

Rethinking Reformation

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"Seeking Refuge in God against God": The Hidden God in Lutheran Theology and the Postmodern Weakening of God

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Abstract: Martin Luther emphasizes the affective experience of the living God rather than God as an abstract, metaphysical idea. Luther explains this experience of God by distinguishing between God as Deus absconditus in his hidden majesty and God as Deus revelatus suffering on the cross. According to Luther, sinners experience the hidden God as a terrifying presence causing them to suffer. Through faith, however, sinners are able to recognize that this wrathful God is one with the God of love and mercy revealed in Christ. Based on this paradoxical understanding of God, Luther admonishes Christians to seek refuge in God against God. In recent decades, Luther's accentuation of the revealed God has inspired postmodern philosophers and theologians in their efforts to recast the notion of God in light of the Nietzschean outcry on the death of God and Heidegger's critique of ontotheology. Hence, John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo have weakened the notion of an omnipotent God in favour of an anti-metaphysical understanding of "god" kenotically denouncing his power and occurring as an ethically obliging event. Conversely, postmodern thinking have inspired contemporary Lutheran theologians to reinterpret the notion of God. In this article, Luther's theology serves as a resource for critiquing these postmodern attempts at post-metaphysically rethinking God the central claim being that they are unable to proclaim the saving promise of a reconciliatory union between God hidden and revealed and between sinful human beings and Christ. As a result, theology is reduced to an ethical manifesto or to compassionate anthropology leaving despairing humans without a language with which to express their sufferings.

Keywords: The hidden God; *Deus absconditus*; the revealed God; *Deus revelatus*; suffering; experience of God; divine omnipotence; sin; promise of unification; Aristotelian metaphysics, postmodern theology, the weak God

1 Introduction: Rethinking God in his complex relation to the world

Theology is continuously challenged to rethink the understanding of God in his complex relation to the world on Biblical grounds in order to adequately articulate human experience with God. In recent decades, Martin Luther's theology has prompted postmodern philosophers and theologians to postmetaphysically recast the notion of God. Together with the Nietzschean outcry on the death of God and Heidegger's critique of ontotheology, Luther's accentuation of the revealed God incarnated in Christ has inspired philosophers John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, among others, to weaken the notion of an omnipotent creator God in favour of an anti-metaphysical, relative notion of "god". Conversely, postmodern philosophy has motivated contemporary Lutheran theologians to reinterpret the notion of God. For instance, Marius Timmann Mjaaland has reexamined Luther's notion of the hidden God from a Derridian perspective. In this article, I employ Luther's theology as a resource for critiquing these

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postmodern attempts at reformulating the notion of God. Instead, I suggest a contemporary rethinking of God deeply rooted in Luther's emphasis on the affective experience of the living God in the interplay between suffering and anticipatory reconciliation.

Lutheran theology rests on the assumption that God is the constitutive force behind human existence, whom humans perpetually fail to acknowledge because of their sinful self-centeredness. As the Danish theologian K.E. Løgstrup states, individuals fight to become sovereigns of their own lives and refuse to accept existence as God-given. Moreover, postlapsarian human beings deny their sin and fail to realise their dependence on God's forgiveness and saving mercy. As a result, Lutheran theology is required to ponder how humans become able to recognize God as both giver and saviour of created life and acknowledge the world as his graciously given creation.

"What is above us is no concern of ours." This proverbial statement from *De servo arbitrio* epitomizes how Luther dissociates himself from scholastic speculations on God's metaphysical being. According to Luther, sin fundamentally limits human cognition of God and causes humans to experience God as *Deus absconditus*; an incomprehensible and terrifying presence inducing human suffering. In opposition to natural theology, Luther maintains that God's goodness is only recognizable in the weakness of the crucified Christ suffering *pro nobis*. Thus, according to Luther, God reveals himself to sinners wearing a Janus face of both wrathful law and loving mercy. Consequently, believers should be "seeking refuge in God against God."

This paradoxical experience of God gives rise to two interconnected questions, which continue to haunt Lutheran theology. First, how can the ambiguous creator God, who causes human suffering and death, be identical with the God of love proclaimed in the New Testament?⁴ Second, how are sinners to trust the Christian promise of reconciliatory coherence between the overwhelming wrath with which the hidden God confronts sinners and God's mercy revealed in the incarnation, suffering, and death of Christ?

Drawing on insights from the Danish Lutheran theologian Regin Prenter as well as Oswald Bayer, I argue that suffering and contestation are central to postlapsarian experience with God and maintain that the comforting promise of reconciliation between God's wrath and mercy lies at the core of Lutheran soteriology. On this basis, I question whether postmodern theologians accentuating ambiguity and Derridian *Différance* as central to the notion of God are able to proclaim such as promise. Moreover, I discuss whether postmodern theology centring on a weakening of God is able to embrace and relieve suffering and provide comfort to despairing humankind.

I begin the article by examining Luther's understanding of human experience with God centring on the notion of *Deus absconditus*. I then outline the postmodern theologies suggested by Vattimo and Caputo, which centre on a weakening of God. Furthermore, I sketch out the influence of postmodern philosophy on contemporary Lutheran theology. Finally, I employ the examination of Luther's theology as a basis for critiquing postmodern rethinking of God.

¹ In *The Ethical Demand (Den etiske fordring*), Løgstrup argues that human beings misunderstand their existence when they fail to acknowledge it as given and instead claim to be sovereigns of their own lives. According to Løgstrup, the givenness of life fundamentally indebts humans to each other and demands unselfishness of them (Løgstrup, "The Ethical Demand", 146).

² Luther, "De servo arbitrio", WA 18, 605,20-21: "Quae supra nos nihil ad nos." Luther repeats the statement in several other writings. I refer to the Weimar Edition of Luther's works (WA). In order to facilitate the reading, I employ the English titles of lectures, disputations, and commentaries, whereas other texts are referred to by their German or Latin titles. However, I employ the Latin titles of the lectures on the Psalms as is common in most research literature.

³ Luther, "Operationes", WA 5, 204,26-27: "... ad deum contra deum confugere."

⁴ This question has spurred contemporary debates in both Germany and Denmark concerning the status of the Old Testament in the canon of the church (see e.g. Notger Slenczka, "Die Kirche und das Alte Testament").

⁵ Luther's theology develops throughout his carrier from the early writings of the 1510's, which unfold a theology of the cross emphasising humiliation and suffering (e.g. *Lectures on Romans* and *The Heidelberg Disputation*), to the writings of the late 1520's and the 1530's, which outline norms for a wholesome Christian society (e.g. *The Large Catechism* and *Lectures on Genesis*). The aim of the article is, however, not to examine this development but to trace some general themes important for contemporary Lutheran theology. Consequently, I refer to several different writings without commenting on their *Sitz-im-Leben*.

2 The hidden God and the promise of reconciliation in Luther's theology

2.1 The Janus face of human experience with God

"I am cursed, God is against me." This is, according to Luther, the despairing outcry spoken by the widow of Nain in Luke 7:11-17 as she loses her only son. Luther expounds the gospel narrative in a sermon from 1534. Although the narrative itself centres on the miracle performed by Jesus, who raises her son from the dead, Luther focuses his attention on the dark despair in which the widow is left as she lives through the experience of God turning against her. The narrative tells of a universal human experience of suffering, which Luther interprets as caused by God's wrath or judgement. As a further example hereof, Luther mentions Job, who loses everything and ends up cursing the day he was born while begging for God to leave him be. Both the widow of Nain and Job interpret their suffering as God's punishment and struggle to understand their offense. God seems to punish randomly and for no apparent reason. According to Luther, both will be richly rewarded because they remained faithful to God's promise despite their trials: "Our Lord God gives back so abundantly, if you only endure him and do not despair over him."

Luther asserts that suffering and contestation are central to human experience with God throughout his works. In addition to interpreting suffering as God's punishment for sin, Luther explains suffering as occasioned by God abandoning his creatures. In that sense, Christ's outcry on the cross expresses a common human experience: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Moreover, Luther understands suffering as a way for God to remind ungrateful human beings of all the good gifts they have received from him. Hence, in a previous sermon on Luke 7:11-19 from 1526, Luther states:

For God sees that the treasures of the whole world do not move us, therefore he does this abundantly and out of sheer grace that he blindfolds us, so that we should see what a noble treasure we have before us, if we could not realise his grace and kindness from pious things we should notice it from hurtful things.¹¹

Finally, Luther claims that suffering is a way for God to test the devoutness of his creatures. This is especially prominent in his exposition of the *Aqedah* in *Lectures on Genesis* from 1538. According to Luther, death is a play to God and, thus, God plays with Abraham when commanding him to kill Isak: "For they have death for the sake of play and fun, just as we are accustomed to playing with a ball or an apple." ¹²

Luther summarizes these experiences of God's wrath and abandonment in his notion of the hidden God, *Deus absconditus*, who is impossible to grasp because he fails to conform to human standards of justice and seemingly contradicts the incarnatory revelation of God as a god of love. In his *Operationes in Psalmos*, Luther admonishes Christians to seek refuge in God against God.¹³ The statement relies on a paradoxical understanding of human experience with God. According to Luther, human beings experience God as both *Deus absconditus*; as the creator God inflicting his judgement and causing humans to suffer, and

⁶ Luther, "Predigt uber das Euangelion Luce am vij. Cap", WA 37, 538b,10-11: "Ich bin verflucht, Gott ist widder mich."

⁷ Job 3:11-23.

⁸ Luther, "Predigt uber das Euangelion Luce am vij. Cap", WA 37, 537b,26-28: "So reichlich gibt unser Herr Gott wider, wenn man jm nur aus helt und an im nicht verzweivelt."

⁹ The notion that suffering is a result of God abandoning his people prevails in the Book of Psalms. Thus, Ps 30:7 concludes: "You hid your face; I was dismayed." Likewise, the psalmist despairingly asks in Psalm 13:1: "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

¹⁰ Matt 27:46.

¹¹ Luther, "Ewangelion Luce VII", WA 10 I, 2., 384,31-35: "Denn Gott sihet, das die schetze der gantzen welt uns nit bewegen, darumb thut er das zu eim überfluß, auß lauter gnad, das er uns ein blinden für die augen stelt, auff das wir sehen sollen, was wir für ein edlen schatz haben an unserm gesicht, ob wir seine gnad und wolthat nit künnen erkennen am frommen, das wir sie doch am schaden merckten."

¹² Luther, "Lectures on Genesis", WA 43, 218,25-26: "Quia mortem pro ludo et ioco habent, non aliter atque nos cum pila aut pomo ludere solemus."

¹³ Luther, "Operationes", WA 5, 204,26-27 (on Psalm 6): "...ad deum contra deum confugere."

as the revealed God, *Deus revelatus*, who proclaims the forgiveness of sin and promises an eschatological end to worldly suffering. God in his majestic omnipotence threatens sinners with his terrifying absentious presence. Shielded by Christ, though, humans are able to survive their encounter with God's wrath. Participating in Christ through faith, humans experience God as a god of love.

2.2 Sin as a cognitive barrier to recognizing God

Luther's distinction between *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* expresses a basic restriction to the scope of human cognition caused by sin. In his exposition of the Fall in *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther maintains that sin has fundamental consequences for the human ability to recognize God's being and his will.¹⁴ With the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, a cognitive barrier between the Creator and his creature is established as human consciousness is turned inwards casting a blind eye to God.¹⁵ Paradoxically, the ability to know of good and evil, which Adam and Eve attain by eating the forbidden fruit, causes an all-encompassing inability to know of God that is to trust God's word. Because of sin, God's glory, righteousness, wisdom, and love appear inconceivable to humans. Consequently, theology is questioned to answer how sinful humanity becomes able to recognize God.¹⁶

In answering, Luther relies on the biblical claim that God has to hide his being or his glory. Throughout the Bible, the presence of God or his glory is depicted as dangerous to humans. As a result, God has to hide in order to become perceptible for human beings. In the Old Testament, God reveals himself in awestriking glory in order to establish his covenant with the Israelites, but has to hide this glory in a cloud or in the tabernacle because no human can survive seeing it.¹⁷ In the New Testament, God's glory transcends its invisibility and hides in the suffering and shame of Christ. Hereby, God establishes a new covenant, which promises universal salvation and enables humans to participate in divine glory through faith.¹⁸ Luther passes on this biblical understanding of God hiding his being or his glory and claims that God hides in two ways: First, God hides "in maiestate et natura sua." Second, God hides sub contrario specie in suffering and death at the cross. In this way, both *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* denote God's self-revelation, which has to be hidden. This revelation is, however, never a complete revelation of God's being as human recognition of God remains fragmentary because of sin.²¹

In *The Heidelberg Disputation* from 1518, Martin Luther unfolds how sinners are able to recognize God by famously distinguishing between the erroneous recognition of God in the *theologia gloriae* of scholasticism from the proper recognition of God in the *theologia crucis*.²² Luther criticises scholastic speculations on God's metaphysical being and maintains that the human ability to recognize God's works and his will is

¹⁴ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis", WA 42, 106ff.

¹⁵ In his early *Lectures on Romans* from 1515-16, Luther famously describes sinful humanity as "incurvatus in se ipsum" (Luther, "Lectures on Romans", WA 56, 304,25-26).

¹⁶ Cf. 1 Cor 2:6-16.

¹⁷ Cf. Exod 33:20; Judg 13:22; Isa 6:5; Deut 4:12ff.

¹⁸ Cf. Rom 1:20; Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:15f.

¹⁹ Luther, "De servo arbitrio", WA 18, 685,14.

²⁰ Cf. Westhelle, "Luther's Theologia Crucis", 163.

²¹ As professor of systematic theology Knut Alfsvåg underlines, the notion that God remains fundamentally hidden despite of his self-revelation is central to both the Old and the New Testament as well as to Luther's theology (Alfsvåg, "Hvem kjente Herrens tanke", 244). Accordingly, in *De servo arbitrio*, Luther argues that although God reveals himself in Scripture many things concerning God remains hidden outside of Scripture (Luther, "De servo arbitrio", WA 18, 606; cf. Mjaaland, "The Hidden God", 199).

²² Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation", WA 1, 362,21-22. In his now renowned book *Luthers Theologia crucis* from 1929, Walter von Loewenich defined Luther's early theology as a theology of the cross on the basis of *The Heidelberg Disputation*. Von Loewenich identified Luther's opposition to *theologia gloriae* in favour of *theologia crucis* and his strong emphasis on Christian shame as hallmarks of genuine Lutheran theology. Following Loewenich's book, the perception of Lutheran theology as *theologia crucis* has won widespread approval among Luther scholars (e.g. Althaus, "Die Theologie Martin Luthers", 34-42, Blaumeiser, "Martin Luthers Kreuzestheologie", 13; Prenter, "Den unge Luthers Teologi", 6; Westhelle, "Luthers theologia crucis"). Loewenich agrees with his *Doktorvater* Paul Althaus in claiming that *theologia crucis* concerns the question of knowledge and underlines that God can only be known in his suffering. More recent interpretations of *theologia crucis* focus on human sinfulness and the existential consequences of the cross (cf. Blaumeiser, "Martin Luthers Kreuzestheologie", 13).

completely destroyed in the Fall. Rather than explaining God as a transcendent being beyond material reality, Luther accentuates how Scripture reveals God as immanently present in Christ crucified.

Luther firmly opposes the Aristotelian *theologia naturalis* of Thomas Aquinas, who claims that God and his attributes such as goodness and infinity can be known through creation on the basis of an analogy of being, *analogia entis*. Luther breaks with Thomas' distinction between sacred doctrine learned through revelation and natural theology according to which God is recognisable through reason.²³ According to Thomas, humans are able to comprehend God in his works because they are his creatures. Although some truths of God are only accessible through revelation, Thomas underlines that other truths of God, the so-called *praeambula fidei*, are demonstrable by reason. These include the realisation that God exists, famously proven by Thomas in five arguments, and that he is good.²⁴ According to Thomas, faith presupposes this natural knowledge just as grace presupposes nature and perfection the perfectible.²⁵

By contrast, Luther denies the human ability to recognize God "in gloria et maiestate" and maintains that God is to be recognized "in humilitate et ignominia crucis." This recognition happens through faith and, thus, *analogia entis* is replaced by *analogia fidei*. Luther maintains that because of the limits to human cognition caused by sin, humans are unable to recognize God as a merciful God through reason and outside of his revelation. God appears as an incomprehensible and terrifying presence in his majestic being and can only be known as a god of love in the suffering of Christ on the cross. Here, God appears *sub contrario specie* displaying his humanity, weakness, and foolishness.²⁷

In line herewith, Luther repeatedly distinguishes knowing *that* there is a God from knowing *who* God is *pro me*, that is whether his intentions are good or bad. In one of his last sermons from January 1546, Luther recapitulates this distinction: "That there is a God, who has created everything, you will know from his works, i.e. from you and from every creature, this you surely realise. But himself, who he is, what kind of divine being he is, and how his disposition is, this you cannot realise or experience from without."²⁸

In this way, Luther's rejection of a theology of glory concerns the sinful attempt to recognise God in the world without acknowledging that sin distorts human perception of God. Consequently, postlapsarian humans experience God *per se* as an ambiguous and capricious presence and can only recognise and praise God's benevolent will through Christ.²⁹ In the shame of Christ incarnate, the unfathomable God becomes a fathomable Word and can be spoken concretely about. At the same time, though, this shame disguises the divinity of Christ and, thus, confirms the insuperable barrier to human cognition, which will only be broken down in the eschaton. Hence, the suffering Christ simultaneously constitutes a revelation of God's glory as well as its ultimate disguise.³⁰

In *De servo arbitrio*, Luther explains this paradigmatic distinction between God hidden in his majesty, *Deus absconditus*, and God hidden in human flesh, *Deus revelatus* or *praedicatus*. On the one hand, God in himself, *Deum ipsum*, supersedes human perception and reigns in hidden majesty, "Deus absconditus in maiestate."³¹ On the other hand, God in his Word, *Deum praedicatum* or *verbum Dei*, makes himself

²³ Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae I", q. 1, a. 1.

²⁴ The so-called *Quinque viae*, relying on Aristotelian philosophy, are (Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae I", q. 2, a. 3): 1) God as the unmoved mover, 2) God as the first cause, 3) the argument from contingency, whereby God is maintained as a necessary being underpinning a perishable world, 4) the argument from degree, whereby God is maintained as for instance goodness and truth *per se* setting the standard for the degrees of goodness and truth among creatures, 5) the teleological argument, whereby God is understood as setting the behaviour of non-intelligent objects of the world.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae I", q. 2, a. 2.

²⁶ WA 1, 362,12-13; cf. 362,18; John 14:9.

²⁷ Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation", WA 1, 362,4-5.

²⁸ Luther, "Euangelium auff den vierden Sontag nach Epiphanie (Matt 8:23)", WA 51, 150,41-151,3: "Das ein Gott sey, von dem alle ding geschaffen sein, das weissestu aus seinen wercken, das ist: an dir und allen Creaturn, die sihestu wol, Aber jn selbs, wer er sey, was fur ein goettlich Wesen, und wie er gesinnet sey, das kanstu nicht von auswendig ersehen noch erfaren."

²⁹ Thus, in the sermon from 1546, Luther states: "Denn Gott kan nicht recht erkant noch angebetet werden denn von denen, die sein Wort haben, dadurch er sich selbs offenbart hat" (WA 51, 150,1849; cf. John 1:18; 4:22).

³⁰ I have examined honour and glory as key concepts of Luther's theology in my PhD dissertation entitled "Soli deo honor et gloria – a study of honour and glory in the theology of Martin Luther".

³¹ Luther, "De servo arbitrio", WA 18, 685,21.

known to humans and is able to become worshipped. God gives himself to humans dressed in his Word. This revealed Word is not hidden in remote seclusion, but appears hidden *sub contrario* in objects, senses, and experiences because "all which is to be believed, is hidden." Luther underlines God's omnipotence in order to stress that God remains free and unlimited although limiting himself to human flesh in his Word in order for sinful humanity to be able to recognize and have faith in him.³³

At first sight, Luther's distinction between God's hidden will and his revealed Word seems to refer to the scholastic distinction between God's absolute power, *potestas absoluta*, i.e., the power with which God is able to do everything, and his ordained power, *potestas ordinata*, through which he governs creation. However, opposing this distinction, Luther maintains that God's omnipotence does not concern his ability to do things but his actual power with which he works all in all.³⁴ According to Luther, the hidden God is omnipotent not just because of his abstract power, but because of his activity in the visible world: "God is omnipotent, not only with regard to ability, but also with regard to action."³⁵ In this way, Luther's notion of the hidden God denotes a certain way for God to act in the world and, thus, a certain human experience of God taking action.

Several scholars have explained how Luther's notion of *Deus absconditus* serves to describe the epistemological boundaries of human perception.³⁶ However, they tend to disregard that according to Luther, these boundaries also determine the revealed God, who is hidden *sub contrario specie* in shame and suffering. In this way, both *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* spell out the fundamental barrier to human cognition of God caused by sin. Both notions confirm the abysmal separation between the human and the divine, which constitutes this-worldly existence and has devastating consequences for the ability of human beings to experience God as a god of love.

Moreover, God's hiddenness is not merely a cognitive but also an experiential category in Luther's theology; a verbalisation of human experience with God. Central to Luther's understanding of this experience is the claim that God reveals his Word as both a condemning Word of the Law and a comforting Word of the Gospel. Whereas the Law humiliates the sinner, the Gospel allows the believer to participate in the righteousness of Christ and mediates a promise of reconciliatory union with him. Luther expounds this paradoxical experience in his answer to the Louvain theologian Jacobus Latomus, *Rationis Latomianae confutatio*, from 1521, which argues that individuals are faced with God's Word as Law and Gospel, respectively.³⁷ In the face of the Law, humans are exposed as wholly sinners, who are moved to confess their sins. In the face of the Gospel, humans are wholly righteous as they hide under the wings of Christ in faith.³⁸ According to Luther, even justified human beings remain sinners in relation to the world and, thus, suffer under the cognitive barrier caused by sin and experience the Word of God as both Law and Gospel.

2.3 The promise of reconciliatory union

As appears, Luther's theology centres on the cognitive and affective experience of the living God rather than on God as an abstract, metaphysical idea. Moreover, Luther is concerned with the existential consequences of God's hiddenness and maintains that whether it pertains to God's ontological being as such remains

³² WA 18, 633,9: "omnia quae creduntur, abscondantur."

³³ WA 18, 685, 23.

³⁴ WA 18, 718, 28-30; cf. Dieter, "Luther as Late Medieval Theologian", 41.

³⁵ Luther, "De servo arbitrio", WA 18, 719,24-25: "Deum esse omnipotentem, non solum potentia, sed etiam actione." Cf. Althaus: 1963, 103.

³⁶ E.g. Westhelle, "Luther's theologia crucis", 163; Gregersen, "Ten Theses", 10.

³⁷ The text presents one of Luther's most systematic accounts of the doctrine of justification unfolded through distinctions between sin and grace as well as Law and Gospel. It is shaped as a direct response to Latomus' *Articulorum doctrinae fratris M. Lutheri per theologos Lovanienses damnatorum ratio ex sacris literis et veteribus tractatoribus*, which challenges Luther's claims that any good work is subject to sin and that sin remains in the Christian after baptism.

³⁸ Luther, "Rationis Latomianae confutatio", WA 8, 112,2-3: "... fides, quae se sub alas Christi recondat et in illius iustitia glorietur."

outside the realm of human cognition. Luther unfolds the relation between the hidden and the revealed God from the perspective of pastoral care rather than as part of a systematic exposition of theological doctrines. Using these notions, Luther conceptualises the primordially biblical claim that God is both an almighty and righteous creator god passing his sentence on sinners through a Word of the Law and a humiliated god of love, who refrains from executing this sentence and, instead, forgives sin through his Word of the Gospel.

The paradoxical experience of this double-tongued God nourishes the question, which haunted Luther as a young monk: How am I as a habitual sinner to trust that the hidden God is not an evil demiurge but is actually one with the revealed God, who suffered and died on the cross for my sake (*pro me*)?³⁹ A central question in this connection concerns the coherence between God's righteousness and his mercy and asks how God is able to spare sinful humanity without relativizing his righteousness? In his *Lectures on Galatians* from 1531, Luther recapitulates the former question and establishes faith in Christ as its answer:

Then how can these two contradictory things both be true at the same time, that I am a sinner and deserve divine wrath and hate, and that the Father loves me? Here nothing can intervene except Christ the mediator. 'The father', he says, 'loves you, not because you are deserving of love, but because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father.⁴⁰

Coherence between the hidden and the revealed God relies on God's external Word of promise revealed in Scripture, which humans are unable to proclaim to themselves. According to Luther, faith in Christ is a gift of trust in the fact that God's Word is one despite of its appearance as both Law and Gospel. Through faith, sinners are able to trust that the wrathful, hidden God manifesting his righteous verdict and the loving God revealing his forgiving grace in Christ are one God.

In this way, justification is a revelatory event, which breaks through the cognitive barrier of sin and exposes the human being to God's wrath and mercy while proclaiming the divine promise that the wrath of the hidden God will yield to the love of the revealed God in the eschaton. This ultimate unification between the wrath of the hidden God and the mercy of the revealed God simultaneously constitutes a reconciliatory unification between God and his fallen creatures, which is anticipated in a momentary union with Christ in faith and will be fulfilled eschatologically as God becomes all in all.⁴¹

According to Luther, Christian existence is characterised by a longing for such unification between human beings and God. This longing originates in the fundamental separation between the human and the divine, which conditions Luther's Christology as well as his anthropology and is rooted in the distinction between the creator God and his creatures. According to Luther, even prelapsarian human beings were defined by their separation from God and their longing for unification with him. Thus, in his exposition of the creation account in the *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther maintains that Adam and Eve depended on their relationship with God, which they sustained by confirming their trust in him in a perfect worship. In his interpretation of Gen 1:27, Luther explains how both men and women partook in the glory of the future life already at creation: "In order not to give the impression that he was excluding the woman from all the glory of the future life, Moses includes each of the two sexes." In this way, even prelapsarian existence was characterized by separation from its source of being and clung to an eschatological hope of reconciliatory union with God.⁴³

This primordial, paradisiacal separation develops into an abysmal division between the righteous God and sinful humanity in the Fall. In Luther's retelling, the accounts of Genesis 1-3 narrate how the human

³⁹ The question of coherence between God's wrath and his mercy continues to enthral Lutheran theology. Hence, Oswald Bayer maintains that in order to establish security of salvation, theology is challenged to connect the Old Testament emphasis on the transcendence and unity of God with the paradoxical claim that God was crucified (Bayer, "Martin Luthers Theologie", 2) Moreover Regin Prenter maintains that theology is used to unite "die notwendige ontologische Ausrichtung der Gotteslehre

^{2).} Moreover, Regin Prenter maintains that theology is urged to unite "die notwendige ontologische Ausrichtung der Gotteslehre mit dem dreieinigen Gottesgedanken der Christologie" (Prenter, "Der Gott der Liebe ist", 288).

⁴⁰ Luther, "Lectures on Galatians", WA 40 I, 372b,14-18: "Quomodo igitur simul vera sunt ista duo contradictoria: Habeo peccatum et sum dignissimus ira et odio divino, et: Pater amat me? Hic nihil omnino intercedit nisi solus Mediator Christus. Pater, inquit, non ideo amat vos, quia digni estis amore, sed quia amastis me et credidistis, quod a Patre exivi."

⁴¹ 1 Cor 15:28.

⁴² Luther, "Lectures on Genesis", WA 42, 51b,34-35: "Ne videretur mulier excludi ab omni gloria futurae vitae, comprehendit Moses utrunque sexum."

⁴³ This separation is captured in the etymology of the word existence, which in Latin ex-sistere literally means to stand out.

relation to God develops from a trusting and deeply dependent relation of loyal creatures to their creator into a distrustful relation between God and sinful humanity. Sinners turn their back on God and mistakenly believe themselves capable of overcoming the separation between the human and the divine. As Genesis 3:5 states, sinners want to become "like God, knowing good and evil". Throughout his works, Luther explains how works-righteous human beings strive to bridge the separation between the human and the divine by doing good and meritorious works whereby they attempt to earn salvation. In this way, sin prevents individuals from realizing their utter dependence on a faithful relation to God. Instead of trusting and worshipping God, sinners trust their own powers and worship themselves as idols.⁴⁴

By contrast, Luther conceives of justification as a process in which human beings receive their existence outside of themselves in a union with Christ partaking in his attributes through faith. Christ is simultaneously fully human and fully divine thereby incarnating the separation between the human and the divine in order to overcome it. ⁴⁵ Similarly, the justified human being becomes doublenatured and is both an inner human being, who is righteous *coram Deo*, and an outer human being, who struggles with sin *coram hominibus*. ⁴⁶ Luther explains this union between the human and the divine through the notion of *communicatio idiomatum*, an exchange of attributes uniting the two natures of Christ. Luther employs this image of exchange to describe the relation between God and humans in faith. It is, however, only because Christ incorporates the paradox of the human and the divine, that he is able to effect an exchange of attributes between God and human beings whereby omnipotence and impotence are interlaced. ⁴⁷

In this way, notions of power, wrath, and righteous judgement are inescapable to Luther's articulation of human experience with God, which relies closely on biblical imagery. Lately, though, Luther's accentuation of the revealed God and his aversion to the conceptual gymnastics of scholastic metaphysics have inspired postmodern thinkers to weaken this powerful notion of God. In the following paragraph, I present these attempts to recast God before critically discussing their relevance for a contemporary rethinking of God in Lutheran theology.

3 The weakening of God in postmodern theology

Luther's refusal to speculate on God's metaphysical being and his emphasis on God's incarnation in Christ serves as a source of inspiration for contemporary postmodern rethinking of God. Over the past decades, postmodern thinkers have suggested a weakening of the powerful, theistic notion of God as an almighty and possibly terrifying presence.⁴⁸ Accordingly, Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo conceive of a traditional, theistic notion of God as offensive because it lays the groundwork for authoritarian state building and political oppression by promoting notions of power and authority and by feeding the illusion

⁴⁴ Thus, in one of his principal works, *De libertate christiana*, Luther describes how the sinner "deum negat et seipsum sibi Idolum in corde erigit" (Luther. "De libertate christiana", WA 7, 54.14-15; cf. WA 56, 179.17; WA 6, 211.28-29).

⁴⁵ Within recent years, Finnish Luther research led by Tuomo Mannermaa has underlined the importance of participation and union with Christ for Luther's theology and asserted the ontological aspects of faith by employing the orthodox notion of *theosis*. Hereby, a one-sided emphasis on the forensic aspects of justification is criticised. Instead, Mannermaa argues for a coexistence of forensic and effective aspects in Luther's theology by employing a distinction between favour and gift: "The favor (*favor*) of God (*i.e.*, the forgiveness of sins and the removal of God's wrath) and the 'gift' of God (*donum*, God himself, present in the fullness of his essence) are united in the person of Christ" (Mannermaa, "Justification and Theosis", 28).

⁴⁶ Luther unfolds this understanding of the human being throughout his works but most prominently in *De libertate christiana*.
47 Cf. Bayer, "Martin Luthers Theologie", 187.

⁴⁸ Graham Ward, professor of divinity at the University of Oxford and a prominent proponent of postmodern theology, identifies three main strands of postmodern theology: First, Vattimo, Caputo and others are inspired to proclaim an emaciated metaphysics by critical theory and French post-structuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Paul de Man, Emmanuel Levinas, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Second, several post-structuralist thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida treat religious themes in their own writings. Recently, this has been the case with the discussion of Pauline theology in works by Alain Badiou (Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism), Giorgio Agamben (The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans) and Slavoy Žižek (The Fragile Absolute: or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?). Third, some postmodern theologians seek to develop a robust political theology partly as a response to an increased visibility of religion in the public sphere of the Western World (Ward, "Theology and Postmodernism", 473-480).

of objective knowledge. Instead, Vattimo and Caputo unfold a so-called weak theology centring on an antimetaphysical and relative notion of "god" inspired by the Nietzschean claims that God – as a metaphysical reality - is dead and that knowledge is perspectival.⁴⁹ Heidegger's critique of ontotheology is an important background for this post-metaphysical, anti-theistic notion of God. Hence, both Vattimo and Caputo concur with Heidegger's revolt against a theistic perception of God as an unchangeable, highest being and his understanding of God as an event of being.⁵⁰ Moreover, postmodern theologies are indebted to the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida, which disseminates the Heideggerian critique of objective metaphysics and enlightenment rationality and accentuates ambiguity and transience of meaning through the notion of *différance*.⁵¹ Consequently, postmodern theologians understand theology as an interpretative undertaking aiming to facilitate an event of meaning rather than as a promoter of metaphysical truth claims.

Vattimo and Caputo both acknowledge their indebtedness to Luther's objection against scholastic metaphysics. According to Vattimo, the Reformation unearthed the core idea of Christianity being the negation of an objective, rational, and eternal structure of the world. Moreover, Vattimo argues that Heidegger was inspired by Luther to criticise the objectivism of metaphysics.⁵² Correspondingly, Marius Timmann Mjaaland, who reinterprets the hidden God from a Derridian view point, claims that Luther "presents an intriguing argument for the destruction of metaphysics." According to Mjaaland, Luther argues for a double work of destruction in *The Heidelberg Disputation* consisting in a demolition of the self-centered human being and a break with the speculative metaphysics of scholastic theology. As I outline below, though, Luther's theology might also serve as a source for criticising postmodern attempts to weaken the powerful notion of an omnipotent God in favour of a post-metaphysical "god" compassionately suffering on the cross.

In the following, I will present these postmodern attempts at rethinking the notion of God focusing on the works of Vattimo, Caputo, and Mjaaland before critically discussing them in light of Luther's understanding of the hidden God.

3.1 The weakening of God in the theologies of Vattimo and Caputo

The term weak theology stems from the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo's notion of weak thought (*pensiero debole*), which opposes the claim of classical metaphysics to uncover fundamental structures of reality and instead unfolds through a hermeneutical praxis of interpretation.⁵⁴ Vattimo argues that the present post-metaphysical age depends on interpretations rather than on absolute truth claims and that Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Luther pioneered the break with objective knowledge by focusing on the subject and relying on Scripture rather than on the robust metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle. ⁵⁵ Thus, in line with the famous Reformation motto *sola scriptura*, Vattimo claims that faith does not centre on objective knowledge but on the textual interpretation of a certain tradition: "This means that to profess faith in Christianity is first of all to profess faith in the inevitability of a certain textual tradition that has been passed down to me. Take away the Bible and I would not be what I am."

⁴⁹ Cf. Vattimo, "After Christianity", 13-14.

⁵⁰ Cf. Andersen, "Gud og det givne", 128-131.

⁵¹ Cf. Derrida, "Différance".

⁵² Vattimo and Girard, "Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith", 81. In the introduction to *After the Death of God*, Jeffrey W. Robbins describes how the alliance between the church and the Roman Empire led to the emergence of Christendom (as opposed to Christianity), which emphasised the exaltation of Christ instead of his suffering and death. Since the Reformation, however, "there has been a steady dismantling of the old Constantinian alliance leading to the eventual collapse of Christendom in the modern era" (Robbins, "Introduction", 7).

⁵³ Mjaaland, "The Hidden God", 2.

⁵⁴ Caputo, "The Folly of God", 54; Robbins, "Introduction", 16.

⁵⁵ Robbins, "Introduction", 17. According to Vattimo, "interpretation is the idea that knowledge is not the pure, uninterested reflection of the real, but the interested approach to the world, which is itself historically mutable and culturally conditioned" (Vattimo, "Toward a Nonreligious Christianity", 31).

⁵⁶ Vattimo, "Toward a Nonreligious Christianity", 36.

Vattimo proposes a close connection between secularized philosophy and Christian revelation maintaining that secularization is not a process of abandoning religion but of God's *kenosis* in salvation history. In this way, secularization is a paradoxical realization of God's religious vocation for weakening.⁵⁷ According to Vattimo, the kenotic weakening of God means that the omnipotent God denounces his power and authority by incarnating himself in Christ. Hereby, God as a transcendent, unmovable being, who grounds temporal reality, gives way to a weak God of immanence, alterability, and movement.⁵⁸ This kenotic process weakens the violence of traditional metaphysics: "Salvation is the historical process through which God calls us, time and again, to desacralize the violence and dissolve the ultimacy and peremptoriness claimed by objectivist metaphysics."

Vattimo defines himself as an atheist with respect to the omnipotent god of philosophy and maintains that the metaphysical god of Greek philosophy is fundamentally different from the Christian God since any kind of strong metaphysical thinking dissolves as the almighty God is born in human flesh. Vattimo agrees with Heidegger in understanding God as an event of being and maintains that God renounces his omnipotence at the cross in order to become truly solidary with suffering human beings. Thus, rather than emphasising Christ as a justifying gift of righteousness and grace, Vattimo accentuates Jesus as a compassionate travelling companion; a fellow wanderer in a world of suffering and an exemplar of charity: "God is not the content of a proposition; he is a person who walked among us and left us an example of charity." According to Vattimo, imitating God means mimicking his kenotic weakening and living charitably.

Inspired by Vattimo, the American philosopher of religion, John D. Caputo, has proposed a theology of the event explaining God as an event, which presents a promise of a new life to believers. This event of God confronts human beings with a radical otherness from the future that disrupts the present horizon of possibilities and calls humans to respond. Thus, according to Caputo, God's holiness is "the seat of an ethical call that orders me to the stranger." This call obliges human beings to "make *God* happen." Caputo relies on Emmanuel Levinas' understanding of God as the event of ethics and argues that God is not a spatial transcendence but "a temporal recess" which leaves a trace on the face of a stranger. Humans respond to this event through absolute, unconditional hospitality and doing hospitality is what constitutes membership in the kingdom of God, which is not an immaterial world behind the material one but rather "a certain excess in the world."

Thus, apparently, Caputo believes the event of God to instigate an ethical order in the world. At the same time, though, Caputo breaks with an understanding of God as a stabilising guarantor of reality explaining God as a destabilising and even dangerous 'perhaps' which exceeds calculation and evades rules. ⁶⁷ Caputo follows Derrida in describing God as the unconditional, which lies ahead and is "a chance for life, a hope against hope, a desire beyond desire. But it may very well be a catastrophe, a disaster, death and destruction, the death of God and of the human, a crucifixion of both God and humanity."

⁵⁷ Vattimo, "After Christianity", 24. Vattimo is inspired by the radical death of God theology from the 1960's formulated by e.g. Thomas J. J. Altizer emphasising the kenotic self-emptying of Christ (cf. Robbins, "Introduction", 9). In a sense, Vattimo's weak thought establishes the philosophical precondition for the return to religion characteristic of the postmodern era (Robbins, "Introduction", 17; 20-22).

⁵⁸ Cf. Sandbeck, "God as immanent transcendence", 19.

⁵⁹ Vattimo and Girard, "Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith", 87.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁶¹ Ibid., 49.

⁶² Caputo unfolds his theology in *The Weakness of God. A Theology of the Event* and *The Folly of God* as well as the essay "Spectral hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event". Caputo hints at a Lutheran influence in the introduction to the former where he states his willingness to face the consequences of his theological endeavour by quoting Luther's famous words "Hier stehe ich" (Caputo, "A Theology of the Event", 1).

⁶³ Ibid., 270; cf. 271.

⁶⁴ Caputo, "Spectral hermeneutics", 64.

⁶⁵ Caputo, "A Theology of the Event", 271.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 270; cf. 268.

⁶⁷ Caputo, "The Folly of God", 80-81.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 79-80.

In this way, both Vattimo and Caputo denounce the metaphysical god of Greek philosophy and scholastic theology in favour of a weak god of love, who has kenotically emptied himself of authority and leads by example obliging humans to ethical action. Thus, an ethical concern lies at the core of Vattimo and Caputo's theologies as the event of God reveals an ethical imperative to serve the poor. ⁶⁹ However, Caputo differs from Vattimo in highlighting the eschatological and ambiguous aspects of this event.

3.2 The weak God of contemporary Lutheran theology

Recently, postmodern philosophy and theology have taken roots in Lutheran soil as philosophers such as Derrida, Vattimo, and Caputo have inspired Lutheran theologians to rethink the notion of God. Following the lead of Vattimo and informed by Hegel, Danish theologian Niels Grønkjær maintains the changeability of God in his book with the telling title *The New God. After Fundamentalism and Atheism.* Grønkjær breaks with a theistic understanding of God as almighty and, instead, conjures an image of God as weak and everchanging. As opposed to the dead and immovable God of fundamentalism, Grønkjær advocates Luther's definition of God as a living God whose movements Grønkjær explains with reference to the Hegelian notion of *Geist*.

Another Danish theologian, Lars Sandbeck, has advocated a dismissal of God's omnipotence in favour of an understanding of Jesus as a compassionate companion suffering *with* rather than *for the sake of* human beings. Referring to Vattimo and Caputo, Sandbeck maintains that the death of Christ means the death of God as a metaphysical, transcendent beyond. Furthermore, Sandbeck is influenced by Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian interpretation of Pauline theology in claiming that following God's renunciation of power, the only divine being left is the Holy Spirit understood as the community of believers. According to Sandbeck, the Holy Spirit "signifies a process in and through which the obstacles to a community constituted in utter mutuality are transcended." Sandbeck transmits Žižek's Hegelian understanding of the incarnation as immanent transcendence, which he explains as an event of reconciliation whereby God happens. In this event, human egoism and lack of love are overcome and a community of abundant love emerges. In this way, Sandbeck agrees with Vattimo and Caputo in combining a weak notion of God with an emphasis on the ethical abilities of believers, which flourish with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

A recent and profound attempt at rethinking God in light of postmodern philosophy is presented by the Norwegian professor of systematic theology, Marius Timmann Mjaaland, who reinterprets Luther's notion of the hidden God from a Derridian perspective in his book *The Hidden God. Luther, Philosophy, and Political Theology*. According to Mjaaland, Luther's understanding of the hidden God changes from 1515 to 1518. In his first lectures on the Psalms, *Dictata super psalterium*, held from 1513 to 1515, Luther employs the notion of *Deus absconditus*, which is profoundly influenced by the negative theology of Dionysius Areopagita, to denote a double destruction of both human beings and human constructions of God. According to Mjaaland, "this double negation of the possibility of grasping God is indirectly a confirmation of divine power." In *The Heidelberg Disputation* from 1518, however, the hidden God denotes God suffering on the cross and has immediate political and social relevance: "With *The Heidelberg Disputation*, we see a change of conditions and a change of perspective, from essence to existence, from power to suffering, from the invisible *supra nos*

⁶⁹ Cf. Robbins, "Introduction", 16.

⁷⁰ Grønkjær, "Den nye Gud".

⁷¹ Cf. Sandbeck, "De gudsforladtes Gud"; "Afsked med almagten", 121-125.

⁷² Sandbeck, "God as immanent transcendence", 35.

⁷³ Ibid., 36

⁷⁴ A main point of both Grønkjær and Sandbeck is that the harsh critique of theology promoted by the so-called new Atheists, most prominently Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, only concerns a theistic notion of God but fails to counter the new, postmodern God: "Understood theologically, atheism is merely an internal remark on theism" (Grønkjær, "Den nye Gud", 286, my translation).

⁷⁵ Mjaaland, "The Hidden God", 91.

to the invisible within the visible."⁷⁶ In this way, Mjaaland confirms the abovementioned two understandings of the hidden God in Luther's works: "a hidden God beyond reason versus God hidden in suffering and weakness at the cross."⁷⁷ In agreement with postmodern thinkers such as Žižek, Mjaaland describes the latter as an immanent transcendence destructing the concept of God with respect to omnipotence, being, glory, and perfection.

Mjaaland argues for the theoretical significance of this hidden God, who determines the conditions for speaking about God. Relying on a Derridian mindset, Mjaaland claims that *Deus absconditus* points to an original difference within God which breaks the concept of God open and reveals a space of possibility and otherness; of difference and change: "The paradox is that the argument for a strict division between abscondity and revelation leaves the reader with profound and unavoidable ambivalence." This difference is not identical with the hidden God *per se* understood as his absolute will, power, or nature, but consists in the gap that separates the presence and the absence of God. According to Mjaaland, this difference between *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* is pre-theological because it precedes the logos of theology and forces theologians to consider the conditions for speaking or not speaking about God. On the conditions for speaking or not speaking about God.

Owning to a common interest in Derrida, Caputo and Mjaaland both emphasise the ambiguous character of human cognition of God. Mjaaland interprets the hidden God or rather the difference between the hidden and the revealed God as a disturbing sign. According to Mjaaland, Luther confronts the reader with *Deus absconditus* in order to force him or her into a wasteland; a desert of not knowing. In this way, the Derridian influence proves fruitful in uncovering the ambivalence of human experience with God outside of Scripture. From the view point of Luther's theology, though, it seems that this experience threatens to remain an intellectual experiment rather than a lived reality. Moreover, Mjaaland refuses to identify sin as the cause of this ambivalence. These critical remarks anticipate the critique of postmodern reflection on God, which I present in the following paragraph.

4 Discussion: The ambiguous human experience with God

As outlined above, Luther dissociates himself from scholastic speculations on God's metaphysical being and emphasises the pastoral aim of theology focusing on the revealed God suffering *pro nobis*. Apart from influencing postmodern theology, this focus in Luther's theology paved the way for a dismissal of a metaphysical notion of God in favour of an existential or hermeneutical theology accentuating God in his revelatory Word. Thus, Eberhard Jüngel, one of the leading figures of hermeneutical theology, employs Luther's theology as a point of reference for critiquing a theistic notion of God as an unmoved mover withdrawn from creation. Following Luther, Jüngel argues that any notion of God has to begin with Jesus suffering on the cross. Jüngel refuses to allow speculation on the hidden God into theological discourse and maintains that God's absolute hiddenness is overcome by his precise hiddenness in Christ.

However, Luther's refusal to speculate on God's metaphysical being is not a dismissal of the reality hereof and it is anything but a denial of God's power and omnipotence. In fact, it emerges from an immense reverence for and a fear of God as the all-encompassing reality. By refusing to scrutinize into God's hidden majesty, Luther acknowledges the abysmal division between the human and the divine as well as the limits

⁷⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 106-7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁸¹ Ibid., 105-6.

⁸² Cf. Jüngel, "Gott als Geheimnis der Welt".

⁸³ Jüngel, "Die Offenbarung der Verborgenheit Gottes", 171; "Quae supra nos", 239. Mjaaland criticises Jüngel for unilaterally focusing on the revealed God and claims that Jüngel's refusal to discuss the notion of God outside of Scripture leads to protection and conservation of religious truths and images in the name of Scripture. At the same time, however, Mjaaland warns that an inclusion of the hidden God into theological discourse would lead to "an endless production of monsters and myths" (Mjaaland, "The Hidden God", 99).

to human cognition caused by sin, which are only to be broken down by faith. As Regin Prenter poignantly states, the relation between God and human beings is dialectical as it expresses itself in the constant interplay between the questions posed by the sinner, who comes to a stand-still at the border drawn by God's hiddenness, and the answers given by God in his revelation communicated by his Word.⁸⁴

A dismissal of *Deus absconditus* and a weakening of the almighty creator God oppose not only Luther's theology but also the biblical narratives of God, both of which perceive of the omnipotence of God as an indisputable precondition for his humiliation and death *pro nobis*. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, such a dismissal threatens to render theology speechless with regard to the basic human experience of separation and estrangement within a paradoxical existence lived in the interplay between death and life, shame and dignity, condemnation and forgiveness. Luther verbalises this experience through the notions of *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* and expresses the existential paradox in a quest for coherence between the terrifying God in his almighty power and the merciful God suffering on the cross.

Thus, for Luther the hidden God is not an abstract notion pertaining to God's transcendent being but rather an inalienable part of human experience with the living God. As I have argued, Luther employs the notion of *Deus absconditus* to explain experiences of suffering and shame as an integral part of the human relation to God. Prenter confirms this emphasis on God's hiddenness as part of the experience of faith rather than as a metaphysical abstraction and sees it as common to both Anselm and Luther: "God's incomprehensibility or hiddenness is for Anselm as it is for Luther not an abstraction (*the idea* 'Deus absconditus'!) but an inalienable part of faith's experience with the majesty of the living God." *Deus absconditus* is, as Prenter states, "the near God, whose actions we experience daily without being able to decipher them." A weak, postmodern theology finds it difficult to believe in an omnipotent, hidden, and majestic God. In light of human experience, though, a forgiving and loving God seems equally – if not more - incomprehensible. Thus, even though Christ suffering on the cross might appear a more approachable God, the hope of his forgiving and saving presence is outrageous in light of the suffering, which determines postlapsarian existence.

As outlined above, Lutheran theology is haunted by two questions: First, how can the ambiguous creator God, who causes human suffering and death, be identical with the God of love proclaimed in the New Testament? Second, how are sinners to trust the promise of reconciliatory unification between the overwhelming wrath with which the hidden God confronts sinners and God's mercy revealed in the incarnation, suffering, and death of Christ? Following Derrida, Caputo and Mjaaland underline the ambiguity of God, thereby leaving the despairing sinner in a limbo without certainty of salvation. This is the limbo inhabited by Luther as a young monk, which he was only able to escape when realizing that justification takes place by faith alone and mediates God's promise of an end to ambiguity.

In Vattimo, Caputo, and Sandbeck's thought, this question of coherence between the hidden and the revealed God yields to a unilateral focus on the revealed God as exemplar. The hidden God vanishes in favour of Jesus as an exemplary God-man or of God as an ethically obliging event. As a result, justification threatens to become an acknowledgement of good behaviour rather than judgement and forgiveness of sin. A dismissal of an existential notion of sin might lead to human beings becoming responsible for their own salvation as they are to follow the example of Christ and make God happen as an ethical event.⁸⁷ Hereby, Caputo, Vattimo, and Sandbeck risk paving the way for modern works-righteousness.

⁸⁴ Prenter, "Guds virkelighed", 111.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 140 (my translation).

⁸⁶ Ibid., 147 (my translation); cf. Bayer, "Martin Luthers Theologie", 10. Moreover, Løgstrup stresses the ambiguous nature of human experience with God's creation in *Creation and annihilation* (*Skabelse og Tilintetgørelse*). According to Løgstrup, human beings are unable to grasp the coherence between the goodness of creation and the random suffering and death conditioning human existence bound for annihilation.

⁸⁷ In his book on Luther's theology, *Martin Luthers Theologie. Eine Vergegenwärtigung*, Oswald Bayer skilfully sums up and criticises three contemporary theological arguments weakening or dismissing God's omnipotence. First, it is argued that God does not cause evil, but only allows for it. Hereby, a power vacuum is opened for an evil counterforce to God. Second, God's omnipotence is replaced with the ethical powers of humans to overcome suffering and the powerless God becomes a mere symbol of the human obligation to love. According to Bayer, this humanism grounded in the theology of the cross turns humans into gods responsible for salvation. Third, contemporary theology is defined by a principialisation of love based on the claim that God is love. Following Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Barth, several theologians maintain that evil and darkness lost their power with the death of Jesus. Even though the world might appear evil it is ontologically speaking already reconciled with God (cf. 2 Cor 5:17-21). Hereby, however, the reality of evil is slighted, which has devastating effects for pastoral care (Bayer, "Martin Luthers Theologie", 187-88).

Furthermore, if Christ crucified is solely a powerless human being expressing his exemplary compassion for suffering humanity, the hope for union between sinful and despairing humans and Christ revealing the promise of future glory remains unfounded. In this way, weak theology seems incapable of conveying the comforting promise of reconciliation between the experience of God's wrath and his love and mercy which is the essence of the Gospel.

Finally, weakening the notion of God into compassionate anthropology risks rendering human beings speechless in the face of adversaries, as they are unable to communicate to God in prayers of lamentation and in worship and praise. Throughout his works, Luther maintains that the proper human response to God in his exalted majesty is either profound lamentation or doxological glorification given through faith in Christ. According to Luther, glorification and adoration are fitting responses to God the almighty, as this statement from *De servo arbitrio* shows:

The will of the divine nature should not be questioned but simply be adored, glory should be given to God, because he as the only righteous and wise does injustice to nobody.⁸⁸

Martin Heidegger opposes the metaphysical God of philosophy to the God of worship: "This is the cause as causa sui. This is the proper name for god in philosophy. To this god the human being can neither pray nor offer sacrifice. Before the causa sui, the human being can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god."89 Accordingly, Niels Henrik Gregersen states that the hidden God can only be admired, as he is beyond communication, whereas the triune God can be praised and should be glorified in his suffering. 90 However, Luther's understanding of *Deus absconditus* exceeds Heidegger's remote God of philosophy. As outlined above, the hidden God is not withdrawn from the world but is active as an omnipotent creator God exercising his concrete power. Following biblical tradition, Luther maintains God's hiddenness as a necessary means of God to communicate with sinful humanity either as a Word of Law or as a Word of Gospel. Through these divine Words, God invites his creatures to answer in lamentation and glorification. Praise and glorification are acknowledgements of the reconciliatory coherence between the hidden and the revealed God, which procures salvation. The eulogy in 1 Tim 6:16 epitomises this glorification of the hidden God: "It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion." Moreover, the omnipotent God, who causes humans to suffer, is the object of intense lamentation as when the widow of Nain laments the loss of her only son with the outcry: "I am cursed, God is against me."91

What are the consequences if the widow of Nain, if Job, or if any suffering human being is left without a God to direct his or her lamentations at; without a God to curse and accuse. What happens if God is no longer understood as an inflictor of suffering but merely as a comforter? Where do desperate human beings direct their despair if God can no longer be held responsible? Observing the secular society of today it seems that human beings, who are left without God or with a weakened God, turn their grievances inwards and blame themselves and their own poor decisions both morally and health-wise for their sufferings. As opposed to the external judgement of God, though, this judgement, which humans pass on themselves, comes with no promise of forgiveness.

Conversely, by maintaining that suffering is an integral part of the postlapsarian relation to God, human beings are able to accept their responsibility in causing others to suffer because God partakes herein. In this way, God does not allow humans to ignore the suffering, they have caused, or the shame they feel and he refuses to accept that the burden of guilt crushes them. Instead, God helps his creatures carry their suffering

⁸⁸ Luther, "De servo arbitrio", WA 18, 632,23-25: "Voluntatis vero divinae rationem quaerendam non esse, sed simpliciter adorandam, data gloria Deo quod cum sit iustus et sapiens solus nulli faciat iniuriam." Cf. 684,37-39.

⁸⁹ "Dies ist die Ursache als die Causa sui. So lautet der sachgerechte Name für den Gott in der Philosophie. Zu diesem Gott kann der Mensch weder beten, noch kann er ihm opfern. Vor der Causa sui kann der Mensch weder aus Scheu ins Knie fallen, noch kann er vor diesem Gott musizieren und tanzen" (Heidegger, "Identität und Differenz", 77).

⁹⁰ Gregersen, "Ten Theses", 10.

⁹¹ Luther, "Predigt uber das Euangelion Luce am vij. Cap", WA 37, 538b,10-11. As Oswald Bayer maintains, the hidden God is the object of a lamentation, which is directed at the revealed and approachable God in Christ (Bayer, "Martin Luthers Theologie", 189).

and shame by acknowledging his responsibility as creator. Moreover, God is able to promise forgiveness and an eschatological end to suffering.

5 Concluding remarks: Rethinking God in contemporary Lutheran theology

In this article, I have examined contemporary attempts to rethink the notion of God. I argue that two questions concerning the notion of God continues to haunt Lutheran theology. First, how is the ambiguous creator God, *Deus absconditus*, who causes human suffering and death, identical with the God of love, *Deus revelatus*, proclaimed in the New Testament? Second, how are sinners to trust the promise of reconciliation between the overwhelming wrath with which the hidden God confronts sinners and God's mercy revealed in the incarnation, suffering, and death of Christ?

I have examined these questions by investigating Luther's paradoxical notion of God in his hidden majesty and suffering on the cross. Luther emphasizes the affective experience of the living God rather than God as an abstract, metaphysical idea and unfolds the relation between the hidden and the revealed God from the perspective of pastoral care. According to Luther, sinful humanity experiences God in his majestic omnipotence as a terrifying presence causing human suffering. Through faith, however, sinners are able to recognize that the wrathful, hidden God and the loving God revealed in Christ are one and the same God and to trust the promise of eschatological reconciliation with God. Based on this paradoxical understanding of God, Luther admonishes Christians to seek refuge in God against God.

On this basis, I have employed Luther's theology as a source for critiquing postmodern attempts to weaken a powerful notion of an omnipotent God in favour of a post-metaphysical "god". Philosophers John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo interpret God as an event, which ethically obliges human beings and argue for an understanding of Christ as an exemplar of charity rather than as a gift of salvation. Here against, I claimed the need for a paradoxical understanding of God as both hidden and revealed as well as a robust notion of sin in order to adequately define human experience with God, which spell out a fundamental division between the human and the divine. Whereas postmodern theology finds it difficult to believe in an omnipotent God, a forgiving and loving God seems even more outrageous in light of human experience. Thus, *Deus absconditus* might in fact, as Regin Prenter claims, be "the near God, whose actions we experience daily without being able to decipher them."

Moreover, I stated that if God is merely an ethical event or a powerless human being expressing his compassion for suffering humanity, the Christian promise of union between sinful human beings and Christ the redeemer remains unfounded and theology is reduced to an ethical manifesto or to compassionate anthropology.

Finally, I argued that if God is merely a fellow sufferer, human beings are left without a language with which to lament their suffering and without an external authority to accuse and beg for help. According to Luther, the aim of theology is to comfort frightened humanity by establishing certainty of salvation *sola gratia* without good works. Hereby, theology answers the question, which haunted Luther as a young monk and made him despairingly hate God: "Oh, when will you become pious and provide satisfaction so that you will get a merciful God?"⁹³ This certainty is lost if humans become obliged to procure the event of God

⁹² Prenter, "Guds virkelighed", 147.

⁹³ Luther, "Von der heiligen Taufe Predigten", WA 37, 661,23-24: "O wenn wiltu ein mal from werden und gnug thun, das du einen gnedigen Gott kriegest?" Cf. WA 40 I, 368b,28-32. This consolatory dimension of Luther's theology is at the centre of attention in the works of several Luther scholars. Hence, Paul Althaus states that according to Luther, the difference between philosophy and theology lies in the fact that theology based on the Word of God is able to provide assurance as to the question of how God relates to me (Althaus, "Die Theologie Martin Luthers", 23). In his interpretation of Luther's theology, Oswald Bayer emphasises the notion of *promissio*; God's comforting Word of promise re-establishing his relationship with sinful humanity (see e.g. *Promissio*. *Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989). In accordance herewith, Hans- Martin Barth has recently argued that the primary concern of Luther's theology lies within pastoral care (Barth, "Die Theologie Martin Luthers", 35).

through ethical action. As a result, human beings are left curved in on themselves with no one to direct their utter despair or their wild hope for reconciliation at. Conversely, if God can be held responsible for suffering, human beings are giving a language and a conversational partner in their sufferings. They can turn to God and cry: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

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