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# Luther and the Mystics

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# BOOKS IN REVIEW

## LUTHER AND THE MYSTICS

BENGT R. HOFFMAN

Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976

285 Pages (Text to 236, Notes 247-272,

Bibliography 273-278, Indexes) (U.S. \$8.95)

Hoffman, professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, has presented the public with a well-documented work. Two basic theses are presented: first, that Luther's *inner* spirituality was of far greater importance than traditional Lutheranism has recognized; and secondly that this spirituality resembled that of two late German mystic writers, Johann Tauler and the anonymous "Frankfurter", author of the *Theologica Germanica* which Luther edited, and to a lesser extent also that of Bernard of Clairvaux. Of these two theses, it would appear that the former is Hoffman's greatest concern.

Part I of his book, encompassing a bit more than half the length, argues painstakingly that the *subjective* side of Luther's faith has been neglected and historically misinterpreted. Hoffman claims that this misinterpretation has been common to a number of schools, sometimes for different reasons. Traditional Confessionalists, Liberals, Neo-Orthodox, the "Pneumatic School", and recent Roman Catholic scholars are examined. In general, Luther's arguments for the "objective" nature of faith have predominated, the subjective being explained away or relegated to a supposed undeveloped period of Luther's spiritual progress.

Hoffman postulates that the sources of such misinterpretation have been three-fold, the first being a lack of differentiation in regard to mysticism (In this regard, he shows that Luther did differentiate, rejecting much of patristic and medieval mysticism as trying to reach God without Christ, but finding Tauler evangelical). A second factor in misinterpretation has been, he says, a careless grouping together of medieval mystics and the medieval scholastics. A third factor has been the dominant materialistic naturalism of the last 250 years. This worldview has affected Christian scholars as well so that references to non-physical realities have often been explained away.

In Part II, titled "Luther's views on God, man and salvation", Hoffman cites many parallels between Luther's expressions and those of Tauler, the "Frankfurter" and Bernard, showing that Luther at times used mystical-type terminology. A few examples may be interesting: "God is the *tremendum*, that which makes men tremble. But he is also the *fascinosum*, the power that entralls and fascinates" (p. 132). "The terms *gemitus* and *raptus* are used by Luther and some mystics about salvation . . . *Gemitus* signifies the religious affect engendered by God's awesomeness." (p. 151). "Luther said that he 'was once caught up into the third heaven' " (p. 153-54). "Life with Christ is like 'a secret wedding' " (p. 156). "To

participate in God was tantamount to partaking of invisible power" (p. 175); ". . . the power field of Christ" (p. 164). ". . . [E]very believer is part of a tabernacle . . . which 'in a mystical sense is also the church'" (p. 159).

In Part III and in the twenty-page Conclusion (Part IV) Hoffman discusses affinities between Luther's practices in prayer, exorcism and healing and contemporary charismatic movements, and also spends a short space on Luther's views of life after death. By implication, present-day charismatics are also related to some of the mystics. One may, for instance, compare the expression "the power field of Christ" (p. 164) with the principles outlined by Agnes Sanford (e.g. in *The Healing Light*). By implication also (though Hoffman doesn't say it) charismatics face some of the same dangers as the mystics.

Hoffman's interpretation of mysticism and related emotional states appears — at least as he has used his sources and references — to draw heavily on the following: Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (second edition 1960, first published 1923); articles by Bengt Hagglund, Heiko Oberman, Erich Vogelsang (all on Luther and mystics); and to a lesser extent on Steven Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), and Nathan Soderblom, *Humor och melankoli och andra Lutherstudien* (Stockholm: SKSR, 1919).

It appears to me that Hoffman has in fact demonstrated the importance for Luther of his inner spirituality *throughout* the course of his life. Not least in his argument is his critical examination of the defectiveness of interpretations of Luther which argue otherwise. Hoffman has also, I think, convincingly showed the relationship of Luther's expressions with those of the three mystics named, though Luther rejected many mystics. I must confess a certain uneasiness with the title. Perhaps in arguing that Luther's spirituality resembled Tauler's, the "Frankfurter's" and to some extent that of Bernard, Hoffman has really proved that these three had evangelical insights that were later more fully developed by Luther?

The reason for my uneasiness is two-fold. First, while being ignorant of Hoffman's sources, and having read little in mystical writers (some Simone Weil, some of Bernard, plus some shorter bits whose authors have been forgotten by me), what I have read is different that what Hoffman is presenting. My second reason for uneasiness with the title is a comparison with the inner spirituality and terms used by Jacques Ellul and C.S. Lewis, whose works I have read extensively. Ellul, in *Prayer and Modern Man* comes to "Prayer as combat", which compares with the forcefield idea (cf. my article in *Consensus*, Vol. I no. 3). Lewis certainly reached depths of understanding of inner spirituality and was a firm believer in the reality of the invisible<sup>1</sup> in much the same way that Hoffman speaks of Luther's convictions. Yet Lewis, in *Letters to Malcolm, chiefly on prayer*,<sup>2</sup> XII, explicitly questions the whole position of mysticism. He compares the mystical process of "loss" of self with the emptying of a wine-glass or to that of an Englishman leaving England, arguing that the common experience of emptying or leaving in no way indicates the quality or worth of any subsequent filling or arrival. Thus because various mystics share

1. For example, in *Perelandra* (reissued as *Voyage to Venus*), and in *Mere Christianity* (revised 1955, London: Collins, Fontana), p. 32 (Book I) and Book II, chs. 2 & 3.

2. Glasgow: Collins (Fountain Books), 1977 (first published, Geoffrey Bles, 1964).

some (or one) experience tells us nothing of the positive content of their beliefs.

Interestingly enough, and disturbing, Hoffman explicitly states in his argument for a comparison of Luther with some mystics an argument similar to that used by Lewis *against*, viz. that Luther did not find even all "Christian" mystics of one mind nor all relying on Christ.

Another ground for uneasiness is a description used by Hoffman in Part IV: "the exuberant tongue-speaker."<sup>3</sup> This is disappointing in an otherwise perceptive observer, tending to continue the stereotype that tongue-speaking is necessarily wildly emotional; though such may be the case in some backgrounds where emotion is already emphasized, it is unrepresentative of many quiet speakers in tongues (and is certainly not implied by St. Paul in I Corinthians 14:5, 14 and 18).

Compositionally, some of the chapters in Parts I and II suffer from repetition, especially in the defense of Luther's relation to Tauler, but also in Hoffman's criticism of other views. Rather oddly, Hoffman neglects to repeat in his text (in chapter 10, "Luther on life after death") an occurrence already referred to in a note (note 22 for chapter 5) which is comparable to the type cited by Raymond Moody in *Life after Life*.

This book reveals new insights about Luther and possibly might lead toward tolerance and reconciliation within the Church. The general reader might wish to read only the last half of the book, perhaps working backwards from the Conclusion to Part III and then to Part II.

3. Hoffman, p. 231.

— Vincent E. Eriksson

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