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Rath Yatra and Rivers: Reimagining Reformation and Luther's Theology

Mary Philip (Joy)¹

Chimamanda Adichi, the Nigerian writer, talks of the danger of a single story. And she is right. A single narrative, be it that of a historic event, or of Luther or any of the other prominent figures be they theologians – or geologists, for that matter – is problematic. The year 2017 marked five hundred years since the Reformation, a turning point in the history of the world and in which Martin Luther had a prominent role to play. Reformation discourses and Luther research/scholarship has so far been dominated by the German, the Nordic Scandinavian and to some extent the North American constituencies. So, what would Reformation discourse and Luther's theology look like without the frills and fanfare of the West or the global north? What would it take to think outside of that predominant story? I am doing what I do best: try and change the narrative. And, as those from the colonized world often do, I will use the master's language and tools to, at the very least, shake up the master narrative.

Luther's theology – be it the two kingdoms doctrine, theology of the cross, the law/gospel dialect, the mammoth amount of literature – is not free size or a fit for all. Luther's theological concepts are often viewed as a key, but for what?

If we receive it only to construct locks to fit the key, it will not open anything other than the lock itself ... The key is a real gift if, and only if, it opens the lock that holds us captive. The doctrine of justification, or any other doctrine, is irrelevant if it does not fit [address] the plea of the supplicant heart, the broken soul and the damaged life.²

The two kingdoms doctrine may be a helpful discursive tool in the context of Germany, but will it serve the same purpose in South Sudan or Guatemala or India? The freedom of a Christian is a genius of a doctrine but it will break the back bone of a caste driven society like India, and much as I wish it, it won't fly in India.

I have chosen to reimagine Luther's understanding of the relationship between faith and reason in a way that is relevant to the contexts that I am in and to the twenty-first century. History is a compendium of events and moments

recognized for its allergic power of intervening in the present when and where it offers itself as such, as present, as 'gift.' Any moment then can be this inconvenient event that presents itself. The Reformation of the 16th century, particularly the work of Luther, is itself one of such moments, but most importantly it pondered theologically about the incision the non-rational makes into the realm of reason."³

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² Vítor Westhelle *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 194.

³ Description of the symposium, *Fides et Ratio*, held at Faculdades-EST, São Leopoldo, Brazil in 2015.

In the twenty-first century, how does faith, the non-rational, make that incision? Or is it the rational that makes an incision into the realm of faith?

A couple of years ago, I watched a Hindi movie, based partly on fiction and partly on facts, that prodded me to rethink the relationship between faith and reason. There was an officer in the Bomb disposal squad of the Indian Army who came to be known as the man who cannot die. The movie, titled, *Jab Tak hein Jaan* is based on this man. *Jab Tak hein Jaan* means “As long there is life (in me).” It is a love story where a vivacious young woman, Meera, keeps making deals with Jesus. I guess I could have chosen a profound life experience or even a slightly philosophical movie instead of a Bollywood movie, as Indian Hindi films are often referred to. But I have come to a point where the ordinary seems to encompass a lot more meaning than the extraordinary. Coming back to the movie, the couple – Samar and Meera – actually meet for the first time in a church where Meera had run into to make a deal with Jesus.

The conversation is in so-called Hinglish (mixture of Hindi and English). First, Meera thanks Jesus because she came out as the topper in the university. That was her request to Jesus the week before and the deal was that if he granted the request, she would quit eating chocolates. She then puts in her next request, and this time it is to make her father not like the guy, a banker, that is being introduced to her as her prospective groom that evening and if that were to happen, i.e., if her father does not like the banker, she would stop wearing fur coats – and she reminds Jesus how much she loves fur! She goes on to say that Jesus always keeps his end of the bargain, so that she could not but help keep hers as well. The script is such that it gives a comical tone, but comedy is not necessarily the intent. Her faith is unflinching as is her love. In summary, Samar and Meera fall in love and the day she is to tell her father about Samar, Samar meets with an accident. On her knees on the street next to where he is lying covered in blood, she cries out to Jesus, “Please save Samar if you spare his life, and keep him safe always, I will stay away from him.” Well, of course he survives and when she comes to see Samar, he jokingly asks her if she made a deal with Jesus.⁴ Then he asks: what did you ask for, to which she responds – “your life” and to the next question, what did you give up in return, she says “you.”

They part ways, but Samar is not very happy with Jesus and decides that he is going to court death and goes on to become a bomb defuser in the Indian army. The movie actually starts with Samar defusing his ninety-seventh bomb. He has become sort of a legend as the man who cannot die and he does not even wear a protective suit. Apparently Jesus was keeping his word to Meera and had been sparing him (well, we can say that he using was his expertise and faculty of reason to diffuse the bombs). Ten years pass by and another accident makes a meeting with Meera inevitable. This time too Samar is spared but Meera was asked to give some thought to why he was spared. While this may sound like a mushy love story, there is nonetheless a poignant conversation where a friend of Samar’s talks to Meera when she comes to know that she is going to once again stay away from Samar to continue to keep him alive. The friend says:

I don’t know your God or any God; I don’t even pray. Your faith, which is really your love, is incredible and it has kept Samar alive all these years. But what is the point if your faith is not life giving? Your faith is laudable but use your reason as well. Faith, I

⁴ Jesus se deal kiya?

don't think works alone. Think Meera – why was Samar being kept alive all these years? Is God so egoistic that God needed your faith to feel godlike? You don't need such a God, nor such faith. If faith is that which leads only to death – what is the point in having faith? Faith is that which makes for life. If it does not, it is not faith.⁵

Yes, faith is that which makes for life. What about reason? It has its days, but if it does not make for life, are we then in trouble! So, if both faith and reason are pro-life we should not have any problem, right? History, sadly, says otherwise. So, what is the relationship between faith and reason? Or, what is the nodal or the “and” question? Pope John Paul II's famous two wings metaphor – one of faith and one of reason – well known. Well, that had to be one hell of a brave bird since the wings of faith and reason were never seen as equal in length. How can we understand the “and” or the nodal question?

Faith, for Luther, gave rise to freedom. Not the kind of freedom to do anything, but that which frees one to serve and love others. Faith in God and love of neighbor are intrinsically bound.⁶ He goes on to say, “O, when it comes to faith, what a living, creative active, powerful kind of thing it is.”⁷ This understanding of faith is something that brings about life. A person of faith thus uses her/his faculty of reason to promote life, and not just *mere* life, but life in full. One could say that it enlivens and illuminates reason. I think this is what Luther meant about the renewing of reason in the light of faith.⁸ His often referenced “if you do not believe, you will not understand” points to this.⁹ But just as faith enlightens reason, reason advances faith. The following words of Luther highlight this:

The understanding, through faith, receives life from faith; that which was dead, is made live again; like as our bodies, in light day, when it is clear and bright, are better disposed, rise, move, walk etc., more readily and safely than they do in the dark night, so it is with human reason, which strives not against faith, when enlightened but rather furthers and advances it.¹⁰

In the Bhagavad Gita, which is part of the Hindu Scriptures, there is a section called *Gitopadesham*, where Arjuna (one among the Pandavas), the mightiest of all warriors and a favourite of the Gods, is in the battle field against his first cousins, Kauravas. This is a battle of dharma, a righteous war that is asked of Arjuna by his faith. On seeing his cousins that he grew up and played with, Arjuna falters and says: how can this be dharma (of faith);¹¹ I am killing my own family. Arjuna is caught in between – do I follow my dharma, my faith, or do I pay attention to reason? Krishna, who is the avtar of Lord Shiva and the charioteer of Arjuna, interestingly, employs the faculty of reason by critically engaging Arjuna and his arguments. Krishna, by appealing to Arjuna's faculty of reason, shows that he (Krishna, the

⁵ My translation of the conversation in Hindi.

⁶ Francesca Aran Murphy, Balázs and Kenneth Oakes, *Illuminating Faith: An Invitation to Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 41

⁷ Martin Luther, 'Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,' in *Martin Luther: Selected Writings* ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 24.

⁸ *Illuminating Faith*, 43.

⁹ Isaiah 7:9

¹⁰ Luther's Table Talk, 144.

¹¹ Dharma means religion, duty and broadly faith. D. C. Mathur, “The Concept of Action in the Bhagvad-Gita,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 35, no. 1 (1974): 34-45.

God) “knows and understands” the issues that he is facing, thereby leading Arjuna to the knowledge of God and thus to abide by his Dharma.¹² In the process Arjuna is brought to a space where he accepts that following his dharma is his karma (good karma is what assures moksha or salvation) and goes to battle. Without appealing to Arjuna’s rationality Krishna would be wasting his time dishing out advice concerning matters of faith (which has no rational grounding, and precisely what informs Arjuna’s thinking). Krishna values Arjuna’s faculty of reason and helps Arjuna to see reason in the advice that he (God) has to offer. Krishna thus affirms Arjuna’s faith by appealing to his faculty of reason. The question then becomes: “without an ability to reason, can we even prepare ourselves to the possibility of a God revealed.”¹³ The task of a theologian is to probe and ask questions, and to put her faculty of reason to work. The story of doubting Thomas is a case in point. The answers to the question of whether faith needs reason will vary but we are obliged to examine the rational basis of faith.¹⁴

Our planet and its inhabitants are not the same as it was eons ago. It has evolved and it is evolving. The faculty of reason has also evolved. But how about our precepts of faith in relation to reason, especially as Lutherans? Most of Luther’s theology is in paradoxical form, but that is not exactly the position he takes in the formulation of the relationship between faith and reason. However, his views on reason take paradox to its zenith. Luther’s view of reason as devils’ bride and harlot is well known. He calls reason as the red murderess and then as God’s greatest gift to humans.¹⁵ It is also worth remembering that even when Luther is speaking of *ratio* or reason, we cannot be sure what exactly he is referring to. Then again, does *ratio* really correspond to reason as I would use it? Luther uses reason in a variety of ways:

1. As a faculty, be it theologically or philosophically
2. As a doctrine as manifested in a discipline
3. As expressed in our lives¹⁶

However, it is quite interesting that for someone who has been merciless and relentless in condemning reason, Luther was also rational in developing his own arguments that grounded his views and principles. Words like “reasons,” “causes,” “offering proofs,” and “giving explanations” were regular occurrences in his argumentations be it with Karlstadt or Cajetan.¹⁷ In one place he calls reason a whore and in another he says that it is necessary for a good and just society and he had reasons for saying so.

So, has Luther made faith and reason into protagonists which stand opposed in a life and death struggle?¹⁸ Or, is it possible that Luther’s understanding of reason can be reread

¹² The details of this conversation is impossible to lay out here but it is detailed in Bhagavad Gita.

¹³ V. V. Raman, “Introductory essay,” in Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Religion: Does Faith Need Reason?* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1998).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Personally I like the metaphor of a whore quite apt for reason and I mean that in a positive way. If faith is that which accords hope, hope in a God that will not succumb to negation then reason as the whore affords promise. She promises a climatic experience though experiencing that does not depend on her alone.

¹⁶ Theodor Dieter, “Martin Luther’s Understanding of Reason,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, 25 (2011), 249.

¹⁷ Ibid., 252.

¹⁸ Ibid., 257.

and reimagined to give it a different meaning? What if there is a give and take between faith and reason? Let's say faith appeals to reason and reason receives some kind of enlightenment from faith.

The renowned physicist Varadaraja V Raman, who is also a brahminic Hindu, has a similar view to faith and reason, but he goes on to say that there is a communication between the two. He changes the narrative and I, while not claiming to be a physicist, agree with Raman's view and add certain nuances of my own.

It is indeed high time that we changed the narrative of this dichotic relationship between faith and reason. Most often the love stories that we see or read about are of how reason justifies certain actions of one but is seen as a betrayal of faith by the other. There is no question about a relationship between reason and faith, but rather the nature of that relationship. Is it a relationship that needs to be reimagined? Let us ask ourselves this question: How can we reimagine the relationship between faith and reason, or change the dominant narrative? How can we, talk about the "and," the nodal question that simultaneously seeks a stable definition in the very gesture of making it unattainable? Are there alternative threads yet undisclosed by the history that points to places and the moments in which something different might be taking place?

Before any attempt is made to change the narrative, it is helpful to clarify some terms. I refer to the "nodal" question or the "and" in faith and reason? So, what are nodes? They are points of intersection or encounter, where two things meet. In some ways they are margins. Applying that analogy, nodes are dangerous and as Mary Douglas would put it, what comes out of nodal points are of the marginal kind.¹⁹ A node is defined as:

1. a point, or a space where lines or pathways intersect or branch; it is a connecting point, like a junction, intersection, or an interchange
2. mathematically, it is a point at which a curve intersects itself.
3. in Astronomy it is either of the two points at which a planet's orbit intersects the plane of the ecliptic or the celestial equator.
4. in Botany, nodes are the points on a stem where the buds, leaves, and branching twigs originate. They are crucial spots on the plant where important healing, structural support, and biological processes take place.
5. in communication networks, a node (from the Latin *nodus*, 'knot') is either a connection point, a redistribution point, and is capable of creating, receiving, or transmitting information over a communications channel.
6. in data communication, a physical network node may either be a data communication equipment (DCE) such as a modem, hub, bridge or switch; or a data terminal equipment (DTE) such as a digital telephone handset, a printer or a host computer, for example a router, a workstation or a server.²⁰

But nodes are also places of growth. In medical terminology nodes are sites that contain lymph and are called lymph nodes. And we all know what an inflammation of that lymph nodes could be saying. The lymph nodes contain lymphocytes that are responsible for

¹⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Routledge: New York, 2002), 150.

²⁰ These descriptions are from a variety of sources – internet definitions, common understandings and from memory.

immunity. They are normally found in joints like the armpits, neck, elbows, back of the knee etc. When these nodes are swollen, it is indicative of some form of infection or disease that can be a simple cold to cancer. The SAN or the sinoatrial node in the heart muscle is responsible for the beating of the heart. Pacemakers are inserted when the SAN stops working.²¹

Mary Douglas was right when she said that what comes of these nodes or what happens at these nodal junctures are of the marginal kind. Indeed, nodes are places of encounter where communication happens. So, what happens or what can happen at the faith-reason nodal junction? Can it be an encounter where something different, a different kind of knowing can ensue?

Faith and reason are indeed different ways of knowing. I go back to V. V. Raman who uses the example of asking his students, “why are you taking this course?” One student might say, “it is a required course; I have to take it.” The other says, “I want to know more.” One comes from a place where certain rules are set in place; the other come from a place of not knowing and has a purpose but also the possibility of movement, for something new to happen. This, he says, is akin to the relationship between faith and reason.

How does this communication happen?

I work best with metaphors since it gives me added vocabulary as the language I use daily is not native to me. But I also know that there is a limit to what metaphors can offer. It is akin to what my mentor used to caution us about using typologies. It is like taking medicines. Read the label before you take it (One tablet every four hours and keep out of reach of children). So, be aware: the metaphors I use are my way of presenting another perspective and it can take you only so far. And, most importantly, it is *a* perspective not *the* perspective. So, how do we understand this nodal question? What happens when faith and reason come together?

What is being presented here are three ways of looking at the relationship between faith and reason, at what might happen at the nodal junction of faith and reason. Note that when I look at “and” as a nodal question, it is not “node” as in one anatomical point of connection as all the definitions above denote. For me, it is more than that. The conjunctive function is also of bringing together as in a journey or an encounter where there is a journeying alongside, or a mingling, a courtship, as in between two people or blood vessels or rivers. The journey is the connection or node. I employ the work of Juan Luis Segundo, an Uruguayan liberation theologian, and Madathiparambil Mammen Thomas, an Indian theologian and humanist, and their take on faith and reason in my attempt to reimagine Luther’s take on faith and reason. The intention is not to compare or contrast Luther with Segundo and/or Thomas. It is up to the reader to see/detect or not see/detect Luther and/ Luther’s theology come alive in their contexts. Also note that there is no conclusion, and this will remain an ongoing conversation.

Faith and Reason – Travelling alongside as complementary elements

If one were to take a close look at Segundo’s theology, the word “reason” does not appear often. His usage of it is quite sparse. Instead you will find the term “ideology” and for

²¹ Ibid.

him it is analogical to reason though not in its entirety. He is careful to point out that it is permissible to use ideology in place of reason only if faith and reason are not seen as “opposing alternatives.” Faith and reason are not opposing, but complementary realities.²²

According to Segundo, faith without ideologies is dead. Ideology is a system of means, natural or artificial, employed to attain an end in human existence. In his extrapolation of ideologies and faith, Segundo uses Albert Camus’ play *Caligula* as a parable of human condition. The emperor eradicates all physical and emotional attachments of persons that deter them from their pursuit of happiness because according to him it is these bonds that prevented them from achieving their goal of happiness. But his actions only end up in a state of indifference and finally death. The moral of the story for Segundo is that no human being can experience in advance whether life is worth the trouble of having lived and in what way it might be worthwhile. One cannot make an exploratory trip first and then come back and start again. Faith presupposes the “wager” that one’s life is worthwhile, that life is worth risking. Real life presupposes a non-empirical choice of some ideal that one presumes will be satisfying. It is the ideal chosen ahead of time by non-empirical standards that organizes and gives direction to the means and ends used to achieve it. And this means and ends are, for Segundo, “ideology.” But just as faith is about taking risks, in believing that one’s life is worthwhile despite empirical evidence, faith also requires some verification. And verification here means attributing a value to it, a value that verifies that life is worthwhile. According to Segundo, this verification comes from the experience of others.

While faith forms the meaning structure, ideology is the efficacy structure. As a meaning and valuational structure, faith is not simply a clue-giving tool that points us in the right direction as far as what we ought to do. It is the deciding factor in how we perceive reality. In other words, it is the “cognitive principle which enables us to see certain things rather than other equally obvious things.”²³ So, if faith is that which facilitates my perception of reality, then ideology is the systematization of this perception and whatever means, be they natural or artificial, that enables me to attain my goal.²⁴

A helpful sidebar is Segundo’s distinction between anthropological faith and religious faith. It is the anthropological dimension of faith which makes it the necessary basis of everyday life. The function of anthropological faith is to structure human existence in a meaningful way, with a valuation structure. Those that have the capacity for faith but do not believe in God revealed in Jesus are said to have anthropological faith. Anthropological faith is another term for human quest for meaning and liberation. And everyone, religious and non-religious, have this (at least we hope). Anthropological faith precedes revelation because one of the prerequisites to receive the truth of revelation is an engagement in a common quest for human liberation. Segundo uses the term valuational structure because it brings order to a complex array of values and enables human beings to categorize the events and happenings in their lives in an effective though unconscious way in accordance with the values that they have already accepted as normative. What is decisive is not whether or not and to what extent, one is able to explicate one’s faith but rather what specific scale of values

²² Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 94. Please note the use of both ideology and reason and at times interchangeably.

²³ *Faith and Ideologies*, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

one ends up choosing. It is the human element in faith and not the religious which is crucial in bringing about humanizing acts.

Anthropological faith becomes a religious faith in two ways: adherence to a specific tradition,²⁵ and dependence on the “transcendent data.” Underlying faith or valuational structure is what Segundo refers to as ultimate possibilities or limits of the universe and the human being. There is no experience be it our own or somebody else’s that can affirm, confirm or deny these possibilities because they come to us as “transcending experience.” In other words, they exceed the limits of our experience and verification, and that is when faith comes into play. The unverifiable possibilities are what Segundo refers to as transcendent data. However, the transcendent data does not make the anthropological faith any less important, or “believe the primacy of the human valuational criteria.”²⁶ It does not displace anthropological faith; rather it contributes and deepens it, as Segundo makes it clear in these words:

Only by building on the anthropological faith can we develop faith in the transcendent data. Thus it still remains irrelevant whether this faith is accepted explicitly or not, whether we consciously cross this limit of experience. Much more decisive is the matter of determining what values or what meaning structure those transcendent data support, correct, develop or deepen. What matters is their potential contribution to basic anthropological faith.²⁷

In other words, anthropological faith is that which powers my drive to alleviate my fellow human beings’ inhuman conditions, whether the untouchables in my village, or to transform structures and systems that oppress my indigenous neighbors in Canada even before I fully comprehend God’s unconditional love for the created order. While anthropological faith, by way of the human valuation criteria, brings to the fore one’s sense of justice and liberation as a rightful claim for all, religious faith on the other hand should alter in some radical way the scale of values in one’s life. In other words, it should bring about metanoia or “change of mind” of criteria and values, i.e., in the valuational/meaning-structure itself.

The metaphor that would aid in illustrating this complementarity is that of two rivers running side by side, and the image that would best sum up Segundo’s take on Faith and Reason comes, to my pleasant surprise, from the land of Brazil. Almost ten kilometres from the inland city of Manaus in northern Brazil, ‘the Meeting of the Waters’ is the point where two of Amazon River’s tributaries converge but never mix. The Rio Solimões is the lighter river, its muddy, milky coloring from a rich sediment of sand, mud and silt that it carries from the Andes Mountains. It is also known as the ‘white water river.’ The darker river is the Rio Negro, and it gets its ‘black tea’ hue from rotten leaf and plant matter that has dissolved in

²⁵ Tradition for Segundo, in the words of Bryan P. Stone, is not the depository of faith or a pool of data to be learned and obeyed; it is a living and vital process of “learning how to learn” in which we put our faith in others who have learned how to make their faith effective in ever new and creative ways. This is called as deuterio-learning, a term Segundo borrows from Gregory Bateson, where we learn from the experiences of others or from the way that others learned, thus creating not a reservoir of data but a reservoir of experiences to which we could not have had access by ourselves (Stone, *Effective Faith*, 50.).

²⁶ Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*, 74.

²⁷ Ibid.

the water. It looks dark and murky, but the Rio Negro carries little or no sediment, and is considered one of the cleanest natural waters in the world. On really clear days, water visibility in this black water river can exceed nine meters.²⁸

The two rivers Solimões and Negro flow side-by-side without mixing over a distance of six kilometers. The reason they never mix is because of the stark differences in temperature, speed and water density between the two. But you can see them making inroads into the other. If you looked carefully you can see streaks of muddy milky color into the dark Rio Negro and dark streaks of Rio Negro weaving in and out of Rio Solimões. The Solimões is faster, cooler and denser, its waters flowing up to six km/h at 22 °C, and the warmer, slower waters of the Rio Negro flow at a more leisurely two kmph, and maintain a temperature of around 28 °C. The two rivers eventually converge and become part of the Lower Amazon River.²⁹

For Segundo, both faith and ideology are necessary dimensions of life, and the relationship between faith and ideologies is one of difference and complementarity. Faith and ideologies travel alongside each other, different and unique as they are, where the journey matters. It is journeying side by side, each one unique in its own way but working alongside, one being the meaning structure and the other efficacy. The two flow together respecting difference, dissonances and yet listening, encouraging translation, not as a solution but as a practice.

Faith and Reason – A Sangam (Sangam = meeting)

Madathiparambil Mammen Thomas is an Indian, and India is a beautiful country which is both chaotic and orderly at the same time. Think of the way the *chai-wallah* (the one who makes tea) prepares each cup of tea in precisely the same manner, or the way the rickshaw driver expertly weaves through traffic. For Thomas, this is true in the case of faith and reason as well – there is something orderly but chaotic at the same time. Faith and reason are two seemingly contradictory elements. How can we sustain two contradictory ideas without our head exploding, is what he would ask?

The uniqueness of his theology was that, though rooted in the Christian faith and tradition, it was flexible enough to be germane in the ever-changing, unpredictable, varied contexts. As was in the case of Segundo, ideologies played an important role in Thomas' thinking as well and functioned as tools for social change, and these were always in need of evaluation and judgment by the gospel as well as from the contexts within which one was operating out of. Reason and ideology for that matter came to be tools that aided in interpreting issues and integrating changes in the society. What was of prime concern to him was that whatever the tool used, be it reason or ideology, it had to provide a principle of interpretation rooted in Christian faith, while also be bendable enough to be relevant to the context. Thomas' context was a poverty and caste ridden, religiously pluralistic, politically corrupt India. Christian faith interacts with the context and reason and ideology is what makes that possible.

For Thomas, concrete consciousness and comprehension of the context and involvement in it comes before one's understanding of the scriptures. It is the exploration of

²⁸ Online information taken from http://www.braziltravelbuddy.com/Manaus/sightseeing/Meeting_of_the_Rivers accessed on August 18, 2015.

²⁹ Ibid.

the context using one's reason and ideology that led to theological reflection. In the early years of his life, Thomas worked in Aluva, a city close to Kochi in Kerala. Part of his routine was to walk the streets of Aluva and interact with boys he found on the streets – some poor and begging, others pickpocketing, yet others simply desolate. It is said that he used to go back to his little room all agitated and asking why these boys were not in school or safe at home. So, he got himself trained to make and repair shoes and then taught the street boys the art of being a cobbler so that they could fend for themselves. Faith for him was participation and involvement in the situation/context and to respond to the realities, be it political, social, religious, or cultural. Thomas' principle was to carry out action through reflection on scriptures depending on what the situation calls for. And that required the faculty of reason.

Thomas sees the relationship between faith and reason as integrally connected to the task of humanization, of according human beings dignity and respect, regardless of caste, or creed because for him human personhood was the starting point for doing theology. Humans, whether *paraya* or *pulaya*, or *hijida*, or *devadasi*,³⁰ a Christian, Hindu, Jain or Muslim, indigenous and settler, all are created in the image of God and all had the right to live. It becomes a question of social responsibility. Jesus came so that all human beings may have life and life in full. So, if one section of God's created order is not living life in full, then for him, it is our responsibility to see that the wrong was made right and in the process if one had to risk one's own faith, then so be it. It was about "risking Christ for Christ's sake."

What does risking Christ for Christ's sake mean? Theology is not just the explication of my faith in Jesus Christ. It involves also putting that faith alongside other faiths, and alongside rationality and other human values which we share with others, allowing the examination of each, including my own faith, in the categories of the others. In this process, I as a Christian risk Christ for Christ's sake. Years ago I was shown a picture in my systematic theology class. It was a photograph of a stained glass window of St. Paul Community Baptist church in Brooklyn, New York. It shows Jesus trampling and breaking the cross. The message seemed to say: destroy the cross, take it apart so that there are no more crosses. Risk Christ for Christ's sake.

Long gone are the days of Constantine's "in this sign you will conquer" though, sadly, there are still vestiges of that attitude. And equally bygone are the times of Christianity ruling the roost. The world, as we know, always had and still has a plurality of religious communities, each embodying their own particular religious traditions and expressing diverse apprehensions of God, the ultimate reality. But pluralism rarely posed a challenge or threat to established religions for "there was little traffic across the boundaries." But we are in a situation now where we are forced to traverse the boundaries. We are in a situation when interfaith/religious dialogue has become a necessity. The destiny of the human community has become all of a piece. Human race is moving from a static concept of reality to a more dynamic and evolutionary one. The contemporary reality of the various faiths cannot be understood apart from the dynamics within each which has been brought to life by the dynamics of the single world history into which we are being drawn. This new history poses new questions and sets up new agendas and responsibilities before all the faith traditions. In trying to respond to the new questions and in the efforts to discharge the newly acquired responsibilities, severally and together, there comes the possibility of having a

³⁰ Parayas and pulayas are Dalits; Hijidas are eunuchs; Devadasi's are temple prostitutes.

dialogue; to have at depth a real meeting of the faiths, which in turn calls for a radical openness. This open dialogue is made possible only if reason lends a helping hand. I can be open to the other only if I am able to state where I stand and in order to do that I should be able to lay out my reasons for taking that stance. This is probably what Luther had to do in his debates with his opponents as well as colleagues.

For Thomas the nodal question of faith and reason presented the image of Sangam. Sangam simply means a meeting. Triveni Sangam is where two rivers Ganges, Yamuna meet under the watchful spectre of the invisible or mythical Saraswati River. Sangam is in the town of Prayag in Allahabad, India.³¹ It is one of the most famous pilgrimage sites of Hindus and its religious importance is evident in the millions of Hindus that take a dip in these waters for the expiation of their sins. Sangam is the site for historic Kumbh Mela held every twelve years³². Sangam's repute is also in it being the place where the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi was immersed in 1948. The two rivers, Ganges the river of Faith and Yamuna that of learning/knowledge maintain their identity and are visibly different as they merge. But they merge and become one. While the Yamuna is deep (forty feet) though calm and greenish in color, the Ganga is shallow (four feet), but forceful and clear. Saraswati remains hidden, but the faithful believe that she makes her presence felt underwater. From Sangam the Ganges continues on until it meets the sea at the Bay of Bengal. It is believed that all the gods come in human form to take a dip at the Sangam.

Sangam is a reminder of faith and reason meeting and mingling with each other, always undergirded by the spectre of the divine. It represents a nodal juncture where a new leaf of understanding grows. Or else it becomes the site of branching out to new vistas. There are been numerous stories of healing and transformation that has happened after a dip in the holy waters at Sangam. Some call it superstitious but who is to say? When Jesus heals the paralytic it is a miracle but the instance of healing after a dip in the holy waters is phony or superstitious. Whatever, it may be, the power of faith at this Sangam is believed to be such that Mark Twain commented thus after his visit to Prayag in 1859,

It is wonderful, the power of a faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys and endure the resultant miseries without repining. It is done in love, or it is done in fear; I do not know which it is. No matter what the impulse is, the act born of it is beyond imagination, marvelous to our kind of people, the cold whites.³³

This is about faith in action whether it is as a quick and immediate action in response to the context or a deeper commitment to a cause. Faith is made relevant to the context. It is faith that participates and involves in the situation/context as it demands in order to interpret the contemporary realities.

What has been laid out so far is my interpretation of what Juan Luis Segundo's and Thomas' understanding of the nodal question so as to reimagine the dominant

³¹ It happens in other towns as well where the rivers meet but the one at Prayag is what I am engaging with here.

³² It is held once in twelve years because that is when the earth and Jupiter align.

³³ This is taken from a documentary, "Images of Kumbh Mela," by the Indian film maker Bimal Roy. Years after Roy's death his son found the footage and made into a documentary. The quote was part of the documentary.

understandings of the relationship between faith and reason. I would like to present a third option. A child once asked a storyteller, “Every time you tell us a story, you have to put it inside your own head first, don’t you?”³⁴ The child could not have been more right. If I am going to tell a story about faith and reason, first of all, I, as the storyteller need to experience that story, to exercise and nurture my own imaginative spirit. Humans are rational beings (or at least we hope we are) but am I going to talk about faith as someone who has faith (as in practicing/experiencing) or am I going to indulge in some intellectual masturbation about faith? Faith and Reason – how can I reimagine the relationship between the two, or change the dominant narrative? How can I talk about the “and,” the nodal question that simultaneously seeks a stable definition in the very gesture of making it unattainable? Here is Effy’s narrative from the movie *Copenhagen*.

I’m telling him a story about Skagen. It’s in the north of the country where the two oceans meet. I went there once with my mother. She was sad because her boyfriend left, and I was sad because I had a fight with my best friend. So she brought me to the end of the beach and then she pointed to the right where the Baltic Sea is. It’s a very beautiful and very blue sea; the current travels west. Then she pointed to the left to the North Sea; also a very beautiful and blue sea, but the current travels east. Then she pointed to the middle and she said that that is the perfect relationship... You look to the left and you look to the right, and both seas are there. And they can meet in the middle, but they never lose themselves in each other. They are always themselves no matter what.³⁵

Effy’s words refer to the northern tip of Denmark called Skagen. I found Skagen to be an apt metaphor for my understanding of the nodal question.

Skagen is believed to be site of this extraordinary wonder of nature called the “two seas” phenomenon. At the tip of Skagen is Grenen beach, where the two seas Kattegat and Skagerrak meet. Kattegat flows into the Baltic Sea and the Skagerrak into the North Sea. Their convergence at Grenen is a remarkable sight. They meet and then go their separate ways. Their coming together leads to unique wave interaction, and inimitable currents. The two seas have different saline content and water density. North Sea has a greater saline concentration than the Baltic. The guide at the museum said that the clashing of the waves on the sand is a sight to behold.

Waves continually rise from both sides and break into each other at the end of the peninsula on Skaw Spit, a sand reef that extends almost a nautical mile into the sea. As Skaw Spit is curved like a dog’s tail, the effect is peculiar: the tail seems to wag back and forth in response to the wind and sea currents. You never really know what Grenen will look like, and it is always exciting to see it time and again.³⁶

Faith and Reason – it is not possible to have one without the other. Just as the North Sea and Baltic Sea they have different saline content, their temperature is different. Their

³⁴ Cited by Susan Burt in *Season’s of Change*

³⁵ Mark Raso. *Copenhagen*. Millennium Entertainment, 2014.

³⁶ On speaking to a guide at the museum, I was directed to a website from where I obtained the quoted information on Skagen.

current may flow in opposite directions but it ultimately contributes to the immensity of the ocean. The North Sea is calmer, while the Baltic is rough. May be it was the case on that particular day. In some places they barely touch each other, in another they seem to kiss and caress each other and in yet other places they lash at each other, mingle a bit before they go their way. Faith and Reason are what they are; the two do not get lost in each other. However, the two do touch each other, there are possibilities of caressing and cajoling and clashing so as to enlighten and enliven, even change the landscape as is observed at Skagen. There are occasions when they journey alongside, making inroads into each other in the course of the journey as in Manaus or it may be that they intermingle as in Sangam. Or then, they may be occasions when they seem to have a nonchalance attitude. Faith and reason seem to be saying: Come, let us court each other, kiss and caress and even make out but let's not get lost in each other.

Reimagining Luther's theology – the relationship between faith and reason – cannot but be followed by a re-imagination of reformation itself. Is reformation relevant in the twenty first century and if so, how? I employ the Indian festival *rath yatra* to very briefly elucidate this re-imagination.

Reformation and Rath Yatra

Rath Yatra is the chariot festival of India, especially in the city of Puri in the state of Odisha.³⁷ It is believed that every year during midsummer Lord Jagannath, who is the avatar of Lord Vishnu, along with his siblings – Balabhadra, his brother and Subhadra, his sister travels from Puri where he resides to the countryside. They travel on elaborately and intricately decorated chariots pulled by the devotees themselves through the villages and towns greeting people and showering them with blessings.

There are two parts to this grandiose procession – the invocation ceremony or *ratha prathishta* and the chariot pulling or *ratha tana*. The chariots differ in their specifications, in size, in the number of wheels and in adornments, Lord Jagannath's being the largest. The fabric used to cover the chariots, the painting and the motifs on the chariots are all unique, all of which are donated by people (or businesses). *Rath yatra* happens every year and in different parts of India – Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and so on. It is not only Hindus that join the festivities. Everyone, regardless of caste, class or creed, in the community is involved in and is part of the celebration, whether it is in the building or the pulling of the chariot. It is one day when even the untouchables are able to enter the temples. The significance of *rath yatra* is in its power to bring together people from all walks of life. It is a living example of unity amidst diversity, of equality and integration. While there is a sacredness and ritualistic order in how it happens, the event itself is not stuck in time. Each year the *yatra* differs in direct correlation to the place and it is a reflection of the changes in the village, town or city. And not only that, even though *rath yatra* originated in Puri, it now happens in various parts of India and in each place the procession is distinctively unique to that place. If in the early times, it was the devotees that pulled the chariot, in recent times, it is mechanized, and floats are a familiar sight. Thousands and ten thousands of miles far removed, *rath yatra* is celebrated in over 170 countries, Rome,

³⁷ Formerly, Orissa.

Germany (Heidelberg, to be exact), Britain,³⁸ Canada, Kenya, South Africa, United States, Adelaide, to name a few. In each of these places the festival is made relevant to the context and its people.

If reformation is to be relevant for our times and not continue to be this event stuck in time, and run into the danger of a single story, it needs to be like *rath yatra* that comes alive in the contexts they are in and thus relevant to the time and place. It needs to be steered by the people into the streets where life happens. It needs to be the time when all, regardless of differences in nationality, belief systems, language, or colour have access to resources. It needs to be an experience of bringing people together and not dividing people into silos. *Rath yatra*, is not a once in a life time event. It keeps happening, *semper eventuras*. Reformation, like the *rath yatra* cannot be a once in a life time event. It needs to keep happening. Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, when asked about why gender parity was important to him said, “because it's 2015.”

If you ask me why it is important to reimagine reformation and Luther's theology, I say “because it is 2017.”

³⁸ It is said that in the eighteenth century when the British first saw *rath yatra*, rather than seeing it for what it was, a unifying event, they called it a destructive force sending back horror stories of how people were killed in the confusion and commotion. This gave rise to the term juggernaut. There have been instances of accidental death of devotees which may have given rise to the term. Well, it makes sense as reformation had the same effect, whether it was the peasants that were killed or the Jews or the Anabaptists.