

# The American Luther

By Christine Helmer

**Abstract:** This essay introduces important developments in recent Luther scholarship in America and argues for a specific retrieval of Luther for contemporary religious and theological issues, such as the problem of evil and the role of experience in theology. The essay describes how contemporary feminist and liberation theologies have recontextualized Luther in America. Also addressed is the current interest in historical investigations of Luther in relation to medieval thought that aligns with the American reception of Finnish scholarship on Luther. These developments show that the American Luther is moving beyond its fundamental shaping by German Protestantism.

**Key Terms:** feminist theology, epistemology, neo-Kantianism, German Protestantism, experience, global Luther.

## Re-creating the American Luther

Martin Luther was probably unaware of America, but America certainly has become aware of him over successive generations of scholars, missionaries, and practitioners. But there is a dilemma here: the history of German Protestant theology fundamentally shaped the American Luther, and yet if Luther is to become a dialogue partner for today, Luther scholarship in North America must move beyond the German Luther. There are new questions to be asked in the context of contemporary developments in American religion and theology. Luther's German origins must be complemented by acknowledging the significant roles he plays in the West and in the world.

My purpose in this paper is to describe some accomplishments of Luther scholars in North America and to suggest directions they might take in the future. I acknowledge the geographical restriction of my assigned topic (America) to North America (including Canada). There is vibrant scholarship on Luther occurring in both northern and southern hemispheres of America; my restriction to the north reflects my biography and area of exper-

tise. My main point is that the American Luther (or more accurately *Luthers*) must more seriously engage with the diverse methodologies, ideological commitments, ecclesial sympathies, and academic inquiries across the landscape of American religious pluralism if Luther is to be relevant to contemporary theological discussions. So I foreground the issues relevant to an understanding of Luther that has potential for discussion beyond strict ecclesial (Lutheran) uses of Luther, focusing on theological scholarship that builds bridges from close analysis of Luther's texts to broader discussions of contemporary pertinence. I summarize, in the first section, a few recent and significant works on Luther that pave a new road for the way ahead. The challenges to recontextualizing the German Luther in North America are the focus of section two; and suggestions for the future of Luther studies in America comprise the third section of the essay.

First, a personal note: I am returning to Luther scholarship after a period of absence. Soon after I completed the publication of *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, I reached a distinctly Lutheran saturation point.<sup>1</sup> The customary topics of Word and church, Scripture and tradition, preaching and 'pure' doctrine all felt predictable to me. Other issues were

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more compelling to me: questions of modernity and experience, epistemology and theories of *Wissenschaft*, emotions and self-consciousness. These questions introduced me to a life after Luther. I have come to realize that this absence from Luther was necessary. I return to Luther now with new questions to ask of a Luther I regard not as a figure from the past to be worshipped but as a dialogue partner for constructing theology today.

Life after Luther also introduced me to a community of researchers beyond the usual Lutheran cast of characters. This discovery has given me a new angle from which to ponder the future of Luther scholarship. Historical truth and theological truth are the hallmarks of good scholarship, and Luther scholarship has been exemplary in this regard. Yet the love of truth cannot be conducted at the expense of love for the other. I have seen that Luther scholars represent a more-or-less homogeneous group of (white, male Western) individuals, a demographic fact that has had the intellectual consequence of a corresponding homogeneity of opinion on many issues of religion, theology, and ethics.

Where are the Luther scholars who courageously and critically address Luther with urgent contemporary concerns of justice, diverse ways of knowing, and alternative ways of being? Is the Lutheran 'tradition' to be preserved at the cost of irrelevance? Does the obsession with truth have to do with the fear of the other rather than with the joy of mutual dialogical-dialectics? I confess that as a young woman just out of graduate school I experienced the homogeneity as less than hospitable. So I left the flock and found greener pastures among Schleiermacher scholars exercising the *freie Geselligkeit* (free sociality) that characterized their 'founder.' I learned from this community of scholars that the cultivation of hospitality is a *desideratum* for the future of theology. The extension of welcome to younger scholars, particularly to women, is to multiply the voices through which the Holy Spirit may speak.

My return to Luther, to sum up, is shaped by two commitments. First, Luther's insights are too important to be monopolized by Lutherans; and second, the future of Luther scholarship is too important to be determined solely by one homogenous

group. The community of Luther scholars demands a global shaking up in order that Luther can speak prophetically and dangerously to us today.

## Contributions to Luther Scholarship

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Scholarship on Luther in North America has been situated in the two places of academic inquiry allocated to religious studies: the seminaries of particular religious communities, and secular institutions of higher learning, public and private. Context determines the contours of the scholarship. Scholarship on Luther is different when situated in either of these two arenas. I focus in this section on representative contributions to scholarship on Luther from both locations that have engaged the broader academic audience. Many recent scholars read Luther creatively, with the intention of recontextualizing—and reconceptualizing—him in interdisciplinary and global contexts.

## Luther and Feminist Theology

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One of the most exciting developments in Luther scholarship has emerged from feminist theology. Connecting women's concerns, experience, and ways of knowing to theological method and content, feminist theologians are discovering Luther as a resource for critical reflection. They build on research already undertaken on women in early modernism (e.g. by Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, Lyncal Roper, and Peter Matheson, among others). Driving this scholarship is intense concern about the "divide," as Deanna Thompson has described it, between feminist theology and Luther scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Feminist theologians, primarily philosophers of religion, have long been concerned with epistemology. They have studied theories of knowledge, in particular women's ways of knowing, that have been excluded from places of educational privilege. They also have been preoccupied with critical reflections on the spiritual, theological, and political abuses that traditional theories of sin and salvation

have perpetuated. So they protest the cross's salvific relevance for those who have the cross of oppression placed upon them. Responsible theology, in feminist terms, entails critical inquiry into the cross's justification of abusive theologies (and social praxis). Salvation may mean freedom from the cross rather than its ongoing imposition.

With critical theory in mind, it is not surprising that feminist and liberation-oriented Luther scholars critically appropriate Luther's theology of the cross. Mary M. Solberg's powerful work, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross*, leads the way.<sup>3</sup> Solberg makes the valuable distinction between a theology of the cross and an epistemology of the cross on the basis of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation (1518). The theology of the cross, according to Solberg, represents Luther's radical, power-destabilizing, and audacious representation of a God who saves in unexpected form. The epistemology of the cross is Solberg's constructive retrieval of Luther's theology of the cross to highlight God's transformation of ways of knowing reality and living in reality. The cross's soteriological meaning has serious implications for knowing and doing; its critical function serves to contrast worldly power and ambition with compassionate existence.

Five other books complement Solberg's work in recapturing the radical potential of Luther's theology for asking critical questions of power and abuse. Walter Altmann's *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective* (translated by Mary Solberg) contextualizes Luther's doctrine of justification in relation to the church's work to promote economic and political justice.<sup>4</sup> Altmann makes clear that Luther's theology has not been domesticated by five hundred years of familiarity; its liberatory edge can still be productively mined for today's world. Deanna Thompson's *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and the Cross*, looks productively at the intersection between feminist theology and Luther scholarship in order to come up with a soteriologically and politically viable theology that advocates women's freedom from abusive structures, innocent suffering, and patriarchal power.<sup>5</sup> A critical reading of Luther, according to Thompson, must adopt some tenets of feminist theologies in order to challenge the traditional theories of atonement

that have been used to justify women's oppression. A critical appropriation of Luther as a 'theologian of the cross' can announce salvation as women's freedom to be whole persons in relations of friendship with others.

In *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda sets Luther's theology of the cross in opposition to global capitalism and the environmental crisis.<sup>6</sup> This study indicates by powerful empirical data the deleterious effects of a global market economy on poverty and on the environment. Its analysis is supplemented by a constructive ethical model of agency that appropriates Luther's theology of justification. Moe-Lobeda finds inspiration for a subversive view of human agency in Luther scholarship from Finland that she argues explains transformative and economically responsible agency better than the predominant forensic model.

Finally, both Marit Trelstad's edited collection, *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*,<sup>7</sup> and Vitor Westhelle's recent book, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross*,<sup>8</sup> update Luther's theology with an emancipatory orientation that corrects abusive possibilities of traditional theologies of salvation, appealing to Luther's theology of the cross as a central corrective to abusive atonement theories. Luther's voice is too radical and too dangerous to be silenced by church doctrine.

### *Luther and Ecumenism*

The traditional limits of Luther scholarship are also being tested by scholars working with an ecumenical objective. A lasting contribution in this particular direction of Luther studies was made by Heiko Oberman, who wrote that Luther cannot be studied without intimately connecting him to his medieval forerunners.<sup>9</sup> If Luther can be viewed in relation to late medieval Catholicism and fifteenth-century nominalist philosophy, then certainly he can be retrieved for ecumenically sensitive and philosophically nuanced discussions today. David Yeago's essay "The Catholic Luther" is pivotal in this regard because it neatly distinguishes between Luther's theology of justification and "a tragic chapter" of

Western schism, namely the political and ecclesiastical bifurcation of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism from a common catholic root.<sup>10</sup> Justification cannot create Protestant identity alone because its reality grounds Christianity as a whole.

More nuanced discussions of Luther's relation with the Middle Ages open new research doors. An essay representative of this new conception of Luther's understanding of law is George Lindbeck's "Martin Luther and the Rabbinic Mind."<sup>11</sup> Lindbeck's essay dovetails with biblical scholar Krister Stendahl's work to clearly distinguish between Paul's view of law and Luther's idiosyncratic second use of the law.<sup>12</sup> This distinction opens the way for Lindbeck to demonstrate Luther's profound appreciation of the first use of the law. A rapprochement between 'Luther as catechist' and rabbinic thought reveals the Ten Commandments in the light of God's goodness, establishing a beautiful order for creation. Obedience to the commandments is made possible by divine goodness in the first place.<sup>13</sup>

Lindbeck's important essay is complemented by another, David Yeago's "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal."<sup>14</sup> Yeago's careful study analyzes the law/gospel relation as advanced by a German theologian whose reception in American scholarship on Luther has had the most profound impact. Yeago shows that Werner Elert ontologically distorts Luther's distinction between law and gospel. Luther, according to Yeago, contextualizes law/gospel in relation to other doctrines, such as God and Christ, and does not conceive of the distinction as the sole hermeneutical principle of all theology. Yeago's work aligns with Finland's Risto Saarinen in uncovering the neo-Kantianism that has dominated Luther scholarship since at least Albrecht Ritschl.<sup>15</sup> This modern version of Luther, as the newly emerging consensus argues, clouds access to the historical Luther.

The liberation of Luther's ideas from their Kantian interpretation requires attentiveness to late-medieval times that is also methodologically supported by taking the many genres in which Luther wrote into consideration. The full range of Luther's theology can be opened up by investigating genres other than the usually privileged sermon. The

disputation, for example, demonstrates that Luther's inquiries into medieval philosophical questions were an important part of his theological method. To name just one case, in his later disputations (1543-45), Luther's understanding of the Trinity can be seen at the forefront of his interests.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as I have discovered, Luther's view of the Trinity has a surprisingly speculative 'inner-trinitarian' side (as I term Luther's pre-Kantian analogue to the immanent Trinity) that contrasts with the usual neo-Kantian privileging of the 'benefits of Christ' as these benefits are communicated in the sermon.

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### *Historical Studies of Luther*

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Theological work on Luther draws on historical study of Luther's person and time. Historical studies, such as Lee Wandel's book on various Reformation positions on the Eucharist,<sup>17</sup> and Timothy Wengert's work on Luther and Philip Melancthon are also important contributions to theology.<sup>18</sup> Other representatives of solid work on Luther are the contributions of *Lutheran Quarterly*; while synopses of major publications on Luther are compiled in the annual *Luther Digest*. Luther's twentieth-century reception is an ongoing area of interdisciplinary work, as historian James M. Stayer illustrates in his recent *Martin Luther, German Saviour*.<sup>19</sup> Historians—e.g. James Kittelson, Heiko Oberman, Martin Marty, and Richard Marius—have found out that interest in Luther's biography extends into the realm of popular reading.<sup>20</sup> Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand* continues to be the undisputed half-century classic in this regard.<sup>21</sup> Finally, twelve new volumes are anticipated for the *American Edition of Luther's Works* (already 55 volumes), which will make more German and Latin texts accessible to an English-speaking audience.

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### *Connecting America with Europe*

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Studies of Luther's theology also build bridges to Europe. One of the most influential developments of the last decade is the reception of works by Luther scholars from Finland.<sup>22</sup> This research

program is characteristic of Luther studies' ongoing commitment to detailed, careful, and historically contextualized work that opens up new possibilities for studying medieval philosophy, spirituality, and mysticism as integral dimensions of Luther's work.<sup>23</sup> The conversation with Finnish scholars adds fresh interpretative directions to the dominant dialogue between American and German scholars (see section II below). Representative interpretations from Germany that have achieved canonical status in North America are: the translation of Bernhard Lohse's (second) indispensable introduction, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*;<sup>24</sup> and translations of works by Oswald Bayer—in particular, his thin but rich *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*;<sup>25</sup> the very recently published *Theology the Lutheran Way*;<sup>26</sup> and the German original, *Martin Luther: Eine Vergegenwärtigung*.<sup>27</sup> The sheer research precision, breadth of knowledge of Luther's corpus, and attention to exactitude of detail make these works by Lohse and Bayer indispensable studies for American scholars.

Nevertheless, creative engagement rather than one-sided import should be the goal of Luther in America. The American context shapes the questions asked of Luther in a particular way. Questions concerning the relevance of Luther for contemporary issues of religious pluralism, global capitalism, as well as the worldwide protection of women's and children's dignity are urgent theological and ethical questions. If Luther scholarship is to take seriously Luther's contribution to world Christianity, then it should formulate questions that set Luther in global context.<sup>28</sup> The restriction of Luther's relevance to a particular caste is an unfortunate specter that continues to haunt Luther scholarship in America.<sup>29</sup> Great care must be taken to cultivate diversity in Luther scholarship. The quantity and quality of dialogue partners is linearly equated to the quantity and quality of the dialogue. Luther's own theology of the Holy Spirit can be evoked here. The Spirit's only tools are human hands, human mouths. If these are restricted, then the Spirit's power is diminished. Luther is too exciting, his theology too inspiring to be circumscribed by human restrictions.

## Challenges to Luther Studies

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It is a matter of historical contingency that Luther scholarship in America has been fundamentally shaped by German Protestant scholarship. A description of the challenges facing Luther studies in America requires taking stock of this circumstance, the particular philosophical conceptuality, and the distinctive theological position that this shaping has produced. Beyond this inheritance, new interpretative directions can be explored that would better suit the challenges of religious studies, history, and theology in America today. I describe in this section the tasks facing the American Luther today, posed by Luther's German and neo-Kantian legacy.

## The American Luther's German Pedigree

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Luther scholarship has a rich pedigree. A sweeping survey of the history of Luther scholarship shows it to be one of the most powerful intellectual legacies in religion. Luther scholarship in Germany over the past one hundred and fifty years is representative of German Protestantism; many of the historians and theologians marking the intellectual development of this history have contributed in significant ways to our understanding of Luther. Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth, Karl Holl and Adolf von Harnack—German Protestantism's development is intertwined with Luther. It was the Ritschlian School in the very early part of the twentieth century that announced the Luther-Renaissance. Ritschl's program for the completion of the Reformation situated Luther as the object of historical study. The causes of the Reformation breakthrough, its dating, and its shaping of the mature Luther became the focus of this renewed look at Protestantism's origins.<sup>30</sup> Holl, Theodosius Harnack and his son Adolf, Reinhold Seeberg and his son Erich, and another Erich Vogelsang—all figures of importance in the fields of church history, history of dogma, and systematic theology—were also associated with this renewed interest in Luther in the early part of the twentieth century.

## National Socialism

The genealogy is not without its horrifying moments. Werner Elert can be regarded as one of the most important theologians in Germany in the 1950s, and his ‘ontologizing’ of Luther’s law/gospel dialectic exerted a powerful shaping influence on Luther’s thought, as Yeago has shown.<sup>31</sup> Yet Elert drafted the “Ansbach Memorandum” on June 11, 1934, a document that Stayer shows was a response to the Barmen Declaration (May 31, 1934) by “stak[ing] out an orthodox Lutheran tradition that was pro-Nazi, although distinct from that of the German Christians and their Luther Renaissance advisers.”<sup>32</sup>

Paul Althaus is another Luther scholar who, like Elert, taught at Erlangen University in the 1930s, and exerted enormous influence on the study of Luther in North America. His *Introduction to Luther’s Theology*, first translated into English in 1966, is still in print with Fortress.<sup>33</sup> Yet Althaus also allied himself with National Socialism and signed the Ansbach Memorandum after two drafts, although he expressed criticisms of Nazi racial politics and the theological distortions of German Christians.<sup>34</sup> The question concerning the relationship between one’s object of study and one’s political commitments admittedly has its methodological difficulties, yet given the reception of Luther by National Socialists—the propaganda around *Reichskristallnacht* on the night of Nov. 9, 1938 (the eve of the anniversary of Luther’s birthdate) is a case in point—the political commitments of two influential Luther scholars, Elert and Althaus, must not be swept under the carpet.

The notoriety of Elert and Althaus contrasts pointedly with the relative silence guarding Christa Müller’s work on Luther’s hymns. Müller, a member of the Confessing Church, wrote two books on Luther’s hymns during the 1930s.<sup>35</sup> She intended that her books be political and theological protests against National Socialism. Curiously, her name has been largely left off the secondary literature canon of (male) Luther scholars. Müller’s case exposes the serious question regarding the body of work that has been cited as authoritative in Luther studies.

Who has been left out? Why? Can voices raised for theological truth and political justice finally be retrieved in order to show that Luther’s thoughts can and must provoke the very consensus identified with his name?

## Luther Scholarship and Neo-Kantian Philosophy

The history of the German shaping of Luther in America is cast in the mold of German theology and politics, but importantly also of German philosophy. The philosophical conceptuality of neo-Kantianism has been perhaps the most decisive factor in the twentieth-century reception of Luther. This philosophical trajectory earned its reputation by interpreting Luther’s theology as word-oriented. Although other philosophical interpretative possibilities could have been taken—Hegelian speculative philosophy, for example, that is centered on Luther’s theology of the cross—the neo-Kantian paradigm became dominant for interpreting Luther. The theological result of this interpretation is that Luther is turned away from speculative doctrinal concerns, such as the Trinity and Christology, towards the question concerning the tangible and verbal mediation of the ‘benefits of Christ’ to the human. Mediation is the question concerning the mechanism by which Christ is communicated to the human in such a way that justifying faith is created. Yet mediation in neo-Kantian terms is conceived according to the dualism between spirit and flesh. Mediation must occur on the spiritual side of the divide if justification is to be represented as the victory of spirit over flesh.<sup>36</sup> The word then becomes the site of this mediation; the spiritualization of the word is its neo-Kantian fruit.

The word of God theology is a contextualized interpretation of Luther. The implication of this—and of any interpretation for that matter—is that the relative consensus must be historically and critically examined. I do not by this critical observation mean that the word is not a central element in Luther’s thought. It is, as Oswald Bayer’s careful studies of the *promissio* in Luther’s theology document.<sup>37</sup> Yet the word-oriented theology shaped by

neo-Kantian philosophy is only one interpretative option. Other options, worked out under different philosophical conditions, are required in order to yield more accurate interpretations of the metaphysical and doctrinal dimensions of Luther's thought. The speculative implications—both philosophical and theological—are better highlighted, for example, when Luther's understanding of the Trinity is interpreted in continuity with medieval thought. 'To know Christ' includes more than 'knowing his benefits;' it also includes his person, the two natures constituting this person, and his inner-trinitarian relations to Father and Spirit.

### Contemporary Epistemological Challenges

Another area of scholarly challenge for Luther studies is making the connections between Luther and modern questions of knowledge, experience, and subjectivity. The current plurality of theological positions available today—the evidence of the American Academy of Religion is a case in point here—presents the problem of bridge-building between different discourses, different histories, and different regions of experience. Making connections requires dialogical sensitivity and epistemological flexibility, not traditional strong points either in Luther or in Luther scholarship. Luther presses a binary theory of truth for maximal rhetorical and epistemological effect, and his scathing scatological language has effected much inter-religious harm. The dangerous implications of Luther's explosive and dualistic rhetoric and logic must be tempered by sufficient nuancing if his thought is to speak to a contemporary audience.

Luther's appeal to revelation and the Spirit, for example, is merely the starting-point for asking how religious and theological knowledge is acquired. In order to probe epistemological issues, a more robust theological anthropology is required that explains how revelation is concretely communicated and incorporated into one's experience of how Christ's benefits affect personal being. What Luther offers to modern theology tends to be a description of the

sinner *coram deo*, while modern theological sensibilities require a sufficient notion of subjectivity and individuality in order to perceive the human as the subject of justification. Luther can be mined for a full description of human subjectivity. He has many wonderful things to say about the human person in terms that are compellingly realistic. Reason, emotion, psyche, and body all provide the elements of a robust anthropology that can open avenues for appreciating justification's efficacy in grasping the sinner.<sup>38</sup> Luther's religion is 'lived;' his theology can be 'living' if it can creatively build the bridge to contemporary concerns.

The challenge of reconceptualizing Luther, rather than merely recontextualizing him, is the challenge of American Luther scholarship today. There are critical discourses that must be appreciated if Luther scholarship is to move beyond the liberal/conservative divide that has stymied creative discussion. The new critical discourses of postcolonial theory, liberation theologies, and liberal theologies demand that the current theological discussion in America be situated in a contemporary global context. These developments look at the global effects of race, economics, and various forms of exploitation associated with dominant economic powers. They can serve as powerful critical tools for theology today.

If Luther's insights into the real but fragile effects of the gospel under the conditions of self-destroying humanity are to be taken as serious theological descriptions of reality, then his work must be brought into proximity to the issues driving contemporary discussions. Marion Grau, for example, has creatively interpreted Luther's famous doctrine of the communication of attributes through the lens of economic exchange in the harsh context of global capitalism, thereby demonstrating the critical potential of Luther's deep theological insights for the economic injustices wreaked by globalization.<sup>39</sup> Dialogue also entails critical appropriation of these new theological theories. Serious historical work can, for example, challenge theoretical clichés about reality. Yet the dialogue between past and present must occur if Luther's dialogical potency is to be tested today in America.

## Constructive Prospectives

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Luther is not important because he is Luther, but because he has inspiring and powerful things to say about issues that matter today. If Luther's work is to provoke us to think more clearly about the self in relation to a God under the conditions of this world, then it must be excavated from the past in such a way as to bring it into the contemporary conversation. To close I sketch several areas into which Luther may be helpfully invited.

### *God in the Presence of Evil*

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Luther's theology of God's omnipresence is uncannily apt for many important discussions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context. The contemporary global realities of brutal warfare and unimaginable violence speak loudly from every newsstand and from every Internet site. If a curious mix of horror and distraction can be said to characterize contemporary reactions to current affairs, these same responses can be said to drive scholarly energy in America today. For those acutely and painfully aware of the scholar's responsibility beyond the confines of one's immediate discipline, the age-old questions of theodicy—'why,' and 'how'—keep surfacing. Humans struggle to articulate reasons for evil happenings that transcend the perpetrators' moral capacity to imagine.<sup>40</sup> The quest for rationalization is cut short by reality that is unfathomable from the imagination's perspective.

In the face of "horrendous evils" (to use Marilyn McCord Adams's term), Luther presses for explanation. Instead of "why," however, Luther asks, "where is God?" This question of "where" points to Luther's insight into the nature of humanity that strives to make sense of evil in relation to God. Free will cannot explain evil, as modern free will theorists hold, nor can God be held responsible for human failure. Rather, Luther meets the problem of evil from another perspective. The question, "where is God?" has to do with the determination of God's presence in and with evil. Although God's omnipresence in all created reality is

theologically axiomatic, God's precise whereabouts in the concrete and personal situation is the existentially and spiritually important question. Luther challenges doctrinal truth, perverse from its abstract vantage-point, and answers with the underdetermination of God's presence. Whether this underdetermination is doctrinally related to God's hidden presence in the world—the *posteriori dei*; or to God's hidden presence of mercy in Christ—the cross (and this distinction is a theologically important one to make), it is a distinctive feature of Luther's theology that has serious epistemological and theological implications.

What is known about God is filtered through a human cognitive and experiential lens. Luther makes clear that as humans, we know very little about God, and what we know as humans always misses the mark. Christians have a slight epistemic advantage in that they know a bit more about God's mercy in Christ, but share the same lot with fellow humans in not really knowing God's whereabouts in the world. God's dynamic working in the world is always outside of human control, whether in the rise and fall of nations or in the word from the cross. The amplitude in Luther's doctrine of the living God spans the extremes of life itself, from the unpredictable and painfully ambiguous to certain and compassionate comfort. Epistemological skepticism tempers theological certainty, allowing God to be truly divine and truly human.

### *Luther's Thought and American Piety*

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Luther's commitment to epistemological uncertainty and theological underdetermination is possibly the greatest gift he can offer to America. American piety tends to differ from European piety in its appeal to the certainty of revealed knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Epistemologically secured certainty, whether by biblical infallibility or by the Holy Spirit's action, is related to noetic certainty. Unless assent to these epistemological foundations is given, no discussion concerning the nature of the subject matter can take place. In this epistemically determined context, Luther's theology can offer a realistic corrective. Even his confident determination of the cross is a divine truth still



veiled to mortal reason. The cross certainly reveals God's mercy, but conveys it in a manner that seems not only at odds with divinity, but even perverse from a human point of view. Luther's concentration of all determined knowledge on the cross frees theological faith and reason from epistemological hubris and opens up a generous space for the pursuit of religious knowledge. We press on to greater clarity in the middle of ambiguity precisely by being in conversational relationship with others. Existential and dialogical opportunities are created by human admission of unknowing.

### *Luther's Theology and the Particularity of Experiences*

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Another area of significant contribution is theology's connection to reality. In this section, I am addressing (some) theology in America that relates the production of theological claims to the particularities of experience. This type of reasoning argues that theology can no longer be the product of universal reason disembodied from particular gender, ethnicity, language, and customs, but is integrally bound up with personal and social-cultural constructions. Experience frees theology from abstraction in order to root it in particularity.

Some forms of feminist theology, for example, presuppose that women's ways of knowing are less constrained by rational strictures and can therefore contribute mystically rich content to theological claims. There are critical questions that need to be raised, particularly philosophical ones about the nature of experience and the criteria used for categorizing experience, as well as cultural-critical questions concerning identity demarcation. These questions, however, should not constrain theology's efforts to articulate its claims creatively in proximity to 'lived religion.' Theology's tendency to abstraction should not lose the reality of which it speaks.

The history of Luther's reception has always been preoccupied with the existential dimension of Luther's biography and theology. His words have been scrutinized since he spoke them; scholarly excellence requires that Luther's ideas be histori-

cized in their precise context. Yet a prescribed correlation between history and ideas does not always mean that experience is truly described. When Luther's account of religious experience is filtered through neo-Kantian analysis—to appeal again to this case—it loses its emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual dimensions. The justification of the 'transcendental I' forbids any empirical results, so that experience in its robust sense can only be said to be rendered in terms of the 'hearing of the word.'

Christiane Tietz's book *Freiheit zu sich selbst* is a novel response to the insidious loss of experience in the neo-Kantian tradition of Luther interpretation.<sup>42</sup> Tietz identifies the problem with her analysis of the concept of 'self-acceptance.' The gain in subjectivity after justification is a self-relation that itself is constituted by the God-relation. An account of subjectivity in psychological, philosophical, and theological terms is required rather than denied by a Lutheran doctrine of justification. The central claim of Tietz's study could be used to introduce Luther's robust and realistic understanding of human nature and religious experience to mainline Protestants in America who hunger for religious experience. Luther's theological anthropology could be brought into serious conversations with experientially oriented traditions, for example charismatic Catholics and Pentecostals, in a scholarly effort to understand the nature of experience and the reality that takes hold when God visits God's people. The *verbum externum* has its effects in body, spirit, and soul. Once flesh is intimately joined to spirit, the repertoire of theological tools, such as critical theory, gender analysis and transdiscursive theology, can be applied to better understand Christ's benefits in experiential terms.

### **The Task Ahead**

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The task for contemporary theology is to probe religious experience and God's relation to that experience. This task is not merely an academic exercise, but is related to the question of theology's very survival in America. In a nation that has rendered

religion in the binary terms of a cowboy-western, and effaced the public forums of true intellectual discussion of religion, the discipline of theology is having enormous trouble getting any public or intellectual traction. Many reasons can be cited for this situation, from sociological changes in theology's public status to theology's own sin of splendid isolation. If theology is to be a viable participant in discussions with those who care deeply about America in the world today, then theology must begin to think deeply and seriously about its own subject matter. It must recover its subject matter as an exciting perspective on reality that is worth talking to others about. A reformation in theology is required. Perhaps Martin Luther is the person to lead the way.

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## Endnotes

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1. *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study of the Relationship Between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther's Works (1523-1546)*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte/Abteilung Abendländische Religionsgeschichte 174 (Mainz: Zabern, 1999).
2. See Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).
3. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).
4. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).
5. See footnote 2.
6. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).
7. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).
8. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).
9. See his famous *Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000).
10. *First Things* 61 (March 1996): 41.
11. In: Peter Ochs, ed., *Understanding the Rabbinic Mind: Essays on the Hermeneutics of Max Kadushin*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 14 (Atlanta: Scholars Press 1990), 141-64.
12. Stendahl's book is by now a classic with important implications for Luther's understanding of law and gospel: *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1976).
13. Lindbeck, "The Rabbinic Mind," 155.
14. *Pro Ecclesia* 2:1 (Winter 1993): 37-49.
15. See Saarinen's pivotal work, *Gottes Wirken auf uns: die transzendente Deutung des Gegenwart-Christi-Motiv in der Lutherforschung*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz 137 (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989).
16. See ch. 2 of my *The Trinity and Martin Luther*.
17. Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
18. See, for example, Timothy J. Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melancthon's Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
19. *Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917-1833*, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).
20. James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986); Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwartzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989; reprint: 2006); Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: Christian Between God and Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).
21. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1955).
22. The most significant monograph to date that is representative of the Finnish school has recently been published. See Tuomo Mannerma, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, trans. Kirsti Stierma (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). Conference papers introducing Finnish scholarship on Luther to North America are collected in: Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For an essay describing in detail the North American reception of Finnish Luther scholarship, see Risto Saarinen, "Partizipation als Gabe: die neue finnische Lutherforschung nach zwanzig Jahren," *Ökumenische Rundschau* (forthcoming in 2008).
23. See for example the new collection entitled *Luther's Spirituality*, ed. and trans. Philip D. W. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey, The Classics in Western Spirituality (TM) Series (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2007).
24. Ed. and trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).
25. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Lutheran Quarterly Books* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
26. Ed. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes, *Lutheran Quarterly Books* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
27. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).
28. See forthcoming in 2009: Christine Helmer, ed., *The Global Luther: Theologian for Modern Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress).
29. The recent *Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (ed. Donald K. McKim, Cambridge Companions to Religion [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003]) represents this unfortunate restriction. The only contribution by a woman is Jane Strohl's "Luther spiritual journey" (pp. 149-64). See Timothy Wengert's accurately critical "Review Essay: The Cambridge Luther, an Unreliable Companion," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19/1 (Spring 2005): 79-84.
30. Albrecht Ritschl, "Festrede am vierten Seculartage der Geburt Martin Luthers 10. November 1883," 148-74," in *Albrecht Ritschl: Kleine Schriften*, ed. Frank Hofman (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1999).
31. See footnote 14.
32. Stayer, Martin Luther, *German Saviour*, 131.
33. Trans. Robert C. Schulz (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966).
34. For more, see Stayer, Martin Luther, *German Saviour*, 130-3.
35. Christa Müller, *Das Lob Gottes bei Luther, vornehmlich nach seinen Auslegungen des Psalters*, Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus 7/1 (Munich: Kaiser, 1934); eadem, *Luthers Lieder: Theologische Auslegungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1936).

36. I trace this progressive neo-Kantian association of spirit with word in my essay "Mysticism and Metaphysics: Schleiermacher and a Historical-Theological Trajectory," *The Journal of Religion* 83/4 (October 2003): 517-38.

37. See footnotes 25, 26, and 27.

38. See Birgit Stolt, "Joy, Love and Trust—Basic Ingredients in Luther's Theology of the Faith of the Heart," Institute for Luther Studies, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, <http://www.holytrinitynewrochelle.org/yourti84373.html>.

39. Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy: Refinancing Redemption* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004).

40. Marilyn McCord Adams terms "horrendous evils" as those

evils that transcend human capacities to rationalize or to imagine. See her most recent *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*, *Current Issues in Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); see also Robert A. Orsi, "Love in a Time of Distraction," *Harvard Divinity Today* 3/2 (Summer 2007): 8-9; online: <http://hds.harvard.edu/news/HDT/2007v3n2.pdf>

41. Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

42. *Freiheit zu sich selbst: Entfaltung eines christlichen Begriffs von Selbstannahme*, *Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie* 111 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005). See my review in *The Journal of Religion* 88 (Jan. 2008):114-15.