

## Protestant Mysticism: Not a Contradiction in Terms

Although scholars have recently challenged the idea that the phrase “Protestant mysticism” is a contradiction in terms, it had long been assumed that Martin Luther swept aside all things medieval, and therefore mysticism as well. For instance, Brunner defined the options thus: “Entweder die Mystik oder das Wort.”<sup>23</sup> The epigram to Brunner’s work (by Luther, of course) firmly aligns Protestantism with the Word: “Verbum est principium primum, Luther.”<sup>24</sup> With the weight of Luther’s authority behind him, Brunner suggests that mysticism is somehow not quite Christian—or at least not quite biblical—and thus has no place in Protestantism, which purports to be firmly rooted in Scripture, as Luther’s principle of *sola scriptura* has it. Brunner writes: “Gott kommt zu uns, indem er *spricht*. Die Taten Gottes sind Kund-machungen, Euangelia. *Das* ist die Gegenwart des ‘Numinosen’: daß seine Gedanken kund werden. *Das* ist das *Mysterium tremendum*, daß er uns anruft.”<sup>25</sup> God does not make himself available to Christians via special experiences of the numinous and the *mysterium tremendum* (these words describe his understanding of mystical experience), but rather is *only* present through God’s call, his word and his *Euangelia*. To belong to Luther’s “evangelical” camp<sup>26</sup> is to repudiate mysticism and respond solely to the Word.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Emil Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort: Der Gegensatz zwischen moderner Religionsauffassung und christlichem Glauben dargestellt an der Theologie Schleiermachers* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1924), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “Evangelical” was the preferred self-designation of Luther and his followers, whereas “Protestant” and “Lutheran” were other designations. Emphasizing the primacy of the *Euangelia* is another way that Brunner indicates that Lutheran theology is true, and moreover, true because it is based on the evangelical speech act. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010), 608.

<sup>27</sup> Brunner also insists that union (a central theme in mystical texts) is nothing more than hearing and responding to God’s word: insofar as a Christian accepts God’s words, they become part of his person, which constitutes a kind of union. “Dieses Rufen hören, diesem unfaßbaren Sprechen Glauben schenken, diese Wahrheit, die all unsere Wahrheiten außer Kraft setzt...diese uns Fernste...als *unsere* geltende

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2. M. Luther's childhood was that of a normal [RC](#) boy in a burgher home. His father wanted him to become a lawyer and sent him to 3 preparatory schools (in Mansfeld, Magdeburg, and Eisenach). In Mansfeld he received training preparatory to academy work. It was probably in Magdeburg, under instruction of the [Brethren\\* of the Common Life](#) at the Cathedral School, that he first saw a ([Lat.](#)) Bible. In Eisenach he fortunately moved in the Schalbe-Cotta family circles, where he seems to have roomed at the Cottas (see [Cotta, Ursula](#)) and boarded at the Schalbes, whose son he tutored. Both families were very devout. A frequent guest was Johann Braun, vicar at [St.](#) Mary's [Ch.](#) and in charge of the Franciscan monastery at the foot of the Wartburg, a castle near Eisenach; around him gathered a group of young people interested in music and poetry.

3. In spring 1501 Luther entered the [U.](#) of Erfurt, which had [ca.](#) 2,000 students (see also [Trutvetter, Jodocus](#)). In May 1505 he entered the Erfurt Law School; obtained a copy of [Corpus\\* iuris canonici](#) to aid his studies. Then, quite unexpectedly, July 17, 1505, he entered the Black Cloister of the local [Augustinian\\* Hermits](#) (their black garb gave it its name). Later he often spoke of a severe thunderstorm which had wrung from him a prayer to [St.](#) Anne and a vow to become a monk.

4. Luther did not find peace of mind and soul in the monastery, but he determined to keep his vows. He was ordained priest in spring 1507, celebrated his 1st mass May 2, 1507, in presence of his father, other relatives, and many friends. He continued his studies 1507–12, acquiring the degrees of Biblicus (or *lector*), Formatus, Sententiarius, and [ThD](#) The more he studied medieval [theol.](#) and the more he became involved in the labyrinth of [scholasticism,\\*](#) the more confused he became. The main problem which disturbed him: How may I render God gracious to my soul?

5. Luther was called to Wittenberg 1508 to teach moral [philos.](#) He was recalled to Erfurt 1509, perhaps to assist his old Augustinian teacher Johannes Nathin (15th–16th [c.](#)) instruct novitiates. In November 1510 Luther and another monk set out on foot for Rome to help settle some matters pertaining to the Augustinian Order. They reached Rome January 1511. The pope was in Romagna. All cardinals except 2 were absent.

Few relic chambers were open. Luther was shocked by the worldliness of some of the It. clergy. He climbed the Scala Sancta (see Lateran), praying for his grandparents.

6. Shortly after his return to Ger. he was recalled to the U. of Wittenberg, where he was trained to succeed John Staupitz in the chair of lectura in Biblia as soon as he had earned the doctorate, which was awarded October 18–19, 1512 (see also Frederick III [1463–1525]). While lecturing on Gn, Ps, Rm, Gl, and Heb 1512–18, Luther evolved from a scholastic theol. to a Biblical humanist. Probably in fall 1514, while lecturing on *Ps* 71, he discovered the key to the entire Bible in the principle of “justification by faith.” He did not fully understand all its implications but realized that he had found the “Gate to Paradise” (WA 54, 186). In course of time he won the whole U. faculty to his point of view. By 1517 the school was becoming a center of Biblical humanism.

7. The “New Theol.,” which was Christocentric and stressed sola\* Scriptura, was too dynamic to leave the RC Ch. unaffected. Conflict with traditional scholastic theol. was unavoidable; it began in connection with sale of indulgences.\* Luther posted notice of a debate on the school bulletin board (N door of the Castle Ch.) October 31, 1517, listing 95 theses (see Theses, Ninety-Five, of Luther) for discussion. He hoped that an academic debate would clarify the subject of indulgences and determine the position the U. should adopt toward the practice. The theses were in Lat. because that was the academic language of the day. For some unknown reason the debate was never held. But the subject was timely. The theses rapidly spread through Ger. Many agreed with Luther's stand. Financial returns from indulgence sales in Ger. were greatly reduced.

8. This financial loss brought immediate reaction from J. Tetzel,\* indulgence salesman in Luther's territory, from Tetzel's fellow Dominicans, and from Albert\* of Brandenburg, who was hoping thus to pay his “fee” for appointment as abp. Mainz, which made him holder of 3 ch. positions simultaneously. All these brought pressure to bear on the pope to silence Luther.

9. The processus inhibitorius (Lat. “process of inhibiting”), the RC church's way of silencing its critics, was set in motion. The Augustinian Order was instructed to discipline its recalcitrant mem. But at the

[Heidelberg\\* Disputation](#), April 1518, Luther won many new friends; instead of reprimanding him, the Order asked him to write an elaboration of his original 95 theses.

10. Under influence of the Saxon Dominican provincial, the fiscal procurator of Rome opened Luther's case, charging "suspicion of heresy." In September 1518 Luther was summoned to appear at Augsburg before the papal legate [Cajetan\\*](#) (see also [Augsburg Diet](#) [1518]). Luther was willing to be convinced on the basis of Scripture that indulgences were Biblical. But the differences could not be reconciled. [J. v. Staupitz\\*](#) absolved Luther of the vow of obedience [ca.](#) the middle of October 1518. Cajetan recommended to Frederick III that Luther be either banished or surrendered to Rome.

11. On Luther's initiative the Wittenberg [U.](#) faculty sent a letter dated November 22, 1518, to Frederick III, attesting complete agreement with Luther's views. Upon this statement of Luther's case and the advice of his court, Frederick III; refused to surrender Luther to Rome before he had been proved a heretic by a neutral tribunal. Luther hoped for solution by a [gen.](#) council.

12. [RCs](#) connected with the case include [K. v. Miltitz\\*](#) and [J. Eck,\\*](#) the latter known [esp.](#) for his part in the [Leipzig\\* Debate](#) 1519. First hopeful of cleansing the [ch.](#) of error, Luther began to realize that no reformation of the existing body, permeated with error in head and [mems.](#), was possible.

13. After election of [Charles\\* V](#) 1519 Rome again turned its attention to the Luther case. The [univs.](#) of Louvain and Cologne had issued condemnations of Luther's [theol.](#) 1519. The bull *Exsurge, Domine* was drafted June 15, 1520: it gave Luther 60 days to recant and required all his writings to be burned. Tension mounted. At Wittenberg, Luther retaliated by burning the [Canon\\*](#) Law and the bull. Rome's reply was the bull of excommunication, *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, issued January 3, 1521. Considerable pressure was exerted on Charles to condemn Luther. After much [pol.](#) maneuvering, Charles summoned Luther to appear at the [Diet of Worms\\*](#) 1521. Luther resisted all efforts to persuade him to recant and privately and [pub.](#) reiterated that he could not recant unless convinced of error by Scripture. Lacking necessary support of [Ger.](#) princes to secure Luther's condemnation, Charles waited till the Diet had been dismissed, then in a rump session declared Luther a heretic and outlaw who could be killed on sight. Luther's prince, who left

the Diet earlier because of illness, anticipated the outcome and arranged to have Luther placed in “protective custody” at the [Wartburg](#).\*

14. At the Wartburg Luther reexamined his position and clearly realized that reform of the existing [ch.](#) was impossible, that the only solution was a return to the practices and tenets of early Christianity. His Wartburg works include a [Ger. NT](#) (see [Bible Versions, M](#)).

15. In March 1522 Luther returned to Wittenberg against the wishes of his prince to quiet the confused situation which had developed there under the ill-considered leadership of [A. R. B. v. Karlstadt](#)\* and [G. Zwingli](#)\* (see also [Luther, Controversies of, d](#)). He preached a series of 8 sermons and began to reorganize [ch.](#) services. Hymn singing was [introd.](#) and the liturgy revised, providing greater participation by the [cong.](#) (see also [Luther, Hymns of](#); [Luther, Liturgies of](#)).

16. Other works include the Large and Small Catechisms (see [Catechisms, Luther's](#)); postils (see [Postil](#)) providing sermon materials for the “emergency preachers” who filled pulpits made vacant by conversion of many congs from [RCm](#) to Lutheranism: a [Ger. Bible](#) (see [Bible Versions, M](#)); tracts; letters; treatises (see also [Luther, Chief Writings of](#)).

17. The [pol.](#) situation that followed the Diet of Worms was confused. The [Edict of Worms](#)\* could not be enforced. New economic forces brought on other disturbances culminating in the [Knights\\* Revolt](#) and the [Peasants\\* War](#). In both cases Luther's writings were misconstrued. When he called on forces of law and order to quell the revolt, he was accused by his enemies of turning against the peasants.

18. When the 1529 [Diet of Speyer](#)\* nullified an earlier pronouncement permitting a prince to control religious affairs in his realm both factions prepared for violence. The rift which had developed among followers of Luther and those of [H. Zwingli](#)\* divided [Prot.](#) forces. An attempt to resolve their differences at the Marburg Colloquy 1529 (see [Luther, Controversies of, g](#); [Lutheran Confessions, A 2](#)) ended in agreement on all points but the Real Presence (see [Grace, Means of, IV 3](#); [Lutheran Confessions, A 2 \[b\]](#)). Other attempts at reconciliation [bet. RCs and Prots.](#), include the 1530 Diet of Augsburg (see [Lutheran Confessions, A](#)). See also [Lutheran Confessions, B 1–2](#).

As Brunner's choice to introduce his argument with Luther's words suggests, the Wittenberg Reformer's opinion on mysticism (as with so many of Luther's opinions) cast a long shadow.<sup>28</sup> Luther, it is true, read many of the texts now considered "classics" of the mystical canon—texts by Dionysius the Areopagite, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Jean Gerson, the (anonymous) *Theologia deutsch*, and Johannes Tauler<sup>29</sup>—but his relationship to these medieval authors is perhaps best characterized as ambivalent. Common features between these mystical texts and his own writings are counterbalanced by the elements that Luther either rejects or transforms so greatly as to make a break with the medieval sources.<sup>30</sup> For instance, Luther reports reading Tauler's sermons with avid

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Wahrheit und darum als unser innerstes Wesen glauben, das ist das Teilhaben an Gott, von dem allein evangelische Gotteserkenntnis etwas weiß und wissen will." Brunner, 6.

<sup>28</sup> The literature on the mutual exclusivity of mysticism and Protestantism is voluminous. See for instance Oberman; Alois M. Haas, "Luther und die Mystik," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, (60:2): Bernard McGinn, "'Vere tu es deus absconditus': The Hidden God in Luther and Some Mystics," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 94-114; Steven E. Ozment, "Eckhart and Luther: German Mysticism and Protestantism," *The Thomist* 42 (1978): 259-280; Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson and Martin Luther (1509-1516) in the Context of their Theological Thought*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969); Paul Rorem, "Martin Luther's Christocentric Critique of Pseudo-Dionysian Spirituality," *Lutheran Quarterly* (11): 291-307; Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 140. Oberman points out that it is not clear that Luther even thought of them collectively as "mystical" authors belonging to a coherent body of thought, the category of *mysticism* being a much later invention. Consequently, Luther could be said to have had no opinion on mysticism *per se*, but rather only on the individual writers. Luther describes, for instance, a "mystical sermon" by Tauler, presumably to distinguish it from Tauler's non-mystical sermons (Ibid., 140-141).

<sup>30</sup> A number of scholars have argued that, on the contrary, there are many mystical elements in Luther. Berndt Hamm, for instance, argues that "Luthers ausgereifte Theologie, die man im Vollsinn des Wortes als 'reformatorische' bezeichnen kann, hat nicht nur eine mystische Seite oder Dimension und rezipiert nicht nur traditionelle mystische Motive, Bilder und Begriffe, sondern zeigt in ihrer Gesamtkomposition mystischen Charakter." (Hamm, "Wie mystisch," 242.) However, Hamm then states that his argument depends on his redefinition of mysticism, a specifically Reformation faith-mysticism: "Man wird sich umgekehrt darauf einlassen müssen, bei Luther einem neuen Typ von Mystik, einer reformatorischen Glaubensmystik, zu begegnen, so wie es im Mittelalter wiederholt frappierende Neuaufbrüche der Mystik gab." (Ibid, 243.) In particular, Hamm suggests that an inability to see that Luther's theology is fundamentally mystical is due to a view of mysticism that relies too strongly on Dionysius and Meister Eckhart. That Hamm argues for a constantly evolving mysticism, rather than a universal or transhistorical one, is interesting; however, Hamm is asking a different question (whether Luther pioneered a new kind of mysticism) than mine (how Luther related to medieval negative theology). Berndt Hamm, "Wie mystisch war der Glaube Luthers?," *Gottes Nähe unmittelbar erfahren: Mystik im Mittelalter und bei Martin Luther*, edited by Berndt Hamm and Volker Leppin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 242-243. See also Carl E.

interest,<sup>31</sup> and praised the *Theologia Deutsch* for being more sound than scholastic theology,<sup>32</sup> while at the same time rejecting the idea of the *Seelenfunke* (*synteresis*)—so crucial to Tauler’s theology and anthropology—that leads the soul to union with God.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Luther praised Dionysius for articulating a negative theology that seemed to coincide with his view of God’s hiddenness, but then sharply criticized the same writer for his presumptuous speculations that seem to bypass (or to simply ignore) the crucified Christ.<sup>34</sup>

As important as Luther was for Protestantism, the fate of medieval mystical writers in the early modern era does not begin and end with him. Widening the scope of research on the [sixteenth](#) century in Germany, in particular to take in the comparatively neglected second half of that century, shows that mystical texts did indeed find many passionate readers, both in orthodox and heterodox contexts, as we will see in Chapters 1 (in the case of Eckhart) and 3 (in that of Dionysius). Furthermore, much of the previous scholarship on Protestant mysticism has proceeded by designating a certain set of ideas or motifs as mystical (elevated as paradigmatic), and then trying to detect the presence or absence of these ideas in texts written by Protestants. This approach does not do justice to the complexity of the source text, whose ideas appear as a simplistic caricature or

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Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998); Bengt R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics: A Re-examination of Luther’s Spiritual Experience and His Relationship to the Mystics*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976).

<sup>31</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 239; Bernd Moeller, “Tauler und Luther”, *La mystique rhénane*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 159.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, ed. and transl. Bengt Hoffman, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 53-54.

<sup>33</sup> Steven E. Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson and Martin Luther (1509-16) in the Context of their Theological Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 214-215. See also Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Rorem, “Luther’s Christocentric Critique,” 291-292.

overlaid with modern preconceptions of what mysticism is.<sup>35</sup> More importantly, such a method neglects the simple fact that early modern readers did not read a modern critical edition of the works of Dionysius or Eckhart. While these critical editions attempt to do justice to their respective authors, they are not the same texts that Weigel sat down to read in his study or his university library. In referring to modern critical editions rather than the editions that the early modern writer might actually have used, much of the context of Weigel's reading practice is lost, a context that is invaluable to historians seeking to understand how ideas travel from one person to another. Thinking about texts in this way places ideas firmly in the material world, where they rely not only on parchment and quills or paper and printing presses but also on the bodies and minds of readers for their existence and transmission.

A far more fruitful approach, and the one I use in this dissertation, is a close reading of texts by Protestants that document an engagement with medieval texts, to discover how those medieval texts are retained or transformed, reclaimed or reappropriated. In this dissertation, then, I study the textual network of one Protestant reader of mystical writings, Valentin Weigel, focusing on his engagement with the tradition of negative theology in his reading of Meister Eckhart (Chapters 1 and 2) and Dionysius the Areopagite (Chapters 3 and 4). Thinking of reception history as a textual network, it is perhaps useful to imagine this network as a piece of cloth: on a superficial level, one can note the finished product (the cloth fashioned into a coat, for instance), or

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<sup>35</sup> Even Hoffman, who explicitly rejects this approach of dealing with mysticism *en bloc* (Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics*, 37-38), as he calls it, ultimately does just that, in statements such as “we are pointing out the essentialness of the mystical in the Reformer’s justification experience” (Ibid, 218). Moreover, Hoffman defines mysticism as the “‘experimental’ and ‘experiential’ apprehension of God” (Ibid, 16) and sets out to document Luther’s “experiences of the invisible” (Ibid, 218). To define mysticism as experiential is already to exclude the consideration of certain mystical writers from discussion—Dionysius and Eckhart in particular—whose writings, as Denys Turner argues, are chiefly to be understood as a critique of experientialism and mystical experiences (Turner, *Darkness of God*, 258-273).



one can observe the texture of the fabric, the composition of the fibres, and how the individual threads are woven together in specific ways to create the piece of cloth.<sup>36</sup> I refer back to the texts that Weigel cites and use these texts to retrace the material path along which ideas travelled to Weigel. I look, for instance, at the circumstances in which it was first edited and printed, by observing who else in Weigel's extended network read and cited those texts in order to establish how and why Weigel might have first approached these texts. I then follow the ways that Weigel deploys the ideas he took from Dionysius and Eckhart in the course of his *oeuvre*, showing how these ideas change as he adapts them, and how they in turn shape his work. Weigel's corpus presents an additional challenge because it is split between Weigel's original works and his "derivative" ones, in which Weigel seems merely to collate his reading notes from various texts, adding a title and few introductory remarks of his own. These so-called derivative texts have generated relatively little interest in the few scholarly works on Weigel, as described above, other than to note that Weigel did indeed know the author in question, whereas Weigel's very practice of excerpting is interesting in its own right.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jane Newman's *The Intervention of Philology* is an exemplary demonstration of how much is to be gained by studying the relationship between texts and the world of their sources without relying too heavily on modern critical editions. Newman describes her approach as "reading slowly," which, in the case of the Daniel Caspar von Lohenstein (1635-1683) plays she studies, means taking the time to explore the densely populated footnotes appended to the text and the numerous references embedded in the text itself. (Newman, 12) Thus, even though a given text may only be mentioned in the footnotes, and might therefore have been accorded only a secondary status, for Newman the learned apparatus is a way for the text to open itself up to its context, rather than independently assembling a context the scholar believes to represent contemporary ideas on whatever subject is being investigated. In addition, Newman's "slow reading" is a more sensitive measure of influence that does not depend on sheer numbers of citations. Newman's "excavation" of Lohenstein's textual world represents an attempt to avoid "'asymmetric' narratives about [the past's] relationship to the present," in which the past is simple and the present is complex. (Newman, 10) Jane O. Newman, *The Intervention of Philology: Gender, Learning, and Power in Lohenstein's Roman Plays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Another problem with relying on modern critical editions is that texts are not always transmitted whole and perfect, and acknowledging this fact opens up new landscapes to investigate, such as a text that is considered minor by virtue of being mere "copying." As Ann Blair's media-historical study *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* makes clear, it is important to recognize that note-taking and excerpting were important and legitimate practices in pre-modern writing, rather than

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