

Article

Luther/an(d) Feminist Intersectional Theology

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Received: 18 December 2019; Accepted: 15 January 2020; Published: 21 January 2020



Abstract: This article will offer some criteria for evaluating a contemporary feminist engagement with Martin Luther's work. The key theory and method is intersectionality: where Luther's theology has resonance with intersectionality is where his work continues to have potential for feminist theological engagement. In turn, intersectionality helps identify and explain some of the lingering failures and limitations of his work for contemporary theology. Six core concepts of intersectionality will be explored and applied to Luther's work, suggesting that where he fails is precisely where contemporary feminist theology has significant insight to offer.

Keywords: Martin Luther; Lutheran; intersectionality; feminism; feminist theology

1. Introduction

How can twenty-first-century feminist theologians make effective and authentic use of a sixteenth-century monk's writing? The monk in question here eventually became a pastor, preacher, husband, father, and prolific scholar, but given the epistemic distance between Martin Luther's world, his concerns, his identity and ours today, can any meaningful connections be made? A significant body of literature suggests that the answer is yes, including monographs like *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and The Cross* by Deanna Thompson, and edited volumes like Mary Streufert's *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives* (Streufert 2010 and Thompson 2004). What, other than matters of convenience and personal preference, might ground this work going forward? Not everything in Lutheran feminist theology needs to be proof-texted with Martin Luther, and not everything in Luther's work needs to show up in Lutheran feminist theology. In addition, feminist theology in the twenty-first century must make thorough and effective use of intersectionality as both theory and method. This is required in order for feminism to overcome the single-axis thinking which has too-often sidelined race, class, and other identity and justice issues. This article will offer some criteria for evaluating a feminist engagement with Luther's work.

The key concept and lens is intersectionality: where Luther's theology has resonance with key features of intersectionality is where his work continues to have potential for feminist theological engagement. In turn, intersectionality helps identify and explain some of the lingering failures and limitations of his work for contemporary theology. Because intersectionality should inform and foreground all feminist theological work today, this argument will begin with a thorough discussion of it as a theory and method, and this article will be structured according to six key concepts in intersectionality that can now serve as guide for an analysis of Luther's work.

I proceed with full awareness that the language and worldview of the sixteenth-century reformer was in many ways radically different than that which informs a concept like intersectionality. Luther's understanding of justice, for example, is that of a pre-Enlightenment thinker. His understanding of what it means to be human is informed by a late-medieval experience and view of the world, rather than one informed by social science and even the Copernican Revolution. Nevertheless, ideas like the priesthood of all believers, the freedom of a Christian to serve her neighbor, vocational and spiritual

equality, and the relational nature of human life continue to be generative for feminist theological work today. These are just a few of the ways in which Luther's theology continues to play an active role in twenty-first-century Christianity. Bringing the concept of intersectionality to bear on evaluations of Luther's work grounds further engagement with it in something more than proof-texting and matters of convenience.

2. Intersectionality

Drawing on insights from multiple generations of black feminist thought and action, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the word "intersectionality" in her 1989 article in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum* discussing the 1976 case *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* (Crenshaw 1989). In that lawsuit, black women sued General Motors for discrimination, claiming systemic disadvantage and discrimination on the job. The court ruled in favor of General Motors because black women were not a protected category by legal standards; black people were, and women were, but a lawsuit had to allege discrimination on the basis of sex or race, not both. The legal code had no space to comprehend that multiple forms of identity define each of us at all times and shape our experiences of power and oppression. Though Crenshaw's use of the word in 1989 marks a particular moment in the development of this theory and method, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge point out that its core ideas

"formed within the context of social movements that faced the crises of their times, primarily the challenges of colonialism, racism, sexism, militarism, and capitalist exploitation. In this context, because women of color were affected not just by one of these systems of power but by their convergence, they formed autonomous movements that put for the the core ideas of intersectionality, albeit using different vocabularies." (Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 64).

Though this had happened for many generations, Collins and Bilge begin their formal historical study in the 1960s and 1970s, while suggesting that intersectional analysis is found in nineteenth-century black women's voices like Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper (Collins and Bilge 2016, pp. 67–68).

In their book *Intersectional Theology*, Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw describe it this way: "Intersectionality is a lens for understanding how gender, race, social class, sexual identity and other forms of difference work concurrently to shape people and social institutions within multiple relationships of power." (Kim and Shaw 2018, p. 2). Their emphasis here is on multiple aspects of identity, how they work together, how they advantage and disadvantage us—often at the same time—and how various aspects of identity connect us to power and others disconnect us from power. The fact that this all happens concurrently and in shifting patterns leads them to describe the phenomenon as kaleidoscopic (Kim and Shaw 2018, p. 2).

Intersectionality as a theory and a method begins with this recognition of the multiplicity inherent in human experience and identity. It also pays close attention to power and the identities and relationships that grant and deny people access to it. Vivian M. May describes it as matrix thinking, wherein we understand identity and relations as multidimensional and interconnected. (May 2015). Patricia Hill Collins similarly discusses how power operates in a matrix of domination rather than in mere additive layers:

"Embracing a both/and conceptual stance moves us from additive, separate systems approaches to oppression and toward what I now see as the more fundamental issue of the social relations of domination. Race, class, and gender constitute axes of oppression that characterize Black women's experiences within a more generalized matrix of domination." (Collins 1991, p. 226).

In black feminist thought, attention to the simultaneity of experiences is built in, and it has consequences. May highlights this point when she says that intersectionality "is not (and does not aim to be) neutral." Rather, it "takes a stand against inequality and harm and overtly aims for social

transformation and meaningful change.” This is a deliberate bias toward “multifaceted forms of justice.” (May 2015, pp. 28–29).

Collins and Bilge, in their definitive text *Intersectionality*, identify six core concepts that illuminate different elements of this approach. Using these as a frame and criteria, I will move to evaluate the utility and relevance of Luther’s theology in the twenty-first century. Intersectionality here thus functions as a theory and a method; it is a theory about how and why things are, and it is a way to proceed in doing theology. The six concepts are: social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice. Briefly described, social inequality is understood as the result of intersecting aspects of identity and their relationship to systems of power and oppression. Power is something that is made visible by intersectionality, understood as the result of multiple factors, and experienced at various levels from the personal to the structural. Relationality captures the simultaneity of co-existent truths as well as identities; it is the “both/and” feature of intersectionality that highlights interconnections among divergent facets of identity and their avenues to and from power. Social context is continually named and analyzed as contributing to and often defining access to power and reinforcing inequality. Complexity is a theme running through each of these concepts, while intersectionality itself is defined by complexity it is also a tool used to analyze it. Finally, social justice is viewed as a telos, a goal toward which this theory and method move for those who employ it in criticizing the status quo. (Collins and Bilge 2016, pp. 25–30).

Several of these concepts have particular resonance with Luther’s theology, and I argue that this is why those areas of his work continue to be rich avenues of engagement with contemporary feminist theology. In addition, several of these concepts serve as analytical tools that highlight particular limitations and failings of Luther’s work for intersectional feminist theology today.

3. Social Inequality

Martin Luther paid close attention to the way that the church and society around him valued the life and work of some people more than others. He argued against this vehemently, saying that “it is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate.” (Luther [1520] 2015, p. 381). In arguing that all are equally called by God, he transformed the notion of vocation. In the worldview he challenged, the spiritual realm was valued above all else, and work that was associated with it was imbued with God’s blessing. This was the work of the church and its leaders. By contrast, anything associated with the temporal was of little consequence, including the farmer or artisan or parent and the work that they carried out every day. Luther railed against this form of social inequality because he believed it misrepresented a spiritual equality that preceded and transcended all. Without advocating the elimination of social and political hierarchies altogether, he directly challenged any way in which the church maintained power for itself at the expense of others spiritual value.

The concept of intersectionality focuses our attention on social inequalities in order to discern their origins and work toward their eradication. It “encourages understandings of social inequality based on interactions among various categories.” (Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 26). In addition, intersectionality encourages an approach wherein one does “not merely describe the world but . . . take[s] a stand.” (Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 40). Noticing and analyzing social inequality can be and is done by many people, including scholars. What distinguishes intersectionality as a theory and method is its attitude toward social inequality, namely that it is wrong-relation in the world.

Luther’s argument for a priesthood of all believers emerges in response as his challenge to the status quo, claiming that “all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office.” (Luther [1520] 2015, p. 381). There is a theological root to this claim, namely his reclamation of justification by grace through faith in Christ. Because of the power of God’s grace, all Christians were justified, restored to right relation with God, and spiritually equal. “It follows,” he concludes, “that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake

of status.” (Luther [1520] 2015, p. 383). It was not just clergy and church leaders, all people were called to live lives and do work in service to God. The egalitarian impulse of this vocational sense lingers today. Luther saw very clearly the inequalities being perpetrated by the institutional church in his time and argued that it was fundamentally wrong to continue such a stratified view of a person’s worth and the value of their work.

4. Social Context

Our contemporary understanding of social context and its role in theology was largely unavailable to Martin Luther. This is one place where we are afforded a tool to criticize and reject a significant aspect of his work: his writings on the Jews. As Brooks Schramm points out, “Luther takes his place alongside that legion of Christian thinkers and leaders—both before and after him—that forcefully advocated and participated in the expulsion or deportation of Jews.” (Schramm and Stjerna 2012, p. 4). Of course, criticism of this aspect of Luther’s theology and biblical interpretation does not require intersectionality, as basic analysis attentive to the integrity of Jewish scripture and beliefs and the fundamental humanity of Jews themselves allows any scholar to identify these tragic flaws. In keeping with this article’s argument, however, we can see an example of how intersectionality offers a particular resource for this critique.

Ideas, institutions, and identities always and only have meaning within particular historical and social contexts and taking that into account is essential for intersectional analysis. “Social context matters in how people use identity to create space for personal freedom.” (Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 125). It is because of his context that Luther could perpetuate bias against the Jews and remain largely unchallenged. He created space for Christian freedom while foreclosing the possibility of others’ freedoms. Context enables beliefs and actions to take hold. This is in part because recognizing “the particular constellations of power relations . . . in their specific social contexts” requires recognizing the shifting nature of institutions and the power that they make available to some and not to others. (Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 92). In the sixteenth century, and arguably true today in many contexts, Luther and other Christians had power that was not available to those who were not Christian. Noting the relevance of social context means admitting that there are realities beyond oneself and beyond one’s control that affect possibilities, decisions, and consequences. Luther’s world was in many ways defined by antisemitism, and his theological work and biblical interpretation reflected that as well as enhanced it.

With new resources and new translations and leadership of scholars like Kirsi Stjerna, Brooks Schramm, and Thomas Kaufman, we can see now that Luther’s theology never had room for Jews to continue existing as Jews. His call for their correction and removal, and his profound disregard for their integrity as persons and for their religion as a tradition, does not just show up late in his life as the ravings of a cranky and ill old man. They are woven in from the earliest essays: “For this promise of God does not lie: the promise was made to Abraham and to his seed, not for one year or for a thousand years, but ‘for the ages,’ that is, from one generation to another, without end.” (Luther [1521] 1956, p. 354). The Jews’ ongoing refusal to accept that Jesus was the messiah and the fulfillment of God’s word was, to him, ongoing rejection of God. When this refusal was based on Jewish interpretation of their own sacred texts, the very ones Luther insisted proved that Jesus was the promised deliverer of the Jews, the reformer was outraged. Ultimately, history reveals that the Nazis who come centuries later are lamentably able to infer support for their agenda from his writings. This reveals some tragic logical consequences of his beliefs about Jews all along. Luther ultimately decided that the Jew had ceased to be his neighbor. He believed intensely that after 1500 years of rejecting the messiah they were accusing God of lying and challenging the foundation of all that he held most dear. He thought that they misunderstood their own sacred texts, they concealed the fact of their own deceptions, and this vexed him. Their rejection of God was, for him, an ultimately unforgivable offense. Luther’s social context only served to reinforce this view.

In the afterword to their book, Schramm and Stjerna put it this way:

“Martin Luther never danced at a Jewish wedding. He never broke bread at Passover. He never shared a cup of Sabbath wine. He never studied Torah with a rabbi. He never held in his arms a newly circumcised Jewish boy. He never saw the anguish of expelled Jewish families vandalized at the hands of an irate Christian mob. He never smelled the smoke of burning Jewish martyrs.” (Schramm and Stjerna 2012, p. 203).

Because this is how dehumanization works, after all. You can much more easily demonize a whole category of “other” when you do not know one of them in the flesh and soul of an authentic human life. Luther could not and did not account for the way in which his own social context and relationships—and lack thereof—influenced his readings of sacred texts and his theological claims. Our ability to do so empowers us to critique and repudiate this part of his work explicitly.

Luther uses his own identity and worldview to create personal freedom for himself and those who share his beliefs. He also did not think critically about the power his social context afforded him as an educated Christian male university professor and pastor. Though our conceptions of power and freedom are decidedly shaped by the Enlightenment that had not yet swept Europe, we know that Luther was keenly aware of power structures when criticizing the church and its leaders, and when advocating for the freedom of a Christian. He simply failed to apply such an analytical frame to himself and his own work.

5. Power

As the discussion about the priesthood of all believers already makes plain, Luther was keenly interested in how the church claimed and exercised power. This included social and political power, and it definitely included power over the sacraments. Intersectionality continually draws our attention to noticing who has power, from where power flows, and those places where access to power is blocked.

Collins and Bilge note that “intersectional frameworks understand power relations through a lens of mutual construction. In other words, people’s lives and identities are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways.” (Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 26). Among other things, this means that every person stands at a literal intersection where power flows in and out from various directions. Some aspects of one’s identity and experience offer connection to power, like white skin in a white racist society, while others impose barriers, like a female body in a patriarchal culture. A person can choose to trade on one aspect at the expense of another. At its most fundamental level, intersectionality makes power and lack of access to it visible precisely when dominant structures and institutions would prefer that it remain invisible so that the status quo could perpetuate its control.

The kind of power about which Luther was primarily concerned was that which flowed from God and was experienced through the means of grace, the sacraments. In his 1520 treatise on “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” he arrives at the titular metaphor after considering the ways that the church, through its priests, bishops, and pope, was limiting access to power by limiting access to the sacraments. So great was the offense that he likened it to the ancient exile of Israel in Babylon: “By them we have been carried away out of our own land, as into a Babylonian captivity, and despoiled of all our precious possessions. This has been the fate of the mass; it has been converted by the teaching of godless men into a good work.” (Luther [1520] 2016, p. 49). The analogy is powerful: to be exiled from one’s own home, kidnapped against one’s will, forcibly removed from one’s family, this is how Luther viewed being denied full access to the means of grace that he understood the sacraments to be. He says that “they [the pope and bishops] presume themselves to be all-powerful with God” and that they are “inventing the lie” about the mass and other sacraments. (Luther [1520] 2016, p. 49). They were abusing their power and blocking other people’s access to it. Real power, indeed the only power that matters for Luther, flows from God. God is the one who acts and confers grace in the eucharist and in baptism. The church and the priest cannot control this, and any claims to do so are dangerous. This is why, for example, he maintains that “a wicked priest may baptize” and why the baptism of infants continues to be permissible, because it is not the priest or even the baptized who does something to make grace happen, it is God who freely bestows grace upon the world.

For him, this was one of the gravest offenses possible because grace was the freely given abundant gift that liberated Christians from the anxiety and obligation to do and say the right things in order to merit salvation. Recapturing this understanding of grace from the gospel transformed Luther personally and empowered his theological Reformation. He challenged anyone who tried to control access to something that was freely given by God. At the same time, he was relatively unable to see his own power-position, living as he did an excommunicated priest, relegated to the margins of the Roman Catholic Church, an institution that shaped and formed his life. Here again, concepts from intersectionality along with the benefits of hindsight help us understand that Luther was also a person of enormous power himself, the leader of a movement that eventually reformed the global Christian community.

6. Relationality and Complexity

Luther's theological anthropology is one place where relationality and complexity are evident. He routinely speaks of the Christian as existing at the intersection of four relational directions. (Riswold 2006, 2009). Primarily, the human exists in relationship with God, *coram Deo*. This means that a person owes their existence and life to God as creator and sustainer. The human also exists in relationship with other people, *coram hominibus*, a key aspect of his claims about freedom. In addition, this relationship among humans takes place in relationship to the world itself, *coram mundo*. This is the physical and cultural context that informs such relations among humans as well as the God-human relationship. Finally, and throughout all of this, a human person exists in relationship with herself, *coram meipso*. There is an interiority to human life in relationship with God and others in the world that provides important room for discussion about spirituality, vocation, and personal character. These four relational elements of human life for Luther contextualize many of his theological concepts and remain effective connection points to twenty-first-century feminist theology insofar as they capture the complexity of relationality.

A key feature of intersectionality is relationality. "Relational thinking rejects *either/or* binary thinking. . . . Instead, relationality embraces a *both/and* frame. The focus of relationality shifts from analyzing what distinguishes entities . . . to examining their interconnections." (Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 27). Because this is intertwined with social context and power as previously discussed, Collins and Bilge note that this introduces a continual theme of complexity that makes intersectionality dynamic and fluid as well as always a bit untidy. (Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 29). The features of relationality and complexity actually provide a more realistic assessment and analysis of identity and social relations than other theories, precisely because they account for the organic nature of human life.

There are several particular theological concepts where we see this play out in Luther's work, including his continuous assertion that a human being is saint and sinner, free and bound, and that God is hidden and revealed. As discussed previously, Luther reclaimed the Pauline insistence that justification comes by the grace of God alone and is received by the Christian in faith alone. What this did not mean was that sin ceased to have a hold on a person's life. A person was, in fact, saint and sinner at the same time. Luther knew this was a point of confusion for those who could not embrace such complexity: "The adversaries do not want to admit this. Therefore they laugh when we say that faith justifies and yet sin remains." This was possible for him because "to justify . . . means to infuse new qualities." (Luther [1536] 1960, p. 167). Through grace, righteousness was added to the individual and though sin remained, the condemnatory effects of it were removed. Righteousness existed for the person *coram Deo*, in relationship with God, while sin bound the human will and infected human life. To accept this, Luther knew, required the ability to accept two apparently contradictory things, namely that the Christian was *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously justified and sinner.

This was not the only complexity where the relationship between two seemingly opposed things define what it means to be human. When speaking of the Christian as both free and bound, Luther puts it this way: "A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything. A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all." (Luther [1520] 2008, p. 50). These two contradictory things

are both true because of the ontology that he goes on to explain in his 1520 essay. As regards the inner, spiritual person, freedom rules as a gift from a gracious God. As regards the outer, physical person, complete attention can be given to the neighbor because a Christian no longer has to worry about doing enough to merit grace and salvation. Her own needs are taken care of and so she is freed to serve her neighbor. It is through the relationship with God that freedom and power are conferred upon the individual, and then she is freed and invited to use that power on behalf of the good of the neighbor. While Luther certainly did not think about structural inequalities in the way we can today, his framework here gives us another way to call on those who have privilege to use it on behalf of the good of others.

One final concept where Luther's work reflects relationality and complexity is in his understanding of God as both hidden and revealed. In *The Heidelberg Disputation*, he argues that "because human beings misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering" and a theologian of the cross is one who comprehends this (Luther [1518] 2015, p. 99). For Luther, the scandal of the cross reveals this paradoxical and complex nature of God. It is the event where we find life in death, freedom in bondage, and divine in human. A theologian of glory fails to recognize the confounding paradox embedded in all of this and believes himself to be secure in his knowledge of God. Luther argued that "a theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is," because he understood that we human beings are uniquely capable of deluding ourselves that things are as we would expect or wish them to be, rather than what they actually are. (Luther [1518] 2015, p. 99). Luther also challenges claims to human wisdom when he says, "that wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by human beings is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened." (Luther [1518] 2015, p. 100). One who is "puffed up, blinded, and hardened" is unable to be surprised by grace and humbled at the cross or the tomb. The complexity of human knowledge about God is encapsulated in this idea of the divine as both hidden and revealed, each in unexpected places that challenge our claims to wisdom in the first place.

7. Social Justice

Luther's theology has a bias toward right-relations with God, self, and neighbor. When read with an eye toward his intentions, focus, and goals, this is evident in the many points sketched above. Though he would not and did not use the word justice, his teleology captures this element insofar as justice can be understood as right-relationship with others. Right-relationship includes things like attending to the needs of others in a mutual web of service. And, like most work toward social justice, his does not ultimately or completely succeed. He was unable to wield his own power for the benefit of all—including the Jews and others whose lives and beliefs he disregarded. Nevertheless, his understanding of the gospel promise of new life in Christ as a grace-filled, unearned gift from God shapes a theology seeking deeper and more authentic relationships with God, self, and the neighbor. If these relationships really existed in a web of mutual service, attention, and accountability, we might say that looks like justice.

The telos of intersectionality is its bias toward social justice. In applying this to theology, Kim and Shaw note that intersectionality "calls us to prioritize the margins and ensure our theologizing moves us toward a more just world by disrupting dominant paradigms and destabilizing structures of power while envisioning a way forward toward God's reign of peace." (Kim and Shaw 2018, p. 45). There is a goal toward which this analysis moves, and Vivian May points out that this focus on social justice can be used as a critique against those who may claim to be using other facets of intersectionality's methods and theories toward aims that actually preserve unjust structures (May 2015). This both/and of intersectionality itself can be applied to Luther's work once more, to see how his theology has a telos of right-relations, criticizing and disrupting some dominant paradigms, while at the same time it serves to strengthen some persistent wrong-relations of dominance and subversion.

Here is where twenty-first feminist theology may succeed where Luther fell short. We can draw on points of resonance with intersectionality to see what can best be drawn from a sixteenth-century white

male Christian university-educated pastor, professor, and preacher. His work changed the social and theological world in some good ways and for some good reasons. There are core truths in his analysis of power, his understanding of the complexity and relationality inherent in human being, and his telos of right-relations with God, self, and neighbor. As does each of us and each generation, however, he committed some tragic errors and we are better equipped not only to not commit those errors, but to learn how and why we must do differently: we are compelled to be completely attentive to the needs of our religiously marginalized neighbors, to take risks for the sake of those most vulnerable in our society, and to understand how to extend the power that flows to us for the benefit of those to whom it is blocked.

Funding: His research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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