**Christian Wolff**

**Living Reformation - Freedom, Education, Responsibility**

**1 Leading Question**

For more than two years I have been considering two questions with regard to this special year 2017:

* How can we effectively and permanently oppose those who stir up hatred against refugees and Muslims week after week, who resent democracy, who work towards making nationalistic thinking acceptable again, who aim to restrict freedom of religion and diversity – and who, in all this, claim to act in the interest of the Western Christian civilization? That is to say, how can we defend the basic principles of Christian faith and liberal democracy, which have been established by the Reformation, against right wing populism?
* How do we as Christians and as a Church want to celebrate this year’s Reformation anniversary in a fitting and credible way? Are we able to communicate the achievements of the Reformation in such a way that they can also be understood in a largely dechristianized society, regarded as fuel for human interaction and rediscovered as starting points for the basic principles of our society’s coexistence?

In my view, these two questions are connected because of the fact that the events of the Reformation in the 16th century were much more than just internal process within the Church. They were accompanied and fuelled by an industrial revolution, the invention of printing. This gave the reformers barely controllable access to the public and helped them spread their ideas to a previously unthinkable extent. Furthermore, the Reformation occurred at the same time as the new Copernican world view developed, according to which the Earth spins on its own axis and revolves around the sun. What’s more, the global claim to power of European forces expanded with the conquest of Latin America. By the way: Luther had no idea about Copernicus or Columbus. However, the basic goal of the reformers was to free the people from their immaturity – both self-imposed and dictated by the clerical hierarchy above – through the grace of God and to free them from fears. And this had an impact on all areas of people’s lives. Therefore, I find it much too short-sighted to concentrate on the person Martin Luther in this anniversary year or to celebrate the Reformation anniversary as a “Feast of Christ” – in a very Church-internal way of thinking – and be meticulous in making sure that the Catholic Church including Pope Francis is along for the celebration.

Looking back at the Reformation after 500 years, we should focus on what – despite all conflicts and contradictions – is of the utmost importance as an achievement for all Christian Churches and the societies in which they exist: **freedom, education, responsibility.** These three keywords need to be communicated far and wide and put into the current socio-political, interreligious and intercultural context, which is characterized by social tensions, nationalization of politics, a new tendency to autocratic systems and authoritarian leadership, a willingness to ostracize anything and anyone foreign, departure from the peace project Europe, military armament and a highly explosive situation in the Arab world as well as a dramatic loss of importance for the Churches in Central Europe – all of which is an expression of and a reason for fear. And we have another thing to consider: we speak of post-factual times, of alternative facts that are meant to declare a lie as reality. We notice that more and more people never leave the resonance chamber of the internet. They aren’t fed with truths “from above” but rather have nothing but their own convictions reflected back on them. What falls by the wayside is democratic discourse, the search for the truth, open communication, formation of a consensus in society – and the consideration of your neighbour (“selfie” awareness). In light of this, I think it’s important to emphasize the three achievements and realizations of the Reformation in such a way that all people, independent of their religion or worldview, can accept or openly discuss them – and most of all feel one thing: that the measure of truth is freedom, a freedom that overcomes the fears.

**2 Freedom**

The Reformation, that means the events at the beginning of the 16th century, was at its core a history of liberation. It started off from the basis of biblical faith: man’s likeness to God (Genesis 1).

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him.*

Genesis1:27

This likeness to God of man means nothing other than that every human is a piece of God – in both meanings of the word: being a “part” of God and having been “made” by him. Every human being – no matter what their nationality, physical properties or religious tendency may be – has something “god-like” in and on themselves. In his “Small Catechism”, Martin Luther expressed this perfectly in the explanation of the first article of the Apostles’ Creed:

*I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my limbs, my reason, and all my senses, and still preserves them.*

Behind this lies the realization that every person can find their justification before God because every person is blessed with rights and dignity as a creation of the one God. The reformers also referred to the origin of the faith: the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12ff). Through this realization, the people managed to free themselves from the patronization of clerical and secular hierarchies and curb fears of the eternal torments of hell, of infinite failure. This led to two opposite developments:

* On one hand, the suppressed and downtrodden parts of the population, the knights, the Jews or the peasants, saw their chance to consider themselves equal parts of society and demand their rights. To the peasants we owe one of the source documents of modern democracy: the 12 articles of the peasants from 1525. The third article is particularly worth recalling:
1. *It has been the custom hitherto for men to hold us as their own property, which is pitiable enough, considering that Christ has delivered and redeemed us all, without exception, by the shedding of his precious blood, the lowly as well as the great. Accordingly it is consistent with Scripture that we should be free and should wish to be so. Not that we would wish to be absolutely free and under no authority.*

The impulse towards freedom and participation sparked by the Reformation is connected with the demand for social equality – something that already became apparent in the *“Leisnig Ordinance of a Common Chest”* from 1523, which Luther co-authored. The *“Leisnig Ordinance of a Common Chest”* was a kind of first communal constitution and organized the earnings and expenses as well as their administration. It is considered a basic document of Lutheran social teachings and an example of political responsibility rooted in faith. The chest itself was secured with four locks. To administer the funds, 10 representatives were elected from the four classes: two noblemen, two councilmen, three citizens and three peasants. One of each group’s representatives received one of the four keys so that there was a necessity of agreement – a precursor of a democratic decision-making process which must always lead to a compromise.

* It is no surprise then that the old secular and clerical centres of power tried to defend their imperious influence against the uprising groups of the population and their reform projects, to prevent emancipation and restrict education. But it also cannot surprise that the idea of freedom was a matter of controversy within the reformatory groups – as shown prominently by the dispute between Martin Luther and the peasants. It brings to light the contradiction of it all: on the one hand, Martin Luther defended the justification of the peasants’ demand in front of the rulers; on the other hand, Luther spoke in favour of the martial suppression of the peasants in quite drastic words. For example, he let his exaggerated hatred run free in his piece “*Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants”*:

*Stab, smite, slay, whoever can … one who is killed fighting on the ruler's side may be a true martyr in the eyes of God … any peasant who is killed is lost in body and soul and is eternally the devil's.*

But not only the 12 articles of the peasants and the Leisnig Ordinance of a Common Chest can be regarded as a societal realization of reformatory freedom. The concept of the priesthood of all believers, which Martin Luther developed in 1520 in his tract *“To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation”*, is also a finding that necessarily follows from the equality of all people before God. This concept was intended to overcome the strict separation of clergy and laity but, under today’s circumstances, it has much farther reaching consequences. Martin Luther made the leaders of his time take the following to heart:

*Why are your life and limb, your property and honour so free, and mine not? We are all alike Christians, and have baptism, faith, Spirit and all things alike. If a priest is killed, the land is laid under interdict, -- why not when a peasant is killed? Whence comes this great distinction between those who are equally Christians? Only from human laws and inventions!*

If we now replace the word “Christian” with “human” than we feel even more strongly the revolutionary spirit of Luther’s ideas. In this spirit, during the first phase of the Reformation between 1517 and 1525, Martin Luther courageously and publicly refused to obey the clerical and secular authorities and practiced freedom:

* On 10th December 1520, Luther publicly burned the papal bull of excommunication in Wittenberg. In doing so, Luther radically broke with Rome as he had openly turned against the canonical laws.
* In 1521 at the Diet of Worms, Luther opposed the emperor’s imposition to recant his teachings:

*I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. God help me. Amen.*

With this, Luther had questioned the authorities, and all areas of life – Church, society, culture, politics, economy – became subject to a fundamental, revolutionary change. Today we cannot even begin to imagine how radical and expansive a change this was. Great uncertainty and power vacuums were caused particularly by the dissolution of the canonically influenced legal system in Central Europe. Internal peace was threatened in a dangerous way. Two things remain important for our leading question:

* On one hand, Luther took public responsibility based on his faith and thereby undermined the authority of an unjust, reprobate command and power structure. Taking this liberty to listen to God more than to people is an expression, or rather a necessity of Protestant existence until this day: freedom of faith versus claims to power of clerical hierarchy or submission to impositions by the state.
* On the other hand, we have to face the facts: after 1525, Luther withdrew freedom and pluralism in favour of verbal brute force in conflicts with his enemies, in particular with the Jews, and he employed the power of the authorities. Yes, he sacrificed the concept of freedom from the 1st commandment in his “Small Catechism” by simply dropping the half sentence *“who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”* (which was included in the *“Heidelberg Catechism”*).

Ultimately, we can learn from Luther, but not just from him, how difficult is the tension-filled dialectic which he developed in his 1520 piece *“On the Freedom of a Christian”* and which still constitutes the Protestant idea of freedom today:

*A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.*

Today it would be wise to understand this dialectic as a challenge every day – and not make the mistake to want to dictate freedom in an armchair decision and decree obedience. For only the tension between freedom and commitment can bring about responsibility. We should be aware that reformatory convictions are less of a solution to a problem than merely pointing out the problems. That’s why they insist on conditions that allow freedom, plurality, participation and a democratic discourse.

**3 Education**

If freedom is the central gift of the faith, it necessarily sets something else in motion: education. Only education enables a person to reflect on what is good/right and/or bad/wrong. This ability to reflect is both a gift and a temptation. In order to gain orientation in this process, it is important to listen to the call of humanists and reformers: *“ad fontes”*, back to the sources, back to the biblical basics: man is a creation of God, the liberation of the people of Israel, the life and work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is necessary to be able to read and understand all of these sources. That’s why the Reformation sparked an immense, media-supported impulse for education. The reformers quickly realized that the faith in the triune God as the basis of freedom is stunted, if you don’t educate the individual people. In 1524, Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), a friend of Martin Luther’s and the first great educational politician of the modern era, noted in an appeal *“To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany, That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools”*:

*Whose fault is it that there are at present in all cities so few capable men, but the fault of the authorities who have left the young to grow up like saplings in the forest and have given no thought to their instruction and training!*

Like Luther, Melanchthon lamented a lack of education in his 1528 instructions for visitations. However, as opposed to Luther, Melanchthon saw education not just as a means to an end, a means to strengthen the faith:

*Several (children) learn nothing from the Holy Bible. Several teach the children nothing but the Holy Bible. Either is unacceptable.*

That’s why the reformers insisted from the start that people (which means both boys and girls!) learn to read, write and calculate and discover the environment in order to be able to live autonomously, as follows from the freedom of a Christian, and to overcome dependencies. With this, the reformers started what could be called the democratization of education, established the unity of faith and education and laid the foundation for general education. How else could the people have followed the Lutheran worship service, the German Mass? With its three key features liturgy, sermon and church music, it relied fully on the participation of the people and – thinking of the music – on the inclusion of all technical and scientific possibilities:

* Luther democratised the **liturgy** by having the people participate in the service. The mass wasn’t “read” by the clergy but rather celebrated by the congregation.
* By putting a focus on the **sermon**, the worship service became a public educational event. The word of God became the critical measure of the people’s life in society.
* **Church music**, especially biblical words set to music, gave the service a universal language and created a new medium of proclamation.

For us today this means that we need to approach our services with the ambition to educate and develop according to quality features: Formation through faith – formation of faith.

Melanchthon, however, was not just thinking of worship services and the church. In the already mentioned instructions for visitations he wrote:

*The preachers shall also urge the people to send their children to school so that people may be raised who are capable of teaching in church and govern in other ways.*

Here a connection is drawn between education and good governance – a highly topical argument today. A few years ago pupils asked me why I supported the development of the forum thomanum education campus. I answered:

1. In general terms: I would like to take the reformatory approach of *“believing, singing, learning”* – which was the slogan of the anniversary “800 years THOMANA” in 2012 – and apply it to the 21st century. Even more in the digital age, we have a pressing need for more citizens who are musically and culturally educated, religiously tied, socially competent and democratic-minded to take responsibility in our society.
2. Personally: I would like to be governed and cared for by reasonable people.

Education is an important prerequisite for democracy and social equality. As Philipp Melanchthon recognized very early – it is not just about knowledge, but also about understanding, making connections, it is about the music, ethical orientation and reflecting the so-called final questions – all things which come up all too rarely in today’s educational canon. I’d like to refer once more to the triad of *“believing, singing, learning”* which shows how important it is for us to use education to constantly reveal the starting points from which we gain orientation: *“ad fontes”*, back to the sources – this call of the humanists and reformers must not remain unheard today if we don’t want to dumb down as a society.

**4 Responsibility**

In an interview with the weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT (No. 52 from 23/12/2015), the philosopher Wilhelm Schmid raised a highly charged question:

*Being modern means purposefully liberating oneself from religion, tradition and conventions. Those are the instruments that define how one should live. Just one thing hasn’t been considered from the start:* ***What do we do then?***

With this question, Schmid uncovers a deficit that is created if we not only leave behind tradition, but also neglect the reformatory impetus “ad fontes”. Then we have to wonder: What replaces the old authorities, the biblical foundations? How and before whom will we take responsibility for what we do or don’t do? After the destruction of the old system, the reformers were facing the challenge of redefining responsibility or man’s answer to the old question *“Adam, where are you?”* Back then, they did it in a very class-specific way. Today it is key to relate responsibility to *every* individual: everyone is responsible for what he or she does, before God and therefore before mankind – no matter if he or she is baptized or religious or not.

This principle is backed by my firm conviction that, in the 21st century, we can only understand and communicate the reformatory achievements globally and universally, that means ecumenically and relating to all people – just like the concept of man’s likeness to God from the biblical history of creation can only be interpreted in an interreligious and intercultural context. If we acknowledge God as the creator of heaven and earth, then this doesn’t apply only to the so-called Christian West. Then we have to be serious about the fact that Muslims, Hindus, atheists are not mistakes of creation but people, who have the same right to live as we do. That’s why the passage on man’s likeness to God stands like a preamble, a kind of original gospel, at the beginning of our Bible. We can picture our life as a direct counterpart to the one God and as the nucleus of all freedom but also all responsibility. At the same time this is the source of what we today call human dignity and democracy in the sense of equal participation. For whatever is valid for me, I cannot deny another, whether near or far away. These considerations almost overwhelmed the reformers, as well. This is evidenced by the conflicts between Christian denominations turning to horrible violence in the 16th and 17th centuries (just think of the Thirty Years’ War), but also in Luther’s hardly bearable verbal excesses against his clerical opponents and against the Jews. We should always remind ourselves: in the 16th century, the divide and animosity between Protestants and Catholics (as well as between Lutherans and Reformists) was at least as big as between Christians and Muslims today. But at the same time a more than arduous process began with the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, if not earlier, which resulted in the realization that different faiths can only exist in the long run under the conditions of freedom and plurality.

We can only commemorate the achievements of the Reformation in a credible way if we understand the testimony of faith *“On the Freedom of a Christian”* (Luther) and on the justification of man by God’s grace alone universally and in the context of other worldviews and religions, which means that all people are concerned and included without having to think and believe as we do. At the same time we have to remember: every person has the right to be respected in their individuality, their uniqueness as well as untouchable in their dignity, but despite and because of this everyone holds a great responsibility for another and for the community. Freedom and education can only be practiced convincingly if no one is excluded from them. How else are we going to live today in the spirit of Christ in a society where the diversity of God’s creation is not only reflected in different colours of hair or body heights, but also in the variety of origin, skin colour and life designs. Seeing Jesus Christ as the salvation of the world means following the benchmarks that we owe to him: compassion, justice, non-violence, respect for life. This corresponds to the biblical basics like man’s image of God, the double commandment of love and the golden rule. This is where freedom finds its limits and responsibility is defined. Responsibility directs the interplay between individual freedom and commitment to basic values. Responsibility is man’s answer to God’s call from the burning bush (Exodus 3)

*“Moses, Moses”: Here I am!*

**5 Conclusions**

If we can look at it this way, hopefully we will soon realise that reformatory faith, that the triad of freedom, education, responsibility is geared towards plurality and social justice and radically challenges all national and ethnic limitations. At any rate, we should be glad and grateful that we as Protestant Christians can live so openly and overcome all confessionalism and nationalism this way. However, this always hinges on the condition that we do a lot to support education and formation, including the formation of faith, and assure ourselves of our own convictions by constantly going back “ad fontes”, to the sources, to the biblical message. We can only live free from fear of other religions, if we are aware of our own centre:

*You need to be aware of your centre, if you want to draw wide circles.* (Meister Eckhart)

The German president Joachim Gauck said in his final speech in January in this year:

*The crucial dividing line in our democracy doesn’t lie between long-established and new citizens, or between Christians, Muslims, Jews or atheists. The crucial dividing line lies between democrats and non-democrats. It’s not the origin that counts, it’s the attitude.*

In the year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the crucial dividing line doesn’t lie between Catholics and Protestants. It lies between those who don’t grant freedom, education, responsibility to everyone, but make them conditional on *“human laws and inventions”* (Luther), which means their own preconceptions and fears – and those who see freedom as a gift and a challenge and don’t want to deny anyone this opportunity. Here again, it’s not the religious or ethnic background that counts, it’s conviction and credibility.

Christian Wolff, Pastor em.

Consulter for church, politics and culture

[www.wolff-christian.de](http://www.wolff-christian.de)

info@wolff-christian.de