
MARTIN LUTHER'S RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In the second half of the twentieth century, the overcoming of the influence of Kant's philosophy on the interpretation of Luther's theology gave the impetus to a new shift in the Luther studies. However, it also revealed the importance of the theological intuitions of the Reformer on the current philosophical-theological debate on the possibility of restoring metaphysics and ontology in particular. The study aims to present the ontological dimension and the orientation of some of these intuitions present in Luther's commentary on the Letter to the Romans. This dimension is determined by his conviction that the revelation of the trinitarian God in Christ has shown the truth of being in general, and of human being in particular; the truth of the fact that this being is structurally related but also of the fact that, in the historical space, this relationship has to bring to date and to augment what is happening by means of following the Crucified and Risen Logos of the Creator, and uniting with his Holy Spirit in the communion of believers.

Key words

Martin Luther; Letter to the Romans; Rethinking Ontology; Ontology and Revelation; Relational Ontology

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This article takes its cue from the conviction that Sergio Carletto observed the developments in *Lutherforschung* in recent decades in the right way. According to him, the “majority of contemporary Luther scholars, and not only those belonging to the Lutheran confession, acknowledge that, in the case of Martin Luther, they are faced with a creative and radical rethinking of the ontological categories in the light of the dialectic structure of the Christian mystery and

of revelation: the christological event and its actualisation in the work of the Spirit oblige us to redefine ontology [...]”¹.

I begin, moreover, from the assumption that, despite the divergences among Luther scholars on their subject’s *type of ontology* (and on its ontogenesis, including the influences received), there is a marked convergence on a fundamental characteristic of this ontology: the centrality it gives to the category of relation. The aim of the present study lies in putting forward a brief reflection on how this category should be considered. This has a twofold purpose: a correct interpretation of Luther’s thought and a correct use of it by those who are today forced to formulate a persuasive reply to the question: What kind of ontology can be inspiring for the theology of today and tomorrow?

I shall show how Luther employs certain concepts and terms, ideas and perspectives of ontological significance in his *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans (die Römervorlesung)* from 1515–16. Although this is a youthful work, it contains *in nuce* the proposal for a radical *metanoia* of “thought” and the programme for its actualisation as “new language/theology”. This is no accident, given some characteristics of Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, which the reformer observes acutely. According to him, the Apostle philosophises in this letter; however, he “thinks about the things of the world in another way than the philosophers and metaphysicians do”². Consequently, Luther exclaims:

But alas, how deeply and painfully we are caught up in categories and quiddities, and how many foolish opinions befog us in metaphysics! When shall we learn to see that we waste so much precious time with such useless studies and neglect better ones? We never cease to live up to the saying of Seneca: “We do not know what we should know because we have learned superfluous things; indeed, we do not know what is good for us because we have learned only what harms us”³.

¹ S. Carletto, “Lutero, la divinizzazione e l’ontologia. Temi e figure della ‘finnische Luthereforschung’”, *Annali di Studi Religiosi* 3 (2012): 176.

² “Aliter Apostolus de rebus philosophatur et sapit quam philosophi et metaphysici” (WA 56, 371,2–3; M. Luther (ed.), *Lectures on Romans [= Lectures]* (ed. by Wilhelm Pauck, Louisville: Westminster Press, 2006), 235.

³ “Sed heu, quam profunde et noxie hēremus in predicamentis et quidditatibus, quot stultis opinionibus in metaphysica Inuoluimur! Quando sapiemus et videbimus, quod tam preciosum tempus tam vanis studiis perdimus et meliora negligimus? Semper agimus, vt sit verum in nobis, quod Seneca ait: ‘Necessaria ignoramus, quia superflua didicimus, Immo Salutaria ignoramus, quia damnabilia didicimus’” (WA 56, 371,11–16; *Lectures*, 236).

Luther is convinced that the *Letter to the Romans* is a biblical text of extraordinary importance in the sense that it helps think with sufficient clarity of the realities indicated by the terms “law”, “Gospel”, “sin”, “punishment”, “grace”, “faith”, “justice”, “flesh”, “spirit”, “good works”, “love”, “hope”, “cross”, and even “Christ” and “God”⁴, realities which lie at the centre of Christian preaching and whose deepest truth should be thus known in the best possible way, which ensures that they are what they really are and how they are. As the numerous pages of the *Lectures* attest, Luther forces himself to take exactly this step, thus displaying pronounced interests of an ontological value.

In this paper, I shall seek to highlight one particular example of this work of his, one which certainly is important for the theme “Luther and Ontology”⁵. It concerns the Lutheran concept of *form* and that of the *substitution of forms*, both of them fundamental for the development and formulation of Luther’s ontological insights.

1. Form and the Substitution of Forms

As already mentioned, some passages of the *Lectures* – the *dictum* and the author’s way of arguing – give an immediate impression his struggle to grasp the great complexity of the above-mentioned “realities”, including their internal structure. The comment on vv. 5 [*secundum hominem dicere*] and 7 [*si enim veritas Dei*] of chap. 3 of *Rom* is certainly one of these passages⁶.

Here, Luther asserts that, before the words of God, it is necessary to have *humilitas* and *fides*, but in the most radical sense of these terms: that is, we “must become inwardly nothing [*ut penitus nihil fiamus*], emptied of everything, and, completely rid of ourselves [*omnis evacuemur, exinaniamus nos ipsos*]”⁷. To provide a further explanation, Luther employs philosophical terms and notes that, as the philosophers say, a “matter cannot be formed unless it was first formless or unless the

⁴ Cfr. WA DB 7, 3,17–19; 7, 26,6–8.

⁵ See W. Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967); A. Ghiselli, K. Kopperi and R. Vinke (eds.), *Luther und Ontologie: Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1993); D. Bielfeldt, *Martin Luther and Ontology*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. <https://tinyurl.com/y99e5bps> (Online Publication Date: Oct 2016).

⁶ Cfr. WA 56, 216,4–219,11.

⁷ WA 56, 218,14; *Lectures*, 70.

previous form has been done away with; and the ‘possible intellect’ cannot obtain a form unless the ground of its essence is bare of all form and like a *tabula rasa*”⁸.

According to Johannes Ficker⁹, the reformer is citing a principle which goes back to Aristotle, specifically to the book I of the *Physics* (chaps. 5–7), where is an explanation of the nature of the change which takes place in a man who from being non-musical becomes musical. Aristotle insists on the need to distinguish between what remains in and after the change, the substratum (the man), and the two opposites that follow each other. However, Ficker also notes that Luther’s formulation reproduces the reworking of this principle in the *Summule in libros Physicorum* (1494) of William of Ockham, where it is written:

Unomodo dicitur priuatio forma expellenda quando alia forma introducitur et sic una forma contraria est priuatio alterius (I c. 9); quando aliquid alteratur ab una qualitate ad aliam, subiectum continue remittitur et expellitur forma contraria et illa tota expulsa continue et successive acquiritur alia qualitas contraria precedenti (III c. 22)¹⁰.

In the light of Ficker’s clarifications, what is the true significance of the term “form” as used in the above passage from Luther, and how do we interpret the explanation regarding the substitution of forms? If it is true that Luther does not refuse to employ a term and i.e., of Aristotle, does he do so by following the philosophical insights of the Stagirite?

I recall that, in the *Physics*, Aristotle speaks of the change from one *mode of being* (the non-musical person) into another *mode of being* (the musical) by employing arguments with a clear ontological dimension, not only simply thanks to distinguishing in a single human subject the presence of that which is its *substratum* (the man himself) and the so-called “opposites” (the non-musical and the musical) but also by the belief that the latter have to be interpreted as “entities” that are not purely external, or superficial, but of a certain consistency, given that “everything [and so, therefore, every respective mode of being] comes

⁸ “Et ut philosophi dicunt: Non inducitur forma, nisi ubi est priuatio forme precedentisque expulsio, et: Intelletus possibilis non recipit formam, nisi in principio sui esse sit nudatus ab omni forma et sicut tabula rasa” (WA 56, 218,21–219,1; *Lectures*, 70).

⁹ Cf. note 3, in *Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/1516. Die Scholien*, ed. J. Ficker (Leipzig: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung Theodor Weicher, 1908), 58.

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibidem*.

from the substratum and the form (*morphé*)¹¹. According to Aristotle, the latter is something not only unitary, like order and harmony, but it is a single principle which – as explained in the *Metaphysics* – is not actually a substance separate from things; on the contrary, it is an intelligible essence, that is to say, the fundamental principle within them.

So then, when Luther employs the term “form” in the context of the reflection on human beings and their justification by God, it is clear that he does not intend to refer to the level of human behaviour or to the sphere of psychological/spiritual interiority (the conscience) but rather to indicate something fundamental, essential, concerning the level of the human being in some way.

It should be remembered, in fact, with reference to what is formulated and in the context of the explanation of vv. 5 and 7 of chap. 3 of *Romans*, that the i.e., of stripping oneself, of sacrificing oneself, is to be understood according to the logic of the substitution of forms. Luther is looking at the person called to entrust himself to the words of God from whom alone one can receive justice (be justified). For this type of relation the following applies: “it cannot happen [*non potest fieri*] that one who is full of his own righteousness can be filled with the righteousness of God”, given that He “fills only those who hunger and thirst”¹². And Luther continues:

Whoever, therefore, is satiated with his own truth and wisdom is incapable of comprehending the truth and wisdom of God, for they can be received only in emptiness and a vacuum. Let us, therefore, say to God: Oh, that we might willingly be emptied that we might be filled with thee; Oh, that I may willingly be weak that thy strength may dwell in me; gladly a sinner that thou mayest be justified in me [...]¹³.

The i.e., of *nihil* and of *vacuum* only underlines the radical nature of the change which takes place in the person, given that the *nihil* and the *vacuum* concern a specific state/mode not only of knowing/thinking

¹¹ Aristotle, *Physics* I,7,190b; ed. R. Radice (Milano: Bompiani, 2011), 159.

¹² “Non potest fieri, vt plenus iustitia sua repleatur iustitia Dei, Qui non implet nisi esurientes et Sitientes” (WA 56, 219,3–5; *Lectures*, 70).

¹³ “Ideo satur veritate et sapientia sua non est capax veritatis et sapientie Dei, Quę non nisi in vacuum et inane recipi potest. Ergo dicamus Deo: O quam libenter sumus vacui, vt tu plenus sis in nobis! Libenter infirmus, vt tua virtus in me habitet; libenter peccator, vt tu iustificeris in me [...]” (WA 56, 219,5–9; *Lectures*, 70–71).

but also and most importantly of being¹⁴, which is a necessary presupposition of another, “new” mode of being and consequently of thinking. For Luther, the exemplary case of this “being empty/nothing (in oneself)”, which shows its true dimensions and which is decisive for the transformation of a person, is the person of Jesus Christ, described in vv. 3–4 of chap. 1 of *Romans*. That is clear from the comment on these verses found in one of the first pages of the *Lectures*¹⁵.

2. The Substitution of Forms in the Person of Christ

Commenting on the words of Paul [*De filio suo, qui factus est ei ex semine David secundum carnem, qui predestinatus est filius Dei in virtute secundum spiritum sanctificationis ex resurrectione mortuorum Iesu Christi*], Luther insists on the fact that Christ is the Son of God, of whom it is true that he is the One who was before all things and has made all things but also the one who became incarnate, emptied (as much as to be able to say *being* “of the seed of David”), beginning to “exist in time” as a creature. Not only that; precisely in his being/becoming “son of David”, in his being weak (in the flesh), humbled and emptied, He “is now in turn established and declared to be the Son of God in all power and glory”¹⁶. Luther explains:

[...] and, as according to the form of God, he emptied himself into the nothingness of the flesh by being born into the world, so, according to the form of a servant, he fulfilled himself unto the fullness of God by ascending into heaven. [...] For from the very moment of Christ’s conception it was correct to say, in view of the union of the two natures: This Son is the son of David and this man is the Son of God. The first is true because his divinity is

¹⁴ See S. Juntunen, *Der Begriff des Nichts bei Luther in den Jahren von 1510 bis 1523* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Gesellschaft, 1996).

¹⁵ Referring to these two verses, Luther observes: “As far as I know, this passage has not been adequately and correctly interpreted by anyone. The ancients were blocked by an inadequate interpretation of it, and the moderns because they lacked the Spirit. [Iste locus nescio si ab vlllo sit vere et recte expositus. Antiquis obstitit interpretationis improprietas, Recentioribus vero absentia spiritus]” (WA 56, 166,18-19; *Lectures*, 12).

¹⁶ “[...] vt sicut filius Dei per humilitatem et exinanitionem sui factus est filius Dauid in carnis infirmitate, Ita econtra filius Dauid infirmus secundum carnem nunc rursus constitutus est et declaratus filius Dei in omni potestate et gloria” (WA 56, 167,16-19; *Lectures*, 13).

emptied¹⁷ and hidden in the flesh. The second is true because his humanity is fulfilled and translated into divinity¹⁸.

Wishing to summarise the sense of these considerations aimed at displaying the paradox of the divine-humanity of Christ, the author of the *Lectures* adds:

And though he was not born as the Son of God but as a human son, he was nevertheless always the Son and is even now the Son of God¹⁹.

The substitution of forms in Christ is clearly something exemplary since it can and must happen in everyone. It would be useful, therefore, to focus on other christological passages, in which Luther takes up and develops this same idea. Above all, there are his comments on vv. 2 [“*tristitia magna es mihi*”] and 3 [“*optabam enim ego ipse anathema*”] of chap. 9 of *Romans* where he highlights the abandoned Christ as the most extreme example of self-negation (an example which Paul intends to follow on behalf of his own people).

Having to be short, I prefer to cite another significant passage in the *Lectures*, the comments on vv. 24 [“*spes, que videtur, non et spes*”] and 26 [“*nam quam oremus, nescimus*”] of chap. 8.

3. God Works as Creator – *ex nihilo*

Here, Luther explains first of all that the substitution of forms occurs in correspondence with the action of God, with his divine nature. That is, it belongs to the *nature* of God “first to destroy and to bring to nothing whatever is in us before he gives us of his own, as it is written: ‘The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings down to hell and brings

¹⁷ For the understanding of the Lutheran i.e., of *emptying*, the comparison with the *verbum abbreviatum*, developed in the comment on *Rom* 9,28 is useful [“*Verbum enim consummans et abbrevians in Iustitia*”]; cfr. WA 56, 406,17–410,19.

¹⁸ “Vt sicut se secundum formam Dei Exinaniuit vsque in carnis inanitatem nascendo in mundum, ita secundum formam serui se impleuit vsque in plenitudinem diuinitatis ascendendo in ceelum. [...] Nam ab initio conceptionis Christi propter vnionem vtriusque nature verum fuit dicere: Iste Deus est filius Dauid Et iste homo est filius Dei. Prima i.e., vera, quia exinanita est diuinitas et in carnem abscondita. Secunda ideo, Quia impleta est humanitas et in diuinitatem traducta” (WA 56, 167,19–22; 167,24–168,3; *Lectures*, 13).

¹⁹ “Sed licet hoc ita esset, Vt non sit factus filius Dei, licet sit factus filius hominis, et tamen i.e., semper fuit filius et est filius Dei etiam tunc” (WA 56, 168,4–5; *Lectures*, 13).

back again”²⁰. It is part of this way of proceeding that he operates, only “then we are fit for his works and counsels, when we have stopped making plans, let our hands rest, and have become purely passive in relation to God in our inner as well as our outer doings”²¹. Only then He “proceeds to shape us into the form his art has planned”²².

Obviously, this and other similar passages of the *Lectures* point to what their author will write later. It is, for example, in his *Comment on the Magnificat* where he explains that this kind of working by God, which the *Lectures* call “conferring of the new form”, is in reality Himself operating as Creator who continues to be present in the world. As Luther puts it:

For even as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues still the same. Even now and unto the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed and living. Again, whatever is something, precious, honorable, blessed and living, He makes to be nothing, worthless, despised, wretched and dying. After this manner no creature can work; none can produce anything out of nothing²³.

These words also confirm what arises from the above reflections in the *Lectures* in connection with the substitution of forms, namely, that this substitution occurs not only at the surface but at the roots of human existence and that the *nihil* in itself represents the *conditio sine qua*

²⁰ “Quod totum i.e., facit, Quia Natura Dei est, prius destruere et annihilare, quicquid in nobis est, antequam sua donet; sicut Scriptum est: ‘Dominus pauperem facit et ditat, deducit ad inferos et reducit’” (WA 56, 375,18–20; *Lectures*, 240).

²¹ “Capaces autem tunc sumus operum et consiliorum eius, Quando nostra consilia cessant et opera quiescunt et efficitur pure passivi respectu Dei, tam quoad interiores quam exteriores actus” (WA 56, 375,22–24; *Lectures*, 241).

²² “[...] tunc exaudiens incipit artis et consilii sui formam imprimere” (WA 56, 378,7–8; *Lectures*, 243).

²³ “Denn gleich wie er im Anfang aller Kreaturen die Welt aus nichts schuf, davon er ‘Schöpfer’ und ‘allmächtig’ heißet, so bleibt er unverändert dabei, auf solche Art zu wirken, und alle seine Werke bis ans Ende der Welt sind noch so beschaffen, dass er aus dem, das nichts, gering, verachtet, elend, tot ist, etwas Kostbares, Ehrenvolles, Seliges und Lebendiges macht. Umgekehrt macht er alles, was etwas, kostbar, ehrenvoll, selig, lebendig ist, zunichte, gering, verachtet, elend und sterbend. Auf diese Weise kann keine Kreatur wirken, (sie) vermag nicht etwas aus nichts zu machen” (WA 7, 547,1–8).

non for such a change to take place effectively. However, something else must be added, which is of crucial importance for our subject. I refer to Luther's conviction that the *nihil* of man in itself, his self-renunciation coincides in some way with the working of the Creator, given that a person can "renounce" himself, become nothing, only thanks to the divine action of destruction and reconstruction. Thus, the truth about someone who *renounces himself* is that he is acting only as *co-operator* with God, as one who participates in the divine action in question. Human action consists in entrusting oneself unconditionally to the creative, life-giving and salvific Word of God made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ; it consists in hiding oneself, or better, in the *transferring* (*transitus*) of the person into the Word.

This last consideration brings me to the heart of the theme of my paper; undoubtedly, because it indicates the true extent of the Lutheran concept of *cooperatio* and his *ontological* dimension. This concept indicates the absolute prius of God's action: He relates to the creature as a "His" Creator;²⁴ at the same time God asks that it be related to Him as "His" creature. But this consideration is of great importance for it invites us to understand the substitution of forms as a *relational event*. A passage from the *Lectures* explains it well; the transition from one form to the other consists in leaving one's own form to welcome the form of the Word of God trustfully and totally, *conforming* oneself to it. Luther explains:

"The Word became flesh" (John 1:14) and "took on the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7), in order that the flesh should become Word and man take on the form of the Word; then, in terms of the third chapter of the letter before us, man will become as righteous, truthful, wise, good, meek, chaste as the Word itself is whose form he takes on by faith²⁵.

Therefore, the abandoning or renouncing of one's own form of being coincides with the relating of a person to "another than him": the

²⁴ In fact, this *relating* of His does not exclude the *cooperation* of people, made in God's image and likeness and so predisposed to this type of primal relation; however, it is only possible because of God as only He can work a radical change on the level of being.

²⁵ "Sic 'Verbum caro factum est' et 'assumpsit formam serui', vt caro verbum fiat et homo formam assumat verbi; tunc, vt c. 3. dictum est, homo fit iustus, verax, sapiens, bonus, mitis, castus, sicut est verbum ipsum, cui se per fidem conformat" (WA 56, 350,1-5; *Lectures*, 188).

Word of God. The intensity of this relation is such as to ensure that the person *exists/is* as though *conformed*, clothed with the form of the same Word. Therefore, the *nihil* does not lie in being in a space-time neutral zone (psychological-spiritual or other) but in the conscious and desired existing-already-now-in-a-relation to the Word of God manifested in the *forma Christi*. It is exactly this important truth that Luther intends to reiterate in the *Lectures* when he comments on v. 24 of chap. 8 of *Romans* [“*spes, que videtur, non est spes*”], once again citing Aristotle.

4. The Idea of *Esse* as *Actus-Relatio*

Referring to the words of the Apostle, Luther observes that they are metaphors but not from the theological point of view. In fact, if one has a particularly intense hope, it happens that “what is hoped for and the hoping person become one through tense hoping”²⁶. This i.e., is present already in Augustine and, later, in St. Bernard and Tauler too, who asserted that “*anima plus est, ubi amat, quam ubi animat* [the soul is more where it loves than where it lives]”²⁷. However, it is, above all, *De anima* (lib. III) of Aristotle which justifies the existence of this type of fusion. The Greek philosopher holds that “the intellect and what it understands, sensory perception and what it perceives, and, generally, potentiality and its object become one. In the same way love changes the lover into the beloved”²⁸. Taking Aristotle’s insight for his starting point, Luther explains:

Accordingly, hope changes him who hopes into what he hopes for, but what he hopes for is not apparent. Hope therefore transfers him into the unknown and hidden, into an inward darkness, so that he does not know what he hopes for and yet knows what he does not hope for. Thus, then, the soul that hopes has become hope and, at the same time, what it hopes for, because it is staying with what it does not see, i.e., hope²⁹.

²⁶ “Ideo fit, vt ex re sperata et sperante per intensam spem velut vnum fiat” (WA 56, 374,9–10; *Lectures*, 239).

²⁷ “Secundum illud B. Augustini: ‘Anima plus est, Vbi amat, quam vbi animat’” (WA 56, 374,10–11; *Lectures*, 239).

²⁸ “Et Aristoteles 3. de anima dicit, Quod ex intellectu et intelligibili, ex sensu et sensibili fit vnum et vniversaliter ex potentia et obiecto suo. Sic amor transfert amantem in amatum” (WA 56, 374, 12–14; *Lectures*, 239).

²⁹ “Ergo spes transfert in speratum, sed speratum non apparet. Ideo transfert in incongnitum, in absconditum, in tenebras interiores, ut nesciat, quid speret, et tamen sciat,

That the *transitus* towards another than oneself, which is to be understood as a real becoming of this other, concerns not only hope and love but also and above all faith, is the object of intense reflections which pervade and theologically unite the *Lectures* like a *Leitmotiv*. However, part of this object is the conviction that this *transitus* concerns people in their whole existence and, moreover, that they are not transferred into an abstract reality or into a religious, spiritual or moral i.e., but into a real existence; the Word of God makes itself perceptible in the world through Jesus Christ. Not by chance, Luther reiterates that faith creates indwelling, that is, having faith means having Christ (as mediator of this faith)⁵⁰ and, therefore, one can and must maintain that He dwells in us⁵¹. Certainly, with regard to us, Christ is “outside”, like something good which is extrinsic to us, but, through the work of God, he is also “within”, becoming wisdom, justice, sanctification and redemption for people; therefore, all “these are in us only by faith and hope in Him”⁵².

All these explanations show that by the substitution of forms, the *Lectures* understand something very *complex*. However, the complexity of what Luther intends to grasp and describe is manifested even more as soon as some fixed points of his thought are taken seriously. First of all, the i.e., that, if it is true that, while respecting human freedom, God acts as Creator (creating, that is, *ex nihilo*) in the *ordo redemptionis*, this activity takes place against the background of His uninterrupted action which belongs to the *ordo creationis* and consists in the holding-in-being of every creature through His eternal and creative Word (that is, through His uninterrupted speaking as Creator, since he is *Deus loquens*); in fact: “God moves and works everything”⁵³, being “un-

quid non speret. Sic ergo anima facta est spes et speratum simul, quia in eo versatur, quod non videt, i.e., in spe” (WA 56, 374,14–18; *Lectures*, 240).

⁵⁰ Cfr. WA 56, 298–299.

⁵¹ Cfr. WA 56, 278,1–280,9.

⁵² “Ideo Recte dixi, quod Extrinsicum nobis est omne bonum nostrum, quod est Christus. Sicut Apostolus dicit: ‘Qui nobis factus est a Deo Sapientia et Iustitia et sanctificatio et redemption’. Quæ omnia in nobis sunt non nisi per fidem et spem in ipsum” (WA 56, 278,22–25; *Lectures*, 134).

⁵³ WA 18, 709,21. The meaning of these words is to be understood in the light of the truth affirmed in Luther’s disputation *De iustificatione* (1536): “Quicquid Deus creat, hoc etiam conservat” (WA 39/1, 107,14). For a summary presentation of this subject, see A. Beutel, “Wort Gottes”, in *Luther Handbuch*, ed. A. Beutel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 361–371, here especially 365–367.

ceasingly active in all His creatures”⁵⁴. The latter, and human beings especially, are predisposed by nature to welcome this fundamental and life-giving *motus Dei* and to interact with it, given that He has made them, and so structurally endowed them to be, *verba creata* or *vocubula/dictiones dei*⁵⁵. Therefore, when God transfers people into His Word, that is, when he clothes them with the *forma Christi*, this transferring/transformation coincides with the manifestation of what people already are, on the level of being, as creatures of God; his being-word (his verbal nature) uttered in view of and through the eternal *Verbum* of the Creator is revealed in Christ.

Along with this, however, we must consider seriously another cornerstone of Luther’s thought: the i.e., that the substitution of forms, namely, the *transitus*, is not an event made up of the chronological succession of what was before (the old form) and what is after (the new form), taking place once for all or with a certain periodicity, nor is it a concluded action of transferring (from one “place” to another). From the dense pages of the *Lectures*, it is clear that it is an event that is always underway, that is, an action without a pause, which is to say that, between the two forms, there is a relation of fluent exchange, of continuous transferring. This means that the complex reality indicated by the terms “substitution”, “transit” or “transformation” is, from the ontological point of view, simultaneously dynamic, processual and relational. Wishing to shed light precisely on this ontological insight to describe the great complexity of being human from the perspective of the *ordo redemptionis* (therefore describing people in the light of their baptised/Christian-being), Luther explains, in his comment on v. 2 [“*sed reformamini*”] of chap. 12 of *Romans*:

For just as there are five stages of natural growth, according to Aristotle: not-being, becoming, being, action, and being acted upon, i.e., privation, matter, form, operation, and passion, so it is also with the Spirit: not-being is something without a name and man in sins; becoming is justification; being is righteousness; acting is to act and live righteously; to be acted upon is to be made perfect and complete. These five are somehow always in motion in man. In whatever way the nature of man may be explained – and leaving out of account the first “not-being” and the last “being”, for in

⁵⁴ WA 18, 711,1.

⁵⁵ Cfr. Beutel, Wort Gottes, 365–367.

between these two: “not-being” and “being acted upon”, the other three, namely, “becoming”, “being”, and “acting” are always in motion – by the new birth he passes from sin to righteousness and thus from “not-being” through “becoming” to “being”. [...] But from this “new being” which is really a “not being”, he proceeds and passes into another “new being” through “being acted upon”, i.e., through becoming new, he passes into being better and from there again into being new. For it is really so that man is always in privation, always in becoming or in the state of potency and matter, and always in action. In this way, Aristotle philosophizes about these matters and he does it well, but he is not well understood. Man is always in not-being, in becoming, in being; always in privation, in potency, in act; always in sin, in justification, in righteousness, i.e., always a sinner, always penitent, always righteous³⁶.

Looking in the same way at the processual/dynamic reality of the human being but expressing himself in ethico-spiritual terms, Luther declares:

None is so good that he cannot become better, and none is so bad that he cannot become worse, until at last we become what we are to be [*ad extremam formam perueniamus*]³⁷.

³⁶ “Nam sicut in naturalibus rebus quinque sunt gradus: Non esse, fieri, Esse, Actio, passio, i. e., priuatio, Materia, forma, operatio, passio, secundum Aristotelem, Ita et Spiritu: Non Esse Est res sine nomine et homo in peccatis; fieri Est Iustificatio; Esse est Iustitia; opus Est Iuste agere et viuere; pati est perfici et consummari. Et hec quinque semper velut in motu sunt in homine. Et quodlibet in homine est Inueniri – respectiue preter primum non esse et vltimum esse, Nam inter illa duo: Non esse et pati currunt illa tria semper, sc. fieri, esse, agere – per Natiuitatem nouam transit de peccato ad Iustitiam, Et sic de non esse per fieri ad esse. [...] Sed ab hoc ipso esse nouo, quod est verum non esse, ad aliud nouum esse proficiendo transit per passionem, i. e., aliud fieri, in esse melius, Et ab illo iterum in aliud. Quare Verissime homo semper est in priuatione, semper in fieri seu potentia et materia et semper in actu. Sic enim de rebus philosophatur Aristoteles et Bene, Sed non ita ipsum intelligunt. Semper Homo Est in Non Esse, In fieri, In esse, Semper in priuatione, in potentia, in actu, Semper in peccato, in Iustificatione, In Iustitia, i. e., Semper peccator, semper penitens, semper Iustus” (WA 56, 441,23–442,2–17; *Lectures*, 322).

³⁷ “Nemo ita bonus, vt non fiat melior, nemo ita malus, vt non fiat peior, vsque dum ad extremam formam perueniamus” (WA 56, 442,24–26; *Lectures*, 323).

5. Attempt at an Ontology in the Light of Revelation

The ontological insights in the *Lectures* are obviously even richer. Moreover, they are to be found developed and applied in many of Luther's numerous works, including his final text: the *Commentary on Genesis* (1535–1545). One thing is certain: that all the principal concepts of Lutheran theology, beginning with those of faith, sin, holiness, justice, grace, baptism and others, intend to indicate realities which are-in-act⁵⁸, that is to say, which are characterised by a specific *motus essendi* nourished by the relation, desired or rejected, of a person towards the eternal and creative Word of God, manifested in Christ through the Spirit. Luther was pressed into pursuing this path of theological development by the desire to grasp and describe the great and paradoxical complexity of the created world, and, *in primis* of the human being, just as it appears in the light of the Trinitarian revelation attested by Holy Scripture and experienced, in its salvific effects, in the community of faith, the Church (it too understood in its being a reality-in-act: *creatura Verbi*). This is why Luther's ontological insights aim at holding together the aspects of the realities of the *ordo creationis/redemptionis* that are multiple and even contradictory: from the protological to the eschatological, from the anthropological to the ecclesiological, from the earthly outward appearance (perceptible by the senses) to the *inner reality* (perceptible through the spirit), from the aspect of the already to that of the not yet.

But is this an appropriate way of proceeding? Is Luther not risking elaborating an approach to the truths of faith which does not have the certainty and the stability of the ontological/metaphysical system of the scholastics? In my opinion, the response to such questions should be sought in dialogue with what Bernhard Welte writes in connection with the need for a revision of the Trinitarian formula of the Council of Nicaea.

According to this German philosopher and theologian, the reason for such a need is of an ontological character. What is required is a change of ontology, and that is because “at Nicaea, Western metaphysics’ understanding of being ended up predominating whereas the understanding of being predominant in the Bible was of an earlier, pre-metaphysical

⁵⁸ See L. Žák, “Taufe und Firmung in den Lehrtexten der evangelisch-lutherischen Reformation interpretiert mit Bezug auf das fundamentum fidei dynamicum”, in *Taufe und Abendmahl im Grund und Gegenstand des Glaubens*, eds. E. Herms and L. Žák (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 37–78.

nature and primarily seemed to be able to be explained on the basis of the concept of event”³⁹. Western metaphysics objectivised, orienting itself to the abiding nature of the entity of the reality observed and/or believed. However, it relegated “the primordial event of Revelation with its quality of event”⁴⁰ to the second level. Welte is convinced that this way of thinking has now been superseded irretrievably and that, therefore, “we must seek to discern the [ontological/metaphysical – L. Ž.] suggestions in the original form of the Revelation”, forcing ourselves to render the great theological formulas in a transparent way «and also to look through them in the direction of the more original element, that is, in the direction of the factual message of the Gospel”⁴¹.

I wonder if Welte’s words are not expressing, at least in part, the heart of Luther’s insights in relation to his criticism of scholastic metaphysics and, furthermore, if they do not shed light on the way Luther chose to travel when, in his *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, he proclaimed the need for a radical renewal of the *modus essendi/cogitandi* of Christians⁴².

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³⁹ B. Welte, “La formula dottrinale di Nicea e la metafisica occidentale”, in *La storia della cristologia primitiva. Gli inizi biblici e la formula di Nicea*, ed. Id. (Brescia: Paideia, 1986), 133.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, 137.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, 141.

⁴² See W. Christi, “Gerecht und Sünder zugleich. Zur Ontologie des homo christianus nach Martin Luther”, in *Niemand ist eine Insel. Menschsein im Schnittpunkt von Anthropologie, Theologie und Ethik*, eds. Ch. Polke, F. M. Brunn, A. Dietz, S. Rolf, A. Siebert (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 65–85.