



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."¹

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 tradition² 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."³ 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."⁴ These depictions underscore the experiential, unitive nature of the mystical path; Hamm calls it an important aspect of "pre-Reformation pastoral theology."⁵ 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.⁶ 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."⁷

Luther's perspective has been called "faith mysticism."⁸ 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."⁹ 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.

² Eric Lund, "Johann Arndt and the Development of a Lutheran Spiritual Tradition" (PhD diss., Yale, 1979).

³ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200–1350* (New York: Crossroad: 1998), 26.

⁴ Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 53.

⁵ Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 193.

⁶ Bengt R. Hoffman, *Theology of the Heart: The Role of Mysticism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, ed. Pearl Willemsen Hoffman (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 1998), 206–13.

⁷ Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 191.

⁸ Hoffman, *Theology of the Heart*, 202, traces the origin of the descriptor "faith mysticism" to Nathan Söderblom, *Tre livsformer [Three Patterns of Life]* (Stockholm: Hugo Gebers, 1922).

⁹ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works (1545)," trans. Andrew Thornton, <https://tinyurl.com/2zphv7>.

Hamm suggests that Luther distinctively interwove a rational scholastic theology with “the affective level of experiential mystical theology.”¹⁰

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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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.”¹³ It is here that Luther’s unique faith mysticism intersects with and encompasses his theology of the cross and becomes “a mysticism of *Anfechtung*.”¹⁴ 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

¹⁰ Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 231–32.

¹¹ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” in *The Annotated Luther*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 499.

¹² Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” 500.

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 1518.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ The pietists saw themselves as reformers of the reformation, a "new" or "second" reformation.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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":²²

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.²³

¹⁵ Hoffman, *Theology of the Heart*, 216–18; Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 224–29; *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, trans. Bengt Hoffman (New York: Paulist, 1980).

¹⁶ Jonathan Strom, "Problems and Promises of Pietism Research," *Church History* 71 (2002): 547–49.

¹⁷ Daniel L. Brunner, *Halle Pietists in England* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 29–42.

¹⁸ Susan O'Brien, "A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735–1755," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 813.

¹⁹ Carter Lindberg, *The Third Reformation? Charismatic Movements and the Lutheran Church* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 131–78.

²⁰ Anthony W. Boehm, Preface to *Pietas Hallensis*, by August H. Francke (London: J. Downing, 1705), xiv–xl.

²¹ Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist, 1979).

²² Martin Schmidt, "Luthers Vorrede zum Römerbrief im Pietismus" in *Wiedergeburt und neuer Mensch* (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1969), 299–330.

²³ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans" (1545), trans. Andrew Thornton, <https://tinyurl.com/t8ttqe7>.

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.

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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

²⁴ Daniel L. Brunner, "The 'Evangelical' Heart of Pietist Anthony William Boehm," in *Heart Religion: Evangelical Piety in England and Ireland, 1690–1850*, ed. John Coffey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 77–80.

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.”²⁷ The overall intent is to reorient how we see ourselves—to join God in knowing ourselves as God knows us²⁸—and how we thereby engage the seemingly incomprehensible chaos of our world. Surrendering rational control in contemplation is not anti-rationalism or intellectual naïveté 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.”²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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

²⁵ An initial reading list could include Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1961); Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart* (New York: Amity House, 1986); Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2004); David G. Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012); Barbara Ann Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

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.

²⁷ Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, 161–62.

²⁸ Thanks to James Finley for this language.

²⁹ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 3–.

³⁰ Howard Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons Given in Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 1962* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1978), 14–15.

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

³¹ Martin Luther, “The Gospel for the Festival of Epiphany, Matthew 2[:1-12],” trans. S. P. Hebart, in *Luther’s Works* 52, ed. Hans J. Hildebrand (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 286.

³² *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. Carmen Acevedo Butcher (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 12.

³³ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1955), 67.

³⁴ Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis Assisi* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2014), 9.

³⁵ Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, 145.

³⁶ Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 214.

interchangeable.”³⁷ 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.”³⁸ 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.”³⁹ It does

³⁷ Hoffman, *Theology of the Heart*, 218.

³⁸ Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (New York: Convergent, 2016), 180–81.

³⁹ Richard Rohr, “Walk Gently on the Earth,” Center for Action and Contemplation, September 24, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/r32ueld>, italics added.

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."⁴⁰ ⊕

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⁴⁰ Rowan Williams, "Archbishop's Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome," Dr. Rowan Williams 104th Archbishop of Canterbury (website), October 10, 2012, <https://tinyurl.com/t8ggzpu>.