

Preface

I HAVE BEEN FASCINATED by Christian mysticism, sometimes called negative theology, since my first encounter with Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* during my undergraduate days. The *Mirror* not only provided me with an opening to other Christian mystical writers, but it also opened me to the writings of mystics who populate, beyond counting, non-Christian traditions. Porete's mystical theology still inspires me and is the inspiration for each chapter in this book, particularly her notion of "living without a why," which she defined as life lived in union with God's will. "Living without a why" was also her description of the life of grace and, when all is said and done, I think is quite similar to Martin Luther's theology of grace.¹ Accordingly each chapter in this book comprises theological reflections from a Lutheran historian of religions on the life of grace inspired by Marguerite Porete's mirror. More is known about Martin Luther than about Marguerite Porete; what we know of Porete is that she was a French beguine mystic who wrote a single text, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, for which she was burned at the stake for heresy in Paris in 1310. She was in all probability a solitary beguine who might have been an itinerant teacher to interested listeners. She wrote the *Mirror* in Old French sometime between 1296 and 1306, and some of her ideas were appropriated by Meister Eckhart, and through Eckhart, may have influenced Martin Luther during his tenure as an Augustinian friar.

The solitude of a writer is never absolute. We depend on others, especially on those whose expertise is a source for shaping one's ideas. In particular, I am deeply grateful to Douglas A. Oakman, who has read chapter 7 and offered both support and valuable criticism. Doug is one of the leading New Testament scholars in North America. He specializes in historical Jesus research with a focus on the peasant context of Jesus's life in first-century Galilee and his depiction of Jesus as a political activist. He

1. Hamm, *The Early Luther*, chap. 8.

has also published brilliant work on Saint Paul's Christology.² We have been colleagues and friends for twenty-five years as members of the Department of Religion at Pacific Lutheran University, and I deeply appreciate his critical support of my work.

I am also grateful to Dr. Marit Trelstad for contributing the Foreword to this volume. She currently serves as chair of the Department of Religion at Pacific Lutheran University and is one of the more creative Lutheran feminist theologians working in North America. Her work and mine are deeply influenced by the process vision of reality of Alfred North Whitehead, whose work we both encountered as students of John B. Cobb Jr. during our days as graduate students at the Claremont Graduate University—although I preceded her by more years than I like to remember. We are two of a rather small number of Lutherans who have incorporated process thought into our particular theological reflections.

I also want to thank K. C. Hanson, editor-in-chief at Cascade Books for bringing yet another of my manuscripts to publication. I am also grateful to two of his colleagues at Cascade Books for their careful editorial assistance: Jeremy Funk and Heather Carraher. It is a pleasure beyond measure to work with such skilled professionals.

This book is dedicated to John B. Cobb Jr. About six years ago my wife, Regina, and I were visiting with John and his wife, Jean, in Claremont. During a conversation in his living room after lunch, he asked me about my future plans for publication. At the time, I was, and still am, heavily focused on Buddhist–Christian dialogue and science–religion dialogue. But I approached these topics as a historian of religions rather than as a theologian—or so I thought. At the end of our conversation, John smiled and said, “Paul, you’re a theologian.”

“I thought I was a historian of religions,” I said. “No one’s ever called me a ‘theologian’ before. What do you mean?”

“Just think about it and you’ll come to your own conclusions, he answered.”

I have been thinking about it ever since. In fact, it has been my *koan* for the last six years. This book along with my earlier volumes, *Theological Reflections at the Boundaries* and *Passing Over and Returning: A Pluralist Theology of Religions*, represent how I am still thinking about it. For initiating me into an unexpected, and at the time undesired, theological journey of creative transformation, my gratitude to John Cobb is beyond measure.

2. Most notably, see Oakman, “The Perennial Relevance of Saint Paul.”