

Reviews 12.2.14

Religion & Spirituality / Christianity

Dominus Mortis: Martin Luther on the Incorrumpibility of God in Christ by David J. Luy (Fortress Press)

Modern interpreters typically attach revolutionary significance to Luther's Christology on account of its unprecedented endorsement of God's ontological vulnerability. This passibilist reading of Luther's theology has sourced a long channel of speculative theology and philosophy, from Hegel to Moltmann, which regards Luther as an ally against antique, philosophical assumptions, which are supposed to occlude the genuine immanence of God to history and experience. David J. Luy in **Dominus Mortis** challenges this history of reception and rejects the interpretation of Luther's Christology upon which it is founded. Luy is assistant professor of biblical and systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

Dominus Mortis creates the conditions necessary for an alternative appropriation of Luther's Christological legacy. By re-specifying certain key aspects of Luther's Christological commitments, Luy provides a careful reassessment of how Luther's theology can make a contribution within ongoing attempts to adequately conceptualize divine immanence. Luther is demonstrated as a theologian who creatively appropriates the patristic and medieval theological tradition and whose constructive enterprise is significant for the ways that it disrupts widely held assumptions about the doctrine of divine impassibility, the transcendence of God, dogmatic development, and the relationship of God to suffering.

According to Luy in the introduction to **Dominus Mortis**, contemporary appraisals routinely allege that Luther's theology marks a watershed moment in the history of dogma, specifically as it pertains to the doctrine of God. Luther is supposed by many to espouse a conception of the divine being that departs in fundamental and portentous respects from his theological forebears. The contents of the alleged departure are variously elaborated. As a general point of consensus, however, the shift is taken to signal nothing less than the inception of an alternative dogmatic trajectory within Christian thought. At its root, the cusp of the departure consists in a single, positive affirmation, which Luther leverages against the prevailing currents of antecedent theological tradition: God suffers, and does so in God's very nature. Luther's endorsement of this material claim is the determinative presupposition and touchstone for many modern receptions of his thought.

Dominus Mortis demonstrates that the point of historical consensus, to which Luy refers as the 'divergence thesis,' is mistaken. Contrary to widely held opinion, Luther nowhere rejects the doctrine of divine impassibility. Careful examination of key texts reveals an abiding commitment to the invulnerability of Christ's divinity as a criterion of Christological description. Luther's doctrine of Christ should not be regarded as the seminal hinge point in the emergence of an alternative doctrine of God. By demonstrating all this to be true, this study creates the conditions necessary for an alternative appropriation of Luther's significance within contemporary theology.

Dominus Mortis is not entirely deconstructive in nature. Its purpose is not merely to expose the divergence thesis's exegetical weaknesses and leave the matter there to rest. It is surely true, as the prevailing account assumes, that Luther lays particular emphasis upon the radical immanence of God in Christ. This observation qualifies the reformer as a

Reviews 12.2.14

significant conversation partner for ongoing constructive endeavors to forge adequate doctrinal conceptualizations of divine nearness. So, although its focus rests primarily upon the more basic matter of historical accuracy, **Dominus Mortis** intentionally addresses questions of constructive theological import. The question that ultimately emerges is whether Luther's rendering of divine immanence can still possess ongoing significance once he is shown no longer to reject the doctrine of divine impassibility. The central goal, then, is to create the conditions necessary for an alternative appropriation of Luther's Christology, and to outline a few programmatic gestures of what such an appropriation might entail.

The book presents three stages of argument, which are subdivided into five major chapters. The first stage includes only one chapter (chapter 1), and provides a careful specification of the divergence thesis, as expressed in major historical and theological literature composed during the past half-century. This preparatory identification is necessary (if also a bit tedious), because it outlines the essential exegetical and conceptual claims upon which the self-purported descriptive legitimacy of the divergence thesis rests. The second stage of the argument (chapters 2-4) is by far the most detailed in its approach. Having identified the divergence thesis's constitutive claims, each of those claims is exposed to critical scrutiny.

The product of this sequential assessment is the decisive refutation of the divergence thesis as a viable interpretation of Luther's Christology. The third stage of the argument (chapter 5) is constructive in nature. It focuses upon the task of redirecting contemporary appropriations of Luther's theological significance. The space necessary for this 'redirection' is established on the basis of the alternative specification of Luther's Christological views provided in chapters 2 through 4. As the result of the three stages of argument, **Dominus Mortis** demonstrates the inadequacy of the prominent divergence reception and provides the outline for a historically responsible alternative.

Sometimes the best innovation consists in showing that no innovation is needed. David J. Luy demonstrates how Luther's theology of the cross employs the resources of patristic and medieval theology. This careful study reminds all friends of Luther to not read our own favorite ideas into the thought of the Reformation. – Risto Saarinen, University of Helsinki
*This is an extremely important book ... **Dominus Mortis** is a demanding, bold, and stimulating piece of scholarship whose argument has profound implications for the future course of both historical and constructive theology. An exceptional achievement! – Ronald K. Rittgers, Valparaiso University*

An important book, Luy in **Dominus Mortis** challenges our understanding of God and of the relationship of God to suffering.