ll tell you.”

III. A FASCINATING LUTHER TEXT

1. At the end of his explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says:

“These 3 articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites – even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God – nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the LORD Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” [Bk. of Concord. Kolb-Wengert, edd., p. 440 (66)]

2. People who “believe in and worship only the one, true God [but] nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them” are people who have indeed encountered God, God as deus absconditus, to use Luther’s vocabulary. They have not encountered deus revelatus, God revealed in Christ. With no “Christ-encounter,” they “do not know what God’s attitude is

toward them," viz., God's merciful attitude toward sinners. They do not know the Gospel. Not knowing the Gospel (never having heard it), they cannot trust it, and the last two sentences in the citation above are the inevitable chain reaction.

3. Luther does not confine this analysis to the Turks, but to "all who are outside this Christian people." [German: *ausser der Christenheit*] So initially I propose to proceed with the same general perspective for all mission theology reflection, and later come to specific focus on the Turks, i.e., Islam.
4. At first Luther's evaluation of heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites is surprising: "They believe in and worship only the one, true God . . ." "Only the one, true God"? What does that mean? Since Christ is absent in such believing and worshipping – "they do not have the LORD Christ" – the object of their faith and worship must be *deus absconditus*, the one, true God, but God with his mercy-for-sinners hidden, undisclosed.
5. Remember that the hiddenness of God does not mean that there are no signals of God at all in people's lived experience. On the contrary. God's creation abounds with such signals, as Paul says in Romans 1:19ff: they have been evident "ever since the creation of the world." But not so the Gospel, God's "mercy to make sinners righteous." Out there in our general experience of God in creation such Good News is *abscondita*, hidden – often contradicted – in the "strange and alien" God-encounters all people have in God's creation. That Gospel is what *deus revelatus* is all about (Rom. 1:16f): "For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith."

6. Deus revelatus is God in the Gospel. Deus absconditus is God in the law. It is the same “one and only true God” but as different as left-hand and right-hand. Put into the format of the creed: encountering deus absconditus [Romans 1] is a first-article relationship with God – in whatever form it may take – but not (yet) a second-article or third-article encounter with God-in-Christ and the Spirit of Easter that leads to “new creation.”
7. Because deus absconditus encounters with God are common among all human creatures – those who trust Christ as well as those who do not – there is common ground here, common “God-experience” for Christians to engage in God-talk with “heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites.”
8. This proposal is in conscious contrast to the widespread axiom in missiology today that “common experience of God’s grace” is a point of contact for Christian conversation with people of other faiths. The Good News of God’s mercy in Christ is not “common experience” in the God-encounters of daily life, even those that do indeed bring blessings. Those are deus absconditus encounters, if for no other reason than that God’s mercy in Christ is not accessible there. It is hidden, thus unavailable.
9. Our common human experience of deus absconditus is, however, not all gloom and doom. It includes all the gifts of creation that make human life possible and even enjoyable. See Luther’s gift-list in his explanation to the creed’s first article in the Small Catechism. “Alles ist Gabe.” Everything is a gift. But there always comes a “but.” “But” none of those good gifts suffice to get sinners forgiven, to remedy the bad news that “for all of which I am

already in debt to God with unfulfilled obligations.” Those are the words, rightly translated, with which Luther concludes that first-article explanation in his catechism. [Too bad that standard English versions of the catechism mistranslate this sentence into a statement of “duty” and not “over my head in debt.”] God’s gifts of creation are gifts that obligate us receivers to “thank and to praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.” And where is there one human who is “paid up” in fulfilling these obligations? For just one day, let alone for a lifetime?

10. Hidden here is God’s grace and mercy for sinners who aren’t paying up – who can’t pay up – their “debts.” Forgiveness is also a gift, but a grace-gift with a qualitatively different character from God’s gifts in creation. This grace-gift covers failed obligations. It does not impose new ones. But what about the common “God-experience” of gifts received and unfulfilled obligations? Why not start inter-religious dialogue there?
11. Deus absconditus encounters have their downsides, also their dreadful downsides. And that too is common God-experience throughout the human race. Suppose we did begin inter-religious conversation with the daily lived experience of “God hidden”? How do encounters with the hidden God appear in the experience and perception of people of other faiths? How do they appear in the lives of Christians? That leads to the opening question for mission conversation proposed above: “How do YOU cope?” Where in their own “grace” experiences do they have resources for coping with the obligatory aspect of creaturely gifts received, and with the consequences

of failed accountability in meeting such divine debts? Once we've learned of theirs, it's our turn to tell of ours.

12. "Having" is one of the key terms in the Luther citation above: "They do not have the Lord Christ." "To have Christ"—Christum habere — is a regular synonym for "faith" in Luther's vocabulary. "Glaubstu, Hastu; Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht." [When you believe, you have (something). When you don't believe, you don't have (it).] Faith is a having, a possessing of a resource not had before. And with new resources, you can cope as you were not able to cope before. Yes, even cope with dark side of encounters with deus absconditus.
13. So a missionary coming from this deus absconditus perspective would first of all listen as people tell of the God they believe and worship, listen for what they do have, anticipating that since/if they do not claim the Lord Christ, they do indeed not have him. Signals of such "not having" are consistent with deus absconditus encounters: "not knowing God's [merciful] attitude toward them, [consequently] having no confidence of God's love & blessing, remaining in eternal wrath and damnation, not being illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."
14. Note that all of these benefits are centered in one's relationship to God, and all of them a "having," a possessing that people did not have before. E.g., the freedom that comes with "having Christ" is first of all a freedom at the point where it is often least expected: "coram deo," to use Luther's favorite phrase, as we "confront God face to face." The unitary Missio Dei perspective

widespread today, while not ignoring faith (=having Christ), in no way makes this “face-to-face-with-God” reality so central to the mission task as Luther does here. To modify Hamlet a bit: “To have, or not to have (the merits and benefits of Christ) – that is the question.”

15. It ought to be obvious. In order for someone to “have Christ,” someone else must offer Christ. Christian mission is precisely such an offering. In Apology IV of the Lutheran Confessions Melancthon makes the point that the fundamental verb accompanying God’s promise is “offer” (in contrast to the law’s fundamental verb “require”). The upshot of “sharing” deus absconditus experience in mission conversation and dialogue is to listen for and to hear those signals of people’s need for Christ – the same need(s) the Christian also has living in the same deus absconditus world we all do. It is humanity’s face-to-face-with-God dilemma which “necessitates Christ.” That Christ-offer is what the missionary is called to do.

IV. GOD HIDDEN, GOD REVEALED IN THE LIFE EXPERIENCE OF MUSLIMS

In the presentation for our seminar I cited selections from the texts listed below. I won’t list the citations here, but will summarize: they were expressions from Muslims who now are Christians of their move from a “deus absconditus faith” to a “deus revelatus faith in Christ.”

1. Letter from Luther Engelbrecht, missionary to Muslims in India: “What’s Good, What’s New in the Gospel for Muslims?”
2. Lamin Sanneh. Born and raised in Muslim West Africa [Gambia], now Prof. of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University. “Muhammed, Prophet of Islam, and Jesus Christ, Image of God: A Personal

Testimony," INT'L BULLETIN OF MISSIONARY RESEARCH (October 1984), p. 169-174.

3. "Muslims Tell . . . 'Why I Chose Jesus,'" an article in MISSION FRONTIERS (March 2001)

V. SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. No one's day-in/day-out religious experience – whatever their religion – is grace alone.
2. To center inter-religious conversation—also with Muslims—on grace-experiences leaves vast areas of God-experience untouched, and almost guarantees that Christian grace-talk, centered in the crucified and risen Messiah, will be blurred.
3. The grace of God in Christ is not simply an unexpected and undeserved experience of goodness, as one missiologist defines it. It is rather a surprising fresh word of mercy from a Creator whom we chronically distrust, and to whom we are unendingly in debt.
4. Might not this fact – Christians' own chronic distrust of their creator, with all its consequences, and their willingness to confess it – serve as a leaven in the dialogue? Even a leveler? Christians come with paradoxical God-experiences and paradoxical faith-confessions. "Lord I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). And Christians admit to being "simultaneously saint and sinner."
5. Thus, Christians are no "better" in their moral life or the strength of their faith than their dialogue partners. They might even be worse. Their claim is not about themselves, but about a Word they have heard, that "surprising fresh word of mercy," which encourages them to live in hope before the face of God despite all evidence to the contrary.
6. Inter-religious conversation that sidelines the

negative God-experiences is not speaking the whole truth. To talk about Christian grace-experience without specifying the antithetical God-experience it must cope with does not give the dialogue partner a fair shake. Nor does it clarify the Good and New in the Good News of the one Christians call Lord.

7. When Christians do not hear from the dialogue partners how they articulate their own negative daily life experiences of the divine, and what resources they “have” to bring them through their own valleys of the shadow, then Christians are left impoverished, and the conversation is skewed.
8. It may sound negative to push religious dialogue in the direction of humankind’s common experience of deus absconditus, but it does bear promise. First, it ecumenizes the project to include the whole human race. Everyone has personal data useful for the conversation. Everybody can do it. It is not the preserve of the elite. Second, it’s existential, not cerebral— about life, not beliefs. Though beliefs may eventually enter, the conversation begins on common ground. Third, the standard barricades in Christian-Muslim conversations – Trinity, Christ’s deity, jihad, morality – are moved away from center focus. Fourth, it’s “easier” to get to Gospel. What the Christian conversation partner has to offer is the Jesus story as Good News – something Good and something New – both for Christians coping with their own experience of deus absconditus, and for the parallel experience of their Muslim conversation partners.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder