



# Luther in Sweden

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**B**Y WAY OF INTRODUCTION I WOULD LIKE YOU TO USE YOUR IMAGINATION. TWO young boys, Martin and Jacob, are standing by the stove reading their schoolbooks.

MARTIN: *Hic, haec, hoc*, genitive *hejus*....

JACOB: *Hujus* is the genitive.

MARTIN: That's what it says in the book; but it must be wrong... You say: *is, ea, id*, genitive *ejus*, don't you?

JACOB: You must say *hujus*, Martin, because that's the way the book has it.

MARTIN: I am not going to say it—I don't want it to be *hujus*! No—no!

JACOB: Then you'll get a thrashing again...

MARTIN: I'll get it anyhow...even if I know my lesson by heart. Yesterday father heard me in my lesson in Donatus, and I knew it perfectly at home—but when the schoolmaster asked me to recite the passage in class, I couldn't remember it... and then he struck me till I bled. And when I came home, mother beat me because I had been beaten in school! She said it was shameful of me... But I say it's an injustice and the schoolmaster is inhuman. I don't care about the pain—but the shame of it, the shame!

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*A study of the jubilee celebrations of the reformation in Sweden shows Luther interpreted as instrument of divine providence, as fellow believer, as hero of history, and as interpreter of the gospel. Luther can be captured by the spirit of the age or can generate in every age new patterns of thought and action.*

JACOB: Well, why don't you study then, Martin?

MARTIN: What's the good of it? He'll say I don't know my lesson, no matter what I say. But you see, Jacob, the worst of it is that he has threatened to beat me in front of his daughters—and that is shameful. But if he does that today, I'll go and drown myself in the lake, or set fire to the house... yes, I'll burn up the village, the forest, the whole universe—there is nothing good in the world—no justice—not that much!<sup>1</sup>

This dialogue comes from the first act of August Strindberg's play *The Nightingale of Wittenberg*, completed in September 1903—long after his *Inferno* crisis, but in the year when his third, very short and stormy marriage to the famous actress Harriet Bosse was dissolved. At this time Strindberg had become very impressed by Martin Luther. He felt they were soulmates. Strindberg had experienced severe childhood years and so presumably had Luther, as this dialogue suggests. But above all, Strindberg saw in Luther a man, just like himself, who stood alone. In a key line of the play, Martin cries: "Alone!...So much the better! Almighty, living God! Now You and I stand alone!"<sup>2</sup> Strindberg talked about this drama as "the strongest and most youthful that I have written! No doubts as in *Master Olof*, no scruples, no women around your neck, no parents standing in the way, no compromising with friends."<sup>3</sup> It is surely a very important play for everyone interested in Strindberg.

#### I. SEEKING THE THOUGHT PATTERNS IN AN AGE

Strindberg's drama is one example of how Luther is sometimes interpreted, or better, used. Luther becomes an instrument for developing one's own ideas. This was the point that the Danish church historian, P. G. Lindhardt, made at the 1977 International Congress for Luther Research in Lund:

Luther's importance for the Nordic Reformation is not profound. He was a name, a symbol, a flag. Apart from the *Small Catechism* and a few Psalms he was never much read or used, and still less understood; that is still true today, or at least up to the time of dialectic theology. Orthodoxy, pietism, the enlightenment and, above all, the revival movements of the nineteenth century have all made use of his much respected name and used it for their own purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Is Lindhardt right? His lecture surely raised a lot of questions, some of which I tried to answer in my book *Luther in Sweden*.<sup>5</sup> That book, published in Swedish, provides the background for this essay.

Anders Nygren once published an essay with the title "The Role of the Self-Evident in History," in which he claims that every age has things that are self-evident to it, things that go without saying and are presupposed by both friends

<sup>1</sup>August Strindberg, *World Historic Plays*, trans. Arvid Paulson (New York: Twayne, 1970).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>3</sup>In a letter to Emil Schering, Strindberg's friend and German translator (November 1903).

<sup>4</sup>P. G. Lindhardt, "Luther und Skandinavien," in *Luther und die Theologie der Gegenwart: Referate und Berichte des Fünften Internationalen Kongresses für Lutherforschung*, ed. Leif Grane and Bernhard Lohse (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1980) 144.

<sup>5</sup>Carl Axel Aurelius, *Luther i Sverige: Svenska lutherbilder under tre sekler* (Artos, 1994).

and enemies.<sup>6</sup> To be able to understand a certain age, one will have to find such fundamental patterns of thought. Nygren's essay does not, however, tell us how to do this.

There are, however, in every age people who are not yet familiar with the fundamental patterns of society's thought—particularly, I suggest, the rising generation. Therefore, the catechetical tradition, over the years, provides insight into the common thought patterns as these were transmitted to the younger generation. The *catechetical tradition* thus becomes an important aid for us, offering a perspective in which whatever is said about Luther in a given age might be interpreted.

Another source of knowledge, that tells us specifically about the understanding of Luther and the reformation at different times, is the *reformation jubilees*—primarily those that were celebrated in memory of the birth of the reformation on October 31, 1517. In the evangelical world jubilee celebrations have been held every hundredth year, starting in 1617. (One could say that the practice was started even earlier, at the hands of Luther himself. In a letter to Amsdorf in 1527, i.e., ten years after the event at the Castle Church, Luther tells how he celebrated the memory by drinking a glass of beer.<sup>7</sup>) This source, the jubilees, is, however, problematic. People tend to exaggerate at such occasions. Nevertheless, we can expect to discover a lot about Luther in the official speeches. Still, we will have to consider who was invited to speak and who was not. This material therefore requires another, parallel source for our investigation, namely, the *reception of Luther in the popular movements* at the time.

## II. REFORMATION JUBILEES IN SWEDEN

Let us make four short stops on our journey through the history of Swedish theology, focusing on the interpretation of Luther and the reformation on each occasion.

A. *In 1617* every Protestant country celebrated the reformation with speeches, dramas, services, and sermons. There was, however, one exception, Sweden. The Swedish reformation jubilee was celebrated in 1621—not in remembrance of the Diet of Worms (1521), but in celebration of the election of Gustav Vasa as the leader of the people and the spiritual and temporal liberation of the nation—liberation, that is, from the papacy and from the Danish supremacy. Gustav Vasa is regarded as both *reformer et salvator*. The biblical texts for the services were chosen to develop this theme of dual liberation. They all stemmed from the Old Testament and dealt with the sufferings and rescue of the people of Israel and the reformation of Jehoshaphat in politics and liturgy.

<sup>6</sup>Anders Nygren, "Det själv klaras roll i historien," in *Tro och vetande: Religionsfilosofiska och teologiska essayer* (Helsingfors, 1970) 92.

<sup>7</sup>Luther concludes the November 1, 1527, letter by writing: "Wittenbergae die Omnium Sanctorum, anno decimo Indulgentiarum conculcatarum, quarum memoria hac hora bibimus utrinque consolati, 1527. T. Martinus Luther" ("Wittenberg, All Saints. In the tenth year of the trampling out of indulgences. In memory of that all of us who were consoled thereby drank together. 1527. Martin Luther") (WA, Br 4:275).

In order to understand this jubilee, we must consider the contemporary situation. It fell shortly before Sweden's entry into the Thirty Years War. Relations with neighboring countries, especially Poland, were extremely strained. In this light, one might easily interpret the jubilee as pure political propaganda. However, we have to keep in mind that we are here dealing with a time more unknown and alien to us than we usually think. Their distinction between religion and politics was quite different from our own. To understand that age we have to identify its self-evident presuppositions.

The use of the Old Testament thinking is a case in point. During that time, the Old Testament was regarded, first, not as a book of laws, but as a book of history, God's history with the people of Israel—indeed, any people. As such it tells about God's providence, and this seems to be one of the self-evident presuppositions of the seventeenth century.

In Haffner's *Compendium* (which belongs to the catechetical tradition), published by the Swedish archbishop Petrus Keniccius as early as 1612, this concept of God's providence is thoroughly developed.<sup>8</sup> It throws light upon all the texts used in the jubilee. The history of the previous century is interpreted as the story of God's care for the Swedish nation and his guidance (*gubernatio*) of the people. Gustav Vasa is described as God's chosen instrument, by whom God turned misery into prosperity. The same goes for the present king, Gustaf Adolf. In developing the wonderful ways in which God has governed the nation, a terminology is used that is familiar to us from Luther's commentary on Psalm 101, where Luther speaks about *Gottes Wundermänner* ("God's extraordinary leaders").<sup>9</sup> Gustav Vasa stands out as a *vir heroicus*, inspired by God (*afflatu dei*) and led by God's angel.

Interestingly enough, hardly anything is said about Luther in the Swedish jubilee. The major speech, by Olof Laurelius, bears the title *Suecia, gnothi seauten* ("Sweden, know thyself") and Laurelius reminds the audience not to be too curious about how the reformation is celebrated elsewhere, for example, in Germany.<sup>10</sup> Curiosity is often condemned in the scriptures, he adds. This speech, as well as the jubilee as a whole, demonstrates the attitude of a growing superpower.

The striking Swedish distance from Luther as a person continues throughout the seventeenth century. Luther's personal authority is toned down, and, when spoken of, he can also be criticized. The sole authority in the church is the word of God, brought into the daylight through the reformation. At the same time, the Swedish theologians were doing what Luther did, very often with his writings as models: translating the Bible, writing hymns and prayers, catechizing, etc.

In summarizing the results from this first stop, we must draw conclusions quite contradictory to Lindhardt's. In Sweden, Luther was not "a name, a symbol, a flag." He was, however, very influential in shaping the Swedish church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He is, if I may say so, present in his absence.

<sup>8</sup>M. Haffner, *Compendium doctrinae caelestis ex locis theologis* (Stockholm, 1612).

<sup>9</sup>Martin Luther, *Psalm 101*, LW 13:158 (see WA 51:210).

<sup>10</sup>M. Olaus Laurelius, *Oratio jubilaea* (Uppsala, 1622).

Interestingly, the vocabulary used in describing Gustav Vasa as the instrument of God's providence was applied to Luther at the jubilees abroad. It was characteristic of the period, founded in the contemporary patterns of thought.

B. In 1721 the Swedes celebrated their second jubilee, still not in tune with the rest of the evangelical world. It was hardly a time for celebration. The fortunes of war had taken a downturn with the defeat at Poltava and the surrender at Perevolotjna. Sweden was in a state of decline, and Russia was growing into the new, great power of northern Europe.

The jubilee differed little from the previous one. Gustav Vasa was still in focus, although Luther was mentioned more often. One of the speeches was given by David Nehrman Ehrenstrahle, the one who introduced the idea of natural law into Sweden. Unfortunately his manuscript was lost in a fire some years afterwards.

Outside the jubilee, however, Luther's person was stirring considerable interest in some circles, not least among the Swedish officers in the Siberian prison camps. Their interest was in Luther's role in the early pietistic movement, which was spread among the prisoners of war as well as among middle class citizens in Stockholm. The voice of the pietists was certainly not heard at the jubilee, and their writings were not published, but there are many manuscripts available for study. These often refer to Luther. One might suspect, of course, that they are using Luther only to defend themselves against the accusation of being heterodox. That is the standpoint of P. G. Lindhardt. But I am not quite convinced. Luther seems to be very important to the pietistic self-understanding. They recognize in him, not primarily a *Wundermann*, an instrument of God's providence, but a fellow believer, someone who has, like them, experienced a transformational rebirth. That is how they interpret Luther's discovery of the gospel. They constantly refer to the exposure of faith in Luther's preface to Romans:

Faith...is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith.<sup>11</sup>

The pietists were thoroughly eclectic in their study of Luther, but they seem to be quite convinced of his authority. It was, however, the same authority assigned to Philipp Jacob Spener, August Hermann Francke, or anyone else having experienced the same transforming power of the grace of God. This is the authority of one who is born again. He or she has a knowledge of the heart and is therefore capable of a right application (*applicatio*) of the word of God. The pietists contrasted many of the ordained ministers, who, in their view, lived a carnal life and paid only lip service to God.

How do we summarize this period? Obviously Luther was not just "a name, a symbol, a flag" to the pietists. But, focusing on his personal spiritual break-

<sup>11</sup>Martin Luther, *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (1546 [1522]), LW 35:370 (see WA, DB 7:10).

through and his teachings on a living faith, they certainly did understand him as a sixteenth-century pietist. This concentration on the inner life, on the individual and his or her experience, is typical, not just for the pietists, but for the approaching period of modernity and the birth of the modern ego. Later in the eighteenth century, when it was no longer a novelty, it became influential also in the catechetical tradition.

C. In 1817 there was a third jubilee—finally celebrated by the Swedes at the same time as everywhere else, thanks to pressure from the Norwegians, among others. Unity among the evangelical nations was regarded as essential at the time of the Napoleonic wars. The Swedish archbishop, Andreas Lindblom, hesitated, noting that Sweden usually celebrated the anniversary of the Diet of Worms. Obviously, Lindblom was no longer aware of the real reason for the Swedish deviation. His misunderstanding is, however, explicable. The ideas of the enlightenment had long since penetrated society, and in that perspective the Diet of Worms stood out as the major event of the reformation. After all, that was the occasion when Luther referred to his *conscience* and demanded arguments from the scriptures and *reason*.

The jubilee finds its true form in the nineteenth century, with cannon shots, splendid processions, sumptuous banquets, and special services. It was the century of jubilees, reflecting the romantic reaction against the sententious attitude of the enlightenment. Romanticism brings historical consciousness: things belong together and do not appear out of the blue. At the same time, romanticism focused on the great personalities in history. How do these seemingly contradictory elements correspond? Let us listen to one of the most prominent speakers, Esaias Tegnér, in Lund:

They say that a great man makes his epoch, and they are right as long as they don't understand something preposterous thereby. God is the only one who creates something out of nothing. A great man, even the greatest, is inevitably a son of his epoch; but he is the eldest son, he is the bailiff of his epoch. The age is his and he administers his estate according to his own judgement. The scattered elements are there, but not yet clarified and in chaotic battle with each other. He is uniting them and bringing them to order, directing them to a common goal; he is acting on his time, leading and binding together, in one word: educating. This is his greatness; this is his strange, creative ability.<sup>12</sup>

Nothing indicates that Tegnér had ever read Luther. Nevertheless, he was able to give a magnificent portrayal of the reformer. Luther became a hero, but he was preceded by others like Wycliffe and Hus, forerunners of the reformation. They are equally stressed. The two features, typical of Romanticism, are brought together: the *outstanding* and the *continuity*. Both can be found in the catechisms of the time, which are normally extended with a short introductory chapter on the history of Christianity, from Adam and Eve to the present time, focusing especially on the great personalities of history.

<sup>12</sup>Esaias Tegnér's *Samlade Skrifter*, vol. 5 (Stockholm, 1948) 8.

In Uppsala the situation was quite different. The most prominent speaker was Erik Gustaf Geijer. He had studied Luther, and he emphasized the living word (*viva vox*) and Luther's view of the word as kerygma or address, which was not at all typical for the time.

In the northern parts of Sweden there was at the same time an awakening among lay people. They called themselves Luther readers, and reading Luther was exactly what they did, especially his *Lectures on Galatians* from 1535 and the *Hauspostille* (sermons). This movement dissociated itself from both pietistic legalism and the rationalism of the enlightenment, stressing justification as the gift of God's unconditional grace through faith.

It is obvious from this glimpse of Luther in Sweden at the beginning of the nineteenth century that those who had actually read Luther were able to say things both unfamiliar and new to the epoch, whereas the others were doomed to reflect in their speeches the epoch's favorite ideas. There were both kinds, so Lindhardt is partly right and partly wrong.

D. In 1917 the fourth jubilee was celebrated. Already two decades earlier, the so-called Luther renaissance had begun in Sweden thanks to two outstanding theologians, Nathan Söderblom and Einar Billing. Later on, the former became archbishop in Uppsala and the latter bishop in Västerås. Although different on a personal level they were very good friends and, above all, they shared a common interest, the particularity of Christianity. They rejected both watered-down liberalism and petrified Lutheran orthodoxy, underlining what they understood as the often neglected main theme of the Bible and church history, namely, a *God who acts*. No one in the history of theology, according to Billing and Söderblom, had elaborated this fundamental theme more profoundly than Luther: God's passionate action towards his people, manifested above all in the Easter event.

Furthermore, they interpreted Luther's theological thinking as a unity, centered around the Easter event. In his booklet *Our Calling* (1907), Billing describes this in an almost poetic way:

Whoever knows Luther, even but partially, knows that his various thoughts do not lie alongside each other, like pearls on a string, held together only by common authority or perchance by a line of logical argument, but that they all, as tightly as the petals of a rosebud, adhere to a common center, and radiate out like the rays of the sun from *one* glowing core, namely, the gospel of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>13</sup>

This understanding of the unity in Luther's theology had obvious consequences for the methodology of Swedish Luther research during the next fifty years. In the same book Billing draws the methodological consequences: to understand Luther's thoughts on any particular question, one must relate them to the center of his theology, the gospel of unconditional grace. In this *systematic* perspective, *history* is seen in a new light, Billing claims. Thus, when Gustaf Aulén writes his book on Luther's ecclesiology (1912) or Gustaf Wingren on Luther's doctrine of vocation (1952), they

<sup>13</sup>Einar Billing, *Our Calling*, trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Rock Island, IL: Augustana, 1951) 7.

view their task in the same way.<sup>14</sup> Each wants to place Luther's understanding of church or vocation within the unity of Luther's theology by relating it to the center, justification by grace through faith.

Billing gave a sound reason for studying Luther at all. When Anders Nygren characterized Swedish Luther research, his words reminded people of Billing:

It is not because of Luther that the research is interested in him; it is not primarily to find out how he incidentally thought in one or the other question that theology turns to him, but it is done because, and in so far as, he can help us to a deeper understanding of the gospel.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising that Swedish Luther scholars (in contrast to their colleagues on the continent) don't devote their lives to writing only about Luther. Their treatises on Luther were often followed by biblical commentaries or works on biblical theology. Anders Nygren wrote a commentary on Romans and Ragnar Bring one on Galatians. This approach explains the motto associated with the Swedish Luther renaissance: "Forward to Luther!" To everyone involved, this meant nothing less than "Forward to the Gospel." In the light of this, one can also explain the *ecumenical* interest shown by these Luther scholars: Luther is the interpreter of the gospel for the whole church. He is not owned by the Lutherans. This point was stressed so much that Luther almost broke away from history, as though he were without any significant forerunners or followers. In their view, he belonged to the future. Historically, he stood at the point where the church was divided. Theologically, he—or rather his interpretation of the gospel—will be found where the lines once again converge. That is the vision of these theologians in the century of ecumenism.

### III. LUTHER THROUGH THE AGES

Four centuries—four different interpretations of Luther. We have met him as the *instrument of God's providence*, as a *fellow believer*, as a *hero of history*, and as the *interpreter of the gospel*. Does this mean that the interpretations of Luther merely reflect the various thought patterns of different epochs, that whatever is said about Luther is inevitably captured by the spirit of the time? Not necessarily. We have also seen how a serious study of Luther's writings could lead to contradictions with common thought patterns and presuppositions. Luther's writings have not merely confirmed the status quo; they have also generated new patterns of thought and action, making him something rather different than just "a name, a symbol, a flag." Read seriously, Luther's writings can continue to work in the same way. ⊕

<sup>14</sup>Gustaf Aulén, *Till belysning af den lutherska kyrkoidén: dess historia och dess värde* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1912). Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

<sup>15</sup>Anders Nygren, "Die Lutherforschung in Skandinavien," in *Gott ist am Werk: Festschrift für Hanns Lilie zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. H. Brunotte and E. Ruppel (Hamburg: Furche, 1959) 18f.