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Elements of Ontology in Luther's Lectures on Romans (1515–1516)

ABSTRACT

The author starts from the assumption that Martin Luther did not want to deny the importance of ontology (and metaphysics) for theology, but rather to regulate the meaning and use of the categories and main ontological concepts/terms in the perspective of the *novum* of God's Revelation in Jesus Christ, (a *novum*) witnessed by the Holy Scripture as the origin of a being renewed through faith. By examining some passages of his *Lectures on Romans* (1515–1516), the article highlights the presence of some significant “ontological signals” of the reformer's thought, in particular those that intend to express the being of the believer with concepts like “Exchange of Forms,” *creatio ex nihilo*, *transitus* and *actus/motus*. Furthermore, it shows that Luther understands these concepts in a relational key, that is, he considers the relationship between the triune Creator and His creature as absolutely essential for the understanding of the person's being; a relationship that on the one hand is already given – and ontologically will never be interrupted – through every single act of creation (i.e. with the birth of every human being), and on the other hand is being implemented through the gift of faith in Christ, understood as a relationship of trusting acceptance of the triune Creator's will of communion.

KEYWORDS

Ontology, Metaphysics, Martin Luther, Letter to the Romans, Epistemology, Ontology and Revelation

To my Evangelical-Lutheran colleagues
E. Herms, W. Härle and Ch. Schwöbel
with gratitude for the unforgettable and extraordinarily ecumenical experiences
of theological debate on the thought of Martin Luther
in the spirit of *ut omnes unim sint*.

I. THE QUESTION OF ONTOLOGY IN LUTHER AND THE *LETTER TO THE ROMANS*

In the world of Catholic theology and beyond, the idea has been widespread according to which Luther not only abandoned all reference to metaphysics and thus to ontology; rather, he rebuked and demolished the causes for which theologians employed them. Such opinion has not entirely disappeared: various scholars keep “suspecting that the Lutheran model implicates a substitution of the issue of salvation with the ontological question, which has been declared settled forever.”¹ Some scholars basically continue to show their belief in the fact that the reformer substituted soteriology “to ontology, thus eliminating all types of philosophical content.”² However, as a matter of fact, at the end of the 20th century, the Lutherforschung gave convincing evidence of the need to revise such standpoint. 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

¹ S. Rostagno, *Ontologia e linguaggio nel discorso luterano*, in: *Lutero e i linguaggi dell'Occidente*, a cura di G. Beschin, F. Cambi, L. Cristellon, Brescia 2002, p. 100.

² S. Rostagno, *Ontologia e linguaggio nel discorso luterano*, op. cit., p. 100; cfr. A. Maffei, *Teologie della Riforma. Il vangelo, la chiesa e i sacramenti della fede*, Brescia 2004, pp. 29–30. As for 20th-century Catholic theologians, it is sufficient to mention Yves Congar, who strongly believed that Luther had developed an “anti-rational reaction;” see Y.M.-J. Congar, *Théologie*, in: *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, ed. direction of J.M.A. Vacant, E. Mangenot, É. Amann, vol. XV/1, Paris 1946, col. 415. Among the most recent work on Luther and the refusal of metaphysics/ontology, see J. Masís, *Fenomenología de la vida religiosa en el joven Heidegger: la destrucción de la tradición ontológica de la mano de Lutero*, “Logos: Revista de Filosofía” 40 (2012), pp. 7–34.

in the light of the dialectic structure of the Christian mystery and of revelation [...].”³

Therefore, no abandonment or demolishing of the ontological categories and concept: rather, a reconsideration made in the context of a polemic and critical debate with Scholastic theology.

But the issue concerning the relationship between ontology and Luther has not yet been settled according to *Lutherforschung*. As a matter of fact, it keeps on making scholars argue and debate, even though many agree upon the fact that the reformer had no intention of re-thinking or revamping ontology as a system of philosophical thought (seeing that the categories and concepts of ontology had been “re-modeled” by him in order to serve his theological system). The true *quaestio* at the core of the arguments is concerned with the type of ontology that was at the basis of the Wittenberg doctor’s re-thinking. In summary, according to some scholars, Luther substituted “substance ontology” with “relational ontology.” According to others, he switched to “ontology under the cross” or “ontology of promise and gift” (also known as “ontology of justification”). Lastly, some prefer to only speak of a rigorously biblical ontology animated by an ample conception of reality that is typical of Scripture. In the context of the present volume, one must also cite the Finnish school, which sees in Luther a trinitarian-type of theological ontology or a “trinitarian ontology.”⁴

Despite these divergences, there is a marked convergence on a fundamental characteristic of the ontological intuitions by the Wittenberg reformer: the central role he gives to the category of relation. The aim

3 S. Carletto, *Lutero, la divinizzazione e l'ontologia. Temi e figure della "finnische Lutherforschung"*, “Annali di Studi Religiosi” 3 (2012), p. 176. Among the works that have contributed in consolidating and spreading this stance, one must certainly cite W. Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, Göttingen 1967. Regarding the rediscovery of metaphysics/ontology in Luther, see the summary remarks in L. Grane, *Erwägungen zur Ontologie Luthers*, “Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie” 13 (1971), pp. 188–198; D. Bielfeldt, *Martin Luther and Ontology*, in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, <https://tinyurl.com/y99e3bps> (Online Publication Date: Oct 2016); O. Bayer, *Uns voraus Bemerkungen zur Lutherforschung und Lutherrezeption*, “Lutherjahrbuch” 84 (2017), here especially pp. 177–179.

4 See T. Mannermaa, *Hat Luther eine trinitarische Ontologie?*, in: *Luther und Ontologie: Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers*, Hrsg. A. Ghiselli, K. Kopperi, R. Vinke, Helsinki 1993, pp. 9–27.

of the present study lies in putting forward a brief reflection on how this category should be considered. This has a twofold purpose: finding a correct interpretation for Luther's thought and a correct use of it by those who nowadays are forced to formulate a persuasive reply to the question: What kind of ontology can be inspiring for the theology of today and tomorrow?

My study is ideally inspired by a conference held in 1993 by Gerhard Ebeling on Luther's ontological understanding of reality.⁵ I shall follow the German theologian's choice not to attempt historically-genetically or systematically reconstructing the new ontological orientation of the reformer: rather, I shall try to pinpoint and analyze some of his ontological clues or "highlights" (*die ontologische Signale*).⁶ It is significant that Ebeling himself tried to find such highlights in the very first works by the Augustinian monk, in particular in the *First Psalms Lecture* (*die Erste Psalmenvorlesung*) from 1513–1515, and in the *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans* (*die Römervorlesung*) from 1515–1516.

This study is based on the latter work alone: our aim is not that of repeating Ebeling's analysis; rather, we aim at adding new tiles in the mosaic of the scholar's stimulating line of thought.⁷ I shall show how in his *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, Luther employs certain concepts and terms, ideas and perspectives of ontological significance. 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,

5 The conference was held during a meeting of the "Löwensteiner" theological circle in Schönthal and has already been published as *Luthers Wirklichkeitsverständnis*, "Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche" 90 (1993), pp. 409–424; English translation: *Luther's Understanding of Reality*, "Lutheran Quarterly" 27 (2013), pp. 56–75.

6 Cfr. G. Ebeling, *Luther's Understanding of Reality*, op. cit., p. 58.

7 The German theologian ended his conference with the words: "This summary of observations on Luther's ontological intention, which I have ventured to put forth, is a collection of fruit, which I have harvested from more than sixty years of association with Luther's theology. Fruit contains seeds which should germinate, grow and ripen in the future. May it be so in this case as well" (G. Ebeling, *Luther's Understanding of Reality*, op. cit., p. 72).

he “thinks about the things of the world in another way than the philosophers and metaphysicians do.”⁸ 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.”⁹

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 *Jesus Christ and God*,¹⁰ “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.

I shall seek to highlight one particular example of this work of his, one which certainly is important in order to clarify which type of ontological framework was present in the reformer's line of thought. It concerns the Lutheran concept of *form* and that of the *substitution* – or the

8 “Aliter Apostolus de rebus philosophatur et sapit quam philosophi et metaphysici” (*D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar 1938 (Weimarer Ausgabe [=WA] 56), 371,2–3; M. Luther, *Lectures on Romans* [= *Lectures*], edited and translated by W. Pauck, Louisville 2006, p. 235).

9 “Sed heu, quam profunde et noxie heremus 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*, p. 236).

10 Cfr. M. Luther, *Deutsche Bibel: 1522–1546*, Bd. 7: *Das Neue Testament, Episteln und Offenbarung*, Weimar 1931 (WA DB 7), 3,17–19; 7, 26,6–8.

exchange – of forms, both of them fundamental for the development and formulation of Luther's ontological insights.

2. FORM AND THE IDEA OF SUBSTITUTION/ EXCHANGE OF FORMS

As already mentioned, some passages of the *Lectures* 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 passages.¹¹

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*].”¹² 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 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*.”¹³

According to Johannes Ficker,¹⁴ the reformer is citing, in the first part of the text,¹⁵ a principle which goes back to Aristotle, specifically to the book I of the *Physics* (chaps. 5–7), where is an explanation of the

11 Cfr. WA 56, 216,4–219,11.

12 WA 56, 218,14; *Lectures*, p. 70.

13 “Et ut philosophi dicunt: Non inducitur forma, nisi ubi est privatio forme precedentisque expulsio, et: Intellectus 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*, p. 70).

14 Cf. note 3, in *Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/1516. Die Scholien*, Hrsg. J. Ficker, Leipzig 1908, p. 58.

15 As for the second part of Luther's text, Evangelical theologian Theodor Dieter pinpoints the paraphrased citation of a passage from Aristotle's *De anima* (*On the Soul* III,4; 429b29–430a2; see Aristotle, *De Anima*, translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Ch. Shields, Oxford 2016, pp. 60–61; for the commentary: pp. 308–311). For an interpretation of Aristotle's text, see Th. Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles. Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie*,

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:

Uno modo dicitur priuatio forma expellenda quando alia forma introducit 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).¹⁶

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 idea of Aristotle,¹⁷ does he do so by following the philosophical insights of the Stagirite?¹⁸

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

Berlin–New York 2011, pp. 257–260. For an even more in-depth explanation, see R. Polansky, *Aristotle's De anima. A Critical Commentary*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 451–457.

16 Quoted in note 3, in *Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/1516. Die Scholien*, op. cit., p. 58.

17 For an overview of Aristotle's concept of form, see F.A. Lewis, *Form and Matter*, in: *A Companion to Aristotle*, ed. G. Anagnostopoulos, Oxford 2009, pp. 162–185.

18 For a summary response, see G. Ebeling, *Luther's Understanding of Reality*, op. cit., p. 59; the very same author has suggested broadening the scope of Luther's concept of form in G. Ebeling, *Lutherstudien. Disputatio de homine*, Bd. 2, Teil 3: *Die theologische Definition des Menschen. Kommentar zu These 20–40*, Tübingen 1989, pp. 473–483.

“everything [and so, therefore, every respective mode of being – L. Ž.] comes to be out of the underlying thing and the form.”¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹

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 idea 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

19 Aristotle, *Physics* I,7,190b20–21; translated (*Books I and II*) with Introduction and Commentary by W. Charlton, Oxford 2006, p. 17.

20 “In *Phys* I, Aristotle is inclined to wonder whether the form or the matter of a thing ranks first; in *Phys* II, however, and in the *Met*, he plumps unequivocally for the primacy of form. It is the form of a thing that above all determines its nature, or that is ‘the cause of being’ and ‘the cause of being one’ for the thing (*Met* Z.17, H.2). And if its form is the cause of being for the thing, Aristotle can now explain what it is for an individual to belong to a kind. The kinds or secondary substances of the *Cat* are no longer substances at all, but ‘compounds of this form and this matter, taken universally’; and for a thing to belong to a given kind is for its matter to be informed by the form that typifies es the kind” (F.A. Lewis, *Form and Matter*, op. cit., p. 168). See also D. Bostock, *Space, Time, Matter, and Form. Essays on Aristotle’s Physics*, Oxford 2006, pp. 80–81.

21 This remark is based on the interpretation of Luther’s commentary on *Romans* 3:5,7 as suggested by Dieter, though the latter’s conclusions are not accepted in their entirety; see Th. Dieter, *Der junge Luther*, op. cit., pp. 269–271.

righteousness of God," given that He "fills only those who hunger and thirst."²² 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 [...].²³

The idea 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 but also and most importantly of being,²⁴ 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*.²⁵

22 "Non potest fieri, vt plenus Iustitia sua repleatur Iustitia Dei, Qui non implet nisi esurientes et Sitientes" (WA 56, 219,3-5; *Lectures*, p. 70).

23 "Ideo satur veritate et sapientia sua non est capax veritatis et sapientie Dei, que 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*, pp. 70-71).

24 See S. Juntunen, *Der Begriff des Nichts bei Luther in den Jahren von 1510 bis 1523*, Helsinki 1996.

25 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*, p. 12).

3. THE SUBSTITUTION OF FORMS IN THE PERSON OF JESUS 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 Ihesu 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.”²⁶ 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 emptied²⁷ and hidden in the flesh. The second is true because his humanity is fulfilled and translated into divinity.²⁸

26 “[...] 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*, p. 13).

27 For the understanding of the Lutheran idea 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.

28 “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 celum. [...] Nam ab initio conceptionis Christi propter vnionem vtriusque nature verum fuit dicere: Iste Deus est filius Dauid et iste homo est filius Dei. Prima ideo 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*, p. 13).

Wishing to summarise the sense of these considerations aimed at displaying the “paradox” (K. Barth)²⁹ 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 God.³⁰

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.

4. GOD WORKS ALWAYS AS CREATOR: *EX NIHILO*

Commenting on verse 26, Luther explains 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 back again.’”³¹ 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

29 Cfr. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E.C. Hoskyns, Oxford–New York 1968, p. 29.

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

31 “Quod totum ideo 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*, p. 240).

become purely passive in relation to God in our inner as well as our outer doings.”³² Only then He “proceeds to shape us into the form his art has planned.”³³

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 nothing.³⁴

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 non* for such a change to take place effectively. However,

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

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

34 “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).

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.³⁵

This last consideration brings me to the heart of this paper's topic; 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;³⁶ 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 faith.³⁷

35 Cfr. G. Ebeling, *Luther's Understanding of Reality*, op. cit., pp. 65–67.

36 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.

37 "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, 330,1–5; *Lectures*, p. 188).

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

5. THE *TRANSITUS* (AND THUS THE *TRANSFORMATION*) IN GOD

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."³⁸ According to Luther, this idea is present already in Augustine – and, later, in St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Johannes Tauler too –, who asserted that "*anima plus est, ubi amat, quam ubi animat* [the soul is more where it loves than where it lives]."³⁹ 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."⁴⁰ Taking Aristotle's insight for his starting point, Luther explains:

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

39 "Secundum illud B. Augustini: 'Anima plus est, vbi amat, quam vbi animat'" (WA 56, 374,10–11; *Lectures*, p. 239). The assertion has been proven not to be by Augustine, but rather, by Bernard. On this topic, see the stance by F. Posset, *Pater Bernhardus: Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux*, Kalamazoo (MI) 1999, pp. 110–112.

40 "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*, p. 239).

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., hope.⁴¹

One wonders if Luther's explanation had been based on the reflection upon the soul's amorous union with God (that is, the transformation of man) as theorised by Jean Gerson, an author the young Augustinian monk used to read with enthusiasm.⁴² I am specifically referring to the part of the renowned text *De mystica theologia* where the French theologian disproves some errors in the concept of the soul's transformation in God by citing the St. Bernard's *De praecepto et dispensatione* and Aristotle's *De Anima*.⁴³ The author criticizes and sees as heretical the concept of transformation according to which the soul, by uniting with God, loses its own being and receives a divine one: the soul "is no longer a creature, nor does it see and love God through created things. It is God who sees and loves Himself."⁴⁴ At the same time, Gerson criticizes the viewpoint of those who deem that "the creature's

41 "Ergo spes transfert in speratum, sed speratum non apparet. Ideo transfert in incognitum, in absconditum, in tenebras interiores, ut nesciat, quid speret, et tamen sciat, 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*, p. 240). For a detailed analysis of these words made within the debate on the concept of hope developed in the *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, see R. Schwarz, *Fides, spes und caritas beim jungen Luther: unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der mittelalterlichen Tradition*, Berlin 1962, pp. 321–331. Another interesting interpretation of this passage of the *Lectures* is found in Th. Dieter, *Der junge Luther*, op. cit., pp. 271–275.

42 Cfr. M. Cassese, *La mistica nuziale in Martin Lutero*, in: *Lutero e la mistica*, a cura di F. Buzzi, D. Kampen, P. Ricca, Torino 2014, pp. 188–189, 201.

43 At the beginning of his reflection, Gerson states: "Uniones autem spirituales plures invenimus, ut per inhesionem, per informationem, per actuationem, per assistentiam principalitatis, per illapsum, per sustentationem ypostaticam ubi plures nature in una persona conveniunt, sed omnium suprema unio est in divina essentia seu natura in qua tres persone summa unitate subsistunt" (J. C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, ed. A. Combes, Lugano 1958, p. 103).

44 J. C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, op. cit., p. 105.

love for God is none other than God Himself, since the rational spirit formally loves God in the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁵

Gerson also points out that in order to explain such spiritual transformation, some use examples from the physical world. Nevertheless, they too see the transformation as a loss of being, as a complete mutation of the soul into God. The same mistake is made by some who interpret St. Bernard’s words, which Luther himself discussed upon: “Neque enim praesentior spiritus noster est ubi animat, quam ubi amat.”⁴⁶ These and other similar interpretations are far from the truth and totally deviated from reality. As Gerson states, “the soul does not lose its proper being, unlike the drop of water, which ceases to be as such due to the corruption that generates something else. For the same reason, the example of transubstantiation, which occurs in the Holy Sacrament is not sufficient in explaining the lover’s transformation in the loved God.”⁴⁷

45 J. C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, op. cit., p. 106.

46 For the sake of completeness, this is the full text of Bernard’s remarks: “Aut certe conversatio nostra in coelis est, quomodo dicit apostolus: spe enim salvi facti sumus (Rom. VIII, 33). Spe itaque jam in coelestibus habitamus, cum adhuc re ipsa in terris peregrinemur et in corpore. Vel aliter: habemus et unde corpori, et unde Domino inhaereamus; illud vivificando et sensificando, illum credendo et diligendo. Neque enim praesentior spiritus noster est ubi animat, quam ubi amat: nisi forte putetur esse magis ubi invitatus et ex necessitate tenetur, quam quo sponte et alacri, fertur voluntate. Denique ubi est thesaurus tuus ibi est et cor tuum (Matth. VI, 21). Item si Deum amans anima ex ipso vivit, uti corpus ex ipsa; quo pacto, quaeso, praesentior esse contenditur ubi dat, quam unde accipit vitam? Fons siquidem vitae charitas est: nec vivere animam dixerim, quae de illo non hauserit. Haurire porro quomodo potest, nisi fuerit praesens ipsi fonti, qui charitas est, quae Deus est? Praesens igitur Deo est qui Deum amat, in quantum amat. In quo enim minus amat, absens profecto est. In eo autem minus Deum amare convincitur, quod carnis adhuc necessitatibus occupatur. Illa vero circa corpus occupatio quid est, nisi a Deo quaedam absentatio? et absentatio quid, nisi peregrinatio? Et peregrinamur ergo a Domino, et in corpore peregrinamur: cujus nostra nimirum et intentio praepeditur aerumnis, et curis charitas fatigatur” (St. Bernard, *De praeecepto et dispensatione*, cap. 20, 60, in: *S. Bernardi opera omnia*, ed. J.-P. Migne, vol. 1, Parisiis 1879 (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina [= PL], 182), col. 892–893.

47 J.C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, op. cit., pp. 108–109.

However, the French theologian does not stop there and cites other interpretations of the idea of the soul's transformation into God. He does not classify these interpretations as erroneous and many of them – in my opinion – could have inspired Luther himself. Gerson states that some authors “give the example of the white-hot iron or inflamed coal: both remain the same, yet they take up some features of the fire or heat they incorporate. In some sense, they lose their own characteristics (coolness, stiffness, the color black) so that the incandescent iron seems to be completely like fire.”⁴⁸ Most of all, however, he recalls how some authors “in order to explain such union, generally use the example of the union of matter with form, or that of a perfectible reality with what makes it perfect.”⁴⁹ Gerson explains:

It is clear that matter, before it receives form, is imperfect and lacking beauty, vigor and action. But as soon as a form is given, it immediately reaches perfection according to the features of the form that has joined it. Thus the soul, before it unites to God in the enlivening love, dwells in a somewhat spiritual death: it lacks beauty, the capability of carrying out enlivening acts and is dead to eternal life. When, on the other hand, it joins God as the source of all life, it is given a somewhat divine life not because of a formal union of the soul with God (which disgusts God's perfection), but because of a more intimate spiritual penetration of God in the soul, which excludes all shades of imperfection. This happens due to the qualitative and harmonizing disposition produced by love, which plays a similar role to that of matter as a necessary (yet not sufficient) prerequisite for taking up the human form.⁵⁰

48 “Sic preterea aer illuminatus incorporat in se lumen solis, ita ut ex aere et lumine unum fieri videatur. Sic ferrum affectum per magnetem induit magnetis proprietatem, ut videlicet ferrum aliud ad se valeat trahere. Sic vapor, qui substantialiter est aqua, levitatem accipit et quamdam ex calore aeris conditionem” (J.C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, op. cit., p. 109).

49 J.C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, op. cit., pp. 109–110.

50 “Constat nimirum quod materia ante susceptionem forme imperfecta est et sine decore, sine virtute, sine actione. Detur ei forma, mox venit ad perfectionem iuxta forme sibi unite proprietatem. Sic anima, priusquam uniatur Deo per vivificum amorem, manet in quadam morte spirituali, sine decore, sine virtute ad actus vivificos, mortua vite eterne. Si autem Deo coniungatur tamquam fontali totius vite principio, datur sibi vita quedam divina, non quidem per formalem inhesionem Dei ad animam,

In wanting to clarify the key points in the topic of transformation, Gerson deems it important to reinstate that the latter is an event which involves man in his entirety, his corporeity included. However, this event happens with a certain degree of complexity. As a matter of fact, the first thing that happens is the same event that is widely known about love: since by nature it can link and unite homogenous realities and separate heterogeneous ones, “all of what inside man is spiritual or divine, love separates it from what in him is terrestrial or corporeal. This is how the separation between the spirit and the soul happens in man, that is the separation between the spiritual and the sensitive and psychic. The precious element is thus separated from the vile one. And since ‘God is Spirit’ [John 4:24] and likeness is the cause of union, one understands why the purified rational spirit joins God’s Spirit: precisely because it is made similar to it.”⁵¹

At the same time, such union also pertains to the body, something that Luther would not have denied. Gerson explains:

Having been made similar to God in the aforementioned way the spirit, determined and influenced by love, ends up determining and influencing the body, which acts as a material element that is capable of receiving form for its redundancy on the body itself. Therefore, the body takes up some features of the spirit itself by abandoning or keeping its own inactive. Hence Aristotle’s motto “In the virtuous man, all agrees with reason.” In the same way, as attracted by God, our spirit attracts that which belongs to the body and thus creates the admirable union of the spirit with God and of the body with the spirit.⁵²

hoc enim repugnat divine perfectioni, sed per illapsum quemdam intimiorem et spiritualement seclusa imperfectione qualibet. Et hoc mediante amore tamquam qualitativa et armonica dispositione, quodammodo proportionaliter sicut dispositio materie prequiretur, nec tamen sufficit, ad humane forme susceptionem” (J.C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, op. cit., p. 110).

51 J.C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, op. cit., p. 111.

52 “Spiritus itaque sic assimilatus Deo, sic qualificatus et affectus per amorem, qualificat et afficit consequenter corpus proprium tamquam suum formabile sive materiale per redundantiam spiritus ad corpus: quo fit ut corpus proprium sic habitatum et affectum induat et gerat quasdam proprietates ipsius spiritus, propriis vel derelictis vel in multum ab actione suspensis. Inde est illud dictum Aristotilis: ‘In virtuoso, inquit, omnia consonant rationi’. Sic ergo spiritus noster tractus a Deo trahit consequenter

Let us, however, go back to Luther. That the *transitus* towards another than oneself, which is to be understood as a real "becoming one" with this other, concerns not only hope and love but also and above all faith,⁵³ is the object of intense reflections which pervade and theologically unite the *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans* 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 idea 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)⁵⁴ and, therefore, one can and must maintain that He dwells in us.⁵⁵

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."⁵⁶

6. THE IDEA OF *ESSE* AS *ACTUS-RELATIO*

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 idea 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

ea, que corporis sunt, ac proinde resultat unio mirabilis spiritus ad Deum et corporis ad spiritum" (J.C. de Gerson, *De mystica theologia*, op. cit., p. 112).

53 See R. Schwarz, *Fides, spes und caritas*, op. cit., pp. 327–328.

54 Cfr. WA 56, 298–299.

55 Cfr. WA 56, 278,1–280,9.

56 "Ideo Recte dixi, quod Extrinsecum 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*, p. 134).

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,”⁵⁷ being “unceasingly active in all His creatures.”⁵⁸ The latter, and human beings especially, are predisposed by nature to welcome this fundamental and lifegiving *motus Dei* and to interact with it, given that He has made them, and so structurally endowed them to be, *verba creata* or *vocabula/dictiones dei*.⁵⁹

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 idea 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.

In wishing to precisely shed light on this ontological insight in order to describe the great complexity of being human from the perspective of the *ordo redemptionis*, (that is according to justification by faith alone, therefore describing people in the light of their baptised/

57 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/I, 107,14). For a summary presentation of this subject, see A. Beutel, *Wort Gottes*, in: *Luther Handbuch*, Hrsg. A. Beutel, Tübingen 2005, here especially pp. 365–367.

58 WA 18, 711,1.

59 Cfr. A. Beutel, *Wort Gottes*, op. cit., pp. 365–367.

Christian-being), Luther explains, in his comment on v. 2 (“*sed reformatamini*”) 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 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 righteous.⁶⁰

60 “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 hocipso 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,

Looking in the same way at the processual and dynamic reality of the human being but expressing himself in ethical-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.”⁶¹

By meticulously analyzing Luther’s explanation, Theodor Dieter rightly points out that the reformer aims at giving the concepts and categories in his theology of justification a decidedly realistic and thus ontological depth by using a perspective that allows to define the baptized person’s being in processual and dynamic terms. As a matter of fact, the five degrees/aspects – not-being (privation), becoming (matter), being (form), action (operation), being acted upon (passion) – should be seen as degrees/aspects that are simultaneously and dynamically present in a single believing identity, that is in a single being of the baptized person, uninterruptedly and substantially determined by the event of justification⁶² (that is, by the justifying relationship with God, into which the believer is introduced by God himself during baptism). This type of ontological comprehension is also highlighted by the fact that Luther has “little interest in stressing the fact that the new being is matched by a new act;” rather, he means that “in relation to a subsequent new being, the previous one appears to be a non-being: therefore, one can say that the new being has sprung through passion from the current non-being.”⁶³

In the very same context of Luther’s explanation, enriched by what he states in the commentary on the *Letter to the Romans* 8:26, Dieter highlights the very concept that has already been mentioned above: the fact that the being’s determination (viewed as justification by faith)

in iustitia, i. e. semper peccator, semper penitens, semper iustus” (WA 56, 441,23–442,2–17; *Lectures*, p. 322). For a detailed analysis and an in-depth explanation of the key-concepts of this passage aimed at underlining how the Reformer interpreted and modified the Aristotelian idea of movement, see Th. Dieter, *Der junge Luther*, op. cit., pp. 335–346.

61 “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*, p. 323).

62 Cfr. Th. Dieter, *Der junge Luther*, op. cit., pp. 338–339.

63 “[...] vielmehr zu sagen, daß das neue Sein im Verhältnis zu einem weiteren neuen Sein Nichtsein ist und daß aus diesem Nichtsein durch Leiden neues Sein wird” (Th. Dieter, *Der junge Luther*, op. cit., p. 339).

coincides with an uninterrupted becoming from nothingness that is only possible thanks to God. As a matter of fact, "a new justified-being never springs from the previous justified-being, but is always a *creatio ex nihilo*."⁶⁴

7. CONCLUSION: RETHINKING BEING IN 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-act, that is to say, which are characterised by a specific *motus essendi*⁶⁵ 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*

64 Th. Dieter, *Der junge Luther*, op. cit., p. 342.

65 See L. Žak, *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*, Hrsg. E. Herms, L. Žak, Tübingen 2017, pp. 37–78. The use of the concept of movement in an ontological manner in Luther's theology of justification, together with the issue regarding its Aristotelian provenance mediated by the reinterpretation of the Aristotelian concept of movement by William of Ockham have been examined in detail by Th. Dieter, *Der junge Luther*, op. cit., pp. 276–346. On this very topic, an interesting contribution is made by the summary reflections by O. Bayer, *Philosophical Modes of Thought of Luther's Theology as an Object of Inquiry*, in: *The Devil's Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. J. Hockenbery Dragseth, Minneapolis 2011, here especially pp. 20–21.

that are multiple and even antithetical: 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 1970, 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 nature and primarily seemed to be able to be explained on the basis of the concept of event.”⁶⁶ 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”⁶⁷ 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 [metaphysical and ontological – 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.”⁶⁸

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*,

66 B. Welte, *Die Lehrformel von Nikaia und die abendländische Metaphysik*, in: *Zur Frühgeschichte der Christologie. Ihre biblischen Anfänge und die Lehrformel von Nikaia*, Hrsg. B. Welte, Freiburg i. Br. 1970, p. 109.

67 B. Welte, *Die Lehrformel von Nikaia*, op. cit., p. 113.

68 B. Welte, *Die Lehrformel von Nikaia*, op. cit., p. 116.

he proclaimed the need for a radical renewal of the *modus essendi/cogitandi* of Christians.⁶⁹ At this point, I would also like to add that after him, this path has been pursued by many other theologians, some of which have openly and critically recognised the blatant limitations for theology of metaphysics and Scholastic ontology. Most of all, these theologians have realized the possibility and necessity of drawing basic ontological intuitions “from the bowels of Christian Revelation.”⁷⁰ I am referring in particular to Sergei N. Bulgakov and Pavel A. Florensky,⁷¹ the renowned Russian Orthodox theologians from the beginning of the 20th century. I should also mention the “school of trinitarian ontology,”⁷²

69 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*, Hrsg. Ch. Polke, F.M. Brunn, A. Dietz, S. Rolf, A. Siebert, Berlin–Boston 2011, pp. 65–85.

70 G. Lorizio, *Eschaton e la storia nel pensiero di Antonio Rosmini. Genesi ed analisi della Teodicea in prospettiva teologica*, Roma–Brescia 1988, p. 190; cfr. G. Lorizio, *Teologia e “metafisica della carità” nel pensiero di Antonio Rosmini*, “PATH” 5 (2006), here especially pp. 386–389. A summary glance on the different paths of trinitarian ontology as followed by 20th century authors can be found in my essay *Unità di Dio: “quaestio princeps” dell’ontologia trinitaria*, “PATH” 11 (2012), pp. 439–464.

71 For a brief presentation of the ontological-trinitarian intuitions of these theologians, together with the ones expressed by philosopher Lev Karsavin, see L. Žak, *Il contributo della filosofia religiosa russa al ripensamento dell’ontologia alla luce della Rivelazione trinitaria*, in: *Un pensiero per abitare la frontiera. Sulle tracce dell’ontologia trinitaria di Klaus Hemmerle*, a cura di P. Coda, A. Clemenzia, J. Tremblay, Roma 2016, pp. 145–165.

72 The illustrious representative of this school and its current guide is Italian theologian Piero Coda, the professor of the “Sophia” institute in Loppiano (Italy). Among his studies on trinitarian ontology, see *Evento pasquale. Trinità e storia, Città Nuova*, Roma 1984; *Il negativo e la Trinità. Ipotesi su Hegel*, Roma 1987; *Dalla Trinità. L’avvento di Dio tra storia e profezia*, Roma 2011 (in particular 1.4. *L’ontologia trinitaria sprigionata dalle “viscere della Rivelazione”*, pp. 521–583). His recent text is extremely interesting: *Trinità come pensiero. Un manifesto*, “Sophia” 9 (2017), pp. 9–17. Coda’s line of thought and his trinitary ontology in particular are examined in C. Redondo Martínez, *El Dios in-ex-sistente. El misterio de la unidad y de la distinción en la ontología trinitaria y cristológica de Piero Coda*, Toledo 2016; E. Prenga, *Gottes Sein als Ereignis sich schenkender Liebe. Von der trinitarischen Ontologie Piero Codas zur trinitarischen Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität und Interpersonalität*, Freiburg i. Br. 2018.

founded by the Catholic theologian and bishop Klaus Hemmerle, the author of the inspiring work *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*.⁷³

What characterizes these and many other theologians from the “new way” is the (hermeneutical, much more than thematical) centrality of the trinitarian dogma in re-thinking ontology, but also the belief in the need to understand God-Trinity as a agapic relationship mystery that has been revealed in Jesus Christ and especially during his death and resurrection. I believe that comparing the reformer’s ontological intuitions and those put forward by these authors could break new interpretational grounds for scholars of both *Lutherforschung* and trinitarian ontology. The decennial work carried out by the Finnish school on the trinitarian approach or foundation of Luther’s ontology are, from this point of view, an extremely relevant incentive which should be welcomed with interest and speculative creativity.

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73 Cfr. K. Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*, Einsiedeln 1976. This work’s philosophical and theological proposition has been examined by numerous studies, among which one must cite the following: E. Siregar, *Sittlich handeln in Beziehung. Geschichtliches und personales Denken im Gespräch mit trinitarischer Ontologie*, Fribourg–Freiburg i. Br. 1995; A. Frick, *Der dreieine Gott und das Handeln in der Welt. Christlicher Glaube und ethische Öffentlichkeit im Denken Klaus Hemmerles*, Würzburg 1998; M. Böhnke, *Einheit in Mehrsprüchlichkeit. Eine kritische Analyse des trinitarischen Ansatzes im Werk von Klaus Hemmerle*, Würzburg 2000; M. Fenski, *Klaus Hemmerle und die Ökumene. Weggemeinschaft mit dem dreieinen Gott*, Paderborn 2002; V. De Marco, *Il pensiero filosofico di Klaus Hemmerle. Dalla fenomenologia del sacro all’ontologia trinitaria*, Assisi 2008. See also an excellent introduction to the key concepts in this work by Hemmerle as examined by P. Coda, *Rivelazione e ontologia trinitaria o del necessario accesso alle “Tesi” di K. Hemmerle*, in: *Un pensiero per abitare la frontiera*, op. cit., pp. 17–30.

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