

comprehension, through outrageous and incredible acts through many human lives, including sins of many kind, women's sins even – and the mystery of motherhood. We are challenged enough by Luther's searching to continue his work of trying to understand what it means to be a man and a woman, to pay more attention to the theological promise coming from both genders and the theological value of motherhood and womanhood, and to see God's presence in the physicality and humanness and the opposite of our expectations. Drawing into the conversation voices of the daughters of Eve who have experienced and encountered the divine in their own bodies and experiences is an enterprise, I believe, Luther would find ever so fascinating. Especially if it shed yet new light into the mystery of motherhood; a topic for which he had a soft spot in his heart.

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God's Court Jester on the Masks of God: A Theatrical Metaphor in Luther's Exegesis

Tibor Fabiny, *Budapest*

1. Luther's Significance in Exegesis and Hermeneutics

Recent Luther scholarship has demonstrated that Luther became a reformer through his exegesis and hermeneutics. Though his great historical achievement was the Reformation, he was, nevertheless, primarily a doctor, a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. Far from being a systematic theologian, he was a biblical exegete. It has been suggested that if Luther had belonged to a modern theological faculty today, he would have been the professor of Old Testament exegesis.¹

One of the key-issues in hermeneutics is the question of the literal sense. In his early career Luther practiced the medieval *Quadriga* (the idea that canonical Scripture can be read with four “senses:” the literal, the allegorical, the moral/tropological, and the anagogical/eschatological). Though he never entirely abandoned allegory for homiletical purposes the literal meaning was basically the only meaning for Luther. Even here, however, a further distinction is to be made: Luther's interest was not exclusively in the *sensus literalis* (as in the case of Nycolas of Lyra and the rabbinic exegesis), but in the *sensus literalis propheticus*. Therefore, his interpretation of the Psalms (and other texts of the Hebrew scriptures) was throughout christological. James Samuel Preus suggested that Luther's hermeneutical divide was no longer between the Old Testament as “letter and law” on the other hand,

¹ The suggestion of Heinrich Bornkamm in *Luther, und das Alte Testament* (Tubingen, 1948) quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor, Luther's Works*, Companion Volume. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959) p. 46.

and the New Testament as "Spirit and Gospel" on the other hand. Instead, he found this divide was already within the Old Testament itself: the Old Testament, he recognized, contained both promises and laws from the very beginning. In this sense, could he speak about the Old Testament as a great "testimony" to Christ. The believer, therefore, had to read the Old Testament with Christ in his mind, *was Christum treibel*. This evangelical *hilaritas* leads us to appreciate the dramatic nature of his exegesis and theology.

2. The Dramatic Nature of Luther's Exegesis and Theology

I would argue that there was a dramatic aspect in Luther's exegesis. Eric W. Gritsch has shown us that Luther's self-image in his address *To the Nobility of the German Nation* was that of a court-jester" (*Hofnarrr*)² and that Luther appears:

to have worn his heart on his sleeve, tipping his cap to the troubled consciences of common folk, ringing his bells to warn the mighty in both church and world of God's unyielding power, and tapping his feet to the tune of the gospel's cheering and chilling news of Christ's lordship in a world nearing its end.³

Indeed, Luther seems to have radically appropriated and even enacted St. Paul's paradox concerning wisdom and foolishness especially in his *theologia crucis*, to which we shall return.

As Gritsch pointed out, Luther's originality lies also in his use of humor as a tool for interpreting Scripture. He frequently used dramatic terms in his theology, such as: "game," "laughter," "theater," "disguise," and "hiding." In 1532, Luther lectured on the "laughter of God" in Psalm 2, suggesting that God's laughter was a way of hiding his wrath from the stupidities of humanity. This should teach us to laugh at our enemies in times of suffering and anxiety: "Then it will come about that we shall laugh at the fury of the Turk, the popes, tyrants, sects, heretics, and all the

² Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin – God's Court Jester. Luther in Retrospect*, Ramsey, NJ, Sigler Press, 1991p.33

³ *ibid* p.viii

adversaries of Christ's kingdom, as a comical spectacle."⁴ In Luther's non-dogmatic dramatic theology, "comedy and tragedy," "laughter and weeping," "concealment and revelation," and "hiddenness and recognition" are in a complementary relationship with each other. Gritsch quotes Niebuhr who said that: "Humor is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer."⁵

3. The Various Masks of God

Luther never failed to emphasize the difference between the revealed and the hidden God (*deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus*). The real God (*deus per se*) or the naked God (*deus nudus*) is never identical with what we experience of him either in his revelation or his hiddenness. Luther frequently mentions (following St. Paul, 1Cor 4:9) that Christians have become a "spectacle" for the world (*theatron to kosmo*). In this *theatrum mundi*, where Satan and his angels disguise themselves as angels of light (2Cor 11:14) and the Pope and the hypocrite clergy pose as representatives of God, it is necessary for God also to hide himself under various masks.

Luther says: "When God reveals Himself to us, it is necessary for Him to do so through some such veil or wrapper and to say: 'Look! Under this wrapper you will be sure to take hold of Me.'" (LW, 15) One of his favorite quote is from Isaiah 45:15: "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself," and concerning this passage he says "For under the curse a blessing lies hidden; under the consciousness of sin, righteousness; under death, life; and under affliction, comfort." (LW 4,7) The following reflects the various masks of God Luther believed God employed.

⁴ Quoted by Eric W. Gritsch, "Luther's Humor as a Tool for Interpreting Scripture" in, Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (eds.) *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective Studies in Honor of Karl Fried Froehlich on His Sixtieth Birthday* Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p.188

⁵ Quoted by Gritsch, "Luther's Humor as a Tool for Interpreting Scripture", p.187

a. *The Mask of Creation*

Luther also spoke about creation and history as the face or mask of God (*larva dei*): "Now the whole creation is a face or mask of God. But here we need the wisdom that distinguishes God from His mask. The world does not have this wisdom. Therefore it cannot distinguish God from His mask." (LW 26, 94)

b. *The Mask of Secular Rulers*

For Luther, God governs this world by secular rulers and authorities: "those masks of judges, magistrates, teachers, doctors, and lawyers are necessary ... it is God's will that under these masks you should serve His ordinance and man's need Without these masks peace and discipline could not be preserved." The whole world is a *Mummenschanz*, a masquerade, and while a "masked God may frighten others, Christians know that behind every divine mask there is a gracious God."⁶

c. *The Mask of Human Achievements*

God hides himself not only beneath human, worldly powers (LW 9,41) but also beneath human achievement of which humans are never meant to boast: "He should regard all such preparation and equipment as being the work of our Lord God under a mask, as it were, beneath which he himself alone effects and accomplishes what we desire." (LW 45,331), and again "He uses our effort as a mask under which He blesses us" (LW 9,96)

d. *The Mask of His Word*

God hides himself also in his very word. With his promises as masks he protects humans being from the absolute, naked God. Concerning Psalm 51, Luther warned the reader not to interpret them as the words of the absolute (i.e., naked) God. David is "speaking with God as He is dressed and clothed in His Word and promises, so that from the name 'God' we cannot exclude Christ ... We must take hold of this God, not naked but clothed and revealed in His Word; otherwise certain despair will crush us. This

God, clothed in such ... in such a pleasant mask... this God we can grasp and look at with joy and trust.... Satan is busy day and night, making us run to the naked God so that we forget His promises ... " (LW 12,312)

e. *The Strange Mask of Joseph as the Strange Mask of God*

One of Luther's favorite biblical heroes was Joseph. Joseph was sold by his bothers and, through much sufferings and afflictions, he rose to the court of the Pharaoh, "God allows Joseph to be crucified, hurled in prison" (LW 8, 30). Still, Joseph trusted in God, "For he saw God's back and waited until God should reveal and show forth His salvation" (LW 7,103). This Joseph, who had been tortured both by his brothers and his God, concealed his identity from his brothers when they come to Egypt. Instead of vengeance he, as Luther remarks, played a "very pleasant delightful game" by hiding a cup in his younger brother Benjamin's sack (LW 7, 237). The brothers are afflicted just as he was tortured and tried by God, "At the end of the trial, however, they see the greatest goodwill and love. 'Ah, how friendly our brother Joseph meant to be to us!'" (LW 7, 237). For Luther, Joseph thus becomes a God-figure: "After our liberation we have the same feeling about God, who allows us to be tried and afflicted in order that we may prove what His good and pleasing will is (Rom. 12:2)." (LW 7, 237) Joseph acted in a strange ways with his brothers, just as God also acts in a strange ways with afflicted humanity, "He afflicts us with evils and misfortunes of every kind." (LW 7,237) Job in his sufferings also accuses God with lying. It is not God, however, but we who are the liars, says Luther: "For we hide our sins; we do not want to be guilty of the sins we have perpetrated ... God plays with us and says: 'Because you are well pleased with your hypocrisy, flatter yourself, and dream that you are cleansed of every sin, I will disclose to you and show you what kind of person you are in My sight and will remove from you that mask of smugness and hypocrisy.'" (LW 7, 237)

Thus, Joseph played the *deus absconditus* with his brothers; he tortured them to make them repent. His brothers are frightened; they think they are confronted with the devil. But at the end in the recognition scene he reveals that "I am your brother Joseph" just

⁶ Gritsch, *Court Jester*, p.191 and p.258, cf. LW 26,95

as God reveals his true self and true work (*opus proprium*) after his "strange acts" (*opus alienum*). Joseph, just as God, revealed his mercy and love for his brothers in an indirect way.

f. *God Wearing the Mask of Satan*

If the world is a huge masquerade where both God and Satan wear masks to hide themselves, then the greatest problem for the believer is to discern God under the mask. Commenting on Isaiah 45:9, Luther remarked:

The children of God have all the afflictions. The ungodly children of Satan enjoy the highest state of well-being. Everything seems the opposite of what it should be. The godly are maltreated, the ungodly receive gifts. In this vein the flesh blasphemes the work of God. So today we see our word and God's Word to be futile, everything seems exactly the opposite of what it should be, and then we see God's work to be unjust. So God and Satan weary us with masks and external spirits so that we are led to believe that what is of God is Satan and what is Satan is of God, and then we say in our heart, 'I wish I had never been born.' (LW 17,127)

Likewise, commenting on Galatians 5:11 Luther again remarks:

Thus God wears the mask of the devil, and the devil wears the mask of God; God wants to be recognized under the mask of the devil, and He wants the devil to be condemned under the mask of God. (LW 27,43)

God hides himself in the mask of his opposite. The culmination of God's hiddenness, according to Luther, is on the cross where the glory and the beauty of God is hidden in ugliness.

g. *Christ Wearing the Mask of a Worm*

The Son of Man becomes a worm on the cross, as Christ makes reference to Psalm 22. This worm, says Luther in his commentary on Psalm 8:4 "is mocked, spit upon, scourged, crowned, and crucified.... His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and His form beyond that of the sons of men. He had no form or comeliness that we should look at Him, and no

beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men." (LW 12, 123) In his exegesis of John 3(vs. 15), Luther identified this worm with the brazen serpent of Moses:

This signifies that Jesus Christ, God's Son, born of a virgin, became like us condemned people and hung on the cross like a poisonous, evil, and harmful worm. Yes, He resembles the serpent which got us into trouble in Paradise, that is, the devil. He was so despised, condemned, and rejected by the world that He was finally sentenced to an ignominious death and hanged as an arch villain among the murderers.... He was not regarded as a godly person but as a venomous worm unworthy of having the sun shine onto Him, as a menace to the entire world. Such was the low esteem in which the world held Him, and His Christians today share this with Him. (LW 22, 340)

As a result, then, true Christians are also seen as disgusting, venomous worms by the world: "Paul declared that we are looked upon as the most obnoxious and venomous worms, which mislead and pollute the whole world, as καθήματα and περιψήματα, the most damnable and the most infectious people, the world's curse and purgatory." (LW 22,340)

Reflecting on Luther's words here, Kenneth Hagen says "The meaning of Christ as worm on the cross carried the connotations of Christ being abject, the object of contempt, forsaken, nauseating, abominable, rotten stench, scandal, offensive or, simply, rotting worm."⁷ The most horrible mask of the God's Son is that of the worm.

We know, however, that this was not the end of the story. We can speak about the resurrection of the worm (i.e., Christ) and therefore, the hope of our own resurrection. Commenting on the Genesis story of Sarah's death Luther remarks: "it has pleased God to raise up from worms, from corruption, from the earth, which is totally putrid and full of stench, a body more beautiful than any flower, than balsam, than the sun itself and the stars," (LW 4,190) To the unbelievers of this world, Christ appearance is that of a worm. But to the believer, only this worm (which has

⁷ Kenneth Hagen, "The Testament of a Worm: Luther on Testament and Covenant", *Consensus* 8 (1982) p.19

emerged from the cocoon of the grave a most beautiful butterfly) can save us from perdition and heal us from our terminal disease.

h. The Mask on the Cross (Luther on Galatians 3:13)

Luther also used the image of the Cross as a mask in his exegesis of Galatians 3:13 (“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written ‘cursed be every one who hangs on a tree’”). Jesus took upon himself the mask of the sinful men: “Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world. He is not acting in His own Person now. Now He is not the Son of God, born of the Virgin. But He is a sinner, who has and bears the sin of Paul, the former blasphemer, persecutor, and assaulter; of Peter, who denied Christ; of David, who was an adulterer and a murderer.” (LW 26,277) However, says Luther, we should rejoice because Christ took upon himself the sins of all mankind and thus became the greatest sinner (*maximus peccator, peccator peccatorum*); this is “the joyous of all doctrine” and the source of most comfort.⁸

By this fortunate exchange with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person. Clothed and dressed in this, we are freed from the curse of the Law, because Christ Himself voluntarily became a curse for us, saying: ‘For My own Person of humanity and divinity I am blessed, and I am in need of nothing whatever. But I shall empty Myself (Phil. 2:7); I shall assume your clothing and mask; and in this I shall walk about and suffer death, in order to set you free from death.’ Therefore when, inside our mask, He was carrying the sin of the whole world, He was captured, He suffered, He was crucified, He died; and for us He became a curse. But because He was a divine and eternal Person, it was impossible for death to hold Him. Therefore He arose from death on the third day, and now He lives eternally; nor can sin, death, and our mask be found

in Him any longer; but there is sheer righteousness, life, and eternal blessing. (LW 26,287)

4. Luther’s Theology of the Cross

The theatrical metaphor, the idea of the mask, and the notion of revelation by concealment are not accidental images for Luther. Rather, they form a coherent theology which scholars have come to call *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross. What is then, the subject matter of the theology of the cross? Against many misunderstandings and misconceptions Gerhard O. Forde says that “It is a particular perception of the world and our destiny, what Luther came to call looking at all things through suffering and the cross.”⁹ He says that “it is so radical and deep for its time that it is still vital for our time,”¹⁰ this is a story that “claims us”¹¹ and wants us to become theologians of the cross,¹² it teaches us “to say what the thing is,” and “to call a spade a spade.”¹³

Luther first formulated his theology of the cross during the Heidelberg Disputation (1518). He called his theses “theological paradoxes,” which was the reformers’ new way of forming arguments against the traditional syllogism of scholastic theologians. The central notion, the great divide between the way of glory and the way of the cross, is described in theses 19-21 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*:

19) The man who looks upon the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be theologian (*Non ille dignus theologus dicitur, qui invisibilia Dei per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conscipit*).

⁹ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross. Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1997, p. xii

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid* p.9

¹² *ibid* p.4

¹³ *ibid*.p.13

⁸ This has also been suggested by Finnish Luther research. See: Tuomo Mannerma, *Christ Present in Faith. Luther’s View of Justification*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005, p.15

20) The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen is suffering and the cross does, however, deserve to be called a theologian (*Sed qui visibilia et posteriora Dei per passiones et crucem conspecta intelligit*).

21) The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross says what a thing is.¹⁴

The theology of glory wishes, with human achievement and free will, "to see through" the cross in order to find, by speculation, a "transcendent meaning" (virtue, wisdom, goodness etc.) and contemplate the invisible greatness of God. Luther asserted, however, that "peering into 'invisible things of God' only 'puffs up, blinds and hardens.'"¹⁵ The cross, however, teaches us to see differently: the cross is not transparent, we cannot look behind it; it is a mirror and we are forced to gaze upon it. We cannot explain the cross; nevertheless we must preach the cross. The theology of the cross reveals that things are not what they seem; it makes us recognize that there is a crucial discrepancy between appearance and reality. According to the theology of the cross, it is the cross that reverses our way of seeing. Only by faith is it revealed that God concealed himself in the form of its opposite: in the shame of the cross. The cross cuts down the wisdom of the wise, the vision of the theologian of the glory. It is only through suffering and the cross that we can come to know God. Only through this suffering can we learn what things really are, that the spade is a spade.

The idea is that "God's revelation can take place in the form of opposites, *sub contrario*. God does his alien and wrathful work before he does his proper and loving work; he makes alive by killing, brings to heaven by going through hell, brings forth mercy out of wrath."¹⁶ The alien work is the *opus alienum* and the loving

work is the *opus proprium*. In Isaiah 28:21 it is called "the strange work" and "the strange act" of God. It is God who assaults and inflicts us; he causes the terrors of temptation, the *Anfechtungen*. In Forde's words: "Knowledge of God comes when God happens to us."¹⁷ Luther even goes so far as to suggest that God, in his alien work, becomes a devil for us before becoming God for us: "God cannot be God unless He first becomes a devil. All that God speaks and does the devil has to speak and do first."¹⁸

Alister MacGrath mentions five marks¹⁹ of the theology of the cross: 1) *theologia crucis* is a theology of revelation rather than a theology of speculation 2) This revelation must be regarded as indirect and concealed 3) This revelation is to be recognized in the sufferings of the cross of Christ 4) This knowledge of God who is hidden in his revelation is a matter of faith 5) God is particularly known through sufferings, he makes himself known through sufferings. God is the source of *Anfechtung*, he assaults man in order to break him down and thus to save him. It is significant that God is hidden and the *Deus absconditus* hides his mercy under his wrath.

Conclusion

Luther's *theologia crucis* is a frequently discussed *topos* in Luther studies. Eric W. Gritsch has even extended this term to Luther's ecclesiology when he spoke of "A Cruciform Church" in the tenth chapter of his *Court Jester*. Gritsch's always creative, witty, and even dramaturgically-sensitive approach has inspired the author of the present article to identify the mask as a crucial theatrical metaphor in Luther's exegesis. Martin Luther and Eric W. Gritsch have taught us that imagination, metaphor and humor give rise to theology.

¹⁴ The English translation of theses 19-20 is given on the basis of McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985, p.148, and the thesis 21 on the basis of Forde's *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, p.71. The translation of „posteriora" has caused the same conflict in the English translation as in the Hungarian one (Magyar Luther Füzetek 8. p.28)

¹⁵ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, p.77

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.31

¹⁷ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, p.90

¹⁸ *ibid.* p.90 cf. LW 14,31

¹⁹ Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985. p.149-151

LUTHERANISM

Legacy and Future

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF ERIC W. GRITSCH
ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS ORDINATION

EDITED BY

HOLGER ROGGELIN/SCOTT GUSTAFSSON

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