

# 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 Amosposl(pr3.Tms)85.1(pr3.Tmsot86.1(ed)-32istion)-322.1tioned

more compelling to me: questions of modernity and experience, epistemology and theories of 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 Sozialität* (free sociality) that characterized their 'founder.' I learned from this community of scholars that the cultivation of hospitality is a *notwendige Voraussetzung* 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

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.

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, Lyndal 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





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, *Luther's Theology*;<sup>24</sup> and translations of works by Oswald Bayer—in particular, his thin but rich *Luther's Theology*;<sup>25</sup> the very recently published *Luther's Theology*;<sup>26</sup> and the German original, *Luther's Theology*.<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

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.

A

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.

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 *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 Luther’s death on the night of Nov. 9, 1938 (the eve of the anniversary of Luther’s birth-date) 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



## Constructive Prospectives

---

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.

---

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 deter-







