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Paranoia and the law: Martin Luther and critical theory in hermeneutical dialogue

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Abstract

Critical theory represents the dominant theoretical framework currently deployed in the humanities, yet it is a framework that many theologians have been slow to engage. The recent 'postcritical' turn in critical theory, however, has striking affinities with several key concerns of Christian theology, as is becoming increasingly recognised. This article suggests that dialogue between critical theory and theology can be mutually beneficial, particularly in relation to hamartiology. It argues that there is a strong parallel between Martin Luther's theology of the law and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's account of critical theory's 'paranoid' hermeneutics. It then draws on this parallel to diagnose a weakness in Sedgwick's 'postcritical' response to such paranoia, and suggests that this weakness can be repaired by a specifically theological approach to hermeneutics.

Keywords: critical theory; hermeneutics; law; Martin Luther; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; sin

How, in a world full of deceit, oppression and injustice, can we express a vision of hope? Can we move beyond the negativity of endless critique, whilst remaining critically engaged with all that is problematic and pathological in the world? Is there a way to privilege the positive in our hermeneutics without collapsing into naïveté? Such questions have been driving a recent development within critical theory which seeks to make a turn towards the 'postcritical'.[1] Thinkers influenced by this development are concerned that the methodologies of critical theory have hitherto offered only the possibility of negative critique, without opening space for positive readings of texts and the

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[1] Critical theory is used in a loose sense here (as opposed to a tight reference to the Frankfurt school) to include the various theoretical systems in the humanities that are united around a concern for uncovering pathologies through critical engagement, especially of oppression and asymmetries of power. It will be used as a placeholder for this 'style of thought' (for which critique is often a synonym), which has become an object of scholarly interest in its own right. See, for instance, Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 10; Didier Fassin, 'The Endurance of Critique', *Anthropological Theory* 17/1 (2017), pp. 4–29; Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); D. N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); and Bruno Latour, 'Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30/2 (2004), pp. 225–48. The term 'postcritical' is of growing importance in critical theory and will be treated at more length in what follows. For an introduction, see Felski, *Limits*, pp. 151–85.

world. As I will argue, such questions should also be of interest to theologians, especially as we wrestle with doing theology under the conditions of depravity that the Christian doctrine of sin emphasises.

If theologians and postcritical theorists are interested in the same sorts of questions, however, the relationship between theology and theory is by no means straightforward. Indeed, critical theory has often been seen as simply inimical to theology, perhaps due to the trend in religious studies that associates critique with exclusivism and the rejection of faith.[2] In this article, however, I will join a growing chorus of theological voices that seek to engage critical theory more constructively, realising that it is the dominant theoretical framework in much of the humanities, as well as in politics and culture in the West more broadly.[3] As Wood argues, 'theologians who aspire to any influence beyond the narrow … guild must engage sympathetically with critique. Although its limitations are real, critique remains an essential form of inquiry in the humanities, and especially in the study of religion.'[4] Given the 'hegemony of critique', theology has to be able to grapple with this thought-world in order to have credence beyond the walls of its discipline. Moreover, the doctrine of sin in particular seems to have affinities with critical theory, since both involve reflection on what McFadyen calls 'the pathological in human affairs'.[5] Critical theory claims that there are problematic dynamics in the world (for instance, racism, sexism or colonialism) that result in radical, systematic, cross-generational oppression, as well as problematic dynamics within individuals (e.g. self-delusion and bias) which result in distorted visions of the world. If these claims to identify what McFadyen calls 'concrete pathologies' are taken seriously by theologians, I would suggest that they offer diagnostic tools for what theologians understand as the results of sin.[6] As Wood argues,

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[2]See William Wood, *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), pp. 245–8. Barthian theology is also associated with this kind of rejection of critical theory, since it is often typified as 'resisting all "mediations" through other spheres of knowledge and culture'. John Milbank, 'Introduction: Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy', in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 2. In fact, Barth's own relationship to other intellectual disciplines was substantially more subtle and resists this kind of critique. See John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 164–75.

[3]Notable examples, with similar interests to this article, include Wood, *Analytic Theology*; Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), esp. pp. 146–53; and Linn Marie Tonstad, 'Everything Queer, Nothing Radical', *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 92 (2016), 118–29.

[4]Wood, *Analytic Theology*, pp. 244–5. Wood deals specifically with his own discipline of analytic theology, but his argument applies equally to theology more broadly.

[5]Alistair I. McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 3.

[6]Ibid., p. 6. It is important to clarify that I am not claiming that a doctrine of sin can simply be read out of critical theory. Whilst, as McCall argues, there clearly are ways that 'sin can be known through the study of human existence and experience', there are also good reasons for the Barthian claim that sin, qua sin, can be known only in relation to faith. Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), p. 19. Without entering into this debate about the origin of the knowledge of sin, I am suggesting that, if we accept a Christian hamartiology as given, there are good reasons to think that critical theory could actually help theology. Precisely because 'man is corrupt even in his self-understanding' (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p. 379), discourses that engage this self-delusion should be taken seriously by theologians. This is especially the case for theologians working downstream from Luther and his strong claims regarding sin's continual effect on the intellective processes even of justified Christians. On this complex aspect of Luther's thought, see Bernhard Lohse, *Ratio und Fides: Eine Untersuchung Über die Ratio in der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958).

Christian theologians who are sensitive to the noetic effects of sin have an even greater obligation to take critique seriously. Woven into the very fabric of Christian orthodoxy, we find the claim that, as a result of the Fall, the inner voice of reason is often self-serving and self-deceptive.[7]

This article will offer one example of the generative possibilities that come from reading an important text from recent critical theory in dialogue with a Christian theological source. I will explore a parallel between Eve Sedgwick's diagnosis of much critical writing as 'paranoid' and Martin Luther's understanding of the theological use of the law. Central to this argument is the realisation that both Sedgwick and Luther are fundamentally concerned with hermeneutics (even if the relationship of critical theory to that term has been fraught).[8] That Luther was exercised by how to read texts well is unsurprising: as Ebeling has shown, for Luther 'theology consisted of the interpretation of the holy scriptures'.[9] Critical theory has also been orientated around hermeneutics: a core facet of its methodology has been what Ricoeur called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.[10] Sedgwick is deeply embedded in this tradition: even as she expresses concerns about the hermeneutics of suspicion, she never suggests that knowledge production is rooted in anything other than interpretation, whether of texts specifically or cultural artefacts more broadly. Indeed, as we will see, it is precisely reading strategies (taken in the widest possible sense) that are the focus of her analysis. For this article I will use the term hermeneutics relatively broadly, to describe the way that truth is apprehended through processes of interpretation, whether directed to texts, cultural artefacts or other sources of reflection.

Specifically, I will argue that the close analogy between Luther's vision of the theological use of the law and Sedgwick's analysis of much critical theory as functionally 'paranoid' actually gives theological justification for some of the critical practices of suspicion that Sedgwick denigrates. If Sedgwick seeks to move beyond the negativity of critique, Luther's theology of the law suggests such a move might be premature. Such an argument could, however, conclude with little more than a capitulation to deconstruction: an affirmation of the impossibility of positive speech under the conditions of sin and finitude. Like Sedgwick, theologians have good reasons to resist such a move, and so I will use Luther's hermeneutical principle of the law/gospel distinction to offer a more theologically robust framework for a hermeneutic that also moves beyond the negativity of critique, but remains more realistic about the depths of human depravity than Sedgwick's putative 'reparative reading'.

Sedgwick's diagnosis of paranoid reading

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was a prominent critic and theorist working in the overlapping fields of queer theory, affect theory and critical theory. Her 1998 essay 'Paranoid

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[7]Wood, *Analytic Theology*, p. 262. Tonstad makes a similar point about the relationship of queer theory to 'typically Protestant worries about human capacities for self-deception'. Tonstad, 'Everything Queer', p. 126.

[8]Felski, *Limits*, pp. 30–4.

[9]Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (London: Collins, 1970), p. 96.

[10]Although there is some dispute about where Ricoeur originally coined the term, it seems he actually first used it in print in a foreword to Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), p. xvii. See Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 50–77. On the centrality of this hermeneutic strategy in critical theory, see Felski, *Limits*, pp. 14–51.

Reading and Reparative Reading' marked something of a change of trajectory in her work, as she sought to diagnose what she saw as a problem in the style of reading that dominated her field.[11] The article has been extremely influential and various critics have followed Sedgwick in beginning to question the supremacy of suspicion.[12] I focus on Sedgwick's essay here because it represents, in a particularly influential form, a burgeoning desire from within critical theory to try to move beyond some of the limitations of the hermeneutics of suspicion, and to generate a more positive, potentially hopeful, hermeneutic. In that sense, her project is similar to mine: we are both concerned with the possibilities of ongoing constructive discourse over and against the reductive tendencies of critique. That said, I will suggest that the argument Sedgwick makes for reparative reading potentially fails to take seriously the reality of interpretative depravity that critical theory (and the doctrine of sin) reveals. What will, in fact, be more useful in Sedgwick is her diagnosis of the hermeneutics of suspicion, and the parallel this offers to Luther's conception of theological use of the law.

Sedgwick's essay presents a nuanced argument, written in an idiom that resists easy summary. At its heart is the contention that, in queer theory in particular but also in the humanities more broadly, a single hermeneutic has come to dominate thought to the exclusion of other possible ways of knowing. As she puts it, 'to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is … widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities'.[13] She identifies this hermeneutic tendency as a form of 'paranoia' by tracing its origins in the 'masters of suspicion', especially Freud.[14] Paranoia, she argues, 'comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry' and uncovering the hidden, and almost certainly malignant, meanings of texts becomes an ethical imperative.[15] Concerning critical theory, she claims that 'in a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive, pious or complaisant'.[16] Faced with the reality of evil and oppression, the response of theorists is that 'you can never be paranoid enough'.[17]

Sedgwick also offers a careful analysis of paranoia that includes a five-fold typology, of which the final part is of particular interest to the current project: the idea that paranoia places its faith in exposure.[18] As she writes:

> Whatever account it may give of its own motivation, paranoia is characterised by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se – knowledge in the form of exposure … paranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as

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[11]Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is about You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51.

[12]Examples include José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Love Heather, 'Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *New Literary History* 41/2 (2010), pp. 371–91; and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations* 108/1 (2009), pp. 1–21.

[13]Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading', p. 125.

[14]Ibid., pp. 124–6.

[15]Ibid., p. 126.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., p. 127.

[18]The other four are that paranoia is 'anticipatory', 'reflexive and mimetic', a 'strong theory' and a 'theory of negative affects'. Ibid., p. 130.

though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known.[19]

Within critical theory, Sedgwick argues, enormous faith is placed in the mechanism of exposing hidden but real pathological dynamics as the means to resolving real-world problems: 'as though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip and jump away from getting it solved, at least self-evidently a step in the right direction'.[20]

To Sedgwick, this is a strange phenomenon, especially given the frequent failure of such unveilings to enact transformation. Whilst acknowledging that 'some exposures, some demystifications, some bearings of witness do have great effectual force (though often of an unanticipated kind)', she offers a number of amusing vignettes that highlight the historically and culturally specific nature of such 'unveilings'.[21] For example, D. A. Miller's Foucauldian project of uncovering 'the intensive and continuous "pastoral" care that liberal society proposes to take of each and every one of its charges'[22] seems ridiculous to Sedgwick in a context of diminishing mental health care.[23] Moreover, Sedgwick takes pains to show the ways that demystification can often be met with a 'narrow-gauge, everyday, rather incoherent cynicism'.[24]

Most interestingly for present purposes, suspicion seems unable to comprehend that an audience might already be aware of the pathologies it uncovers and still remain unmoved. The empirical evidence, Sedgwick argues, is at odds with the assumption that exposing problems leads to their solution, as the relation between exposure and transformation is complex, contingent and largely unpredictable. She writes: 'we must admit that the efficacy and directionality of such acts [of exposure] resides somewhere else than in their relation to knowledge per se'.[25]

Sedgwick offers this analysis of the hermeneutics of suspicion as a means to 'situate it as one kind of epistemological practise among other, alternative ones'.[26] She wants to destabilise paranoia's claim to priority in critical enquiry, positioning it instead as a hermeneutic that 'knows some things well, and other things poorly'.[27] To this end, she focusses on paranoia's motivations and performative effects, suggesting that 'some of the main reasons for practicing paranoid strategies may be other than the possibility that they offer unique access to true knowledge. They represent *a* way, among others, of seeking, finding, and organising knowledge.'[28] By analysing and destabilising the paranoia that lies behind the hermeneutical practice of critique, and identifying it as mutable and contingent, Sedgwick hopes to open the field to other, less deconstructive forms of reading.

In place of paranoid reading, Sedgwick proposes 'reparative reading'. This essay is an early foray into this territory for Sedgwick, and she gives much less space to her

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[19]Ibid., p. 138.

[20]Ibid., p. 139. Felski makes a broadly similar argument concerning critical theory's trust in exposure in her discussion of the similarities between critique and detective fiction. Felski, *Limits*, pp. 85–116.

[21]Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading', p. 141.

[22]D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. viii.

[23]Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading', p. 141.

[24]Ibid., p. 143.

[25]Ibid., p. 141.

[26]Ibid., p. 128.

[27]Ibid., p. 130.

[28]Ibid.

suggestions for reparative practice than her diagnosis of paranoia. As such, her proposal is somewhat vague and preliminary, and largely limited to the field of queer theory.[29] Indeed, the only concrete example of reparative practice she gives is that of camp, with its 'startling juicy displays of excess erudition', and its commitment to 'surplus beauty'.[30] Yet, even if the specifics of what reparative reading might look like are deliberately undetermined, her argument is that such reading practices open up insights that are simply unknowable for a paranoid reader.

Moreover, she claims that there is no *a priori* reason to assume that the hermeneutics of suspicion has any epistemological priority over a reparative hermeneutic. The distaste for 'amelioration' and 'mere pleasure' only exists within criticism because of

> the exclusiveness of paranoia's faith in demystifying exposure: only [because of] its cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people's (that is, other people's) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn't have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions).[31]

As she writes towards the end of the essay, the reparative reading position is 'no less acute than a paranoid position, no less realist, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmic'.[32] There may be reasons for paranoia's dominance, she contends, but they have little to do with a privileged access to truth.

As may now be clear, I am broadly sympathetic to Sedgwick's project of trying to find ways forward for positive hermeneutics, and I too have no interest in defending the wholesale reduction that critique can sometimes endorse. The limitation in Sedgwick's argument, however, is in its lack of precision in defining the *relationship between* paranoid and reparative readings. Of course, the choice of the name 'reparative' suggests that such a hermeneutic responds to a previous deconstruction of some sort, and Sedgwick is careful not to denounce the hermeneutics of suspicion *tout court*. She recognises 'the paranoid exigencies that are often necessary for nonparanoid knowing and utterance'.[33] Yet she more often seems to present paranoia and reparative reading as merely two different possible options in an ecology of interpretations. As she puts it, her project is to 'understand paranoia in such a way as to situate it as one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones'.[34] Reparative reading has a relationship to paranoia, but it is a loose one, in which both hermeneutics can exist in parallel, and in which neither has a claim to priority.[35]

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[29] Ibid., p. 147.

[30] Ibid., p. 150.

[31] Ibid., p. 144.

[32] Ibid., p. 150.

[33] Ibid., p. 129.

[34] Ibid., p. 128.

[35] Felski, in her more comprehensive treatment, evinces a similar attitude. Felski, *Limits*, pp. 151–85. She emphasises the practical unprofitability of critique (her preferred term to paranoia, p. 179), and suggests it is something from which one can 'move on' to arrive at a postcritical position, without apparently feeling the need to justify this theoretically (p. 193).

Paranoia and the law

There are, I will argue, significant contributions that Luther's theology of the law can make to this discussion of hermeneutics. Before I can make this argument, however, it is first necessary to recognise a parallel between Sedgwick's depiction of paranoid knowing and Luther's understanding of the theological use of the law. As we have seen, a characteristic of critical theory is the enormous hope it invests in the power of revealing problems to catalyse change: that is, in the power of changes in knowledge to bring about changes in behaviour. The problem Sedgwick underscores is the failure of this hope in practice: exposure does sometimes produce transformation, but just as often meets indifference or apathy.

The parallel to Luther's understanding of the theological use of the law is striking.[36] In the Antinomian Disputations of the 1530s he argues that 'the Law was not given in order to justify nor to make alive nor to help in any way toward righteousness [Gal 3:21]. But [the Law was given] to *expose* (*ostendat*) sin and work wrath [Rom 3:20; 4:15], that is, to make the conscience guilty.'[37] Here Luther talks about the law in the same terms Sedgwick uses in relation to paranoia – its function is 'to expose'. Luther also makes a similar point to Sedgwick about the relationship between such exposure and change in human activity. As he wrote in 1520, 'although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it'.[38] The law is thus, as regards changing behaviour, radically impotent: 'the law says do this and it is never done'.[39]

The explanation of this impotence lies in Luther's anthropology. As Zahl has argued, for Luther human willing always follows the desires of the 'heart', and these dynamics are only ever tangentially related to knowledge.[40] This point is clearly seen in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology,* in which Luther claims that 'it is false to state that man's inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites', since under the conditions of original sin, the will is 'captive' to evil.[41] This means that correcting knowledge of what should be done (what Luther calls 'precepts') has little effect on human action. The law's relationship to human willing acts in the opposite direction to what might be assumed, so that 'a good law will of necessity be bad for the natural

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will'.[42] The law does not correct behaviour, but inspires rebellion.[43] Luther, like Sedgwick, is claiming that the common assumption that correcting knowledge will change behaviour simply does not work in practice. Hence:

> The words of the law are spoken, therefore, not to affirm the power of the will, but to enlighten blind reason and make it see that its own light is no light and that the virtue of the will is no virtue … The whole meaning and purpose of the law is simply to furnish knowledge, and that of nothing but sin; it is not to reveal or confer any power.[44]

The law exposes ('reveals sin'), and that is the extent of its ability.[45]

 Luther thus gives an important theological explanation for Sedgwick's observation that 'the efficacy and directionality of such acts [of exposure] reside somewhere else than in their relation to knowledge'.[46] Following the Augustinian tradition, Luther offers a sophisticated account of the seeming impermeability of human behaviour to discursive practices like the law, that appeals to the distortion of human desire caused by concupiscence.[47] As Zahl has argued, affect theorists like Sedgwick are aware of many of the same dynamics that Luther articulated, but Luther provides a theological explanation for this intransigence of human behaviour, willing and emotion.[48] Significantly, as Zahl shows, Luther sees the law as extending beyond the explicit divine commands expressed in scripture:

> These experiences [of conviction under the law] are most often occasioned by Biblical teaching or preaching that seeks to apply particular divine standards to the lives of all its listeners. But they are also experienced more broadly in human lives whenever sin is revealed, no matter how or when or by what means that happens.[49]

This opens the possibility that things other than scripture can be brought to bear to diagnose pathology in the world – i.e. that critical theory could function as an instrument of the law.[50] As we shall see, Luther maintains that the law is good, and necessary,

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[42]*WA* 1:227; *LW* 31:14.

[43]Luther is on solidly Pauline ground here. Cf. Rom 5:20.

[44]*WA* 18:677; *LW* 33.127 (*On the Bondage of the Will*).

[45]This is a common theme in Luther, especially in *Bondage of the Will*. See e.g. *WA* 18:673–4, 694–5, 766; *LW* 33.121, 153–4, 261. See also *WA* 8:609; *LW* 44.302–3 (*Judgment on Monastic Vows*) and *WA* 8:83, 103–4; *LW* 32.195, 223–4 (*Against Latomus*).

[46]Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading', p. 141.

[47]See L'ubomír Batka, 'Luther's Teaching on Sin and Evil', in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), pp. 239–41. On Augustine's view of the postlapsarian will, see Ian A. McFarland, *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 61–87.

[48]Zahl argues that affect theory offers a 'chastened view of the power of discursive practises to make bodies move' and thus suggests a very limited role of knowledge in transforming behaviour. Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, p. 141. Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Sylvan Tomkins', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 93–121; and Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 35.

[49]Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, p. 168.

[50]This is, of course, disputed in Lutheran theology. For an opposing view, see Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 149–52.

provided it is used correctly. Paranoia likewise, as Sedgwick admits, 'knows some things well'.[51] What Luther's view of the law adds to the discussion is a more positive role for critique in the project of positive hermeneutics. For, where the law accuses, the heart is being prepared for grace.[52]

The law/gospel distinction and positive hermeneutics

Given this parallel between the law and paranoia, I argue that one of Luther's key hermeneutical resources can be mobilised in this discussion of reading strategies: the law/gospel distinction. Contra Sedgwick, I suggest that the paranoid reading position should not be seen as an epistemology that simply coexists alongside reparative readings in a healthy ecosystem of knowledge production, in which one picks the stance most appropriate to the moment. This is to display a naïveté regarding human capacity for self-deception. Rather, in analogy to Luther's view of the law and the gospel, critique and repair need to be understood as hermeneutical tools that both remain necessary, *but which are ordered to one another in a particular way*. To lose reparative reading is to surrender to deconstruction, yet to lose critique is to leave discourse unprotected from the realities of intellectual sin.

Luther's understanding of the law/gospel distinction has been extensively studied, and only a short overview is necessary here.[53] The law, as a word of God, is always a word of demand, of what *ought* to be. The gospel, on the other hand, is a word of promise, which gives a 'passive righteousness' to the believer.[54] More than that, however, it is a word of promise with very specific content. As Luther summarises it: 'if you ask: What is the Gospel? you can give no better answer than these words of the New Testament, namely, that Christ gave his body and poured out his blood for us for the forgiveness of sins.'[55] Yet maintaining a distinction between the law and the gospel is, for Luther, the central theological task,[56] since, as Ebeling argues, 'to confuse the law and the gospel is the normal occurrence, the state of affairs which exists everywhere'.[57] As Luther writes in the greater Galatians commentary: 'this distinction is easy to speak of; but in experience and practice it is the most difficult [thing] of all'.[58] The human condition is such that 'reason cannot refrain from looking at active righteousness'.[59] In their own strength, humans continually return to trusting in the efficacy of the law.

For Luther, however, the law is not bad (though he can be read in that way).[60] Rather, the law has a function – a *use* – in salvation. Its role is to prepare for the gospel,

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[51]Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading', p. 130.
[52]Cf. *WA* 1:360; *LW* 31.50 (*Heidelberg Disputation*).
[53]See esp. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation,* trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 58–65; Charles P. Arand, 'Law and Gospel', in Nelson and Hinlicky, *Oxford Encyclopedia of Luther*, pp. 92–103; and Robert Kolb, 'Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections on his Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of his Theology', *Lutheran Quarterly* 13/4 (1999), pp. 169–75.
[54]*WA* 40.1:44-46; *LW* 26:7 (*Galatians*).
[55]*WA* 8:524, *LW* 36:183 (*On the Misuse of the Mass*).
[56]*WA* 40.1:207; *LW* 26:116 (*Galatians*).
[57]Ebeling, *Luther*, p. 117.
[58]*WA* 40.1:49; *LW* 26:10.
[59]*WA* 40.1:42; *LW* 26:5.
[60]This was a major factor in the Antinomian controversy. See Saarinen and Nelson, 'Law', pp. 85–6; and Lohse, *Luther: An Introduction*, pp. 178–84.

as the word that convicts of the ever-present reality of sin. As Luther argues succinctly in the *Heidelberg Disputation*: 'The law humbles, grace exalts … "Through the law comes knowledge of sin" [Rom 3:20], through knowledge of sin, however, comes humility, and through humility grace is acquired.'[61] This is why both law and gospel are necessary, even as they are distinct: it is only in 'despair', as human weakness and evil is fully recognised, that the 'promise of grace' becomes a word that can guarantee comfort, and actually enact change.[62] As Luther goes on to argue, the love of God active in the gospel 'does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it'.[63] Yet Luther insists that the law remains necessary: 'as long as we live here, both [law and gospel] remain'.[64] The fact of being *simul iustus et peccator* means that Christians never escape the need for the law's convicting voice,[65] since, as Lohse has it, 'we can never reach a state "beyond the law and Gospel"'.[66] The end point of Christian preaching and teaching is thus not the law but the gospel; however the law must be preached to expose sin, since 'if sin is ignored, people fall into the presumption of a false innocence, just as we see among the heathen and later among the Pelagians'.[67] Without the law, the gospel would be radically naïve.

   In order to secure the consolation the gospel offers, Luther puts a particular emphasis on homiletic strategies that produce a cluster of positive affects. For example, in the introduction to the 1531–5 Galatians lectures, he claims that the gospel is correctly perceived when a Christian knows that God will 'preserve my conscience happy and peaceful',[68] when a believer is 'raised up again and gains hope'[69] or when there is 'full and perfect joy in the Lord and peace of heart'.[70] Significantly, this requires a certain amount of hermeneutic legwork on the part of the theologian, since, as Zahl shows, the same scriptural text can 'in principle be either law or gospel'.[71] As Luther puts it:

> In affliction and in the conflict of conscience it is the devil's habit to frighten us with the Law … It is also his habit to set against us those passages in the Gospel in which Christ Himself requires works from us and with plain words threatens damnation to those who do not perform them.[72]

If the Devil can thus twist even the words of Christ, it takes all the 'study', 'meditation' and 'prayer' of the theologian to 'instruct consciences, both your own and others, console them, and take them from the Law to grace'.[73] Luther is clear that the ultimate truth

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[61] *WA* 1:361; *LW* 31.51.

[62] *WA* 40.1:42; *LW* 53.51.

[63] *WA* 1:354; *LW* 31:57.

[64] *WA* 40.1:48; *LW* 26:10 (*Galatians*).

[65] *WA* 56:347; *LW* 25:336 (*Lectures on Romans*).

[66] Lohse, *Luther: An Introduction*, p. 272. Whether there is a necessary *sequence* of law *then* gospel has been disputed in Luther scholarship. My argument does not rely on such a temporal sequence, but rather only that the two are in ordered relationship. On this question, see Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, pp. 62–3.

[67] *WA* 39.1:348; *LW* 73.54 (*Antinomian Disputation II*).

[68] *WA* 40.1:51; *LW* 26:11.

[69] *WA* 40.1:45; *LW* 26:7.

[70] *WA* 40.1:47; *LW* 26:9. This is a very brief sample. For more, see Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, pp. 169–71.

[71] Simeon Zahl, 'Tradition and its "Use": The Ethics of Theological Retrieval', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71/3 (2018), p. 315.

[72] *WA* 40.1:50; *LW* 26:10–11.

[73] *WA* 40.1:49–50; *LW* 26:10.

for a Christian is that which consoles a sinner that her redemption has been won in Christ: that is the gospel. An interpretation of a passage that reads it as the law which condemns – with all the negative affect that surrounds such a reading – is also a true reflection of reality, but is to be used only as preparation for the greater reality of the positive gospel. In Luther's theology the gospel is truly at work when reading and preaching produce positive affects in the reader, and for this reason such interpretations have an ultimate priority.[74]

Three implications

I can now draw out three implications of this parallel between the law in Luther's theology and Sedgwick's description of the hermeneutics of suspicion. The first is to underscore the indirect connection between exposure and change. As we have seen, Luther offers a subtle account of why the sorts of exposures that critique deals in might not catalyse change in the way that a theorist would hope. Like the law, suspicion can only ever reveal, and not cure. Yet in the law/gospel distinction, Luther offers a plausible account of why there might indeed be some connection between critique and change, and why critique could continue to matter. The law, whilst it may be impotent to enact change directly, is nevertheless still a crucial word of God for Luther, in that it acts indirectly, by revealing sin in order to prepare the heart for grace, which can bring about change. Its connection to the change which the gospel enacts is real, therefore, even as it is indirect. The sort of knowledge the law deals with (i.e. the knowledge of human incapacity) is, in Luther's theory of change, only effective in as much as it leads the believer into the law/gospel pedagogy, in which the word of promise alone can actually transform the affections.[75]

Yet Luther also gives a plausible explanation for why critical theory, despite its sophisticated conceptual framework for viewing human behaviour as intractable, still seems to place such faith in exposure. This, Luther thinks, is simply a key characteristic of human existence under sin. We cannot distinguish the proper use of the law. We cannot help sliding back into trust in the law and active righteousness, with all the despair that that engenders. In such a light paranoia's faith in exposure is rendered comprehensible, even as it remains problematic.

This leads to the second implication, which is to posit a much tighter and dialectical link between paranoid and reparative reading than Sedgwick suggests. If, as I have argued, paranoia functions similarly to the law, then we can, with Luther, affirm its continual and vital role in exposing, analysing and diagnosing concrete pathologies in the world. At the same time, we can agree with Sedgwick that critique is not the end point of hermeneutics; that reduction and despair are not the goal but a stop along the way. Yet, in distinction to her, I would argue that paranoia and repair are not merely parallel hermeneutics in an interpretive ecology: useful for some things and not for others, both

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[74]It is true that, especially in his early theology, Luther often seems to prioritise suffering as more hermeneutically reliable than positive experiences: e.g. *WA* 1:362; *LW* 31.53 (*Heidelberg Disputation*). The value of such suffering, however, is that it opposes natural human wisdom and thus reveals human dependence on God. As such, it still functions as an instrument of the law, and is therefore always hermeneutically provisional, as compared to the gospel. See *WA* 1:361; *LW* 31.51. For a discussion, see Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 86.

[75]For an account of how this theory of sanctification can work in practise, see Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, pp. 175–82.

with equal epistemological weight. Rather the reparative requires the paranoid, lest it be unmoored from the evil of the reality it describes. Without the knowledge of depravity, delusion and self-delusion that critique makes possible, reparative readings seem to have few resources to avoid naïveté. Yet the critical as an end in itself falls prey to all the problems that Sedgwick highlights, and which Luther sees in the misuse of the law: despair, cynicism or a puffed-up arrogance.[76] The law without the gospel causes nihilism and despair; the gospel without the law causes presumption and over-confidence. Likewise, the reparative relies on the critical to retain its connection to the reality it describes.

Thirdly, there is a major point of disanalogy between Sedgwick's typology and Luther's law/gospel distinction which reveals a significant contribution that theology can make to this discussion. The disanalogy is that, in Luther's framework, the gospel is always a word that has content – that is concretely tied both to a set of historical events and to a particular moral teleology. This is in contrast to the reparative reading practices advocated by Sedgwick. Put simply, within Luther's theological framework, the consolation of the gospel is always rooted in a defined vision of the good, such that any practice of hopeful hermeneutics is given credence by the extent to which it corresponds to this axiology. By contrast, I would suggest that the lack of concrete content I have already identified in the 'reparative' reading strategies advocated by Sedgwick is linked to the failure of the critical project to articulate an agreed positive normativity.

For Luther, as we have seen, the gospel in the law/gospel distinction is never just good news *per se*, but is the good news of salvation for sinners won by the death of Jesus Christ. It is his belief in the fact that there is, definitively and objectively, consolation offered to sinners that allows Luther to give precedence to readings that emphasise such consolation. When Luther makes a claim like 'where Christ is truly seen, there must be full and perfect joy in the Lord and peace of heart', he is saying that real apprehension of truth (truly seeing Christ) can be recognised by the presence of positive affects ('full and perfect joy'), and thus that such affects are an indicator of a correct hermeneutic.[77] Yet this is not quite the same as Sedgwick's argument for why pleasure and amelioration should have seats at the hermeneutical table. As we have seen, Sedgwick actually offers little theoretical justification for focusing on positive affects, beyond the observation that they have been sidelined. By contrast Luther prioritises consolation, joy and relief for precise and theological reasons. It is because these emotions relate truthfully to the reality that is secured in the *content* of the objective gospel that they are the primary affects that drive gospel-orientated reading.

We can see this in another way by examining Sedgwick's claim that critical and reparative strategies should live alongside each other, 'knowing some things well and other things poorly'. For Luther, I would argue, this is true, but only with significant caveats. Critique and the prioritisation of negative affect know a *specific and defined set of things* well – the realities of sin and the depths of evil, though these remain always more opaque and inaccessible than our critical practices can diagnose. Gospel hermeneutics – which like reparative reading focus on positive affects and attachments – by contrast, know well the reality of grace, the love of God and the goodness of creation, but only in so far as the law also does its convicting work. What makes the gospel the end point of hermeneutics for Luther is the theological claim that it is the goodness of God and his redemptive activity that have ultimate victory over the reality of sin in the Christian. The law/gospel

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[76]Lohse, *Luther: An Introduction*, p. 272.
[77]*WA* 40.1:47; *LW* 26.9 (*Galatians*).

pedagogy has a defined formal order because this order corresponds to the reality that God is ultimately sovereign, and it is his gospel that will reign.

This suggests that theology has resources to offer in terms of defining the good towards which a reparative reading strategy might be orientated. Such strategies can gain traction, I would argue, in proportion to how well they can articulate a good to which they are ordered, and in the process further refine their understanding of the pathology that they seek to diagnose. Whilst critical theory is unlikely to accept the Lutheran gospel as its destination, the logic of the law/gospel distinction at least highlights the importance of defining an axiology as the foundation for a positive hermeneutic. This very idea is, of course, contrary to insights that are sometimes seen as central to critical theory, which has often centred around a specific rejection of teleology and any sort of normative axiology. Nevertheless, without such a vision of the good, it is hard to see how critique can ever escape its reflexive negativity, without simply collapsing into a shallow hedonism that can only affirm the pleasurable and the ameliorative.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that a dialogue between Luther's theology of the law/gospel distinction, and Eve Sedgwick's diagnosis of the critical tradition as functionally paranoid, offers helpful insights for both theology and critical theory. I have shown that a recognition of the parallel between Sedgwick's discussion of paranoia and Luther's theology of the use of the law allows the possibility that critical practices can function as the 'law': revealing sin, illuminating real pathologies in the world and uncovering self-deception and bias. This gives such practices significant weight as tools for theological reflection on sin and epistemology, especially within the theologian herself. Critical theory, as a particular instrument of the law, thus has much to offer theology. Understood in light of the theology of the law, the idea that the theologian might have to choose between theological analysis of personal and cultural pathologies and 'secular' critical analysis is a false choice.

On the other hand, I have argued that theology has resources needed by contemporary critical theory as well. Luther's theology of sin, and his understanding of the psychological effects of the law on sinners, gives good theoretical reasons to explain both the tenacity of critique's faith in exposure, and the ways that this faith is often unsupported by reality. Secondly, the law/gospel distinction gives us a theological rationale for thinking that critique and repair are not simply parallel strategies, but rather are ordered to one another, mutually inscribed as vital tools for knowledge in a fallen world. Finally, I have suggested that theology, with its long tradition of careful reflection on teleology and the good, has resources to offer critical theorists interested in postcritical or reparative reading. It is precisely as a coherent vision of the good is articulated that postcritical reading can gain epistemological and theoretical traction that goes beyond simply articulating another parallel strategy amongst others. Luther gives us, I have argued, a way to affirm that positive affect has a definitive place in hermeneutics, not simply because it has been overlooked, or because we happen to prefer it, but because it is, ultimately aligned with the reality of 'the sinning human and the justifying God'.[78]

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[78]Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, p. 37.