

ASIAN  
HORIZONS  
Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2017  
Pages: 283-296

## THE REFORMATION AS A RETURN TO THE GOD OF REVELATION The Indian Significance of Martin Luther

Subhash Anand<sup>♦</sup>  
*St Paul's School, Udaipur*

### Abstract

If the ecumenical movement as the common search towards the visible unity of Christians is to bear fruit, we need to rediscover how we receive God's self-disclosure. The present article first examines how Luther understands 'revelation.' Then the author discusses the role of creation and history – not merely of Abraham and his descendants – as channels of divine self-disclosure. Jesus is presented as *the* revelation, and consequently as the hermeneutic key to understand the revelatory character of creation and history. If creation, history and Jesus mediate revelation, then we need to safeguard creation; ensure that humans who shape history, are governed by values; and return to Jesus by a thorough use of the historic-critical method.

**Keywords:** Church Unity, Creation, Environment, Historical-Critical Method, History, Jesus, Just Society, Revelation

From ancient times humanity has been in search of a saviour god. She "with all diligence has endeavoured to ascertain what God is,

---

♦**Subhash Anand** retired as Professor of Indian Philosophy and Religion, from Jnanadeep Vidyapeeth, Pune, in 2008. Currently he is engaged in promoting inter-religious dialogue in Udaipur. His publications include *The Local Church and Inculturation* (1985), *Major Hindu Festivals: A Christian Appreciation* (1991), *The Way of Love: The Bhāgavata Doctrine of Bhakti* (1996), *Story as Theology: An Interpretative Study of Five Episodes from the Mahābhārata* (1996), *Hindutva: A Christian Response* (2001), *Hindu Inspiration for Christian Reflection: Towards a Hindu-Christian Theology* (2004), *Major Hindu Celebrations: A Christian Appreciation* (2008), *The Eternal Stranger: An Interpretative Study of Five Śiva Episodes in the Mahābhārata* (2009), *A Preface for an Indian Christology* (2010), *May They All Be One: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of the Church* (2012), *The Divine Feminine: Towards A Biblical Gynaecology* (2015). His articles and book-reviews have appeared in national and international journals. Email: 43subhash@gmail.com

what He has in mind and does, yet has she never been able to attain to [the knowledge and understanding of] any of these things.”<sup>1</sup> Philosophy may suggest that God exists and that humans can find their fulfilment only in God. But at the heart of human existence is the experience of communion through freedom and love. The final fulfilment of humans can only be the culmination of this experience. But then is this longing a mere wish or is it a real possibility? Martin Luther was intensely engaged with this question.

### **Grace as Revelation**

The deep longing humans have for an experience of communion through freedom and love can also be the experience of salvation only if God is also a mystery of communion through freedom and love. “Philosophy knows no more than one infinite.”<sup>2</sup> Only God can give us a deeper insight about God, otherwise God would be no God. God does this because God is our most loving Abba. “He has Himself revealed and opened the deepest abyss of his paternal heart and of His pure unutterable love. For He has created us for this very object, that He might redeem and sanctify us.”<sup>3</sup> The self-disclosure of God is the beginning of a love relation, a gesture of grace. To accept this offer of salvation we need to be further graced by God. “He has given to us even His Son and the Holy Ghost, by whom to bring us to Himself... we could never attain to the knowledge of the grace and favour of the Father except through the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the paternal heart... But of Christ we could know nothing either, unless it had been revealed by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>4</sup> Thus for Luther, there can be no salvation without revelation. Here I fully agree with Luther. God is not something out there, somewhat like gravity waves, which we have recently discovered. God is Freedom, and the ground of all freedom. God can be known only in an encounter of love. Even then only God can make the first advance. This is one way of summarizing Luther’s conviction about the exclusive role of Jesus Christ, scripture, grace and faith in the process of our salvation. In Jesus God invites us to the highest communion through freedom and love by sharing in the communion between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the highest expression of freedom and love.

I have the impression that for Luther divine revelation was needed not merely for salvation. “With the support of the mathematical

---

<sup>1</sup>*Large Catechism*, 2 (Creed), martinluthersermons.com/The%20Creed.pdf, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>*Commentary on Genesis (=CGe)*, www.lutherdansk.dk/Luther's%20Works%201%20Lectures%20on%20Genesis%201-5.pdf, 4.

<sup>3</sup>*Large Catechism*, 2 (Creed), 6.

<sup>4</sup>*Large Catechism*, 2 (Creed), 6.

disciplines – which no one can deny were divinely revealed – the human being, in his mind, soars high above the earth.”<sup>5</sup> So too, he thinks that what Genesis says about creation is not merely a theological confession, but also a scientific given. What scientists learn through their observation need not be correct. “Because these facts are revealed by the sacred Scriptures, they are certain. Although the rest of the ideas have the support of experience, they are not so sure, because experience can be deceiving.”<sup>6</sup>

Even when God reveals God, the revelation can never be exhaustive for the simple reason that God cannot be adequately manifested through created realities. “When God reveals Himself to us, it is necessary for Him to do so through some such veil or wrapper and to say: ‘Look! Under this wrapper you will be sure to take hold of Me.’”<sup>7</sup> Explaining the vision of the prophet, Luther comments: “Thus Isaiah says that he saw the Lord in a very wide garment (6:1), because God cannot be depicted or viewed in a vision which is absolute or subject to direct perception. Therefore such figures of speech have the approval of the Holy Spirit, and the works of God are set before us so that we can grasp them.”<sup>8</sup> Revelation does not minimize the distance between Creator and creatures; it makes us more aware that God is *the* mystery. Hence revelation can only be communicated through symbolic language. The function of revelation is not to inform us about some doctrine, but to bring us in the presence of God. Hence we cannot be too dogmatic about the content of revelation. Revelation is not something we receive, but a mystery we encounter. As God grounds our existence, the more we understand ourselves the better will we understand that mystery.

Luther seems to be under the impression that God cannot directly reveal God to us because due to our sin we cannot experience God directly. “Perhaps God appeared to Adam without a covering, but after the fall into sin He appeared in a gentle breeze as though enveloped in a covering... This nature of ours has become so misshapen through sin, so depraved and utterly corrupted, that it cannot recognize God or comprehend His nature without a covering.”<sup>9</sup> It is not sin but finitude that prevents us from experiencing God directly. To do so we need to stand outside (*ekstasis*) time and space and somehow participate in God’s eternity, and in some way become like God.

---

<sup>5</sup>CGe, 46.

<sup>6</sup>CGe, 44.

<sup>7</sup>CGe, 15.

<sup>8</sup>CGe, 15.

<sup>9</sup>CGe, 11.

According to Luther, the revelation of the Triune God is already given to us in Genesis. The account of creation in Genesis testifies that, “in the unity of the Godhead there is a certain plurality of Persons.”<sup>10</sup> Referring to Prov 8:22-27, he maintains that “Solomon shows that he understood the [Trinitarian] doctrine of our religion which was revealed by Moses but he does it in such a way that the uneducated people heard and read his words and yet did not understand them.”<sup>11</sup> Some may think that Luther is reading his Trinitarian theology into Genesis. He anticipates this: “You say, these evidences are too dark to prove so important an article of faith. I answer: At that time these statements had to be made so darkly by divine counsel, or at least because all things were reserved for that future Lord for whose arrival was reserved the restitution of all things (Acts 3:21), of all knowledge, and of all revelations.”<sup>12</sup> Revelation is progressive. Some things will become clear to us only when we finish our pilgrimage: “Nor can we say anything certain about other things, which will be revealed on the Last Day, when we shall be clothed with a different flesh.”<sup>13</sup>

It is not easy to understand what Luther means by ‘revelation.’ He “did not always care for rigorous definitions of terms and concepts he worked with.”<sup>14</sup> He insists that, “what is asserted without Scripture or an approved revelation, may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed.”<sup>15</sup> Here he seems to admit the possibility of different kinds of revelation. He also does not distinguish between the revelation itself and the record of that revelation and its impact on the immediate witnesses. The former is an event at a particular moment in time and space, the latter is available to generations to come all over the world. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition the former is an event, that is not merely located at a particular point of history, but is itself a part of history. An event is the expression of free choice that manifests itself beyond the individual involved, and in some way affects the people who perceive that expression. As

---

<sup>10</sup>CGe, 21.

<sup>11</sup>CGe, 21.

<sup>12</sup>CGe, 59.

<sup>13</sup>CGe, 31.

<sup>14</sup>Rostislav Tkachenko, “(Not) Scripture Alone: An Examination of Martin Luther’s Theology of the ‘Scripture-Tradition’ Correlation in the Context of the Historical Development of the Western Christian Tradition,” [www.academia.edu/7846932/\\_Not\\_Scripture\\_Alone\\_An\\_Examination\\_of\\_Martin\\_Luthers\\_Theology\\_of\\_the\\_Scripture-Tradition\\_Correlation\\_in\\_the\\_Context\\_of\\_the\\_Historical\\_Development\\_of\\_the\\_Western\\_Christian\\_Tradition\\_SUMMARY](http://www.academia.edu/7846932/_Not_Scripture_Alone_An_Examination_of_Martin_Luthers_Theology_of_the_Scripture-Tradition_Correlation_in_the_Context_of_the_Historical_Development_of_the_Western_Christian_Tradition_SUMMARY).

<sup>15</sup>*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, [martinluthersermons.com/Babilonien%20Captivity%20of%20the%20Church.pdf](http://martinluthersermons.com/Babilonien%20Captivity%20of%20the%20Church.pdf), 2.23, 11.

such, an event tends to embody the thought or intention of that individual. Thus an event is also a communication, an interpretation. An event is both deed and word. The divine self-disclosure is meant to guide the individual in his or her journey to become the unique person God wants him or her to be. Revelation may also have a public function only if it is in some manner authenticated, usually by the life of the person involved. It will function primarily as an inspiration and only secondarily as an explanation of what that inspiration means and why it calls for a response.

The idea that God speaks through word and deed is brought out by an Old Testament word: *dābār* (word, event).<sup>16</sup> At times God's word (*dābār*) directly comes to his favoured one – for instance Abraham, engaging him in a dialogue (Gen 15:1-5). The prophets of Israel are especially chosen to receive the word of the Lord (Is 38:4; Jer 1:4), and then proclaim it to others (Is 1:10; Jer 2:4). Sometimes God speaks to his people through his deeds. “Now therefore stand still and see this great thing (*dābār*), which the LORD will do before your eyes” (1 Sam 12:16). What God does remains a mystery: “It is the glory of God to conceal things (*dābār*)” (Pro 25:2).

Seeing revelation as the manifestation of divine grace is possible only if the Divine is understood not only as the mystery of Being but also of Love. Some Indian thinkers, who maintain that the Ultimate is *nirguṇa* – a term which in my opinion they mistranslate as ‘impersonal’ – will not be comfortable with our approach. Our response will be that God is beyond all qualities (*guṇa*) we experience. In that sense God is truly *nirguṇa*, free from all qualities that are part of creation. On the other hand, God is *sagūṇa*, having all the good qualities we cherish. More correctly, God is all those qualities. God is not just loving, but God is Love. Thus we bring together the three ways of speaking about God: negation (*nirguṇa*), affirmation (*sagūṇa*), and transcendence.<sup>17</sup>

### Creation as Revelation

God's self-disclosure takes place through nature and history. In the account of creation, the verb *'mr* (say, command) is used ten times (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29). God's word is always effective. He speaks and something happens. The fact that God spoke ten times

---

<sup>16</sup>See Frank Ritzel Ames, “[*dbr*] דבר”, Willem A. VanGemeren (Gen. ed.), *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols., Grand Rapids (Mich.): Zondervan, 1997, vol. 1, 912-915.

<sup>17</sup>For the meaning of *nirguṇa* and *sagūṇa*, see Subhash Anand, *The Way of Love: The Bhāgavata Doctrine of Bhakti*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996, 39-48.

and that God rested on the seventh day (2:2) links the account of creation to the Exodus narrative, with its emphasis on the Ten Commandments and on the Sabbath (Ex 34:28; 20:11). The ten words of God bring forth the creation which is very good (Gen 1:31). By observing the Ten Commandments, Israel will become God's holy people. Creation is a revelation of God who calls us to participate in a covenantal mystery. Seen in this way, creation is the beginning of the history of salvation.

Luther emphasizes the Judeo-Christian belief that God creates the universe out of nothing. "The Father creates heaven and earth out of nothing through the Son, whom Moses calls the Word. Over these the Holy Spirit broods."<sup>18</sup> Creation is totally a gift of love. So too, salvation is totally a gift of love. Humans cannot merit it. Luther's *sola gratia* governs the whole of salvation history. Creation is possible because already within God there is the eternal Word. "Thus the Father spoke inwardly, and outwardly light was made and came into existence immediately."<sup>19</sup> Creation is not merely the revelation of God as the Supreme Cause, but also in some manner the disclosure of the 'within' of God, a manifestation of the loving communion within God. But creation is not merely a revelation: "The created word is brought into being by the uncreated Word. What else is the entire creation than the Word of God uttered by God, or extended to the outside?"<sup>20</sup> We can understand incarnation in an analogous manner and say that already creation is the first incarnation of God. Through the mystery of Incarnation God becomes personally present within history. But every creation entails divine immanence, God's presence as its ground; otherwise it would cease to be. "Thus we see that the Holy Spirit also has His own language and way of expression, namely, that God, by speaking, created all things and worked through the Word, and that all His works are some words of God, created by the uncreated Word."<sup>21</sup> In creation too the divine Word 'becomes flesh.'

The carpenter may forget the chair he made, and yet it will continue to be. Creation, however, is totally a different kind of making.

Therefore when the text says: "And God saw that it was very good," it refers to the preservation itself, because the creature could not continue in existence unless the Holy Spirit delighted in it and preserved the work through this delight of God in His work. God did

---

<sup>18</sup>CGe, 9.

<sup>19</sup>CGe, 18.

<sup>20</sup>CGe, 22.

<sup>21</sup>CGe, 47.

not create things with the idea of abandoning them after they had been created, but He loves them and expresses His approval of them. Therefore He is together with them. He sets in motion, He moves, and He preserves each according to its own manner.<sup>22</sup>

Creation reveals God; but its splendour is so great that we may be misled, and consider the creature itself as the Creator.

Thus there is no doubt that our first parents worshiped God... when the sun was rising, by marvelling at the Creator in the creature or, to express myself more clearly, because they were urged on by the creature. Their descendants continued the custom, but without understanding. Thus, this practice turned into idolatry.<sup>23</sup>

Just as Luther's understanding of creation brings out one aspect of his *sola gratia*, so too it links up with his *solus Christus*. "Nevertheless, because he [man] was created in the image of the invisible God, this statement is a dim intimation, as we shall hear that God was to reveal Himself to the world in the man Christ."<sup>24</sup> Humans are the original icons within creation (*eikōn*, Gen 1:26, LXX). Jesus is the originating Eikōn (Col 1:15). For Luther creation is not merely the first moment of the history of salvation; it is also the first Christological disclosure. "Luther was concerned not only with apologetic questions, but also – and even more – with what the creation account teaches its readers about God's character and personality. He viewed almost everything in the account as a revelation of God's benevolence and grace."<sup>25</sup>

Understanding creation as a divine disclosure gives us a deeper awareness of our task as Christians. Modern science, with all its branches, is giving us more and more insights into the mysteries that surround us. The heliocentric claim of Galileo and other astronomers of his time disturbed not only simple Christians but also the 'learned' bureaucrats who staffed the Vatican. So too, it took time for us to accept the evolutionary explanation of human origin. Most of us seem to be unprepared for what is taking place around us.

In our time humanity is experiencing a turning point in its history, as we can see from the advances being made in so many fields. This epochal change has been set in motion by the enormous qualitative, quantitative, rapid and cumulative advances occurring in the sciences and in technology. We are in an age of knowledge and information.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>CGe, 50-51.

<sup>23</sup>CGe, 15.

<sup>24</sup>CGe, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Denis Kaiser, "Luther's Creation Theology," [www.perspectivedigest.org/article/162/archives/20-2/luther-s-creation-theology](http://www.perspectivedigest.org/article/162/archives/20-2/luther-s-creation-theology); accessed on 30-06-2017.

<sup>26</sup>*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 52.

So often our people are much more in touch with the world of today and its questions than their pastors. We are taken by surprise, but we cannot let them down. "I urge you to not fall into that paralysation of standard responses to new questions."<sup>27</sup>

Luther sees creation not only as the result of God's word, but also in some way the word itself. Creation is the first scripture that speaks to us about God, the first sacrament that draws us to God. Creation not merely as something, but as the presence of Someone: one who is the communion of love. Luther also believes that God loves and preserves creation. This will motivate us to be more concerned about environment and its sacred character. If it is God's word, we need to love and preserve this word so that it does not get polluted by human greed and lack of commitment. Creation can be the home of God's children only when we see it as God's holy temple. We in India need to be concerned not just about *svaccha Bhārata* (clean India) but also about *svaccha viśva* (clear universe).

Our worship must motivate us to fulfil our task. Unfortunately our liturgy today, particularly the Latin liturgy, approaches the material and gestures we use less symbolically and more legally. We are more worried about the 'validity' of the sacrament, not about its catechetical efficacy. For instance, seeing the thin little round host some people may find it easy to accept the real presence of Jesus, but many will find it difficult to believe that it is real bread broken for us, inviting us to become the bread broken for others. Nowhere in real life do they come across real bread that comes anywhere close to the host used for the Eucharist. This may explain why the Eucharist does not seem to motivate us to Christian living. We approach it legally: fulfil our obligation to attend Mass on Sunday. Only when the material of creation used in our liturgy speaks to us powerfully, will creation be really sacred to us. Otherwise our concern will be another expression of our selfishness: ensure a healthy environment for our survival and enjoyment.

### **History as Revelation**

The story of the creation of humans ends on a tragic note: Adam and Eve are expelled from the presence of God. But God does not abandon humans to their tragic lot.

It was a great comfort for Adam that, after he had lost Paradise, the tree of life, and the other privileges which were signs of grace, there

---

<sup>27</sup>Pope Francis in his Address to the Bishops of Mexico, [w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/PF\\_20160213\\_messico-vescovi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/PF_20160213_messico-vescovi.html).



was given to him another sign of grace, namely, the sacrifices, by which he could perceive that he had not been cast off by God but was still the object of God's concern and regard. This is what God was indicating when He kindled and consumed the sacrifices and offerings with fire from heaven, as we read about the sacrifice of Moses (Lev 9:24) and of Elijah (1 Kings 18:38). These were true manifestations of the divine mercy which the wretched people needed in order not to be without some light of the grace of God.<sup>28</sup> Thus the history of Israel was an experience of God's revelation, the revelation of God's mercy and love.

Luther believes that Adam and Eve "had a most perfect knowledge of God, for how would they not know Him whose similitude they had and felt within themselves?"<sup>29</sup> Here it is important to note that in being made unto God's image and likeness, humans received a primordial revelation. It is this prevenient grace that makes all humans long for God. It would be unfair on our part to claim that while the inborn longing for God is God's gift to all humans, God actively reveals God only in the Judeo-Christian frame.

God's mercy in revealing Himself to us by such various ways is surely inexpressible, just as Prov 8:30 also bestows glorious praise on this very gift: "I was delighted every day, playing before Him, playing in the world, and My delight was with the children of men." But the Hebrew verb... is incorrectly reproduced by the word 'play.' What Wisdom is saying is that Its concern was for men and that It revealed Itself to them. It is as if It were to say:

I have always displayed Myself to the eyes and ears of men in such a way that they could become aware of My presence in the sacrifices, in circumcision, in burning incense, in the cloud, in the Red Sea, in the manna, in the brazen serpent, in the tabernacle of Moses, in the temple of Solomon, and in the cloud. And it was My delight to display and reveal Myself in this manner to the children of men.<sup>30</sup>

Divine Wisdom pervades the whole universe. She reveals Herself not only to the descendants of Abraham, but to all the children of Adam. The religious history of all the nations is also a revelation of God's love. Just as in the history of Israel there is ample resistance to God, so too the history of all nations has areas of darkness.

Speaking of the disappearance of Enoch, Luther says: "It was a unique manifestation of divine mercy that Enoch was taken away to

---

<sup>28</sup>CGe, 249.

<sup>29</sup>CGe, 66.

<sup>30</sup>CGe, 248.

the Lord alive... Thus after Lamech has seen that his grandfather has been taken away to Paradise without pain, sickness, and death, he assumes that Paradise with all its glory will follow at once."<sup>31</sup> Enoch's being taken up to God was a revelation that his descendants too will have the same future. Strictly speaking the life of Enoch is not part of the story of Israel. So too, we find very holy women and men in all nations, whose lives have been a revelation to their contemporaries, and brought them closer to God. God continues to reveal God in the history of all peoples. For us Christians in India, this is an invitation to discover in the lives of the mystics of our land the presence of God. Some Christian liturgies celebrate the feasts of the holy men and women of the Old Testament. We need to discover and appropriate our Old Testament.

Luther's belief that God's revelation continues to happen within human history challenges us to ensure that this history is an experience of salvation. The struggle to safeguard the dignity of every human, irrespective of age, colour, religion and gender, acquires a new significance in our land where we seem to be moving towards a totalitarian state and a monolithic nation. The struggle for a just society is the struggle for the emergence of the God's Kingdom. God reveals God precisely because God loves humans. Authentic religion does not consist in cult, but in concern for humans and human values. These were also the values of Jesus of Nazareth. Only by accepting and embodying these values will we become the disciples of Jesus and the revelation of his Gospel.

### **Jesus as the Revelation**

Jesus is not simply one who brings the eternal Word of God to us; he is that Word with us. "The 'Word of God' in the New Testament was essentially the historical Christ."<sup>32</sup> Jesus is not just another prophet, another messenger; he is also the message. He is God with us (*emmanouēl*). If we really believe this, then we need to get back as much as possible to Jesus of Nazareth who lived about two thousand years ago. This is very important because central to the Judeo-Christian tradition is the claim that God reveals himself in history. Commenting on Jn 1:1-14, Luther says: "This is the most important of all the Gospels of the church year... For upon it is clearly founded the

---

<sup>31</sup>CGe, 352.

<sup>32</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings*, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959, 67; quoted by Siegbert W. Becker, "The Word of God in the Theology of Martin Luther," 4, [www.wlsessays.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/363/BeckerTheology.pdf](http://www.wlsessays.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/363/BeckerTheology.pdf); accessed on 31-03-2017.

important article of faith concerning the divinity of Christ.”<sup>33</sup> This is the text that clearly proclaims the mystery of the Incarnation: the pre-existence of the Word with the Father from all eternity and his existence with us in history. Tracing the Old Testament background of Jn 1:1-14, Luther goes back to the story of creation in Genesis, and concludes: “From these words of Moses it is clearly proved that God has a Word, through which or by means of which he spoke... since all things were created through this divine utterance.”<sup>34</sup> Thus for the Old Testament writer the whole of creation is the first scripture that mediates the Word of God. Creation is not just the artefact of some artisan, but the utterance of a speaker, because “through which [Word of God] all things were made and spoken.”<sup>35</sup>

Luther wants to make clear that when John speaks of the eternal Word, he is not just following the Old Testament model of personifying divine attributes. No, God and his Word are distinct: “the Word and he that speaks it, are not one person; for it is not possible that the speaker is himself the Word. What sort of speaker would he be who is himself the Word? He must needs be a mute, or the word must needs sound of itself without the speaker.”<sup>36</sup> It is precisely because within God there is the eternal Word, the eternal Other, held together by the Spirit-Love, that God can communicate in love and freedom. Creation is his first communication; it comes to its fulfilment when others who can love and communicate with him, come to be and be what they are to be. Creation and human history are part of divine communication. Hence Scripture can never be adequately understood without a proper understanding of creation and history.

There is however a deeper significance in the Christian doctrine of the eternal Word of God. To say that creation, history and scripture are different modes of divine communication does not do full justice to the depth of the Christian doctrine of the eternal Word. This eternal Word is the eternal Communication, the possibility of all other communication.

God spoke the Word of himself; this can be nothing else than an image that represents him, since every word is a sign which means something. But here the thing signified is by its very nature in the sign or in the Word, which is not in any other sign. Therefore he very

---

<sup>33</sup>*Sermons*, vol. 1, [martinluthersermons.com/Luther\\_Lenker\\_Vol\\_1.pdf](http://martinluthersermons.com/Luther_Lenker_Vol_1.pdf), 171.

<sup>34</sup>*Sermons*, vol. 1, 172.

<sup>35</sup>*Sermons*, vol. 1, 173.

<sup>36</sup>*Sermons*, vol. 1, 173.

properly calls it a real image or sign of his nature. The word of man may also in this connection be used in a measure as an illustration; for by it the human heart is known.<sup>37</sup>

Luther's insistence that the Word is not merely a personification but a real person, and that this person is active in creation and human history not merely as cause, but as person, implies that we have with us God's self-communication. This is precisely the mystery of the Incarnation. This explains why Christian tradition holds that God has definitively disclosed himself in Jesus of Nazareth. Unlike all other words of God, "this Word is not an empty sound, but brings with it the whole essence of the divine nature."<sup>38</sup>

Within twenty years after his death, the disciples Jesus came to be called Christians – he followers of Christ (Acts 11:26). Hence, strictly speaking, Christians are not followers of the Bible or 'Biblians.' They are not people of a book.<sup>39</sup> They are people of the way (*hodos*, Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), the way exemplified by Jesus. They are disciples of Jesus. Hence even in our understanding and interpretation of the Bible we need to be guided by the historical person of Jesus; by what he taught and not by what others thought about him. "Properly understood, the Historical Jesus is a bulwark against the reduction of Christian faith in general and Christology in particular to 'relevant' ideology of any stripe... [therefore the Historical Jesus is] a constant stimulus to theological renewal."<sup>40</sup> As the very Word of God, the historical Jesus is the norm that helps us to see better the significance of what the Bible, and following the Bible, the Church has to say. The historical Jesus is the canon within the canon.

The honest acceptance of the findings of contemporary Biblical scholarship, especially of the conclusions arrived at by a proper application of the historico-critical method, tends to undermine many of the cherished Roman Catholic beliefs. Hence "it is not too difficult to see why at the dawn of the twentieth century the Magisterium and the newly formed Pontifical Biblical Commission utterly closed the door to much higher [Biblical] criticism."<sup>41</sup> This was bound to have

---

<sup>37</sup>*Sermons*, vol. 1, 175.

<sup>38</sup>*Sermons*, vol. 1, 175.

<sup>39</sup>The Qur'ān refers to Christians and Jews in this manner (3:64).

<sup>40</sup>John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1991-2009, vol. 1, 200.

<sup>41</sup>Peter Brown, "Catholic Biblical Scholarship," *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* (January 2007) 6-15, [www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=7385](http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=7385); accessed on 31-03-2017.

severe adverse effects on the life of the Church. There was a big gulf between the well-founded views of scholars and the uncritically held beliefs of the vast majority of the clergy – including bishops – and the laity. I am reminded of what one well-known Church historian said while describing the situation of the Roman Church before the Reformation.

How far were these populations [Catholics of Europe] really instructed in their religion? How far did they understand what all this ritual, for example, meant?... How far was their belief pure; that is to say, free from superstition? And closely connected with the enquiry into such matters is the important question of the professional capacity of their clergy. The Middle Ages present the most staggering contrasts... No one will fail to marvel at the contrast presented by the supreme competence of the teachers of theology in the great universities and the degree of theological knowledge possessed by the rank and file of the parish clergy...<sup>42</sup>

It is frightening to think that this description seems to paint a picture of our situation too. Without taking contemporary scholarship seriously we would be building on sand. We can thank God that the Vatican has admitted the importance of the historic-critical method for the proper study of Scripture.<sup>43</sup>

Roman Catholics who are still not too comfortable with the need to return to Jesus of history may find solace in what Pope Francis said to the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission:

As we know, the Sacred Scriptures are the written testimony of the divine word, the canonical memorial that testifies to the event of Revelation. The Word of God therefore precedes and exceeds the Bible. This is why our faith is not only centred on a book but on a history of salvation and above all on a Person, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh.<sup>44</sup>

In studying the New Testament, we are studying how the early disciples understood Jesus. In pursuing the historic-critical method we are trying to get close to the person of Jesus himself, trying to discover what he really thought about himself, and what he taught us about God and about God's dealings with us. We need to remember that Jesus is the Lord of the Church, and as Luther said, he is also "the Lord of the Scripture."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>Philip Hughes, *The Reformation*, London: Burns & Oates, 1960, 27.

<sup>43</sup>See Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," April 23, 1993, [www.catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC\\_Interp.htm](http://www.catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp.htm); accessed on 31-03-2017.

<sup>44</sup> [w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/april/PF\\_20130412\\_commissione-biblica.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/april/PF_20130412_commissione-biblica.html)

<sup>45</sup>CG/3, 68.

When we claim to deeply love somebody and when we wish to put our whole future in the hands of that person, then we are not satisfied merely by knowing even thoroughly what others have said about her or him. We try our very best to know that person personally. We try to find out – as far as we can – what he or she really is. Jesus too insists on this approach. He questions his disciples about his identity. They tell him what they have heard from others. He is not satisfied by their answer and hence puts them a straight question: “who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8:29). Every Christian has to face this question and have an answer that will meet the approval of Jesus. Only then he will see clearly and be clear about his vocation (Mt 16:17-18). “There are certain great questions that each human has to work out for himself or herself... we cannot substitute the lessons of others for our own wrestling with the central problems of life, problems that each person must face squarely alone.”<sup>46</sup> For us in India, this knowledge of the historical Jesus is very important to deal with the questions that arise within a multi-religious and plural-cultural milieu. The historical Jesus scandalized his co-religionists by his liberal views. Jesus is the hermeneutical key to all human history. “Without the Divine Word, without Jesus Christ, we could not understand the voice of God in history. Without Him we would remain in search of those unknown rules of the game. For this profoundest mystery in history, this hidden but decisive process... only the cross offers the key.”<sup>47</sup>

Our mission in India is deeply undermined by the divisions that disfigure the Church of Jesus. Denominational concerns have become more important than a united witness of love and service. We give the impression that we are more worried about the growth of our institution than of the Kingdom of God. As a result we are involved in a competition that at times violates rules of human decency and justice. Our doctrinal differences demand that we accept the historical Jesus as the one and only essential norm for Christian existence.

---

<sup>46</sup>John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, 4.

<sup>47</sup>Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, tr. Martin H. Bertram, Saint Louis (Miss): Concordia Publishing House, 1958, 216-217.