

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 139: OCTOBER 5, 2017



**CHRISTINE HELMER** is professor of German and religious studies at Northwestern University and the 2017-2018 Corcoran Visiting Chair in Christian-Jewish Relations at the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College. This interview was conducted by Boisi Center associate director Erik Owens and Boisi Center graduate research assistant Jack Nuelle after Professor Helmer's October 5th lunch colloquium entitled: "Luther in America." It has been edited for length, clarity and content.

**OWENS:** We're marking the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses. What is the legacy of Martin Luther among mainstream thinkers in Germany and in the United States?

**HELMER:** The history of German theology is the history of scholarship on Luther. Or in other words, the development of German theology over the past five hundred years is closely intertwined with an ongoing reception of Luther. Theological texts from the age of confessionalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth century all cite Luther as major authority for doctrinal positions. The Pietists of the eighteenth century were interested in the mystical Luther. In his *Philosophy of History*, the early nineteenth century philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel looked to Luther as the innovator of the western concept of freedom. Finally the movement of Protestant theology that took place at the turn of the twentieth century in Germany and then in the Nordic countries, known as the Luther Renaissance from which dialectical theology originated, focused on Luther's biography and doctrine of justification, this in connection with the burgeoning of the new sciences of economics, sociology, and the history of religions. This history demonstrates an ongoing robust engagement with Luther; and in this history,

various portraits and images represent Luther in different ways.

For example, Johann Arndt at the origins of Pietism appropriated the mystical Luther, thereby connecting Luther with late medieval mystical authors such as Tauler and Gerson. This picture of Luther contrast with that of many contemporary



German Luther scholars who would say there is no mysticism in Luther. According to this line of thinking, Luther's theology of the word contradicts any type of "interiority" associated with mysticism. Another example of the appropriation of Luther is the "death of God" theology of the 1960s and 1970s. This theological direction made productive use of Hegel's motif of the "death of God," the double negation represented by Christ's cross at the center of speculation theology: Luther of course is Hegel's inspiration; Luther thought that Christ's death "swallowed up" death. The commemoration of

Luther's reformation in 2017 is based on the picture of Luther constructed by the Luther Renaissance of one hundred years ago. Luther's biography became a subject of study at this time; this year an incredible number of Luther biographies were published. This history of Luther scholarship thus demonstrates contradictions and continuities, all showing how Luther continues to be productive for theology and philosophy.

**OWENS:** Let's expand on the Luther Renaissance briefly and then move to the American context. Why and when did this Renaissance occur?

**HELMER:** The centenaries of the Ninety-Five Theses have been celebrated over the past five hundred years. But we see a new development in German academia between the fourth anniversary of Luther's birth in 1883 and the fourth centenary of the Reformation in 1917 that places the study of Luther's biography and primarily his conversion experience at the center of scholarly and popular interest. The categories and methods that are being used today in Protestant theology are, to a large extent, due to developments that took place in the early twentieth century in Germany.

This period was one of extraordinary development in the academy. The University of Berlin had become the center for the

emergence of new academic disciplines, such as ethnomusicology and anthropology. We see Max Weber interested in correlating the new disciplines of the history of religion and economics. Georg Simmel was instrumental for inventing the discipline of sociology. We also see Lutheran theologians, like Rudolf Otto, who are interested in extending their studies of Luther into the comparative study of religion. Many fascinating innovations took shape at this time, and Luther scholars were part of these discussions and innovations.

In 1883, the four hundredth centenary of Luther's birthday, Luther scholars began to be interested in Luther as a historical figure rather than as a systematic theologian. It is during this time that the picture of Luther who converted from monasticism to family man, from Catholic to Protestant (and then became crankier with age) became popular. This biography focused on conversion became the conceptual framing for how Luther's ideas were to be interpreted. Furthermore, Luther's biography became central to the way in which the history of the west was periodized. We see this connection in Weber's book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* from 1904/05. Weber's account of modernity begins with a look at Luther's connection to the Middle Ages and then to modernity. In Weber's view, Luther was a transitional figure, representing traditional capitalism, yet presaging modern capitalism with this theological idea of vocation.

**OWENS:** It's hard to underestimate his influence in European thought. This is incredible to hear a reminder of the rootedness of Luther in so many other disciplines. How does the American reception of Luther differ, not just in the past 100 years, but in the contemporary context here? What have Americans seen differently in Luther's work, his life, than Germans typically have?

**HELMER:** There are three ways I think American scholars of Luther have contributed new perspectives that do not

duplicate Luther scholarship in Germany. It must be mentioned that the Finnish contributions to Luther scholarship over the past two decades are very important to Luther scholarship in America. Finnish historical theologians, specifically Risto Saarinen and Pekka Kärkäinen emphasize the continuity between Luther in the Middle Ages. This emphasis on continuity differs from the dominant tenor in German scholarship that continues to insist on Luther's break with the

---

**“Christian theologians must take seriously the anti-Judaism that is central to its theology and history.”**

---

Middle Ages. I emphasize: Finland is a small country, but it is very powerful in terms of its influence on global Luther scholarship.

The first strand in American contributions to Luther scholarship is in close conversation with the Finnish theologians (and two theologians in Germany, namely Theodor Dieter and Volker Leppin). This scholarly direction has the “Catholic Luther” as its object of study. In America this direction is to a large extent due to the work of George Lindbeck, who was invited as Protestant observer to Vatican II. I remember him saying that this was one of the most transformative experiences of his life. Lindbeck was himself a trained medieval theologian; he had worked on Pierre D'Ailly, one of the main medieval thinkers with whom Luther was in conversation.

Lindbeck developed the theological model of doctrine that was applied to the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues leading to the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification on October

31, 1999. Lindbeck's influence on contemporary ecumenism is enormous. His ecumenical proposal was in part motivated by his recognition that Luther was a theologian connected more to medieval theologians than to modern thinkers. I was inspired by Lindbeck's position regarding Luther's medieval Catholic inheritance for my own work, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, which was very recently published as a revised second edition by Lexham Press. In that work, I demonstrate how Luther developed a robust understanding of the Trinity in eternity in discussion with medieval theologians, notably William of Ockham. Luther's work on doctrine furthered medieval discussion, and did not break abruptly with it. I have two doctoral students—one who finished a dissertation on Luther's ethics in the Antinomian Disputations from 1537-1540, another who is finishing a dissertation on Luther's two Christology disputations from 1539 and 1540. Both Candace Kohli and Aaron Moldenhauer have demonstrated that Luther's theology is to be seen in continuity with medieval sources. The work of studying Luther as late medieval theologian is difficult for someone trained in a Protestant seminary. Most Protestant seminaries do not have medieval philosophers on the faculty, let alone theologians who are familiar with doctrine in the Middle Ages. It is my hope for the future of Protestant theology and Luther scholarship that medieval philosophers and scholars of early modernism would mutually inform each other's work.

A second distinctive American contribution to Luther studies is feminist scholarship on Luther. Particularly significant in this regard is the feminist critique of the Lutheran category of law and gospel as abusive. American Lutherans inherited the law/gospel dialectic from Werner Elert and other German theologians working in the 1950s. In a recent essay published in a volume I co-edited, *Lutherrenaissance: Past and Present*, American theologian Marit Trelstad

powerfully shows how the law/gospel dynamic represents an abusive rhetoric that has been imposed onto the doctrine of God. Feminist constructive theologians have recovered other aspects to Luther's thought, specifically his epistemology, in order to both correct the abusive connections in standard interpretations of Luther and offer spiritually healthy depictions of Luther's thoughts on divine compassion for those who are suffering. How can women's ways of knowing add to and complement the traditional ways in which doctrines have been seen and articulated? Unfortunately feminist contributions are still marginalized in Lutheran scholarly circles. Theology is ultimately a patriarchal discipline, and women are silenced in many different ways in theology, particularly in Luther scholarship. It is my hope for the future of theology that feminist scholarship be acknowledged by male theologians as significant, and as such, be taken seriously as integral to the discipline.

The third contribution is the ways in which American historians have looked at the cooption of Luther by German Lutheran theologians in the Third Reich. Many of the Lutheran theologians in this era were affiliated to varying degrees with National Socialist politics—like Emanuel Hirsch, Werner Elert, or Paul Althaus. It has been American and Canadian historians, specifically Susannah Heschel and James M. Stayer, who have done necessary and important work on the connections between the alliance of Luther scholarship and Lutheran theologians to National Socialism.

**OWENS:** On that last point, it's a complicated process to retrieve a Luther that isn't anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish. Could you speak a bit about how that retrieval works in the cutting-edge scholarship that you're thinking about? What might the upshot be for the influence of Luther on contemporary theological constructive work?



**HELMER:** There has been a disconcerting silence since the Second World War on Luther's anti-Judaism and his cooption for modern anti-Semitism. These two aspects—his sixteenth-century anti-Judaism and the use of Luther to promote racist politics of Nazi Germany—are, I think, two parts of the same phenomenon. Thus scholarly work in one area can inform the second area and vice versa. Historians such as Heschel and Stayer are leading the way in studying the collusion between Lutheran theologians and Nazi Germany. Recently some Lutheran scholars have begun to actively study Luther's anti-Judaism. While this topic remained marginal in Luther scholarship even up to about a decade ago, scholars have begun to take more and more seriously the centrality of anti-Judaism to Luther's theology. The common view in this regard is that Luther wrote five texts that explicitly addressed his position on Jews. Yet scholars are beginning to realize that Luther's anti-Jewish sentiments and claims cannot be isolated in distinct texts. Luther's entire corpus is permeated by a constant debate with, and antipathy against, Jews.

This insight informs an incredible anthology that was published in 2012 by two American Lutheran theologians, Kirsi Stjerna and Brooks Schramm. Stjerna and Schramm compiled a chronological

anthology of various excerpts from 1513 to 1546, spanning Luther's entire career. What is striking as you read is that anti-Judaism is present in each text, from his earliest commentary on the Psalms to the sermons he delivered just days before he died. Some of the last words Luther spoke on this earth are vitriol against Jews.

This anthology challenges Luther scholars to look at Luther's entire corpus as an expression of anti-Judaism. It asks really hard questions about what it means to articulate Christian doctrine, particularly the Trinity and Christology, which Luther does in his biblical commentary in ongoing polemic against rabbinic interpretation. What does it mean for Christian theologians to look at Luther as a test case for Christian anti-Judaism running right through the very center of his theology rather than isolating it in a few texts?

The implications of looking at Luther as a test case for Christian anti-Judaism are huge for reconceptualizing Christian theology and the teaching of Christian theology in connection to, and in conversation with, Christian-Jewish relations.

**NUELLE:** How do we take his specific theological concepts and separate them from that anti-Judaism?

**HELMER:** When I first looked at Luther's interpretation of the Trinity in his later works, particularly from 1543, I studied those works for his articulation of Trinitarian doctrine. One of these texts, *On the Last Words of David*, is considered to be one among four of Luther's late anti-Jewish treatises. When I worked on this specific text, which is an interpretation of a passage in 2 Samuel, I bracketed out the anti-Jewish polemic. My goal was to demonstrate a speculative dimension to Luther's Trinitarian theology, a topic that itself was controversial enough in Luther scholarship that considered Luther to have rejected any speculation of God in eternity in favor of a theology of the cross.

I would not interpret this 1543 text in the same way today. Luther was trained in the medieval genre of disputation. His entire thought is structured by the opposition between two players in the disputation, the opponent and the respondent. Carrying on a polemic against the other is constitutive of the way Luther thinks. Thus I think that any work on Luther's core doctrine—particularly Trinity, Christology and justification—require an account of how and why he articulates particular doctrines in ongoing polemic against Judaism. Luther's anti-Judaism, I reiterate, is central and not marginal to his theology. Thus any scholarship on Luther going forward must take seriously this polemic as constitutive of the way he develops a doctrinal claim.

The implications of this approach to Luther are indeed significant for Christian theology. There is a running polemic against Jews that accompanies the history of Christian theology. As the main editor of Christianity for *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, I see this in every article submitted in my area. Every single article from the medieval period on biblical interpretation includes at some point a polemic against Judaism. Christian theologians construct Jews as their "other," their biblical interpretations in opposition to Jews. This fact demands serious reflection and historical analysis. Christian theologians must take seri-

ously the anti-Judaism that is central to its theology and history. I hope that as Christian theologians imagine new ways to teach their discipline that they include Christian-Jewish relations as central. This can be done in two ways; first as historical analysis of the past as in, for example, the study of Luther's anti-Judaism; and second the construction of theology for the present that promotes both a correct understanding of Judaism on its own terms and a peaceful recognition of Judaism as a religion that, like Christianity, represents a unique perspective of the living God.

---

**“Luther scholarship is no longer dictated by what is going on in Germany; in fact innovative and historically careful Luther scholarship is done outside of Germany.”**

---

**OWENS:** On what you termed “the Catholic Luther”, you published a seminal work called *The Trinity and Martin Luther*. Tell us how that came about, that there's a 20-year gap between this, and what does that say about the state of Catholic scholarship on Luther?

**HELMER:** It is wonderful that a few weeks ago Lexham Press republished my *Trinity and Martin Luther*, first published in Germany in 1999. This shows that the book continues to be read as representative of a direction in scholarship that I think situates Luther in new scholarly configurations. I could not have written the book without the assistance of Marilyn McCord Adams. As a medieval philosopher and expert on Ockham, she worked with me on reconstructing medieval debates informing Luther's works, particularly his later disputations. I remain convinced that we cannot in-

terpret Luther accurately without deeper knowledge of medieval philosophy and theology. I am hopeful that the republication of *The Trinity and Martin Luther* will reach a wider audience in America and inspire younger scholars interested in Luther to brush up on their Latin and medieval philosophy in order to continue the work of retrieving the late medieval Catholic Luther.

There are important contemporary thinkers with whom I am in conversation about this project. Graham White, whose 1994 work *Luther as Nominalist* continues to be a standard in the field, is one important conversation partner. I mentioned Risto Saarinen and Pekka Kärkäinen in Finland, David Luy in America is also a remarkable scholar. But for the most part, there is a lot of work that still needs to be done, many dissertations that can still be written, on Luther and his medieval inheritances.

On the other hand, medieval philosophers have only over the last twenty years come to appreciate that theology is actually an important part of medieval philosophy. The discipline of philosophical theology and philosophical interest in Christian doctrine, such as Trinity, Christology, Eucharist, have flourished largely due to the work of Marilyn McCord Adams and her two-volume Ockham book. If Luther scholars begin to become more familiar with medieval philosophy, and if medieval philosophers begin to move their research projects into the early sixteenth century, then I think new and exciting conversations can take place.

When I look back at the way I developed my ideas on Luther's medieval and speculative doctrine of the Trinity, I am still convinced I was right about my interpretation. I might work them out a bit differently, perhaps in with more detail vis-à-vis Gabriel Biel and medieval logical and metaphysical categories. But twenty years ago, the field was very different, both the state of Luther scholarship and medieval philosophy. Furthermore what it meant to be acknowledged as a Luther scholar twenty years ago is different

from today. Then, being recognized in the German-speaking context was a definite must. Today, this is not the case. Luther scholarship is no longer dictated by what is going on in Germany; in fact innovative and historically careful Luther scholarship is done outside of Germany. My rather German syntax in *The Trinity and Martin Luther* thus betrays the world in which Luther scholarship took place twenty years ago. Today thankfully, Luther has gone “global.”


[END]





Visit [bc.edu/boisi-resources](http://bc.edu/boisi-resources) for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life  
Boston College  
24 Quincy Road  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467  
tel 617-552-1860  
fax 617-552-1863  
[boisi.center@bc.edu](mailto:boisi.center@bc.edu)

 [boisicenter](https://www.facebook.com/boisicenter)  
 [@boisi\\_center](https://twitter.com/boisi_center)