The Reformation and the Jewish People

Paper at the LCJE in Berlin on 2017/8/15
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I. In the first of his 95 theses, Martin Luther asserts: "Christian repentance must encompass the whole life." If this is true, it must encompass also the dimension of theology. The criterion for theological repentance is the Bible. Sometimes, however, dramatic events are needed to really open our eyes.

II. One of the most influential pioneers of Christian-Jewish relations in Germany was Hans-Joachim Kraus (he died in 2000). One of his many books has the programmatic title "Rückkehr zu Israel" ("Returning to Israel"). This "Returning to Israel" for him has a theological meaning. In this book, which is a collection of articles where he presents a good deal of his lifelong theological thinking, we find these words: **"Two events have thrown Christendom into a deep crisis: The extermination of the Jews in Europe and the establishment of the State of Israel."**

Why does Kraus claim that these two events became a crisis of *Christendom*? Because both events, each in a different way, show the dead end of a Christian theology that, during many centuries, has taken its shape in direct opposition to Judaism, the Torah and the Jewish people as a whole. Beginning with the "Contra-Judaios"-literature of the 2nd century, Christian faith has been configured as an antithesis against everything that was Jewish. This anti-Judaism has proved to be the pre-stage of the abysmal racist anti-Semitism, with the holocaust as its result. The holocaust has exposed the false direction in which Christendom has developed. Therefore, Kraus speaks of the *crisis of Christendom!*

The establishment of the State of Israel has further contributed to this crisis. Why? To the surprise of many Christian circles, the existence of the State of Israel, combined with a vital Jewish life in the Chosen Land brought to light a simple but theologically relevant truth that had been forgotten and hidden: *Am Jissrael chai!* ("The people of Israel is living!") I say "forgotten and hidden" because the People of Israel had been living all along – during the atrocities of the medieval age as well as in the death camps of Nazi Germany. Israel *was* there. All the time.

III. What has Luther to do with all this?
We have to be fair. Luther could not know of these two events that Prof. Kraus highlights in his book – the holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel. But let's try to imagine Luther as a time witness to these two events.

Could it be that in the light of the horrible advice he had given the state authorities (to burn the synagogues and their books and to chase the Jews out of the country, and more of that kind) he would have agreed to the measures taken by the Nazis from 1933 up to the *Reichspogromnacht* in 1938? Considering that the Nazis followed through with everything Luther had suggested in his later writings, this idea does not seem abstruse at all. Yet after having seen the outcome of all this in 1945, he might just as well have said: "This is not what I wanted" – the very same words he once used when looking at the thousands of slaughtered peasants after the peasants' revolts in 1526, during which he encouraged and even incited violence and oppression by state authorities. But it was too late.

In the same way, can we say with certainty that Luther would have considered the establishment of the State of Israel a "sign of faithfulness of the God of Israel towards his chosen people"? These are the words of the well-known resolution of the Rhenish Church in 1980. Or would he rather have applied his Augustinian hermeneutics, according to which worldly things such as an earthly Land must not be mixed with spiritual truths? An earthly Messiah and an earthly Kingdom was an equally impossible thing for Luther. This suggests that Luther would most probably have rejected the idea that the establishment of the State of Israel was a "sign of the faithfulness of Israel's God". Many Lutherans reject this idea until today.

I am convinced that the anti-Jewish outbursts in Luther's later writings are no slipups by an old man but are rooted in his very theology in a consistent way. I will try to underline this by hinting at a few features of his theology that have survived until this day.

One of the key expressions in Luther's theology is the dialectic of "Law and Gospel". The "Law" demands obedience to God's ethical will, while the "Gospel" promises the forgiveness of sin in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Ever since, the expression "Law and Gospel" is frequently used as a guiding principle in homiletics and pastoral care, as we all know.

However, for Luther, "law" is primarily an overall synonym of something horrifying that includes accusation, manifestation of sin. For him, "law" therefore directly links to the curse and the wrath of God of which man can only be freed by the justifying and gracious gospel of Christ. The gospel, in Luther's eyes, needs the accusing law, its menace. Otherwise, we cannot taste the forgiveness, which the Gospel provides.

However, does this view of the law (dogmatically speaking: the *"usus elenchticus legis"*, as the accusing use and character of the law") cover all its aspects in the light of the Bible? While it has some support in Paul's theology, it is not the whole truth. What about a Psalm like 19 or 119 in which the author praises God and rejoices in view of the good gift of the Torah? Or take Psalm 1: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked […], but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night." This for me recalls the words of the orthodox Rabbi Ehrenberg from Berlin when he said to me, with a bright shine in his eyes: "Oh, the Torah has such a wonderful power."

Luther sometimes looked at Moses as if he was the direct enemy of the Christian faith, the opponent of grace and justification, and a synonym of curse and wrath. Paul, however, says of Moses that he does not speak against the law and that, quite on the contrary, Paul as a Jew lived according to the law. I need not tell you what he writes in Rom. 9,1-5 when he points out the still valid privileges of the Jewish people, especially the covenant and the Torah. Covenant and Torah are twins. If you remove the Torah from these privileges you will destroy the covenant together with the whole history of the Jewish people.

Unfortunately, Luther has done exactly this. He does so with a striking logic: If the Torah, the Law, turns out to be a curse and if the Torah is at the heart of the Jewish faith, then the Jews, living "under the law" must be a curse themselves. Consequentially, he claims that the Jews as a people are the living example of God's wrath and curse. He underlines this with a striking *historical* proof, as he sees it: "Look at their history! Since 1400 years they live in exile and are in a deplorable state. No one wants them. Everybody is against them. Do we need any more proof that this is due to the gruesome punishment for a gruesome sin, namely the crucifixion of the Lord?" "Poor people" he called the Jews in his first treatise (1523),

"damned people" in his later ones. Be it in a friendly or unfriendly way, in both cases the Jewish people figures as a corporative manifestation of God's wrath and curse. Only should they convert to Christianity they can be saved from this deplorable state. If they do not, however, the wrath of God will remain upon them. Beyond that, also the authorities must take measures of "strong mercy" (as he puts it sarcastically) for this "damned people".

Luther, however, was not a Marcionite. He was a biblical scholar, who interpreted the whole Bible. We have wonderful examples of biblical studies by Luther, especially on the Psalms. Yet his Christological glasses through which he read the Old Testament led him to interpret everything good he found there to be for the benefit of the church. Luther related the good promises to the church and left the bad things to the Jews. He thereby stole the *Tanach* from the Jews. What got lost in this concept is the fundamental biblical insight: the fact of the validity of the covenant of the people of Israel from Abraham up to the eschatological perspective in Rom. 11,26. In face of this covenantal history we have to say: This covenant with all its dramatic history until the end stands and will stand *for the manifestation of God's faithfulness* and not for the manifestation of God's wrath. O yes, there *is* judgement, there *is* wrath. But Paul elaborates in a touching way in Rom. 9-11 that in the light of the whole scripture mercy prevails all the judgements (Rom. 11,25ff).

It is quite evident: Luther does not only "paganize" the Jewish people but demonizes them for the benefit of the Church. This is blatant supersessionism in the following sense: The Church has taken the place of the Jews that the Jews had lost.

This Lutheran concept of "Law and Gospel" was influential up to Friedrich Schleiermacher, Adolf v. Harnack, Emanuel Hirsch, Paul Althaus and others. In a more radical rather Marcionite form (with a complete rejection of the Old Testament) it has become the theology of the "Deutsche Christen" in Nazi Germany and is still present in Lutheran circles today. (As an example, I mention Prof. Slenscka, a Lutheran theologian at the theological faculty of the Humboldt-University in Berlin. He recently caused a veritable nationwide uproar when he suggested removing the Old Testament from the biblical canon.)

This concept can be presented also in a quite "innocent" and subtle way: I visited a church together with the pastor of that church. This Lutheran pastor was glad to show me its church windows. "Left-hand side", he told me, "at the northern side, there are the windows with the stories of the Old Testament. But on the right-hand side, where the light comes in, there are the New Testament stories." I could hardly identify the motifs on the left-hand side because these windows, of course, are all the time lying in the shadow directing to the north.

I took a deep breath. What did he mean to tell me? That Israel was and is without light, without any insight who God is? That Israel lies in a deep shadow? Do we as Christians not have insight of who God is also from what we find on the left-hand side, in the Old Testament? "Is not salvation from the Jews" (John 4,22)? Do we not have the basic principles of our ethics from that side, too? And do we not find sheer grace and justification by faith also at the left-hand side, the eternal love of God along with mercy and forgiveness? "Bless the Lord who forgives all iniquity, who heals all your diseases who redeems you, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy...." (Ps. 103). Do we not get from that side deeply moving examples of prayer that we are using in our services with joy and thankfulness? Do we not learn from them the language of grievance and lamentation in our afflictions as much as we can learn out of them the language of gratefulness and praise? Millions of people find comfort in the words of Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me."

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The Psalms are primarily the prayer book of the *Jewish people*. We often forget this. This people went through the atrocities of the medieval times with words of these psalms on their lips and, later, even on the way into the gas chambers.
Some of my dear Messianic friends sometimes call Jews who do not believe in Yeshua "unbelievers". Do you not think that this is inadequate and hurting? I hold it is an offense.

I think in face of what we call "Jewish evangelism" at this conference, we have to always be aware of the two interconnected questions: *Why*, on what theological basis, are we evangelizing *Jews* and *how* do we exercise this.

IV. The Reformed Branch of the Reformation
Finally, I just want to take a look at the reformed branch of the reformation. The French Christians experienced what it means to be a refugee, as they had been persecuted by the Catholic Church of that time. I am referring to Johannes Calvin and the Huguenots. The approach of Calvin to the Jewish People shows that this different context led to a quite different perspective: The Reformed saw themselves *in a similar and common destiny* with the wandering and homeless Jewish people. Calvin knew that such suffering was rather a sign of election instead of rejection. He therefore wrote in his main work "Institutio": "Qui osera donc priver de Christ les Juifs?" ("Who therefore dares to take the Jews away from the communion with Christ?") He refused to see the Jewish People separate from their Jewish Master, Jesus Christ, and neither could he see the Jewish People separate from the other "wandering People of God", the church. While also Calvin's Israel-theology generally remained in the classical framework of the superiority / inferiority scheme concerning Judaism, he knew better than Luther: The two people – the Jewish people and the church – belong together.

V. Final Remark
Marc Kinzer, a prominent Messianic Jew in the USA draws a striking Christological conclusion from the idea of this togetherness. In Isaiah (40ff) the "Servant of God" is referred to as the *People of Israel*. In the New Testament the "Servant of God" is Yeshua. Does this not suggest a union in which both, Israel and "their" (as well as our) Yeshua belong together in an inseparable, mysterious way, in a way which Marc Chagall chose in his famous painting "White Crucifixion"[1]?

The above points out the need to continue our theological investigations and to keep asking ourselves how the two people of God belong together, what separates them from each other and most of all, what both of them are able to testify to each other in view of their faith and their common God.

[1] Marc S. Kinzer, Postmissionary Messianic Judaism. Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, Mich. 2005, p. 228f.