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Martin Luther and Dionysius the Areopagite

Fredric Cleve †

In his writings Martin Luther expresses his opinions of Dionysius the Areopagite at least forty times. His remarks are interesting, because his attitude to Dionysius undergoes a significant change. At the outset of his theological activity Luther is partly under the influence of Dionysius, but he soon emancipates himself from him. He starts to see Dionysius as his theological opposite, and in several theological questions he presents his own position in a dialogue with Dionysius. Luther knows that his attitude to Dionysius has changed, and he indicates several times that liberation from Dionysius' influence has meant a great deal to him. Although Luther changes his position in regard to Dionysius, there are also features in his discussion with Dionysius which pervade his whole production.¹

Luther's view of Dionysius as a historical person

The changes in Luther's opinion of Dionysius become obvious when he writes about Dionysius as a historical person. In his commentary on St. Paul's letter to the Romans from 1515–16 he takes for granted that Dionysius is a disciple of St. Paul. Luther thinks that Dionysius is the person mentioned in Acts 17:34. When Luther comments on Romans 16:23, he says that Sosipater is the man to whom Dionysius wrote a letter, and in connection with Romans 16:23 he mentions that Caius received four letters from Dionysius.² In his lectures on the *Epistle to the Hebrews* in 1517–18 Luther speaks of the divine Dionysius.³ In his second series of lectures on the *Psalms* in 1518–19 Luther calls him the blessed Dionysius.⁴ He refers to Dionysius' negative theology and to his description of the mystical way.⁵ In his discussion of the indulgences in 1518 Luther finds support for his position in Dionysius.⁶ In his debate with Eck in Leipzig in 1519 Luther refers to Dionysius and points out that Dionysius concludes his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* by speaking of the bishops. Dionysius has nothing to say about the pope. In Luther's opinion Dionysius thus supports him in his rejection of the primacy of the pope.⁷

Towards the end of the 1510s Luther tries to interpret Dionysius in a way which conforms to his own thinking. He associates Dionysius' teaching of *theologia negativa* and of the mystical darkness with his own theology of the cross.⁸

¹ On Dionysius see e.g. Stiglmayr 1911, viii–xxvi; Gilson 1955, 81–85, 597–598; O'Daly 1981, 772–780; Louth 1986, 184–189 and Juntunen 1996, 72–75.

² *WA* 56.152.9–13.

³ *WA* 57/3.111.21

⁴ *WA* 55/2.138.8

⁵ *WA* 3.372.13–26.

⁶ *WA* 1.551.36–39. Cf. *WA* 1.445.13–26.

⁷ *WA* 59.438.162–164, *WA* 59.449.539–545.

⁸ *WA* 5.176.31–33.



The Roman Catholic Cathedral of Dionysius the Areopagite on Panepistimiou Street in Athens was originally designed by Leo von Klenze in 1844, redesigned by Lysandros Kaftantzoglou, and completed in 1887. It was built in Italianate style with an arcaded loggia.

About 1520 Luther becomes more questioning and critical in his judgement of Dionysius. In *Operationes in Psalmos*, written between 1519 and 1521, he says: “Dionysius, whoever it may be”.⁹ In his pamphlet *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae* from 1520 he speaks very critically of Dionysius. He says that Dionysius is devoid of profound knowledge. He finds that Dionysius’ mystical theology is very harmful. Dionysius is more a Platonist than a Christian. No believing Christian should occupy himself with him. One cannot learn anything about Christ from Dionysius. Those who knew something about Christ lost it when they read Dionysius. Luther says that he speaks from experience.¹⁰ Dionysius’ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* receives a harsh judgement too. According to Luther, Dionysius describes ecclesiastical customs and plays with allegorical

⁹ WA 5.503.9–10.

¹⁰ *Atque mihi (ut magis temerarius sim) in totum displicet, tantum tribui, quisquis fuerit, Dionysio illi, cum ferme nihil in eo sit solidae eruditionis. Nam ea quae in ‘coelesti hierachia’ de angelis comminiscitur, in quo libro sic sudarunt curiosa et superstitiosa ingenia, qua, rogo autoritate aut ratione probat? Nonne omnia sunt illius meditata ac prope somniis simillima, si libere legas et iudices? In ‘Theologia’ vero ‘mystica’, quam sic inflant ignorantissimi quidam Theologistae, etiam pernitosissimus est, plus platonisans quam Christianisans, ita ut nollem fidelem animum his libris operam dare vel minimam. Christum ibi adeo non discas, ut, si etiam scias, amittas. Expertus loquor: Paulum potius audiamus, ut Iesum Christum et hunc crucifixum discamus. Haec est enim via, vita et veritas: haec scala, per quam venit ad patrem, sicut dicit ‘Nemo venit ad patrem nisi per me’.* WA 6.562.3–14. Cf. WA 8.289.34–290.5.

interpretations in his book. Luther considers himself capable of writing a better hierarchy than Dionysius. He asserts that even the most poorly gifted person can play around with allegories. A theologian should not occupy himself with allegories until he is completely able to interpret the right and simple meaning of the Scripture.¹¹ Luther declares further that he does not regard Dionysius as an authority on the doctrine of the sacraments. He indeed knows that Dionysius is important for the doctrine of the sacraments, because he is the only one of the Church Fathers who speaks of six sacraments and because he includes extreme unction among the sacraments. Luther concedes that Dionysius takes his starting point in the Bible, but he emphasises that Dionysius and his followers do not stick to the proper meaning of the Scripture but interpret the Bible according to their own arbitrary thinking. It is, therefore, not necessary to regard something as a sacrament just because Dionysius has written about it.¹²

In his book against Latomus from 1521 Luther calls Dionysius the romancing Dionysius. He tells us that Dionysius alleges that his letter to Polykarpos is written to the Apostolic Father Polykarpos.¹³ In his lectures on the first letter of St. John from 1527 Luther nevertheless speaks of Saint Dionysius. He refers to Dionysius' tale of Carpus' vision. In Luther's opinion the vision may be authentic because it is in accordance with the Bible.¹⁴

In the 1530s Luther repeats his negative judgements of Dionysius. In his commentary on *Genesis* from 1531, Luther establishes that Dionysius is not a disciple of St. Paul. The writings of Dionysius are filled with silly rubbish. A disciple of St. Paul could not have occupied himself with such things. Luther refers to Dionysius' book *On Celestial Hierarchy* and to his doctrine of the angels. Everyone can see that Dionysius' writings contain useless and worthless human thoughts, Luther asserts.¹⁵ In his first disputation against the antinomians from 1537 Luther admonishes his audience to shun Dionysius' mystical theology like the plague. The mystical theology is a swindle and an expression of the imposture of the devil. Through the mystical theology the devil can capture people's minds so strongly that they accept Dionysius' lies as the infallible truth and the highest wisdom. They believe that they sense a foretaste of the coming life and of the eternal blessedness. Luther puts Dionysius on the same level as Thomas M ntzer, Caspar Schwenkfeld and the anabaptists.¹⁶

¹¹ WA 6.562.15–25.

¹² WA 6.568.24–29.

¹³ WA 8.65.26–30.

¹⁴ WA 20.640.1–5.

¹⁵ *Apud Graecos est Dionysios, quem iactant Pauli discipulum fuisse, sed id non est verum. Est enim plenissimus ineptissimarum nugarum, ubi de Hierarchia coelesti et ecclesiastica disputat. Fingit novem Choros tanquam sphaeras, supremam Seraphim, Deinceps Cherubim, Thronos, Dominationes, Virtutes, Principatus. Postea in Hierarchia inferiore Potestates, Archangelos, Angelos. Haec quis non videt nihil esse quam ociosas et futes hominum cogitationes?* WA 42.175.1–7.

¹⁶ *Admoneo vos, ut istam Dionysii mysticam theologiam, et similes libros, in quibus tales nugae continentur, detestemini tanquam pestem aliquam. Metuo enim, cum tempore fanaticos homines venturos, qui talia portenta rursus in Ecclesiam invehent et per hoc sanam doctrinam obscurabunt et prorsus obruent. Delusiones sathanae sunt, qui ita fascinat sensus hominum, ut talia mendacia pro certissima veritate ac summa sapientia amplectantur aut putent, se sentire gustum quendam vitae ac beatitudinis futurae. Easdem stultitias sparserunt in vulgus Muntzerus et Anabaptistae, qui remoto Christo iactabant, se habere revelationes, cum nudo Deo agere et loqui. Marcus [St bner], qui primus fuit autor huius erroris, dicebat se plenum divinitate.* WA 39/1.390.3–13. Cf. WA 43.72.23–30; Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* 1.3; Gilson 1955, 82.

Luther's early interpretation of the mystical theology

During the 1510s Luther links up to the mystical theology of Dionysius. In his lecture on the Epistle to the Hebrews from 1517–18 he speaks in connection with Hebr. 5:12 about three types of theology: the symbolic or sensual, the proper or rational, and the mystical or spiritual. He mentions that Dionysius calls the mystical or spiritual theology *alogon* because it cannot be transmitted or apprehended through words or through the reason. It can only be received through experience.¹⁷ Luther also calls the mystical theology ecstatic or negative theology. The mystical or negative theology implies that God is praised by wondering, astonishment and silence. One does not express anything about God, because one knows that it is impossible for our thoughts to praise God in an adequate way.¹⁸

In these contexts Luther accords great value to the mystical theology. The proper, affirmative theology is imperfect when it comes to understanding and speaking. The negative theology is the perfect theology. Compared to the affirmative theology the negative theology is like wine in relation to milk. Luther observes that Dionysius often uses the word *hyper* when he speaks of the negative theology. It is necessary to rise above every thought and above every manifoldness and enter into the darkness of God.¹⁹

In connection with Ps. 18:12 “He made darkness his secret place,” Luther says that the word darkness might be interpreted in different ways. God's secret place is darkness because God dwells in the secret and the darkness of faith. God is darkness also because he dwells in a light which no man can approach. Darkness can also refer to the incarnation and the Church. As regards the second kind of darkness Luther emphasises that no reason can approach God until it first loses its own light and is exalted by another light. Luther refers to Dionysius who says that it is necessary to enter into an exalting light and ascend through negation. This is due to the fact that God is hidden and incomprehensible.²⁰

When Luther describes what it means to enter into this darkness, he emphasises that entering the darkness is a movement where the soul is elevated upwards and permeated with the Word of God. He refers to Jesus' parable of the vine in St. John 15. In entering the darkness the branches of the vine are purged. From man's point of view it is a passive process. The soul encounters the inner Word of God. This Word catches the soul. It is not the soul that grasps the Word. The soul is deprived of all imagination and concepts and is carried off by the Word. The Word brings the soul into the desert. Luther quotes Hosea 2:3: “Lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day she was born, and make her as a wilderness, and set her like a dry land and slay her with thirst”.²¹

¹⁷ *Sermones Dei apostolus hic manifeste distinguit in perfectos et incipientes, quare et necessario in proficientes. Que differentia non facilius intelligitur quam iuxta triplicem illam theologiam superius quoque commemoratam, scil. simbolicam, propriam, mysticam, seu sic: sensualem, rationalem, spiritualem. Quam ultimam Dionysius vocat Alogon, i.e. irrationalem, scil. quod nec verbo nec ratione tradi aut capi potest, sed sola experientia. Simbolica theologia est ea, que docet Deum per figuras et sensibiles imagines, ut olim apud Iudeos in templo, tabernaculo, archa, sacrificiis et similibus cognoscere. Que et hodie tollerantur apud Christianos in ornamentis imaginum ecclesiarum, item in cantibus, in organis et similibus. WA 57/3.179.6–15. Cf. Dionysius, De caelesti hierarchia 2; Gilson 1955, 82.*

¹⁸ WA 3.372.13–16.

¹⁹ WA 3.372.16–27.

²⁰ WA 55/2.138.5–10, Dionysius, De divinis nominibus 1.5.

²¹ WA 5.176.11–21.

The quotation from Hosea shows, says Luther, that mystical ascension is painful. It is a narrow and unpleasant way. The soul has to leave everything visible. It is stripped of all senses and of all that it knows and has been accustomed to. In other words, it has to die and descend to hell. The soul feels as if it is totally doomed to destruction. It does not touch either earth or heaven, and it does not know itself or God. It is reduced to nothing and it does not know anything. It can only say with the bride in the Song of Solomon 5:8: "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, tell him, that I am sick of love". When the soul enters the obscurity and darkness it does not see anything. It becomes increasingly weaker, but in reality it is stronger when it becomes weaker. According to Luther this process is what the mystical theologians call entering the darkness and ascending above being and non-being.²²

As we have seen, Luther connects the mystical ascension with faith, charity and hope. According to him it is impossible to contemplate the uncreated Word if one has not first been justified and received the purity of the heart through the incarnate Word. Only through faith and only through Christ do we have access to the Father. Everything we can do and endure must happen in faith in Christ, Luther points out. When we have been justified by faith and received the remission of sins, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The incarnate Word is, therefore, necessary for the purity of the heart, and not until we have this purity can we be caught up to the uncreated Word. This elevation, too, is God's gift. Nobody can think that he is so pure in heart that he may claim to be caught up with St. Paul to the third heaven or to be with St. Peter, St. James, and St. John on the mountain of transfiguration.²³

Hope is also important for the mystical elevation. Through hope the person who hopes is led to the object of hope. In hope, subject and object melt together. But the object of hope does not appear. The soul does not know for what it is hoping, but it knows for what it does not hope. The soul moves in something which it does not see. Luther quotes Romans 8:24: "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?"²⁴

The ascension into the darkness is above all related to the love of God. Luther emphasises this fact in connection with Romans 5:5: "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts". Luther says that St. Paul speaks of the love of God because he means a love where we love God alone. It is a love where God is loved for his own sake. In this love there is nothing that we can see or experience, either within ourselves or outside ourselves. There is nothing visible that we can trust, nor love nor fear. The love of God is elevated above everything to God, who is invisible, inconceivable and inaccessible. This love does not know what it loves, but it does know what it does not love. In that respect this love resembles hope. This love rejects all that is known and experienced. It does not want what it has and it wants what it does not have. Here again Luther quotes the bride in the Song of Solomon 5:8: "I am sick of love".²⁵

Luther emphasises that the entering into the darkness is impossible through man's own achievements, through deeds which man himself has chosen.²⁶ The entering is, on

²² *WA* 5.176.21–30.

²³ *WA* 56.299.27–300.8.

²⁴ *WA* 56.374.5–21.

²⁵ *WA* 56.307.3–15.

²⁶ *WA* 5.176.29–32.

the contrary, something that happens to man. It is a question of God's dealing with the soul. The love of God does not exist within us. It has not been born within us, and it has not begun within us. We cannot achieve the love of God through moral choices and habits as is the case with the moral virtues. We must turn to God and apply for his love. The love of God is a gift which we have not earned. The Holy Spirit sheds the love of God into our hearts. It is shed into the core of the heart, not on the surface of the heart as foam on water.²⁷

For Luther the trials are instruments for shedding the love of God. They awaken hope, and in the trials the authenticity of this love is tested.²⁸ Entering the darkness means, therefore, to be exposed to the afflictions of the cross, to death and hell. The cross alone is our theology, Luther insists.²⁹

Many authors who have written about the mystical theology of Dionysius have not, in Luther's view, understood what entering the darkness really means. They have no doubt dispensed with all images of the passion of Christ and they have wanted to listen to and contemplate the uncreated Word. But they have tried to do so without first being justified and without getting the eyes of the heart purified through the incarnate Word.³⁰ They have looked at their own righteousness and thus still kept to something visible. They have not been tried and they have therefore not learned to hope.³¹ They have thought that they possessed love, but their love has been foam on the surface. The trials have revealed the pride and the impatience that dwells in their innermost.³² They have not, in other words, loved death and hell, but they have used the mystical theology for the purpose of enhancing their selves. They have then deceived their readers. No one should believe that he is a mystical theologian, Luther says, if he has read, understood and taught Dionysius, or if he believes that he has understood Dionysius. One becomes a theologian, not by understanding, reading and contemplating, but by living, dying and getting judged, Luther emphasises.³³

Luther's later view of Dionysius and the mystical theology

After 1520 Luther becomes more critical of Dionysius and the mystical theology than he was during the 1510s. He keeps a gradually increasing distance from the mystical theology. As mentioned above, in 1537 he admonishes his audience to detest Dionysius' mystical theology as a harmful plague. Luther's negative attitude is bound up with his stronger emphasis on the incarnate Word, Christ's humanity and the means of grace. His conflicts with the Roman Church and his battles with Thomas Müntzer and other spiritualists have driven him to this position.

As time goes on Luther also adopts an attitude of reserve towards the allegorical interpretation of the Bible. He admits that it was very difficult for him to free himself from

²⁷ *WA* 56.307.16–33.

²⁸ *WA* 56.307.13–15.

²⁹ *Crux sola est nostra Theologia*. *WA* 5.176.32–33.

³⁰ *WA* 56.299.27–300.8.

³¹ *WA* 56.307.11–15.

³² *WA* 56.307.21–23.

³³ *WA* 5.163.17–29.

the study of the allegories even if he realised that they are empty speculations. According to Luther only the historical meaning of the Bible gives true and firm knowledge. When one has treated the historical meaning and understood it correctly one can use allegories as decorations and illustrations. But sheer allegories, which are in no respect coherent with the historical meaning of the text, should be rejected as empty dreams.³⁴ Luther says that he has had an aversion to allegories since he began to appreciate the historical meaning. He has used them only when the text itself points to them or when it is possible to draw the allegorical interpretations from the New Testament.³⁵ Luther recommends that especially younger students of the Bible should read the old teachers with discrimination and discard those who are less probable. They should not, like Luther and the scholastic theologians, be betrayed by the authority which the title Church Father or Teacher of the Church suggests.³⁶ Luther regards Dionysius as a representative of the allegorical interpretation of the Bible, and his critical remarks also apply to Dionysius.³⁷

Luther's criticism of the mystical theology has its background in his distinction between God's omnipotence and God's orderly rule of the world, between God's *potentia absoluta* and God's *potentia ordinata*. Through his omnipotence, through his *potentia absoluta*, God, according to Luther, sometimes makes wonders. God saved the three men in the burning furnace in Babylon and he can see to it that even children who, owing to the neglect of their parents or for some other reason, have not been baptised, do not become condemned.³⁸ But as a rule God works through his *potentia ordinata*, through the ordinances which he has instituted. He works through the things which he has created and he does not want to leave them idle. He does not give us manna from heaven but he wants us to work in our vocation. He does not create men out of dust of the earth but through the union between man and woman.³⁹ The same is true when it comes to the participation of the salvation. According to God's *potentia ordinata* the Church must say and teach that no one is saved without the external baptism. Salvation is not attained through spiritual speculations independent of external things. One must listen to the external Word, one must ask for the baptism, one must receive the Eucharist and one must ask for absolution. All these are external things, but they are enclosed in the Word. Without them the Holy Spirit does not bring about salvation.⁴⁰

Luther criticises Dionysius for giving rise to speculations on the naked majesty of God. Luther obviously thinks that Dionysius imagines a communion with God, which is not mediated by the incarnate Christ and the means of grace, or that he is not content to have communion with God through the humanity of Christ and the means of grace. The hidden God, whom the soul meets in the mystical darkness, is God in his *potentia absoluta*. According to Luther, God has not intended that we should meet him in that way. Luther says that many have followed Dionysius and written much on spiritual nuptials, where they have imagined that God is the bridegroom and they the brides. They have taught that mortal men in their corrupt state after the fall can contemplate God in his inscrutable and

³⁴ WA 42.173.30–37.

³⁵ WA 42.173.26–29.

³⁶ WA 42.173.22–26.

³⁷ WA 7.647.20–32, WA 7.648.16–25 and WA 42.176.19–26.

³⁸ WA 43.71.7–28.

³⁹ WA 43.71.7–16.

⁴⁰ WA 43.71.33–37.

eternal majesty without means and intercessors. Luther alleges that this doctrine has been received as the highest divine wisdom. He admits that he himself during a certain period adopted this doctrine, but he says that this greatly harmed him.⁴¹

The monasteries were of course centres for the mystical and contemplative life. Luther says that many monks and nuns, and especially the best of them, concentrated on practising this life, before God, through the reformation, revealed the light of the gospel. According to Luther some monks and nuns wrote down their dreams because they hoped that through them they would get special revelations.⁴² Luther states that Müntzer and the anabaptists have spread the longing for an unmediated communion with God among people. Müntzer and his followers boasted that they had revelations and that they spoke and communicated with the uncovered God. One of them, Marcus Stübner, contended, according to Luther, that he was filled with divinity.⁴³

Luther does not totally reject special revelations. He admits that some of the revelations which, according to the tradition, Dionysius and others have had, might have been true. Among other revelations, Luther thinks of Dionysius' reports on Carpus.⁴⁴ Luther reminds us of the fact that God revealed himself to patriarchs and prophets either in dreams or visions or through the voices of other patriarchs or angels.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, he says that he does not care for these revelations and that he himself for that matter does not long for them. They have no value compared to the baptism, the Eucharist and a conversation with a pious brother.⁴⁶ Luther is content with the revelations of the face of God which he sees in the baptism and in the ministry of the Word. There a brother becomes an angel for his brother when he absolves, comforts, teaches, admonishes and encourages him.⁴⁷ Luther would not be worried if God did not reveal himself to him in a visual way as he did to Abraham. It is enough for his salvation that he is baptised, that he listens to the gospel and that he receives absolution through the power of the keys.⁴⁸ The mystical speculations and the mystical experiences are not the important thing for Luther, but the means of grace which give him a share in the salvation.

Luther finds support for his reticent attitude to these speculations in an example from the ancient Church. He quotes a desert father, who said to his monks when they devoted themselves to speculations: "If you see yourself ascending to heaven and already have one foot over the threshold, pull it back immediately and don't allow the other to follow". In Luther's interpretation the desert father, through this advice, wanted to persuade his monks to abstain from speculations.⁴⁹

⁴¹ *Scriptura inquit: Non videbit me homo et vivet, et ut hoc periculum evitemus, donatum est nobis verbum incarnatum, quod positum est in praesepio ac suspensum in ligno crucis. Hoc verbum est sapientia et filius patris et enarravit nobis, quae sit voluntas patris erga nos. Qui relicto illo filio suas cogitationes et speculationes sequitur, maiestate Dei obruitur et desperat. Ad has speculationes de maiestate Dei nuda dederunt occasionem Dionysius cum sua mystica theologia.* WA 39/1.389.13–19.

⁴² WA 43.71.37–72.3.

⁴³ WA 39/1.390.10–13.

⁴⁴ WA 42.667.23–24; WA 20.640.5–6; Dionysius, *Epistula* 8.6.

⁴⁵ WA 42.667.29–31.

⁴⁶ WA 42.667.24–27.

⁴⁷ WA 42.667.31–35.

⁴⁸ WA 42.667.38–42.

⁴⁹ WA 43.72.4–9.

Luther has two main arguments against striving for achieving an immediate communion with God. One is that this striving is an illusion, a deceit of the devil. It is an attempt to climb into heaven without a ladder.⁵⁰ The devil tempts people who devote themselves to speculation into believing that they are already in heaven and already sitting in the lap of God.⁵¹ The devil suggests that they can have communion with God without Christ and without the Word and the sacraments. Such a life appeals to reason and it seems to be the worship of angels.⁵² People who are devoted to a contemplative life also gain the admiration of others. They are regarded as great spiritual personalities who have a special holiness.⁵³ They are themselves fond of their worship and speak with contempt of the active life. Luther admits that he, too, took that view before he was liberated from his misconception.⁵⁴

Thus, the contemplative life as an immediate way to God is for Luther a lie and a conceit, it is the devil's farce. Those who are devoted to this sort of life are driven to spiritual pride and they neglect their duties towards their fellow men. That does not mean that Luther totally dismisses the contemplative life. But he wants to connect the active and the contemplative lives with each other and he rejects a speculation which overlooks the humanity of Christ. Dionysius' view has been described as a call from God which is transmitted from one mediator to another until it reaches us.⁵⁵ God thus becomes very distant. Luther insists that God has come close to us in the man Jesus and in the incarnate and risen Lord who is really present in the Word and the sacraments. A right way for living a speculative life is to regard one's baptism, read one's Bible, listen to sermons, honour one's father and mother and help one's working and struggling brother. One should not, as the monks do, lock oneself up in a confined room, but one should fulfil one's vocation.⁵⁶ Luther says that he has a definition of the contemplative life that is different from what they teach in the monasteries. His definition reads: "The true contemplative life is to listen to and obey the audible word and 'not to know any thing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified'".⁵⁷

Luther's second argument against the unmediated speculation is that it is dangerous. It is dangerous to try to explore and seize God only through reason and rapture without the mediator Christ. In that case one comes in contact with *Deus nudus*, with God in his majesty, and in his absolute power. When the uncovered or hidden God speaks in his majesty, he terrifies and kills. He said to Moses: "There shall no man see me, and live", Exodus 33:20.⁵⁸ Luther also refers to the experiences which the Israelites had when God spoke to them at Sinai, Exodus 20:19 and Deuteronomy 18:16 ff.⁵⁹ Luther stresses

⁵⁰ WA 43.72.1–3.

⁵¹ WA 43.72.9–14.

⁵² WA 43.72.15–17.

⁵³ WA 39/1.391.9–20.

⁵⁴ WA 43.72.15–16.

⁵⁵ Stiglmayr 1911, 144, n. 1.

⁵⁶ *Qui enim recte speculari volet, intueatur Baptismum suum: legat Biblia sua, audiat conciones, honoret patrem et matrem, fratri laboranti subveniat, non concludat se, ut sordidum monachorum et monacharum vulgus solet, in angulum, et delectetur ibi suis devotionibus, ac sic putet se in Dei sinu sedere, et commertium habere cum Deo sine Christo, sine verbo, sine Sacramentis etc.* WA 43.72.9–14.

⁵⁷ *Vera vita speculativa est, audire et credere verbum vocale, ac nihil velle scire "nisi Christum, eumque crucifixum".* WA 43.72.20–21.

⁵⁸ WA 39/1.389.10–390,1.

⁵⁹ WA 39/1.390.13–19.

God's power and active actions, and he knows that his concept of God differs from that of Dionysius. In the 1510s he already criticises Dionysius' notion of a God who is totally inconceivable, a God who cannot be given a name.⁶⁰ Later on he finds Dionysius' speaking of God as ens and non-ens ridiculous.⁶¹ For Luther the negative theology does not mean that God is understood as non-ens. The true negative theology is the holy cross, where God does not appear, but where the groanings of the Spirit which cannot be uttered, nevertheless are present, Romans 8:26.⁶²

A person who follows his own thoughts and speculations is, according to Luther, likely to end in despair. The clarity of the majesty of God depresses him. When the uncovered and hidden God speaks in his majesty, he only frightens and kills.⁶³ Luther, therefore, stresses that the incarnate Word has been given to us in order to preserve us from the danger which the encounter with the uncovered God implies. The incarnate Word lies in the crib and hangs on the cross. This Word is the wisdom of the Father and the Father's Son, and it has proclaimed the Father's will concerning us. When we want to communicate with God we have to listen to the voice of Christ. God has appointed him teacher for the whole world. He alone knows the Father and he reveals the Father to whoever he wants. God does not want us to listen to what happens in rapture. We shall listen to the Son. In him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden, Colossians 2:3.⁶⁴

The Holy Spirit is also working through Christ when he sanctifies and gives life. Luther points out that there is a difference between the Holy Spirit, given through Christ, and the Holy Spirit in his uncovered majesty. In the latter case the Holy Spirit is as terrifying as the uncovered God. The Holy Spirit is a person in the Holy Trinity, and what applies to God also applies to him. Luther also connects the Holy Spirit with the distinction between law and gospel. When the Holy Spirit meets us as God in his nature and majesty, he is attached to the law. Then he is the origin of the law and it is also through him that the law accuses us of our sin. Only when the Holy Spirit is a gift through Christ, he gives us life and sanctifies us. Then he is attached to the gospel, to the promise of salvation.⁶⁵ It is, therefore, not possible to seek communion with God in the Holy Spirit outside the incarnate Christ and outside the external Word. When, in that case, one really meets the Holy Spirit, one encounters the uncovered God and ends in despair. And when one does not meet the Holy Spirit, the speculation ends in presumption.⁶⁶ Both despair and presumption are, for Luther, contrary to the essence of the Christian life.

Luther is nevertheless not unfamiliar with the trials and tribulations and the cross which he connects with the negative theology. He says that he knows them. He experienced them not only in the monastery before his reformatory breakthrough, but many times even later. He points out that the cross and the trials are dangerous situations. The devil can use these situations to drive a man to despair, disdain or blasphemy. The devil reminds us of the fact that we are sinners. He wants us to draw the conclusion that God, because of the

⁶⁰ *WA* 5.187.22–39.

⁶¹ *WA* 40/2.543.8–10.

⁶² *WA* 40/2.543.11–13.

⁶³ *WA* 39/1.389.16–18; *WA* 39/1.391.3–7.

⁶⁴ *WA* 39/1.389.13–16; *WA* 39/1.391.4–17.

⁶⁵ *WA* 39/1.389.26–30; *WA* 39/1.391.17–18.

⁶⁶ *WA* 39/1.389.30–390.22.

sin, is angry with us. In that situation we have to humbly admit that we are sinners and to approach God with groanings which cannot be uttered. These groanings penetrate the heavens and, so to speak, compel the divine majesty to forgive and save.⁶⁷ It seems as if Luther thinks that these groanings come from the assailed man himself. In that case they are an expression of the new man which dwells within him. Luther regards the confession of sins as one element of faith.⁶⁸ At the same time Luther emphasises that, with regard to those who are subjected to trials, we should follow St. Paul's exhortation: "comfort the feebleminded", 1 Thessalonians 5:14. The Holy Spirit exhorts the Christians everywhere to teach and restore each other with divine authority.⁶⁹ The other side of faith is that through Jesus we are saved from our wicked, sinful and damned being.⁷⁰ Luther testifies that he himself has often been helped and restored by a word from a brother, who has in no way regarded himself as an equally good interpreter of the Bible as Luther. A word from a brother has a tremendous weight when, in time of danger, it is directly derived from the Bible. The Holy Spirit is an inseparable companion to the Bible, and he moves and restores the hearts in many different ways through the Word.⁷¹ The means of grace, the external Word of the Bible, the gospel and fraternal dialogue thus play an important role also in Luther's understanding of the negative theology. When Luther stresses the importance of the fraternal dialogue, he perhaps wants to emphasise the significance of community as opposed to the individualism of speculation and mysticism.

Luther's views on Dionysius' doctrine of the angels and of man

It is also possible to observe a development in Luther's concept of Dionysius' doctrine of the angels. In the 1510s he still considers Dionysius seriously, but by 1520 his attitude becomes critical. Luther's own attitude to the angels also changes. During a fairly long period he speaks rather theoretically and objectively of them, but about 1530 they gain a more existential significance for his faith. He gives prominence to the fact that the angels are guardians and they participate in the battle between God and the devil. This battle concerns all men and especially the Christians. Luther's stronger emphasis on the angels might be connected with the fact that he has got married and has children. He has discovered what it means to be responsible for a defenceless child.⁷² As the angels become important for Luther only comparatively late, he cannot assert that Dionysius would have misled him concerning them.

In his lecture on the epistle to the Hebrews in 1517, Luther, in relation to Hebrews 1:14, asks the question if all angels are sent out by God. He mentions that the divine Dionysius says that the higher ranks of angels are never sent out. However, Luther points out that the text in Hebrews 1:14 is very clear. It says that "the angels are ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation". In the Christmas

⁶⁷ *WA* 40/2.543.2–7.

⁶⁸ *WA* 19.77.15–17.

⁶⁹ *WA* 40/2.543.14–21.

⁷⁰ *WA* 19.77.17–19.

⁷¹ *WA* 40/2.543.22–30.

⁷² When Luther writes of the angels, he often stresses the tasks of the parents, e.g. *WA* 34/2.257.21–29; *WA* 34/2.279.22–285.1.

gospel St. Luke also intended that all angels were present when he writes: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God”. It corresponds with Hebrews 1:6, which states: “And let all the angels of God worship him”. Dionysius can, on the other hand, refer to Daniel 7:10, which makes a distinction between angels who minister to God and angels who stand before him. Luther tries to solve the contradiction between Dionysius and the epistle to the Hebrews by agreeing with Bonaventura’s solution of the problem. Bonaventura thinks that Dionysius speaks of the visible sending of angels while the apostle in the epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the invisible sending. All angels are not sent in a visible way, but all are sent in an invisible way.⁷³ One can notice that Luther here concentrates on the sending of the angels.

In his book *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae* in 1520, Luther is already more critical of Dionysius. He wonders with what authority and with what reasons Dionysius supports his assertions concerning the angels in his book on the celestial hierarchy. When one reads and judges the book freely, one finds that it contains Dionysius’ own fancies and dreams.⁷⁴ In his lectures on Zechariah from the mid 1520s Luther develops his criticism. He says that Dionysius dreams of a heavenly hierarchy where some angels learn from others and where some angels are superior and others inferior. According to Luther, Dionysius presents this and many other things in an unabashed way as if he himself would have seen it. Luther especially rejects the idea that the angels learn from each other. He points to St. Matthew 18:10 and contends that God instructs the angels. God uses their services and he sends them to comfort his tormented and frightened people.⁷⁵ Luther again states that Dionysius dreams and makes up ridiculous things concerning the angels.⁷⁶

In his commentary to Genesis from the mid 1530s Luther says that Dionysius’ books on the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchy are filled with silly rubbish. Dionysius invents nine choirs or spheres of angels. The highest are the seraphs, the cherubs and the thrones. Then dominations, virtues and princes follow, and then in the lower hierarchy powers, archangels and angels. Is it not clear to anyone that these are nothing but worthless and futile human thoughts, Luther says.⁷⁷ He also wonders at whoever says that there are nine choirs. He declares that the Franciscans have added a tenth sphere, where the Mother of God lives as in a palace.⁷⁸ In another context Luther rejects Dionysius’ idea that the angels are of different substances.⁷⁹ According to him Dionysius dreams when he thinks that cherub is a name for one of the order of angels. Referring to the Hebrew, Luther contends that cherub is a general concept which applies to all angels. Cherub alludes to the apparition of angels, and it means that the angels encounter men in a youthful, fresh shape and that they have a youthful face.⁸⁰ In a sermon from 1537, however, in connection with Colossians 1:16, Luther admits that there is a difference between angels, and that some angels are superior to others. He says that doctors and teachers, basing their

⁷³ WA 57/3.111.21–112.11.

⁷⁴ WA 6.562.3–8.

⁷⁵ WA 13.568.14–21.

⁷⁶ WA 13.604.38–42.

⁷⁷ WA 42.175.1–7; Dionysius, *De caelesti hierarchia* 7.1; Louth 1986, 186.

⁷⁸ WA 42.175.13–16.

⁷⁹ WA 36.406.18–19.

⁸⁰ WA 42.175.23–26.

statements on this Bible passage and on similar biblical quotations, have taught that there are nine orders or choirs among the angels. Without any success they have made great efforts to differentiate between the choirs. Luther says that he cannot distinguish between different kinds of angels either. That perhaps reduces his standing as a theologian, but it does not damage his Christian faith.⁸¹ He is apparently not interested in the idea of a hierarchy of angels and does not bother to polemise against this idea.

After 1530 Luther speaks fairly often of the angels in his sermons. In a sermon on St. Michael's day in 1532 he asks how we can get to know the angels. He does not accept Dionysius' answer. He suggests that Dionysius speculates about things which we cannot see. We do not get to know the angels with our eyes, Luther says, but we ought to hear what they say. The words of the angels show what is in their hearts. Luther quotes Jesus' saying in St. Matthew 12:34: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh". Here, as in many other contexts, Luther regards that what is heard, and not that what is seen, as fundamental for the knowledge of God and for the communion with God. At the same time it is clear that he bases his opinion on the Bible. He points to St. Luke 2:14 and he alludes to the hymns in the revelation of St. John. According to Luther the angels sing of the Saviour, of the child in Bethlehem, of the glory of God and of peace on earth. They also sing of those who have welcomed Jesus and of the patience and the sufferings of the Christians. From that we understand what the hearts of the angels are like and how they are disposed towards us. We get comfort not only from our Saviour but also from his heavenly host which has a friendly attitude towards us.⁸²

On St. Michael's day 1531 Luther delivered three sermons on the angels. In 1593 they were published with the title: *Drei christliche, trostreiche und in Gottes Wort wohlgegründete Predigten von guten und bösen Engeln*.⁸³ In these sermons Luther mentions Dionysius, but he also gives a thorough exposition of his own view of the angels and of their signification for the Christian life. Luther says that Dionysius and other Church teachers have written much on the angels. They have written that the angels stand before God and play, and that the angels do not care about men on earth. The monks have said that one should not attribute to the angels such childish works as care about men. Luther remarks, that Dionysius is right in saying that the angels stand before God and praise him. The Bible teaches that the angels always behold the face of God. But the Bible also teaches that the angels keep watch over men on earth. They are valets, nurses and guardians, especially in things which concern faith, Luther emphasises.⁸⁴ He compares the angels to parents and princes. When the parents have bred children, they are the children's protectors and guardians. They are their children's maids. The prince is the servant of the servants, i.e. the servant of the parents. He is obliged to watch and see to

⁸¹ WA 45.290.21–28.

⁸² *Sic sol man auch angelos erkennen contra Theologiam Dionysii scriptam de angelis de substantiis separatis. Speculatur res, quam non viderunt, ut Christus: 'Ex abundantia' etc. Si sol ein man erkennen, ex sermone agnoscitur, ex augen non agnoscitur. Nihil curo, quod non bey der nasen, augen sehe, modo audiam, quomodo loquatur. Sic in omnibus rebus statim videbis, an stultus vel sapiens. Sermo indicat, quale cor et anima. Sic quando de angelis scribendum, cogitandum, nihil, quomodo in celis agant, sed quomodo reden und singen. Ibi quid in eorum corde stick. 'Ex abundantia cordis eorum ghet.' Tamen all gedanken de Salvatore, puero et de gloria dei et pace in terris und gedult und leiden den Christen. Ibi intelligo cor, rationem eorum.* WA 36.406.18–27.

⁸³ Aland 1957, 57.

⁸⁴ WA 34/2.257.21–258.3.

it that the children are not inflicted with damage first of all through preserving the peace in the country.⁸⁵ Luther is deeply conscious of man's constant struggle with the devil. He emphasises that the devil is an indefatigable furious spirit. The devil is extremely angry with men and especially with believing people and he constantly wants to harm them.⁸⁶ In Luther's eyes the parents, the princes and the authorities are instruments in the struggle against the devil. He regards the angels in the same perspective. If the angels should not keep watch over us, the devil could before long prevent the prince's protection and obtain power over us. We could not live an hour but would perish in many ways, were not the angels keeping watch over us.⁸⁷ Luther describes perspicuously how the angels guard us and how they prevent the devil from hurting us even when we, the parents, the authorities and the prince are sleeping.⁸⁸

According to Luther the angels are also charged with the task of being companions and attendants. In relation to Psalms 91:11: "For he shall give his angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways", Luther says that Dionysius, Thomas and other philosophers have written about this biblical quotation without treating the matter the quotation is about. The matter is that God has ordered his angels to be with us in all our ways.⁸⁹ Luther is again very perspicuous. He takes the expression "in all thy ways" literally. According to him "in all thy ways" means that God has ordered his angels to be with us in our bed, in the church, in the town, on the street and in the field. The angels are with us when we have our morning prayers, when we work in the field and while we are travelling. Wherever we may go or stand, we have to know that God's angel is with us and keeps watch over us against the evil powers which surround us on all sides.⁹⁰ The expression "in all thy ways" applies also to our death. For Luther it is very important that the angels are our attendants also when we die. Then we do not know where we are going, but our attendants, the holy angels know.⁹¹ Face to face with death, man is overtaken by anxiety because he feels his sin. But he need not be anxious. He can say with confidence: "It is written: 'He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways'".⁹² Luther advises his listeners to meet death with the following prayer: "My God and Father, I commit myself to you, my highest protector, let your angel and guardian protect me".⁹³

⁸⁵ *Viel Philosophi unnd andere haben von den Engeln geschrieben, alls Thomas, Dionysios, aber sie haben den Schweiss geschrieben, keiner hat diese stück angerüret, davon dieser Psalm saget. Gott der HERR spricht, Er habe das im sinne, das du dich für jhm nicht fürchtest, darumb gibt er Wächter und Hüter, Vater unnd Mutter, Obrigkeit, darzu seine heilige Engel. Die Eltern sind nicht anders denn eine Kinder Magd, Also ein Fürst und Obrigkeit ist ein Knecht aller Knechte, mus wachen unnd warten, dass mein und dein Kind nicht erstochen werde. Also müssen die lieben Engel auch thun, damit du ja sihest, dass Gott der HERR dich reichlich begnade und sicher bewahre. WA 34/2.279.26–280.21. Cf. WA 34/2.258.22–24.*

⁸⁶ *WA 34/2.258.25–259.19; WA 34/2.281.12–13.*

⁸⁷ *WA 34/2.281.12–14; WA 34/2.281.29–31.*

⁸⁸ *WA 34/2.258.29–259.19.*

⁸⁹ *WA 34/2.279.22–280.20.*

⁹⁰ *Er saget aber: 'Auff allen deinen Wegen' das ist: im Bette unnd ausser dem Bette, inn der Kirchen, inn der Stadt unnd auff dem Felde, In summa: wo wir gehen oder sahen, da soll sein heiliger Engel bey uns sein. Ja, auch wenn wir sterben unnd in eine ander Welt reysen. Gehe nun hin, wo du hin wilt, so hastu treffliche Geleitsleute, die auff dich Warten. WA 34/2.280.21–25. Cf. WA 34/2.259.24–28.*

⁹¹ *WA 34/2.280.28–29.*

⁹² *WA 34/2.281.18–26.*

⁹³ *WA 34/2.281.16–18.*

Luther asserts that his doctrine of the angels has two effects upon men. It makes them careful and it comforts them. The doctrine of the angels is thus connected with Luther's distinction between law and gospel. Luther notices that no one willingly does anything evil when other people are present and watch it. But even when no one is nearby and we are totally alone, we are, according to Luther, surrounded by good and evil spirits, and we ought to be shy of them. Luther's doctrine of the angels thus has a moral educational function. In this respect it is, to a certain degree, law. The consolation, the gospel, consists of the assurance that, even when we are alone in our trouble, we can say: "You are alone, but you are yet not alone, the good angels who God has sent to you are with you".⁹⁴

The notion of the angels is connected with the understanding of the evil angels, the demons. Luther ascribes to Dionysius the statement: "Even if the demons and the human beings fell, their natural faculties, such as intellect, memory and will, etc. remained intact."⁹⁵ Luther finds this statement very dangerous. It means that the evil angels in falling from heaven lost grace, life and justice, but that their nature was not destroyed.⁹⁶ This position has consequences for the understanding of man and of his possibilities to be saved, and it is the anthropological aspect more than the demonological aspect in Dionysius' statement which interests Luther. He thinks that Dionysius' statement is an incisive wording of the idea that the natural faculties are intact after the fall. According to Luther it is a great blasphemy when the scholastics say that man's natural faculties are intact, but it is an even greater blasphemy, when the same is said of the demons.⁹⁷

Luther treats Dionysius' statement, when, in connection with Genesis 1:26, he discusses man as the image of God and the likeness of God. In this context he gives an account of the scholastic interpretation of the relationship between nature and grace. According to Luther, the scholastics teach that the image of God consists of the intellect, the memory and the will which belong to all men.⁹⁸ According to the scholastics, the statement that God created man in his own image means that man has intellect, memory and will. The scholastics think that the likeness of God is a sort of perfection of the image and that grace, in a corresponding way, perfects the nature. The likeness of God means that intellect is illuminated by faith, that memory is strengthened by hope and steadfastness, and that will is adorned by charity.⁹⁹ Faith, hope and charity are not qualities inherent in human nature, but gifts which God grants out of his grace.

When the image of God is described as intellect, memory and will, these mental faculties are regarded as an image of the Holy Trinity. Luther says that he does not reject modes of thought where everything is traced back to the Trinity, but he does not know if they are very useful. They can get unwanted consequences, if they are developed further. Owing to them one can contend that man has a free judgement through the deduction: God is free, and since man is created in God's image, his intellect, memory and will are free. Then it is also possible to say that man's free judgment, his *liberum arbitrium* contributes to the salvation as a preceding and effective cause.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ WA 34/2.260.19–28.

⁹⁵ WA 42.45.35–39.

⁹⁶ WA 40/2.384.13–14.

⁹⁷ WA 40/2.322.29–35. See also citation in n. 98.

⁹⁸ WA 42.45.3–10.

⁹⁹ WA 42.45.11–17.

Against the idea that man's natural qualities are intact Luther contends that human nature has been corrupted through Adam's fall. Human nature has a distorted fear and love in relation to God and men.¹⁰¹ Corruption does not affect the functions of the intellect, the memory and will as such, but it appears in man's encounters with God and his neighbours. Man's life is characterised by unbelief and selfishness. His capacity for faith and charity has been destroyed. According to Luther, therefore, we must confess that we are sinners and that all our efforts before God are condemned.¹⁰² It is not enough to say that sin consists of thoughts, words and deeds which are against God's law. According to Luther, everyone who is born of father and mother is already a sinner before he can think, speak and act. Nothing which is good before God can be born out of this evil root. The whole human nature is corrupted by the sin and subjected to eternal death.¹⁰³ It is not enough to say, as the scholastic theologians do, that original sin is taken away in baptism. Least of all can one say that a light is left in man after the Fall, and that man, even if he is not baptised, receives God's grace when he follows this light.¹⁰⁴ According to Luther the corruption of human nature is a permanent condition.

Luther supports his pessimistic understanding of human nature both with quotations from the Bible and with reference to Christ and his salvation. He quotes Psalms 90:8: "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret *sins* in the light of thy countenance". This passage shows, according to Luther, that we are living under God's wrath. We are prey to death due to God's wrath, which is provoked by our sins. Luther also refers to God's promise concerning the seed of woman who shall bruise the head of the serpent, Genesis 3:15 and to God's promise to Abraham: "and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" Genesis 22:18. In Luther's opinion the promise of blessing shows that the human nature is cursed and belongs to the realm of the devil, where darkness, hatred of God and unbelief reign.¹⁰⁵ Luther asks what Christ is needed for, if the human qualities are unscathed. If man has a good will, if he has an intellect by which the will can be guided, what is it then that has been lost in paradise and which can

¹⁰⁰ *Quare etsi istam diligentiam et cogitationes has non damno nec reprobo, quibus omnia rediguntur ad Trinitatem, tamen haud scio, an sint valde utiles, praesertim cum ea postea longius ducantur. Nam huc quoque affertur disputatio de libero arbitrio, quae ex imagine ista nascitur. Ita enim dicunt: Deus est liber, ergo cum homo ad imaginem Dei sit conditus, habet etiam liberam memoriam, mentem et voluntatem. Ad hunc modum multa excidunt, quae aut improprie dicuntur, aut postea impie accipiuntur. Ita nata est hinc periculosa sententia, qua pronuntiant Deum ita gubernare homines, ut eos proprio motu sinat agere. Ex hoc dicto multae incommoda opinioniones enatae sunt. Simile est, quod citatur: Deus, qui creavit te sine te, non salvabit te sine te. Hinc conclusum est: liberum arbitrium concurrere tanquam causam praecedentem et efficientem salutis. Non dissimile est Dionysii dictum, periculosius superioribus, ubi dicit: Quanquam daemones et homo ceciderunt, inquit, tamen naturalia manserunt integra, ut sunt mens, memoria, voluntas etc. Sed si hoc verum est, sequitur, quod homo viribus naturae possit facere, ut salvus fiat. WA 42.45.24–39.*

¹⁰¹ WA 40/3.384.19–21.

¹⁰² WA 40/3.384.28–38.

¹⁰³ *Si ego, tantus vir, sic quasi de coelo in infernum usque prolapsus sum, an non magnum mihi et aliis hic lapsus documentum est, nihil boni esse in carne mea? Magna itaque sapientia est, scire, nos nihil esse quam peccatum, ne sic leviter de peccato sentiamus, sicut Papae doctores, qui definiunt, peccatum esse dictum, factum aut cogitatum contra legem Dei. Quin tu sic defini secundum hunc Psalmum, Peccatum esse hoc totum, quod est natum ex patre et matre, antequam homo possit per aetatem aliquid dicere, facere aut cogitare, Ex hac autem ceu radice nihil boni coram Deo enasci posse. Hinc nascitur divisio peccati. Nam tota natura primum per peccatum corrupta et aeternae morti subiecta est. WA 40/3.322.16–25.*

¹⁰⁴ WA 40/3.384.33–35.

¹⁰⁵ WA 40/3.384.16–27.

only be restored through Christ, Luther asks.¹⁰⁶ Luther does not accept the philosophical anthropology of his time and he regards Dionysius as a representative of it. Luther's anthropology is theological and based on the biblical revelation and on the message of Christ as Saviour. He does not want to build on Aristotle but on Moses, David and Paul. They have their view of man from the first commandment and from the promises given to Adam and Abraham.¹⁰⁷ Luther regards the doctrine of the corruption of human nature as very important for the Church, because it accentuates the righteousness and glory of God and emphasises Christ's role as Saviour. Luther thinks that neither the pope nor the Turk embraces this doctrine. He admits that he himself had been doctor of theology for many years and had read the Bible carefully without knowing this doctrine.¹⁰⁸ In this context it is important to observe that Luther makes a distinction between creation and salvation, between righteousness valid before God and righteousness valid before men, *justitia coram Deo* and *justitia coram hominibus*. Man can at least partly accomplish the latter, but he cannot achieve the righteousness that is valid before God.

Lasting and changing features in Luther's interpretation of Dionysius

Luther's understanding of Dionysius changes, as we have seen, very much about 1520. But there are, nevertheless, some features which remain firm in all contexts where Luther expresses his opinion of Dionysius. One such feature is the emphasis on the first commandment. The central point in Luther's theology is that we shall let God be God; that God shall be the one from whom we expect everything good and with whom we take refuge in every need. We shall love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might. God shall be loved for his own sake. This is the reason why Luther constantly emphasises that our communion with God is founded on God's will and God's activity, not on our efforts. Before 1520, as well as later, justification, understood as God's intervention through Christ, has fundamental significance for communion with God. In this respect Luther points throughout to the incarnate word, Christ's humanity, the audible word and the gospel. Another lasting feature is that Luther attaches great importance to man's experience of his own situation and that he interprets this situation in the light of the biblical revelation.

The changes in Luther's attitude to Dionysius are many. After 1520 he does not regard Dionysius as an authority. He no longer makes efforts to bring his own thinking into agreement with Dionysius' opinions. That is a consequence of the fact that, after the debate in Leipzig in 1519, Luther wanted to build his theology on the Bible alone. In his controversy with Müntzer and other spiritualists in the 1520s Luther lays greater stress than before upon the humanity of Christ, the external word of the Bible and the means of grace. He connects the communion with God with participation of the means of grace, and he dissociates himself from Dionysius' negative theology, which, in his view, is embraced by the spiritualists. One reason for this is that Luther has become more aware of the corruption of human nature and sees man as a subject of the contest between God and the devil. Also, Luther now more clearly perceives the difference between Dionysius'

¹⁰⁶ *WA* 40/3.322.29–35.

¹⁰⁷ *WA* 40/3.384.21–23.

¹⁰⁸ *WA* 40/3.384.30–33.

understanding of God and his own. He does not accept Dionysius' idea of a circulation from God to the world and from the world back towards God.¹⁰⁹ He does not regard God as primarily a subject for contemplation and adoration. He perceives God as an active God, who includes man in his actions and in his combat with the powers of evil. In this combat man is a subject of God's actions through the orders which God has established in his creation and through Christ, the angels and the means of grace. Man is also God's collaborator in his position as parent or authority.

These differences in the perception of God have several consequences. Luther lays stress on that which can be heard, not on what can be seen. He emphasises existential relations instead of intellectual and contemplative attitudes. He regards faith and love as the sum of Christian life. Faith means that we see ourselves as condemned sinners and receive the salvation that Christ has won. Faith fulfils the first commandment. Love is directed to our fellow men. It means that we love them as Christ has loved us and that we refrain from vengeance.¹¹⁰ Luther values active life more than contemplative life, and he understands active life as a life in the daily vocation and in society. It is a life where we serve our fellow beings on God's behalf. He thus emphasises life in the ordinary human community in contrast to the individualistic communion with God that characterises contemplative life. He seems to be especially worried when Thomas Müntzer and other spiritualists try to spread contemplative life to common people. In the monasteries contemplative life was at least supervised and controlled.

Some of these features are also visible in Luther's view of the angels. There one can clearly see how he turns from an ontological to an existentialistic approach. The angels gradually gain a greater significance for him. He regards them as God's fellow combatants in the battle with the powers of evil. His understanding of the contemplative and the active life are reflected in his description of the angels. He does not forget that the angels praise God, but he emphasises more strongly their service to men and their role as God's servants. His interpretation of the angels reminds us of his understanding of the role of faith and love in Christian life, and concerning the angels he puts the stress on love.

The changes in Luther's attitudes also affect the meaning of some theological concepts. In his later theology the hidden God is not the end of the mystical ascent, the inconceivable God beyond being and non-being. The hidden God is instead God in his absolute power, the frightening God, the God of the law and the judgement. The Holy Spirit is also a person in this hidden God if he does not meet us through Christ. For Luther the negative theology is no longer a means for mystical ascent. It is a trial, the culmination of the Christian's spiritual struggle. Only the Holy Spirit, the sighs of the new man and the external word can save man in this precarious situation.

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¹⁰⁹ Gilson 1955, 85.

¹¹⁰ *Solche fragen mag man nemen aus dem unsern betbuchlin, da die drey stuck kurtz ausgelegt sind, odder selbs anders machen, bis das man die gantze summa des Christlichen verstands ynn zwey stuck als ynn zwey secklin fasse ym hertzen, wilchs sind glaupe und liebe. Des glaubens secklin habe zwey beutlin; ynn dem eynem beutlin stecke das stuck, das wyr gleuben, wie wyr durch Adams sunde alzumal verderbt, sunder und verdampft sind, Ro. v. Psal. l. Im andern stecke das stucklin, das wyr alle durch Jesum Christ von solchem verderbten, sundlichen, verdampften wesen erlöset, sind, Ro. v. Joh. iii. Der liebe secklin habe auch zwey beutlin. Inn dem eynen stecke dis stücke, das wyr yderman sollen dienen und wolthun, wie uns Christus than hat. Ro. xiii. Im andern stecke das stucklin, das wyr allerley böses gerne leyden und dulden sollen. WA 19.77.11–22.*

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