

AND THE WALLS COME TUMBLING DOWN: GLOBALIZATION AND FRAGMENTATION IN THE LWF



By Vitor Westhelle

If the myth of the Tower of Babel represents the antipode of the Pentecost, the story of the siege and destruction of Jericho is the anti-narrative of the building up of the walls of Jerusalem. In the first case we have the symbolic expression of the dialectics of dissemination and communication, in the second of deconstruction and totalization. The simultaneity or the rapid oscillation between the two poles of both dialectical movements is a prevailing feature of late modern societies. In the words of Anthony Giddens:

It has become a commonplace to claim that modernity fragments, dissociates. Some have even presumed that such fragmentation marks the emergence of a novel phase of social development beyond modernity—a postmodern era. Yet the unifying features of modern institutions are just as central to modernity—especially in the phase of high modernity—as the disaggregating ones.¹

At the theoretical level, moments of diastases and of syntheses have been brought so close together that systems are erected almost as fast as they disintegrate. The legitimacy of systems of referentiality is both and at the same time the highest and the most contested value in late modernity.

Theologically this same movement reproduces itself in the continuing efforts of finding a universal foundation for religion or Christianity and the equally militant attempt at eschewing any foundation. Also in theology the global village with its new missiological promises—as expressed in a Parliament of World Religions or in proposals for a global ethics—finds its counterpart in the old and renewed adage—“to every tribe a scribe”—now phrased as the incommensurability of language-games.

Globalization and Fragmentation among Lutherans

For a particular confessional family or communion, such as Lutheranism—which I will address in this case study—the same phenomenon can also be observed. After reaching a global expression as a result of the missionary efforts of the nineteenth century, Lutheranism first felt the impact of fragmentation which came along with the breakdown of political colonialism. Does fragmentation follow globalization?

However, in the case of a confessional family such as Lutheranism, there is a complicating factor. It supposes by definition a tightly defined common ground, the confessional writings that sustain a common language, or so we were led to believe. Being sanctioned by its historical confessions, would a confessional family be exempt from the vicissitudes of this age? Examples to the contrary are legion, but one is emblematic. In the Helsinki Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in 1963, one of the main purposes was to discuss and approve a common statement on the meaning of “justification” (as the article by which the church stands or falls) for today. However, the effort of reaching a consensus ended in

¹Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1991), 27.

Vitor Westhelle, formerly a parish pastor in Matelandia in Brazil, is now Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. A *dialog* editorial council member, he also serves as advisor to the Executive Council of the Lutheran World Federation.

a major collapse. The assembly failed to adopt the document prepared by the Commission on Theology, even after it was redrafted. In face of the frustration felt by the delegates for not having the basic theological document carried, the chair of the session in which the proposed statement was being discussed assured all that, despite no agreement having been reached as to what justification meant, no one had challenged the "Unaltered Augsburg Confession."² Nonetheless, delegates from India and Tanganyika went on record asking why they should adhere to a confession issued in Germany in the 16th century if no agreement could be reached about its present meaning for the communion.³ A common symbol of faith assumed to be of global relevance and the fragmentation of its meaning subsisted side by side. In a sense the appeal to the past rescued the present, but in another sense it obviated itself.

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) will complete, on July 1, 1997, fifty years of existence. It was founded on this day in 1947 [at 12:25 p.m., the report tells us] in Lund, Sweden⁴ as the successor to the Lutheran World Convention, an almost exclusively North Atlantic organization. In this brief reflection I am interested in examining some shifts in the theological self-understanding of the LWF during this half-century. I will be using mainly the assemblies' proceedings to indicate emphases and new trends in theological discussions. This does not mean, however, that theology in the Lutheran communion is done only or even mainly in and through assemblies. They are not the Lutheran magisterium, but they have been markers in the history of the role of theology in the Lutheran communion, defining emphases and magnifying trends. Since the assemblies are the privileged places where policies are drawn and strategic priorities are conceived, I regard them as main events to diagnose what I am interested in examining, namely, the discontinuities in the theological self-un-

derstanding of the LWF in its attempt to be the expression of a global communion of churches.

Perusing the assemblies' reports a number of questions were normative for this investigation. Who is the subject of the theological discourse? On which grounds is this subject constituted? What is the relationship between ecclesial, confessional, academic, and social factors in the definition of the theological agenda? What is the relation between the shifts in theological orientation and cultural changes in society? A genealogical approach instead of a historical or systematic one is going to guide this study, laying emphasis on types of attitudes and characteristic features of some periods. A typology does not impart a logic to history, but it reveals trends inherent to it.



Theology and Culture



The transformations the LWF went through in its fifty years of existence reflect a general movement observable in the late modern culture in the west after the Second World War. I will not attempt a characterization of modern culture in general, except to define the post-WWII period as belonging to late modernity as a phase of modernity marked by a tremendous acceleration of the unifying and the disaggregating trends observable in modern societies. Three basic periods can be identified linking theological changes to cultural drifts.

The fifteen years that followed the Second World War were viewed as a period for building a sense of identity in world Lutheranism based on strong theoretical and confessional foundations. During this time the master narrative was the European Lutheran confessional heritage as expressed in academia. In Lund (1947), Anders Nygren expressed it with the motto that would symbolize the creation of the LWF: "Always forward toward Luther."⁵ In his catch phrase the Swedish theologian was able to characterize both the confessional anchor and the sense of a progressive movement toward a common identity.

Building a sense of identity and finding a ground for legitimacy was by and large also the general mood in post-WWII western culture. The reconstruction of the world order, the foundation of the United Na-

²*Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly of the LWF, Helsinki, July 30-August 11, 1963* (Berlin: Lutherisches, 1965) 365.

³*Ibid.*, 294.

⁴*Proceedings of the LWF Assembly, Lund, Sweden, June 30-July 6, 1947* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publishing House, 1948) 21.

⁵*Ibid.*, 140.

tions, the large consensus that there were universal human rights, the Cold War with its implicit assumption that the world had to opt between competitive political systems (both entailing universal claims), the Third World being compelled to join an option for development and/or a socialist revolution that would usher its countries to the assumed universal status of the developed nations, the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948—all of these features mark an era in which there was a certain ground for legitimacy. Legitimacy had a referentiality by which universal claims could be made; and even when contested, it was in the name of another referentiality. There were master narratives competing for the allegiance of humankind.

From the 1960s on this confidence in a referential basis for legitimacy was considerably corroded. There was a demise of master narratives that would grant legitimacy. Globalization is a name given to the phenomenon that marks simultaneously the dissolution of privileged spaces, of a geographical hierarchy, and the consciousness of an irreducible pluralism. Economic systems, financial structures, and communication networks are now crossing cyberspace at the speed of light and bringing the world closer; but this phenomenon will also cause a profound sense of a pervasive relativism and of increasing local basis (instead of universal foundations) for knowledge. Similarly, during this second period the LWF experienced the withering of a professorial type of theological orientation, matching the general cultural trend of holding as suspicious any theoretical system claiming universal validity. "Praxis," then "alterity" and "difference," are terms that gained currency. Students and not professors (or administrators) became the ones to reshape the university. Not by coincidence, in the Fifth Assembly of the LWF in Evian, 1970, a militant student outvoted an established European professor of theology in the dispute for a position in the Executive Committee.⁶

But if the 1960s and '70s were marked by the paroxysmal hope that walls would fall down, it is in the '80s that paradoxically the cold war ends, walls fall, but a new sense of conformism, of neo-conservatism makes its debut on the stage that earlier had displayed an enraged prophetic optimism. Neotribalism affirms the autochthonous values of

cultures while national states are downsized in favor of civil society. At the same time the market becomes global but also mobile, and ever more strongly detached from national allegiances. It is the time for technicians, for experts in and consultants for microspheres. Competence and effectiveness in administering the "know-how" take the lead and seize the place once occupied first by academic professionalism and, more recently, by social prophecy.



*From Dogmatic Argument to
Contextual Reflection*



In the history of the LWF since its inception the role of theology changed in considerable ways following general cultural patterns. The trend goes from confessional unity to contextual pluralism. Any examination of the procedures of the assemblies and inter-assembly reports reveals that classical theological argumentation and dogmatic formulae have progressively disappeared from the documentation. What has grown are contextual reflections on a diverse set of issues that have gained theological relevance. The semantic field of the theological discourse drifted away from its traditional center. Questions related to social justice, ecology, peace, ecumenism, racism, sexism, age, technology, and so forth have been substituted for the classical loci of Lutheran theology that dominated the language of the LWF until the middle of the '60s. The attempts at defining Lutheran identity, which were prevalent in the first assemblies, are not absent from the later period, but their semantic value is different. In the Lund Assembly of 1947 or in Hannover in 1952, confessional Lutheran theological loci functioned in apologetic and foundational ways. When they appear in more recent documents or statements they are used frequently in a rhetorical and nonfoundational sense.

Methodologically there have also been significant changes. The movement is from deductive procedures to inductive ones, and then more recently to a

⁶*Sent into the World: The Proceedings of the Fifth Assembly of the LWF* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971) 138-139, 146.

basic uncertainty about what a methodological procedure really is. To a large extent methodological issues are themselves issues in dispute. While in Lund (1947) and Hannover (1952) the structure of the reports moved from confessional principles into theological definitions and then into particular recommendations, Evian (1970) and Dar-es-Salaam (1977) started from the contextual realities of the churches and economic, social, racial, gender, and age issues. Budapest (1984) and Curitiba (1990) were pressing the issue of globalization dealing mainly with the challenge of world religions and ecology, respectively.

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Building Up and Breaking Down Walls

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Transformations in the theological self-understanding of Lutheranism as expressed by the LWF are far from erratic. In these changes the same periods, marked by the assemblies, can be identified: the first goes from Lund (1947) to Helsinki (1963), the second from Helsinki to Dar-es-Salaam (1977), and the third from Dar-es-Salaam to the present. The crucial moment in this development is the Evian Assembly in 1970 and its surrounding events.

From Lund (1947) to Helsinki (1963) we have the initial development of a crisis in theological conception. In Lund the theological self-understanding was so evidently at the core of everything that theology was not even one of the five departments then created. (It would be created five years later in Hannover.) The very metaphor used in Lund for the theological task was the all-encompassing need to rebuild the "ruined walls of Jerusalem." The wall metaphor gave expression to what the concerns really were. "Unity of faith [is] reflected in the common body of doctrine."⁷ In Hannover (1952) this is still the dominant approach

(the image of building or rebuilding is still kept), but tentative questions start to emerge as to the importance of the relation between theory and practice, between doctrine and existence.⁸ In Minneapolis (1957) this becomes structurally formulated by the recommendation of both the Commission on Theology and on Liturgy that the latter be integrated into the former.⁹ But still the doctrinal emphasis is dominant. The building of walls was still the theme. And the wall was to separate Lutheranism both from secularism and from an irresponsible ecumenism (the target being the Roman Catholic Church and, to a lesser extent, the Reformed tradition).

The crisis surfaced in Helsinki (1963) on the occasion of the frustrated attempt to pass the statement on the doctrine of justification. In dispute were two views of the human condition. A fundamental biblical and confessional anthropology, that had not been questioned before, began to be challenged by a contextual anthropology ("circumstance" language is introduced). It is on the basis of a disputed diagnosis of the human condition that the disagreement on the meaning of justification ensued and brought the failure of the Commission on Theology to have its document on "justification" adopted by the assembly. This is in itself revealing: the discussion was not about the doctrine of justification as such, but the relation between justification and the human condition. The impasse happened at the methodological level. The time in which professional theologians of high reputation were able to lead and shape the theological identity of the LWF was withering and along with it went the strong sense of a defined confessional nucleus. Without direct reference to Lund, the wall metaphor is inverted: Christ "has broken down the wall of hostility" (cf. Ephesians 2:14).¹⁰ The expression entails a double entendre: it not only makes a christological assertion, but it reveals also the incapability of sustaining the building of the walls called for in Lund. Exit Jerusalem, enter Jericho.

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Make Love, Not Theology

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The second period, leading from Helsinki to Dar-

⁷Proceedings, Lund, 96, 99, 71.

⁸Proceedings of the Second Assembly of the LWF, Hannover, Germany, July 25-August 3, 1952 (Gunzenhausen, Bavaria: Buchdruckerei Riedel, 1952) 32, 143.

⁹Proceedings of the Third Assembly of the LWF, Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A., August 15-25, 1957 (Geneva: LWR, 1958) 102.

¹⁰Proceedings, Helsinki, 442-43.

es-Salaam (1977), marks a transitional stage, at the center of which is the controversial Evian Assembly in 1970. Much is known and debated about this assembly. Theology is conceived in a new way. If the meaning of theology were to be restricted to the sense it had in Lund, the Evian students' motto, "Make love, not theology!" was indicative of a fundamental shift. But it was not theology as such that would fade away. It was a new methodological approach signaling its advent. The new emphasis started to manifest itself in the anthropological emphasis observable in Helsinki (1963). Helsinki's introduction of anthropology as a critical and unsettled issue would then be radicalized in Evian's emphasis on sociology and politics. The increase of "two-thirds world" (a concept introduced at Evian) representation (which had been already called for in Helsinki) and the polemical decision to change the venue from Pôrto Alegre, Brazil (due to the suppression of human rights in the country originally elected as host) brought to the agenda questions like human rights, poverty, racism, sexism, and so forth. The unifying center for theological reasoning drifts to new locations.

Two of the world's leading theologians present there (Heinz Eduard Tödt from Germany and Gustaf Wingren from Sweden) changed the nature of the theological contribution as it was known in the LWF until then. A new tone in respect to the confessional heritage is introduced. In the case of Tödt, Luther was criticized in the keynote address for having the very motivating quest of his theology ("How can I find a gracious God?") conceived within a sordid monastic context by an "isolated monk" with a "deeply anxious conscience" and should not be "used, therefore, as the leading motif either for theology or for preaching."¹¹

Wingren, in turn, took a drastic hermeneutical stance and proposed that article VII of the *Augsburg Confession* offered the freedom for "more than merely 'unity of churches.'"¹² He then made a significant and debated proposal for the LWF to support the nomination of the Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop Helder Camara for the Nobel Prize (later adopted as a resolution by the Council¹³). A socio-politically informed theology was to dominate the Department of Studies in the following period, exemplified by the multi-volume study on "The Identity of the Church and Its Service to the Whole Human Being," publish-

ed by the Department of Studies in the middle '70s. The understanding of mission as service to the world reverted definitely to the wall metaphor of Lund.

This trend culminates in Dar-es-Salaam's discussion on *status confessionis* in relation to apartheid in South Africa.¹⁴ The best illustration for the new tone in the discussions and the culmination of this period was given in Dar-es-Salaam by Dr. Manas Buthelezi's call for new confessional barriers, now being drawn along social, political, and racial divisions: "The drawing of a new confession is a matter of a redefinition of boundaries within which the unity of the church is possible."¹⁵ The cycle is completed: the Lund motif, the wall metaphor, returns in Dar-es-Salaam. The role of theology returned to the ecclesiological concentration; but if at Lund confessional and doctrinal unity was conceived to strengthen the identity of Lutheranism, in the 1970s this identity had to be reinvented from the concrete social, economic, political, and ecclesial experiences of the churches worldwide, going, on the one hand, beyond the institutional churches—as Wingren suggested. Yet, on the other hand, it redefined boundaries that traditional theological discussions did not detect—as the resolution on *status confessionis* exemplified. The significant critical confrontations that had to be faced in the first period—secularism and a hasty ecumenism—were now the significant positive and welcomed challenges.

In the period that follows up to Curitiba (1990) the contextual concern of the theological task is brought to fruition in a department that addresses questions that go from worship to social systems, passing through education, women's issues, youth, ecumenism, and encounter with other faiths and ideologies. If this seems to be a theological inflation, it represents also a significant fragmentation in the theological agenda. Normative and confessional issues give place to a pluralistic conversation where voices of the Third

¹¹*Sent into the World*, 32.

¹²In David P. Scaer, *The Lutheran World Federation Today* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1971) 23.

¹³*Sent into the World*, 145-146.

¹⁴*In Christ a New Community: The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the LWF, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, June 13-25, 1977* (Geneva: LWF, 1977) 180.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 93.

World start to emerge with more consistency. If in the first period foundational confessional questions were dominant, and in the second the debate provoked a methodological shift and a relocation of the semantic field of the theological discourse, in the third period, which starts with the predominance of an inductive methodology, the question was again largely on substantial issues—still related to social, political, racial, and gender issues, but much more focused on the concrete ecclesial experiences of the different churches.

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The Sage, The Prophet, and the Other
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Let's review this history, moving from unity to fragmentation. The first period can be defined by its emphasis on doctrinal unity. It can be characterized as having the role of theology interpreted in terms of providing a dogmatic foundation for the unity and the mission of the Lutheran family. A look at the methodological structure of the proceedings in Lund makes this clear. By and large, the argumentation is professional and academic. It moves from principles to definitions and then to practical (missiological) applications. The spokespersons (who were actually spokesmen) for theological affirmations were mostly theological professors from Germany or Scandinavia. They brought their academic approach and credentials into the theological practice of the LWF. Theological professional competence in the tradition of established European universities was a requirement to enter into the conversation. The Luther Congress founded in 1956 gathered the theological academic resources to lend its support to the LWF theological identity and buttress the confessional walls. The subjects of the theological discourse are the "sages." The sages are those who speak the truth as foundation, the ground for what is. With a look from the outside, the sage describes what is the case and suggests the answers that will convey identity and foster unity. The sage defines.

The second period is marked by prophetic denun-

ciation. It signals the crisis of the model dominant in the first period. The crisis announced itself when still mainly European theologians were no longer able to accept a common statement even on the doctrinal core of Lutheranism, the doctrine of justification. Helsinki could be seen as a premonition of the dramatic events that would shake Europe, and so also the LWF, in the '60s. Evian (1970) is the culmination. There, the still dominant Europeans, joined to a certain extent by the "Third Block" (USA), would raise their prophetic voices denouncing injustices in the world. The last minute change of venue of the assembly is highly emblematic. It was the North Atlantic world that was from outside raising the prophetic voice of denunciation threatening to boycott the Fifth Assembly if it were to be held, as planned, in Brazil. The prophet takes the place of the sage—standing, however, still outside of an alienated condition. Prophets are able to discern better what is taking place inside. They are the seers in a world in which even the victims don't realize the fate that besets them. Contrary to the sage, the prophet is not an enunciator of what is, but of what ought to be. The new definitions of *status confessionis*, as they came to be discussed in Evian (1970) and defined in Dar-es-Salaam,¹⁶ emerge precisely after no agreement on the *articulus stantis aut cadentis* had been reached in Helsinki (1963)! The prophet denounces and announces.

The third period can be defined as a moment of global fragmentation. What distinguishes the third period from the second is again a change in the subject of the theological discourse. Theological voices from the Third World start to appear with more consistency in the conversation. I believe that this shift was already announced in the context of the Resolution on Human Rights at Evian. The text originally submitted had a clear prophetic tone. It looked at the world in which human rights were being violated from outside and denounced it. The Brazilian situation was used as the exemplary case. A heated debate followed until a compromise was reached by the so-called Marshall Resolution (named after Robert Marshall, president of the LCA) that redrafted the document to include a confession that no one has the right to point the finger at another, for "the hands of oppression in any country receive their support from

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 180.

many sources, so that the blame must be shared by virtually all of us."¹⁷ This started a shift in the prevailing prophetic tone surrounding Evian by overtly admitting that if the responsibility must be shared by all, all have a right to enter the theological conversation. Obviously, this brought along a new sense of democratic participation and representation, as it also signified the eclipse of the hegemony of the professional academicians as well as a fragmentation in the theological conversation. This new trend was announced in Curitiba (1990) by both the self-understanding of the LWF as a communion and the restructuring of the organization which downsized the Department of Studies to four desks. The latter move can be interpreted in one sense as a return to a more traditional view of the task of theology. But, as worldwide representation increased, the new Department for Theology and Studies had less of a teaching and overseeing role (as it would have had in Lund or Hannover) and more of a catalyst function, gathering the pluralistic expressions of Lutheran churches in the world.



Kenosis and Communio



What has been described has also been seen as a sort of theological *kenosis*. But the lamented demise of any historical reality is often the result of a view that takes the historical definition of the past and projects it into the future, failing to realize that what seems to have disappeared has only moved outside of the past's field of vision. This can be exemplified by an observer's remark at Evian that the sanction given to the so-called union negotiations (allowing united churches to affiliate with the LWF), that passed in plenary at 4:15 on July 22, 1970, represented at that very minute the death of Lutheranism on a worldwide basis.¹⁸ Obviously, this observation is easily understandable if one is restricted to the theological self-understanding of Lund. The important thing is to try to define the new ways a theological self-understanding is taking shape. World Lutheranism did not disappear, but continued, exactly by owning the new dimensions theology took.

In a sense, since the Curitiba restructuring, the

LWF has conceived the role of theology as requiring again the foundationalism that characterized theological endeavors at its inception. But the presuppositions are no longer given. This has resulted in a certain ambiguity that was conceptualized by the former Commission on Studies as a necessary complementary task: (a) to provoke a spiral effect in all the work of the LWF, guiding and monitoring its programs and the theologies of the *communio*, and (b) to serve as a catalyst and coordinator for theological discussions in and among the diverse churches.¹⁹ These two tasks, clearly meant as complementary charges, are in fact not so easy to put together. They even undermine each other at least in methodological terms. But it is exactly this contradictory coexistence that characterizes the present theological situation. While the second task represents a continuation from the previous agenda, the one born in the '70s and affirmed in the '80s, the first one attempts to retrieve the foundational agenda of the first period. In fact the new title of the Department for Theology and Studies (as it was named after Curitiba) reveals the concern of merging the first period's Department on *Theology* with the second period's Department of *Studies*.

In its 1995 meeting in Windhoek, Namibia, the Executive Council of the LWF received a document entitled "Ten Theses on the Role of Theology in the LWF" prepared by the Program Committee for Theology and Studies. Theses 6 and 7 set the tone for the way theology should be defined and practiced:

6. In the history of the LWF as a communion of churches, the awareness of the tension between the gospel that holds us together, and the diversity by which we express it, grew as creative challenge for both the self-understanding of the LWF as a communion and its theological practice.

7. This challenge offers new opportunities for the exercise of theology in the LWF through which the communion will be promoted if, and only if, these characteristics of theological practice are followed: a) the LWF offers itself as a place for different articulations of diverse experiences; b) as a catalyst for innovation within theologies in different contexts; and c) as a guarantor of both the diversity and of the necessity of expressing commonalities.

¹⁷*Sent into the World*, 148.

¹⁸Scaer, *The Lutheran World Federation Today*, 41.

¹⁹"Theology in the LWF: Legacy Document of the Commission on Studies" (Baguio City, 1989).

With this theological charter the LWF moves into its coming assembly in Hong Kong. It remains to be seen what will give it its theological profile, but nothing less can be expected than a still greater pluralism in the conversation *and* a deeper pursuance of identity. That these polar opposites appear simultaneously is what links Lutheran theology to our late modern condition. Whether this is a captivity or a promise depends now on whether the *communio* ecclesiology that has joined Lutheranism to other traditional confessional families will also be expressed as a *communio* theology, a theology that

incorporates in its practice the awareness that it is done neither before nor after Pentecost, neither before nor after Babel, but in the midst of the fragile balance of the Spirit that scatters and draws together. If something is to be learned it is that we don't have the right to despise the present, either in the name of an honorable past or for the sake of utopian dreams. Between the discourses of the sage and of the prophet a semantic field is open to those *inspired* to speak the truth with boldness. And this is the plight of those who understand that fragmentation and globalization can also be simultaneous gifts of the Spirit.