A Short Introduction

Health, beauty, strength, and sexual desire are today highly valued. The mannequin or model in beautiful clothes is not merely a person showcasing haute couture but a paradigm to aim for, an ideal of beauty. As long as we can remain healthy and sexually active, we are considered valid human beings. Having a fit and healthy body thus becomes completely essential, a virtual path to salvation. We imagine ourselves as controlling our future through our body.

It is through the human body that we experience pleasure. Our eyes help us to absorb beautiful views, the beauty of flowers, architecture, and other people. Taste sensations are released by delicious food, and the sensitivity of our skin relays the caresses of another person or the warmth of a beloved pet. Our ears register tone of voice as well as music. But the body also registers pain and vulnerability. Harsh sounds grate on the ear.

The human body is currently attracting considerable interest. Health studies offer tips on how to stay in shape. But the body has always been central to people's hopes for the future. In the Middle Ages, female mystics regarded Jesus not merely as an object of love but as a lover. Catherine of Siena saw herself as married to Christ in a vision. The ring she wears is made of skin—Christ's foreskin. Physical foreskin. Physical proximity to Christ and his physical body implies a bodily union.

In the history of the Church, the human body has often been viewed as something that a human being ought to control by means of the intellect. Human sexuality came into competition with devotedness to God. For this reason, a woman's body was often seen as threatening, since it risked arousing a man's desire. This attitude can be glimpsed in Origen, Augustine, and Bernard of Clairvaux, and is a continual motif in the history of mysticism.

Martin Luther initiates something new. He sees a human being as a whole. Body and spirit do not stand in opposition to each other. Nonetheless, when he speaks of flesh it has a negative connotation. What he has in mind is a human being's general tendency to fixate—body, spirit, and soul—upon itself and to turn away from life, fellow human beings, and God. And yet sexuality, body, and sexual desire do not represent obstacles to the spiritual. Luther rejects any such opposition. On the contrary, God often shows his love for human beings precisely through the material and the physical. The care and love provided by other people thereby become signs of God's own love. A meal of good food, beer, and wine brings us together with other people and drives away mistrust and depression. It is about community and joy. In the home of Katharina von Bora and Luther, the meal—supper—is closely associated with the meal in the church that has long been known as the Lord's Supper. Like the evening meal, the Eucharist is a sign of care, love, joy, and community—a meal of thanksgiving. The sharp boundaries between spiritual and material are dissolved in Luther's writings because he sees God's care and love in the material, the everyday. The Word of God becomes a message of love that helps people to make sense of what they encounter.

When theologians talk about the body, they are often referring to the Church as body and community. In this study, I want to restrict myself primarily to the human body and its senses. In contrast to the ascetic traditions, sensual presence for Luther is neither a sin nor a threat to our closeness to God.

The body is a mystery that can never be fully encompassed or described. And yet we take it as fairly self-evident what a body is. We are all also aware that the body changes during its lifetime. Time, age, and health all play their part. Our vulnerability is especially visible at the beginning and the end of life.

This represents a challenge in a culture that values strength and health. How should we treat vulnerability, suffering, and death? Luther surrenders neither to body cult nor to body loathing. He is not primarily concerned with the body, though it is a gift and a means of support. Rather, his interest is in our relationship to God as well as to other people.

In this book, I choose to read Luther's own texts in dialogue with scholars from our era who are interested in the body's significance for theology. Luther's view of gender, sexuality, and sexual desire are summarized against a background of intellectual history. I go on to read Luther

through contemporary wounds associated with gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic and religious affiliation.

Luther uses the erotic language of mysticism when referring to relationships with God as well as relationships between people. He thereby passes on several important aspects of the mystical tradition. These include queer elements. Christ is described as both bride and bridegroom. Although Luther holds a fairly traditional view of women, they never become a threat to how human beings relate to God and the spiritual, but are instead regarded as partners and equals. Man and woman are seen as God's co-creators. They pass on life by giving birth and taking care of new lives.

In our era, symbols and concepts are being reformulated. Theologians are referring to God as a relationship. People without children of their own are also involved in creating and caring for new life. Luther thought highly of the work of the body. He valued the lowliest of tasks, which were often performed by women, and claimed that these were more important than those of monks and nuns. This poses a significant challenge for the present: to make visible the bodies which serve and give life so that others can live in comfort.

Luther recovered the language of eroticism for shared physical intimacy as well as for politics. In actualizing this theology of love, I want to provide inspiration for an impassioned politics and an erotic physical spirituality that sees and cares about real, physical bodies in our world.