



Martin Luther on the European Discovery of America¹

REINHARD SCHWARZ

University of Munich, Munich, Germany

Media contributions reflecting on 1992 as the “year of Columbus” were plentiful. Most of these spoke of the conquest of the new world, the subjection of the original inhabitants, and their forced conversion to Christianity. But what were the first impressions of the European discoverers? What was the nature of the first reports received by the contemporaries of Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci? The politics of conquest, introduced by the Spanish and Portuguese kings rather quickly following the discovery, apparently did not become publicly known as rapidly as the initial reports of the surprising discovery itself.

I. THE RELIGION OF THE AMERICAN NATIVES AS REPORTED BY THE EUROPEAN DISCOVERERS

Our only concern here is whether the discovery of America produced any particular reflection among the theologians of the day. The question is justified by the fact that, given the circumstances of the time, the early reports of the newly discovered “islands” circulated quite rapidly, not only in Latin to the scholars but also in German to a broader audience. Already in 1497 a Straßburg printer published a German version of a letter from Columbus reporting “on several islands,

¹This article originally appeared as “Die Entdeckung Amerikas—eine Frage an die Kirche” in *Luther* 63/2 (1992) 60-66. It is reprinted here, translated by Frederick J. Gaiser, with the kind permission of the author, the Luther-Gesellschaft, and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

recently found by the King of Spain....”² And at the beginning of the sixteenth century an even more ethnologically instructive, though also brief, report of the travels of Amerigo Vespucci was printed several times in Latin and, in an abbreviated version, also in German.

It was evident from the first reports, despite their brevity and imprecision, that the European seamen had come upon people who knew nothing at all about Christianity, who in fact practiced none of the religions previously known in Europe. An illustrated broadside with an excerpt from the journals of Vespucci said of the South American natives: “Thus, they have no temple and respect no law, nor are they idolaters. What more can I say? They live according to nature, so they might better be called Epicureans or hedonists than Stoics.”³ The first report of the journeys of Columbus published in Germany includes the sentence: “I, too, have found no false belief or idolatry among them, except that they believe that all power and all good is in heaven.”⁴

II. LUTHER'S CONCEPTION OF THE CHURCH GIVEN THE NEW VIEW OF THE WORLD

According to the geographical index in the Weimar edition of Luther's works,⁵ Luther mentions the newly discovered islands only three times: twice in the early days of the reformation (1522) and once in his later years in the great historical tables of the *Supputatio annorum mundi* (1541-45).⁶ In the last reference Luther regards the spread of syphilis (the "French" or "Spanish" disease) throughout Europe since the end of the fifteenth century as a significant sign of the coming of the last day. Luther reports that the disease was said to have been brought from the "islands newly discovered in the west."⁷

Luther mentions the recently discovered islands from a completely different perspective in 1522, both times in the same connection. What interests Luther is the news of people who have had no contact at all with Christianity. How then can the church claim to be "catholic," i.e., worldwide? Or, asked in a different way: How

²The text can be found in *Die deutsche Literatur: Texte und Zeugnisse*, vol. 2/1, *Spätmittelalter und Frühhumanismus*, ed. Hedwig Heger (Munich: Oscar Beck, 1975) 383-387. For an English version, see, e.g., "The Letter of Christopher Columbus describing the results of his first voyage," in *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*, trans. Cecil Jane (New York: Bonanza, 1960) 191-202.

³*Deutsche illustrierte Flugblätter des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 3, ed. Wolfgang Harms (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1989) 470-471, no. 241. The word "Stoici" is misrepresented in the print as "Senici."

⁴Heger (see footnote 2), 386, lines 99f.

⁵WA 62, 16 (the cautious index reference is in brackets and is followed by a question mark: [*Amerika?*]). The name and place index to the Letters (WAB 15) contains no references; nor does the index to the Table Talk. Judging from the lack of references in the index, the names Columbus and Vespucci remained unknown to Luther.

⁶See WA 53, 169, where Luther, referring to the years 1497 and following, writes: "Morbus novus Gallicus, alias Hispanicus cepit, Ex Insulis novis repertis in Occidente (ut dicitur) invecus Europae, Unum de signis magnis ante diem Extremum" ("The new French or Spanish disease, imported into Europe from the newly discovered islands in the west [so it has been said], has brought about one of the great signs before the last day"). Next, as an additional sign of the coming day of judgment, Luther names the fact that in the time of Emperor Maximilian I many strange appearances have occurred in the heavens.

⁷Apparently this is at least partially correct. See Geoffrey Cowley, "The Great Disease Migration," *Newsweek* (Columbus Special Issue, Fall/Winter 1991) 54-56.

can the gospel be the universally valid apostolic message if it was first brought to the Germans only 800 years after the time of the apostles and if "now recently many islands and lands have been found," which in 1500 years have not been reached by the gospel at all?⁸ Luther proceeds, on one occasion, from the Christmas epistle, Titus 2:11-15, where it says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (v. 11). On the other occasion, Luther raises the same question in his Ascension Day sermon on Mark 16:15, where the Lord commissions his disciples: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."⁹ Must the universal character of the apostolic message be denied if the apostles in fact "did not go into all the world? After all, no apostle has ever come to us, and now in our own time many islands have been found where there are heathens, and no one has preached to them." Luther's answer demonstrates that he understands the universality of the apostolic preaching to be derived solely from Christ's commission. It is from the beginning a world-encompassing message intended for all people, even if all people have not yet heard it and even if the universal intention will finally be fulfilled only at the end of the age.¹⁰

This message or sermon works the same way as when someone throws a stone in the water that results in waves or circles or currents....So it is with this sermon; it is begun by the apostles and continually goes forth for ever and ever. Preachers pass it on here and there in the world, and though it is persecuted and driven out, it comes again and again to those who have never heard it; it is made known, even though along the way it is blotted out and turned into rank heresy. Or, as we say when someone sends out a message, “The message has gone forth,” even though it is still underway and has not yet arrived at the prescribed place or intended location. For example, one says, “The emperor’s message has gone forth,” even though it has not yet arrived at Nürnberg or been heard by the Turks, where it is intended. The sermon of the apostles is to be understood in the same way.¹¹

III. THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH

In his own spiritual development, Luther grew up with a different historical picture of the universality or catholicity of the church. Traditionally, it was thought that the church had already been spread to the entire world (as much as it was then known) in the time of the apostles and that by the time of the early fathers the church flourished everywhere. It was seen as a consequence of the sins of Christian people that in the meantime the church had shrunk “into the corner of Europe alone.” This reading appears in Gabriel Biel’s interpretation of the canon of the mass,¹² a work thoroughly studied by Luther while preparing for his ordination as a priest. Such teaching was not peculiar to Biel or to his scholastic leanings. In the

⁸WA 10/1/1, 21, lines 14-17 (Wartburgpostille on Titus 2:11-15).

⁹WA 10/3, 139, lines 17f.

¹⁰WA 10/3, 139, line 26, through 140, line 1.

¹¹WA 10/3, 140, lines 1-16. The final comparison is used by Luther also in the other text of interest to us here: WA 10/1/1, 23, lines 3-9.

¹²Gabriel Biel, *Canonis Misse Expositio*, vol. 1, ed. H. Oberman, W. Courtenay (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1963) 207, lectio 22, no. 3-11.

traditional view, the regions of the earth known to the middle ages had been divided among the apostles for their missionary preaching: e.g., Indochina fell to Thomas, India to Bartholomew, Egypt to Simon Thaddeus, and Ethiopia to Matthew.¹³ Despite its geographical reduction, Gabriel Biel argued that the church had not forfeited its theological universality insofar as it continued to maintain the pure truth, mediate true salvation, and did not weaken in the constancy of the faithful.¹⁴ For Biel, the church alone offered in full the teaching necessary for salvation; it alone remains victorious until the granting of the prize. These theological bases for the universality of the church are, for Gabriel Biel, given within the Roman Catholic Church, the “bark of Peter.” For Luther, on the other hand, the universality of the church is grounded in Christ’s commission to preach the gospel; it remains a characteristic of the message of Christ. Since the gospel is valid for all, the church has a universal commission even when, in its historical form, the church remains a contingent reality.

IV. JOHANN GERHARD’S RELAPSE INTO OLD THINKING

It is noteworthy that in the face of the news of newly discovered islands, never reached by

Christianity, Luther asked himself and his congregation in Wittenberg what that meant for the universality of the church. Some hundred years later, the problem was given a new impetus by Johann Gerhard (1582-1637). Meanwhile America had become known as the fourth part of the world—where America meant what we now call Central and South America, regions which had witnessed the spread of the Roman Catholic Church along with Spanish and Portuguese rule. No one yet spoke of North America in contrast to Latin America. Through its mission in Africa and the Far East, begun in the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church had also drawn these continents into its new consciousness of universality. It could, therefore, present itself as the worldwide church, present in all four parts of the earth, an image often portrayed in Baroque art (e.g., Tiepolo's mural on the ceiling of the castle of the prince-bishop in Würzburg). As the rise of Protestantism contested the Roman Catholic Church's claim to catholicity, Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) argued theologically that the worldwide extension of Roman Catholicism was a sign of the church's true catholicity.

Johann Gerhard disputed Bellarmine's argument.¹⁵ On the one hand, supported by the testimony of Roman Catholic authors like Bartolomé de Las Casas, he claimed that the conversion of the American natives had been compelled, often by cruel methods, resulting in only a problematic Christianity. On the other hand, Gerhard supported the idea that the new world had already been known long ago under the name Atlantis and that, already in its early days, Christianity had been

¹³The Nürnberg physician and humanist Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514) passes on this tradition, assigning a region to each apostle, in his *Weltchronik* (1493; reprint, Munich: Konrad Köbl, 1976) Blatt 102 recto.

¹⁴See note 12, lectio 22, no. 12-19.

¹⁵Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologica*, loc. 22, c. 11, sec. 4, § 188; ed. Eduard Preuss, vol. 5 (Berlin: G. Schlawitz, 1867) 430-434.

brought to this region; although the area had been totally forgotten, it was not true that the Christian faith had only now arrived there. As interesting as Gerhard's response is in its details, his argumentation functions at the same level as Bellarmine's. The discussion between these two theologians of the confessional period revolves around that which, in the outward form of the church—Roman Catholic or Protestant, speaks for or against the universality of one or the other church. Things would have been quite different had Johann Gerhard worked from Luther's perspective and fundamentally contested the notion that the universality of the church could be demonstrated by its worldwide extension—if not now then at least in an earlier period during the development of the early church. Luther argues differently: he does not try to prove the catholicity of the church through empirical evidence of its worldwide extension, but instead focuses the church's universality in the universal address of its proclamation. The only thing that makes the church worldwide is its being entrusted with a message for all people.

V. LUTHER REVISITED: "FAITH COMPELS NO ONE"

In the 1522 Ascension Day sermon already mentioned, Luther rejects any use of force in conjunction with the missionary preaching of the gospel. The text (Mark 16:15f.) shows

the nature and way of faith; for faith compels and forces no one to the gospel, but

leaves each person free, opening the gospel to each. Whoever believes, believes; whoever comes, comes; whoever remains outside, remains....For the Lord commanded the disciples to do no more than preach the gospel, and that's what they did: they preached the gospel, letting hear those who would; they did not say, "Believe or I'll kill you."¹⁶

When Luther was saying these words to his congregation, of course, he knew nothing of the forced conversion of the natives of Latin America that was even then underway. But he also knew nothing about how difficult it would become to practice tolerance even in those areas touched by the reformation.

REINHARD SCHWARZ is a church historian whose work has focused on the reformation. He was one of the planners of the Eighth International Congress for Luther Research held in 1993 at Luther Northwestern Seminary.