BOOK REVIEWS

United with Christ: Martin Luther and Christian Mysticism. By Volker Leppin. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2025. 198 pp. + viii.

Volker Leppin needs no introduction to readers of *LQ*. One of Germany's leading Reformation scholars who now teaches at Yale Divinity School, Leppin stands in the scholarly tradition of Heiko Oberman and Berndt Hamm with his commitment to situating the Reformation in its late-medieval theological context. He is cautious about positing radical breaks between the Reformation and late-medieval Christianity. Transformation, not rupture, is his most important interpretive category (134).

This book is informed by Leppin's Reformation-as-transformation thesis. Its central argument is that "we cannot understand Luther without mysticism" (11). The book explores the myriad ways that Luther was influenced by certain strands of medieval mysticism along with how he transformed this mysticism in the development of his evangelical theology. Throughout, Leppin argues against the traditional view that mysticism is inherently anti-Protestant. He is aware of potential problems associated with mysticism, especially its misappropriation by Nazis during the Third Reich (2). But he argues that such abuses should not deter Reformation scholars from the careful philological analysis of the relevant texts that is necessary to understand Luther's theology accurately (4–5).

Seven of the eight translated chapters have appeared elsewhere in German and much of their content is also found in Leppin's 2016 *Die fremde Reformation*; the introduction and final chapter of *United with Christ* are new. The chapters explore the following themes: the influence of Tauler's self-destroying anthropology yet everyday-life-affirming theology on Luther; the complicated relationship of mysticism to the ecclesial mediation of grace through sacraments in the Middle Ages; the influence of Tauler's understanding of repentance on Luther's *95 Theses*; the Augustinian nature of the Rhenish

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mysticism that shaped Luther; the influence of late medieval Passion mysticism on Luther's soteriology; the way mysticism shaped Luther's law-gospel dialectic, theology of justification, and teaching on the priesthood of all believers; mystical influences on Luther's theology of Word and Sacrament; and Luther's monastic-mystical approach to theology that revived *lectio divina*.

Despite Leppin's interest in rooting Luther's theology in medieval mysticism, he does not look to it to provide a total explanation of the Reformer's thought. He concedes that over time mystical language diminishes in Luther's works (11, 54, 120), but he still insists that its subtle yet unmistakable presence may be discerned in the Reformer's mature theology (105).

When assessing the influence of mysticism on Luther, so much depends on how one defines mysticism (see Rittgers, "Martin Luther," in *Protestantism and Mysticism* [2019]). Elsewhere, Leppin has defined it as the believer's experience of the temporary inbreaking of the transcendent into the immanent ("Luther's Roots in Monastic-Mystical-Piety," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther* [2014], 49). In *United with Christ*, Leppin offers somewhat different definitions: "direct contact with God" (1); "a passive, God-given posture" (105) that realizes one is radically dependent on God for one's being and constitution (10). For a more fulsome definition, one must look to Leppin's notes: "In the following, I understand 'mysticism' to be a character of theology or spirituality centered with a worldly possibility of unification of a believer's will, or essence, with God" (24 n3). These definitions are related but not identical. It would have been helpful if Leppin, in conversation with the work of Bernard McGinn and Berndt Hamm, had gathered these various definitions into one overarching and clear definition in the introduction. As it stands, even the sympathetic reader wonders at times what Leppin means by mysticism and whether the definition is not too broad, claiming things for mysticism that Luther could have gained from non-mystical sources, even as mystical sources certainly shaped him.

We have other translated work from Leppin on Luther and mysticism (see "Luther's Roots in Monastic-Mystical-Piety," 49–61, and "Mysticism," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, vol. 2,

655–666). But *United with Christ* provides the most comprehensive English account of his field-defining contributions to this crucial subject in Luther studies. The translation disappoints in several places, as does the copyediting, but, thankfully, Leppin's insightful and provocative meaning, coupled with his absolute mastery of the primary sources, still manages to break through.

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Disputations I. By Martin Luther. Edited by Christopher Boyd Brown. Luther's Works, Volume 72. Saint Louis: Concordia, 2025. 671 pp. + lix.

A companion to volume 73, this book assembles thirty-eight disputations or colloquies which Luther or his colleagues held. Luther's disputations reveal him to be a high-level academic who is ready to use logic and dialectic to advance the gospel and clarify doctrine. These disputations cover a range of issues which Luther faced including his appreciation for logic despite his misgivings with Aristotle, his challenge to Biel's supposition that "first grace" can be earned, his reconception of the gospel as neither a directive nor a description but instead a promise, his dismissal of the superiority of monastic life over secular engagement, and his advocacy for the distinction between law and gospel.

While Luther's opposition to Aristotle is well known, he advocated that pastoral candidates study Aristotle's *Logic* to help them become good thinkers. Although not a disputation, *Dialectica* (1540), an accessible handbook on logic which Luther wrote to assist his son Hans, incorporates a few interpolations from an editor since Luther is referred to, at times, in the third person. Interestingly, Luther corrects the tree of Porphyry who, being unschooled in the Christian faith, failed in his schema of logical categories to distinguish the "uncreated" (the Creator) from the "created" (creatures) in the category of "incorporeal" (20). Likewise, Luther insisted that specific theological topics, such as God, humanity, and angels, not be defined by natural reason but instead by scripture. All other things should be defined by their cause (20).