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A Theological Review of a Lutheran Theology from the Subaltern

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Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, Editor. The Alternative Luther: Lutheran Theology from the Subaltern. New York: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2019. 352 pages. \$120.

Reviewed by Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth

Luther scholars have been relishing for quite some time this current era of five hundred anniversary celebrations. In 1983, Luther scholars and Lutherans worked through red tape to get visas allowing them to go to East Germany to see the place of Luther's birth. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the pilgrimages became easier and Lutherland sites began to promote tourism. In 2010, some Lutherans walked the route of Luther's first pilgrimage to Rome. In 2017, Wittenberg embraced the spirit of the Reformation creating youth camps, seminars, and an Eco-Reformation garden walk. Now academics are in the midst of celebrating anniversaries of specific works by Luther, and the books are coming thick and fast.

Yet, during this time when Luther scholarship is proliferating on book shelves, there are fewer readers of these books than most Luther scholars would like. Luther was a remarkable historical figure and transformative theologian whose work and insight affected religion, philosophy, and culture not only in the West but globally over the next half millennium. Yet, in the 21st century Luther's audience has become unfortunately parochial. Lutherans read Luther, and Luther scholars (who are mostly Lutheran) read Luther. But secular audiences, non-Christians, Roman Catholics, and even many non-Lutheran protestants are rarely engaged in the work that is being done explaining Luther's significance in the history of ideas, the history of culture, and the present and future of theology and ethics.

Elsa Marie Wiberg Pedersen's edited volume *The Alternative Luther: Lutheran Theology from the Subaltern* is a book that could change this unfortunate trend. The thesis of this book is that a look at the historical Luther reveals him as a precarious member of a colonized society who evangelized the good news of the freeing power of the Gospel to others who suffered under the medieval version of the Roman empire. In other words, Martin Luther did not write for established Lutherans, but wrote from the perspective of a precarious member of a state that was colonized, and dominated, by the Roman Empire who used Germans as their henchmen to guard their own privilege. As such, Luther's thought has much to say to those who are seen as, or who seem themselves as, outside of the Lutheran establishment. *The Alternative Luther* brings together scholars from around the globe who present Luther's theology and its applications to precarious people, especially the occupied, the poor, the abused, and the othered. The result is a book that offers Luther's work as revolutionary and healing to an audience that sees itself as precarious or allies itself with those who are subaltern.

Pedersen's vision for the book is made clear from the first page: she hopes "to widen the scope of Luther's and Lutheran theology" by presenting it from the perspective of the subaltern, from "those who are never or rarely heard" in order to "reach both those often ignored and those by whom they are ignored." (1) In other words, she wants those who have parochialized Luther to recognize his wider message and in doing so, welcome those beyond the borders of traditional Lutheran stereotypes as part of the always intended beloved community.

In order to meet this goal, the book is written in the language of subaltern and post colonial studies. Some traditional Luther scholars will find themselves learning new vocabulary as they are taken out of the comfort zone of their own familiar jargon. This will be good for them. That said, Pedersen and her authors have worked to be remarkably inclusive, explaining terms carefully and thoroughly so that no reader will find herself excluded from the conversation. Pedersen begins her introduction with a lesson about the history of subaltern studies and a primer of the main thinkers and the vocabulary they use setting the reader up to understand the rest of the essays and their context.

The first section of the book, "Precarious Life," examines how Luther addresses those who are put in danger by the power structures in place in a given society. Pedersen sets the tone for this section with her presentation of Luther as "the banned, excluded, and outlawed" theologian who was "in a most precarious situation." (22) She explains how his situation placed him "in-between" being a "commended leader" and "condemned heretic" (32) accused of being "too liberal" with women, Jews, and Turks even as he himself admitted to being a fallible human being and a "mere mouse-shit."(32) Both Pedersen's introduction and this first chapter help the reader, whether an accomplished Luther scholar with little knowledge of post-colonialism or a subaltern scholar who has read little of Luther, to see Luther as he was in his historical context, setting the stage for understanding his theology as it applies to precarious people.

Next, Kirsi Stjerna, in "Luther against Luther: Freedom Theology and Anti-Jewish Exegesis," explains how Luther failed to see the precarious position of the Jews in his own time in "Luther against Luther: Freedom Theology and Anti-Jewish Exegesis." Scholarship about Luther and the Jews is difficult to write. On one hand, if one presents how Luther's anti-Semitism was cultural and fundamentally opposed to the core of his theology, one risks seeming to dismiss his anti-Semitism as a real problem. On the other hand, if one presents Luther's anti-Semitism as a genuine theological issue, one risks suggesting that it is Lutheran to be anti-Semitic. Stjerna has been at this work for a long part of her career, and she handles the issue adeptly and honestly. In this essay she speaks of the tension in the issue. While Luther was himself precarious and subaltern, he failed to take note of the precarious position of the Jews, in part because they were so subaltern that they were hidden in his society. Stjerna notes that there was a great deal of anti-Jewish propaganda and very little opportunity for normal interaction with Jewish people (no doubt in part because of the propaganda!) (43) She notes that Luther was criticized early in his career for being a "Jews' friend" or a "Judaizer" (45) which Luther felt compelled to deny even though he clearly was "empathetically aware of the suffering of the Jews in the hands of Christians"(46) and "rejected the abuse of the Jewish persons." (47) But Stjerna insists it be remembered that Luther, at the end of the life, seemed to lose faith in the possibility of dialogue between traditions, asking that synagogues and Jewish books be burned. Stjerna warns in this essay that readers must not follow Luther when he ignored the precarious persons in his midst. Instead, readers must rather remember that Luther's ultimate message was about compassion and freedom—a message that must be upheld against those that use hate speech today against Jews, and others in precarious positions.

The third essay in this section, Elisabeth Gerle's "Eschata, the Kingdom of God, in a time of Presentism, Patriarchy, and Neo-Nationalism," is dedicated to a discussion of the "tension between citizens' rights and human rights". (55) Gerle recognizes that Luther's radical call to see and respect each human being as holy in the gaze of God called for an ethical and political reorganization of priorities. But she also recognizes that there are and will be continued questions about the relationship of the public and the private, the state and the individual, the nation and the family. Her essay provides clarity about Luther's position and its revolutionary reorientation while leaving the reader to continue to wrestle with specific questions about political authority and individual rights in times of both crisis and peace.

The revolutionary reorientation that demands the reader recognize the holiness of each person is the theme of the last two essays in the first section. In "Theology behind the Wall," Peter Lodberg speaks of the use of borders, walls, and names in Berlin, in Israel and Palestine, in Biblical contexts, and in politics generally in order to remind the reader that these human divisions are not part of God's providential plan. Rather God seeks to dismantle all that divides people from each other. Trygve Wyller's essay on "The Heterotopic Creation" tells the story of how such divisions are dismantled in spaces that exist within spaces--places where power structures are turned upside down and inside out. By pointing out the connections between Scandinavian creation theology and postcolonial thought, Wyller's writing helps the reader to seek, to create, and recognize such spaces where power is not centralized. In such spaces one sees that there is not a center and an other but simply different aspects of God's creation.

The second section of the book, "Body and Gender" looks specifically at the precarious body of the woman, the gender ambiguous, and the queer. Mary Streufert's essay, "A Word of the Word for our Hearts: Embracing Multiply-Gendered God Language with Luther," begins the section by presenting the complexities of Luther's philosophy of language. Language creates images in the mind of the listener; language constructs power structures and identities. In other words, Luther understood that language matters. Streufert points out that Luther's Latin and German writings are often more gender inclusive than later English translations have made them seem, and she echoes Pedersen's claim in the introduction to the book that it is important to study Luther in his original languages just as Luther found it important to study the Scriptures in Greek and Hebrew. And yet, Streufert insists that this is just the beginning, because language is always relational. Theological language is only important if it "applies to me." (107) So translating Scripture, or Luther's works, is not just about looking at the original words but thinking about what those words mean in relationship to today's reader. In this way the Word lives as it "creates and sustains faith." (113) Streufert's argument is centered on using gender inclusive language in order to create a gender inclusive faith that is truly "for us, for you, for me." (109) But her essay reminds the reader that in preaching, teaching, writing, and translating, words are of critical importance for through them the Word comes to the heart.

Taking Streufert's call to heart, the other four essays in this section look at the use of Luther's words about bodies and minds in order to expose Luther's multi-faceted understanding of all who make up the body of Christ. Mary Lowe's essay on "The Queer Body-Mind" looks particularly at how Luther talked about male homosexuals as well as about the human body and mind generally. Lowe's careful research demonstrates how Luther's depiction of the sin of the "sodamite" was based on Luther's depiction of the priest whose pretense of purity over the married husband hid a worse depravity. This skepticism towards celibate priests coupled with homophobia still remains in protestant rhetoric today, as does Luther's coupling of sodomy with Italian and Turkish flamboyant excess. Lowe demonstrates how Luther's rhetoric was used to create a new subaltern group while raising up the previously ignoble German peasant family. But then, more importantly, Lowe explains how Luther's core theology lifts up the *totus homo*, the entire person as a created and beloved child of God. This core theology can be embraced today by LGBTQI+ Christians as it is a message of God's presence in their lives as whole people. Looking at Luther's words in context in order to find the true message of the Word, Lowe does in her essay what Streufert suggested scholars do, translate the meaning rather than the literal words.

Next, looking carefully at words, Sini Mikkola, in "Manly Women, Feminine Men" examines Luther's descriptions of men and women generally as well as his descriptions of particular men and women. Mikkola reminds readers that despite Luther's usual gender essentialist language, Luther called his wife "mein Herr" and "dominus meus" and remarked on the particular strength of mothers and weakness of fathers. Luther's words were not systematic in their gendered use, but rather Luther used words to promote flexible thinking which is something "we can, and should, make use of when doing theology" as well.

Deanna Thompson's supremely readable "Wild Spaces of Neighbor-Centered Christian Freedom" invites the reader to consider the way we speak about and listen to those who are othered based on their gender, race, and health. While words often create a hegemony beyond which neither the speaker nor listener can hear, Thompson stresses that Luther's vision of freedom through Christ allows a person to "put on" her neighbor and hear her voice in its own context. (158) "Luther understands the Holy Spirit as instilling a new mind" as it "operates in the interior realm," explains Thompson. (159) In his own life, sometimes Luther did hear the other, as he did with several women whom he emboldened such as Argula von Grumbach and Katharina Schutz Zell. And sometimes he did not, as when he was writing his vitriolic words against the Jews. Thompson admits that the reader too will sometimes hear and sometimes not as she strives to listen in wild spaces to those who are persecuted because of their race and to those whose illness makes her uncomfortable. But that hearing is possible, Thompson insists, is assured. So with a vision of freedom held by Luther, she encourages readers to step in to listen.

The final essay in this section is Andre' Musskopf's "Theology by Demand: A Queer and De-Colonial Perspective on Lutheran Theology." Musskopf speaks as a theologian, a Lutheran, a Brazilian, and a queer man. He suggests that each of these identities provide him with different tools in order to communicate his understanding of himself and his world. In the end his essay

suggests that being Lutheran means being open to multiple ways of thinking, seeing, and speaking. In other words, the goal of being a scholar who is Lutheran is not to uncover one right Lutheran way of explaining the world and God's grace but being open to multiple perspectives.

The third section of the book focuses on the precarious nature of women in the face of sexual abuse. All four essays look carefully at Luther's commentaries on Biblical passages in order to present a Luther who cries out in sympathy for girls and women who are abused. Monica Melancthon's excellent Bible study on Dinah makes us rethink the story that has been more popularly told in Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*. Melancthon shows the reader the tender heart of Luther who wonders where God was when the little girl cried out in fear of her rapist. True, Luther sympathized more with the father and brothers than with Dinah, but Melancthon helps the reader understand the Biblical text more broadly and consider our duties to hear and heed the cries of victims globally. Arnfridur Guomundsdottir agrees in "Let's Be Loud." Guomundsdottir examines the story of Tamar crying out after her rape, and Luther's proclamation that "God is for those who suffer." [221 --ML "Consolation for women whose pregnancies have not gone well, 1542)]. She reminds readers that we must listen to the stories of women and cry loudly along with them.

Surekha Nelavala's "Grace Alone" discusses how such listening is possible, especially to muted voices. Nelavala explains that grace is the key component of the "Luther sutra," the teaching that touched her family in India freeing them from the internalized shame of being *dalits* when they converted in the 1940s. Looking at the story of the muted woman in Luke 7, Nelavala speaks of Christ's liberating word and the need to speak it to those who are mute so that they too can speak and be heard. The question of silence and voice is raised again by Kayko Driedger Hesslein in "The Subaltern's Witness: Examining Luther's Explanation to the Eighth Commandment in Light of Clergy Sexual Abuse Claims." Hesslein begins by speaking of Luther's condemnation of rape and his naïve assertion that once marriage was allowed to clergy, rape would become a rare sin. By looking at Luther's explanation of the commandments, Hesslein demonstrates ways in which Luther might have silenced victims of clergy abuse in his fear that some parishioners would try to slander clergy. But ultimately Hesslein reminds readers that Luther's expectation that clergy should be held accountable by secular law was key to protecting victims of clergy abuse. Clergy were no longer considered above the law, but equal citizens with those they served, giving those in their care a voice before authority that was above both laity and clergy.

The final section of *The Alternative Luther* examines "Economy, Equality and Equity." The section begins with the late Vitor Westhelle's philosophical essay "God against God: Luther the Theologian of the Cross." Westhelle explains how Luther's refusal of the medieval economic models of atonement not only presented God as a giver of grace (rather than a lender who makes a partial payment to ease the debtor's burden) but presented the human duty to neighbor as also gracious. Westhelle ties Luther's atonement theology to his admonition against usury and his philosophical commitment to the idea that God does not behave according to human reason or human standards but out of divinely irrational love.

Marit Trelstad picks up Westhelle's theme of epistemology in "Cracking the Ice: Subaltern and Lutheran Principles of Knowledge." Because no human system understands God perfectly, Luther understood that there were multiple ways of looking at the world. Trelstad rejects the idea that Luther shared the worldview that is embraced by white wealthy straight Western men today as the neutral frame of reference. She argues that Luther came from multiple perspectives and recognized that others did as well. Thus, there is not one essential Lutheran perspective according to Trelstad, who argues that the idea that Luther should be a sole authority is fundamentally un-Lutheran. She suggests that readers follow Luther's advice and go to Scripture, reading the text through their own perspective in relationship with Christ and the world.

Allen Jorgenson's "From Common Good to Common Goods" and Terra Rowe's "Genus Precarius: Luther in the Anthropocene" finish the book with this common theme of de-centering epistemology. Jorgenson asks readers to consider how best serving their neighbors requires understanding the goods each neighbor requires. Looking at Luther's admonition that Christians provide nourishment for the poor and education for children, Jorgenson also reminds readers of Luther's requirement that people's individual consciences be respected and Luther's understanding that all of creation needs care. This means that Christians must be open to listening to the needs and desires of those they serve rather than simply obeying their own ideas of what others need. Terra Rowe expands on this idea speaking of the need to de-center Christianity from the private inner world of the self. Despite Copernicus's revolutionary idea that the earth and human beings are not the lowest realm of creation but are themselves orbiting among the stars, Rowe advocates contemporary people consider a more humble understanding of what we now know is a multi-centric universe. Because all beings are in relationship with each other, all beings are precarious, fragile, and vulnerable. And yet, our hope lies in that Christ is "present to all the cosmos" (340) in all its fragility and wonder, "in, with, and under ecosystems within ecosystems within ecosystems—as a microcosm of the macrocosmic body of a cosmic Christ." (340)

The book as a whole does what Pedersen wanted it to do, it brings together perspectives from diverse authors in order to show how Lutheran is heard by subaltern readers. Despite the multiplicity a few common themes emerge. First, there is the data that Luther was himself a subaltern thinker, writing to decolonize Germany. Second, the reader will find that there is no such thing as a systematic Lutheran view. Luther, himself, was an occasional and dialectic writer containing multitudes and urging others to do likewise. Third, the authors insist that Lutheran evangelism is a call to open the Gospel to new ears and to hear the Gospel proclaimed by new voices. The more we de-center the power structures of the church and the academy, the more we will learn about ourselves and our world and the more we will grow in our relationship with God and with the world.

Pedersen's edited volume has much to teach those outside of Lutheran circles about Luther and his subaltern theological perspective. However, if common trends continue mostly Lutherans will be reading this book. Luckily, the volume has much to say to Lutherans about the need to open the conversation to wider and wider circles of readers and interlocutors. I commend this book to Luther scholars, students of subaltern studies, and to those new to both areas.