Luther’s Mysticism, Pietism, and Contemplative Spirituality

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To ask, “Why church?” certainly stirs multilayered theological, missional, ecclesial, and pastoral reflection. The question also has spiritual ramifications. To explore some of them, we will trace a thread of the Lutheran spiritual tradition from Martin Luther’s own “faith mysticism” through particular aspects of German pietism. That overview will provide a foundation for engaging the contemporary contemplative movement, in order to discern how its concepts and practices might provide insight for the practice of spirituality. Our conviction is that deepening the interior journey through a living, active faith leads not to withdrawal but to an awareness—even a vulnerability—that welcomes a healthy struggle with the realities of our world.

Such a faith-rooted interiority can be challenging, for many reasons. Our intellectual acuity can induce us to believe that the question of “Why church?” is simply a theological problem to be solved or a matter of reclarification of mission—all of which resides in the realm of control. Courageously opening ourselves in faith to a contemplative space—and thereby to our often dark, inner worlds—can lead to surrendering our need to control. Such openness to the inward does not sublimate the mind but, by grace, results in a vital integration

The long tradition of Christian contemplative spirituality, from the middle ages through Luther and the Lutheran pietists, provides a rich resource for re-envisioning the Christian community and the divisions within it, as well as between it and the larger world.
of head and heart. “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of. . . . We know the truth not only by the reason, but by the heart.”

As the inner journey inevitably takes us through our unique shadowlands, we become acutely aware of our need for God. Perhaps the church’s uncertain future is offering us—both as individuals and as institutions—a spiritual invitation.

**Luther’s “Faith Mysticism”**

Tracking the thread of a Lutheran spiritual tradition must begin with Martin Luther and his relationship to mysticism. Bernard McGinn defines late-medieval mysticism as “a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it.”

Along similar lines, Berndt Hamm describes mysticism as “a personal, direct, and holistic experience of the blessed nearness of God, which leads all the way to a profound union with God.” These depictions underscore the experiential, unitive nature of the mystical path; Hamm calls it an important aspect of “pre-Reformation pastoral theology.”

Without question, there has been considerable scholarly debate around Luther’s relationship to mysticism and whether or not the mature Luther outgrew any early mystical leanings. Nevertheless, Hamm (confidently) declares that more than ever scholarship is open to seeing Luther as “the founder of an evangelical mysticism and as someone at home in a Protestant mystical spirituality.”

Luther’s perspective has been called “faith mysticism.” Three aspects of his understanding are pertinent to this investigation. First, Luther’s own spiritual journey involved experiences with the living God. Late in life he described his (oft-debated) “tower experience”: “All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. . . . I exalted this sweetest word of mine, ‘the justice of God,’ with as much love as before I had hated it with hate.”

In language that recalls Paul’s vision of the third heaven (2 Cor 12:1–4), Luther’s experience [Erfahrung] of the nearness and in-breaking of God utilizes mystical language; it was nearly inexpressible and was facilitated as much through the heart as through the mind.

1 Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts* 6:423.
5 Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 193.
7 Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 191.
Hamm suggests that Luther distinctively interwove a rational scholastic theology with “the affective level of experiential mystical theology.”

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Second, Luther spoke directly of the union of the soul with Christ through faith. Luther summoned the metaphor of marriage to describe that union, building on Bernard of Clairvaux’s mystical elucidation of the Song of Solomon. In his 1520 tract on the freedom of a Christian, Luther employs Paul’s marriage imagery (Eph 5:21–33): “The third incomparable benefit of faith is this: that it unites the soul with Christ, like a bride with a bridegroom. By this ‘mystery’ (as Paul teaches), Christ and the soul are made one flesh.” The marital, unitive metaphor is grounded in faith, and Luther employs christological language to augment the metaphor. Even as Christ’s two natures, human and divine, unite in one person without being conflated, so does the soul unite with Christ through faith. The incarnation becomes for Luther the underpinning for the wondrous exchange—the communicatio idiomatum [communication of properties]—in which the attributes of Christ and the sinner are exchanged: “For if he is the groom, then he should simultaneously both accept the things belonging to the bride and impart to the bride those things that are his.” The miracle of the incarnation became Luther’s basis for the mystical union between Christ and his bride.

Third, Luther’s faith mysticism was rooted in a theology of descent. Certain streams of mysticism, such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, used “ascent” images for the spiritual life, in which the soul climbs a divine ladder into union with God. Luther resisted any facet of mysticism that spoke of steps up a ladder or an ordo salutis [order of salvation]. Instead of the sinner moving upward to perfection, Hamm insists that for Luther, “Christ moves downward to the unholy sinner in a radical mysticism of descent.” It is here that Luther’s unique faith mysticism intersects with and encompasses his theology of the cross and becomes “a mysticism of Anfechtung.” Through the incarnation, God descends the mystical ladder to enter fully into human brokenness and anxiety. Only with eyes of faith is the blinded sinner able to see and to trust God’s work sub contrario [under the guise of its opposite]. It is this mysticism of descent that drew Luther to mystics

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10 Hamm, The Early Luther, 231–32.
13 Hamm, The Early Luther, 205.
14 Hamm, The Early Luther, 221. Luther used Anfechtung to portray a sense of being inundated by affliction, despair, dread, and spiritual crisis, with a corresponding sense of being abandoned by God.
like Johann Tauler and the anonymous author of *Theologia Germanica*, for which Luther wrote a Foreword in 1518. Luther found a companion in Tauler for his battle with *Anfechtung* and the damnable paradox that God’s (apparent) abandonment leaves us only a faith that desperately clings to our union with Christ.

**“Experience” in Pietism**

If the mystical nature of Luther’s theology has proven contentious, demarcating pietism has likewise stirred extensive scholarly debate. For our purposes, we will narrow the scope of pietism and define it as a “new reformation” within the Lutheran church in Germany, which sought to revive the church through personal spiritual renewal. Represented by Philip Spener’s *Pia Desideria* and August Francke’s institutions at Halle, it was one exemplar of the transatlantic spiritual revival and awakening in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The pietists saw themselves as reformers of the reformation, a “new” or “second” reformation. Early pietism can be characterized by its outspoken critique of what it saw as “abuses” in the Lutheran church, by a focus on practical godliness [*praxis pietatis*], and by their emphasis on a living, active faith.

The pietists were successors to the renewing work of Johann Arndt, whose *True Christianity* (1606) would become the most popular devotional work in German Protestantism. Like Luther and Arndt, they were also drawn to Tauler and *Theologia Germanica*. But when it came to Luther’s own writings, the single most important work, far and away, was his 1545 “Introduction to Romans”.

Faith is a work of God in us, which changes us and brings us to birth anew from God (cf. John 1). It kills the old Adam, makes us completely different people in heart, mind, senses, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. What a living, creative, active, powerful thing is faith! It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn’t ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them.

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Two observations about the pietist use of this text warrant attention. First, Luther’s language about a “living, creative, active, powerful” faith is echoed in the pietist stress on an experiential, inward, heart faith that unites a believer with God. The pietists frequently employed words like rebirth, conversion, and new birth to describe the transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. In language that carries overtones of Eastern Orthodox theosis [divinization], pietists followed Arndt by describing the journey of faith as the recovery, renewal, or restoration of the image of God in the human person.24 Whatever the vocabulary, the focus was on the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about transformation through a living, experiential faith. However, one difference between Luther and pietism is worth noting. On the surface there are parallels between Luther’s struggle with Anfechtung and the pietist emphasis on Bußkampf—the struggle of repentance. But Luther’s battle with Anfechtung continued, and was even intensified, after his paradisiacal tower experience, while, even though the pietists experienced the outward realities of suffering for and under the cross, they found little room for the interiority of Luther’s enduring struggle. Bußkampf was, by and large, a preparatory part of rebirth.

A second observation around Luther’s “Introduction to Romans” is that pietists insisted that faith inexorably result in good works and active engagement with the world. “It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn’t ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them.” A key maxim for pietism is that transformed individuals transform the world. Luther’s mysticism prioritized faith; pietists lifted up a living faith active in works. Justification by faith led inevitably to a praxis pietatis. While pietism’s experiential faith has often been misrepresented as individualistic and subjective, at the very least it was also missional and activist, especially as evidenced in the wide-ranging enterprises of Francke and Halle, including education, a ministry with orphans and widows, international missions, and Bible translation and distribution. The extent of pietism’s missional activism far surpassed anything previously seen in

Protestantism. And its source was a living, creative, active, powerful faith that could never stop doing good.

**Contemporary Contemplative Comparisons**

The last decades have seen a mounting interest in contemplative spirituality, among clergy and laity across faith traditions. Initial seeds planted by Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, and others have been nourished and propagated by the likes of Franciscan Richard Rohr, Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault, psychologist-author David G. Benner, and African American activist-scholar Barbara Holmes. Our specific purpose is to investigate potential connections between some of the key themes in the contemporary contemplative movement and what we have noted in Luther and pietism.

First, contemplative spirituality begins with the interior journey. The practice of centering prayer or contemplation begins at a place of quiet and inner stillness, beyond words, thoughts, or images. Its theological basis, says Bourgeault, resides in *kenosis* (Phil 2:5–11), “Jesus’s self-emptying love that forms the core of his own self-understanding and life practice.” The overall intent is to reorient how we see ourselves—to join God in knowing ourselves as God knows us—and how we thereby engage the seemingly incomprehensible chaos of our world. Surrendering rational control in contemplation is not anti-rationalism or intellectual naiveté but, rather, anchoring the mind in heart and body. In the words of Barbara Holmes, “This contemplative moment is a spiritual event that kisses the cognitive but will not be enslaved to its rigidities.” Contemplative-activist Howard Thurman highlighted the importance of this centering: “It is in the waiting, brooding, lingering, tarrying timeless moments that the essence of the religious experience becomes most fruitful.”

At the end of some lengthy homiletical reflections, in which Luther scolds himself for his verbosity in expounding the simple sufficiency of God’s incomparable word, he writes: “It is an infinite word and must be contemplated and grasped with a quiet mind, as Psalm 84 [85:8] says: ‘I will hear...”

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26 In this essay I use the terms *centering prayer* and *contemplation* interchangeably, although technically there are differences. Parallels could also be drawn with the current (more secular) interest in mindfulness. For a primer on centering prayer, see Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 175–81.


28 Thanks to James Finley for this language.

29 Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 3–.

what God himself will speak within me.’ None but such a quiet, contemplative mind can grasp it.”31

Second, this inward, contemplative journey requires a daring openness to becoming aware of the denied darkness in our unconscious selves. In silence, solitude, and stillness, we are left alone with just ourselves and God—and, more often than not, God is silent. It is just here that Luther’s mysticism of descent and Anfechtung aligns not only with Tauler and Theologia Germanica, but also with contemporaries Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross. The anonymous fourteenth-century author of The Cloud of Unknowing verbalizes this downward-oriented mysticism: “The first time you practice contemplation, you’ll only experience darkness, like a cloud of unknowing. You won’t know what this is. You’ll only know that in your will you feel a simple reaching out to God. . . . So, be sure you make your home in this darkness.”32 For modern contemplative writers, “unknowing” and darkness are to be expected and are necessary to the path of surrender so the mind becomes embedded in the heart. In addition, the hopelessness and helplessness of our modern Anfechtung curb any narcissistic mysticism of ascent. Rather, as Luther understood, suffering funnels us to faith. Merton would concur: “Nothing so easily becomes unholy as suffering. . . . Suffering is consecrated to God by faith—not by faith in suffering, but by faith in God.”33

Lastly, persisting in one’s ever-unfolding interior work deepens compassion and love. Contemplation and action are not opposites but rather flourish and intermingle with each other, something pietism stressed. Love and oneness, which are the dominant themes in mystical writings, mark the essential “bottom line” for most contemplative writers. Jesus invited the disciples to “abide” in his love (John 15:9), in a oneness he modeled with the Father. In reflections on Francis of Assisi, Rohr states: “A heart transformed by this realization of oneness knows that only love ‘in here’ can spot and enjoy love ‘out there.’”34 Oneness with God becomes the source for love of God and neighbor. David Benner writes: “This is not life in a psychotic fog of enmeshment. . . . Slowly we begin to see that both the one and the many are held together in the One—the Eternal Godhead. And as we come to know our self within this One, we also come to know our oneness with all that is held by the One.”35 This contemporary laser focus on mystical love and oneness raises the question of the place of faith, so central to Luther’s own mysticism. Hamm contends that Luther made a “radical break” with medieval love mysticism in favor of his distinctive faith mysticism. 36 Hoffman, however, maintains that in “Luther’s inner harmony with some mystics, faith and love become

35 Benner, Spirituality and the Awakening Self, 145.
36 Hamm, The Early Luther, 214.
interchangeable.” At the very least, Luther would bring a healthy portion of faith to the mystical stew of love and oneness.

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This broad-stroked survey of the contemporary contemplative movement will hopefully provide evidence for potential correlations with a welcoming spirituality. The ramifications of this discussion for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and for ecological solidarity with a groaning creation deserve further outworking.

Conclusion

To ask “Why church?” is worthwhile no matter what the season, epoch, or generation. Still, when one reflects on the deep social and political divides, both inside and outside the church, and on our seeming inability to bridge those chasms, the question is more relevant than ever. And its germaneness reaches all strata of the church. Brian McLaren has written that “we need a common spirituality to infuse both our priestly/institutional—and our prophetic/movement-oriented wings. The spirituality will often be derived from the mystical/poetic/contemplative streams within our traditions.” In this essay we are suggesting that within the Lutheran spiritual tradition one uncovers permission, if you will, to pursue resources of prayer from the contemplative movement, both ancient and modern, all the while holding it accountable to the boundary of a living, active faith. The road can be perilous. To open one’s heart to contemplative spirituality is to kiss the cognitive without being enslaved to its rigidities, to risk the darkness of Anfechtung and unknowing, to join God in knowing ourselves as God knows us, to surrender in faith to the One who is love for the sake of God’s whole creation.

Our conviction is that engaging the inward path with intentionality and faith offers both individuals and the whole church a way beyond and through the dualistic we/they, right/wrong, left/right confines of our society. Rohr emphasizes: “Mature religions and individuals have great tolerance and even appreciation for differences. When we are secure and confident in our oneness—knowing that all are created in God’s image and are equally beloved—differences of faith, culture, language, skin color, sexuality, or other trait[s] no longer threaten us.” It does

37 Hoffman, Theology of the Heart, 218.
not mean that there will no longer be differences; it means that differences will no longer threaten us. Perhaps, by God’s grace, we as the people of God are on the verge of a new, wondrous working of God’s Spirit. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, underscores the corporate possibilities of the interior journey: “Thus the humanity we are growing into in the Spirit, the humanity that we seek to share with the world as the fruit of Christ’s redeeming work, is a contemplative humanity.”

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