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CATHOLIC REFORMATION RESEARCH IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract

The Catholic view of Martin Luther had been marked by polemics for centuries. Approaches to a re-evaluation are only apparent in the 20th century. They are connected with a discovery of Luther's renewal of the Church by Catholic theologians. A milestone was the study by Joseph Lortz on "The Reformation in Germany" (1939). 1961 controversy triggered, when Erwin Iserloh deconstructed the myth of the fixing of the 95 theses. In the 1970s and 1980s, research focused on the development of religious denominations in the 16th century that led to different forms of life and religious cultures. Today Luther is seen and evaluated in ecumenical perspective in his spiritual dimension. The beginnings of the Reformation are therefore important landmarks for a theological view of Luther and his fundamental concerns, which are common to the Catholic and Protestant Churches.

Keywords: Benedict XVI, Confessionalization, Ernst Walter Zeeden, Erwin Iserloh, Heinrich Denifle, Joseph Lortz, Martin Luther, Reformation

Martin Luther and the Reformation of the 16th century were always topics of historical and theological analysis by Catholic researchers. Johannes Cochlaeus was the first to publish a Luther biography in

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1549. It was source-based, but full of polemics. Luther is characterized by seven names: “The doctor and Martinus talked gently and credibly, the Wormser was already worse. ‘The third stage of development ... is the Ecclesiast, which has broken all the bridges behind him.’ Then followed the furious Enthusiast and finally Barrabas, who calls for burning and killing. ‘The last stage of the development was Luther as a visitator. As such he practised the most sharp criticism to the former development.’”¹ It was a long way to the statement by the Church Historian Peter Manns (Mainz), in the context of the 500th birthday that Martin Luther was also a “father in faith” for Catholics. The development to such a classification in the 20th century and today’s assessment is the subject of the following remarks.

1. Polemic since the 16th Century: Heinrich Denifle

In 1903, a book entitled *Luther and Lutheranism in the First Development, Sourcebook* appeared in two volumes. The author was Heinrich Suso Denifle. Born in 1844 in Tyrol, he joined the Dominicans in 1861 and was ordained priest in 1866. In his teaching activities in Rome and Marseille, he attracted attention by his Tyrolean ruthlessness. Denifle became a sub-archivist at the Vatican Archives and found the material for his Luther biography there as well as in other European archives.

Denifle examined Luther’s relationship with the church fathers and scholasticism, and could name a religious-intellectual development without assuming a break in his personality. He turned against Luther’s self-declaration, that as monk he had lived his life of fasting, waking, and praying, and described him as a religious and professor, who had been entrusted with many tasks. Denifle was able to prove that the conception of the justification by God “is nothing more than the ancient doctrine of the church applied by Luther.”²

The person of Luther was, of course, represented by Denifle in the old polemics. Hubert Jedin even saw in Denifle’s work “a moral and

¹ Benedikt Peter, “Johannes Cochläus. Ein Beitrag zur Theologie der Reformationszeit,” *Archiv für schlesische Kirchengeschichte* 58 (2000) 186-187. The quotations are taken from Remigius Bäumer, “Johannes Cochläus (1479-1552),” in Erwin Iserloh, ed., *Katholische Theologen der Reformationszeit I* (Katholisches Leben und Kirchenreform, Vol. 44), Münster: Aschendorf, 1984, 73-81.

²Otto Weiss, “Das Luther-Bild von Heinrich Suso Denifle,” in Mariano Delgado / Volker Leppin, ed., *Luther: Zankapfel zwischen den Konfessionen und “Vater im Glauben”?* *Historische, systematische und ökumenische Zugänge* (Studien zur christlichen Religions- und Kulturgeschichte, Vol. 21), Fribourg: Academic Press, 2016, 373.

scientific execution” of Luther.³ Denifle did not see Luther’s “revolution” in genuinely theological and spiritual development, but in the inability to hold the vow of chastity. He had decayed to gluttony and drunkenness. Some quotations:

“We do not come upon a man who deserved the title of a reformer, but to an agitator, a revolutionary, to whom no fallacy was too bold, no cunning too bad, no lie too strong, no slander too great to justify his Apostasy from the Church and its own earlier principles.”⁴

“Luther was, of course, the most powerful, or rather the most violent of the nation, but by no means in the virtues.” And as Luther’s vices the author counts: “Spirit of lying, deceit, malice, dishonesty, hypocrisy, disgust, arrogance, stupidity, hatred, anger, fierce violence, unspeakable malice, all excess of slander, greed, and infidelity to God by breaking his vows.”⁵

So it is precisely the vision of Denifle on Luther’s development, which distorts his image. For he sees in Luther’s later statements lies and treason. On the Protestant side, however, Denifle’s work was rather cautiously received, indeed greeted, by Luther’s quotations of the influences of patristic, scholasticism, and the liturgy.

2. Corpus Catholicorum

Now it was time to study the Reformation age in a more comprehensive context. Since 1834 a series *Corpus Reformatorum* existed, which in 101 volumes made accessible the collected works by Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin and Philipp Melanchthon. 1883 saw the start of the edition of the works of Luther in the Weimar edition (finalised in 2009 after 127 volumes).

In 1915 the Bonn church historian Joseph Greving in the *Theologische Revue* presented the plan of a *Corpus Catholicorum*. It was to be a series in which works of Catholic writers of the Reformation were to be published. In 1917, the Society for the publication of the Corpus Catholicum was founded within the framework of the Goerres Society. To this day 48 source volumes have been edited in the series of the *Corpus Catholicorum*. In addition, the Society has published further series: *Reformation History Studies and Texts* with currently 165 volumes, “Catholic Life and Battling in the Age of

³Hubert Jedin, *Die Erforschung der kirchlichen Reformationsgeschichte seit 1876. Leistungen und Aufgaben der deutschen Katholiken* (Katholisches Leben und Kämpfen im Zeitalter der Glaubensspaltung, Vol. 5), Münster: Aschendorf, 1931, 22.

⁴Heinrich Denifle, *Luther und Luthertum in der ersten Entwicklung, quellenmäßig dargestellt*, Mainz: F. Kirchheim, 1903, 298.

⁵Denifle, *Luther und Luthertum in der ersten Entwicklung*, 845.

Separation of Faith” – since 1966 the term “battling” has been replaced by “church reform,” with now 76 volumes, as well as a series *Pre-Reformation-Historical Research*, completed in 1976 after 17 volumes.

In the *Corpus Catholicum*, the Catholic historians of the Reformation published, for example, Joseph Greving, Albert Ehrhard, Joseph Lortz, Erwin Iserloh, and Peter Walter.

3. The Reformation Book by Joseph Lortz

Other Luther biographies after Denifle are briefly mentioned. The Jesuit Hartmann Grisar (1845-1932) wrote a three-volume biography with the simple title “Luther” in 1911-1912. Further books from his pen address the media revolution of the 16th century (*Luther’s Battle Images* in four volumes) and the nationalization of the reformer (*The German Luther in the World War and in the Present*, 1924). With the transformations of the Lutheran Catholic image since Cochlaeus, Paderborn’s church historian Adolf Herte (1887-1970), who had to leave in 1945 the academy for his sympathy for the national socialism, was engaged.

The greatest aftermath had the study by Joseph Lortz, published at the beginning of the Second World War, about “The Reformation in Germany,” which wanted to offer “an overall conception of the Reformation in Germany, and especially the figure of Martin Luther.”⁶ On seven pages, Lortz characterizes Luther as the “primordial phenomenon of creative individuality and power” (147). This “certainly is the spark into the long accumulated powder, but it is also much more” (147). Lortz tries to grasp the opposite sides in Luther:

However, the peculiar spiritual and emotional disposition of Luther and the transformation of the essence which he permeates, the unbridled impetus of will and affection in love and hatred, the feeling and experience in him, together with the very early self-consciousness and his consciousness of having a mission of the biggest magnitude, the indulging himself in paradoxes with a tangible lack of a theological and conceptual determinateness, the complete concentration of feeling and experience upon the anxiety which now afflicts him, or the new insight which liberates him, and finally the wholly wonderful power of speech in infinite graduation, always penetrates vividly and with the utmost urgency in the ear and soul and often overlaps the reader and listener with elementary force: all this necessarily leads Luther on the one hand to those exaggerated superlatives, of which his work is full to the brim; on the other hand, this facilitates important and profound fluctuations, which proceed to open contradiction (147-148).

⁶Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, Freiburg: Herder, 1983, V.

Lortz would like to understand Luther so that “purified zeal and deepened faith from both confessions begin to see Luther in a more coherent view” (149). That this is not an easy task was due to Luther himself, to his retrospects and self-interpretations. Lortz admires the “sea of forces, of instincts and insights and experiences,” the “visual power of his language, the violence of his pathos,” “the volcanic production” (149). You can pull out what you want from Luther. “It is enormously difficult, however, to evenly review the genius of the genre and to make the truly decisive one out of it, without succumbing to the danger of self-assimilating harmonizing selection” (149-150).

Lortz emphasizes that Luther is a vitalistic person. And so he turns against all attempts to systematize his statements. “Anyone who wants to make Luther a systematic must first make him dry in the retort. And that is precisely the one against which the succulent abundance of Thuringian peasantry’s son is most rightly opposed... the power and vitality of Luther is diminished” (150). His thoughts belong to “the heart, the feeling, the soul” (151).

Thus Lortz also made strong Luther’s proximity to medieval mystics. His formulations are therefore: “subjective, sensitive, eruptive; immediate expression of the internal friction which is now being carried out” (150). His superlatives live from the paradox, and are connected with the “*theologia crucis*,” “a theology in which precisely the contradictory appears as a symptom of truth: the accursed criminal on the shameful stake, abandoned by God is the Son of God” (150).

Joseph Lortz (1887-1975) originated from Luxemburg. In 1929, he was appointed to the State Academy Braunsberg in East Prussia in Warmia. Braunsberg was the only theological faculty, where the majority of professors were in favour of the national socialism. Joseph Lortz also made no secret of his sympathy for the NS. In May 1933 he joined the party. In his *History of the Church in Ideological Perspective* he added a chapter “National Socialism and Church.” He interpreted medieval Christianity from its supposed “Germanic” roots. Both aspects have been omitted in later editions. In 1935 Lortz moved to Münster as successor to Georg Schreiber, a former Reichstag deputy of the Center Party. In 1945, Lortz took over the presidency of the Institute for European History in Mainz in 1950. Lortz was silent about his behaviour during the Nazi period. However, Luther’s assessment shows some parallels to the contemporary mainstream. His eruptive, life-like, experimental attitude made it easy for Lortz to succumb to the vitalism of the NS.

4. "Theses Nailing": Yes or No? Erwin Iserloh

In the first edition of the 1966 edition of the magazine *Der Spiegel*, there was a three-page report on a considerable historical-theological debate. There it says:

Protestants can protest again: A Catholic is trying to convince them that Martin Luther has not taken the hammer with his hand and thus nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg. The Catholic assertion shakes the heroic picture of the Luther, which has been stamped from the pulpit and the cathedral down to generations of confirmands and fellow students. Ever since, all the celebrations and school holidays on the Reformation Day have been devoted to the memorable October 31, 1517, when, so Luther's researcher Heinrich Boehmer, the Augustine monk Martin Luther, at noon just before 12 O'clock ... went from the Black Monastery to the castle church some fifteen minutes away, and there, at the northern entrance door, ... nailed the poster with the ninety-five theses. The cultural historian Egon Friedell even enthused: 'The 95 theses are the first extra edition of the world's history.' For four years now the Catholic church historian Dr. Erwin Iserloh, now professor in Münster, insists that the Extrablatt is a false report. Iserloh: 'The theses nailing did not take place.'⁷

Erwin Iserloh was at this time a professor of church history at the Theological Faculty of Trier. While reading the book by Hans Volk on Luther's theses nailing,⁸ he had noticed inconsistencies. As a result, Iserloh had once again gone through the sources and had found that the nailing on the door of the castle church, which was customary in the university, was only reported several decades later, while Luther himself pointed out his willingness to discuss. In his memoirs, Iserloh writes about his discovery:

It occurred to me that Luther himself, several times directly after the publication of the theses as towards the end of his life, asserted that, before one of his best friends had learned of his disputation intentions, he had sent the theses to the responsible bishops, his Ordinary Bishop Hieronymus Schulz of Brandenburg, and Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg-Mainz, the pontifical commissar of the [St. Peter's] indulgence, with the request that other instructions be given to the indictments of indulgences, and the doctrine of indulgences by the theologians clarified. It was only when the bishops had not answered that he had passed on the theses to learned men. The letter to Archbishop Albrecht is preserved and bears the date, Vigil of All Saints, October 31st. If Luther had nailed his theses at the Schlosskirche at Wittenberg on that day, he would not have given the bishops any time to reply, which he

⁷*Reformator ohne Hammer. Luthers Thesen*, in *Der Spiegel* 20 (1966), Nr. 1, 32–34.

⁸Hans Volz, *Martin Luthers Thesenanschlag und dessen Vorgeschichte*, Weimar: Böhlau, 1959.

repeatedly asserted. He would have lied to the Pope, as well as to his landlord Frederic the Wise, immediately after the event, and would have maintained this fake picture of the events until the end of his life. But if the 'scene' did not take place, it becomes even clearer that Luther was not boldly steering towards a break with the Church, but rather became the reformer without intention. However, the responsible bishops still have greater responsibilities. Because then Luther gave the bishops time to react religiously.

So: retrieval of Luther's honour, but destruction of a legend. Over 50 years have passed since the violent dispute. A note of Luther's pupil, Georg Rörer, discovered a few years ago ("On the eve of the Feast of All Saints in the year of Lord 1517, Dr. Martin Luther nailed theses on the indulgences to the doors of the Wittenberg churches") can still be dated to Luther's lifetime (about 1544) but contradicts Luther's own statements. Volker Leppin, the Tübingen Protestant church historian, therefore comes to the conclusion: "Rörer's memorandum will be important for the emergence of memory culture in the Wittenberg camp, but not for the historical reconstruction of the incident on 31 October 1517."⁹ Leppin himself posted a photograph of the door of the Wittenberg castle church on 15 January 2017 with the comment: "Whatever happened here in 1517, today I have begun this year's round of Wittenberg Sunday lectures: 'Behind the heroic history. New results of Luther research.'"

5. Confession Formation, Confessionalization, Confessional Cultures: Ernst Walter Zeeden

The fact that the controversies of Reformation research are now to be found in the internal Protestant sphere – think of the publications on Luther's inner life, his anti-Judaism, the question of whether Luther is to be seen in continuity with the late Middle Ages or the beginning of modern times – has its reason in understanding the consequences of the Reformation. It is about the formation of confessions and the emergence of confessional cultures.

In a lecture at the congress of German Historians in Ulm in 1956, Ernst Walter Zeeden, whose researches were at the beginning of the debate about the character of the early modern period as a period of confessionalization and social discipline,¹⁰ described the complex process of the post-reformation epoch as follows:

⁹<http://projekte.thulb.uni-jena.de/index.php?id=105>.

¹⁰Cf. Ernst Walter Zeeden, *Die Entstehung der Konfessionen. Grundlagen und Formen der Konfessionsbildung im Zeitalter der Glaubenskämpfe*, München: Oldenbourg, 1965; Ernst Walter Zeeden, *Konfessionsbildung. Studien zur Reformation, Gegenreformation und*

Under the term of confessional formation, therefore, may be understood: the spiritual and organizational consolidation of the different Christian confessions, which had been diverging since the split of faith, a semi-stable church, according to dogma, constitution, and religious and moral form of life. At the same time, it is a way of reaching out into the Christian world of early-modern Europe, a shield against penetration from the outside with the means of diplomacy and politics; but also their formation by forces external of the Church, in particular the power of the state.¹¹

In the decades following the Reformation and the Catholic reply to the Council of Trent, a process of formation of ecclesiastical and religious structures took place in all three Christian denominations. This process is now known as “confessionalization.” It stands in the tradition of a further concept presented by Gerhard Oestreich in 1969. In the age of absolutism, Zeeden observed “a taming and restraint of all activities in the fields of public as well as private life.” This concept was independently carried out by the Protestant Heinz Schilling and the Catholic Wolfgang Reinhard. Both see the processes within confessions in parallel with corresponding governmental processes.

Wolfgang Reinhard characterizes the confessionalization paradigm in some concise theses: “Thesis 1: Parallelism of ‘Reformation’ and ‘Counterreformation’ ... Thesis 2: Methodical Establishment of New Large Groups ... Thesis 3: Confessionalization in the Service of Political Growth.”¹²

In the meantime, there are numerous attempts to define confessionalization. And even though the criticism of this paradigm has now grown, all historians relied on the process of profiling the Christian denominations and the change in culture that had been initiated in the Reformation and post-Reformation era. Confessionalization and nationalization went hand in hand. The “ideal of a thoroughly religiously shaped society”¹³ was combined

Katholischen Reform (Spätmittelalter und Frühe Neuzeit, Vol. 15), Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985.

¹¹Ernst Walter Zeeden, *Konfessionsbildung. Studien zur Reformation, Gegenreformation und Katholischen Reform* (Spätmittelalter und Frühe Neuzeit, Vol. 15), Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985, 69.

¹²Wolfgang Reinhard, “Zwang zur Konfessionalisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters,” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 10 (1983) 268.

¹³Andreas Holzem, *Konfessionelle Kulturen in katholischen Territorien*, in Thomas Kaufmann / Raymund Kottje / Bernd Moeller / Hubert Wolf, ed., *Ökumenische Kirchengeschichte. Band 2: Vom Hochmittelalter bis zur frühen Neuzeit*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2008, 415.

with the general conviction “that for the social reality to exist at all a lasting Christian character is necessary.”¹⁴

Andreas Holzem, a Catholic church historian in Tübingen, demands a closer look: “There is no Reformation and Counter-Reformation. But there are milder and sharper variants of enforcing unconditional beliefs.”¹⁵ And further:

When the Reformation was about to redesign the life of the Christians completely, the worship, the churchmen who were responsible for it, and the seriousness of Christian life in the municipalities, then there are strong indications that this, as a whole, did not proceed faster or more successfully in Protestant territories than in Catholic churches.

As consequence Holzem draws: “That is why when one thinks about confessionalization as a concept, one should speak also about theology and Confession and, of course, about everyday life and lifestyle reform.”¹⁶

6. Benedict XVI in Erfurt, Germany, 2011

500 years of separate or independent confessional development characterize different religious cultures. Since there are different accents in theology, there are accents in ethics and life-style, in prayer and worship, in ecclesiastical structures and offices. All this plays an important role in ecumenical cooperation. It is all the more crucial that the person of Martin Luther is honoured in his spiritual dimension by the Catholic side. I would particularly like to refer to Pope Benedict XVI, who in several places of his pontificate honoured the theological questions of the Reformation period and exemplified them in the person of Luther.

On 31 October 1999, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in Augsburg signed the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” It is stated that the condemnations expressed during the Reformation period are no longer valid. In the meantime the Methodists have joined this declaration. The terminology of the doctrine of justification has largely disappeared from today’s Christian feeling. However, the issue remains current as Pope Benedict XVI said on 12 September 2006 in Regensburg:

The agreement on justification remains an important task, which – in my view – is not yet fully accomplished: in theology justification is an essential theme, but in the life of the faithful today – it seems to me – it

¹⁴Holzem, “Konfessionelle Kulturen in katholischen Territorien,” 415.

¹⁵Andreas Holzem, *Christentum in Deutschland 1550-1850. Konfessionalisierung, Aufklärung, Pluralisierung*, Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2015, 141.

¹⁶Holzem, *Christentum in Deutschland 1550-1850*, 142.

is only dimly present. Because of the dramatic events of our time, the theme of mutual forgiveness is felt with increased urgency, yet there is little perception of our fundamental need of God's forgiveness, of our justification by him. Our modern consciousness – and in some way all of us are 'modern' – is generally no longer aware of the fact that we stand as debtors before God and that sin is a reality which can be overcome only by God's initiative. Behind this weakening of the theme of justification and of the forgiveness of sins is ultimately a weakening of our relation with God. In this sense, our first task will perhaps be to rediscover in a new way the living God present in our lives, in our time and in our society.¹⁷

He became even more distinct on 23 September 2011 in the Augustinian Monastery of Erfurt. In the speech broadcast by television, he had clearly denied rapid ecumenical progress. In a small circle, however, he found praiseworthy words for the reformer Martin Luther:

As the Bishop of Rome, it is deeply moving for me to be meeting you here in the ancient Augustinian convent in Erfurt. As we have just heard, this is where Luther studied theology. This is where he celebrated his first Mass. Against his father's wishes, he did not continue the study of Law, but instead he studied theology and set off on the path towards priesthood in the Order of Saint Augustine. And on this path, he was not simply concerned with this or that. What constantly drove him was the question of God, the deep passion and driving force of his whole life's journey. 'How do I receive the grace of God?': this question struck him in the heart and lay at the foundation of all his theological searching and inner struggle. For Luther theology was no mere academic pursuit, but the struggle for oneself, which in turn was a struggle for and with God.

'How do I receive the grace of God?' The fact that this question was the driving force of his whole life never ceases to make a deep impression on me. For who is actually concerned about this today – even among Christians? What does the question of God mean in our lives? In our preaching? Most people today, even Christians, set out from the presupposition that God is not fundamentally interested in our sins and virtues. He knows that we are all mere flesh. And insofar as people believe in a life hereafter and a divine judgement at all, nearly everyone presumes for all practical purposes that God is bound to be magnanimous and that ultimately he mercifully overlooks our small failings. The question no longer troubles us. But are they really so small, our failings? Is not the world laid waste through the corruption of the great, but also of the small, who think only of their own advantage? Is it not laid waste through the power of drugs, which thrives on the one hand on greed and

¹⁷Benedict XVI, *Ecumenical Celebration of Vespers, Cathedral of Regensburg, 12 September 2006*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060912_vespri-regensburg.html.

avarice, and on the other hand on the craving for pleasure of those who become addicted? Is the world not threatened by the growing readiness to use violence, frequently masking itself with claims to religious motivation? Could hunger and poverty so devastate parts of the world if love for God and godly love of neighbour – of his creatures, of men and women – were more alive in us? I could go on. No, evil is no small matter. Were we truly to place God at the centre of our lives, it could not be so powerful. The question: what is God's position towards me, where do I stand before God? – Luther's burning question must once more, doubtless in a new form, become our question too, not an academic question, but a real one. In my view, this is the first call we should attend to in our encounter with Martin Luther.

Another important point: God, the one God, creator of heaven and earth, is no mere philosophical hypothesis regarding the origins of the universe. This God has a face, and he has spoken to us. He became one of us in the man Jesus Christ – who is both true God and true man. Luther's thinking, his whole spirituality, was thoroughly Christocentric: 'What promotes Christ's cause' was for Luther the decisive hermeneutical criterion for the exegesis of sacred Scripture. This presupposes, however, that Christ is at the heart of our spirituality and that love for him, living in communion with him, is what guides our life.¹⁸

Pope Francis took up these words when he met the EKD¹⁹ on 6 February 2017. After 100 years of reformation research and an effort to create a just image of the reformer Martin Luther, Catholic theology can say yes to the basic concerns of Luther: "*sola fide*" and "*sola gratia*" – "*sola scriptura*" and "*solus Christus*". Perhaps there remains an important difference: the "*sola*" statements must be classified into the context of life. Faith proves itself in everyday life. Grace needs the openness to the human. The entire Holy Scripture – Old and New Testament in the canonical version of the Old Church – and especially Jesus Christ point to the Church, which is the Christ alive and which in the "*sensus fidelium*" of all the baptized makes possible a deeper understanding of the Bible.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Meeting with the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany*, 23 September 2011, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110923_evangelical-church-erfurt.html.

¹⁹EKD: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (Protestant Church in Germany).