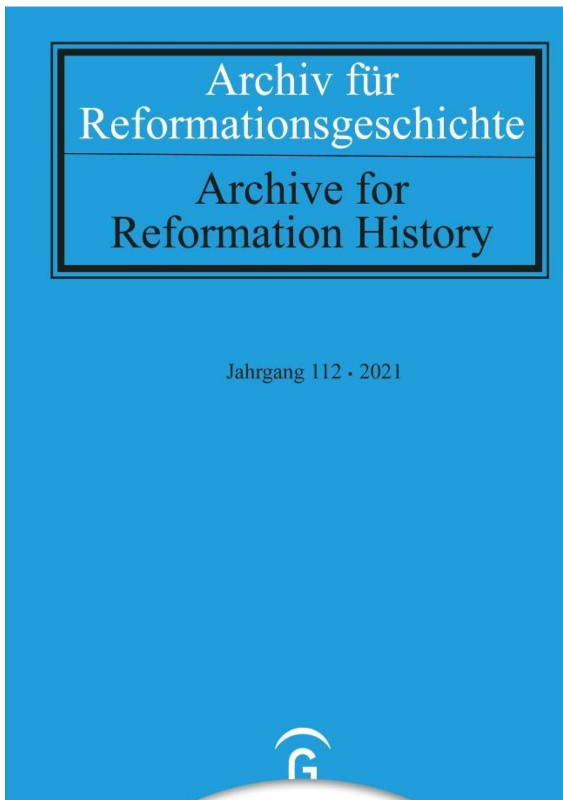


Leseprobe

Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte – Aufsatzband

Jahrgang 112/2021

Bestellen Sie mit einem Klick für 139,00 €

Seiten: 328

Erscheinungstermin: 22. November 2021

Mehr Informationen zum Buch gibt es auf

www.penguinrandomhouse.de

Archive for Reformation History

An international journal
concerned with the history of the Reformation and its significance in world affairs,
published under the auspices of the Verein für Reformationsgeschichte and
the Society for Reformation Research

North American Editors

Ute Lotz-Heumann – Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer

European Editors

Thomas Kaufmann – Martin Keßler

Advisory Board – Wissenschaftlicher Beirat

Michael Driedger, St. Catharines/Ontario – Renate Dürr, Tübingen – Birgit Emich, Frankfurt a. M. – Mark Greengrass, Sheffield – Brad S. Gregory, Notre Dame/Indiana – Scott Hendrix, Princeton/New Jersey – Mack P. Holt, Fairfax/Virginia – Susan C. Karant-Nunn, Tucson/Arizona – Thomas Kaufmann, Göttingen – Martin Keßler, Basel – Yves Krumenacker, Lyon – Ute Lotz-Heumann, Tucson/Arizona – Janusz Małłek, Toruń – Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, Tucson/Arizona – Silvana Seidel Menchi, Pisa – Carla Rahn Phillips, Minneapolis/Minnesota – Heinz Schilling, Berlin – Ethan H. Shagan, Berkeley/California – Christoph Strohm, Heidelberg – James D. Tracy, Minneapolis/Minnesota – Alexandra Walsham, Cambridge – Randall C. Zachman, Notre Dame/Indiana

Vol. 112 · 2021

Gütersloher Verlagshaus

Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte

Internationale Zeitschrift
zur Erforschung der Reformation und ihrer Weltwirkungen,
herausgegeben im Auftrag des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte und
der Society for Reformation Research

Europäische Herausgeber

Thomas Kaufmann – Martin Keßler

Nordamerikanische Herausgeberinnen

Ute Lotz-Heumann – Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer

Wissenschaftlicher Beirat – Advisory Board

Michael Driedger, St. Catharines/Ontario – Renate Dürr, Tübingen – Birgit Emich, Frankfurt a. M. – Mark Greengrass, Sheffield – Brad S. Gregory, Notre Dame/Indiana – Scott Hendrix, Princeton/New Jersey – Mack P. Holt, Fairfax/Virginia – Susan C. Karant-Nunn, Tucson/Arizona – Thomas Kaufmann, Göttingen – Martin Keßler, Basel – Yves Krumenacker, Lyon – Ute Lotz-Heumann, Tucson/Arizona – Janusz Małłek, Toruń – Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, Tucson/Arizona – Silvana Seidel Menchi, Pisa – Carla Rahn Phillips, Minneapolis/Minnesota – Heinz Schilling, Berlin – Ethan H. Shagan, Berkeley/California – Christoph Strohm, Heidelberg – James D. Tracy, Minneapolis/Minnesota – Alexandra Walsham, Cambridge – Randall C. Zachman, Notre Dame/Indiana

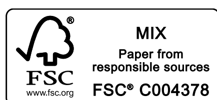
Vol. 112 · 2021

Gütersloher Verlagshaus

Mitarbeiter der Redaktion – Editorial Assistant
Dr. Ellen Yutzy Glebe

Das *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* ist eine jährlich erscheinende Zeitschrift mit einem anonymisierten Begutachtungsverfahren. Manuskripte in deutscher, französischer und italienischer Sprache werden per E-Mail erbeten an Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Dr. h. c. Thomas Kaufmann, Universität Göttingen, thomas.kaufmann@theologie.uni-goettingen.de, und Prof. Dr. Martin Keßler, Universität Basel, martin.kessler@unibas.ch. Manuskripte in englischer Sprache werden per E-Mail erbeten an Prof. Dr. Ute Lotz-Heumann, Heiko A. Oberman Chair of Late Medieval and Reformation History, und Prof. Dr. Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, Susan C. Karant-Nunn Chair of Reformation and Early Modern European History, University of Arizona, ArcRefHist@email.arizona.edu. Es werden nur Original-Beiträge im *ARG* aufgenommen. Es wird empfohlen, rechtzeitig vor Abschluss des Manuskripts bei den jeweiligen Herausgebern Merkblätter zur formalen Gestaltung der Beiträge anzufordern.

The *Archive for Reformation History* is a double-blind peer reviewed journal that appears annually. Manuscripts in English should be sent by e-mail to Professor Ute Lotz-Heumann, Heiko A. Oberman Chair of Late Medieval and Reformation History, and Professor Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, Susan C. Karant-Nunn Chair of Reformation and Early Modern European History, University of Arizona, ArcRefHist@email.arizona.edu. Manuscripts in German, French, and Italian should be sent by e-mail to Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Dr. h. c. Thomas Kaufmann, Universität Göttingen, thomas.kaufmann@theologie.uni-goettingen.de, and Prof. Dr. Martin Keßler, Universität Basel, martin.kessler@unibas.ch. The *ARH* only accepts original manuscripts. Please contact the editors for guidelines for the preparation of manuscripts.



Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe FSC® N001967

Auch als Online-Ausgabe erhältlich: www.degruyter.com/view/j/arg
ISBN 978-3-579-08478-7
Print-Ausgabe: ISSN 0003-9381
Online-Ausgabe: ISSN 2198-0489
Copyright © 2021 by Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh,
in der Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe GmbH,
Neumarkter Straße 28, 81673 München

Die Zeitschrift und alle in ihr veröffentlichten Beiträge sind urheberrechtlich geschützt.
Kein Teil dieser Zeitschrift darf ohne schriftliche Genehmigung des Verlages in irgendeiner Form reproduziert, digitalisiert oder gesendet werden.
Sollte diese Publikation Links auf Webseiten Dritter enthalten, so übernehmen wir für deren Inhalte keine Haftung, da wir uns diese nicht zu eigen machen, sondern lediglich auf deren Stand zum Zeitpunkt der Erstveröffentlichung verweisen.

Satz: SatzWeise, Bad Wünnenberg
Druck und Einband: PB Tisk, a. s., Pribram
Printed in Czech Republic
www.gtvh.de

Inhalt

Peter A. Morton
Martin Luther's Views on Superstition, Witchcraft, and Faith between 1518 and 1529 7

Hannes Amberger
Vom Netzwerk zur Institution: Der Zweibrücker Reformator Johannes Schweblin und seine Korrespondenz 35

Maciej Ptaszyński
Wie politisch war die Reformation in Polen? 66

Erik Lundeen
Preaching Justification in the Early Reformation: The 1523 Advent Sermons of Johannes Oecolampadius on 1 John 96

Hannah M. Kreß
En handbok på svenska und die Einführung der Reformation im schwedischen Reich 117

Bryan D. Kozik
"To resurrect the collapsed religion": Dantiscus as a Key to Catholic Reform in Central Europe 149

Lucie Storchová
Rerum Boemicarum Ephemeris (1584) und die protestantische Geschichtsschreibung in den böhmischen Ländern: Zur Adaptation in einem multikonfessionellen Umfeld 180

Radmila Prchal Pavlíčková
„Sehet, daß jhr ewre Seelen errettet". Trost- und Ermahnungsschriften für die Prager nach der Vertreibung der lutherischen Prediger im Jahre 1622 und Warnung vor der Konversion 211

Steven R. J. Parks
Lutheran Orthodoxy's Anglican Connection: Johann Gerhard's Uncredited Use of William Whitaker in his 1625 *Exegesis sive uberior explicatio articulorum de scriptura sacra* 243

Focal Point / Themenschwerpunkt
Strangers in Strange Lands: Refugees in Early Modern Europe

Susanne Lachenicht
Introduction 265

Silke Muylaert
Coexistence Strategies: The Strangers in London and the Vestment Controversies 275

Daniel Fogt
Migration and Transregional Marriage along the Dutch-German Borderlands, 1570–1601 285

Maximilian Miguel Scholz
The Expanding Definition of Refugee in Early Modern Hesse-Kassel and Württemberg 296

Miscellaneum

Arnold Esch
Ein Ketzer in der Leibgarde des Borgia-Papstes (1501): Aus den Appellationen gegen die spanische Inquisition in den Registern der Poenitentiaria Apostolica 1478–1503 308

Martin Luther's Views on Superstition, Witchcraft, and Faith between 1518 and 1529

By Peter A. Morton

I. INTRODUCTION

In this article I examine developments in Martin Luther's views on superstition, popular magic, and witchcraft between his earliest extended treatment of the subject in 1516–1518 and the publication of the Large and Small Catechisms in 1529.[1] Luther's earliest views were expressed in a set of sermons on the Ten Commandments given in the city church of Wittenberg between June 1516 and February 1517, and published in 1518 as *Decem praecepta Wittenbergensi predicata populo* (The Ten Commandments Preached to the People of Wittenberg).[2] In these sermons Luther's position was based on a providentialist premise, according to which all suffering, including that caused by witches, is not merely permitted by God, but occurs in accordance with his will.[3] His

1. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper and the journal editor, Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, for extensive and very helpful comments and suggestions.

For a detailed, close study of Martin Luther's positions on magic and witchcraft, see Jörg Haustein, *Martin Luthers Stellung zum Zauber- und Hexenwesen* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1990). Other studies of Luther on witchcraft are Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 156–195; Günther Jerouschek, "Luthers Hexenglaube und die Hexenvervolgung," in *Wittenberg: Ein Zentrum Europäischer Rechtsgeschichte und Rechtskultur*, ed. Heiner Lück and Heinrich de Wall (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), 37–149; Sigrid Brauner, "Martin Luther on Witchcraft: A True Reformer?," in *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert, and Maryanne Cline Horowitz (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1989), 29–42; and Beatrice Frank, "Zauberei und Hexenwerk," in *Lutheriana: Zum 500. Geburtstag Martin Luthers von den Mitarbeitern der Weimarer Ausgabe*, ed. Gerhard Hammer and Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen (Cologne: Böhlau, 1984), 291–297.

2. *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009) 1:398–521 (hereafter as WA). For a critical edition of the 1520 German translation published by Sebastian Münster, see Martin Basse, *Martin Luthers Dekalogpredigten in der Übersetzung von Sebastien Münster* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2011).

3. See Peter A. Morton, "Martin Luther's Early Views on Superstition and Witchcraft in his *Decem praecepta* of 1518," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 15 (2020): 194–226. The material in this section and the next draw upon that article. See also Haustein, *Martin Luthers Stellung* (see note 1), 32–67; Cameron, *Enchanted Europe* (see note 1), 159–164; and Uwe Rieske-Braun, "Glaube und Aberglaube: Luthers Auslegung des Ersten Gebots 1516–1518,"

pastoral message was that both the use of magic to protect against misfortune and the fear of witches ignore divine providence and thereby transgress the first commandment.

I will argue in this paper that in a series of catechetical texts between 1518 and 1529 Luther's providentialism underwent three important changes. These changes reflected the sharpening of his theological views and events in the decade after the initial outbreak of the reform movement. First, he presented both popular magic and witchcraft, not as acts of heresy as was widely accepted at the time, but as illustrative of corrupted human nature in the absence of grace, with the result that Christians are free from the binds of superstition, magic, and witchcraft only through divine grace. Second, the general providentialism of *Decem praecepta* came to be replaced by specific exhortations to trust in what I will call the promise of creation that is expressed in the first article of the Apostles' Creed. Those who resort to magic, or turn to pacts with the devil, ignore God's promise to protect and provide for those who place their trust in him. In this, witchcraft is in the same category of sin as superstition and popular magic, for all three represent a failure to place trust in divine providence. Third, whereas in *Decem praecepta* Luther urged his listeners to accept the harm and suffering inflicted by witches with trust in God's will, by the mid-1520s he was arguing on the basis of the two kingdoms doctrine that Christians have a duty to protect their neighbors from the harms caused by other people, and for that reason it is necessary that those guilty of the crimes of witchcraft should be executed under secular law. The result was a providentialism combined with enforcement of the law, with the combination justified by the two kingdoms doctrine.

Luther's texts display a familiarity with the common concepts and arguments in the German witchcraft literature of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Although there were differences in details, the concept of witchcraft as Luther encountered it included a pact with the devil in rejection of Christian baptism; collective gatherings at sabbats involving mockeries of the church sacraments, and sex with Satan and his demons; and maleficent sorcery that

---

Luther-Jahrbuch 69 (2002): 21–46. For discussion of providentialism in the context of the witch trials, see H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 10–66; and Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 507–508, 537–540. See also the discussion of two hierarchical scales – divine potency and malevolence – in Richard Raiswell and Peter Dendle, "Epilogue: Inscribing the Devil in Cultural Contexts," in *The Devil in Society in Premodern Europe*, ed. Richard Raiswell with Peter Dendle (Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2011), 537–551.

caused all manner of death, illness, and destruction. The ideas that witches were guilty of a Satanic pact, and that they gathered at the sabbat, grounded a belief that they comprised a secret heretical sect.[4] To these elements were sometimes added the beliefs that witches secretly flew at night to the sabbat and that they could appear in the form of animals. Opinions on how much of this was real and how much was diabolical illusion varied. The central elements of the concept came together through a confluence of similarly minded figures at the Council of Basel in 1431–1440.[5] Johannes Nider, the Dominican reformer, was a central participant at this council, and his text, *Formicarius* (The Anthill), was highly influential in disseminating the idea of demonic witchcraft.[6] In *Decem praecepta*, Luther made explicit reference to the Strasbourg preacher, Johannes Geiler von Kaisersberg, whose text on magic and witchcraft, *Die Emeis* (The Ant), was heavily influenced by Nider's *Formicarius*.[7] But, at the same time, Geiler's rather rambling text was also influenced by the Tübingen pastor and rector, Martin Plantsch, who had called for calm following the trial of a suspected witch in 1505.[8] Plantsch based his appeal on the absolute sovereignty of God and the consequent impossibility of witches performing any actions not willed by God. On the one hand, Geiler adopted Nider's claim that the spells and rites of witches are harmless in themselves yet serve as a sign for the devil to carry out their evil desires. But he added the providentialist assertion that the actions of the devil are effective only because of God's will that they should be so. In addition to his providentialism, Geiler followed a tradition, tracing to

4. For an outline of the general concept, see Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 91–166. For critical editions of five central texts in the emergence of the concept, see Martine Ostorero, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, and Kathrin Utz Tremp, with Catherin Chène, ed. and trans., *L'Imaginaire du sabbat: Edition critique des textes les plus anciens (1430c.-1440c.)* (Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, 1999). For its early dissemination, see Hans Peter Broedel, "Fifteenth Century Witch Beliefs," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian P. Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 32–49; and Kathrin Utz Tremp, *Von der Häresie zur Hexerei: 'Wirkliche' und imaginäre Sekten im Spätmittelalter* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2008).

5. Michael D. Bailey and Edward Peters, "A Sabbat of Demonologists: Basel, 1431–1440," *The Historian* 65 (2003): 1375–1395.

6. On Nider and his *Formicarius*, see Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

7. Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg, *Die Emeis: Dis ist das Buch von der Omeissen* (Strasbourg: Grüninger, 1516).

8. On Plantsch and witchcraft beliefs, see Heiko A. Oberman, "The Power of Witchcraft: Devil and Devotion," in *Masters of the Reformation: The Emergence of a New Intellectual Climate in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 158–183.

the thirteenth-century legal compilation, the *Canon Episcopi*, that popular beliefs in night flight and transformation into animals are entirely illusions created by the devil.

Although Luther was aware of, and influenced by, the literature about diabolical witchcraft that had emerged in the fifteenth century, his treatment of magic and witchcraft in *Decem praecepta* followed a tradition older than, and with a different history from, that which emerged from the Council of Basel. Following the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Latin church had engaged in an explicit program to reform the lives of the laity and bring them into better alignment with the tenets of the church. This program took the form of instruction in the key statements of the Christian faith, especially the Ten Commandments.[9] The latter were often urged on congregations in preparation for confession before a priest. Included in this program was an attack on the superstitious and magical practices of ordinary people. But unlike the demonological texts of the fifteenth century, a diabolical pact was not placed at the center of the concern. The intent was not to identify and attack a sect of idolaters and heretics but to correct Christian error. The most common understanding of the first commandment in the Middle Ages was that one should love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind. The use of amulets, spells, and other elements of popular magic and superstition were seen as transgressions of this commandment through placing faith in objects and rituals other than those of God and the church. This view was expressed in numerous books of instruction in the Ten Commandments – or *preceptoria* – produced both in Latin and in the vernacular between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Luther's *Decem praecepta Wittenbergensi predicata populo* was firmly in the tradition of the *preceptoria*. Like earlier authors of books of instruction in the Ten Commandments, Luther's principal aim in his treatment of magic was to make the people aware of the impiety of their own practices. In that text Luther shows a close familiarity with popular magic and superstition, and his sermons speak directly to the beliefs and practices of his parishioners. He uses humor to mock common superstitions, such as spreading the branches collected from the procession of St. Mark's onto the fields to ward off birds, saying he understands

9. On this tradition in the context of responses to sorcery, see Peter A. Morton, "Superstition, Witchcraft, and the First Commandment in the Late Middle Ages," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 13 (2018): 40–70. Nider also wrote a catechetical work on the Ten Commandments, *Preceptorium divine legis* (Instruction in the Commandments of Divine Law), which incorporated the descriptions of witchcraft in *Formicarius*. So the boundary between the traditions is not always clear.

that this works only as long as one is standing in the field.[10] And yet, less than a decade later, Luther is calling for the execution of those guilty of witchcraft in language reminiscent of the demonologists. I argue in this paper that, while Luther made significant modifications to the providentialism of *Decem praecepta*, including the use of secular law to punish those who commit maleficent magic, his fundamental position did not change. All forms of magic, from simple superstitions to witchcraft, represent a lack of faith in divine providence. The law is needed to prevent the worst effects of corrupted human nature, yet at the same time people can be moved away from the use of magic only through faith that comes from God.

I will restrict attention in this paper to the years 1518 to 1529. This was a period during which Luther articulated his theological and political views in a series of important documents, and during which his early doctrines of *sola gratia* and the freedom of all Christians produced unexpected consequences.[11] I believe that during these years Luther also developed a coherent understanding of magic and witchcraft, and of the proper form of Christian response. Later developments led Luther to add or modify this view.[12] In general, the fact that Luther always wrote on magic and witchcraft in the context of broader issues means that they must be read in those proper contexts.[13]

II. LUTHER'S VIEWS IN *DECEM PRAECEPTA*

In his sermons on the first commandment in *Decem praecepta* Luther described three forms of transgression. The first category was that of magic and withcraft, a subject that was commonly included in earlier *preceptoria*. The other two forms of transgression were false worship in the cult of saints and what he described as the transgressions "of those who, in place of the true God, worship an idol of their own wisdom and righteousness," by which he meant people

10. WA 1:407, 22–26.

11. For Luther's personal experiences during the 1520s, see Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (London: Vintage, 2016), 145–272. For the impact of these years on Luther's attitude to the law, see John Witte Jr., "Between Sanctity and Depravity: Law and Human Nature in Martin Luther's Two Kingdoms," *Villanova Law Review* 48 (2003): 727–762, esp. 730–733.

12. For example, in the late 1520s the bitter controversy over the real presence of Christ's body in the host led Luther to describe a form of spiritual witchcraft in which false doctrine is spread by the devil. I will turn to this at the end of the paper.

13. For example, Frank, "Zauberei und Hexenwerk" (see note 1), 296, quotes Luther's words (WA 1:403, 5–7) to attribute to him a belief that he was actually mocking.

who believe that they can live righteously through their own free will.[14] These two further categories were new additions of Luther's, and they reflect his own newly emerging theology.

My attention in this paper is on Luther's treatment of magic and witchcraft.[15] These he further divided into three groups, each associated with a stage of life. His examples were drawn from popular belief and legends as well as demonological texts.[16] To the youth he ascribed common superstitions, such as weapons charms and love magic. To those of adult years, with families and businesses, he attributed simple magic to protect these vital possessions. The difference between these first two categories is the degree to which some knowledge is required, such as time of day or special materials. The third category included all those who form a pact with the devil, and these Luther labelled as old women *(vetulae)*.[17] Most of Luther's attention in this section was given to cunning-folk *(viros et mulieres sapientes)*, who were consulted by their neighbors for their knowledge of magic. With regard to what we would think of as witchcraft proper Luther distinguished between acts of maleficent magic and the more fantastical elements, especially flight to the sabbat. Luther dismissed night flight and the sabbat as illusory, but he described the damage caused by witches at length.

Presented within the three groups, maleficent witchcraft represents the extreme end of a continuum from simple, harmless superstitions through increasingly serious transgressions of the first commandment.[18] This format served the homiletic character of the text. Whereas Luther's congregation would have

---

14. "scilicet eorum, qui pro vero deo idolum sapientiae et iusticiae suae colunt." WA 1:426, 17–18.

15. On the other two categories of transgression of the first commandment in *Decem praecepta*, see Cameron, *Enchanted Europe* (see note 1), 162–164.

16. I will adopt Luther's taxonomy in identifying three very broad categories: superstition, popular magic, and witchcraft. Learned magic and natural magic are not much discussed by Luther in his early work, although he alludes to the *ars notoria*, a medieval magical tradition. Clearly the categories are vague and overlapping. For all three categories collectively I will use *sorcery* as an umbrella term, as closest in English to Luther's German term *Zauberei*.

17. Luther mentions cunning-men and -women, but he associates witchcraft proper with women, who he believed were especially susceptible to the Devil's temptations. On Luther's perception of women and witchcraft and, in particular, the differences between Luther's view and those of Heinrich Kramer, see Sigrid Brauner, "Martin Luther: Witches and Fearless Housewives," in *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews: The Construction of Witchcraft in Early Modern Germany* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 53–67.

18. It is possible to argue, however, that Luther perceived the pact with the devil as a difference of more than just degree, but of kind. By 1526 Luther argued that those guilty of *maleficium* and a pact deserved death. Such a division is not obvious in *Decem praecepta*.

found themselves guilty of many of the forms of popular magic he described, the crimes of witches would be something they were afraid of rather than something they themselves might have committed. The sermons could thus address both the temptation to use superstitious means for one's own ends, and the manner in which Christians should respond to the harms they believed themselves to have suffered from their neighbors or from witches. The answer to both issues was faith in divine providence. In place of superstitious acts, we should place our faith in God, and, when afraid of witchcraft, we should trust in God. In these sermons Luther devoted more attention overall to the kinds of superstition and popular magic that occurred among the common people than he did to the threat of witchcraft, and his belief in the latter was restricted to the harm that witches cause.

Luther's *Decem praecepta* differed from the late medieval *preceptoria* in regard to the purpose of the Decalogue. In the *preceptoria* tradition, the commandments were perceived either as guides for bringing oneself closer to Christ, or as indications of what one must strive for in order to achieve salvation. From his early years in Wittenberg, however, Luther had come to follow the Augustinian position that outside of grace human beings can contribute nothing to their salvation.[19] In *Decem praecepta* Luther wrote that it is impossible for Christians to avoid idolatry because of their lack of creaturely humility and their concern for themselves and their possessions.[20] He began the text by citing Romans 3:20 to the effect that through the law one has nothing other than knowledge of sin.[21] Therefore, although in *Decem praecepta* Luther followed late medieval preaching of the Ten Commandments, he did so with very different ends.

The providentialism of *Decem praecepta* separates it not only from the *preceptoria* tradition but also from most demonological texts of the fifteenth century.[22] Providentialism had emerged from a nominalist emphasis on divine omnipotence, and the latter was absolutely central to Luther's theology.[23] Mar-

---

19. The precise origin of the influence of Augustine on Luther is not entirely clear. See Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 103–115.

20. WA 1:399, 5–8.

21. WA 1:398, 13–14.

22. Luther articulates this position in his lecture on Romans 1:24 of 1515. WA 56:179, 26–181, 22. For an English translation, see J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, H. T. Lehmann, ed., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–2018), 25:160–162 (hereafter LW).

23. Luther's treatment of divine omnipotence is expressed in terms of I Corinthians 12 that God works "all in all." See *The Bondage of the Will* of 1525, WA 18:718, 28–30; English

tin Plantsch had drawn from providentialism the implication that people should not seek the origins of their suffering in witches and the devil but in God and therefore in their own sins. In *Decem praecepta* Luther argued that, because the actions of witches and the devil are always in accordance with God's will, we can be comforted in the knowledge that these actions are part of divine providence. Those who deny this have no refuge when they suffer harm from the devil.[24] The reverse side of confidence in divine mercy is fear of divine wrath, for this fear is also part of God's providence. God wills the devil's attacks in order that we are driven into his arms when we come to realize the extent of our helplessness before him.[25] In Luther's view, we must fear the devil and witches because behind them stands the anger of an omnipotent God. As Luther says later, in a sermon of 1526, God can give Satan the power to cause the rivers to drown our cities and to tear every tree from the ground.[26] That he does not is testimony to his mercy. The devil and witches are among the many elements of creation that God uses to fulfill his providence.

In another way, Luther's providentialism complements *Decem praecepta's* place in the tradition of late medieval *preceptoria*. Like the latter, *Decem praecepta* is not intended to convince his readers of a heretical sect of witches at war with Christian society. Nowhere in *Decem praecepta* does Luther call for the death penalty (or indeed any punishment) for witches. His goal is two-fold: to reveal the impiety of the magical practices of his parishioners, and to urge them to seek comfort in the mercy of God when they suffer harm from witches.

III. SORCERY AND HUMAN NATURE

Luther composed a number of instructional texts in the decade leading up to the 1529 publication of the Large and Small Catechisms. These works were intended to make the fundamental elements of the Christian faith comprehen-

---

translation in Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Annotated Luther*, 5 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 2:229 (hereafter AL). Luther's conception of omnipotence was one of God's creative power, quite unlike the scholastic formulation in terms of the possibilities open to God. See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 105–129.

24. WA 1:408, 5–6.

25. It is here, I think, that the solution is to be found to the question raised by Cameron as to the consistency of the power Luther attributed to the devil with his belief in the omnipotence of God. Cameron, *Enchanted Europe* (see note 1), 170.

26. WA 16:552, 16–19.

sible to the laity, beyond offering examples of transgressions as *Decem praecepta* and earlier *preceptoria* had done. The first of these was a short document written in both German and Latin on the Ten Commandments, with the title, *A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments*.[27] This work differs from *Decem praecepta* in two ways. First, whereas the latter addresses only transgressions of the commandments, *A Brief Explanation* outlines both their transgressions and their fulfillments. It contains three parts: a statement of each commandment with an explanation of its meaning; a description of the transgression of each commandment; and a description of the fulfillment of each commandment. The direct explanations of each commandment represent a second departure from *Decem praecepta*, which relies on illustrations of improper conduct rather than explicit statements of doctrine. At the same time, *A Brief Explanation* follows *Decem praecepta* and medieval tradition in presenting the Decalogue as preparation for confession before a priest.[28] In the words of the editors of the Weimar edition, the purpose of *A Brief Explanation* was "to provide an introduction to earnest self-examination through the Ten Commandments, and thereby to bring about an internalization of confession."[29] It was thus still very much in the spirit of the confessional mirror, a "mirror of the soul" in the words of the conciliarist and chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson.

In keeping with both medieval tradition and *Decem praecepta*, sorcery is given a prominent position in *A Brief Explanation* in its descriptions of transgressions of the first commandment. These begin with an extensive list of examples of superstition, popular magic, and witchcraft. The first half reads as follows: "Whoever tries to do away with trouble by witchcraft, by the black arts, or by an alliance with the devil. Whoever uses [magical] writings, signs, herbs, words, spells, and the like. Whoever uses divining rods, uses incantations to find treasure, resorts to crystal-gazing, travels by a magic cloak, or steals milk. Whoever governs his life and work according to certain days, celestial signs, and the advice of fortune-tellers. Whoever uses certain incantations as blessings and charms to protect himself, his cattle, his children, and any kind of property against danger from wolves, sword, fire, or water."[30] This is a comprehensive list and includes each of the common categories of sorcery: popular

---

27. *Eine kurze Erklärung der zehn Gebote*, WA 1:247–256; *Instructio pro confessione peccatorum*, WA 1:257–265. For an English translation, see "The Little Prayerbook (1522)," AL 4:170–171.

28. This connection is indicated by its Latin title: *Instructio pro confessione* (instruction for the confession of sins).

29. WA 1:247.

30. WA 1:252, 3–9; AL 4:170–171.

superstition, learned magic, and witchcraft.[31] Each of the categories of the first sermon of *Decem praecepta* – youth, adulthood, and old age – are covered.[32]

Unlike *Decem praecepta*, however, the text immediately follows the list with a broader set of examples: "Whoever ascribes any bad luck or unpleasantness to the devil or to evil persons and does not, with love and praise, accept both evil and good as coming from God alone, responding to God with gratitude and willing submission. Whoever tempts God and exposes himself to unnecessary danger to body and soul. Whoever shows arrogance because of his piety, knowledge, or other spiritual gifts. Whoever honors God and the saints only to gain some temporal advantage, forgetting the needs of his soul. Whoever does not trust God at all times and rely upon God's mercy in everything he does. Whoever doubts the Apostles' Creed or God's grace. Whoever does not defend others against unbelief and doubt and does not do all in his power to help them believe and trust in God's grace. Here belongs every kind of unbelief, despair, and false belief."[33]

These examples are much more diagnostic of the kinds of attitudes that Luther believes produce transgressions of the commandment, and we can recognize in them several indications of Luther's theological understanding of sin. The first sentence is a statement of the providentialism mentioned earlier. Note, however, that Luther says we should not only look to God as the source of the evils that afflict us, but that we should be grateful for whatever we receive from him – whether good or evil – with "love and praise." Another message in this passage is the statement that one should trust in God and his mercy in all things. This instruction ties Luther's attitudes to sorcery to medieval tradition, but in a way that is uniquely his own. Luther perceived all forms of sorcery as transgressions of the first commandment because it represents a lack of trust in the omnipotence and majesty of God, just as it was viewed in the late medieval catechetical literature. But, as I will argue, he did so in a way that reflected his understanding of human nature after the fall from grace. Accordingly, it is necessary to view his treatment of the subject in that context.

In its simplest editions, the text of *A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments* consists of only three parts: the expositions of the commandments, their transgressions, and their fulfillments.[34] In most versions of the booklet, how-

31. Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (see note 3), 490–491.

32. Haustein, *Martin Luthers Stellung* (see note 1), 98–99.

33. WA 1:252, 9–15; AL 4:171.

34. See, for example, *Die zehen gepot gottes, mit einer kurtzen außlegung jrer erfullung und ubertretung* (Nuremberg: Gutknecht, 1518). Other editions, including that in WA 1, contain additional sections.

ever, Luther added a conclusion *(Beschluß)* to each part. Following a statement of the origin of transgressions of the commandments, Luther added in the conclusion, "This is what nature left to itself does through Adam's first sin."[35] And following the statement of the origin of their fulfillment, he says, "This is what the grace of God does through Christ our Lord."[36] The combined message here is that, since the Fall, human beings through their own abilities can produce only transgressions of the law, while all that is within the law is entirely the work of divine grace. Since Luther offered superstition, popular magic, and witchcraft as exemplars of transgressions at the outset of the first commandment, his conclusions puts them into a different light from traditional understandings. The many forms of magic and superstition listed in that paragraph are not the products of a rebellious will in a certain number of fallen angels and evil persons. They do not merely illustrate certain human choices or forms of heretical practice. They are what nature produces in human beings when left to itself without the aid of divine grace. And the second part of the paragraph, describing more general transgressions, is a description of the naturally sinful character of human beings rather than the vices of some evil people.[37]

The claim was of course not that everyone performs openly superstitious acts or magical rites. In fact, there is a good argument that, in a certain sense, Luther's anthropology was not radically different from that of Gabriel Biel, who had maintained that human beings are capable through their own natural powers to turn towards God and away from sin. Theodor Dieter makes the point that Luther's disagreement with Biel was not over human capacity, but over what kind of love is demanded by the first commandment.[38] As Luther puts it in *Decem praecepta*, obedience to the first commandment requires that a person "love poverty, humiliation, suffering, and death, and to desire those," and "to be vexed with life and its desire for wealth, honor, and passion, because they have their God only through Jesus Christ."[39] Biel would take this to be impossible as much as did Luther, but he did not think that God demanded that degree of love. Yet, for Luther, the matter is not one of degree, but whether

---

35. "Also thut die natur yhr selb gelassen durch Adams erste sunde." WA 1:254, 14.

36. "Also thut die gnade gotes durch Christum unsern hern." WA 1:255, 23.

37. Cameron, *Enchanted Europe* (see note 1), 165. Cameron describes the degree to which, in Luther's view, not only human nature but the entire natural world was depraved and corrupted.

38. Theodor Dieter, "Luther as Late Medieval Theologian: His Positive and Negative Use of Nominalism and Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 214), 35–39.

39. WA 1:400, 10–19.

one is with God or against God. There are indeed degrees of sinfulness. In *Decem praecepta* the three categories of sorcery – common superstition, popular magic, and witchcraft – represent levels of seriousness, from fairly harmless sins to the worst possible. But, in *A Brief Explanation*, Luther jumbled the categories together in no particular order. Here no differences are drawn between the worst forms of witchcraft and the simplest superstitions. All human beings oppose the will of God, and in that sense all forms of sorcery represent the natural acts of human beings in their fallen state. This is also revealed in the catechetical piece that Luther composed immediately after *A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments*.

In the year after he had finished the sermons from which *Decem praecepta* was drawn, Luther gave a new set of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. These appeared in print in April 1519, with the title *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laity.*[40] In these sermons Luther drew two sharp contrasts that characterize the human situation after the Fall. First, in his explanation of the second petition of the prayer, *Thy kingdom come*, he contrasts the kingdom of God, a kingdom of righteousness, with the kingdom of the devil, a kingdom of sin and disobedience. This passage is an early allusion to what has been called the two kingdoms doctrine *(Zwei-Reiche-Lehre)*, which became a central plank of Luther's theology and that of his followers.[41] Luther used the basic idea in various ways, with the result that the doctrine embraces a variety of propositions.[42] As Luther describes it here, the two kingdoms are two human states or ways of being: a state of sin and state of righteousness. The kingdom of God is described as a kingdom "of truth and righteousness," a way of being in which one is free of sin and subject only to God. He describes the kingdom of the devil as "this world" *(dyser welth)*, by which he presumably means the temporal world, where human beings must dwell until the coming of the kingdom of

---

40. *Auslegung deutsch des Vaterunsers für die einfältigen Laien*, WA 2:74–130; LW 42:19–81. John Agricola and Nicholas Amsdorf published earlier versions of the sermons in 1518 and 1519. The first Latin edition appeared in 1520.

41. It is declared, for example, in the *Apology of The Book of Concord*. See Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 231.

42. As I will discuss below, there is also a doctrine of two governments, which is slightly different. The literature is too large to be summarized here. My understanding follows Witte, "Sanctity and Depravity" (see note 11); W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, "The 'Two Kingdoms' and the 'Two Regiments': Some Problems of Luther's Zwei-Reiche-Lehre," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969): 164–185; and W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, "The Zwei-Reiche- and Zwei-Regimente-Lehre," in *The Political Thought of Martin Luther*, ed. Philip Broadhead (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984), 36–61.

God. Since the Gospel says that the temporal world belongs to the devil, it is a world of sin and disobedience. The implication of these descriptions is that, as long as human beings live in the temporal world, they will not be free of sin.

Luther writes that both the godly and the ungodly dwell in the devil's kingdom until the coming of God's kingdom.[43] The godly *(die frummen)* are those who fight against the devil, and the ungodly are those who enjoy the fruits of the flesh. Yet none of us is free, for "no matter how godly we may be, the evil lust always wants to share the reign in us."[44] In light of the point drawn from *A Brief Explanation* above, the fight against the devil can only come from divine grace, since human beings are incapable of resisting of their own natural powers. Life in the kingdom of God is a divine gift. This is confirmed a bit further on, when Luther says, "Therefore we do not pray, 'Dear Father, let us come into your kingdom,' as though we might journey toward it. But we do say, 'May thy kingdom come to us.' If we are to receive it at all, God's grace and his kingdom, together with all virtues, must come to us."[45]

The second contrast that Luther used to portray the corrupt nature of human beings occurs in his explanation of the third petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." The first phrase contrasts God's will with our own, through which we recognize the fact that the two are inescapably opposed. "Thy will be done on earth" says, "Break my will; resist it. No matter what happens let my life be governed not by my will, but by yours."[46] This contrast yields the same result as that drawn by the use of the two kingdoms doctrine: To the extent that our will is governed by our corrupted nature, it will always act in opposition to God's, while it acts in accord with God's will only insofar as it acts through divine grace. Together the second and third petitions of the Lord's Prayer – "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done" – thus serve to illustrate the corrupted nature of human beings and their complete dependence on divine grace in order the keep the Ten Commandments.

43. WA 2:95, 26–27; LW 42:38.

44. WA 2:95, 30–33; LW 42:38.

45. WA 2:98: 23–26; LW 42:41.

46. WA 2:105, 6–7; LW 42:48. This is reinforced in the fourth petition: "God's will is done only if yours is not done. That is to say, the more adversity you experience, the better is God's will done."

IV. THE PROMISE OF CREATION

An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer was followed in the same year by a much shorter piece, *A Short Form of the Lord's Prayer, for Understanding and Prayer*, which offers practical instruction tied to each line of the prayer.[47] In the first petition, "Hallowed be thy name," the advice to seek faith through prayer is applied to the avoidance of sorcery. Luther says we should call upon God to "lead us away from all sorcery *(zeuberey)* and false blessings *(falsche segen)*. Help us to cease all conjuring of the devil or his creatures through your name. Help us to root out all false belief and superstition."[48] Here again, harmless forms of popular magic and commerce with the devil are placed together. By "false blessings" Luther meant the use of short rhymes with the names of Christ or the saints to cure illnesses or provide protection, which was almost a universal practice in German peasant society.[49] Yet this is included together with conjuring the devil, something restricted to learned magicians in the Middle Ages and ascribed to witches in the fifteenth century.[50] Luther's view here is that we must continuously pray for the grace to avoid both popular magic and witchcraft, for human beings are incapable of avoiding idolatry through their own volition.

In 1520 *A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments* and *A Short Form of the Lord's Prayer* were published together with a third piece on the Apostles' Creed, the whole entitled *A Short Form of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer*.[51] Two years later this text was included in Luther's *Little Prayer Book*, which became very popular in the late 1520s.[52] In this work, magic and superstition appear at the very outset of his explanation of the Apostles' Creed. The first article, *I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth*, entails a repudiation of "the devil, all idolatry, all sorcery,

---

47. *Eine kurze Form, das Vaterunser zu verstehen und zu beten*, WA 6:9–19. Another text of the same year is *Eine kurtze und gute Auslegung des Vaterunsers vor sich und hinter sich*, WA 6:20, 20.

48. WA 6:12, 29–32.

49. For discussion of these forms of superstition, see Cameron, *Enchanted Europe* (see note 1), 54–55; Michael D. Bailey, *Fearful Spirits and Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in the Late Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 28–34.

50. Luther's own example of conjuring the devil is the practice of walking backwards around a church, which he ascribes to cunning folk (WA 1:406, 35–407, 1).

51. *Eine kurze Form der zehn Gebot, eine kurze Form des Glaubens, eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers*, WA 7:204–229. In this booklet, the Apostle's Creed is placed between the Decalogue and the Lord's Prayer, as it is in subsequent catechisms, to represent the proper relationship between the three parts of the catechism.

52. WA 10/2:375–482; AL 4:165–199. Mary Jane Haemig counted forty-four printings from 1522 to 1529 (AL 4:164).

and all heresy."[53] And here again we find positive instruction in Christian faith. Such faith, Luther says, brings with it a fear of absolutely nothing, including the devil and his demons. The analysis of the first article addresses the proper nature of such faith by drawing a distinction between believing that there is a God and having a firm belief in God. The latter is the case when one does not merely accept what is said about God but one places one's entire trust in him to the exclusion of everything else.[54]

But these exhortations to place such complete trust in God would raise among Luther's parishioners the question of what basis there can be for such trust in the face of severe hardship. An answer to this question is offered in Luther's analysis of the first article of the Apostles' Creed. It asserts God's almightiness and his majesty as creator of all that exists. He writes, "Since he is almighty, what can I need that he cannot give me or do for me? Since he is creator of heaven and earth, and Lord of all things, who is there that can deprive me or do me harm?"[55] This reasoning is extended to the second article: "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord." Here, too, trust is based on the power that Christ possesses to rule over all created things. Sitting at the right hand of God, Christ is king and Lord over all of creation. But the comfort which recognition of God's omnipotence brings with it is in itself problematic, for such power is incomprehensible to us. In his version of the first article Luther writes, "I consider and place my trust solely in the wholly invisible and incomprehensible single God, who created heaven and earth and who alone is above all things."[56] Therefore, the omnipotence that can ground our trust in God is the very thing that puts him beyond our comprehension. Moreover, Luther urges, this trust should continue even when one is forsaken and persecuted, even when one is "poor, unwise, ignorant, and despised."[57] Indeed, trust in God as it is understood in Luther's explanation of the Apostles' Creed continues despite the fact that everything we take as natural reasons for it – the kinds of reasons that are the grounds for trust in ordinary human affairs – are removed.

The kind of faith demanded of Christians and the grounds for such faith were addressed at length in the *Treatise on Good Works*, also published in 1520.[58] The subject of superstition and magic arises in *Good Works* in Luther's

53. WA 7:215, 27–28.
54. WA 7:215, 5–8.
55. WA 7:216, 1–3, 18–21.
56. WA 7:216, 1–3.
57. WA 7:216, 6–9.
58. *Von den guten Werken*, WA 6:196–276; AL 1:257–367.

discussion of the second commandment. There he says that the commandment contains more than just the proscription against taking the name of the Lord in vain. It also asserts the prescription to "honor, call upon, praise, preach, and glorify his name."[59] In this context Luther addresses the origin of human suffering. God's name is honored, Luther says, when we call upon it whenever we are in adversity or in need. "In the final analysis," Luther argues, "this, finally, is the reason God inflicts us with suffering, affliction, distress, and even death." It is to give us "much reason to run to him, to cry aloud to him, to call upon his holy name, and so to fulfil this work of the second commandment."[60] Luther says that superstition and magic arise when in our need we do not call on God's name but turn to other sources of help, and he gives a list of various forms of popular magic. It includes blessings *(segnen)* and letters *(brieffen)*, by which he meant the use of divine names in spells and charms to heal and avoid harm. He also lists consultation with fortune-tellers *(weyßsagern)*, sorcery *(zawbern)*, conjuring *(beschweren)*, and superstition *(mißglauben)*. All these he says occur when people have no need of God's name and trust God in nothing, and they seek from creatures, other people, and the devil that which they ought to seek in God alone.[61] The superstitions and popular magic of the people thus stand in direct contrast to confident trust in God in the face of suffering and adversity. In light of Luther's arguments in his earlier catechetical works, they are the natural responses of the human will to its plight in the world of "blindness, death, sin, and the flesh."

Much the same can be said for witchcraft, the distinguishing mark of which, for Luther, was the pact with the devil. It is through this means that witches learn their arts, and the devil encourages them in their jealousy and anger towards their neighbors. To draw them further into sin, and to punish the faithless, God arranges that the actions of witches bring about terrible calamities. Luther asserted this interpretation as early as his *Lectures on Galatians* given in 1516–1517.[62] In his comments on Galatians 3:1, he says that jealous and spiteful old women cause illness in infants, and "they also work many other kinds of harm in the bodies of men as well as of cattle and everything."[63] Yet, as we have seen, Luther had no concern for a sect of heretics. These are old women motivated by personal grievances and exploited by the devil. At bottom the core

59. WA 6:218, 15–16; AL 1:287.

60. WA 6:223, 16–19; LW 44:46. Alternative translation in AL 1:294.

61. WA 6:224, 14–24; AL 1:295–296.

62. *In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas M. Lutheri commentarius* (1519), WA 2:436–618; LW 27:151–410.

63. WA 2:506, 12–15; LW 27:245.

motivation of the witch is identical to that of people who practice popular magic, that is, a failure to trust in God's protection.

Luther recognizes that it is most difficult to place our trust in God when we are confronted with misfortune and adversity, when God "shows himself in wrath." This is in fact a key element of his conception of faith in the *Treatise*. From a rational standpoint, our suffering would indicate to us that God neither loves us nor cares for us. Here is where the distinction in the Apostles' Creed between believing that there is a God and believing in God has traction. While our power of reason can tell us that there is a divine creator, this alone does not offer grounds for the kind of faith demanded by the first commandment. According to reason, our suffering separates us from our creator. In a particularly evocative passage, Luther writes, "In this situation, when all our senses and understanding tell us that God is angry, it is an art to trust in God and to regard oneself as better cared for than it appears. In this situation, God is hidden, just as the bride says in the Song of Solomon [2:9]: 'Look, there he stands behind our wall gazing in at the windows.' That is: during our sufferings, which try to separate us from God like a wall or even a barrier, he stands there hidden and yet sees me and does not leave me. He is standing ready to help with grace and allows himself to be seen through the window of a dim faith."[64] Even though, as creator of all things, God is the source of our suffering, still we must see his compassion and place our trust in it.

In an important shift, *Good Works* places the grounds for this trust in a different place than does the explanation of the Apostles' Creed in *A Short Form*. In the latter, Luther bases that trust on God's almightiness in the first article of the creed, and on Christ's lordship in the second article. In *Good Works*, on the other hand, he argues that faith is grounded in the death of Christ. Citing Romans 5:8–10, Luther argues that since Christ died before we were reconciled with him, we will surely be saved now that we are.[65] We know from his omnipotence that God can save us, but it is through the mercy shown in Christ's sacrifice we know that he will. Luther's position can be framed in terms of his interpretation of the covenant. Within the covenantal soteriology of the *via moderna*, the basis for faith is a two-sided covenant, according to which God will reward those who those who do their best.[66] In his

64. WA 6:208, 10–16; AL 1:272–273.

65. WA 6:216, 13–15, 20–25; AL 1:285.

66. "Facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratium." McGrath, *Intellectual Origins* (see note 19), 111. On the history of the doctrine, see Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 83–91. For an introduction to Luther's familiarity with the *via moderna* as largely

early *Dictata super Psalterium* of 1513–1515, Luther worked within the framework of the *via moderna*.[67] But shortly after that time, he came to believe that the covenant cannot possibly be two-sided because we have nothing to offer. The ground for faith, according to the new position, is a one-sided promise made freely by God. Already in his early lectures on Galatians, begun in 1516, Luther had described the relationship between God and humanity in terms of a testament and promise as well as a covenant.[68] In his *Lectures on Hebrews* of 1517–1518, he had written on Hebrews 9:17 that the testament was ratified with the death of Christ.[69] In Luther's view, then, the covenant is a promise made by God, given initially to the Old Testament prophets, which became a testament when God became a man and was about to die, and which was ultimately fulfilled at his death. This testament and its fulfillment derive solely from Christ's mercy, without any contribution from human beings. *Good Works* says that magic and witchcraft arise when this testament is ignored.

There must, however, be more to the story. For the promise that was fulfilled with the death of Christ was forgiveness of sins, and faith in that promise brings eternal life, while the reason that people turn to incantations, blessings, and fortune-tellers is not to seek eternal life, but to be safe and avoid misfortune in this life. In *Decem praecepta* Luther explains in close detail how the youth and those with families and possessions turn to superstition and magic in order to protect themselves and their precious belongings from harm. In this, as *A Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments* puts it, they "seek from the devil, other people, and creatures what they ought to seek and find in God alone." If reliance on magic represents a lack of faith in the divine promise, there needs to be a promise to the effect that God will care for us and provide for us in this life, that is, a divine providence. To address this matter, we need to turn to the Large and Small Catechisms of 1529.

The publication of the catechisms of 1529 was the culmination of the series of catechetical works we have just surveyed.[70] These two books formed a cen-

---

through Gabriel Biel, see Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

67. McGrath, *Intellectual Origins* (see note 19), 230n207. McGrath cites WA 4:262, 4–7.

68. WA 2:521, 25–37; LW 27:268. Here he says that the term *covenant* is the Hebrew term for the promise that God made to Abraham. But that covenant became a testament when God became human and was about to die: "He who stays alive makes a covenant; he who is about to die makes a testament."

69. See Kenneth Hagen, "The Problem of Testament in Luther's *Lectures on Hebrews*," *The Harvard Theological Review* 6 (1970): 61–90, here 82.

70. *Enchiridion: Der kleine Catechismus für die gemeine Pfarrherr und Prediger*, WA 30/1:264–344; AL 4:199–251; *Deutsch Catechismus (Der große Katechismus)*, WA 30/1:123–

tral part of the *Book of Concord* of 1580, the doctrinal standard of the Lutheran Church and the foundation for Lutheran moral education in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[71] The material of the Large Catechism was first worked out in three sets of sermons in 1528.[72] The lesson of the first commandment in the third set of the sermons, given between November 30 and December 18 of 1528, is that we must trust and fear only God, and it refers specifically to our needs in this life: "If you fear me and trust me, I will protect you and supply you with nourishment and all that you need and you shall have what is sufficient."[73] Again this message is directed at those who turn to sorcery: "That is why all sorcerers transgress this first commandment; they neither trust God nor fear him." Luther states first that we should fear and trust in God in the knowledge that his power is greater than that of any other being, just as he did in his earlier treatment of the Apostles' Creed.[74] But in the explanation of the text in this later work, Luther also turns to God's promise rather than his power, as he did in the *Treatise on Good Works*. In the Large Catechism, but in more detail in the sermons of 1528, Luther stresses the fact that the Apostles' Creed consists of three articles, affirming the three persons of the Trinity: "The first article teaches creation, the second redemption, the third sanctification."[75] For my purposes, the difference between the first two is important.

From the first article we learn that everything we have in this life and in the next is from the one who created it: "Thus this article teaches that you do not have your life of yourself, not even a hair. I would not even have a pig's ear, if God had not created it for me. Everything that exists is comprehended in that little word 'creator.'"[76] And from the second article we learn that it is from Christ that we receive righteousness and salvation. In both the Large and the Small Catechisms, under the first article of the Apostles' Creed Luther writes on providence, which we can call the promise of creation. In the Large Catechism he says, "We should emphasize the words 'creator of heaven and earth,'"

238; AL 2:212–415. The Large and Small Catechisms were to an extent the product of a combined effort on the part of many reformers. See Timothy J. Wengert, "Wittenberg's Earliest Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993): 247–260.

71. See *The Book of Concord* (see note 41), 345–375, 377–480.

72. All three sets of sermons are published at WA 30/1:1–122. An English translation of the third series is at LW 51:133–193.

73. WA 30/1:60, 16–17; LW 51:139.

74. WA 30/1:59, 13–14; LW 51:138.

75. WA 30/1:183, 5–8; AL 51:162.

76. WA 30/1:87, 8–9; LW 51:163.

and he follows this with a long description of what is contained in the word *creator*.[77]

It is useful to see that, for Luther, faith in divine providence does not involve a human understanding of an order of creation.[78] In Luther's view, nature is the result of God's continuous creative activity, present in all things at all times.[79] But the promise of creation embraces more than just the constancy of natural events. In the words of Reinhold Bernhardt, "God is the driving force in all world movement and through it, the active principle in the course of events and through them."[80] In his sermons on Genesis of 1527 Luther argued that, although it is within the ability of the earth to bring forth all manner of plants, this is not through the earth of itself, but through the word of God.[81] This is a fact that he says we cannot comprehend. Although we can see God's work continually in nature, we have no ability to understand how this occurs. This point mirrors the promise of salvation: Just as God's righteousness is beyond human comprehension, so his creative power is impossible to understand. And just as his righteousness dumbfounds the doctors of theology, so the doctors and masters who teach natural history have all their arguments demolished by Moses in a few simple words.[82] The attempt to comprehend providence in terms of human ends or a fixed set of laws amounts to a "theology of glory."[83] We can witness the unfolding of God's promise in nature, and we can learn from scripture of God's forgiveness, but we can understand neither. Faith in the promise of creation can come through the smallest miracles of nature, yet our confidence in this world must be sustained entirely through faith in God, not in any human understanding.[84] It follows that superstition and magic are

---

77. WA 30/1:183, 30–184, 23; AL 2:354. For a similar list in the *Small Catechism*, see WA 30/1:293, 9–294, 5; AL 4:223.

78. See Reinhold Bernhardt, *Was heißt "Handeln Gottes"? Eine Rekonstruktion der Lehre von der Vorsehung* (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2008), 67; Charlotte Methuen, "On the Problem of Defining Lutheran Natural Philosophy," in *Religious Values and the Rise of Science in Europe*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2005), 63–80, here 72.

79. He says, for example, "[The power of God] must be essentially present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf. The reason is this: It is God who creates, effects, and preserves all things through his almighty power and right hand, as our [Apostle's] Creed confesses." *Daß diese Wort Christi (Das ist mein Leib etce.) noch feste stehen widder die Schwermgeister* (1527), WA 23:133, 28–135, 2; LW 37:57–58.

80. See Bernhardt, *Handeln Gottes* (see note 78), 61.

81. WA 24:37, 12–14.

82. WA 24:36, 14–21.

83. See Bernhardt, *Handeln Gottes* (see note 78), 70–71.

84. Here is a typical example of his outlook on the everyday miracles of nature: "Look at a

not refusals to accept a rational divine order, as Thomas Aquinas understood them, but rather represent a disdain for what is provided by God.[85]

Pulling the threads of the argument together yields the following conclusions: Since human nature is fully corrupted, human beings are incapable of obeying the law without the aid of divine grace. This is illustrated by the fact that all forms of sorcery, from the simplest superstitions to demonic witchcraft, are the product of the corrupted human will. Sorcery arises when people are confronted by misfortune, and fail to trust in divine providence. This providence is the promise contained in the first article of the Apostles' Creed, that God will provide for all of our needs. This promise cannot be understood by reason, but it can be witnessed, not only in scripture but in the everyday miracles of nature. Sorcery is a transgression of the first commandment, and hence a form of idolatry, because it derives from lack of trust in this promise. The only true Christian response to misfortune is prayer and complete faith in God's promise. To the extent that all human beings are guilty of idolatry through their inability to give themselves up entirely to God, they differ from witches only in the degree of their transgressions. Even a pact with the devil is included among the other forms of sorcery as a failure of faith.

V. EXODUS 22:18, "YOU SHALL NOT PERMIT A SORCERESS TO LIVE."

A further change in Luther's treatment of witchcraft that occurred in the 1520s was that he began to call for the execution of witches. An explicit declaration is in a sermon that he gave in the spring of 1526 on Exodus 22:18, "You shall not permit a sorceress to live."[86] In this sermon he devoted two paragraphs to a fierce denouncement of the crimes of witches, writing "Where the devil does not go, his woman goes, that is, a sorceress."[87] He called for the death penalty for witchcraft on two grounds: the great amount of harm that witches cause,

---

grain of wheat in the field, and tell me how it comes about that the stalk grows out of the earth from a single seed and bears so many kernels on the ear, and gives each one its own form. Moreover, in a single kernel there are many, many miraculous works, which they neither perceive nor pay any heed to." WA 19:488, 9–12; LW 36:339.

85. In this way Luther's characterization of trust in divine providence is similar to that of Jean Gerson. See Morton, "First Commandment" (see note 9), on Aquinas, 47–54, on Gerson 54–62.

86. WA 16:551–552.

87. "Quo non accedit diabolus, accedit mulier eius i. e. maga." WA 16:552, 6–7.

and the fact that they form a pact with Satan. Jörg Haustein read this sermon as presenting a different image of the witch from what I have been arguing for in this paper.[88] He argued that, although there is no suggestion of the sect of witches invented in the fifteenth century, Luther stresses the opposition between "us Christians and the witches."[89] Haustein claimed that, while Luther does not explicitly say it, witches are portrayed as heretics *(Ketzer)*. He concluded that "A *maga* is therefore not something like an errant sinner, who can be converted and improved, but not a Christian anymore at all. And this, even when she is merely superstitious."[90] He pointed out that the tone of this sermon is unusually harsh, similar to that of Luther's *Open Letter to the Peasants* of 1525. The passage that most supports Haustein's view is indeed shocking: "When you see such women, they have devilish appearances, I have seen some. For that reason, they are to be killed."[91] This does sound like a call to arms.

But, as Haustein pointed out, among these women Luther includes even those who simply use words together with herbs.[92] He would have been as much aware as anyone else of the almost universal practice of adding a few holy words to natural remedies to enhance their effectiveness, and it is implausible that he called for the death penalty for such practices. Haustein's comparison with the letter to the rebellious peasants is entirely apt, but more important than Luther's attitude to witches is his new approach to secular law. In the first sentence of the sermon on Exodus 22:18, Luther says that the execution of sorceresses *(magae)* "is dictated by imperial law."[93] Luther had discussed the question whether Christians should enforce secular law three years earlier in *On Secular Authority*, where he answers in the positive, saying that no one doubts that secular law and authority is in the world by God's will and ordinance.[94] He grounded this claim first in scripture, citing Romans, 1 Peter, and Genesis. But his principal argument is based on the two kingdoms doctrine to which he alluded in the *Exposition of the Lord's Prayer*. In *Secular Authority*, he describes the two kingdoms in terms of a few people who are true Christians and the majority of people who are unrighteous. The former need no law, for

88. Haustein, *Luthers Stellung* (see note 1), 123–126.

89. "uns Christen und den Hexen."

90. Haustein, *Luthers Stellung* (see note 1), 125.

91. "Tales feminas si inspicias, diabolicas habent facies, vidi aliquas. Ideo occidantur." WA 16:551, 36–37.

92. "Quaedam herbae sanativae sunt. Si autem tuis verbis opus est, daemon est, non natura." WA 16:551, 36–37.

93. "Hoc etiam praecipit Cesareum." WA 16:551, 1.

94. WA 11:249, 24–253, 16; AL 5:90; LW 45:85.

they have the Holy Spirit in their hearts, and so they would love everyone and willingly suffer injustice and death. The law is instituted by God and encoded in secular law for those who live in a state of lawlessness, in order to restrain their wickedness.[95] But then Luther immediately repeats the point he had established in the context of the Lord's Prayer: All people by nature fall under the law. He says, "Now since no one is by nature Christian or righteous, but altogether sinful and wicked, God through the law puts them all under restraint so they cannot wantonly exercise their wickedness in actual deeds."[96] If this were not the case, he says, "men would devour one another, seeing that the whole world is evil."

The key term again is "by nature." There are a few people in whom the Spirit works, who need no law. But this is not because of anything in human nature, which is wholly corrupt. It comes entirely from grace through the action of the Spirit. Yet there is another sense of the two kingdoms doctrine according to which all Christians are subjects of both kingdoms. In this version, the two kingdoms are not two groups of people, the righteous and the unrighteous. Rather the doctrine is an anthropology, and the two kingdoms comprise two aspects of human nature.[97] This reflects Luther's belief that Christians are *simul iustus et peccator*, spirit and flesh. In their own nature human beings are depraved and deserving of death as the result of the corruption of human nature through the Fall, but Christians are also redeemed and live in faith through grace. If we apply this interpretation, then the law applies to all people insofar as they are governed by human nature, for left to themselves even the saints will sin. But, insofar as the Spirit works in people, the law is unnecessary, and they will act in accordance with the double commandment of love. This in turn leads to a third distinction, between two ways in which God governs his people.[98] On the one hand, God has instituted secular law to main-

95. Luther's description of the two kingdoms doctrine here reflects the interpretation defended by Johannes Heckel, *Im Irrgarten der Zwei-Reiche-Lehre: Zwei Abhandlungen zum Reichs- und Kirchenbegriff Martin Luthers* (Munich: Kaiser, 1957).

96. WA 11:250, 26–29; AL 5:93; LW 45:90.

97. See Witte, "Sanctity and Depravity" (see note 11), 739–742. Something similar is articulated by Thompson, "Zwei-Reiche" (see note 42), 42–46. The difference is that, whereas according to Witte the spiritual aspect of human beings concerns their conduct among their fellow people, Thompson describes it as relating to the individual's relationship with God.

98. This distinction is reflected in Luther's use of the term *Regiment* (translated as "government") in WA 11:251, 15–18, rather than *Reich*. See Thompson, "Zwei-Reiche" (see note 42), 42–50; and Thompson, "Two Kingdoms" (see note 42), 164–185. See also Heinrich Bornkamm, "Luthers Lehre von den zwei Reichen im Zusammenhang seiner Theologie,"

tain peace in society, which is enforced by the sword. The basis of secular law is properly derived from natural law and its proper vehicle is reason. The basis for spiritual life, however, is God's word, and when Christians are guided by God's word they live for others in imitation of Christ.

In *Decem praecepta* Luther had cited Romans 3:20 to the effect that the only purpose served by the law is to reveal our sins, but in *On Secular Authority* he added a doctrine of the law as necessary for the maintenance of social order. Together these form the two uses of the law as described in Luther's 1535 commentary on Galatians 3:19.[99] This addition yielded an important shift in Luther's writing on witchcraft, for it prescribes the coercive use of the law for secular ends. Yet I do not believe that this indicates that Luther changed his attitude to witches such that he saw them as no longer "one of us Christians," as Haustein argued. The crime of those who make a pact with the devil is better described as idolatry than heresy, and Luther argues that through our corrupted nature we are all idolaters. So while the crimes of witches are much more serious than our ordinary sins, and – like the peasant rebellion – ones that infuriate Luther, they are crimes that represent human nature. The appeal to secular law to punish witches reflects a larger shift in Luther's thinking that was initiated with his introduction of the two kingdoms doctrine. *Decem praecepta* represented a more optimistic belief that the Word alone was sufficient to bring reform. Just a couple of years later Luther's optimism had diminished, and, by 1523, he used the two kingdoms doctrine to justify the imposition of secular law on all Christians. In 1526 this was extended to include the punishment of witchcraft by secular authorities, even as a strictly spiritual crime. His new conviction was that the Gospel could only be proclaimed in a society in which the worst impulses of our corrupted nature were held in check.

But how can a providentialist make such an argument for enforcement of the law by good Christians? Earlier proponents of providentialism had used the position to restrain the calls for witch hunting on the grounds that whatever harm we suffer from others comes from the will of God.[100] Does Luther's sanctioning of prosecution for witchcraft conflict with the providentialism of *Decem praecepta* and his later statements on faith? He alludes to this problem in *On Secular Authority*, pointing out that Christ had said, "Do not resist evil."[101]

Archive for Reformation History 49 (1958): 26–49, here 30–31; and Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology, Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy S. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 154–157 and 314–324.

99. WA 40/1:479, 17–481, 25; LW 26:308–310.

100. See Morton, "Luther's Early Views" (see note 3), 198–203.

101. WA 11:254, 29; AL 5:98; LW 45:95.

His solution to this dilemma in this work was to distinguish the motive by which a person acts in enforcing the law. As a Christian, one should not do so for one's own sake, but for that of one's neighbors. "You would be doing it not with the purpose of avenging yourself or returning evil for evil, but for the good of your neighbor and for the maintenance of the safety and peace of others."[102] To the extent that we are citizens of the kingdom of God, we act in accordance with God's will and accept all that comes to us with gratitude. But at the same time Christ instills in us a concern for others, so that we act to protect our neighbors from the harm caused by evil people. In this way, he argues, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil are both treated in the proper manner. As he puts it, "at one and the same time you satisfy God's kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly."[103] This position is consistent with the claims in the sermon on Exodus 22:18 that sorceresses should be killed because they commit serious crimes, such as theft, adultery, and murder, and "also because they have dealings with Satan."[104] Both of these crimes are dangerous to the social order and should be prosecuted under the law, but this does not sanction the pursuit of vengeance by individuals. It is significant in this regard that Luther included "temporal blessings of good government, peace, and security" in his description of divine providence in the Large Catechism. Among the gifts provided by God is the sustainment of a peaceful and orderly society enforced by secular law.[105]

As a final note, Haustein pointed out that in referring to "imperial law" Luther could not have been referring to the imperial criminal code of Charles V, which was not issued until 1532. He speculated that it was probably a referral to the Code of Justinian, the compilation of civil law collected under Justinian I in the sixth century, which was still consulted in the Holy Roman Empire. And there are several places in Book 9, Section 18, of the Code, "Concerning sorcerers, astrologers, and others like them," that call for the execution of those who use magic for harmful purposes.[106] Haustein cites 9.18.9, which

---

102. WA 11:255, 5–9; AL 5:99; LW 45:95–96.

103. There is a congruence here with Luther's distinctions between law and the Gospel, and between righteousness before God and righteousness in the world. See Charles P. Arand, "The Distinction between Law and Gospel in Martin Luther's Theological Development," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.346.*

104. "Sed etiam quia commercial habent cum Satana." WA 16:552, 23.

105. A problem arises here in the fact that, according Luther's own assessment of human nature, the enforcement of the law will always be corrupted by greed and self-interest. Philipp Melanchthon saw Christian humanist education as the solution to this problem.

106. *Codex Justinianus. Das Gesetzeswerk des römischen Zivilrechts. Vollständig ins Deutsche*

says, "Whoever has heard, discovered or apprehended anyone polluted by the stain of witchcraft, he is to drag him into the public gaze at once and display him before the eyes of the judges as the enemy of our communal well-being."[107] Interestingly, the same passage calls for the execution of those who fail to bring offenders before the courts. The reason given is that the person intends either to save the suspect from "the severity of the law and the due investigation, to prevent him revealing his partners in crime," or "to kill his personal enemy under the pretext of inflicting vengeance of this kind." Thus, in this codex Luther could find his belief voiced that Christians have a duty before God to bring those suspected of witchcraft before the law, but for purposes of public order only.

VI. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Luther viewed sorcery of all kinds, including witchcraft, as illustrative of human nature in the absence of divine grace, and that, at the same time, he maintained a form of providentialism in his appeal to the promise of creation. These together would seem to imply the position of Martin Plantsch, that one should not look to witches as the cause of one's suffering but to God. Rather than executing witches, we should inspect our own conscience. Yet in 1526 we find Luther arguing for the execution of witches under secular law. Moreover, he gives the pact with the devil, which is a spiritual crime, as one of the grounds for execution. What we have not addressed is what motivated this shift in perspective. I believe we can follow John Witte Jr. in concluding that Luther learned from the Peasants' Revolt, and from the radical experiments in Wittenberg inspired by his decrees of *sola fide* and a priesthood of all believers, that the social order necessary for the Reformation required the restraints provided by the law.[108] And since we all belong to the devil's kingdom, we are all subject to the law. But I do not think that this led him to elevate witchcraft to the position of a heretical sect, reflective of the demonological

übertragen: Die Constitutionen des Corpus Iuris Civilis. Deutsch mit lateinischen Titeln, trans. Rudolph Halle (Markgröningen: Edition Opera-Platonis, 2018). Online edition, http://www.opera-platonis.de/CI/Codex.html.

107. "Quicumque maleficiorum labe pollutum audierit deprehenderit occupaverit, ilico ad publicum protrahat et iudiciorum oculis communis hostem salutis ostendat." *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Lyon: Hugues de la Porte, 1558–1560), *Codicis Iustinianis*, Book 9, Heading 18, cols. 1778–1780. Online edition, https://amshistorica.unibo.it/176; Haustein, *Luthers Stellung* (see note 1), 125. Translation by John de Boulton-Holland, www.thelatintranslator.com.

108. Witte, "Sanctity and Depravity" (see note 11), 730–733.