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Luther's Participative Ontology

ABSTRACT

Distinguishing between a relational and participative ontology and highlighting the last like a paradigm of our time, the author shows how Luther uses both types of ontology for the explication of justification and how both express the same concept in different ways. The participative paradigm explains justification through the union between Christ and the believer and the following *communicatio idiomatum*. The author underlines that this is not a personal union, but that Christ and the believer become one body and that this union doesn't change human nature but giving a person a new direction. The article closes with some ecumenical considerations of the participative ontology.

KEYWORDS

Luther, participative ontology

I. PARTICIPATIVE ONTOLOGY

In the *Lutherjahrbuch* 2017, Oswald Bayer analyses the current research about Luther.¹ He indicates Luther's ontology as one of the principal themes to be studied in the near future. Not only for this statement I'm very glad about this publication concerning ontology and I hope to draft some ideas for further discussion.

In primis I must clarify, why the title of my article speaks about "participative ontology" and not about "relational ontology." The first reason is that the term "relational ontology" is already used. It is a widespread opinion that the Reformation had substituted a medieval ontology of substance with an ontology of relation. A typical example of protestant relational theology is Gerhard Ebeling who sees the position of human beings *coram deo*. Consequently, there are two subjects, man and God, staying in a good or bad relation. As far as it is a concern, I think that if we speak today about relational ontology, we talk about another type of relational ontology. Consequently, I prefer to use a different term.

In today's world, men are in a net of multiple relations. Human subjects are weak in themselves and determined by the relations in which they stand. We all are parts of one world and we can't take autonomous and independent decisions in political, economic, or environmental questions without considering and evaluating all the global relations. Also, modern physics tells us that, on a subatomic level, all things are connected. For these reasons, it is proper to speak about relational ontology, but it is not the same type of relation like that between two subjects.

If I speak about participative ontology, this also indicates another point of view. Participative ontology, as I propose to understand it, first views the whole and then the particular as a part of the whole. I think this is the way today's people can understand the world and themselves. For this reason, I'll be interested in finding traces of participative ontology in my Lutheran tradition in order to have a predication that speaks to today's people.

I would like to mention two examples that show a participative paradigm. One is Pope Francis who in *Evangelii gaudium* entitles a chapter

1 O. Bayer, *Uns voraus. Bemerkungen zur Lutherforschung und Lutherrezeption*, "Lutherjahrbuch" 84 (2017), pp. 170–189.

“The whole is greater than the part.” In this chapter he used the image of the “polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” I consider that the Pope used a participative paradigm. Indeed he used the image of the polyhedron in many contexts to reflect on pastoral, social, political, environmental, and also ecumenical issues. The polyhedron is the whole and we are a part of it. I imagine that is how many people think today.

Another emblematic example is the document of 2013 of the World Council of Churches *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.² In this document the Greek term *koinonia*, which is translated also as “participation” (Chapter II, B, 13) is central. Paragraph 23 is giving a summary definition of the Church: “The Church is fundamentally a communion in the Triune God and, at the same time, a communion whose members partake together in the life and mission of God.” Also here we have a participative paradigm.

I believe that the document is much influenced by the Orthodox theology because the Orthodox Church has always had a participative paradigm. Worshippers participate in the Holy Spirit or in the divine energies.

2. RESEARCH ON LUTHER'S ONTOLOGY

Now let us deal with Luther. As I said before, many researchers attribute to him a relational ontology. But already in 1967 Wilfried Joest³ found out that Luther didn't use only relational terminology and thought. Finding out this inconsistency he developed a very clever way to integrate those other elements in his relational paradigm.

Much more radical was the so-called “Finnish school,” which began with the book by Tuomo Mannermaa, first published in 1981⁴

2 *The Church: Towards a Common Vision. Faith and Order Paper No. 214*, World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva 2013.

3 W. Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, Göttingen 1967.

4 T. Mannermaa, *In ipsa fides Christus adest. Luterilaisen ja ortodoksisen kristinuskokäsityksen leikkauspiste*, Helsinki 1981 (Missiologian ja Ekumeniikan Seuran julkaisu 30).

in Finnish, then in German in 1989,⁵ in English in 2005,⁶ and in Italian in 2019.⁷ The title of the book is *In ipsa fides Christus adest*: “Christ is present in faith.” His theory was that human beings are justified by the participation in the “real present” Christ. Mannermaa’s scholar, and now successor on his chair, Risto Saarinen published a work⁸ in 1989, highlighting that the research on Luther was influenced by the 19th-century new Kantian philosophy, a hermeneutics premise that forces into a relational interpretation of Luther’s thought, ignoring the parts where the Reformer speaks about real presence, substance, nature, etc. Therefore the Finnish School has introduced a change of paradigm in the Luther research and if you read the studies inspired by this school you will find very often the term “participation” in his various forms.

3. LUTHER’S EXPLICATIONS OF THE JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Now we will come finally to Luther. His central topic was justification *sola gratia et sola fide*. In his programmatic book, *De libertate christiana* of 1520, he speaks a lot about faith, because for his time it wasn’t obvious that we are saved by faith alone. Luther defends this concept with three arguments, which in the numbering of the German edition are the chapters from ten 10 to 12 (WA 7, 24–26).

The first topic is that faith unites the soul and the word of the gospel. The soul and the word become one in a way that the soul participates in the power, holiness, justice, etc. of the word. In this context, he used the image of steel that starts to glow on fire. This image was first used by Origen of Alexandria referring to Christology, but also to explain

5 T. Mannermaa, *Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus. Rechtfertigung und Vergottung*, Hannover 1989 (Arbeiten zur Geschichte und Theologie des Luthertums, Neue Folge 8).

6 T. Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, Minneapolis 2005. A part was published before in *Union with Christ. The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, eds. C.E. Braaten, R.W. Jenson, Michigan, USA – Cambridge, U.K. 1998.

7 *Lutero e la Theosis*, a cura di F. Buzzi, D. Kampen, P. Ricca, Torino 2019.

8 R. Saarinen, *Gottes Wirken auf uns. Die transzendente Deutung des Gegenwart-Christi-Motivs in der Lutherforschung*, Wiesbaden 1989.

the sanctification of worshippers. However, it is clear, that this claim expresses a participative paradigm.

The second topic, in chapter 11, says that faith is worth more than any work because only the faith gives perfect honour to God and allows Him to be God. For this kind of faith, God judges the believer right. Here we have a relational paradigm, as on one hand, there is a believer and on the other hand, God who judges. So the faith and the judgment of God bring human beings in a positive relation.

There is no contradiction that Luther claims in a relational and in a participative paradigm. His goal is to show that we are saved by faith alone and he can explain it in various ways. Consequently, the question is not if Luther used a relational or participative paradigm. He used both. However, it is important to see also the participative ontology.

The third topic, in chapter 12, uses the image of the bride and the bridegroom for saying that faith unites the soul with Christ. This image, coming from the mystical tradition, is particularly relevant because the soul and Christ become one. From the marriage between soul and Christ follows that Christ and the soul become one body. Consequently, they are one and everything is in common for both. Here we see the *freelichen Wechsel und Streit*, the *communicatio idiomatum*, in which all that is proper to one is proper also to the other. So Christ takes our sins and the believer gains justice, holiness, etc. from Christ.

4. LUTHER'S BASIC THOUGHTS OF UNION

This *communicatio idiomatum* is clearly a participative paradigm and it is very central for Luther. That the soul and Christ become one body is a central idea of Luther. He also says that the two became only one thing. In other preachings he often says, that the two became one "Kuchen," this means one cake, that depends on the circumstances in which he preached or wrote, but the basic mention is that Christ and the soul become one body, because it is a biblical statement.

Tuomo Mannermaa in his just mentioned book claimed that the believer and Christ become one person, but the texts he quotes doesn't say exactly this. Therefore I think that he is wrong.⁹ The believer and

9 During the conference the finish delegation claims that Mannermaa doesn't thought this it in the literal meaning, but in sense of Gal 2:20. This could be right.

Christ don't become one person, but one body. This is a qualitative lower union compared to the union of the Trinity or the union of the two natures in Christ, but is still a real union. This concept of union is clearly expressed in the following preaching on John:

As there is made one inseparable person in Christ, who is God and man, so Christ and us become one body and one flesh, that we can't divide, because His flesh is in us and our flesh is in Him, thus He inhabits essentially in us etc. But this union is different from a personal union, it is not so high and great like the union in which Christ, true man, is eternal God together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, but aims at this that Christ the Lord through his flesh and blood becomes one body with us, so that I belong to Him such as in my body all members belong to each other. Also my hand, arm, foot e mouth belong to my body and together are one body. Furthermore all my drops of blood belong to the body. What lacks to one member, lack also to the other. If honour, bad or good happens to one member, it happens to all the body.¹⁰

The consequences of the union are the *communicatio idiomatum* and the *praedicatio identica*. The *praedicatio identica de diversis naturis*, like

However Mannermaa linked the *communicatio idiomatum* with the *unio personalis* and this could be lightly misunderstand. In fact I think that in many authors this point is not clear and so I find important to underline it.

10 "Wie nun eine unzertrenliche Person gemacht ist an Christo, der Gott und Mensch ist, also wird aus Christo und uns auch ein leib und fleisch, das wir nicht scheiden können, denn sein fleisch in uns und unser fleisch in jme ist, das er auch wesentlich wonhaftig in uns ist etc. Aber das ist eine andere vereinigung denn eine Persönliche vereinigung, sie ist nicht so hoch und gros als die vereinigung, da Christus, wahrhaftiger Mensch, mit dem Vater und mit dem heiligen Geist ewiger GOTT ist, doch dahin gerichtet, das Christus der HERR durch sein Fleisch und Blut mit uns ein Leichnam werde, das ich in also angehöre, gleich wie an meinem leibe alle glieder aneinander gehören, denn ja meine hand, arm, fuss und mund gehören zu meinem Leibe und sind ein Leib mit einander, auch alle meine blutstropffen den Leib angehören. Was einem gliedmass feilet, das mangelt dem anderen auch, geschiet einem gliedmass ehre, böses oder gutes, so geschiets dem ganzen leibe" (M. Luther, *Wochenpredigten über Job. 6–8*, in: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Hrsg. J. K. F. Knaake, et al., Weimar 1907 (Weimarer Ausgabe [= WA] 33) 232, 24–233, 8).

Luther called it in *Vom Abendmahl Christi* (WA 26, 261–509), means that two different predicates (predicates intended in the logic meaning) are predicated of the same thing.

By reading Luther is important to understand that he has some basic thoughts which he applies in various circumstances. Union and the following *communicatio idiomatum* and *praedicatio identica* are certainly basic concepts for Luther, because he applied them not only in the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, but also in Christology, where two natures are united in one person, in the doctrine of the Holy Supper, where the bread and the body of Christ are the same thing, in the doctrine of the Church, which is the body of Christ, and other themes.¹¹

These basic thoughts reflect a participatory paradigm. We find these thoughts at the beginning, but with time they became clearer, as Luther developed them, for example when he arguments with Zwingli about the Holy Supper.

5. PARTICIPATION OF HUMAN BEINGS IN DIVINITY AND JUSTIFICATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION

Now we will see how Luther conceive the participation of human beings in divinity and this would mean how he conceives justification through participation.

First, we have to say that this is not the participation in the Holy Spirit like in modern Pentecostal churches, because Luther has always been very sceptical about the work of the Spirit not related to the Gospel and the sacraments.

¹¹ For the importance of the idea of *communicatio idiomatum* in all fields of theology see: Th. Beer, *Der fröhliche Wechsel und Streit. Grundzüge der Theologie Martin Luthers*, Einsiedeln 1980; J.A. Steiger, *Die communicatio idiomatum als Achse und Motor der Theologie Luthers. Der "fröhliche Wechsel" als hermeneutischer Schlüssel zu Abendmahlslehre, Anthropologie, Seelsorge, Naturtheologie, Rhetorik und Humor*, "Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie" 38 (1996), pp. 1–28; J. Haga, *Was there a Lutheran Metaphysics? The interpretation of communicatio idiomatum in Early Modern Lutheranism*, Göttingen 2012 (REFO500 Academic Studies 2); *Creator est creatura. Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation*, Hrsg. O. Bayer, B. Gleede, Berlin–New York 2007 (Theologische Bibliothek Topelmann 138).

Also, it is not general undefined participation like you can find in modern New Age or esoteric movements. For Luther, human beings cannot ascend to God, neither to know him by human rationality. So he founded his theology on the divine revelation in the Bible and found in the incarnation of Christ the way in which God comes to us.

Therefore the foundation of his theology is that the second person of the Triune God becomes human. In Jesus Christ, the divine and the human nature are united in one person. In this way, we can know God because we can't see God directly, but we can see Jesus Christ and through him also God, because Christ was human and God at the same time. So the human Christ, who is also divine, is the only way to God.

If in Christ the two natures are united, that union determines the *communicatio idiomatum*, which means that the human nature of Christ takes part in the properties of the divine nature, like, for example, the ubiquity. This is very important because if Christ's human nature doesn't participate in the divine ubiquity, the incarnation would be only a brief event occurred about 2000 years ago. But thanks to the *communicatio idiomatum* Christ is present also today in his human and divine nature. In the today's church He is present, He preaches, He baptizes and He gives himself in bread and wine. So we can hear Him, we can know Him and we can even eat and drink Him. The most important consequence is, that we can be united with Him by faith.

No doubt about it, recognising the divine by human nature is not a natural faculty. It's the work of the Holy Spirit, who is given us through the word and the sacraments and who let us see that the human Jesus is also God, that the human word is also the Word of God and that the bread in the Holy Supper is also the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us faith, he let us know the divine presence and by faith, he unites the believer to Christ. If the believer and Christ become one body, there is also the *communicatio idiomatum* and the believer participates in Christ's justice and eternal life. So he is saved.

Maybe is now clear why Luther couldn't recognize Zwingli like a Christian brother. If Christ would only sit in heaven on the right side of God and wouldn't be present corporally in today's church, we wouldn't have any access to him. So we couldn't become one body with him and as a consequence, there would be no salvation, or better: there would be only the possibility of the forensic justification. We saw earlier that in *De libertate cristiana* the second reasoning for

the salvation by faith alone was an example of forensic justification. But if we see how hard Luther trades Zwingli, we could think that for Luther the justification by participation in Christ's justice was much more central than the doctrine of forensic justification.

In any case, I think that it is better to say that they are both central for Luther and they complete each other.

6. ONTOLOGICAL CHANGE

When someone comes to faith then an ontological change takes place. There is a new reality. The believer is a new creature. He is now united with Christ and the Holy Spirit works in him. Certainly, the presence of the Holy Spirit and of Christ change him. Faith is not neutral but is a living power that changes the person. The divine presence works in and through the believer. In this regard, there is a process of sanctification.

It is an interesting question if also the human nature in itself changes. Luther says that by faith we receive different, new, and clean hearts but on the other side he says also that the Holy Spirit cleanse our hearts every day.

Maybe we could say that the believer changes from the point of view of the faith but human nature doesn't change. From an external point of view the believer is always a human being and there is no substantial change. So he remains imperfect and also a sinner. He is a new creature not because his human nature changes but because he is one with Christ.

Therefore we can say to the believer that he is a sinner and that's true because he is always human, but we can also say to him that he is just because he is one with Christ who is just. We can say that he is mortal, but we can also say that he has eternal life and both statements are true. Asserting two contradicts predicates on the believer is against human logic, but it is possible because Christ and the believer are one and so you can apply the just mentioned *praedicatio identica*. For this reason, Luther always underlines the difference between philosophy and theology. Theology speaks a new language that is not compatible with philosophical logic.

Therefore we could also give a new definition of the term "ontology," which in philosophy means the human thinking about being. Instead,

in Luther's theology, the *logos* is not the human thinking but is the *Logos* of John, chapter one, which defines being and creates also a new reality. This new reality cannot be seen and even not proven with human faculties but it can be captured only by faith. This is difficult to accept for the human self-comprehension and maybe for this reason Luther has been misunderstood by many people.

Luther quotes that God became human, so that humans would become divine. That is right, but it is often misunderstood. Believers are not be changed in their human nature, but they participate by faith in the qualities of Christ's divinity, which remains to Christ, also if the present Christ forms the inner person and works through him.

Some researchers claim that there is a change in nature of human beings because there's also a process of sanctification. I don't agree with this, first because it is not necessary for sanctification. It can be explained also with the work of Christ and the Spirit in us.

Second, as I said before, Luther has some basic concept of thinking that he applies in various circumstances. In Christ, the human and the divine nature are united without being changed. Also in the Holy Supper, the bread and Christ's body are one thing. Nevertheless, the bread doesn't change in his nature but remains bread. So why Luther should make an exception for the union between the believer and Christ? For this reason, I think that there is no change in human nature in itself.

So far everything seems clear. But there are some passages, that suggest Luther could have also thought of a change of human nature. For instance, we can mention the *Smalcald Articles*, where Luther, explaining that justification is not only forensic but also effective and produces good works, states that "through faith (as Peter says) we receive a different, new, clean heart." Mark Mattes concludes: "The Smalcald Articles state that faith in Christ alters not only the status but also the nature of believers: they receive *different, new, clean* hearts."¹²

Personally, I don't agree. First of all, we should exam what Luther means with "heart" mentioned In Acts 15.9. As for many Biblical terms, Luther doesn't give a univocal definition, but the semantic field infers from the exegesis of Biblical texts. Anyhow, we can observe that the heart is the place of affections, will, consciousness and faith. The heart strives towards God but without certainty to find Him. Its will and

¹² M. Mattes, *Luther on justification as forensic and effective*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, eds. R. Kolb, I. Dingel, L. Batka, New York 2014, p. 265.

strive are not independent or free but are determined by the external. The believer is the person whose heart has found rest in God and whose will is determined by God's love and will. In the light of this brief study, I understand the affirmation of a new heart not in the meaning of a new ontological heart, but the meaning of a new direction determined by God and not anymore by the Devil. Instead of speaking about an ontological change, it would be better to speak about a change in the orientation. From such a heart then the good works rise certainly.

Another example that could suggest a change in human nature is the description of man as body, soul, and spirit as Luther expresses in the explication of the *Magnificat* (WA 7, 544–604). Without engaging in this discussion, I think that the purpose of this description is to demonstrate as the soul has to steer between opposing forces (body and spirit) and that the Reformer suggests more a change in the orientation of the human soul rather than in the human nature.

In the light of the above expressed, my thesis appears as follows: the believer is a new creature with an ontological status different from the unbeliever, as he is unified with Christ he forms with Him one whole body and a new reality. So we can talk of divination. But, in the union with Christ, the human remains fully human and maintains his fallen and sinful nature. Only through physical death and final resurrection humans will receive a new nature.

7. THE RELATIONAL AND PARTICIPATIVE PARADIGM IN LUTHER

Now, let us see how Luther used the relational and participative paradigm.

The participating version says that through the word and the sacraments the Holy Spirit gives us faith which united us with Christ. Being one body with Christ is an ontological fact. This has two consequences. One is the beginning of the way towards sanctification. The other one is the participation in the justice of Christ which saves us.

In the relational version, Luther says that for our faith God will not see our sin but will impute us the rightness of Christ.

So what is the difference between these two various ways of speaking? There are no fundamental differences because in both ways it is

always the faith by which we are saved and it is always the justice of Christ that is attributed to the believer.

Perhaps we could say that the forensic justification gives us the basic statements, but in order to know why this is so and how we can explain this, we must look at the incarnation. Also we must look at the ongoing presence of Christ, at the power of faith that unites us to Christ. Moreover at the concepts of the *communicatio idiomatum* and of the *praedicatio identica*. Summarizing we could say that all these complex concepts are the explication of the simple fact that God imputes us the righteousness of Christ in virtue of our faith.

For a simple believer, it is not necessary to understand in which way justification works, it's enough to have faith. Otherwise, for someone who has doubts and would like to know more, the explications can help. But if someone denies some of the basic concepts of the explication, like Zwingli has done, he denies completely the possibility of salvation.

This is certainly what Luther thought 500 years ago. In our days we can accept that the fundamental statements of salvation by faith alone could be explained in various ways. In that way, we become more ecumenical as Luther, but the explication, that Luther gives us, is also very interesting in today's time.

8. PARTICIPATIVE ONTOLOGY AND ECUMENICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Let me conclude with some ecumenical considerations concerning the union with Christ and ecclesiology. The paper of the World Council of Churches, just quoted at the beginning, says: "The Church is fundamentally a communion in the Triune God and, at the same time, a communion whose members partake together in the life and mission of God."

I believe Luther could underwrite this. In his *Bekennnis* of 1528 he defines the Church like this: "For that I believe that on earth there is one holy Christian church, which is the community as number or as assembly of all Christians around the world, the unique bride of Christ and his spiritual body."¹³ In this quote, we see that he uses two images

¹³ "Dem nach glaube ich, das eine heilige Christliche kirche sey auff erden, das ist die gemeyne und zal odder versamlunge aller Christen ynn aller welt" (M. Luther, *Vom Abendmahl Christi. Bekennnis* (1528), WA 26, 506, 30–32).

that he also has used describing the unity of the believer with Christ. Both, the doctrine of the justification and the ecclesiology, are based on participation in the reality of the present Christ. And after some explication, he continues: "And here there are [present] also Christ, his Spirit, and God."¹⁴ Here we see that Luther has a Trinitarian vision of ecclesiology.

But there is also the aspect of communion within the church. The *communicatio idiomatum* is valid not only between the individual believer and Christ, but all believers are one in the body of Christ. Therefore there is a *communicatio idiomatum* also among the believers so that the joy and pain of one believer are also the joy and pain of the others. In the theology of Luther, there are all the elements which are quoted by the World Council of Churches and so we could say that the theology of Luther is truly ecumenical.

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¹⁴ "Und ist auch Christus und sein geist und Gott da selbs" (WA 26, 507, 10–11).

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