

# On the Cross and in the Cradle: The Mystical Theology of Martin Luther

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What are the important emphases in the theology of Martin Luther? There may well be as many answers to that question as there are Luther scholars. But if answers to that question could be ranked in frequency of response, something having to do with justification by faith would probably be in first place. It is certainly true that in his theology Martin Luther clearly stressed God's imputing Christ's righteousness to sinners, and that he devoted a great deal of ink to the concepts of proclamation, testament, and promise.

Formerly in the seminary and the university, as well as in the pulpit and the pew, the affective side of Luther's theology was often divorced from what was considered the intellectual, more philosophical side of his theology. In medieval terms, the mystic and the scholastic were poles apart, and since one had to pick and choose between the two, the mystical, affective, experiential emphases in Luther were given short shrift. But the mystical motif in Luther's theology has never been completely ignored, and is still worth studying today. This paper will examine Luther's mysticism in its historical context. My goal is to show that while Luther borrowed from much of the tradition which preceded him, he set his own unmistakable stamp on it and transformed it; or, better, reformed it. By subjecting the mystical tradition to the scrutiny of scripture and a christocentric approach to theology, Martin Luther was able to weave this fine theological thread integrally into the fabric of Reformation theology in order to fashion a harmonious whole

## I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is important to recognize that one cannot speak of mysticism, even Christian mysticism, "in general." Three major strands of mysticism can be distinguished before the time of Luther: Dionysian, Romanic, and Germanic.<sup>1</sup> While Luther never rejected any of these absolutely, at times he seems to have accepted very little indeed of Dionysian mysticism. He accepted Romanic mysticism with certain qualifications, and spoke most highly of Germanic mysticism. Because it is beyond the scope of this paper even to summarize each of these forms of mysticism and then supply Luther's evaluation of them, only those aspects which are germane to Luther's assessment will be considered.

Dionysius the Areopagite was responsible for a tradition of Christian mysticism which strongly influenced the West and is still the touchstone for the Eastern church.<sup>2</sup> At first Luther praised Dionysius. He said that while the scholastics spoke of divine secrets the way a shoemaker speaks of leather, Dionysius spoke of deep awe before the ungraspable, unreachable

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<sup>1</sup> Bengt R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 120; and Erich Vogelsang, "Luther und die Mystik," in D. Th. Knolle, ed., *Luther Jahrbuch 1937* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1967), 33.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the influence of the Dionysian corpus in both Western and Eastern theology, see Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality;" Jean Leclercq, "Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages;" and Karlfried Froehlich, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century" in Luibheid, Rorem, and Roques, *Pseudo-Dionysius: the Complete Works* (Mahwah, New York: Paulist, 1987) 11-46. There are also important analyses of the limits of Dionysius' influence on Eastern theology in John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979).

majesty of God, and said that not only every human word but also every human thought was too small to express the glory of God. This is what he called the “ecstatic and negative theology,” which speaks of God with fear and trembling “in deep silence and stillness,” of one who, when all is said and done, remains a “hidden and incomprehensible God.”<sup>3</sup>

While Luther could occasionally speak positively of Dionysian mysticism, he much more frequently criticized it, primarily because he judged it to be insufficiently concerned with and rooted in the incarnate, humiliated, and crucified Christ.<sup>4</sup> The “graded ascent” to heaven which this type of mysticism offered had to be discarded as long as it could put one in danger of thinking one could climb to God on one’s own, or “scamper up a graded ladder of ascent to a God who reigns in glory.”<sup>5</sup> For Luther, the only ladder to God is the ladder provided by the humanity of Jesus Christ. “Our ladder to God is he who descended to us. We have to begin our ascent in his humility and his humiliation.”<sup>6</sup>

Here it becomes apparent that however much Luther valued the role of religious ecstasy in the life of the Christian, it could only function in the context of a fundamental theological principle, that of God’s initiative in the face of humankind’s utter helplessness. As we shall see later, this, together with his concept of man as “*simul gemitus et raptus*,” led him to connect his brand of mysticism with his theology of the cross.

Furthermore, for Luther the God who acts in history is both hidden and revealed. But Luther’s stress on the hidden God has nothing in common with the speculative theology which became associated with the Dionysian approach.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Luther’s concept of God as both hidden and revealed precludes speculation and underscores the role of faith.<sup>8</sup> This is also connected with his emphasis on the Christian’s recognizing that God has placed him in the created world for a purpose, and that God ordinarily carries out his purpose in the believer’s life as the believer lives his life in the world. Here he opposed the Areopagite’s advice to “flee the world of perception,”<sup>9</sup> advice which was followed by his commentators among the monks and scholastics who fled to the inner world of their cloisters and colleges for their visions, revelations, and enlightenments. Luther recommended instead the life lived between birth and death in the observable world with its experience of familial and political needs.<sup>10</sup>

Luther’s estimate of Romanic mysticism was much more positive than his estimate of Dionysian mysticism, although it was certainly qualified. Perhaps it can best be understood in the

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<sup>3</sup> Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, multiple vols. (Weimar: Hermann Boehlau, 1892-), 3; 372, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Hoffman, 120.

<sup>5</sup> S David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1980), 127.

<sup>6</sup> WA 2; 493, 12.

<sup>7</sup> There is some disagreement regarding whether later forms of speculative mysticism were (and are) true to Dionysius. See Heiko A. Oberman, “*Simul Gemitus et Raptus: Luther und die Mystik*,” in Ivar Asheim, ed., *The Church. Mysticism. Sanctification and the Natural in Luther’s Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 27-29.

<sup>8</sup> Vogelsang writes, “That leads to the third and, for Luther, decisive objection against the Areopagite: ‘There one learns nothing of the crucified Christ.’ Whoever falls under this deception of the devil worships his own delusions instead of the true God. Whoever breaks through this deception into true despair before the hidden God, he is already halfway helped. But whoever in boldness, ‘drunk with joy, in this way means already to be sitting on God’s lap,’ he is hard to help. These are *delusiones Satanae*, ‘*qui fascinat sensus hominum, ut talia mendacia pro certissima veritate amplectantur*’ “ Vogelsang, 37, quoting Luther, WA 39 I; 390, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Vogelsang, 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

context of the medieval notion of *homo viator*.<sup>11</sup> According to this idea, the Christian is held in tension between hope and security on the one hand, and fear and unrest on the other, as he is aware of God's mercy and goodness in the past and present, and his judgment in the future. He sees Christ as incarnate in the past, experiences his grace infused into his heart in the present, and looks to Christ as judge in the future. This situation produces *Anfechtung*. The predominant medieval solution to this problem was that man's status as *homo viator* could be suspended only in proportion to the degree in which he was no longer sinful in fact. To the extent that one grew in faith formed by love, one could enter into fuller mystical union with God and experience the peace and ecstasy which were the relief from *Anfechtung* and the threat of judgment.<sup>12</sup>

Although Luther shares the goal of overcoming the status of *homo viator* with the medieval mystical tradition, his means for reaching that goal is radically different. Luther sees the Christian, who is *simul justus et peccator*, not as looking back to the mercy of God and ahead to his judgment, but as simultaneously experiencing both. God's mercy and his judgment have been reconciled literally and historically in the person of Jesus Christ. This becomes a reality for the Christian by faith. Thus the radical break from the medieval mystical tradition is that the Christian knows and experiences the love of God and suspension from his status as *homo viator* while still a sinner in fact, and this is accomplished by means of faith, not love.

In more general terms, Luther objected to the lack of emphasis placed on *Anfechtung* in Romanic mysticism, and especially to the fact that while he placed spiritual *Anfechtung* in the forefront, Romanic mysticism spoke only of bodily *Anfechtung*.<sup>13</sup> Also, while not denying the importance of bridal mysticism,<sup>14</sup> Luther objected to the deep eroticism of it, which he considered to be in opposition to faith, in the Victorines and Bernard. He accepted it insofar as one may share in Christ's life, but asserted that one may never possess the whole Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Most important, Luther objected to the Romanic vision of an ecstatic union of the uncreated Word, without the medium of the external Word. However, this was not the only current flowing in medieval mysticism. As Vogelsang observes:

The critique is clear: only through the incarnate and crucified do we have entrance to the eternal, incomprehensible; only through the revealed do we have the hidden God. Nevertheless, with that the properly Lutheran word to mysticism has not yet been spoken; for Bernard and Bonaventure also spoke similar warnings and criticisms; indeed, here Luther appears simply to be speaking a customary warning of these church mystics of the middle ages.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The following argument is based on Steven E. Ozment, "Homo Viator- Luther and Late Medieval Theology," in Steven E. Ozment, ed., *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971), 142-54.

<sup>12</sup> In connection with this point Oberman distinguishes between Dionysian and Romanic mysticism. In the Romanic view, the Christian who is in the process of loving union with God must indeed lose his identity, but this identity is not the individuality of *homo viator* (Dionysian view), but rather the distortion of his image under the influence of sin. Oberman, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Vogelsang, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Although this paper will not deal with Luther's use of bridal mysticism, the subject is certainly interesting. Luther sees it as the marriage of the Christian to Christ in faith which involves their "joyous exchange" (*frohliche Wechsehl*) of sin and righteousness. See, for example, Luther's treatise "On the Freedom of a Christian" in LW 31: 351.

<sup>15</sup> Hoffman, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Vogelsang, 34.

Luther clearly esteemed Bernard and Bonaventure and apparently was more influenced by their approach to affective, experiential theology than by that of any other theologian of the middle ages. He borrowed one of his definitions of mysticism from Bernard: “*theologia mystica est sapientia experimentalis et non doctrinalis*” (mystical theology is experimental [or experiential] and not doctrinal knowledge).<sup>17</sup> Of Bonaventure he stated, “*Bonaventura...est inter scholasticos doctores optimus* (Among the scholastic doctors, Bonaventure is the best).<sup>18</sup> His high esteem of these two theologians was due to their emphasis, contrary to the Dionysian school, on incarnation and cross, death and judgment. “Bernard held the incarnation of Christ very dear just as Bonaventure; I certainly praise both of them very much.”<sup>19</sup> On another point, he applauds Bonaventure’s approach in combining speculative and affective theology: “...he had made me quite beside myself, because I wanted to feel the union of God with my soul as a union of the intellect and of the will.”<sup>20</sup>

In summary, Luther was sometimes strongly in favor of, and sometimes strongly against Romanic mysticism. In keeping with his customary eclecticism, he accepted certain elements of the tradition, especially those set forth by Bernard and Bonaventure, without buying into the entire system. Moreover, he was able to borrow various aspects of it to suit his own purposes:

Here is repeated the hermeneutical precedent proper to Luther, that he appropriates mystical means of expression, in order to have his way with his own understanding of grace, e.g. against the understanding of grace as *habitus* by the scholastics. But at the same time he interprets their [the mystics’] means of speech in the horizon of his Word-theology.<sup>21</sup>

While Luther’s acceptance of both Dionysian and Romanic mysticism is qualified, his enthusiasm for Germanic mysticism is almost unlimited, especially that of Tauler and of the Frankfurter in the *Theologica Germanica*. He also highly appreciated Gerson, who could be considered to represent a transitional step from Romanic to German mysticism. His use and regard of Gerson, according to Oberman, can be traced back through the levels of his commentaries on the Psalms to two years before the discovery of Tauler in his writings.<sup>22</sup> This esteem is reflected in his comments, “Gerson is the first to have arrived at grasping the point of theology; he also experienced many *Anfechtungen*”<sup>23</sup> and “Gerson is the only one, who has written about spiritual *Anfechtung*.”<sup>24</sup>

This emphasis on spiritual *Anfechtung*, on the necessity of despairing of oneself, and on unconditional resignation to the will of God appears to be what Luther valued most in Tauler and the Frankfurter. Regarding them he said, “I have found more of true theology in him [Tauler] than in all the doctors of all universities taken together,”<sup>25</sup> and “Neither in the Latin nor in the

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<sup>17</sup> WA 9; 98, 20.

<sup>18</sup> WA Tr 1; 330, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, WA 43; 581, 11 quoted by Vogelsang, 38.

<sup>20</sup> WA Tr 1; 302, 30-34.

<sup>21</sup> Karl-Heinz zur Muhlen, *Nos Extra Nos: Luthers Theologie zwischen Mystik und Scholastik* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1972), 200.

<sup>22</sup> Oberman, 33.

<sup>23</sup> WA Tr 2; 114, 1-3.

<sup>24</sup> WA Tr 1; 496, 7.

<sup>25</sup> WA 1; 557, 29.

German language have I seen a theology which is more salutary or more in overall agreement with the gospel.”<sup>26</sup>

Oberman has made the point that one cannot lump together Luther, the Frankfurter, and Tauler in a generalized German mysticism; there are noticeable differences between them, and it is worth remembering that Luther speaks highly of German *theology* not Germanic *mysticism*.<sup>27</sup> As was true of Romanic mysticism, Luther’s use of the terminology of Germanic mysticism must be understood in the context in which he is using it. Steinmetz agrees: “The only way to make progress in understanding the relationship of Luther to the mystical tradition is to discover the meaning Luther assigns to those parts of the tradition he actually uses.”<sup>28</sup> It is indisputable that attempting to discern Luther’s intent in his use of mystical terminology and considering the context of his usage are essential procedures to follow in interpreting Luther. Nevertheless, recognizing his affinity for Tauler and the Frankfurter and establishing his points of agreement with them can help to distinguish the understanding of mysticism they shared from the more monistic nature mysticism of, for example, Meister Eckhart.<sup>29</sup>

### MYSTICISM AS *SAPIENTIA EXPERIMENTALIS*

To the extent that it is possible to summarize Luther’s approach to mysticism as it has been described above, we can say that Luther regarded mysticism as the experiential side of Christianity. This is supported by the fact that Luther devoted little energy to definitions of mysticism, but was content to describe it as *sapientia experimentalis*. Mysticism is the Christian’s personal experience of the presence of God in his life, and although he can compare and contrast his experience with that of others and borrow their terminology to express it, much of it remains outside, above, and beyond the fields of logic and speech. That Luther’s emphasis is on experience is clear also from the manner in which Luther related to mystical theologians:

When we say that Luther was mystical in the sense that he recognized the presence of spiritual friends among mystics we are actually saying ...not that he owed conceptual debts to mysticism but that he found some of its expressions of immediate divine presence congenial with his own deepest experience.<sup>30</sup>

Luther was *in* the tradition of mysticism, but not *of* it. Oberman claims that Luther, whom he apparently places in the *via moderna* camp, did not value “mystical” authors such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugh of St. Victor so much for their mysticism as for their piety. “*Via moderna* and *devotio moderna* are both more strongly interested in *theologia affectiva* than *theologia speculativa*, the ascetic than the mystic, *contemplatio acquisita* than *contemplatio infusa*.”<sup>31</sup>

But even more closely than he related mysticism to piety, Luther integrally connected religious experience with God’s gift of righteousness through faith in Christ. There is a tension between imputation and experience in Luther’s theology, and the objective is definitely emphasized. Nevertheless, *Erfahrung* (experience) is clearly a part of the picture of salvation for him. The external Word is meant for, and must reach, the heart and the will, where it is

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<sup>26</sup> WA Br 1; 79, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Oberman, 39.

<sup>28</sup> Steinmetz, 128.

<sup>29</sup> Bengt, Hoffman, *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 19-20.

<sup>30</sup> Hoffman, 122.

<sup>31</sup> Oberman, 38.

experienced internally. Implicit in God's words "for you" is that one's whole self will be engaged in justification by faith, not just the intellect.

But since this is a matter of faith, also *Erfahrung* cannot be circumscribed and categorized:

The Christ faith is a being taken away (*raptus*) and a being carried off (*translatio*) from all that is experiential (*fuhlbar*) inwardly or outwardly to that which is experiential neither inwardly or outwardly, toward God, the invisible, the totally exalted, inconceivable.<sup>32</sup>

Steinmetz calls this

...dumb amazement in the presence of a mystery which can be experienced but never reduced to dogmatic and rational propositions. Faith elevates the mind to rapture and ecstasy, or, as Luther insists, to supreme repose and silence as well. Faith penetrates the cloud beyond thinking and speaking where God dwells.<sup>33</sup>

The interrelationship between faith and experience—as well as mention of the importance of *Anfechtung*, and the inclusion of the ultimate involvement of the intellect—is expressed beautifully by Luther in his commentary on the *Magnificat* (1521):

It is as if she said: "My life and all my senses float in the love and praise of God and in lofty pleasures, so that I am no longer mistress of myself; I am exalted, more than I exalt myself, to praise the Lord." This is the experience of all those who are saturated with the divine sweetness and Spirit: they cannot find words to utter what they feel. For to praise the Lord with gladness is not a work of man; it is rather a joyful suffering and the work of God alone. It cannot be taught in words but must be learned in one's own experience. Even as David says in Psalm 34:8: "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is sweet; blessed is the man that trusts in him." He puts tasting before seeing, because this sweetness cannot be known unless one has experienced and felt it for himself; and no one can attain to such experience unless he trusts in God with his whole heart when he is in the depths and in sore straits. Therefore David makes haste to add, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in God." Such a person will experience the work of God within himself and will thus attain to the His sensible sweetness and through it to all knowledge and understanding.<sup>34</sup>

Although Luther describes this mystical experience in terms as magnificent as those used by any mystical theologian, it is never the center of his focus, nor is it the stratospheric pinnacle of the believer's life. Instead, it is always part and parcel of Christian faith and life as a whole, neither exaggerated nor divorced from the rest. For this reason, it is an integral, but never overemphasized part of Luther's theology.

...it is downright dangerous to detach the mystical texture from Luther's living spirituality... it is much more a piece and component of his conception of the gospel in

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<sup>32</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 29: 149.

<sup>33</sup> Steinmetz, 139.

<sup>34</sup> LW 21: 302.

general and so encompasses his understanding of faith and justification, his hermeneutic, ecclesiology, and pneumatology.<sup>35</sup>

This point will become even more clear as I examine various distinctive features of Luther's mysticism below.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF LUTHER'S MYSTICISM

The following factors, though not unique to Luther's mysticism, are components of a mystical theology which, as a whole, belongs to Luther alone: central role of the means of grace, especially the Word; emphasis on the incarnate Christ versus the uncreated Word, and theology of the cross. These will be examined in turn; other somewhat more peripheral, or less distinctive aspects of Luther's theology of mysticism may be considered along with them. Before doing this, however, it may be helpful to examine a conceptual thread which runs through and helps unify these notions, and that is Luther's perspective of the believer as *simul gemitus et raptus* (groaning and enraptured at the same time). Gemitus is the religious effect engendered by God's awesomeness. God-given faith brings man into *gemitus*, in which the self knows itself as a sinner and so is radically humbled before God. This very humility is an important mark of the Christian's identification with Christ:

Therefore if you look for a sign of the grace of God or wonder whether Christ himself is in you: no other sign is given you but the sign of the prophet Jonah. Therefore if you have been in hell for three days, that is the sign of the fact that Christ is in you and you are with Christ.<sup>36</sup>

Raptus is reliance on the righteousness of Christ outside ourselves in which we are overwhelmed by the mystical vision of Christ and experience a transformation of our affections and trust. Luther uses *raptus* similarly to *extra nos* to emphasize our passivity in justification; therefore *raptus* applies to all believers, not only those who have reached the highest plane of "high mysticism."<sup>37</sup>

The *locus* for Luther's understanding of the relationship between *gemitus* and *raptus* is his commentary on Psalm 116:11. It should be noted that *simul gemitus et raptus* is a part of Luther's concept of *excessus mentis* and of *ecstasis*.

*I have said in my consternation: Every man is a liar.* This is the ecstasy by which he is through faith elevated above himself, so that he may see the future blessings. Otherwise he, too, was a lying man, but when he was put in ecstasy, he transcended lying and was made truthful by faith. And therefore he sees that those whom he saw loving vanity and neglecting faith are liars, because they regard as good the things that are not. And when they are exceedingly humbled, they consider themselves to be exalted. And therefore it is wonderful how he says that he is at the same time humbled and in ecstasy, but because he knows himself humbled and wretched through the ecstasy. They, however, have not been

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<sup>35</sup> Oberman, 21.

<sup>36</sup> WA 3; 433, 2-4.

<sup>37</sup> Oberman, 54.

humbled (that is, they do not acknowledge it), because they are not yet in ecstasy, but in the transitoriness of lying.<sup>38</sup>

If we highlight the phrases “when he was put in ecstasy ...he was made truthful by faith” and “They, however, have not been humbled ...because they are not yet in ecstasy,” it becomes clear that Luther is regarding ecstasy as contemporaneous with justification, forgiveness, and faith. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that this is not the normative experience of all Christians, nor that it is arrived at by spiritual exercises or a ladder of ascent. “In Luther’s “faith ecstasy” man does not climb up to God, but God climbs down into the darkness of man.”<sup>39</sup> Since the initiative is God’s, it also follows that one ought not seek the experience of religious ecstasy for its own sake, or even for the seemingly altruistic motive of having yet another *reason* for praising God:

God is not to be praised because of what he has given us but because of what he is in himself. The ecstatic faith finds its high point in the adoration of the Holy Trinity, without the worshiper asking what he receives for himself through his faith. God is simply worthy to be praised by all his creatures.<sup>40</sup>

In summary, Luther inherited a tradition of religious experience which used specific terms to define that experience. Luther uses the same terms but gives them new definitions in order for them to be consonant with what he believed to be the central teaching of Holy Scripture, faith in the promise of God. Accordingly *simul gemitus et raptus* became all but identical to *simul iustus et peccator*. As a result Luther evidenced his genius as a reformer: he neither abandoned the tradition nor violated clear scriptural principles. As Steinmetz says, “Luther continuously fills the old wineskins of scholastic and mystical theology with a new and heady wine.”<sup>41</sup>

A logical consequence of Luther’s association of religious ecstasy with justification, faith, and forgiveness is that the proclaimed Word of God plays a central role in Luther’s mysticism. Since faith is a response to the proclamation of Holy Scripture, ecstasy also does not exist in a vacuum, but is called into existence through the work of God the Holy Spirit using the means of the external Word. This ensures that true religious ecstasy is God’s work, not man’s. It also underscores that Christian mystical experience is not only affective but also cognitive. The Word of God is the means which grants understanding to faith<sup>42</sup>, understood both forensically and experientially.

Scripture, therefore, is not just to be viewed as a catalyst for the affections, later to be left behind. Instead of discarding the external Word after it leads to *meditatio* and *contemplatio*, Luther recommends the reading and, we would assume, hearing of Scripture continually in connection with meditation; he says that true meditation is reading and rereading<sup>43</sup>; Luther is referring to the Gospel in Word and Sacrament when he says that if Abraham had seen what we have now, he would have died of wonder and joy. In fact, Luther held the value and efficaciousness of the external means of grace so highly that he reveals that he made a compact

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<sup>38</sup> LW 11:408-09.

<sup>39</sup> Miiikka Ruokanen, “Luther und Ekstase,” *Kerygma und Dogmatik* 32, no. 2, 145.

<sup>40</sup> Ruokanen, 146.

<sup>41</sup> Steinmetz, 128.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>43</sup> WA 50; 659, 22-24.



with God not to give him visions or send an angel to him, because the Bible and the sacraments are sufficient.<sup>44</sup>

The importance of faith for religious experience is perhaps Luther's strongest emphasis. In marginal notes on the mystical theologian John Tauler, Luther remarks that the truly spiritual person is the one who relies on faith.<sup>45</sup> Where earlier mystics spoke of the importance of knowledge, and especially love, in mystical experience, Luther substitutes faith. In his interpretation of Luther, Ruokanen goes so far as to say that if we attempt to approach God through our love, we will find that *amor ecstaticus* is fanatic and a demonic ecstasy of one's own passions.<sup>46</sup>

Faith, on the other hand, exists *extra sensum* and *contra sensum*, under conditions which actually stand in opposition to knowledge of God. For Luther the perfect "negative" theology is precisely a theology of faith, a knowledge of God in the sense of theology of the cross *per contrarium* and not the dionysian *per negativum*.

This holiness of the spirit is the scene of the sorest conflict and the source of the greatest danger. It consists in nothing else than in faith pure and simple, since the spirit has nothing to do with things comprehensible, as we have seen.<sup>47</sup>

The Word of promise creates faith which then believes what is contrary to the evidence which the eye can see: the presence of God in Christ, in the church, and in the individual soul. This is true religious experience.

Faith in the face of apparent contradictions plays an important role also in Luther's understanding of the incarnate and crucified Christ, hidden and revealed, as the object of mystical contemplation. He doesn't seem to be surprised at all that the hidden God should lie behind the revealed God, but explains that all the things that are to be believed must be hidden in order for faith to play a role; faith deals with "things which do not appear" (Heb. 11:1). A baby in a manger and a dead man on a cross don't appear to be likely starting points for learning about and experiencing God, but they are precisely where one must begin. All knowledge of God leads to errors, which does not

...begin from below, from the Word and from the history of the Incarnate and the Crucified. Begin from below, from the incarnate Son ...Christ will bring you to the hidden God ...hold that fast and for certain: when you receive the revealed God, he will take you along to the hidden God.<sup>48</sup>

We do not construct our own ladder of ascent to God; rather, the humanity of Jesus Christ is the ladder by which we ascend to knowledge of God.<sup>49</sup> This would be expected in Luther's theology. It is not by any effort of our own that we are justified; similarly, it is not by a man-centered process of purgation, illumination, and perfection that we gain access to religious experience. The work is God's from first to last, and it has the incarnate Christ as its focus from first to last:

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<sup>44</sup> Ruokanen, 136.

<sup>45</sup> WA 9; 103, 37.

<sup>46</sup> Ruokanen, 143.

<sup>47</sup> LW 21: 304.

<sup>48</sup> WA Tr V, Nr. 5668a.

<sup>49</sup> B0A 5; 345, 4-5.

‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith’ and our sins are forgiven, ‘we have access and peace,’ but only ‘through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ This also applies to those who follow the mystical theology and struggle in inner darkness, omitting all pictures of Christ’s suffering, wishing to hear and contemplate only the uncreated Word himself, but not having first been justified and purged in the eyes of their heart through the incarnate Word. For the incarnate Word is first necessary for the purity of the heart, and only when one has this purity, can he through this Word be taken up spiritually into the uncreated Word. But who is there who thinks that he is so pure that he dares aspire to this level unless he is called and led into the rapture by God, as was the case with the apostle Paul, or unless he is ‘taken up with Peter, James, and John, his brother’ (Matt. 17:1)?<sup>50</sup>

Luther further warns that it is dangerous for the Christian’s goal to be the vision of the unveiled divine Majesty rather than union with the God-man:

Begin your search with Christ and stay with him and cleave to him, and if your own thoughts and reason, or another man’s, would lead you elsewhere, shut your eyes and say: I should and will know of no other God than Christ, my Lord ...But if you abandon this clear prospect, and climb up to God’s Majesty on high, you must stumble, fear and fall because you have withdrawn yourself from God’s grace, and have dared to stare at the Majesty unveiled, which is too high and overpowering for you. For apart from Christ, Nature can neither perceive nor attain the grace and love of God, and apart from him is nothing but wrath and condemnation.<sup>51</sup>

In fact, Luther regarded ecstatic experiences which did not exalt Christ to be demonic, ecstasies which originated from the devil.<sup>52</sup>

The final reason for not departing from God’s revelation in Christ is that to do so is to deprecate Christ, to regard him as insufficient or lacking in some way. What God wants us to know, he has revealed in Christ; the mysteries and secret things of the mind of God which have not been revealed through him are simply not intended for us.

We say, as we have said before, that the secret will of the Divine Majesty is not a matter for debate, and the human temerity which with continual perversity is always neglecting necessary things in its eagerness to probe this one, must be called off and restrained from busying itself with the investigation of these secrets of God’s majesty, which it is impossible to penetrate because he dwells in light inaccessible, as Paul testifies (1 Tim. 6:16). Let it occupy itself instead with God incarnate, or as Paul puts it, with Jesus crucified, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, though in a hidden manner (Col. 2:3); for through him it is furnished abundantly with what it ought to know and ought not to know.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> LW 25:287-88.

<sup>51</sup> WA 28; 101-102.

<sup>52</sup> Ruokanen, 142.

<sup>53</sup> Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will,” in E.G. Rupp & P.S. Watson, eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 206.

Here the emphasis clearly is placed specifically on Christ crucified, not more generally on Christ incarnate. This leads to the final aspect of Luther's mysticism which will be considered, his theology of the cross.

To focus on Christ crucified as of central importance to God's revelation and to cling to him as the basis of one's justification and faith is to know what pattern one's religious experience will follow. It will not consist in soaring higher and higher through the ranks of celestial hierarchies by means of one's own efforts. Instead, it will be a walk with the crucified Lord. The believer does indeed desire to ascend by faith beyond this world to heaven, but it is precisely in being "caught" between heaven and earth that he identifies with Christ:

Faith causes the heart to cling fast to celestial things and to be carried away to dwell in things that are invisible ...For this is how it happens that the believer hangs between heaven and earth ...that is, that in Christ he is suspended in the air and crucified.<sup>54</sup>

If the believer is looking for religious ecstasy, he can do no better than to imitate the crucified Christ:

The first ecstatic One was precisely Christ himself, when he was completely emptied and carried away on the cross and had to cry, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" This ecstasy of emptying is, according to Luther, *purissima illuminatio mentis* (the most pure illumination of the mind).<sup>55</sup>

And so we've come full circle. The believer is *simul gemitus et raptus* as he is mystically joined with Christ in his crucifixion.

In addition, *theologia crucis* has a practical aspect. Luther's contemporaries also spoke of a *theologia crucis*. Like him, they understood it to mean that the only way to heaven was through the cross of Christ, and they also placed the emphasis on Christ *for* us rather than Christ *in* us. But they also spoke of it as lifting us out of this veil of tears, while Luther said that God kept us in this world to test us, and to lead us to identify with Christ's cross and suffering.<sup>56</sup> His emphasis gives this world and our experiences in it not only real value, but eternal value, and therefore motivates us to continue the struggle as we "hang suspended" between heaven and earth with Christ.

At the same time, we have also returned to the vital role played by faith, because God is both hidden and revealed in the crucified Christ. Only the Word of God can reveal to us that the man hanging on the cross is the Son of God. That Word at the same time reveals that the crucified Christ is both judgment and salvation for us; it unmask us as sinners and, through faith in its promise, transports us outside of ourselves to God.<sup>57</sup> We are *simul gemitus et raptus*, and in keeping with this the *theologia crucis* cannot be a theology of ascent and access, but a theology of the Word and of faith.

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<sup>54</sup> LW 29: 185.

<sup>55</sup> Ruokanen, 144.

<sup>56</sup> Oberman, 42.

<sup>57</sup> Zur Muehlen, 203.

## CONCLUSION

Martin Luther was both the most radical and the most conservative of reformers. Any human teaching or philosophy which, intentionally or unintentionally, pushed Christ, justification by faith, and the authority of the Word of God out of center stage was to be purged from the church. Not a gradual shift, but an abrupt about-face back to the roots of historic Christianity was required. On the other hand, matters of *e.g.* biblical interpretation or church usage which had not become entirely perverted, but into which abuse had crept, were to be retained if they could be restored to their original purity.

Luther's genius is reflected in the way he applied this principle to the tradition of religious ecstasy. Although he found much to criticize, he also recognized in it something which was clearly spoken of in Holy Scripture and which "rang true" to his own experience. His response was to take this central element of medieval theology and shape it by, and then interweave it with, his own biblical theology. He did this first of all by regarding it not as the exceptional experience of a select few who have reached the pinnacle of sanctification, but the common treasure of all who have been justified by faith, a treasure which is the foundation, rather than the fruition of Christian life.

He then went on to recognize that if justification is completely dependent on God's initiative and man is pure passive, then religious experience must also be a gift of God and not an achievement based on the arduous endeavors of man. Since God regularly deals with us through means, there was no reason for religious ecstasy to be an exception, and this established the vital importance of the Word. Since Christ is the center of Scripture, the only acceptable approach to Christian mysticism must be a christocentric approach. In the incarnate and crucified Christ God is both hidden and revealed; this reaffirms the central role of faith, because only by faith can the almighty God be perceived in the crucified Christ, and only by perceiving him there can we realize that our union with him is not a matter of our piercing through the fortifications of his heavenly castle, but of his descending to enter the shrine of our hearts.

*Ach mein herzliebes Jesulein,  
Mach dir ein rein sanft Bettelein,  
Zu ruhen in meins Herzens Schrein,  
Dass ich nimmer vergesse dein.*<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Luther, *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch* (Hannover: Lutherisches Lerlaghaus, 1986). Translation from *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1942).

Ah, dearest Jesus holy Child  
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,  
Within my heart, that it may be  
A quiet chamber kept for thee.