

Luther and the modern world

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Speech by Commissioner Vestager at 9th LutherConference & the award ceremony of the LutherRose 2016 in Copenhagen

For a child of Lutheran ministers, it's hard to imagine a world without Luther's influence.

In every part of Danish culture, Luther's influence is there, handed down through Grundtvig, the great philosopher of Danish identity. When our family gather round the Christmas tree to sing the psalm "Det kimer nu til julefest", we're singing Grundtvig's reworked version of Luther's "Vom himmel hoch". Luther comes to us, at only one remove, over five hundred years.

And when my parents received youngsters to prepare for confirmation, it was also a modern version of Luther's catechism they handed out.

It's much more difficult to say how Luther has affected our secular world. Because there's a paradox that everyone in politics – in fact, everyone who sets out to change things – knows very well. We may be trying to achieve a particular goal. But when our decisions meet the real world, control slips right out of our hands. So it can be hard to know what effect our actions will have.

I think that's an experience that all of us can relate to today. We all know that we are living in a historic time, and that our actions will have effects for generations to come. But we can't know exactly what effect we will have. All we can do is to trust in our values, and have the courage to act on them.

That's what Luther did in Wittenberg in 1517.

And I can't hope to disentangle the effects of his decision over the five centuries since. But when I look at Luther's age, I see a lot in common with today's Europe. I see a world that was struggling to deal with change, to remake its old values for new situations. And I think the struggles of that time can be an inspiration for ours.

Luther and competition

Sometimes, it's reassuring just to see that the issues we face have exercised minds like Luther's for centuries.

In my work on competition, I sometimes say that what is at stake is as old as Adam and Eve. For all the economic theories and the business models, it all comes down to greed.

And Luther understood that well, even if he lived in a time when the relationship between business and the Church was very different from today.

In the pamphlet "On Trade and Usury" from 1524, Luther tells us: "When some see that they cannot establish their monopolies in any other way ..., they proceed to sell their goods so cheap that the

others can make no profit ... The authorities would do right if they took from such people everything they had and drove them out of the country."

Well, today we call that sort of behaviour "predatory pricing". We may not follow Luther's advice, to take everything from the company and drive it out of the country. But we do fine it for breaking the competition rules. In fact, just this week we started investigating the biggest railway company in the Czech Republic because we suspect it of predatory pricing against its competitors in the country.

Luther and our values

In a way, these similarities are deceptive. Because our world has changed beyond recognition in the last five centuries.

It can be hard to see how a Europe torn apart by religious war can have anything to say to our peaceful and unified continent. It can be hard to see what lessons there can be from a society where women were invisible for a Europe today that is the best place for women that there has ever been.

But Luther's world was the soil where our Europe took root. And we've only built a peaceful, prosperous society by overcoming the problems that Europe has faced for many centuries.

Every time that we have fallen into war and inhumanity – and it has happened too many times to count in the last five hundred years - we have learned something new about how to build a better world. Each time, we have become a little more respectful of our diversity, more respectful of each other.

Our differences of religious belief, of national culture, have not gone away. We still have Protestant and Catholic churches. Luther's German hymns are still part of a national culture that's unfamiliar to many in neighbouring countries. We still live by national myths and stories that tell of conflict, of our nation's victory and the defeat of others.

What has changed is that we have learned to live and work together, despite our differences.

So today, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church can hold a joint commemoration of the reformation in Lund. And leaders of the Catholic and main Protestant churches [in Germany can issue a joint text](#) calling for a "healing of memories".

Young people all over Europe have come to know each other's culture better, to see the world through someone else's eyes, thanks to the programme named after Erasmus, Luther's great contemporary. And many adults have done the same through the programme for adult learning exchanges, named after the same Grundtvig I mentioned earlier.

And that understanding has helped European nations to create a European Union which is built on a commitment to treat each other with respect. That doesn't mean we'll always agree. But it's because of that commitment that we keep working together, to deal with the problems none of us can face on our own. Problems like climate change, and terrorism, and tax avoidance.

But we must never forget that we got here through centuries of conflict and war. We must never forget that since Luther's time, Europe's highways have been filled with refugees from conflict, from the wars of religion to the Balkan wars of our own time.

So if today we are stable, rich and peaceful, we should remember our past. We should remember Luther's lesson, in his Large Catechism, that "it is God's ultimate purpose that we suffer harm to befall no man, but show all good and love".

And when a refugee family knocks at our door, our first thought should be how we can help. Not how we can entice them to knock on somebody else's door instead, or to look through their suitcase for valuables.

I know that is not always easy to do. We have built our stability, our welfare states, over centuries of hard work. We have learned to trust each other, and built a society where each of us contributes and takes responsibility. But those institutions are strong. Being open to others need not undermine them. In fact, it can make them even stronger if we welcome others in the right way.

Of course, it takes practice to learn to live in a world of diversity. But the best way to learn is to work together, on common challenges.

But if we don't make the effort, we betray the very values that have made Europe our common home.

Communicating our values

Because it isn't enough just to hold those values. We have to live them every day, and show that we're living them.

Luther's actions made a difference because his cause was just. Because people immediately saw the fairness in his argument that the Church should not raise money from people by selling them indulgences.

And over the centuries since, our world has been transformed by causes driven by the same demand for justice. Rights for minorities, for women, for LGBT people, have been built on the simple argument that discrimination is unjust.

But that would have counted for nothing, if those ideas had not been shared.

Luther used new technology – the printing press – like no one before him. He wrote in a German that spoke directly to the people, bringing them the Bible and the catechism in a language they understood. And his pamphlets reached people throughout Europe. As his friend Myconius wrote, "hardly 14 days had passed when these propositions were known throughout Germany and within four weeks almost all of Christendom was familiar with them." In the age of Twitter, that seems a little slow. In Luther's time it was like lightning.

And that is a lesson that we must not forget.

Our belief in fairness and equality, in respect for diversity and for the individual, can help us to get through even the darkest times. It can help to give people confidence that there is another way. That they don't have to follow those who argue for isolation and division as the answer to our problems, but are really selling something that will only hurt those who are most in need.

But that will only happen if we're willing to stand up and be counted. Not just to hold these values, but to live them. To nail our theses to the church door, and say: we stand for a Europe that is for everyone.

Thank you.