



# The Spirituality of Martin Luther

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WHILE TRADITIONALLY A ROMAN CATHOLIC TERM, "SPIRITUALITY" HAS MADE its entrance into the wider theological world by way of ecumenical encounters and aspirations. More recently there have even been studies of Luther's "spirituality." Here a variety of general models may be noted. On the one hand, A. Skevington Wood has defined spirituality as both the religious experience within the self ("the communion of the believer with God") and an active faith-relationship with others ("the response of the human spirit when activated by the Spirit of God").<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is also possible to stress the inter-human dimension of religious life. An example is the definition by Alister McGrath: "Spirituality represents the interface between ideas and life, between Christian theology and human existence."<sup>2</sup> Several insightful approaches, however, have sought to portray Luther's spirituality by way of specific themes. Thus Louis Bouyer<sup>3</sup> has developed his approach in terms of "piety" and "feeling"; Darrell R. Reinke<sup>4</sup> has

<sup>1</sup>A. Skevington Wood, "Spirit and Spirituality in Luther," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 61/4 (1989) 311.

<sup>2</sup>Alistair McGrath, "Reformation Spirituality: A Usable Past," *The Drew Gateway* 60/2 (1991) 3.

<sup>3</sup>Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 3, *Orthodox Spirituality and Protestant and Anglican Spirituality* (London: Burns & Oates; New York: Desclee, 1969; reprint, New York: The Seabury Press, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup>Darrell R. Reinke, "Martin Luther: Language and Devotional Consciousness," in *The Spirituality of Western Christendom*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1976) 166-168.

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reflected on Luther's devotional consciousness and language, and the shift from traditional monastic devotion to a new "word" and "faith" paradigm. G. S. Yule has discussed Luther's spirituality specifically in terms of prayer.<sup>5</sup> In a volume entitled *Spiritualities of the Heart*, Jared Wicks, S.J., has offered "The Heart Clinging to the Word."<sup>6</sup> Other presentations of Luther's spirituality have centered on justification, outlining his entire theology – for example, Marc Lienhard.<sup>7</sup> Without distinct boundaries and therefore all-inclusive are two collections, one edited by Hans Bungert, *Martin Luther: Eine Spiritualität und ihre Folgen*,<sup>8</sup> and the other by myself, "Martin Luther and Spirituality."<sup>9</sup>

Thus while a variety of approaches to Luther's "spirituality" are possible, I shall express my preference for the widest and most inclusive approaches on the grounds that at best they enable a more balanced and hence a more accurate understanding of Luther. Specifically, I suggest that the role of spirituality may be best understood when it is viewed in a line of succession, fulfilling the role first occupied by "piety" (*Frömmigkeit*) and then "faith." In other words, by these three models, "piety," "faith," and "spirituality," I seek to distinguish three identifiable – though overlapping – approaches of interpretation. Assuming that contemporary culture has always significantly participated in the interpretation of the past,<sup>10</sup> I do not seek to "accuse," but only to identify the perspectives which by their specific focus of attention recognize some authentic dimensions of Luther's life and thought.

## I.

1. From the enlightenment to Schleiermacher, Luther's personality and theology were often analyzed in reference to two foci: reasonableness and piety. If appeals to the Bible versus tradition and defenses of Christian freedom were examples of courageous and reasonable modernity, then piety or devotional inwardness were appropriate concerns of Luther's religious heart. Whether within

<sup>5</sup>G. S. Yule, "The Spirituality of Luther and Calvin," in *Christian Spiritual Theology*, ed. Noel J. Ryan (Melbourne: Dove, 1976) 205-210.

<sup>6</sup>Jared Wicks, "Martin Luther: The Heart Clinging to the Word," in *Spiritualities of the Heart*, ed. Annice Callahan (New York: Paulist, 1990) 79-96.

<sup>7</sup>Marc Lienhard, "Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt et al. (New York: Crossroads, 1987) 268-299. Cf. also the overview by Frank C. Senn, "Lutheran Spirituality," in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Frank Senn (New York: Paulist, 1986) 9-54.

<sup>8</sup>Hans Bungert, ed., *Martin Luther: Eine Spiritualität und ihre Folgen*, Vortragsreihe der Universität Regensburg zum Lutherjahr 1983 (Regensburg: Mittelbayerische, 1983).

<sup>9</sup>This issue of *Consensus: A Canadian Lutheran Journal of Theology* (19/1 [1993]) contains Robert A. Kelly, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio Faciunt Theologum: Luther's Piety and the Formation of Theologians," 9-27; Egil Grislis, "Piety, Faith, and Spirituality in the Quest of the Historical Luther," 29-51; Brian V. Hillis, "Spirituality and Practice: Luther and Canadian Lutheran Spirituality," 53-76; Joseph Wawrykow, "Luther and the Spirituality of Thomas Aquinas," 77-107; John W. Kleiner, "Martin Luther and the Jews," 109-126.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte: Mit ausgewählten Texten von Lessing bis zur Gegenwart* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970).

the family, in hymn writing, praying, Bible reading, or preaching, “piety” was the very center of Luther’s religiously motivated personality. Unquestionably one encountered in him a believer, a genius, and a hero – so graphically attested to by the pious postures of the many monuments of Luther built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or, e.g., by such works as those of Hans Preuss.<sup>11</sup> By way of a counterpoint, it is instructive to observe the long-lasting influence of Cochlaeus’ defamations, used in opposing and exposing this “impious” person.<sup>12</sup>

Without any doubt, these various concerns with the inwardness of Luther contributed to our understanding. Yet their limits were real: they did not integrate celebration and critique. Admirers saw what they sought – and that did not include a balance.

2. Theodosius Harnack, a conservative Baltic German Lutheran often credited with beginning modern Luther research, in his epochmaking *Versöhnung und Erlösung* (reconciliation and redemption)<sup>13</sup> turned attention to Luther’s “faith” – his theology. From Karl Holl to Paul Althaus and into the present, the category of “faith” has replaced “piety” and become the dominant model. Of course, biographical studies would still need to pay attention to Luther’s personality and inwardness, but the specific understanding of particular doctrines and the sum total of Luther’s “faith” now preoccupied several generations of scholars. This appeared to be fitting, particularly in the age of the so-called neo-orthodoxy. And, in retrospect, it seems equally fitting that this age would be concluded with a quest for Luther’s doctrinal roots. Indeed, it needed to be recognized that Luther’s “faith” was not exclusively his own – he had borrowed much, and these borrowings and Luther’s reworking of them needed to be understood. Most likely, this process has by no means ended. And certainly it has been valuable.

At the same time, the study of Luther’s doctrines has often, perhaps even all-too-often, failed to ask the truth questions.<sup>14</sup> While it was valuable to know what Luther said and thought, Luther’s misunderstandings and limits were often ignored. Ecumenical good-will, perversely, may have contributed to this.

3. Will the model of “spirituality” serve any better than “piety” and “faith”? Admittedly, the term “spirituality” has been used vaguely and vacuously. I cannot improve on Martin E. Marty’s definition: “Spirituality” is “the code word covering

<sup>11</sup>Hans Preuss has four studies under the overall title *Martin Luther—Der Künstler* (1931), *Der Prophet* (1933), *Der Deutsche* (1934), *Der Christenmensch* (1942) (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann).

<sup>12</sup>Adolf Herte, *Das katholische Lutherbild im Rahmen der Lutherkommentare des Cochläus*, 3 vols. (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorffsche, 1943); cf. also Paul Hacker, *Das Ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther* (Graz: Styria, 1966), in English condensed and recast with a preface by Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion* (Chicago: Herald, 1970).

<sup>13</sup>Th. Harnack, *Luthers Theologie mit besonderer Beziehung zu seiner Versöhnungs- und Erlösungslehre*, 2 vols. (1862 and 1885; reprint, Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1927). The reprint has adjusted all references to the Weimar edition of Luther’s works.

<sup>14</sup>Yet the Scandinavian motif-research may have contributed to this quest, cf. Charles W. Kegley, ed., *The Philosophy and Theology of Anders Nygren* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 1970), and Bernhard Erling, *Nature and History: A Study of Theological Methodology with Special Attention to the Method of Motif Research* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1960).

everything from profound quests to warm tingles between the toes."<sup>15</sup> Nor do I want to overlook the fact that "spirituality" sometimes includes discussions that previously would have come under the rubrics of "piety" or "faith."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, when designated as "spirituality" most often some principle of inclusion is acknowledged, for example, excellence of clarity and centrality of meaning. At the very least, blatant adoration is excluded here since, by definition, Luther's "spirituality" is relativized by being discussed along with other "spiritualities." I find that helpful.

At the same time, I suggest that it would be useful in further discussions of Luther's "spirituality" to continue to learn from modern Luther historians. For example, Roland Bainton's biography from the neo-orthodox period succeeded in providing a sympathetic and yet an authentic portrait of Luther, precisely because it included not only the celebration of Luther's brave deeds and his "faith," but also acknowledged Luther's pre-ecumenical pitfalls and hatreds, not to mention his limits as a person.<sup>17</sup> Yet, carefully, Bainton's account excluded all scatological expressions.<sup>18</sup> On balance, it was still an elitist presentation of Luther. More recently, however, historical scholarship has learned how to balance Luther's greatness with his shortsightedness and sins. What appears to be so very useful here is the awareness that both light and shadow are mutually inclusive; both need to be understood if Luther is to be understood.

## II.

1. Having so far offered somewhat broad generalizations, I will apply the succession of models – piety/faith/spirituality – by pursuing one motif – the role of the devil in Luther's theology. Harmannus Obendiek (1931)<sup>19</sup> sought to distinguish his own approach from that of the rationalism of the enlightenment and its modern followers, who regarded the reality of the devil as something overcome long ago and only historically rather than existentially relevant. Indeed, Obendiek offered a careful presentation of what Luther had to say about the devil. Obendiek arranged these statements systematically, including several key concerns, e.g., Luther's concept of the devil in relation to faith in God, the understanding of the world as a realm of the devil, the relation to reconciliation and salvation, the relation to revelation and means of grace, the relation to the word, and to anthropology. Here at each step were presented religious insights of deep, inward piety. At the same time, although quite aware there were modern ways of interpreting the demonic, Obendiek did not seek to bring Luther in relation to the modern

<sup>15</sup>Martin Marty, "Among the Tribes: Realistic Hope in 1992," *The Christian Century* (8 January 1992) 4.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. above, notes 3 and 7.

<sup>17</sup>Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950) 359-372.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1959) 202-233.

<sup>19</sup>Harmannus Obendiek, *Der Teufel bei Martin Luther* (Berlin: Furche, 1931).

world. The relevance question was not asked. When in conclusion Obendiek came to discuss the meaning of Luther's concept of the devil, he offered the following defense. In contrast to Hermann Grisar,<sup>20</sup> who had judged Luther to be an inheritor of medieval superstition and evaluated Luther's distinct theological insights as being on the same level, Obendiek claimed that he had proceeded in a different direction. Namely, he had systematically correlated Luther's theological formulations with Luther's statements about the devil. And precisely because Luther's statements about the devil fit so well in Luther's entire theology – they should be recognized as theological rather than merely superstitious!<sup>21</sup> With sincerity, charm, and diligence, Obendiek drew a theologically oriented and yet essentially inward looking portrait of Luther's piety. Since it encompassed Luther's total religious stance, in essence indivisible, it was said to be "true," including its – vaguely admitted – shadow sides.

2. Hans-Martin Barth (1967)<sup>22</sup> has offered a detailed exploration of Luther's theologically expressed "faith." His book, initially a dissertation, was even more carefully crafted than the study by Obendiek. It had a clear focus: "the theological place (*Ort*) of the devil according to Luther."<sup>23</sup> At the same time Barth also made clear that he was not interested in the background of medieval theology and folklore. Nor was Barth seeking to find out whether Luther had reached a "more" lofty understanding of the devil. Rather, Barth's study was a thoughtful exposition of how the devil was to be understood on the grounds of Luther's theological view of Jesus Christ. Hence Barth was concerned with such doctrinal topics as christology and the word of God, the dynamic role of the tribulations (*Anfechtungen*) and the limits of the christocentric approach in Luther's understanding of the *Deus absconditus*. Barth spelled out his main point with the assistance of spatial imagery: "God above, Christ or the devil in the middle, and the human being below."<sup>24</sup> From this model, Barth suggested, we may perceive that human beings can approach God only by way of a mediator. At the very best this mediator is Christ; Christ's place, however, the devil always attempts to usurp. This situation explains the dynamic between sin and grace, and the ongoing tensions of the Christian life.

This portrait, drawn with theological categories, has a structural clarity, but it totally neglects the limits of Luther's insights, even their negative impact. Specifically, as Barth explores the inner connection between the devil and heresy, recording without further concern as heretics those whom Luther had identified as such, we are well instructed about the free reign of the devil among the Roman Catholics and all the other protestants who were not among Luther's followers – but hardly thoroughly persuaded. Rather, in retrospect, it seems that the model of "faith,"

<sup>20</sup>Hartmann Grisar, S.J., *Luther* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1955).

<sup>21</sup>Obendiek, *Der Teufel*, 235-237.

<sup>22</sup>Hans-Martin Barth, *Der Teufel und Jesus Christus in der Theologie Martin Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967).

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 209.

when applied uncritically and wholesale, while able to provide an account of the sixteenth-century Luther, permanently encapsulates Luther in that century in which some of us no longer live all of the time.

3. The third model, "spirituality," may be usefully enhanced by approaches that recognize Luther's relative place in history and look at him both sympathetically and critically. Here I very briefly refer to Heiko A. Oberman's *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (German, 1981; English, 1989).<sup>25</sup> And I note with appreciation: "We can encounter Luther only where he was convinced he stood and not where he approximates the temper of our time."<sup>26</sup> If so, then the study of Luther's "spirituality" will need to take the devil as seriously as Luther took him. Moreover, Oberman has noted that instead of sharing the belief in progress as well as in the serene advance of God's kingdom, Luther had lived "in the shadow of the chaos of the Last Days and the imminence of eternity."<sup>27</sup> It was here, according to Oberman, that Luther found himself "between the rage of the Devil and the wrath of God."<sup>28</sup> Yet, unlike a medieval person, Luther did not eventually seek to retreat from the world, but in a courageous opposition to the devil, did battle for the "preservation and improvement of the world."<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, however, there were limits to Luther's insight and creativity.<sup>30</sup> Luther's personality, with some of its "unpleasant aspects" (*Schattenseiten*), and the current prejudices of his own day, which Luther shared without question, were at times far reaching. Professor Oberman sums up:

As productive as Luther's 'medieval' battle against the Devil was, its limitations now become more evident as well. The vision of a world pervaded by the Devil has appalling effects if it leads to collective judgments. When papists, Jews, and so-called fanatics are condemned as groups, individual differentiation becomes impossible. The individual human being disappears behind a uniform foisted upon him.<sup>31</sup>

I suggest that there is continuous need to make use of such historic rigor and existential awareness, or the contemporary wave of "spirituality" will reach only very small heights, if any at all.

### III.

In conclusion, then, let me first state the obvious. There will continue to be a need for studies of Luther's inwardness and piety as well as his understanding of faith, specific doctrines as well as significant motifs. But since Luther is not infallible, exempt from sin and finitude, and not equally relevant on all issues, the study

<sup>25</sup>Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989).

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

of Luther, even when under the rubric of “spirituality,” will need to be undertaken cautiously, following all the canons of sound exegesis. Of course, the late Peter Manns put it best by viewing Luther as both a heretic and father in the faith—*simul hereticus et Pater in Fide*.<sup>32</sup> Although not insuring that Luther studies undertaken in the wide-ranging perspective of “spirituality” will necessarily accomplish a full integration of sin and grace, of Luther’s failings and accomplishments, the attention to wide contextuality may nevertheless serve as an appropriate encouragement.

<sup>32</sup>“Vater im Glauben: Studien zur Theologie Martin Luthers,” in *Luther’s Ecumenical Significance*, ed. Peter Manns and Harding Meyer (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1988) 21.