

A Man of the Church

Honoring the Theology, Life, and Witness
of Ralph Del Colle

Edited by
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“An Irony of Enthusiasm”: The Reversal of Luther’s Epithet in the Enlightenment

For Ralph Del Colle

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RALPH AND I MET when he came to Union Theological Seminary in New York for his M.Div. degree while I was a doctoral student there. We discovered that we had parallel concerns. He had left the Catholic faith of his youth wondering where the Spirit went, whom he had discovered in the Pentecostal movement. I had similarly wondered how the Spirit disappeared in Lutheranism, though I could not square this experience of Spiritless Lutheranism with the texts of Luther that I was studying. Since then Ralph found his way back to Catholicism and has had a fruitful theological career insisting with St. Thomas Aquinas that—lest we confuse God and His work—our profession of ‘one holy Church’ is “directed to the Holy Ghost, Who sanctifies the Church; so that the sense is: ‘I believe in the Holy Ghost sanctifying the Church.’”¹ Ralph has worked, accordingly, to see that “ecclesial life rests on an integrated Christological and pneumatological foundation”² that is faithful to the Church of Rome’s best insights and thus ecumenically open.

1. Ralph Del Colle, “The Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 251, citing from “ST 222ae. I, 9 ad 5 in Aquinas, 1948.”

2. Ibid.

In an incisive contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* on “The Triune God,” Ralph argued that the decisive question touching upon both the contemporary renewal of Trinitarian theology and the ecumenical rapprochement of the divided Church turns on the reintegration of the Spirit: the “nature of the communication is so intrinsic to the divine life that the understanding of God can no longer be rendered as simple, absolute, undifferentiated monotheism.”³ That is to say that the divine self-giving in the economy of the Incarnate Word’s cross and resurrection refers essentially to “the self-communication of divine life that is at the heart of Christian faith known and received in the Spirit.”⁴ This argument deepens and extends the “truism” that “trinitarian theology stands or falls on the basis of whether or not it maintains a vibrant pneumatology.”⁵ The integration of divine self-giving Christology with divine self-communicating pneumatology not only keeps the faithful church open in the Spirit; it also keeps trinitarian theology grounded in the Biblical narrative of the economy of God.

Here the immanent trinity is and remains an *induction*, so to speak, to which faith comes and there *remains*. “[T]he trinitarian naming of God points to the Christian understanding that the event of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Spirit reveal the loving mystery of the saving God whose transcendence in the mystery is the basis for its communication and invitation to the creature.”⁶ But If the immanent Trinity ceases logically to exist as this induction of faith, i.e., as the explication of the implied belief that the revealed Trinity is antecedently capable, competent and willing to keep the commitments made in Christ by the Spirit; and if, instead, the immanent Trinity becomes a revealed truth taken on mere authority more and more detached from its soteriological basis and existential function; then the notion of an immanent trinity invites speculation about the conditions of transcendence as such that must apply. The ironic result, however, is that such transcendental speculation (in the traditions of both Thomas and Palamas) have ended in a self-defeating apophaticism, i.e., in

3. Ralph Del Colle, “The Triune God,” Chapter Seven in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* ed. C. E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 121.

4. Ibid., 121–22.

5. Ibid., 130. “The recognition of the divine persons in their proper relations to the world is essential if trinitarian theology is to be prevented from losing its grounding in the salvific activity of God” Ibid., 131.

6. Ibid.

birth. The sequence is essential; it reflects the narrative structure of this new birth by which it is identified, recognized, and distinguished from imposters. If we “tear down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come,” we end up teaching “not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit.” Or, what is the same, we give heed to some other spirit than the Spirit of Jesus and His Father. That precisely is what Luther tagged as “enthusiasm,” as if one had “devoured the Spirit,” as he wrote sarcastically thinking of the figure of the dove from Jesus’ baptism, “feathers and all.”¹⁵ Luther transposed the term into German as *Schwärmerei*. It denoted the same “self-delusion, a mistaken conviction that one had become a receptacle of a divine possession” as “enthusiasm.” But in German *Schwärmerei* connoted “contagion and mass frenzy,” like “bees swarming around a hive,” by which Luther could stigmatize his spiritualizing opponents, “the mobs that followed self-appointed field preachers or rampaged through churches, smashing the statues . . .”¹⁶ Enthusiasm/ *Schwärmerei* would be for Luther the wrong kind of integration of the Spirit—to the antecedent self, rather than with the Incarnate Word—so that together Word and Spirit transform the antecedent self and thus form believers into the Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Luther holds tightly together justifying faith or regeneration and the particular news of Christ’s coming for those lost to God. He can hold them together because the Spirit who led Jesus in filial obedience and raised Him from the dead is recognizably the same Spirit who raises those dead to God to new life by faith in His crucified and risen Son. In the ensuing centuries, however, Luther’s economically sequenced and theologically integrated unity of Word and Spirit was sundered in his would-be followers. Rival anthropocentric theologies “of the heart” and “of the head”¹⁷ eclipsed Luther’s Trinitarianism¹⁸ with different claims to “enlightenment.” The metaphor of “enlightenment,” to be sure, has a long history going back at least to Plato (*Republic* VI:508–11, VII:514–17). This makes claims for “the” Enlightenment specious historically, as post-modern

15. LW 40:83.

16. Anthony J. La Vopa, “The Philosopher and the *Schwärmer*: On the Career of a German Epithet from Luther to Kant,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60 (1997) 88.

17. See forthcoming, Paul R. Hinlicky, “The Use of Luther’s Thought in Pietism and the Enlightenment,” in *The Oxford Handbook to Martin Luther* ed. R. Kolb et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

18. Wilhelm Mauer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, trans. H. George Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 239–70.

thought increasingly realizes. In the tradition of Augustinian theology to which Luther belongs, *illuminatio* is the aforementioned work of the Holy Spirit, who bathes the transfigured Jesus in divine light, so that faith is born by this revealing-and-seeing-and-hearing of the Father’s Son, Jesus who descends the mount to give His life for the many. Christine Helmer’s pioneering analysis of Luther’s Trinitarianism¹⁹ shows Luther at work with this Augustinian *illuminatio*, the Spirit’s attestation of the Word Incarnate at the Father’s command, *Hunc audite*, bearing witness to those united with Jesus by faith that they too are children of God by the pouring of divine love into their hearts (Rom 5:5, the bishop of Hippo’s favorite Bible verse). Such “enlightenment” is at once intellectual and affective²⁰—very much in contrast to “the” Enlightenment.

IRONIES OF ENTHUSIASM

Luther’s epithet, enthusiasm, consequently suffered a strange reversal in the course of the Enlightenment. What happened historically is this: the Cartesian-Kantian ambition of clearly separating sensible and supersensible realms²¹ predominantly worked to consign Luther with the Pietists to the reactionary private realm of emotion with its false, fervid imaginations—the unfounded source of all error. Alongside of this, however, there was another possibility of a more positive, if somewhat muted relation to Luther’s legacy. The reformer’s critique of enthusiasm could be utilized, though no longer in service to the *Verbum externum*. In Kant’s words from the Orientation essay: “Thus if it is disputed that reason deserves the right to speak first in matters concerning supersensible objects such as the existence of God and the future world, then a wide gate is opened to all enthusiasm, superstition and even atheism.”²² Indeed, as this categorical

19. Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther’s Works 1523–1546* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1999) 230–70.

20. Paul R. Hinlicky, “Luther’s Anti-Docetism in the Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi (1540)” in *Creator est creatura: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiemenkommunikation* ed. O. Bayer & Benjamin Gleede (Berlin & NY: Walter De Gruyter, 2007) 139–85.

21. Immanuel Kant, “The Inaugural Dissertation: ‘Genuine Metaphysics without Any Admixture of the Sensible,’” in Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 188–93.

22. Immanuel Kant, “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood & George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 15.

as to say that he to whom this authority belongs has the most effective control over minds."³³ Contrasting the (supposed) agreement of Moses with natural law and reason, Spinoza not inaccurately reviews "the origins of the Christian religion . . ." to expose its enthusiasm. "It was not kings who were the teachers of the Christian religion, but men of private station who, despite the will of those who held the sovereignty and were their rulers, were long accustomed to address private religious assemblies, to institute and perform sacred rites, to make all arrangements and decisions on their own responsibility without any regard to the state."³⁴ This enthusiastic assertion of an alternative sovereignty, in Spinoza's reading of Christian history, culminated in the massive enthusiasm of the Pope of Rome, who "began gradually to establish his ascendancy over all the kings until he actually attained the pinnacle of dominion." All the efforts of "monarchs by fire and sword" to liberate themselves from the bewitchment, however, failed. In the one allusion Spinoza permits himself to make to Luther and his followers, he points out that it was fellow "churchmen [who] succeeded in doing by pen alone," i.e., by a new assertion of religious authority through the Word, what the secular sovereigns could not accomplish. The moral of the story which Spinoza draws is that Luther's reformation "in itself provides a clear indication of the strength and power of religious authority, and gives further warning of the necessity of the sovereign to keep it in his own hands."³⁵ In drawing this remarkable conclusion, Spinoza was following Hobbes.

Luther does not appear by name in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, but the specter of the Reformer's assertion of "religious authority"—as in *De servo arbitrio*: "Take away assertions and you take away Christianity!"—is everywhere being exorcized, although Hobbes's Protestant biblicism can disguise that. As A. P. Martinich puts it: "Hobbes's fideism is part of a respectable aspect of Reformation Protestantism . . . [b]ut he did not mean by this what Luther did. 'By the captivity of our Understanding [to faith] is not meant a Submission of the Intellectual faculty to the Opinion of any other man, but of the Will to Obedience where Obedience is due.' [Hobbes] favored dictated doctrine."³⁶ In a penetrating study, political philosopher Joshua Mitchell overturns the customary views (themselves

33. Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* trans. S. Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998) 225.

34. *Ibid.*, 227.

35. *Ibid.*, 226.

36. A. P. Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 107.

inspired by Hobbes and Spinoza) of the relation of Luther's theology to the origins of secularism by showing 1) how early modern discourse was inextricably entangled in Christian theological categories, and 2) how the theological understandings of the relation of Moses and Christ, who each "impersonate" one of two kinds of "righteousness," bore far-ranging implications for the emerging understandings of liberty.³⁷

Luther, in Mitchell's account, opens up "the potential for disruptions of political order which emanate from [his understanding of] Christian righteousness" since "the powers of this world" can have "no power over Christians . . ." (cf. Luther's hymn text: "Take they goods, fame, fortune, child or spouse, they yet have nothing gained . . ."). What rescues Luther from a utopian antinomianism, however, is his "dialectical view" that the "law must be fulfilled," that "Christians must pass through the old law to supersede it."³⁸ Christ surpasses Moses by beating Moses at his own game, so to say, over-fulfilling the law by love for those it condemns in order to inaugurate a new regime of grace beyond the domain of works. This dialectical relation to political sovereignty, which claims to be the holy guardian of divine law, is disruptive, effectively so just because it is not willing to be marginalized into a realm of interiority within the closed system of secularism. Rather it comes to assert another sovereignty in public, alongside political sovereignty, albeit a paradoxical "power in powerlessness." For Hobbes by contrast "Luther's claim that Christ supersedes the truth of the Old Testament" (in the dialectical way just described) "had to be countered if there was to be civil peace at all." Hence, just like Spinoza, "Hobbes finds in Moses the foundations of unified sovereignty: political and religious."³⁹ The Hobbes of the second half of *Leviathan*, in turn, just like the Spinoza of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, "is not a theologian rather than a philosopher. He is both—and must be to unify sovereignty."⁴⁰

In a further study, Mitchell argued that Locke's seminal plea for toleration is a conceptual cognate of Luther's dialectical relationship between Moses and Christ: Moses, i.e. the state's claim is limited to the visible realm of works; conscience, belonging to Christ, is beyond its jurisdiction

37. "Luther and Hobbes on the Question: Who Was Moses, Who Was Christ?" *The Journal of Politics* 53 (1991) 676–700; here 682.

38. *Ibid.*, 686.

39. *Ibid.*, 687.

40. *Ibid.*, 698. Similarly, Mitchell's own paradigm-altering analysis does "not substitute a Christian view for an enlightenment view, but rather substitute[s] one Christian view for another[s]" since "Christian speculations on the meaning of (biblical history) are essential to early liberal thought" (*ibid.*).

lights of nature, grace and glory, which Leibniz expressly appropriated in his own *Theodicy*.⁴⁹ The three lights⁵⁰ reflect Luther's breakthrough in disentangling the cosmic Pauline-apocalyptic dualism of the Spirit and the flesh from the Platonic-Gnostic anthropological dualisms pitting mind against matter. But the Pauline dualism is not just lying there in the nature of things to be discovered. It must come on the scene. It must break through to appear. It must be revealed, as when One incognito enters a strong's man's house to bind him and plunder his goods (Mark 3: 27). As tamed as Luther's volatile apocalyptic theologizing becomes in Leibniz's hands, it is still recognizably Luther's assertion of "religious authority" by the sign of offense, the appearance of Jesus Christ in the world. Not only is such Christological affirmation exceedingly rare among the champions of European enlightenment, it is not accidentally related to Leibniz's "moderate" (in his language, i.e., ecumenically oriented, Calixtian) Lutheranism. Leibniz, indeed, is the only major figure of "the" Enlightenment who knows Luther theologically and engages profoundly with his vexing, but also most insightful treatise on the collective bondage of human choice to Adam's rebellion. But Pietists accused Leibniz of crypto-Spinozism; Rationalists complained of him, as they had of Luther, as of one still entangled in the Christian, even worse, Catholic superstition. His was a path not taken.

CONCLUSION

The great tragedy of Western Christianity was the non-reception by Leo X of Luther's theology of the Spirit working through the Word for the reform of the church, as irenically expressed in the 1530 Augsburg Confession.⁵¹ I regard this as a tragedy, though Luther regarded it as a sin, the very sin of "enthusiasm." As he fatefully wrote in the polemical 1537 *Smalcald Articles*, "The papacy is also purely religious raving in that the pope boasts that 'all laws are in the shrine of his heart' and that what he decides and commands in his churches is supposed to be Spirit and law—even when it

49. Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* trans. E. M. Huggard (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1998) 99–101.

50. Thomas Reinhuber, *Kämpfender Glaube: Studien zu Luthers Bekenntnis am Ende von De servo arbitrio* (Berlin & NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2000).

51. Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom*, with a Foreword by Mickey L. Mattox (Grand Rapids: Berdmans, 2010) 258–300.

is above or contrary to Scriptures or the spoken Word."⁵² Today, neither a Catholic theologian like Ralph Del Colle nor a Lutheran theologian such as myself would concur in these fateful mutual condemnations. We both see in the recovering doctrine of the Trinity the right kind of integration of Word and Spirit that establishes koinonia even against our divided church and thus veritably impels us into new relationships and new explorations, owning the divisions between us as mutual problems. Yet as Ralph showed, "communion ecclesiology can be as diverse as the theological trajectories that inform it."⁵³ That important insight leaves us with much work to do in tracing forgotten trajectories at work in the very categories we so unconsciously employ. I hope to have contributed to that work in this study by inducing Lutheran theologians to look self-critically at the fate of their dearest convictions in the course of "the" Enlightenment, a fate which aligned them in the eyes of the Tribunal of Reason together with the scorned enthusiasts and even the popes. But a more edifying note may be sounded too: recovering the mutual and essential referencing of the Word and Spirit by firmly grounding Trinitarian theological discourse in the Biblical economy of God cannot but draw us all together.⁵⁴ It remains true: as the Spirit draws us to Christ, so we are drawn together to the glory of the Father and for the good of the suffering creation. For this insight, the church on the way to the unity the Lord wills is thankful for the theological ministry of Ralph Del Colle.

52. *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb & Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 322.

53. Del Colle, *The Church*, 264.

54. Such has been my own endeavor in Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).