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Neil Pembroke

IRONIC IMAGINATION AND LUTHER'S MYSTICAL BRIDAL IMAGERY

SUMMARY – It is argued that there is clear evidence of a mystical strand in Martin Luther's theology. In particular, Christ mysticism, expressed through bridal imagery, held a central place. The way in which ironic imagination features in Luther's depiction of Christ as the spouse of the spiritual person is also discussed. The aim is not simply to highlight his (undoubted) creativity as a theologian. More importantly, the discussion shows that Luther fully grasped the fact that the life of faith has an ineradicable ironic structure. He was strongly opposed to any suggestion that it is possible to live without the polar tension. Christ the bridegroom abides in the heart of the Christian; through this union he exchanges his righteousness for her/his sin. But, paradoxically, while the new being in Christ is wholly righteous, s/he remains wholly a sinner. For this reason, Luther saw very clearly that the spiritual life of the Christian is lived in tension between freedom and bondage, law and gospel, *gemitus* and *raptus*, faith and love. A parallel is drawn between Luther's approach and that of William Lynch in his work on faith and the analogical imagination.

It is evident that Martin Luther had a keen interest in mysticism. In his preface to the 1518 edition of the mystical text, *The Theologia Germanica*, he writes: 'Next to the Bible and St. Augustine, no other book has come to my attention from which I have learned – and desired to learn – more concerning God, Christ, [humankind], and what all things are'.[1] We also know that he appreciated much in Johann Tauler's spiritual theology. The Reformer's marginal notes in his copy of Tauler's sermons are testimony to this.

Further, as Volker Leppin has demonstrated, core themes in the German mysticism of the late Middle Ages play an important role in Luther's articulation of central theological doctrines such as justification by grace and the priesthood of all believers, as well as in his approach to the law and gospel dialectic.[2] As a

[1] Luther's preface in *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther* (trans. B. Hoffman), New York: Paulist Press, 1980, 54.

[2] See V. Leppin, 'Transformationen spätmittelalterlicher Mystik bei Luther', in: B. Hamm & V. Leppin (Eds.), *Gottes Nähe unmittelbat erfahren*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, 165-185.

result, it is not possible to fully understand Luther's core theology without reference to its mystical roots.[3]

Despite these facts, there are a number of Protestant theologians and historians who flatly reject the notion that there is a mystical strain in Luther's theology. For example, Heinrich Bornkamm writes in *Luthers geistige Welt*: '… Mystik ist bei ihm kein Weg zu Gott; Luther war kein Mystiker' ['Mysticism is for him not a way to God; Luther was not a mystic'].[4] This way of settling the issue carries with it an unstated assumption that mysticism is a unitary phenomenon. It is certainly clear that Luther was not a *high* mystic.[5] He had no interest in systems of spirituality built around active and infused contemplation. Further, he did not accept the high anthropology and the notion of an essential union with God advocated in high mysticism. However, I hope to show that there is abundant evidence in Luther's writing that he embraced a Christ-mysticism of the kind that we find in Pauline writings. For Paul, by grace and through faith a person is brought into a salvific union with Christ: '[I]t is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20). It is in the context of Luther's description of this redemptive union with Christ that bridal imagery is employed. In the spiritual marriage between the believer and Christ the bridegroom exchanges his precious gifts – grace, life, righteousness – for the deadly deficits of his bride – sin, death, and unrighteousness.

I will show that here we have a vivid example of Luther's employment of ironic imagination. The term *ironic imagination* has been employed by a number of spiritual writers and theologians. They use it to describe a capacity in a spiritually mature person to hold contraries together without seeking resolution. The theologian that I use to develop the notion of ironic imagination is the one that has provided the most extensive discussion of it – namely, the Jesuit William Lynch. Lynch helpfully points out that a capacity to embrace contraries such as faith and unfaith, acceptance and criticism, and seriousness and humour is essential if one is to live a mature Christian spiritual life.

In this essay, it is suggested that there is ironic imagination at work in Luther's employment of mystical bridal imagery. Through the exchange associated with the spiritual union of bridegroom and bride, the latter is brought into a state of being in which she is *simul iustus et peccator*. She is wholly righteous because of the exchange, but she is also wholly sinful because of her human nature. An

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[3] Cf. Leppin, 'Transformationen spätmittelalterlicher Mystik', 185. He puts it this way: 'Seine Theologie ist bis in ihre Kerninhalte hinein gar nicht anders zu verstehen als vor dem Hintergrund ihre mystischen Wurzeln'.

[4] H. Bornkamm, *Luthers geistige Welt*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1959, 276.

[5] Cf. B. Hamm, 'Wie mystisch war der Glaube Luthers?', in: Hamm & Leppin, *Gottes Nähe unmittelbat erfahren*, 237-288: 245.

analogical imagination (Lynch also uses this term) is required to appropriate this view of the spiritual being, involving as it does a tension between two contraries.

The purpose in noting Luther's use of ironic imagination is not simply to identify him as a creative and intelligent theologian – though he is certainly that. What this observation highlights is the fact that Luther developed a mature, well-rounded, and realistic spiritual theology. In less adequate theologies, we find a tendency to break the tension arc. A unitary approach is developed that either downplays or ignores an important contrary reality.

The structure of the essay is as follows. First, the scene is set through a discussion of Lynch's work on ironic imagination in the life of faith. Next, Luther's Christ mysticism and his description of the *coincidentia oppositorum* associated with the 'happy exchange' in the mystical marriage are outlined. Finally, the ironic dimension of Luther's mystical bridal imagery is highlighted by comparing it with that of another famous exponent, Teresa of Avila.

Faith's Ironic Imagination

William Lynch begins his analysis by discussing what he calls the 'analogical imagination', and then moves to what he designates as the 'ironic Christic imagination'. For Lynch, the imagination is not a single or special faculty, but rather

> all the resources of man, all his faculties, his whole history, his whole life, and his whole heritage, all brought to bear upon the concrete world inside and outside of himself, to form images of the world, and thus to find it, cope with it, shape it, even make it. The task of the imagination is to imagine the real.[6]

Imagining the real involves an appreciation for the fact that all existents have an analogical structure. It is of their essence that they contain the same and the different. That is, reality has a dipolar structure. But that does not mean that it is marked by conflict. The analogical imagination allows a person to approach the world in such a way that the two poles in any particular existent are seen as holding together in a creative tension. The analogical imagination is the 'habit of perception which sees that different levels of being are also somehow one and can therefore be associated in the same image, in the same and single account of perception'.[7] Those who lack the analogical perspective tend to adopt a univocal interpretation of existence – one that attempts to capture it with a unitary image. This drive to absolutize things and experiences, to only deal with the

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[6] W. Lynch, *Christ and Prometheus: A new image of the secular*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970, 23.

[7] W. Lynch, 'Theology and the imagination', in: *Thought* 29 (1954), 61-86: 66.

ideal, shrinks the height, depth, and breadth of human existence. The univocal perspective is a very limited one; it fails to appreciate that the contrary dimensions in a thing, idea, or experience can be held together in a proper proportion (*ana-logon* means 'according to proper proportion').[8]

Lynch develops his system by positing that the person and work of Christ embodies a particular form of the analogical imagination – namely, an ironic one. He contends that faith finds itself through an engagement with the actuality of human existence. The religious imagination does not simply produce images of what it finds in existence; it actually makes reality.[9] It rearranges existing patterns to compose a new pattern of the way things are. This new paradigm is shaped by irony and ironic images.

The main task of irony is to keep opposites together. It is only through the appreciation of the unity of contraries that one can penetrate to the depths of human experience. On the surface, it appears that the rich and the mighty have the power. But Christians share in a sensibility, that of the Beatitudes, that sees just the opposite. Through the grace of Christ, it is the poor and the weak who are the strong ones.

Lynch points out that it is only a certain way of imagining opposites as forming a unity that is ironic. There is nothing particularly ironic, for example, about the coexistence of the one and the many.[10] This simply represents the form of existence that things actually possess. In any existent thing (except purely spiritual realities) there is both unity and multiplicity. The unity that is a table, for example, is made up of many parts. It is the one table, but it has legs, a top, sides, screws holding it together, etc. There is also nothing ironic about contradiction.[11] Good and evil are contradictory forces; they tend to cancel each other out. The ironic imagination deals not in contradictories but in contraries. In the suffering of a person, for example, there is both good and bad. It is the fact that these contraries can be imagined as coexisting in the experience of one person, and form, moreover, a unity therein, that constitutes the power of the ironic imagination:

> *The usual quality of irony is the unexpected coexistence, to the point of identity, of certain contraries*. Usually the words *contraries* and *contrariety* are employed in a metaphysical sense. The philosophical understanding is that contraries come in

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8 Cf. Gerald J. Bednar, *Faith as imagination: The contribution of William F. Lynch*, Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996, 54.

9 See W. Lynch, 'Images of faith', in: *Continuum* 7 (1969), 187-194: 190; *Christ and Prometheus*, 23.

10 See W. Lynch, *Images of faith: An exploration of the ironic imagination*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973, 84.

11 See ibidem.

> pairs and the pairs in each case are the two most widely separated members of the one species or class, or the two most widely separated subspecies. Thus the very hot and the very cold are the contraries within the situations referred to by the word *temperature*. The very mad and the very wise among mankind would be a pair of contraries and a contrariety that begins to be metaphysical. They are the most widely separated. But suddenly we realize, ironically, that in man, and in one and the same man, they are not widely separated.[12]

In the pre-Christian world, observes Lynch, Socrates is the outstanding exemplar of irony.[13] Even on the physical level, irony is evident. Socrates is an ugly man who expresses the most sublime and beautiful truths. There is also the fact that he makes light of the truth he tells, but yet at the same time he presents as deeply serious because he will not retract it.

Christ's irony, on the other hand, is quite different. There is no trace of mockery in his life and work. His ironies, Lynch points out, do not need parody or laughter. They operate on quite a different plane. Christ asks us to unite the majesty of his vision and promises with the ordinariness of so much of human existence. Christ also requires of us a willingness to unite a confident faith with a holy fear.[14] Lynch contends that faith exists in a 'dynamic partnership' with fear. To give one last, and most important, example of Christ's ironic vision, there is the exaltation of Christ through his embrace of the lowliness of human existence.[15] In absolute obedience the Son accepts the way of suffering and death; in total love and fidelity the Father raises the Son and establishes him in glory as Lord of all. Death and resurrection are united in Christ.[16] Christ helps us imagine a world in which the way to power is through death and weakness.

What Lynch is attempting to do here is to identify a spiritual capacity that is essential in a mature, realistic, well-rounded spirituality. There is a tendency in some Christians to break the tension arc between the poles. Take, for example, the case of the call upon Christians to co-operate with God in God's reconciling, liberating work in the world. The two poles here are God fully at work and humans fully at work. The tension arc can be broken in one of two ways. First,

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[12] Ibid., 85, emphasis in the original.

[13] See W. Lynch, 'Images of faith II: The task of irony', in: *Continuum* 7 (1969), 478-492: 489.

[14] See *Images of faith*, 90-92.

[15] See Lynch, 'Images of faith II', 491.

[16] Others have noted the relationship between Christian paradox and our imaginative capacity. See, for example, D. Louw, 'Creative hope and imagination in practical theology', in: *Religion and Theology/Religie and Teologie* 8 (2001) nos. 3-4, 327-344. He suggests that it is the aesthetic imagination that allows us to hold together the contraries of ugliness and beauty in the suffering of God: 'While theoretical reason involves the values of true and false, and practical reason involves good and evil or the right and wrong, aesthetic reason seeks to portray the beautiful and the ugly, the sublime and lowly, or the deep and the superficial. To perform this act, an aesthetic reason needs imagination and creativity' (334).

there is the trap of thinking that we have to do it all. There may be lip service paid to the notion of God's action in the world, but there is no genuine expectation that God will actually do something. On the other hand, there is an unhealthy tendency to leave everything to God. In this approach, the Christian does not have to think hard and act assiduously because it is all in God's hands.

Another example involves two poles that I will refer to as body and spirit. There are various approaches in which one or other pole is elevated and its counterpart largely or completely ignored. For example, there are those who are unable to view the sexual dimension of their bodily existence as deeply spiritual because they view sex as dangerous and dirty. There are also some Christians who take insufficient care of their bodies because they think that this concern is insignificant compared to the infinitely more important one of cultivating the spirit. On the other hand, some Christians sit lightly with sexual morality because they consider that it is trifling alongside of the central spiritual task of, say, working for justice and peace. Finally, there are also some Christians who are obsessed with the health of their bodies, but only a little concerned with the disciplines that promote spiritual health.

In turning to a consideration of the mystical dimension in Luther's theology, we will see that he shows a profound valuation of the ironic imagination. There is a happy exchange wrought through the union of Christ with his spouse that renders her wholly righteous, and yet she is simultaneously wholly sinful. She is totally free, but at the same time totally bound. Deeply aware of her sin she cries out to God (*gemitus*), even as she is caught up in the rapture of union with Christ (*raptus*).[17] The spiritual person embraces both a theology of the cross and a theology of glory.

Luther's Christ Mysticism

As indicated above, the question of Luther's relationship to the mystical tradition is a contentious one. One obvious strategy in the attempt to settle the issue is to compare his thought with that of certain well-known mystics. The problem is that when scholars have done this they have come up with diametrically opposed conclusions. Two scholars who have engaged in this exercise are Steven Ozment[18] and Grace Jantzen.[19] Ozment compares the theological anthropology

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[17] See H. Oberman, '*Simul gemitus et raptus*: Luther and mysticism', in: S. Ozment (Ed.), *The Reformation in medieval perspective*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971, 219-251.

[18] See S.E. Ozment, *Homo spiritualis*, Leiden: Brill, 1969; and idem, 'Eckhart and Luther: German mysticism and Protestantism', in: *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 42 (1978) no.2, 259-280.

[19] See G. Jantzen, 'Luther and the mystics', in: *Kings Theological Review* 8 (1985) no.2, 43-50.

of Luther with that of mystics that the Reformer is known to have been interested in – namely, Johannes Tauler and Jean Gerson. Following the tradition of Plotinus and his notion of the *centron*, Tauler and Gerson identify a part of the human that remains untainted by the effects of Adam's sin. They refer to it as the *Seelengrund* and the *synteresis* respectively. What these terms refer to is a natural inclination in the human to do good. Ozment attempts to point up the distance between Luther and the two mystics by declaring that the Reformer refuses to accept that there is any capacity in the human that has soteriological efficacy. Ozment is very impressed by the fact that in Luther's marginal notes to one of Tauler's sermons, he substitutes the word 'faith' for what Tauler calls the 'spark of the soul' or the human's highest part.[20] Thus, it is not a spiritual power in the human person but rather faith that makes her a spiritual being. Ozment has this to say:

> All plans which man can fashion through the interaction of his own powers and the objects present to him in the world are shown to be incapable of 'substantiating' him before God and in the face of sin and death. A 'vacuum' emerges, and Luther agrees with Tauler and Augustine that its persistence is simply not possible. But how is it filled for Luther? It is not filled with a *Seelengrund* in substantial unity with the uncreated Ground, but with 'sheer' and 'naked' faith in God alone, i.e. in the 'plan' of God, i.e. in the 'passion of Christ'.[21]

The other strategy that Ozment employs in his attempt to demonstrate the gap between Luther and mystical thought is to clearly distinguish between the way the Reformer and the two mystics approach union with God. According to him, Tauler and Gerson view the human's union with God as resulting in deification; whereas Luther understands union with God to produce simultaneously both likeness to God (Christ makes us righteous) and unlikeness to God (we are sinners).[22]

Grace Jantzen, for her part, sets up a comparison between Luther's work and that of Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and John of the Cross. In contrast to Ozment, she aims to show that such a comparison reveals that Luther was closer to her chosen mystical exemplars than many give credit for. She notes, for example, that some have attempted to contrast Luther with mysticism by linking the former to a theology of the cross and the latter to an ideal of absorption in God. Jantzen's investigations lead her to this conclusion:

> In none of the three is human selfhood lost, even – or especially – in the most intense union with God. All three think of God as lover seeking the purification

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[20] See Ozment, 'Eckhart and Luther', 265.
[21] Ozment, *Homo spiritualis*, 205.
[22] See ibid., 214.

> and fulfilment, but never the abolition, of the beloved. The vocabulary of Luther and the tenor of his thought is [sic] quite different from this, but the differences are much more subtle than are suggested by a stark opposition of a Lutheran theology of the cross to a mystical ideal of absorption.[23]

She also notes that some Protestant theologians have flatly rejected any suggestion that Luther was in any way interested in, or wanting to assign value to, religious experience. Religious experience is associated by these theologians with works and a theology of glory. In contrast, Luther made faith and a theology of the cross central. Janzen's analysis leads her to a different conclusion:

> While none of these mystics [Eckhart, Julian, and John of the Cross] advocated mystical phenomena as having intrinsic value any more than Luther did, it is true that, though they de-emphasised experiences, they certainly did think the Christian life was a matter of continuing existential relationship with God: experience mattered, even if experiences did not.[24]

This last issue highlights the most common objection to the view that Luther sounds mystical notes in his theology. That objection is that Luther would never elevate mystical experience because that would cut across his primary objective of establishing a sure and certain base for the hope of salvation.[25] This he did, so the argument goes, by constructing it as objectively mediated. The gospel, the cross, and the sacraments are all external realities; their efficacy is independent of human feeling and experiencing. Any attempt to link Luther with mysticism, according to this view, fails to appreciate the extent to which he warned against the vagaries and uncertainty associated with personal religious experience.

An important scholar in the fold of those promoting the idea that Luther's theology is influenced by mysticism is Bengt Hoffman.[26] Hoffman is convinced that this objection is the result of a blind-spot in the theological vision of those who promote it. He notes that words like 'feel' and 'experience' are used frequently by the Reformer in the context of the inner, personal dimension of God's work.[27] The source of the blind-spot that causes theologians to miss this aspect is the Western preoccupation with rationalism. Hoffman's thesis in *Luther and the Mystics* is that '*Martin Luther's faith-consciousness was significantly molded*

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[23] Jantzen, 'Luther and the mystics', 44-45.

[24] Ibid., 45.

[25] Cf. ibid., 46, and J. Moltmann, 'Teresa of Avila and Martin Luther: The turn to the mysticism of the cross', in: *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 13 (1984) no.3, 265-278: 267.

[26] See B.R. Hoffman, *Luther and the mystics*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976; idem, *Theology of the heart: The role of mysticism in the theology of Martin Luther* (trans. P.W. Hoffman), Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2003; and idem, 'Lutheran spirituality', in: K.J. Collins (Ed.), *Exploring Christian spirituality*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000, 122-137.

[27] Hoffman, *Luther and the mystics*, 14.

by mystical experience and that western dependence on rationalism has obscured or eclipsed this mystical light'.[28] While it is not possible to settle this issue by supplying a few quotes from Luther's work, my reading of him confirms that there are indeed frequent references to religious feeling and experience. I have reproduced a few of these below in order to give a sense of his perspective. The reader will observe that the writings come from both the early and late periods.

> Let everyone who is godly, therefore, learn to distinguish carefully between Law and grace, both in feeling and in practice, not only in words…[29] (1535)

> The true Spirit dwells in the believers not merely according to His gifts, but according to His own substance. He does not give His gifts in such a way that He is somewhere else or asleep, but He is present with His gifts and creatures (…) The [believer] asks that after he has been justified and has received the forgiveness of sins, this sense of God's mercy might be planted deep within his heart by the Holy Spirit.[30] (1532)

> (…) Paul distinguishes beautifully between the time of the Law and the time of grace. Let us learn also to distinguish the times of both, not in words but in our feelings, which is the most difficult of all. For although these two are utterly distinct, yet they must be joined completely together in the same heart.[31] (1535)

> Since these promises of God are holy, true, righteous, free, and peaceful words, full of goodness, the soul which clings to them with a firm faith will be so closely united with them and altogether absorbed by them that it not only will share in all their power but will be saturated and intoxicated by them. If the touch of Christ healed, how much more will this most tender spiritual touch, this absorbing of the Word, communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word.[32] (1520)

Though a thorough investigation of the matter is beyond the scope of this essay, there do seem to be clear indications that Luther embraced mystical theology as experience of God. He regularly referred to an inner, spiritual dimension in Christian faith. What is even clearer is that he embraced Christ-mysticism in the way this is articulated in the Pauline tradition. Paul writes in Galatians, for example, that 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20). The writer of Colossians gives this exhortation: 'Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and

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[28] Ibid., 18, emphasis in the original.

[29] J. Pelikan (Ed.), *Luther's works*. Vol. 26, Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955 [*Lectures on Galatians Chapters 1-4 (1535)*], 144. Hereafter referred to as LW.

[30] LW 12 [*Selected Psalms I*], 377.

[31] LW 26 [*Lectures on Galatians Chapters 1-4*], 343.

[32] Luther, 'Freedom of a Christian' (trans. W.A. Lambert), in: *Three treatises*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, 283-284.

your life is hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3:2-3). In this form of mysticism there is a deep union or contact of the human with God. This takes place in the depths of the soul; it is antecedent to the powers of knowing, willing, and feeling.[33] It is the result of the gift of God received in faith. When a person comes to Christ in faith, she is in Christ and Christ is in her. There are a number of places in Luther's writings where Christ-mysticism appears. In reviewing the examples given below, the reader will note that, as in the selections above, both early and late writings are included.

> For just as the ray of the sun is eternal because the sun is eternal, so the spiritual life is eternal because Christ is eternal; for He is our life, and through faith He flows into us and remains in us by the rays of His grace.[34] (1515-1516).

> But faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: 'I am as Christ'.[35] (1535)

> [Christ] says: 'I am the Prince of Life, the immortal person, invincible to death. Now, then, bind yourselves to Me, cling to me, and become My members. Then it will come to pass that where I am, you will be also' (Jn 14:3).[36] (1532)

> The fanatical spirits today speak about faith in Christ in the manner of the sophists. They imagine that faith is a quality that clings to the heart apart from Christ. This is a dangerous error. Christ should be set forth is such a way that apart from Him you see nothing at all and that you believe that nothing is nearer and closer to you than He. For He is not sitting idle in heaven but is completely present within us, active and living in us…[37] (1535)

> By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh (Eph 5:31-32).[38] (1520)

While most of these references are to the intimate union between Christ and the individual believer, the reflection on Psalm 45 incorporating a Johannine text suggests also a corporate aspect. In his Christ mysticism, Luther includes an understanding of the mystical Body of Christ. Indeed, as Berndt Hamm notes, the Reformer strikingly combines the images of the body and a cake. Luther suggests that it is as if Christ and all the faithful are baked together in

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33 Cf. E. Iserloh, 'Luther's Christ-mysticism', in: J. Wicks (Ed.), *Catholic scholars dialogue with Luther*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970, 37-58: 39.

34 LW 25 [*Lectures on Romans*], 315.

35 LW 26 [*Lectures on Galatians Chapters 1-4*], 168.

36 LW 12 [*Selected Psalms I*], 232.

37 LW 26, 356.

38 'Freedom of a Christian', 286.

one big cake. ('Wir, die Glaubenden, bilden mit Christus zusammen einen Kuchen, zu dem wir gleichsam zusammenbacken sind'.[39])

Luther's Mystical Bridal Imagery and Irony

Luther famously uses bridal imagery to express the Christ-mysticism that is the wellspring of the life of faith. Faith 'unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom'.[40] This bridegroom 'comes with all his treasures'.[41] Finally, the Church is confident to say, 'In my Bridegroom is life, grace, peace, joy, salvation'.[42] In 'The Freedom of a Christian', Luther describes the 'happy exchange' that results from this union of Christ and the spiritual person.[43] Given that in marriage the spouses share all that they have, it follows that the person of faith is able to lay claim to all that Christ has. The bridegroom offers to his bride his righteousness, life, and freedom. From his bride Christ takes on death, bondage, and sin. Luther expresses it this way:

> (…) By the wedding ring of faith [Christ] shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride's. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned…
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> Thus the believing soul by means of the pledge of his faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom. So he takes to himself a glorious bride, 'without spot or wrinkle, cleansing her by the washing of water with the word' (Cf. Eph 5:26-27) of life, that is, by faith in the word of life, righteousness, and salvation. In this way he marries her in faith, steadfast love, and in mercies, righteousness, and justice (…)
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> Who then can fully appreciate what this royal marriage means? Who can understand the riches of the glory of this grace? Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell…[44]

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[39] B. Hamm, 'Wie mystisch war der Glaube Luthers', in: Hamm & Leppin, *Gottes Nähe unmittelbar erfahren*, 237-288: 248.

[40] Ibid., 286.

[41] *The sermons of Martin Luther* (ed. & trans. Eugene Klug), vol. V, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983, 233.

[42] LW 12 [*Selected Psalms I*], 260.

[43] See 'Freedom of a Christian', 286-287.

[44] Ibid., 286-287.

The beneficiary of this happy exchange is made righteous through the grace of Christ. Her sins have been 'swallowed up' by Christ. But of course this does not mean that she is now sinless. For Luther, the life of faith is a tension arc with righteousness at one pole and sin at the other.[45] The spiritual being is *simul iustus et peccator*. The Reformer ironically declares that the person of faith is simultaneously *wholly* righteous and *wholly* sinful.

It is interesting to compare Luther's use of bridal imagery with that of Teresa of Avila. Though the marriage metaphor has been widely used by mystics, it has been especially important in the Carmelite tradition. So to turn to Teresa's writings seems like a natural thing to do. The discussion is focussed on *The Interior Castle*.[46] Teresa wrote this work toward the end of her life. In it, she reflects on the spiritual journey in terms of a series of different ways of dwelling with God interiorly. While there are many and varied images employed, the organizing principle is the allegory of the human soul as a castle, with the triune God dwelling at the centre. In the centre of the castle, there are intimate and 'secret' exchanges between God and the soul that take place. Since the castle is the soul, we already live in it, but in a variety of ways. The range includes those who dwell in the outer courtyard with the guards and the vermin, right through to those who live at the very centre with God.

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[45] Though they do not refer to the ironic imagination that I introduce into the conversation, other scholars have identified the tension between two poles that is so characteristic of Luther's theology and spirituality. Gerhard Ebeling, for example, structures his introduction to the Reformer's theology around this principle. He observes that 'Luther's thought always contains an antithesis, tension between strongly opposed but related polarities: theology and philosophy, the letter and the Spirit, the law and the gospel, the double use of the law, persons and works, faith and love, the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world, man as a Christian and man in the world, freedom and bondage, God hidden and God revealed – to mention only the most important examples' (G. Ebeling, *Luther* [trans. R.A. Wilson], London: Collins, 1970, 25). Similarly, Jane Strohl observes that: 'For Luther, the life of the Christian on earth is necessarily characterized by the presence and regular manifestation of a series of contrasting realities. His spirituality is built around these polarities that cannot be resolved' (J.E. Strohl, 'Luther's spiritual journey', in: Donald K. McKim [Ed.], *The Cambridge companion to Martin Luther*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 150: Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. 04 April 2012 DOI:10.1017/CCOL0521816483.009).
Finally, in his work on Luther and mysticism Heiko Oberman concludes with this statement: 'One can designate the theology of Luther with the generally recognized summarizing formula, 'simul iustus et peccator'. The very same reality which is summarized by this formula can be expressed in the language of mystical spirituality, and that means for Luther in the language of the personal experience of faith, by the formula, 'simul gemitus et raptus'. For both formulas it is characteristic that they do not indicate a *via media*, but a *simul* which reveals a *coincidentia oppositorum*' (Oberman, '*Simul gemitus et raptus*', 239).

[46] The version that I have used is found in *The complete works of St Teresa of Jesus*. Vol. II (trans. & ed. E. Allison Peers), London: Sheed and Ward, 1972.

What is striking about the way Teresa employs bridal imagery when this is situated in the context of the current discussion, is that one cannot find any irony in it. To be sure, there is irony in a very general sense: the summit of the spiritual life involves the union of the finite with the infinite. This ironic formulation is not unique to Teresa; it is necessarily true of each and every expression of the *unio mystica*.

Let us consider the way in which Teresa uses marital metaphors. She refers, first, to the 'favours' that the Lord grants to his bride. There is the favour of growing like 'our God and Spouse'. Particularly important here is growing to be truly humble.[47] The highest favour granted by the bridegroom takes place in the Seventh Dwelling Places. Here the faithful one receives 'an instantaneous communication of God to the soul'[48] that conveys the glory of heaven and fills it with delight.

One also finds references to a consummation of the spiritual marriage: 'When Our Lord is pleased to have pity upon this soul, which suffers and has suffered so much out of desire for Him, and which He now takes spiritually to be His Bride, He brings her into this Mansion of His, which is the seventh, before consummating the Spiritual Marriage'.[49]

Finally, Teresa distinguishes spiritual betrothal from spiritual marriage. She notes that during the period of betrothal, the two lovers alternate between times of being together and of separating. In the other dwelling places, the soul experiences the delight of union with the Lord, but 'afterwards the soul is deprived of that companionship'. But here in the seventh, 'the soul remains all the time in that centre with its God'.[50]

It is clear from these references that Teresa employs marital metaphors in a straight-forward, conventional manner. There is no irony here. The ordinary experiences and rituals associated with matrimony – conferral of favours, betrothal, and consummation – are transferred into the spiritual sphere.

There is clearly a stark difference between the way in which Luther and Teresa utilize bridal imagery in their description of the mystical union between Christ and the spiritual person. Below I suggest that a capacity for ironic imagination is associated with a mature, realistic spirituality. Obviously, I do not intend to imply that because the ironic element is lacking in Teresa's description of mystical union her understanding of the spiritual journey lacks depth and realism. It is simply the case that these elements – depth and realism – are differently manifested in her writings. Moreover, it is clear from her writings that she had

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47 See *Interior Castle*, 323.
48 Ibid., 335.
49 Ibid., 330.
50 Ibid., 336.

a very firm grasp of the ironic nature of the spiritual life. She took to heart central spiritual principles such as 'blessed are the poor' and 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first'.

The purpose in this last exercise was simply to highlight the particular element that Luther employs in developing his bridal imagery for the intimate union between the believer and Christ, namely, an ironic imagining of the person of faith as simultaneously *wholly* righteous and *wholly* sinful. In harmony with contemporary spiritual theologians such as William Lynch, Luther was acutely aware that mature faith requires a capacity to hold together in one's imagination various contrary elements, each one playing an indispensable role in the spiritual life.

Conclusion

In pointing up the way ironic imagination features in Luther's depiction of Christ as the spouse of the spiritual person, the aim was not simply to highlight his (undoubted) creativity and intelligence as a theologian. Rather, I had a more significant aim in mind. I wanted to show that Luther fully grasped that the spiritual life has an ineradicable ironic structure. He was strongly opposed to any suggestion that it is possible to live without the polar tension. Christ our spouse abides in the heart of the Christian; through this union he exchanges his righteousness for her sin. But, paradoxically, while the new being in Christ is wholly righteous, she remains wholly a sinner. For this reason, the spiritual life of the Christian is lived in tension between freedom and bondage, law and gospel, *gemitus* and *raptus*, faith and love. The consequences for the spiritual life of breaking the tension arc by fixing on one pole only are disastrous. Through her union with Christ the spiritual being is truly free. But to fully experience this in her concrete human existence, she must overcome the temptation to construct absolutes – only law, or only gospel; only the cry, or only rapture; only contemplation, or only action.