

# Productive Misunderstanding in the Early Reformation Revisited: The Case of Lazarus Spengler's *A Consoling Christian Instruction and Medicine in All Adversities* (1521)<sup>1</sup>

Ronald K. Rittgers

*Valparaiso University*

ron.rittgers@valpo.edu

## ABSTRACT

This article revisits Bernd Moeller's concept of 'productive misunderstanding' as a way of explaining the early appeal and success of the Reformation among some of Luther's most important supporters. It does so through a case study of a consolation pamphlet by the secretary of Nuremberg City Council, Lazarus Spengler, whom Luther credited with planting the evangelical faith in this prominent imperial city. Spengler was one of the Wittenberg reformer's most important lay supporters: he authored the earliest pro-Luther lay pamphlet and his name was subsequently appended to the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*. However, in his consolation pamphlet Spengler espoused a view of suffering that Luther had firmly rejected because it contradicted his evangelical soteriology. This important difference suggests that while Spengler did a great deal to promote Luther's cause, and at great personal risk, he acted on the basis of an incorrect understanding of the Wittenberg reformer's theology, at least in the late 1510s and early 1520s. This article explores the reasons for Spengler's productive misunderstanding and suggests that it

1. This article draws on chapter six of my book (in press), *The Reformation of Suffering: A Study of Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). A German version of the study will appear in Berndt Hamm, Hrsg., *Medialität, Unmittelbarkeit, Präsenz—Die Nähe des Heils im Verständnis der Reformation. Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation Reihe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), under the title "'Got neher machen.'" *Das Gnadenmedium des Leidens am Beispiel Lazarus Spenglers Eine tröstliche christliche Anweisung und Arznei in allen Widerwärtigkeiten* (1521)<sup>1</sup>. The present article also served as the basis for a talk I gave in the History Department of Notre Dame University in February 2010 (DeSantis Lecture).

was likely shared by other evangelical burghers. By examining Moeller's concept from a novel vantage point, that of suffering and consolation, this article seeks to shed new light on the reception of Luther's ideas in the early German Reformation.

#### Keywords

Reformation, Nuremberg, Lazarus Spengler, Martin Luther, Johannes von Staupitz, lay pamphlets, suffering, consolation, penitence

Several decades ago Bernd Moeller introduced the provocative concept of 'productive misunderstanding' to help account for the appeal of the Reformation to some of its most important early lay supporters. In an essay (1959) about German humanism and the origins of the Reformation,<sup>2</sup> Moeller argued that the humanists largely misunderstood Luther's evangelical message, seeing in it only the elements that corresponded to their Renaissance creed (for example, an emphasis on learning, languages, and ancient sources) while failing to observe and acknowledge those that did not, most notably, the complete bondage of the human will to sin. Reasoning from the well-documented role that the humanists played in promoting Luther's cause, Moeller concluded: 'It was a productive misunderstanding (*ein produktives Mißverständnis*) that made the humanists into supporters of Luther, and it is not too much to say that this misconception raised the Reformation from the concern of one man to a revolution in world history.'<sup>3</sup> In this essay I would

2. Bernd Moeller, 'Die deutschen Humanisten und die Anfänge der Reformation', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 8 (1959): 46–61. English: 'The German Humanists and the Beginnings of the Reformation', in Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays* (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1982 [Original English edition published by Fortress Press in 1972]), eds. and trans., H.C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr, 19–38.

3. Moeller, 'The German Humanists', 29; 'Die deutschen Humanisten', 54. The English version translates *ein produktives Mißverständnis* as 'a constructive misunderstanding.' I have opted for more the literal 'a productive misunderstanding.' In Moeller's later work on the content of early Reformation sermons he argued against the idea that evangelical clerics misunderstood Luther's central message, insisting that there was a great deal of continuity between the Wittenberg reformer and his evangelical disciples. See 'Was wurde in der Frühzeit der Reformation in den deutschen Städten gepredigt?' *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* [= ARG] 75 (1984): 176–193, especially 192–193. [English: 'What was Preached in German Towns in the Early Reformation', in C. Scott Dixon, ed., *The German Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 33–52, esp. 52.]

This argument should not be seen as a repudiation of the earlier productive misunderstanding thesis, as Moeller's later work focused exclusively on well-educated urban

like to explore a rather striking case of productive misunderstanding in the early Reformation that has escaped the attention of the vast majority of Reformation scholars;<sup>4</sup> I would like to bring new evidence to support Moeller's old claim and thereby contribute to our understanding of the reception of the Reformation in the cities. The case involves one of Luther's most important early lay humanist supporters and has to do with the Wittenberg reformer's attempt to reinterpret the place of suffering in the Christian life according to the dictates of justification by faith, an aspect of Luther's early theology and its reception that Moeller did not address in his seminal essay.<sup>5</sup> The ensuing misunderstanding contributed directly to the success of the evangelical movement in one of Germany's most important and influential cities and thus to the success of the Reformation itself.

### Lazarus Spengler: Nuremberg's lay reformer

Lazarus Spengler (1479–1534) was a lay leader of the evangelical movement in Nuremberg whom Luther credited with planting the new faith in the prominent imperial city. In the early 1530s the Wittenberg reformer asserted, 'Dr. Lazarus Spengler of Nuremberg is the one who introduced the gospel into Nuremberg and he alone has caused it to remain there to today.'<sup>6</sup>

---

theologian-preachers and the content of their extant sermons, not on lay humanists. Whereas Moeller's 1959 article dealt with the reception of Luther's theology among lay humanists, his 1984 article examined the reception of Luther's theology among other theologians and its transmission to burghers. Moeller argued for great theological continuity between Luther and other early evangelical preachers, but for important discontinuity between Luther and lay humanists; he argued for understanding in the first case and misunderstanding in the second. For a refutation of Moeller's 1984 article, see Susan C. Karant-Nunn, 'What was Preached in German Cities in the Early Years of the Reformation? *Wildwuchs* versus Lutheran Unity', in Philip N. Bebb and Sherrin Marshall, eds., *The Process of Change in Early Modern Europe* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), 81–96.

4. See note 59 below.
5. Moeller briefly examined the theme of suffering in 'Was wurde ... gepredigt?', but not in the way I undertake below. Cf. *ARG* 75: 190 [= 'What was Preached', 49–50].
6. WA Tr 2: 296.28–297.2. Cited in Berndt Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler (1479–1534): Der Nürnberger Ratschreiber im Spannungsfeld von Humanismus und Reformation, Politik und Glaube* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 204. On Spengler's relationship with Luther see the same work, 171–182. For other works on Spengler, cf. Berndt Hamm, 'Spengler, Lazarus (1479–1534)', in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 31, 666–670; Hans von Schubert, *Lazarus Spengler und die Reformation in Nürnberg*, edited by Hajo Holborn (Leipzig: M Heinsius, 1934); Harold J. Grimm, *Lazarus Spengler: A Lay Leader of the Reformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University

(Nuremberg was the first imperial city to adopt the Wittenberg version of reform and quickly became one of the most important strongholds of the new faith, especially in southern Germany.) Spengler was a native of Nuremberg and his family belonged to the *ehrbare* or honorable class of families in the imperial city; his father served as secretary to the council of patricians who governed the famous *polis*. After attending a local Latin school and then studying for three semesters in the arts faculty of the University of Leipzig, Lazarus returned to his home city in 1496 to follow in his recently deceased father's footsteps, serving as first secretary for the city court, then as undersecretary for the city council, and finally as one of the two senior secretaries to the city council, a position he held from 1507 to his death in 1534. He became enamoured with Luther's teaching already in the late 1510s while participating in an elite circle of humanists in the imperial city that had access to the reformer's work. Members of this group included some of Nuremberg's most famous sons, among them Albrecht Dürer, Willibald Pirckheimer, and Christoph Scheurl. The latter, who had been a professor of law at the University of Wittenberg, obtained a copy of Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* and discussed them with his fellow humanists in Nuremberg, one of whom, Caspar Nützel, translated them into German and had them published in the imperial city.<sup>7</sup> Despite Spengler's lack of formal theological training, he was an avid reader of theology, and early on had been especially drawn to the works of Jerome.<sup>8</sup> He soon came to adopt a more Augustinian theology as he read (or better, devoured) the works of Luther and other evangelical theologians. Spengler met Luther in October 1518 as the reformer passed through Nuremberg on his way to and from the Diet of Augsburg.

The council secretary authored the first lay evangelical pamphlet, the popular *Apology ...[for] Luther's Teaching* (1519), which went through seven print-

---

Press, 1978). For critical editions of Spengler's works see Berndt Hamm and Wolfgang Huber, eds., *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1: *Schriften der Jahre 1509-1525* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995); Berndt Hamm, Wolfgang Huber, and Gudrun Litz, eds., *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 2: *Schriften der Jahre 1525-1529* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999); and Berndt Hamm, Felix Breiting, Gudrun Litz, and Andreas Zerchele, eds., *Lazarus Spengler*, vol. 3: *Schriften der Jahre Mai 1529 bis März 1530* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010). A planned fourth volume is yet to be published.

7. On the membership of this *sodalitas* see Grimm, *Lazarus Spengler*, 25 and 33, and Gerald Strauss, *Nuremberg in the Sixteenth Century* (London: John Wiley, 1966), 160. Strauss discusses the role of Scheurl and Nützel in the spread of the *Ninety-five Theses* on p. 161.
8. Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler*, 102-106.

ings in just two years.<sup>9</sup> Spengler argued in his *Apology* that Luther's Christianity was based on Scripture, love of neighbor, and true inward piety, while his opponents promoted a religion grounded on human teaching, mere external observance, and self-interest. This latter false Christianity produced anxious consciences because it insisted that human beings had to please and placate the holy God through their own moral efforts; Luther's Christianity, on the other hand, provided peace and comfort for the human soul because of its biblical stress on divine grace and faith, the central source of its appeal for Spengler. Luther's faith simply made sense to the council secretary. He writes:

This I know without doubt, that although I do not consider myself to be a highly-trained scholar, I have never had a teaching or sermon penetrate my mind so powerfully, and have never been able to grasp any more fully, or had any correspond so exactly to my understanding of the Christian order as the teaching and instruction of Luther and his followers.<sup>10</sup>

Spengler went on to assert of the Wittenberg reformer:

the Almighty God ... has awakened a Daniel in the midst of the folk in the person of Dr. Luther. [He has done this] to open our eyes to the blindness in which we have lain for a long time due to the deception of our theologians, and to take from us the fog and darkness of such indecency (*unschicklikait*).<sup>11</sup>

Claims like this contributed to Spengler being named on the papal bull that threatened Luther with excommunication. His pamphlet made its way into the hands of Johann Eck, who was outraged by the council secretary's support for Luther and who therefore appended his name to *Exsurge Domine*. Following two humiliating (and insincere) confessions of wrongdoing,

---

9. The full title of the work was: *Schutzrede und christliche Antwort eines ehrbaren Liebhabers der göttlichen Wahrheit der heiligen Schrift mit Anzeigung, warum Dr. Martin Luthers Lehre nicht als unchristlich verworfen, sondern vielmehr als christlich gehalten werden soll*. Although Spengler intended the *Apology* for discussion in the *Sodalitas*, a printer in Augsburg obtained a copy of the it and, according to the council secretary, published it without his permission. For a critical edition see Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 75–102. For the seven extant editions see 79–81.

10. 'Das weiß ich aber onzweyfenlich, das mir, der sich für kainen hochvernünftigen, gelerten oder geschickten helt, mein leben lang ainich leer oder predig so starck in mein vernunft nie gegangen ist, hab auch von kainem meer begreifen mügen, das sich meins verstands christenlicher ordnung also vergleicht als Luthers und seiner nachvolgler leer und underweisung.' Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 89, lines 5–11.

11. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 100, lines 2–6.

Spengler was absolved and his name was struck from the bull. Nevertheless, he continued to publish pro-Luther pamphlets and hymns, including one against *Exsurge Domine*.<sup>12</sup>

Using his position of influence in the imperial city to great effect, Spengler would go on to play a defining role in the spread and eventual institutionalization of the evangelical movement both in Nuremberg and in other southern German cities. (In addition to being chief secretary to the city council, Spengler also served as a delegate to numerous imperial and regional diets at which he represented Nuremberg's political and religious interests.) He was a humanist turned evangelical who possessed an unwavering commitment to the fledging evangelical movement of his day, and who used the personal and political means at his disposal to promote it. He was arguably one of the most important lay figures in the early German Reformation.

### Spengler on suffering and consolation

In the summer of 1521, almost two years after he wrote the *Apology ... [for] Luther's Teaching*, Spengler composed a short pamphlet entitled *A Consoling Christian Instruction and Medicine in All Adversities*, which was printed twice, once in Nuremberg and once in Augsburg.<sup>13</sup> This was Spengler's first work on consolation and it represents one of the earliest efforts by an evangelical (whether lay or ordained) to contribute to this traditional genre.<sup>14</sup> The council secretary had recently returned to Nuremberg from the Diet of Worms (January-May, 1521) and he was deeply troubled by the threat its edict posed to Luther and his followers. Spengler was also troubled by the prospect of the Imperial Governing Council coming to Nuremberg in the fall of the same year, something Emperor Charles V had ordered at the Diet of Worms.

Spengler addressed the *Consoling Christian Instruction* to his sister, Margaretha, who had sought to console him by letter in his distress about the events at Worms. He says that he is grateful for her encouragement, but he also informs

12. See Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 60–62. Spengler's work against *Exsurge Domine* was entitled: *In bullam pontificis romani, nuper contra Martinum Luther et eius sequentes emanatam* (1520). See Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 134–145.

13. The critical edition of the *Eine tröstliche christliche Anweisung und Arznei in allen Widerwärtigkeiten* is in Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 224–243. For information on the two editions, see 225.

14. On the consolation literature of the ancient and medieval Church see the article on 'Trost' in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 34, 143–153, and the article on 'Trostbücher' in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 8, 1048–1051.

her that he dare not rest in her human solace, rather he must turn to God alone for comfort in this and every tribulation. (Spengler actually says very little about the immediate cause of his distress, choosing instead to address the topic of suffering in the Christian life more generally, as the title of his pamphlet suggests.) The council secretary's account of divine consolation is in many ways quite traditional. He rehearses several themes and remedies found in the ancient and medieval Christian consolation literature: life is a valley of tears and trials for all human beings, especially Christians, and therefore they should expect one *Anfechtung* after another;<sup>15</sup> suffering and adversity ultimately come from God, who sends them to accomplish his good purposes, which include growth in patience and fear of God;<sup>16</sup> the Christian must follow in the Saviour's footsteps (1 Pet. 2:21),<sup>17</sup> bearing the cross patiently, which is the only way to find God;<sup>18</sup> the Christian must accept divinely imposed suffering with gratitude,<sup>19</sup> and also realize that such suffering is always light in comparison with what the sinner deserves;<sup>20</sup> suffering has many positive benefits, including the prevention of future sin,<sup>21</sup> the slaying of the sinful nature (especially pride),<sup>22</sup> the magnification of God's glory (Jn 9:3),<sup>23</sup> and the testing of faith to see if the Christian trusts in God alone or not.<sup>24</sup> Spengler also maintains that divinely sent tribulation provides Christians with an opportunity to be cleansed from past sin, an assertion that warrants further attention.

The council secretary writes:

I know well that trial and tribulation are sent to us from God for our benefit, improvement, and salvation, and that sorrow of every kind, provided that the pain associated with it is received and endured in a proper faith and trust in

- 
15. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 229, lines 22–25 and 230, lines 9–19.
  16. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 231, lines 4–10.
  17. On the importance of following in Christ's footsteps see Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 227, line 25–229, line 3.
  18. 'Es sey weit von uns, widerwertikait und das creutz zu flihen, so es allein die weise ist, Got dadurch zu finden.' Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 229, lines 3–5.
  19. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 231, lines 13–16.
  20. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 232, lines 1–6.
  21. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 233, lines 7–8.
  22. Spengler speaks of suffering as a divinely sent antidote to 'den auffgeplasen gifftigen seuchen der hochfart, der alle andere laster mit ime zeucht.' Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 227, lines 11–15.
  23. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 235, line 15–236, line 2.
  24. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 236, lines 13–18.

God, purifies and washes away sin.<sup>25</sup>

A few lines later Spengler explains: 'Some people are scourged by God through sickness, sorrow, adversity, and suffering so that the same burdens, ordained by God as a penance, can wash away and erase the stains of their sinful [and] punishable past life.'<sup>26</sup> He can also say that God abolishes the guilt of sin through suffering:

Although from the perspective of divine righteousness we are worthy of eternal punishment and torment, the good heavenly Father bears with us as poor and needy people, and refreshes us with the dew of his gratuitous mercy, sending us now this and now that suffering, pain, and adversity, so that he may cancel<sup>27</sup> our sinful debts with them.<sup>28</sup>

How does this washing away of past sin through present suffering work? Spengler does not say, at least not in a clear and unambiguous fashion. He asserts that the patient and faithful bearing of such crosses cleanses the Christian from sin and its debt, but he does not discuss the specific mechanism or logic by which this takes place. This mechanism might have something to do with humility. Spengler says that adversity and tribulation can combat the pride of the Christian by persuading him of his spiritual poverty, fragility, and need for grace;<sup>29</sup> when he confesses these realities to God, that is, when

25. 'Ich waiß wol, das anfechtung und tru[e]bsal von Got zu unserm nutz, fu[e]rderung und hail gesendet werden und das ein ygkliche betru[e]bnuns, so der schmerzen derselben in einem rechten glauben und vertrauen zu Gott angenommen und geduldet wirdet, die sund reynigt und abwescht.' Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 231, lines 4–7.

26. 'Ertliche menschen werden darumb von Got durch krankhait, trübsall, widerwertikayt und leyden gegayselt, damit dieselben beschwerden, als ein puß von Gott verordent, die mackel yrres sündigen, strafflichen begangen lebens abwasch und außtilg.' Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 231, lines 20–23.

27. *Abtilgen* can mean cancel, destroy, or pay off. In the present context, 'cancel' makes the best sense. See Alfred Götze, *Frühneuhochdeutsches Glossar* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 5; Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 16 vols. (Leipzig: S. Hirzel 1854–1960), here vol. 1, Spalte 140; and Robert R. Anderson, Ulrich Goebel, Oskar Reichmann, eds., *Frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, Band 1, Einführung, *a—äpfelkern*, bearbeitet von Oskar Reichmann (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 435–438.

28. 'Wiewol wir nun auß götlicher gerechtikayt ewiger straff und peen würdig wern, geduldet uns doch der gütig hymelisch Vatter als arme, dörfüge personen, überschattert uns auch mit dem tau seiner grundlosen parmherতিকayt und schickt uns dann dieses, dann jhenes leyden, schmerzen und widerwertikayten zu, das er unser sündtlich verschulden damit abtilge.' Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 232, lines 1–6.

29. 'Dann anfechtung, bekummernus, tru[e]bsal, leiden, vervolgung und was dem men-



he agrees with God's judgment of him as a sinner in need of mercy, he is given grace. Spengler holds up the penitent thief on the cross as a model: he confessed his guilt, accepted his just punishment, and in so doing received the promise of Paradise (Lk. 23:39-43).<sup>30</sup> Early on in the *Consoling Christian Instruction* Spengler observes how in the incarnation Christ emptied himself completely (*hat er sich... ganz entleeret*) of his divine prerogatives (Phil. 2:5-11) and trod the path of suffering in order to restore communion between God and humanity.<sup>31</sup> The council secretary maintains that the Christian has to be similarly emptied of self and realize his nothingness (*selbs nichtzit*) before God in order to participate fully in this restored fellowship with God.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the Christian has to become humble, his pride has to be repeatedly

---

schen widerwertigs beegent, wo die in Got, von dem uns dieselben geschickt werden, geordent, sind anders nit dann ein haylsame tyriack und ertzney fu[e]r alle beschwerden der sunden, und zuvor den auffgeplasen giftigen seuchen der hochfart, der alle andere laster mit ime zeucht.' [Affliction, anxiety, misery, suffering, persecution, and that which goes against a person's will, where they are attributed to God, who sends them to us, are nothing other than a salutary medicine for every burden of sin, above all [for the] the puffed up, poisonous sickness of pride, which draws all other vices along with it.] Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 227, lines 11–17.

Later in the pamphlet Spengler similarly writes, 'Dann das sehen und empfinden wir alle tag unwidersprechlich: So wir mit tru[e]bsal und leyden umbgeben werden, so schlagen wir in uns selbs, erkennen uns arm, geprechlich und gnadenbedo[e]rftig menschen; und so wir dann durch solch erkandtnus unser selbs nichtzit in uns finden, dadurch wir mo[e]chten zu hochfart geursacht werden, werden wir gediemu[e]tigt, flihen zu Got, ru[o]ffen und schreien zu yme umb hilf, do wirdet unser vertrau gegen yme gescherpft.' [We see and observe this undeniably every day: when we are surrounded by misery and suffering, we look within ourselves [and] recognize ourselves as poor, vulnerable people who are in need of grace. And when by this insight into ourselves we find nothing in ourselves that could be a cause for pride, we are humbled, we flee to God, [and we] call and cry to him for help—in this way our trust in him is sharpened.] See *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 237, lines 14–19.

30. 'Der schacher am creutz hat von dem Herrn durch kain ander mittel parmertzikait und das hymelisch paradis erlangt dann durch sein bekennen, das er auß billichayt die straff des creutz empfienge und gemeß seinem verdienen belonung einneme. Darumb wollen wir auch mit dem propheten zu Gott ru[o]ffen: "Herr, du bist gerecht und gerecht ist dein gericht." [Ps. 119:137]. [The thief on the cross obtained mercy and heavenly paradise from the Lord through no other means than through his confession that he deserved the punishment of the cross and that he was receiving 'payment' for what he had 'earned.' Therefore we also want to call out to God with the prophet, 'Lord, you are just and your judgment is just.' [Ps. 119:137]. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 232, lines 14–20.
31. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 227, lines 18–28.
32. See note 29 above.

demolished, and this can only happen through suffering. In all of this Spengler sounds like a strong advocate of Luther's so-called 'humility theology.'<sup>33</sup>

Yet the cultivation of humility only accounts for part of the soteriological work that suffering does in Spengler's pamphlet, for the council secretary clearly states that the patient bearing of adversity merits grace, seemingly of its own accord and quite apart from the humility it produces. This is an aspect of his thought to which we will return shortly. First we must note another function of suffering in the *Consoling Christian Instruction*.

Spengler has a lot to say about faith in his pamphlet and in these sections he sounds most clearly 'Lutheran.' Faith alone makes one pleasing to God and it alone unites one to God. Faith alone also allows one to survive tribulation, for it alone is able to cling to the divine promises of God's goodness and mercy and thus renders the Christian largely indifferent to fortune and misfortune.<sup>34</sup> Because it accomplishes so much, Spengler reasons that faith must be constantly tested and proved; therefore the Christian should welcome suffering. The pre-Reformation consolation literature could also interpret adversity as a test of faith, but as Ute Mennecke-Haustein has shown, this traditional explanation took on a new meaning and importance in Luther's approach to consolation; it became *the* explanation for divinely imposed tribulation.<sup>35</sup> It appears that Spengler found this new evangelical emphasis appealing;

---

33. I deal with the thorny issue of the role of *humilitas* and the *humilitas fidei* in Luther's theology in chapters 4 and 5 of my forthcoming book, *The Reformation of Suffering*.

34. 'Der glaub allein macht uns Got gefellig und angenehme, der ist die ainig sewl und grundtfest, die uns in allem unserm leben erhelt, durch den wir Got verainigt und nahend werden und erlangen, was wir pitten. Der allein macht uns alle widerwertikait freudenreich, alle pürden leicht und alle pitterkait süß. Dann wer Got glaubt, in ine auch künlich vertraut und an seiner verhaisung nit zweifelt, dem ist freud und traurn, klagen und frolocken, kranckhait und gesundthait, sterben und leben gleich, der tregt alles das, so yme begegnen mag, on alle beschwerde in Christo.' [Faith alone makes us pleasing and acceptable to God. It is the only pillar and foundation that supports us in our whole life. Through faith we are united with God and brought close to him; through faith we obtain that for which we ask. Faith alone makes all adversity joyful, all burdens light, and all bitterness sweet. For to the one who believes God, boldly trusts in him, and does not doubt his promise, joy and sadness, lament and rejoicing, sickness and health, death and life are the same. Such a person bears in Christ everything that he might encounter without any complaint.] Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 236, lines 19–26.

35. On the importance of suffering as a *tentatio probationis* of faith in Luther, see Ute Mennecke-Haustein, *Luthers Trostbriefe* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1989), 84–85. Mennecke-Haustein demonstrates that the proving of faith took logical precedence over the production of virtue in Luther's understanding of suffering.

regarding suffering above all else as a test of faith helped the council secretary to render adversity meaningful and plausible to himself. But Spengler also goes beyond Luther in the explanations he gives for suffering.

The council secretary is still interested in the sinner atoning for past sin through suffering, and still conceives of suffering being in some sense meritorious.<sup>36</sup> The language he uses (*puß* and *abtilgen*) is the language of late medieval penitential theology, which posited a close connection between suffering and the forgiveness of sin.<sup>37</sup> The majority of theologians on the eve of the Reformation taught that suffering could function as a penance that atoned for the penalty (*poena*) of sin, provided the Christian received it with patience and humility. Suffering was seen as a species of fasting, which helped the sinner to recover a proper relationship with himself by enabling him to combat the concupiscence of the flesh. Suffering rendered satisfaction for the penalty of sin to God, helped to purify human nature, and thus reduced the time the Christian would have to spend in Purgatory after death. This view of suffering helped to render adversity and tribulation plausible to late medieval Christians: suffering was a divine gift that reformed the Christian's character and helped to atone for the penalty of sin; it was soteriologically necessary, it was salvific, and therefore it was to be embraced.

We know that this traditional view of suffering was present in the Nuremberg of Spengler's youth. Johannes von Freiburg's immensely popular *Summa for Confessors* was published by the Nuremberg printer, Anton Koberger, in 1498.<sup>38</sup> In it the famous Dominican explicitly states that all bodily suffering is a means of fasting that renders satisfaction for sin;<sup>39</sup> he also directs con-

36. See Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 232, lines 1–6; 241, line 3; and 237, line 3. But see 238, line 24–239, line 1, where Spengler quotes Bernard of Clairvaux to the effect that God always rescues those who call upon him not on the basis of their own merit but because they trust in Christ.

37. The best work on late medieval penitential theology remains Thomas Tentler's *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

38. It has been asserted that 'Die "Summa Confessorum" des Johannes von Freiburg ... ist das Hauptwerk der mittelalterlichen "Summae de poenitentia," zu mindest in der Germania ...' See Georg Steer, Wolfgang Klimanek, Daniela Kuhlmann, Freimut Löser, and Karl-Heiner Südekum, eds., *Die 'Rechtssumme' Bruder Bertholds: Eine deutsche abecedarische Bearbeitung der 'Summa Confessorum' des Johannes von Freiburg. Synoptische Edition der Fassungen B, A und C*, 4 vols (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1987), here vol. I, 7. On the 1498 Nuremberg edition of the *Summa confessorum*, see *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* (Leipzig, 1925–), M13590, also at <http://www.gesamtkatalogderwiegendrucke.de/GWEN.xhtml>

39. 'Sicut vigilie peregrinationes discipline et omnia opera carnem affligentia reducuntur ad ieiunium.' See Johannes de Friburgo, *Summa confessorum* (Augsburg, 1476) [Her-

fessors to count as a penance all the suffering that penitents have patiently endured.<sup>40</sup> We also know that the library of St. Sebald's Church, the church that Spengler attended, contained 'Excerpta de summa confessorum,' being almost certainly a reference to the work by Johannes von Freiburg.<sup>41</sup> It is likely that priests who served in St. Sebald's Church drew on this work as they prepared to hear confessions, and as they developed sermons and catechism lessons. Spengler no doubt learned of the traditional connection between suffering and penance through one or all of these means.

The *Summa for Confessors* was by no means the only work to address the connection between suffering and penance in late medieval Nuremberg. The anonymous *Mirror of Confession for Sinners*, which was printed in the city by Georg Stuchs in 1510, instructs penitents to say the following to their confessors:

I ask you lastly ... that you would now place on me a small and brief sacramental penance that I can perform already in this hour or on this day. I also ask that you would apply to me, counting it as a penance, the merit of our Lord Jesus Christ's suffering ... along with all my good works, or those which others have done for me (be they prayers, fasts, alms-giving, pilgrimages), plus all the grace and indulgence I have obtained, *and also all the sickness and adversity I have suffered*, and, finally, all of the concern and work ... by which I meet my material needs. Apply to me all of these things as a satisfaction for my sin.<sup>42</sup>

---

zog August Bibliothek A: 16.2 Theol. 2<sup>o</sup>], *Liber III, Titulus XXXIII, Questio cv*. See also *Questiones* cix, cviii, und cix.

40. 'cautus et discretus sacerdos post iniunctam penitentiam dicat penitenti quia omnia bona quae fecerit et omnia male que [sic] sustinuerit et proficiant ad salutem et ei penitentia hec omnia iniungat. Tunc enim valebunt ei omnia si a presbitero iniungantur et penitentia fit deuota ...' *ibid.*, *Liber III, Titulus XXXIII, Questio cviii*.
41. See Elisabeth Caesar, 'Sebald Schreyer: Ein Lebensbild aus dem vorreformatorischen Nürnberg', *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg* 56 (1969): 101. Johannes von Freiburg's *Summa confessorum* was not the only late medieval treatment of confession to bear this title; Johannes von Erfurt and Thomas de Chobham produced works with the same title. It is therefore possible that the St. Sebald's Church library contained excerpts from one of these latter's works, although owing to the widespread popularity of Johannes von Freiburg's *Summa*, it is more likely that it possessed his work.
42. 'Pitt auch zu dem letzten ewr wirdikeit/ wöllet mir itzunt ein kleine kürtze sacramentalichen puß auff setzten, die ich pald in diser stund/ oder in disem tag müg außrichten/ auch wöllet mich tailhaftig machen und zu puß auff setzten/ das verdien des leides inu christi unsers herren/ auch in ainer gemain zu puß geben fur mein sundt/ alle meine güttre werck die ich than/ oder die andere person fur mich thun/ es sey

As was true in cities and territories throughout late-medieval Europe, suffering was salvific in the Nuremberg of Spengler's youth.

The council secretary does not specifically mention the need to atone for the remaining *poena* of sin through suffering in the *Consoling Christian Instruction*, and there is no discussion of Purgatory in the pamphlet, both of which points are quite significant. Spengler has very little to say about Purgatory in his early works. In a pamphlet entitled *Exhortation and Guide to a Virtuous Conduct of Life* that Spengler may have drafted as early as 1509 but only had printed in 1520,<sup>43</sup> he asserted that the patient bearing of adversity was 'meritorious' (*verdienlich*) and that it reduced suffering in the next life, but with no explicit references to Purgatory.<sup>44</sup> In his *Apology ... [for] Luther's Teaching* Spengler mentions Purgatory, but only in connection with his critique of abuses associated with indulgences, something one also finds in his pamphlet against *Exsurge Domine*, as well as in another work that appeared after the *Consoling Christian Instruction*.<sup>45</sup> It is possible, and perhaps even likely that Spengler believed in some kind of Purgatory; after all, Luther himself did not formally reject the notion of post-mortem purgation until 1530. In fact, Luther had stated in print in the late 1510s and early 1520s that he thought there was a Purgatory, although like Wessel of Gansfort he insisted that it was not a place in which souls rendered satisfaction for sin through suffering, rather, it was a place where self-love was purged and love of God's will deepened; Purgatory was a *purgatorium* not a *punitorium*.<sup>46</sup> We know that Spengler was familiar

---

peten/ fasten/ almüsen geben/ wallen/ auch allen gnad und applas den ich löß/ *auch mer alle mein krankheit und widerwertikeit die ich leid!* auch zu dem letzten alle mein sorg und arbeit/ die ich in meinem standt oder ampt/ und domit ich mein zeitliche narung gewynn/ die ding alle setzt mir auff zu einem genüg than uber mein sundt ...' *Peycht Spiegel der Sünder* (Nürnberg, 1510) [The Houghton Library, Harvard University, Typ 520.10.201], fols L2 r-L2 v. My emphasis.

43. See Lazarus Spengler, *Ermahnung und Unterweisung zu einem tugendhaften Wandel*, in Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 6–7.
44. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 21, line 10; 22, lines 13–15; 23, lines 11–12. Merit played a greater role in his theology in the *Ermahnung und Unterweisung* than in either the *Schutzrede* or the *Tröstliche christliche Anweisung*, although it is still present in the latter two works, especially in Spengler's theology of suffering.
45. See *In bullam pontificis Romani*, in Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 141, line 17. In the same volume see also *Warum Luthers Lehre Not und Nutz sei* (August/September 1522), 267, line 26. Spengler was more critical of Purgatory itself in two later writings: the first is a letter to Peter Butz dated June 10, 1526; the second, a revised version of his *Glaubenbekenntnis* that he completed in 1533. See Hamm, Huber, and Litz, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 2, 54, lines 1–2, and 139, lines 1–4, respectively.
46. Luther asserted in the *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* (1518),

with the writings in which such assertions occurred, although he never made such assertions himself.<sup>47</sup> Whatever Spengler's beliefs concerning Purgatory were, it seems clear enough that the doctrine was not central to this thinking about suffering and forgiveness of sin in his early pamphlets. Therefore, owing to the importance of Purgatory in traditional penitential theology, we must be careful about dubbing his view of suffering 'pre-Reformation.' Still, the traditional penitential language he employs appears to have retained at least some of its traditional meaning: the Christian must still bear his suffering patiently for his past sin and its debt to be washed away.

This was not Luther's position on suffering, even though he allowed for some kind of Purgatory; he never interprets tribulation and adversity as a means of rendering penance for the remaining penalty of sin, nor as a way of washing it away. He explicitly states the opposite in his widely distributed *A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* (preached in October 1517, published in February 1518), which was printed twice in Nuremberg.<sup>48</sup> Luther argues that God requires no penalty or satisfaction (*peynn adder gnugthuung*) for sin

---

'Mihī certissimum est, purgatorium esse ...' WA 1: 555.36. In the *Grund und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers, so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind* (1521), he expanded on this assertion: 'Ich hab das fegfewr noch nie geleücknett. hallt es auch noch. wie ich viel mal geschrieven vnnd bekantt wie wol ichs ynn keynen weg, widder auß der schrift noch vornüfft vnwiddersprechlich beweyßen kan Ich find wol ynn der schrift. das Christus. Abraham. Jacob. Moses. Job Daud. Ezechias vnnd etlich mehr. ym leben. die helle versucht habenn. wilchs ich acht sey das fegfewr. vnnd ist nit vnglewlich. das ettliche todren des gleychen leyden Taulerus sagt auch viel daüon vnnd kurzlich mich hab ich beschlossē es sey eyn fegfewr. kan aber keynen andernn also beschließen.' WA 7: 450.11–18.

[The existence of a purgatory I have never denied. I still hold that it exists, as I have written and admitted many times, though I have found no way of proving it incontrovertibly from Scripture or reason. I find in Scripture that Christ, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Job, David, Hezekiah, and some others tasted hell in this life. This I think was purgatory, and it seems not beyond belief that some of the dead suffer in like manner. Tauler has much to say about it, and, in short, I myself have come to the conclusion that there is a purgatory, but I cannot force anybody else to come to the same conclusion.' *Luther's Works* 32, 95. Only in his 1530 *Widerruff vom Fegfewer* (WA 30(2): 360–390) did Luther explicitly reject Purgatory. See Craig Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700* (Basingstone and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 2000), 21–29.

47. Spengler was likely familiar with the *Resolutiones* and had definitely read the *Grund und Ursach*, for he draws on it frequently in a number of his early works. See Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 'Außerbiblische Zitate,' 492.
48. WA 1, 239. For a list of the twenty-two extant editions of *Ein Sermon von Ablass und Gnade* see WA 1: 240–242. Both Nuremberg editions were printed by Jobst Gutknecht in 1518. See editions G and H.

beyond the sinner's 'heart-felt and true repentance (*rew*) or conversion', along with his intention to take up the cross of Christ.<sup>49</sup> Nothing more is required to receive the free gift of divine forgiveness.<sup>50</sup> (Luther asserted early on in the *Lectures on Hebrews* of 1518 that such repentance was produced in the Christian by grace.)<sup>51</sup> He says that Christians should seek to endure the tribulations sent by God, not because they render satisfaction for sin but because they contribute to Christians' spiritual improvement, which is God's purpose in sending them.<sup>52</sup> He criticizes certain 'modern preachers' (*newen prediger*) who make a distinction between two kinds of penalties for sin: curative (*medicativa*) and satisfactory (*satisfactoria*). He rejects the latter category and places all divine *poena* in the former one. He insists that 'all penalty, indeed, everything that God lays upon Christians is edifying (*besserlich*) for them and able to be born by them.'<sup>53</sup> Luther cites 1 Cor. 10:13 in order to encourage his readers that God will not test them beyond what they can bear, and therefore they have no need of indulgences to reduce punishment for sin.<sup>54</sup> This rejection of suffering as a means of penance was a radical break from late medieval theology. For Luther, suffering was no longer salvific, a change of monumental importance for subsequent Protestant theology and piety.

It is quite possible that Spengler had read this sermon, for he claimed in 1521 that he had carefully studied all of Luther's published works up to that point.<sup>55</sup> However, it seems clear enough that Luther's argument about the non-penitential nature of suffering escaped him, both in 1521 when he wrote the *Consoling Christian Instruction*, and therefore in 1519, when he wrote *The Apology ... [for] Luther's Teaching* and was subsequently listed on the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*. Because Luther's position on suffering followed logically from his new evangelical soteriology, there is good reason to suspect that Spengler did not understand Luther's theology of salvation in all its radicali-

---

49. WA 1: 244.15–19.

50. WA 1: 245.21–23.

51. WA 57(3): 101.19–22; LW 29: 112–113.

52. WA 1: 244.34–245.4. See also the following two notes.

53. WA 1: 244.40–245.4. In the *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* Luther writes against those who believe that their sins can be forgiven through their own sorrow for sins and works of satisfaction. WA 1: 542.34–38; LW 31: 103.

54. WA 1: 245.5–12.

55. See Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler*, 178. It should be noted that Spengler does not cite Luther's *Ein Sermon von Ablass und Gnade* in any of his works. See the 'Außerbiblische Zitate' indexes in *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vols. 1 and 2, 492 and 488, respectively.

ty.<sup>56</sup> Spengler could envision some kind of minimal human contribution to the washing away of sin, where Luther allowed none. The council secretary has a lot more to say about merit than one would expect to find in a disciple of Luther at this point. It would seem that Spengler had not grasped Luther as fully as he claimed in his *Apology ... [for] Luther's Teaching*. At least on the matter of suffering and its salvific status, Spengler appears to have misunderstood Luther. The Luther whom Spengler so fervently supported and for whom he was willing to sacrifice so much was not the 'real Luther,' that is, he was not the Luther we encounter in the extant works from this period, including rather uncomplicated vernacular works that appeared in Spengler's own city.

### Understanding Spengler's productive misunderstanding

How may we account for this productive misunderstanding and how important is it? Taking up the latter question first, it is very important. Rejecting the traditional salvific status of suffering was a necessary and essential part of Luther's evangelical soteriology, and it directly informed his proposed reforms of popular piety, much of which he thought was designed to avoid suffering or to make a penance out of it. Spengler agreed with these reforms but did not fully grasp Luther's reasons for them. Even more important is the potential this productive misunderstanding had for the shape of pastoral care in the early Reformation. There is a world of difference between telling a suffering burgher that his adversity is potentially salvific and telling him that it is not, that it is first and foremost a test of faith and then a summons to more faithful Christian discipleship, neither of which merits forgiveness of sin. These are simply two very different ways of seeking to render suffering plausible and meaningful.

How to account for this productive misunderstanding? First, we should make it clear that we have no reason to believe that Luther read the *Consoling Christian Instruction*, as there is no mention of it in the critical edition of Luther's works. Therefore we simply do not know what Luther thought of it. We should also remember that Spengler was not the only prominent lay humanist advocate of Luther's teaching to misunderstand the Wittenberg reformer. The most famous example occurred when Spengler's fellow Nuremberger, Albrecht Dürer, looked to Erasmus to take up Luther's banner after it

56. On Spengler's misunderstanding of Luther in the 'Schutzrede', see Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler*, 178–179. Hamm argues that Spengler's soteriology was influenced especially by Johannes von Staupitz, who still allowed minimal room for human merit in his theology of salvation. See discussion of Staupitz below.



was thought that the reformer had been assassinated at the Diet of Worms. (Luther was of course hidden away at the Wartburg.)<sup>57</sup> Dürer had been drawn to Luther's teaching for many of the same reasons Spengler was,<sup>58</sup> and yet he was not able to see the important differences (especially soteriological differences) that separated him from Erasmus even in 1521. Spengler's misunderstanding was not as obvious as Dürer's, but it did involve a similar inability to discern an important difference between Luther and some of his high-profile, early advocates.

The council secretary's productive misunderstanding of Luther may be attributed especially to his great admiration for the reformer's teacher, mentor, and friend, Johannes von Staupitz, the Vicar General of the Observant Augustinians in Germany and the Netherlands.<sup>59</sup> Spengler saw Luther and Staupitz as two advocates of a single, evangelical theology and therefore assumed that what one taught the other accepted. While there was a great deal of common ground between Luther and Staupitz, especially in their Augustinian stress on divine grace and human sin, there were also crucial differences that allowed Staupitz to remain within the Catholic Church and that caused Luther finally to reject and be rejected by it. One of these differences had to do with the soteriological status of suffering.

Staupitz was well known and much loved in Nuremberg, especially among the circle of humanists to which Spengler belonged. After Staupitz's visits to the imperial city in Advent 1516 and Lent 1517 the circle adopted the name *Sodalitas Staupitziana* in order to express its admiration for his great learning and piety.<sup>60</sup> The vicar general preached a series of Lenten sermons in Nurem-

---

57. See William Martin Conway, trans. and ed., *The Writings* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958), 159.

58. Conway, *The Writings of Albrecht Dürer*, 155. Conway provides a translation of Dürer's 1520 confession of evangelical faith. On Spengler's relationship to Dürer see Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler*, 73–117. On Dürer's enthusiasm for Luther see the same work, 110–111.

59. On this admiration and the general influence of Staupitz on Spengler's early theology see Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler*, 60–68 and 106–108. It should be noted that the critical edition of the *Tröstliche christliche Anweisung* cites Staupitz's Lenten sermons as the source of Spengler's comments regarding the salvific nature of suffering. See Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 231, notes 80 and 89, and 232, n. 96. Franz Posset also comments on Staupitz's influence on Spengler's consolation pamphlet. See *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The Life and Works of Johann von Staupitz* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2003), 189. However, no scholar has examined this specific borrowing from Staupitz in detail, nor has anyone related it to the larger issue of Spengler's understanding of Luther's theology of suffering.

60. On Staupitz's visits to Nuremberg see Posset, *The Front-Runner*, 162–190.

berg that contained important statements about the role of suffering in the Christian life.<sup>61</sup> In one sermon he maintained that if a Christian bore his suffering patiently it could act as ‘a penance and remission of his sins’ (*ain puß vnd ablegung seiner sunden*) that reduced time in Purgatory and thus hastened his journey to God.<sup>62</sup> This was not the highest form of Christian suffering, according to the vicar general, but it was still valid. Staupitz identifies two higher forms: suffering for the sake of eternal merit and thus one’s reward in heaven, and suffering motivated by the love of God with no thought of merit or reward.<sup>63</sup>

61. See I.K.F. Knaake, ed., *Johannes von Staupitzens Sämmtliche Werke*, Erster Band: Deutsche Schriften (Potsdam: A Krausnick—Gropius’sche Buchhandlung, 1867), 15–42.

62. I have taken *ablegung* in the sense of *Erläss* [remission]. For this meaning see Götze, *Glossar*, ‘*ablegen*’, 3.

63. The title of the sermon was ‘Von den Graden des leydens Vnuerdinter Widerwertigkeit Wie die ordenlich Vnd Volkommenlich mogen gesetzt werden.’ [Concerning the Degrees of Suffering Undeserved Adversity: How They May Be Properly and Completely Arranged.] Staupitz places a strong emphasis on the priority of grace at all stages of salvation, but still allows for the connection between patient bearing of suffering and the reduction of *poena*. He argues that ‘Der erst grad das der mensch solch vnschuldig leyden annimpt Vnd gedultiglich tregt fur ain puß vnd ablegung seiner sunden. Dieses leiden also anzunemen Ist wol nit Vnschicklich oder unchristenlich, dem menschan aber gegen den nachfolgenden zwayen graden nit gleich verdinlich. Dann so der sunder dieses leiden der gestalt annimpt Vnd got pit das er Ime das setz fur ein puß vnd genungthuhung [*sic*] seiner sunden, das ist allein ain bezalung der schulden Vnd sonden die der mensch vff sich hat, dann also nimpt er das leyden dorumb an das er In erstattung der bezalung gemachter sundtlicher schulden dester eher Vnd on lange pein des fegfewrs zu got komen mag.’ Knaake, *Johannes von Staupitzens Sämmtliche Werke*, 21.

[The first degree: that a person accepts such undeserved suffering and bears it patiently as a penance and remission of his sins. Suffering for this reason is certainly not inappropriate or unchristian, but in comparison with the two following degrees, it is not equally meritorious. Because if the sinner accepts suffering for this reason and asks God to reckon it to him as a penance and satisfaction for his sins (that is, alone as a payment of the debts and sins that the person bears), then he [only] accepts suffering so that by the paying off of the sinful debts he has incurred, he may more quickly come to God without a prolonged experience of the pain of purgatory.] See also ‘Das alles vnnser leyden vnd widerwertigkeit allein aus dem leyden christi suß vnd fruchtbar wirdet edlich Christenlich leren vnd beschluss reden,’ [That All of Our Suffering and Adversity Becomes Sweet and Fruitful Only from the Suffering of Christ: Several Christian Teachings and Conclusions], 31–32. On Staupitz see especially David Curtis Steinmetz, *Misericordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes von Staupitz in its Late Medieval Setting* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968); Berndt Hamm, ‘Johann von Staupitz (ca 1468–1524), spätmittelalterlicher Reformier und “Vater” der Reformation,’ *ARG* 92 (2001): 6–42; and Posset, *The Front-Runner*.

There is every reason to believe that Staupitz's comments on suffering and penance directly informed Spengler's view of suffering in the *Consoling Christian Instruction*: he knew Staupitz and had attended these sermons, even taking down notes on them, which are still extant. In fact, they are the only record we have of the homilies.<sup>64</sup> Spengler was reading Luther through the lens of Staupitz, the source of much of the Wittenberg reformer's humility theology,<sup>65</sup> and it is clear that the vicar general allowed for considerations of merit within his Augustinian theology.<sup>66</sup> While Spengler may not have been thoroughly 'Staupitzian' in his theology of suffering (the Vicar General's explicit and positive reference to Purgatory in his sermon and the lack of the same in Spengler's pamphlets is significant), he clearly agreed with the idea that suffering could merit grace.

But this important connection to Staupitz only raises the further question: why did Spengler read Luther through the lens of his mentor? Why did he not see the crucial difference in the respective theologians' understanding of suffering? One could respond by saying that as an untrained lay theologian Spengler could not help but read the Wittenberg reformer in this way. For there had been no open disagreements or rifts between Luther and Staupitz, nothing to suggest that there were any substantive differences between the two. They appeared to be proponents of the same broadly evangelical theology.<sup>67</sup> There is certainly something to this explanation, but I think there is

---

64. See also Posset, *The Front-Runner*, 186 and 189; and Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler*, 172–173. Hamm explains that Spengler's notes on these sermons were not an exact recording of their content, 'sondern eine stark auswählende und komprimierende schriftliche Fixierung von Lieblingsgedanken und -themen, die Spengler bei Staupitz ausgesprochen fand und dann in seine eigene Sprache umsetzte.'

65. Posset, *The Front-Runner*, 180–181 and 256. Spengler was also reading Luther through the lens of Bernard of Clairvaux, another important source of Luther's early humility theology. There are numerous references to Bernard in the *Tröstliche christliche Anweisung*, especially his treatment of Psalm 91. See Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 225.

66. See Robert J. Bast, ed., *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety: Essays by Berndt Hamm* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 124, and Steinmetz, *Misericordia Dei*, 96. Steinmetz explains that Staupitz limits the role of merit to growth in grace; one cannot merit the initial infusion of grace: 'The viator may—and, indeed, must—merit the increase of grace, and can even earn eternal life (i.e., *beautitudo*), but he cannot merit justifying grace. Justifying grace is a gratuitous gift of God which antedates all merit and makes it possible.' Spengler, following Staupitz, appeared to view suffering as a means of meriting the increase of grace.

67. It should be noted that when Spengler wrote the *Tröstliche christliche Anweisung* in 1521, Staupitz was no longer vicar general of the Observant Augustinians. He was

another reason for Spengler's productive misunderstanding that has little to do with Staupitz and his relationship with Luther.

The idea that suffering can atone for the penalty of sin is an extremely powerful notion, and it was deeply embedded in the late medieval religious imagination. As we have seen, the idea was present throughout the devotional and pastoral literature of the time, especially in works that deal with sacramental confession. Suffering as penance made deep sense to late medieval Christians, perhaps especially to burghers, who were encouraged by the economic practices of their cities to operate with a ledger-mentality,<sup>68</sup> and who had sought for centuries to use their reason and free will to please and placate the Divine in hopes of securing material and spiritual blessing for themselves and their cities.<sup>69</sup> Suffering typically involves loss of agency; viewing it as penance restored agency to late medieval Christians by providing them with something they could *do* as they suffered: bear it patiently and thus atone for individual and corporate sin. Beyond this, viewing suffering as a divine summons to penance also enabled late-medieval Christians to believe that despite appearances to the contrary, God was still good: adversity and tribulation were ultimately part of the good God's loving plan to bring them to heaven. In this sense, suffering could be viewed as an expression of God's benevolence; it could be viewed as a gift that, as Staupitz put it in his sermon, enabled the Christian 'to come more quickly to God and without a long time of punishment in Purgatory.'<sup>70</sup> Spengler says something similar early on the *Consoling Christian Instruction*, though without reference to Purgatory: he asserts that the chief benefit of suffering in his own life has been to 'make me, as I hope, closer to God' (*mich, als ich hoffe, neher Got machen*), and therefore he has learned to receive it with thanksgiving.<sup>71</sup> His productive misunderstanding of Luther may finally be attributed to his deep desire to grow nearer

---

now the abbot of a Benedictine monastery in Salzburg, having received permission from Rome to leave the Augustinians. There never was a public rift between Luther and Staupitz, although shortly before the latter's death in 1524 he did express certain reservations about Luther's efforts to reform the Church, even as he made clear his ongoing affection for Luther along with his own dedication to the cause of the evangelical movement. See Posset, *The Front-Runner*, 326–327.

68. See James Aho, *Confession and Bookkeeping: The Religious, Moral, and Rhetorical Roots of Modern Accounting* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

69. See Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler*, chapter 5: 'Bürgerliche Religion und christlicher Glaube', 183–203.

70. See note 63 above.

71. Cf. Hamm and Huber, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1, 227, lines 6–10.

to God and his belief that suffering properly could help him do so by meriting forgiveness for his sin.

Luther's Christianity also sought to render suffering plausible and to present it as a means of bringing the Christian closer to God, but penance played no role in this process – the whole notion that suffering (or any other human act) could provide satisfaction for sin had to be rejected. Luther was keenly aware of how much he was taking away from Christians in terms of the traditional means they had employed to understand and cope with suffering. In his *Sermon on Good Works* (1520), which Spengler had read, the Wittenberg reformer conceded that the new evangelical approach was an art (*kunst*) that was very difficult to master.<sup>72</sup> This art involved seeing suffering not as a penance for sin, but first and foremost as a test of faith, for it was only this refined faith that was able to 'see' the good God cloaked under suffering; faith did this by holding to the divine promises of God's mercy recorded in Scripture, even as experience seemed to insist that God was full of wrath.<sup>73</sup> Spengler had not mastered this art in 1521, certainly not in any final or complete sense.

In time he would come to adopt Luther's non-penitential approach to suffering: there are no references to suffering washing away sin in the council secretary's pamphlets from 1522 on; instead there is the language of the *theologia crucis*.<sup>74</sup> Spengler's misunderstanding of Luther may not have been long-lived, but it did play an important role in enabling him to promote the evangelical

---

72. WA 6: 208.10.

73. WA 6: 208.10–18 [*Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, ed. by Otto Clemen et al. with Albert Lietzmann, 8 vols (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1962–1967), vol. I, 233, lines 5–14]. [abbreviated as CL].

74. Spengler uses the language of the theology of the cross in his second work of consolation entitled: *Wie sich eyn christenmensch in tru[e]bsal und widerwertigkayt tro[e]sten und wo er die rechten hilf und ertzney derhalben suchen soll* (1529) [*How a Christian Person Should Console Himself in Affliction and Adversity, and Where He Should Seek the Proper Help and Medicine for the Same*]. The critical edition appears in Hamm, Huber, and Litz, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 2, 365–389. Spengler explicitly refers to suffering as God's '*fremder werck*' in this work. See p. 378, lines 18–19. Interestingly, Spengler makes reference to the *Tröstliche christliche Anweisung*, indicating no displeasure with its contents nor any significant changes in his thinking about suffering and consolation in the intervening eight years (368, lines 15–20). In one sense Spengler was right; from the early 1510s on he had maintained that the Christian must always have crosses in this life and that he must submit to them obediently and patiently so that they can produce their good results. (On this point cf. Hamm, *Lazarus Spengler*, 175.) But Spengler's understanding of these good results appears to have changed. It seems that they no longer included atoning for past sin; this concern has no place in the 1529 consolation pamphlet, which is marked throughout by the language of Luther's theology of the cross.

cause in Nuremberg at a crucial stage of its early development. Spengler likely would have balked at lending his considerable weight to this cause had he seen more clearly just how radical Luther's non-penitential approach to suffering was; he was not yet prepared to accept such a complete rupture with the past, needing more time before he was both willing and able to do so. I believe that Spengler's misunderstanding was genuine and that he sought to correct it when he came to realize that Luther and other evangelical theologians rejected the traditional suffering-as-penance position; I do not think that the misunderstanding was 'strategic' or somehow deliberate, part of a plan to cloak the evangelical faith in traditional garb for a time until it gained surer footing in Nuremberg. It is difficult to say how widespread this misunderstanding was among Spengler's fellow evangelicals in Nuremberg. I know of no sources that speak to this issue and one must be careful about extending the beliefs of an elite burgher like Lazarus Spengler to the common inhabitants of Nuremberg. Still, given the importance of the connection between suffering and penance in traditional piety, it seems quite likely that others shared his misunderstanding and perhaps persisted in it longer than the well-educated council secretary; after all, Spengler himself had encouraged them to continue to view adversity as a penance for sin in his *Consoling Christian Instruction*, even as he sought to promote the evangelical movement in their city.

## Bibliography

### Select Primary Sources

- Friburgo, Johannes de. *Summa confessorum*. Augsburg, 1476. [Herzog August Bibliothek A12: 16.2 Theol. 2°].
- Luther, Martin. *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Vol. 1-. Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883-. [= WA]
- . *Luther's Works, American Edition*. Edited by J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann. 55 vols. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-. [= LW].
- . *Ein Sermon von Ablaß und Gnade*. WA 1, 242–246.
- . *Grund und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers, so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind*. WA 7, 307–456. Engl.: LW 32, 3–99.
- . *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute*. WA 1, 524–628. Engl.: LW 31, 77–252.
- . *Von den guten werckenn*. WA 6, 201–276 / CL I, 227–298. Engl.: LW 44, 15–114.
- . *Widerruf vom Fegefeuer*. WA 30:2, 360–390.
- Psycht Spiegel der Sünde*. Nürnberg, 1510. [Houghton Rare Book Library, Harvard

University, Typ 520.10.201.]

- Spengler, Lazarus. *Eine tröstliche christliche Anweisung und Arznei in allen Widerwärtigkeiten*. In Berndt Hamm and Wolfgang Huber, eds, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1: *Schriften der Jahre 1509–1525*, 224–243. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995.
- . *Schutzrede und christliche Antwort eines ehrbaren Liebhabers der göttlichen Wahrheit der heiligen Schrift mit Anzeigung, warum Dr. Martin Luthers Lehre nicht als unchristlich verworfen, sondern vielmehr als christlich gehalten werden soll*. In Berndt Hamm and Wolfgang Huber, eds, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 1: *Schriften der Jahre 1509–1525*, 75–102. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995.
- . *Wie sich eyn christenmensch in tru[e]bsal und widerwertigkayt tro[e]sten und wo er die rechten hilf und ertzney derhalben suchen soll*. In Berndt Hamm, Wolfgang Huber, and Gudrun Litz, eds, *Lazarus Spengler Schriften*, vol. 2: *Schriften der Jahre 1525–1529*, 65–89. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999.
- Staupitz, Johannes von. ‘Von den Graden des leydens Vnuerdinter Widerwertigkayt Wie die ordenlich Vnd Volkommenlich mogen gesetzt werden.’ In I.K.F. Knaake, ed., *Johannes von Staupitzens Sämmtliche Werke*, Erster Band: Deutsche Schriften, 21–22. Potsdam: A. Krausnick—Gropius’sche Buchhandlung, 1867.

### Select Secondary Literature

- Aho, James. *Confession and Bookkeeping: The Religious, Moral, and Rhetorical Roots of Modern Accounting*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.
- Bast, Robert J., ed. *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety: Essays by Berndt Hamm*. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, 110. Leiden: Brill, 2004.
- Conway, William Martin, trans. and ed. *The Writings of Albrecht Dürer*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1958.
- Götze, Alfred. *Frühneuhochdeutsches Glossar*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971.
- Grimm, Harold J. *Lazarus Spengler: A Lay Leader of the Reformation*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978.
- Hamm, Berndt. ‘Johann von Staupitz (ca 1468–1524), spätmittelalterlicher Reformator und “Vater” der Reformation.’ *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 92 (2001): 6–42.
- . *Lazarus Spengler (1479–1534): Der Nürnberger Ratsschreiber im Spannungsfeld von Humanismus und Reformation, Politik und Glaube*. Spätmittelalter und Reformation. Neue Reihe, 25. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004.
- . ‘Spengler, Lazarus (1479–1534)’. In *Theologische Realenzyklopädie, Studienausgabe*. Edited by Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller, vol. 31, 666–670. Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter. 1993–2006.

- Koslofsky, Craig. *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700*. Basingstone and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Mennecke-Haustein, Ute. *Luthers Trostbriefe*. Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte, 56. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1989.
- Moeller, Bernd. 'Die deutschen Humanisten und die Anfänge der Reformation,' *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 8 (1959): 46–61. [English: 'The German Humanists and the Beginnings of the Reformation'. In Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, edited and translated by H.C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr, 19–38. Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1982 (original English edition published by Fortress Press in 1972)].
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Was wurde in der Frühzeit der Reformation in den deutschen Städten gepredigt?' *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 75 (1984): 176–193.
- Posset, Franz. *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The Life and Works of Johann von Staupitz*. St Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2003.
- Rittgers, Ronald K. *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Reformation of Suffering: A Study of Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press (in the press).
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'Got neher machen.'" Das Gnadenmedium des Leidens am Beispiel Lazarus Spenglers *Eine tröstliche christliche Anweisung und Arznei in allen Widerwärtigkeiten* (1521). In Berndt Hamm, Hrsg., *Medialität, Unmittelbarkeit, Präsenz—Die Nähe des Heils im Verständnis der Reformation*. Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation Reihe. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012 (in the press).
- Steinmetz, David Curtis. *Misericordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes von Staupitz in its Late Medieval Setting*. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, IV. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968.
- Strauss, Gerald. *Nuremberg in the Sixteenth Century*. London: John Wiley, 1966.
- Tentler, Thomas. *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977.



Copyright of Reformation & Renaissance Review: Journal of the Society for Reformation Studies is the property of Equinox Publishing Group and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.