Passionate Embrace: Luther on Love, Body, and Sensual Pleasure

By E. Gerle (2017)

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Reviewed by Deanna A. Thompson

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In an age that vacillates between worship and loathing of bodies, Swedish ethicist Elizabeth Gerle attempts a body theology that charts a course between these two extremes, affirming the imperfect, sensual, vulnerable bodies of real, ordinary people. To do this, she turns to an unlikely historical ally: sixteenth-century Reformer Martin Luther. Gerle proposes that reading Luther alongside some of his predecessors' views of the body on the one hand, and contemporary *eros* theologians on the other, it becomes possible to draw out of Luther a theology of the body that offers important resources for contemporary thinking about sensuality, sexuality, desire and even justice.

While the history of Christianity has often portrayed spirituality and sensuality as existing in opposition, Gerle is interested in telling a different story; one that begins with the creation story and continues through the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and historical Christian writings. She touches on a wide array of thinkers, lingering on the insights of Origen, Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. These thinkers are worthy of attention not only because of their influence on Luther, but also because together they demonstrate that Christian views of the body and sexuality have long been ambiguous, heterogeneous and allowing for multiple interpretations. This insight fuels her rereading of Luther as yet another historical thinker whose views on the body are inconsistent and at times surprisingly rel-

Affiliation

Hamline University, USA.

email: dthompson@hamline.edu

evant for contemporary thinking about actual bodies, human and beyond. Her romp through historical theologising of *eros*, sensuality and the body sets the stage for the heart of Gerle's project: rereading Luther – sometimes against himself and sometimes against long-standing interpretations of him – while on the lookout for signs of a body theology that can still make claims on us today.

It is in her rereading of Luther that Gerle is at her finest. She takes on a Luther that many of us think we know and re-presents his thought from the perspective of being anchored in the everyday, ordinary body. Gerle does not deny that Luther's theology is often preoccupied with sin, suffering and justification, or that he harboured abhorrent views against peasants, Jews, papists and others. Nevertheless, she wants to pick up this lens of sensuality present throughout much of Christian history and refocus it on Luther's life and work to see what emerges.

From her vantage point as a Swedish ethicist, she also wants to move beyond the readings of Luther done by Anders Nygren that categorise Luther's view of Christian love as agapaic *rather than* erotic, that Luther's focus on Christ on the cross emphasises a self-giving love that does not expect or depend upon a response. Committed to reading Luther beyond these and other dualistic categories, Gerle presents a Luther-inspired view of love in which self-giving and loving, sensual response are interdependent and inseparable.

Gerle shows how Luther's view of sin led him to believe – against many of his predecessors – that the body is *not* capable of transformation. But it is precisely his radical ideas about human sinfulness that become surprising resources for a theology that affirms the value of bodies for the here and now. Luther's conviction that sin pervades every aspect of life means that sexuality and desire are also affected by sin, but no more or less than any other area of life. Gerle is keen to show that Luther's rejection of celibacy and the monastic life leads him to stress how natural our sexual urges are and (again contrary to his monastic predecessors) how unnatural the practice of celibacy is for the vast majority of people.

Gerle painstakingly and persuasively illustrates how carnality and spirituality are aligned in Luther's understanding of human beings as *totus homo*. Sensual pleasures are seen not as distractions from the divine but as antidotes to the power of the devil and human experiences of despair. Believe in Christ, Luther counselled, and enjoy music, dancing and even falling in love. That these claims of Luther's were censored from published versions of his Table Talk as early as the mid-sixteenth century suggests that those preserving his thought wanted to preserve a less sensual version

of the reformer. Gerle insists the time is past due for the more sensual Luther to be seen, appreciated and understood.

This rereading of Luther's view of sin and his positive view of the sensuality of the body sets us up for Gerle's most arresting insight: that Luther's use of nuptial imagery to describe the 'joyous exchange' between Christ and the Christian can be read as a passionate, erotic embrace that liberates Christians from all the forms of bondage sin and empowers them to live sensually in the world. While Gerle is clear that a contemporary Lutheran body theology needs to use new knowledge on sex and gender and make more links between sex, body, theology and politics than Luther himself did, she nevertheless finds Luther's use of marriage metaphors for justification pregnant with contemporary possibility. Drawing on recent work by Lutheran feminist theologians Kathryn Kleinhans and Else Marie Widberg, Gerle illustrates how for Luther a Christian's marriage to Christ is less spiritual and more erotic than it was for Bernard or others.

Even as Gerle admits that Luther's thinking on gender and sexuality often conforms to conventional patriarchal norms, she turns to Kleinhans' work on Luther's gender-transgressing interpretation of Christ as sometimes bride, sometimes bridegroom, and she proposes that for Luther, 'gender doesn't seem to be the point' (p. 150). Therefore, it's possible to use Luther's marital imagery to affirm a variety of heterosexual as well as queer relationships.

Gerle also takes on a recurring critique by feminists and others of Luther's view of justification and use of nuptial imagery: the concern that Christ does all while the Christian remains entirely passive. Drawing inspiration from contemporary *eros* theologians like Catherine Keller and Carter Heyward and their emphasis on relationality, Gerle sees in Luther 'not a desire for union but an actually realized union between God and humanity' (p. 144). For him, justification is enacted through a relationship and has a 'real effect on the believer' (p. 142). She notes that Luther's euphoric description of this 'joyous exchange' lends credence to interpretations like her own over those that cast justification primarily in forensic terms.

Turning towards the present, Gerle argues that Luther's vision of justification as a 'passionate embrace' between Christ and the Christian has consequences for contemporary ethics. It's a view that unites *eros* and *agape*, opening up space for matters of justice and healing. Luther's view of Christian freedom, Gerle proposes, is encapsulated in a joy that 'releases energy and desire' (p. 177). Far from being one-sided, being in relationship – being lovingly embraced – by Christ fills Christians with energy to live out their vocation of finding delight in their neighbours and living in ways that support the flourishing of their bodies.

Gerle's rereading of Luther differs from those in the Finnish school who see in his theology an affirmation of theosis. Rather, Gerle argues that, for Luther, to be Christ-like is to follow God's lead and become fully human. And while many contemporary interpreters of Luther turn to his views of the Eucharistic presence of Christ, Gerle insists that even more challenging to the present-day cult of healthy, strong bodies is Luther's repeated casting of Christ's presence in vulnerable, tired, suffering *ordinary* bodies. Gerle is intent on demonstrating that Luther's focus on Christ is in fact a focus on *everyday bodies* rather than on *the body of Christ* (that is, the church). She coins the term 'churchification' in order to critique contemporary theologies that limit their reflection on bodies to the image of the body of Christ and its potential contributions to twenty-first century understanding of ecclesial institutions. While this concern of too much focus on body as ecclesial may be a valid one (perhaps especially for her own Nordic context), Gerle's references to it throughout the text are more impressionistic than argumentative. One of her many important points is that theologians and ethicists indebted to Luther must move beyond understanding his thought in terms of dichotomies or polarising dyads. Given that commitment, it seems unnecessarily dichotomous to suggest that the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ has nothing to say to or about ordinary bodies. In Paul's First Corinthians' vision of the body of Christ, it is none other than the bodies of the weakest and most vulnerable that are most deserving of the corporate body's attention (I Cor. 12.22–3), a point that harmonises well with Gerle's central commitments.

This minor critique aside, Gerle provides the fields of theology, ethics and Luther studies more generally with an elegant and captivating rereading of Luther as a theologian of the body, a rereading that will continue to reverberate for many years to come.