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Abstract

Unlike their Roman Catholic counterparts, early Protestants insisted that individual Christians could be certain that they personally enjoyed God's favor and would be saved. Their faith in Christ's redeeming work would give them "assurance of salvation," and their ministers insisted that every Christian ought to feel that assurance. This article argues that Protestant assurance did not – and could not – banish believers' anxiety that God's saving promises had never been meant for them. "Behind" the God who promised salvation lurked a "hidden God" who had decided the ultimate fate of every individual before the beginning of time. Even the strongest believers – Martin Luther and the first-generation New England minister Thomas Hooker are offered as examples – dreaded the wrath of a terrifying God who might at any moment dash their comfort to pieces.

Disciplines

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Thomas Hooker, Martin Luther, and the Terror at the Edge of Protestant Faith

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Toward the end of his nine-year tenure as Fellow, Thomas Hooker awoke in his sleeping quarters at Emmanuel College terrified by a sense of “the Just *Wrath* of Heaven.” His God, the same God in whom he had always put his trust, had turned against him and was furious at his sinfulness. Dreading divine punishment, Hooker found himself “fill’d . . . with most unusual Degrees of Horror and Anguish.”¹ Alone in the night, Hooker was haunted by the anger of a terrifying God.

Two decades later, thousands of miles from Cambridge on the Connecticut frontier, Hooker had not been able to dislodge that terrifying God from his mind. Describing the feeling of dread that plagued a sinner fearful of his own damnation, he told his Hartford congregation: “The sinner conceives himself in the possession of the Devil really, and irrecoverably in Hell.” “If he do but close his eyes together to sleep,” Hooker continued, “his dreams terrifie him, his thoughts perplex him, and he awakens gastered and distracted, as though he were posting down to the pit.” Rising from his bed, the sinner “raves” that “I must go to Hell, Satan is sent from God to fetch me.”²

To be sure, Hooker’s experience of divine anger at Emmanuel may well have been nothing more than a nightmare, provoked by an indigestible supper. But the feelings of horror and anguish refused to disappear. For some time—“a considerable while” as his Emmanuel colleague John Eliot remembered it—Hooker “had a Soul Harassed with such Distresses.” Hooker’s Sizar, Simeon Ashe, offered to help, and it was Ashe who brought Hooker through the torment, standing by his friend until Hooker finally gained a sense that his God had not abandoned him to the devil. So unnerving was Hooker’s nighttime terror that for the rest of his life he took careful steps to prevent a recurrence. As he lay down to sleep, he would “single out some certain *Promise* of God, which he would Repeat, and Ponder, and Keep his Heart close unto it, until he found that satisfaction of Soul wherewith he could say, *I will Lay me down in Peace, and Sleep; for thou, O Lord, makest me Dwell in Assurance.*”³

What might have occasioned such a prolonged experience of divine anger? What notion of God resided in Hooker’s sleeping brain that could have aroused such dread? This article will argue that Hooker’s experience was not idiosyncratic. An arbitrary, wrathful God lurked at the very core of Protestant faith. Like Hooker, most Protestants found some prophylactic, some mental discipline that could keep this God beneath consciousness. But the prophylactic was never entirely successful. Unwilling to be constrained by the efforts of his human creatures, ready to consign people to an eternal punishment that they had no power to avert, this God always threatened to break through their meager efforts to keep him out of mind.

Thomas Hooker (1586–1647) is largely known today as a New England Puritan, one of the “first-generation ministers” whose preaching and writing came to shape the character of the New England colonies. It is easy to forget that he was nearly fifty, an old man by the standards of his time, when he first set foot in the settlement that would become Hartford, Connecticut. He had spent fourteen years as a student and Fellow at Cambridge, learning his theology. After a short term as chaplain to a local gentleman, he became a celebrity preacher in Chelmsford, England, drawing large crowds to his lectures and presiding over a conference of local ministers. From Chelmsford he was forced to flee to Holland for several years, and it was only when he returned to England that he shortly left (in 1635) for the new world. Fluent in Latin like all his Cambridge colleagues, Hooker had ready access to the

¹ Mather, *Piscator Evangelicus, or, The Life of Mr. Thomas Hooker, in Johannes in Eremo* (London, 1695) Wing M1117, separate pagination, 5–6, republished in *Magnalia Christi Americana* (2 vols.; New York: Russell & Russell, 1967) 1:333. “Horror and anguish” were what godly people like Hooker were expected to feel in the face of God’s anger. His theological mentor William Perkins said of the damned in hell that “their bodies and soules are tormented with infinite horror and anguish arising of the feeling of the whole wrath of God.” *A Treatise Tending unto a declaration in The Workes of That Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Vniuersitie of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins* (3 vols.; London: John Legatt, 1616–18) *New Short Title Catalogue* (hereafter NSTC) 19651, 1:379. Biblical citations in this article will be from the 1611 Authorized Version (KJV).

² Hooker, *The Application of Redemption, By the effectual Work of the word, and Spirit of Christ, for the bringing home of lost Sinners to God. The first eight Books* (London, 1656) [Donald

Wing, *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland, Wales and British America and of English Books Printed in Other Countries 1641–1700* (ed. and rev. Timothy J. Crist et al.; New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1982), hereafter Wing] H2639, *The ninth and tenth books* (London, 1657) Wing H2640, 8:371. To “gaster” was to frighten or terrify.

³ Mather, *Piscator Evangelicus*, 5-6. Our knowledge of Hooker's wrath experience comes from Cotton Mather, who (erroneously) thought of it as a conversion experience; Mather was relying on a manuscript he had obtained from Eliot (see fn. 1 above for the source). It almost surely occurred in 1617 while Hooker was in his early thirties, for his Hartford colleague Samuel Stone's 1647 funeral poem speaks of "*the peace he had full thirty years agoe*" [italics in original]. The poem occurs in the introductory material to Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline* (London, 1648) Wing H2658, sig. C3v.

entire output of western Christian theology, Protestant and Catholic. But he himself stood firmly in a "godly" theological tradition most powerfully represented in the writings of William Perkins (1558–1602). Perkins's doctrine was in turn shaped by John Calvin's colleague Theodore Beza (1519–1605). All three men thought about God in a way derived from the later writings of Saint Augustine; they were "extreme Augustinians."³

Before pursuing my argument, I must question a commonsense assumption. Quite understandably, many people take for granted that what we might call the institutional forms of a religion—things such as rituals, creeds, edifices, iconography, systematic theology—were originally given life by "religious experiences," encounters with God or other supernatural beings. In the minds of those who make this assumption, religion exists because people wanted to make sense of, and to perpetuate the meaning and purpose of, those experiences. I suggest that the assumption needs to be turned on its head. If experiences such as Hooker's were common, we need to ask what notion of God lay behind them. Could such an experience as his have arisen without precedent in his sleeping brain? Must not the complex of ideas and emotions that would have led him to imagine God in this way have been already there?⁴ Would the religious culture in which he came to professional maturity not have provided the soil from which such a "wrath experience" might germinate and grow?

Here I follow the theologian George Lindbeck, who in his seminal book *The Nature of Doctrine* questioned the conventional wisdom that religion arises from religious experiences. Instead, Lindbeck argued for a cultural/linguistic model that explained religion as "above all an external word, a *verbum externum*, that molds and shapes the self and its world." Rather than simply organize pre-existing "religious experiences," Lindbeck wanted to say, this *verbum externum* actually "produces" experience. Religious people not only understand their experience through the interpretive possibilities previously available to them, but those possibilities actually allow the experiences to occur in the first place, or better, provide the linguistic context through which the experiences can "make sense."⁶ Hooker's theological education provided him with those "interpretive possibilities." To put it simply, I propose that Hooker's theological tradition described what God had to be like, and he then experienced God in the manner that his tradition had taught him.

To get to the heart of what the Protestant tradition taught about God, we can do no better than to turn to the description of God's activity offered by the archetypal Protestant, Martin Luther. In his *De servo arbitrio* (1525), his most systematic treatise and one that he always considered among his best, Luther probed deeply into the nature of God.⁵

De servo arbitrio was a response to what might seem like another self-evident assumption, this one made by Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmus argued that men and women had free choice in religious matters; they had the capacity to act well or badly. Luther disagreed. As he finished explaining why he disagreed, Luther came to the issue of how God himself made decisions. In particular, how was it possible to reconcile the loving God of the Bible, who appeared to want "all men to be saved" (I Tim 2:4), with the God who by his "dreadful hidden will" (*occulta et metuenda voluntas*) had ordained that only a predestined few would actually be saved and escape damnation? How was it possible to "defend the mercy and equity of God in damning the undeserving, that is, ungodly persons, who, being born in ungodliness, can by no means avoid being ungodly, and staying so, and being damned, but are compelled by natural necessity to sin and perish"?⁶

³ I use the term "extreme Augustinianism" rather than the conventional "Calvinism" because it describes a style of theology that both comprehends the positions of a number of theologians—the Luther of *De servo arbitrio* and the Catholic Cornelius Janssen were both extreme Augustinians—and may differ from Calvin's, as Perkins's did in some regards. Diarmaid MacCulloch has argued both that "*Anglicanism* is a word best jettisoned by historians" and that "*Calvinism* ought to go the same way." "Protestantism in Mainland Europe: New Directions," *RQ* 59 (2006) 698–706, at 702. Patrick Collinson concurred, writing that the term "'Calvinism' no longer serves the purposes of serious ecclesiastical historians." "The Fog in the Channel Clears: The Rediscovery of the Continental Dimension to the British Reformation," in *The Reception of Continental Reformation in Britain* (ed. Polly Ha and Patrick Collinson; Proceedings of the British Academy 164; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) xvii–xxxvii, at xxxiii. For Hooker's life and influence, see Baird Tipson, *Hartford Puritanism: Thomas Hooker, Samuel Stone, and Their Terrifying God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴ In *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), John Stachniewski takes a literary-critical approach in analyzing the prevailing "godly" religious culture that this article approaches theologically.

⁵ Usually translated as *On the Bondage of the Will*, the title literally means "on enslaved choice." I cite here the standard Latin edition in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (ed. J. K. F. Knaake, et al.; 121 vols.; Weimar, 1883) [hereafter *W. A.*] vol. 18, English translation in *The Bondage of the Will* (trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston; Westwood, N. J.: Fleming Revell, 1957).

⁶ *W. A.* 18:684, 707; *Bondage*, 169, 201–2. Fidei summus gradus, credere illum esse clementem, qui tam paucos salvat, tam multos damnat; . . . qui tantam iram et iniquitatem ostendit (18:633; Packer and Johnston, *Bondage*, 101). Absurdum enim manet (ratione iudice) (*W. A.* 18:707; *Bondage*, 201); Haec dictabit ratio non esse boni et clementis Dei (*W. A.* 18:708; *Bondage*, 201); hoc offendit quam maxime sensum illum communem seu rationem naturalem, quod Deus mera voluntate sua homines deseret, induret, damnet, quasi delectetur peccatis et cruciatibus miserorum tantis et aeternis, qui praedicatur tantae misericordiae et bonitatis etc. (*W. A.* 18:719; *Bondage*, 217). Si autem id movet, quod difficile sit, clementiam et aequitatem Dei tueri, ut

In his defense of free choice, Erasmus had cited a series of New Testament passages, first among them Matt 23:37 where Jesus prays: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered you together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you would not.” Erasmus understood Luther to say that no one would be able to believe—to trust God’s offer of saving grace—unless God

⁶ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 34. The term *verbum externum*, meaning here speech that comes from outside the self, looms large in the theology of Luther. Lindbeck was strongly influenced by the theology of Karl Barth.

had first given her the ability to do so. But did this not, argued Erasmus, make Jesus’s prayer hypocritical? Luther wanted to explain the refusal of most men and women in Jerusalem to be gathered not as a deliberate choice but as the result of God’s not having given them the freedom—the ability—to choose to be gathered. And Jesus himself, or at least his divine nature, had been complicit in that divine decision. The eternal Word that had become flesh in Jesus had actually taken part in the divine decree—the pre-destination—that had denied most of the men and women of Jerusalem the capacity to respond to Jesus’ invitation to gather them. Does not the logic of your position, Erasmus could say to Luther, require you to make Jesus duplicitous, to imagine him praying that the Jerusalemites do something that he himself had caused them to be unable to do? “Why torment yourself with vain tears that we will not be gathered,” one could imagine them saying to Jesus, when you know full well that your own will has already decreed that we will not be gathered? In other words, why blame us for your choosing not to give us the capacity to repent? You may say that you wished us to gather together, but “at the same time you were wishing us not to do so.”

It was inconceivable to Erasmus that Matt 23:37 was meant to be interpreted in such a way as to make Jesus a liar. When Jesus said: “I wished to gather you together . . . but you refused,” it was obvious that he assumed that the men and women of Jerusalem had had the ability to choose either to be gathered or not to be gathered.⁷

The logic of Erasmus’s argument forced Luther to admit that there were actually two radically distinct wills in God: Jesus’s will—the will of God incarnate (*deus incarnatus*)—was not the same as what Luther called the “secret will of the Divine Majesty” (*secreta voluntas maiestatis*). Jesus might “weep, wail, and groan over the destruction of the ungodly,” but the will of the Divine Majesty “purposely abandons and reprobates some to perish.”⁸

Luther granted that the notion of two seemingly inconsistent divine wills defied human reason. He even seemed to take pleasure in drawing attention to the paradox at the heart of the way he imagined God. There was a God “behind” the God whom the scriptures described as offering mercy freely, a God who by his “dreadful hidden will” ordained that only an elect few would actually partake of that mercy. Just as paradoxical was the nature of faith: Christians were called to believe that God was ultimately just, good, and merciful, even though to ordinary human reason he appeared unjust, arbitrary, and even cruel.⁹

Unaided by faith, anyone paying attention to God’s actual behavior would be struck by the fact that he saved so few and damned so many. They would see anger and unrighteousness rather than mercy. It was understandable, conceded Luther, for Erasmus to claim that Luther’s God seemed “to delight in the torments of poor wretches and to be a fitter object for hate than for love.” Only “the highest degree of faith” could trust in a merciful and just God “behind” what appeared so horrific.¹⁰ To a disinterested onlooker, Luther’s God appeared to make promises that he did not intend to keep. Those who dared to ask why God made such promises were warned to discontinue their questioning and “to stand in awe of God who both can do and wills to do such things.”¹¹

In a powerful article, the historical theologian Brian Gerrish has argued that “the antithesis between God as revealed and preached, on the one hand, and God as hidden and unknown, on the other” created a “monumental theological problem” that

qui damnet immeritos, hoc est, impios eiusmodi, qui in impietate nati, non possunt ulla ratione sibi consulere, quin impij sint, maneat et damnentur (*W. A. 18:784; Bondage*, 314). Later Lutherans moved away from statements such as these, which seemed to imply predestination to damnation.

⁷ Si cuncta fiunt necessitate, nonne merito Hierosolyma poterat respondere deploranti domino: Quid inanibus lacrimis te maceras? . . . Cur nobis imputas, quod tua voluntate, nostra necessitate factum est? Tu volebas nos congregare et idem in nobis nolebas, cum hoc ipsum operatus sis in nobis, quod noluerimus. Atqui in verbis domini non accusator in Iudaeis necessitas, sed prava ac rebellis voluntas: Ego volui congregare, tu nolui. Erasmus, *De Libero Arbitrio ALATPIBH, sive Collatio, Quellenschriften zur Geschichte des Protestantismus* 8. Heft (ed. Johannes Walter; Leipzig: A. Deichert’sche Buchhandlung, 1910) 39, English translation in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (trans. E. Gordon Rupp Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) 59.

⁸ Huius itidem Dei incarnati est flere, deplorare, gemere super perditione impiorum, cum voluntas maiestatis ex proposito aliquos relinquit et reprobet, ut periant. *W. A. 18:689; Bondage*, 176.

⁹ *W. A. 18:684, 707; Bondage*, 169, 201–202.

¹⁰ Fidei summus gradus, credere illum esse clementem, qui tam paucos salvat, tam multos damnat; . . . qui tantam iram et iniquitatem ostendit, . . . *W. A. 18:633; Bondage*, 101.

¹¹ Nec nobis quaerendum, cur ita faciat, sed reverendus Deus, quo talia et possit et velit. *W. A. 18:689; Bondage*, 176.

would come to shape the Reformation idea of faith.¹² Gerrish imagines an anxious Protestant asking, “Grant that Christ speaks nothing but comfort to the troubled conscience, who knows how it stands between me and God in heaven?”¹³ It is impossible to read Luther, concludes Gerrish, “and not to recognize that there was a terror in his encounter with the hidden, predestinating God.”¹⁴ Luther’s own prophylactic was his “assurance that we have the Father’s will in Christ” so that anxious Christians could “flee to God in the manger or contemplate the wounds of Jesus.”¹⁷ But it is difficult to resist Gerrish’s conclusion that such pastoral counsels “do not resolve the theological problem, and [Luther] does not pretend that they do.” The hidden, predestinating God “remained in the shadows.”¹⁵ In other words, the possibility that the God on whose promises Protestants were taught to rely might suddenly be replaced by a “hidden” God who seemed to ignore those promises infected Protestant theology from the outset.

Gerrish argues further that Luther’s apologists have never been entirely comfortable with his hidden, predestinating God. They have generally expressed relief that after 1525, Luther came more and more to put God’s *voluntas inscrutabilis* aside and to speak only about what God had revealed in his Word.¹⁹ After *De servo arbitrio*, the argument goes, the “mature Luther” backed away from the stark statements of the “young Luther.”¹⁶ Even in *De servo arbitrio* itself, Luther cautioned pastors to avoid making a distinction between God preached and God hidden (*inter Deum praedicatum et absconditum*) and to speak only of the former: “Keep in view His Word and leave alone His inscrutable will,” Luther wrote, “for it is by His word, and not by His inscrutable will, that we must be guided.”¹⁷

Luther’s writings do seem to take for granted that only serious theologians, not the people in the pews, would confront the terrifying consequences of God’s decision to leave so many people to sin and damnation. When he set forth his well-known *drey Regel* (three rules)—prayer, meditation, and temptation—he explicitly directed them to serious students of theology. Temptations about God’s ultimate intentions for oneself, for which Luther usually used the German word *Anfechtungen*—were not for the faint-hearted. They could be so terrifying that only the strongest believer would be able to withstand them. But to struggle with *Anfechtung* was nevertheless the best way, he thought, for a prospective theologian to come to know the power, sweetness, and comfort of God’s word.¹⁸

When one actually looks at Luther’s own preaching, however, one finds that even after 1525 he was still exposing laypeople as well as theologians to the hidden God. He continued to bring the apparent contradictions in God’s will—and the *Anfechtungen* that resulted—into the pulpit and the lecture hall. Time and

¹⁹ For example, Gerrish speaks of “a long period of relative neglect” of Luther’s notion of a hidden God. “To the Unknown God,” 133. again, we find him depicting biblical figures who felt God’s wrath just when they imagined they enjoyed God’s favor. Those figures agonized over whether God was trustworthy or arbitrary and tyrannical.¹⁹ Let us look at four examples.

The protagonists in these examples—Jesus’s mother Mary, a Syrophenician woman, Jacob, and Abraham—all confront an angry God, one whose promises they had trusted but who now seems to be withdrawing his favor. Mary and Joseph have taken the twelve-year-old Jesus to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover (Luke 2:42–53). Assuming that Jesus is with other

¹² B. A. Gerrish, “‘To the Unknown God’ Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 136.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137–138. Gerrish distinguishes between what he calls “hiddenness I” and “hiddenness II”; my references here are to “hiddenness II.”

¹⁶ A good example would be the first-rate article by Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Der Einfluß des Anfechtungserfahrung auf den Prädestinationsbegriff Luthers,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 3 (1957) 109–39. For a critique of the conventional distinction between the “young” and the “old” Luther, see Thomas Kaufmann, “Der ‘alte’ und der ‘junge’ Luther als theologisches Problem,” in *Luther und das monastische Erbe* (ed. Christoph Bultmann, Volker Leppin, and Andreas Lindner; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 187–205.

¹⁷ *Nunc autem nobis spectandum est verbum relinquendaque illa voluntas imperscrutabilis. Verbo enim non dirigi, non voluntate illa inscrutabili oportet. De Servo Arbitrio* W.A. 18:685; *Bondage*, 170–71.

¹⁸ Luther describes the three rules in the preface to an edition of his German writings. The three rules were oratio, meditatio, tentatio, “Vorrede zum 1. Bande der Wittenberger Ausgabe u. 1539,” W. A. 50:657–61, English translation in *Career of the Reformer IV, Luthers Works* (trans. Robert R. Heitner; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 34:285–87; Es gehören gar starcke Geister da zu, solche puffe [Anfechtungen] auszuhalten, “*Fastenpostille 1525. Euangelium auf den ersten Sonntag nach Epiphanie*,” W. A. 17/2:20, English translation in *Sermons on Gospel Texts for Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. Sermons of Martin Luther* (trans. John N. Lenker; 8 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 2:37.

¹⁹ *Fastenpostille 1525. “Euangelium auff den ersten Sonntag nach Epiphanie,”* W. A. 17/2:16–32; *Sermons* 2:32–53; “Auf den andern Sonntag der fasten Euangelion. Matthei 15 [21–28],” W. A. 17/2:200–204, in *Sermons* 2:148–54; *Genesisvorlesung*, W.A. 42–44, ch. 32:21–24b and ch. 22:1–11, English translation in *Lectures on Genesis, Luther’s Works* vols. 1–8 (trans. George V. Schick and Paul D. Pahl; 55 vols.; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958–1966) 6:125–38 and 4:91–122.

members of their party, they inadvertently leave him behind when they set out toward home. After a day's journey, they discover their mistake and return to look for him. But it takes them three days to find him in the temple, listening and posing questions to the temple elders.

Far more than other exegetes, Luther imagined Mary overwhelmed with guilt, doubting whether Jesus could ever forgive her negligence. Having for more than twelve years been overjoyed that she had given birth to God's son, she now wonders, after days of separation, whether Jesus will even be willing to recognize her as his mother! From a state of exaltation, she was suddenly plunged "into the deepest hell amidst such terror and broken-heartedness that she might have despaired and died."²⁰

Nor was Mary's terror unique. Whenever he wished, Luther explained, God could take comfort and happiness away from his saints and leave them in extreme despair, terrified that they had lost the very thing that had given them the greatest joy. At such times, believers might feel that God "wants to tear the Lord Christ out of our heart"; Christ would be so hidden that trust in him would seem impossible.²¹ Fearing that she had lost Christ entirely, a Christian's conscience would tremble and quake as she felt God's wrath and condemnation. This was "*desertio gratiae*, when a person's heart feels as if God and his grace have left him and no longer wish to be his. Wherever he turns, he sees nothing but wrath and terror."²²

The Syrophenician woman (Matt 15:21–28), confident of Jesus's power but desperate to persuade him to heal her daughter, begged him for help. "Have mercy on me, O Lord," she pled; "Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed by a demon." Jesus ignored her. When the woman continued her efforts, he rebuffed her again, saying he was sent only "unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When she refused to take "no" for an answer, he told her that it was "not right to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs."

"Three times," said Luther, this woman found God to be hostile and indifferent. It was "a hard blow" for her when God appeared "so severe and angry" and hid his grace "so high and deep." The woman had heard Jesus' promises and had believed he could help her daughter; now she feared that he would not follow through on the things he had said he could do, feared that his word would be false.²³ Once more, Luther insisted that her experiences of God's anger were anything but unique. "When someone feels that the word of God, on which the person has built his whole confidence, was not said to him, but was meant only for others," he confessed to his congregation, "is that not a thunderbolt that dashes both heart and faith into a thousand pieces?"²⁴ By excluding her from the house of Israel, God was telling the woman that she was damned and lost, not to be counted among his elect.²⁵

Luther described yet a third confrontation with God's wrath when he lectured to his Wittenberg students on Jacob's struggle with God at Penuel (Gen 32:21–30). Like Peter and Judas, Jacob and Esau were classic types of elect and reprobate individuals. As the elder brother, Esau ought to have received a blessing from his father Isaac, but Jacob had schemed to deceive Isaac and receive the blessing himself. A furious Esau set out to kill his brother, and Jacob fled east. On his journey he dreamed of the famous ladder on which angels ascended and descended, and during that dream God confirmed Isaac's blessing (Gen 28:13–15), not only promising Jacob the land on which he was sleeping but also that all the families of the earth would bless themselves in Jacob and his countless descendants.

Then Esau, with 400 armed men, set out to track Jacob down. Would Jacob be killed and the blessing nullified? Could God change his mind and withdraw his blessing? Were God's promises untrustworthy? Like Mary and the Syrophenician woman, Jacob had been willing to place all his hope in God's favor. But at the brook Jabbok, God took the form of an angel and physically attacked Jacob. As they struggled, Jacob began to think, "What if God has changed his mind, rejected me, and received my brother into grace?" What if I am not God's chosen after all?

²⁰ Zuvor war sie bis in Himel erhaben, itzt ligt sie plötzlich in der tiefen Helle und in solchem schrecken und hertzleid, das sie möcht verzweivelt und gestorben sein. *W. A. 17/2:19* (1525); *Sermons*, 2:36. In another sermon, Luther made it clear that Mary was representing the whole church: Maria sey Christliche kirche. *W. A. 10:140*; English translation in *Luthers Works* (trans. John Kunstmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 52:39.

²¹ Eben damit zum höchsten schrecken lesst, davon sie jre höchste freude haben. . . . er wolle uns den Herrn Christum aus dem Herten reissen. . . . Also das unser Gewissen fület, es habe jn verloren, und als denn zappelt und zaget, als sey es eitel zorn und ungnade gegen im. *W. A. 17/2:20*; *Sermons* 2:37.

²² Anfechtung und leiden, . . . Welche man pflegt zu nennen desertionem gratiae. Da des menschen Hertz nicht anders fület, denn als habe jn Gott mit seiner Grade verlassen und wolle sein nicht mehr. Und wie er sich hin keret, sihet er nichts denn eitel zorn und schrecken. *Ibid.*

²³ Dis ist gar eyn harter puff [=Anfechtung], wenn sich Gott also Ernst und zornig erzeugt und syne gnade so hoch und tieff verbirget Das sie dunckt, er wölle nicht halten, was er geredt hat, und seyn wort lassen falsch werden, *W. A. 17/2:201* (1525); *Sermons* 2:150.

²⁴ Ist das nicht eyn donnerschlag, der beyde, hertz und glauben auff tausent stucken zuschläge, wen es fület, das Gotts wort, darauff es bawet, sey nicht von yhm gesagt, es gehe andere an? *W. A. 17:202*; *Sermons* 2:151.

²⁵ Da gibt er yhr schlechts fur, sie sey der verdampfen und verlornen eyne, die nicht solle mit den auserweleten gerechnet werden. *W. A. 17:203*; *Sermons* 2:151–52.

Jacob was not overreacting. God confronted Jacob, Luther told his students, “as though he wanted to kill him and deprive him of the promises and blessing and hand it over to his brother Esau.”²⁶ In his heart, Jacob could only feel deserted by an angry, adversarial God. He could sense nothing but God’s wrath.²⁷

Luther’s fourth example of *tentatio* was the most terrible of all. After promising Abraham and Sarah that all nations would be blessed through their offspring, God commanded that Abraham sacrifice his only child, Isaac, “the son of the promise” (Gen 22:1–18).²⁸ So far as Abraham could tell, God had simply gone back on his word. After having promised Abraham that “in Isaac shall thy seed be called,” (Gen 21:12), God was now saying, “Take thy son, and offer him for a burnt offering.” God was contradicting himself; he was repenting of his promise. “What extraordinary sin have I committed,” Abraham would have wondered, “that would cause God to withdraw his promise?”²⁹ To that moment God had seemed a loving friend; now he was revealed as an enemy and a tyrant. The suspicion that God hated him caused Abraham to despair.³⁰

But as everyone even remotely familiar with the Hebrew Bible knows, God’s ultimate intention was not what he had initially revealed to Abraham. At the last minute an angel stayed Abraham’s hand, and a ram appeared, caught in the brush. God was “playing” with Abraham, said Luther, testing whether Abraham loved God as much when God was angry as when God was loving and beneficent.³¹ And Abraham passed the test, trusting God’s promise despite all evidence to the contrary.

In each case, someone who had previously felt the favor of a loving, merciful God was thrown up against an altogether different kind of deity. They discovered a God who was distant, uncaring, angry, and terrifying. Worse yet, God’s promises, on which everything depended, appeared to be unreliable. Behind the gracious God they had always known, they encountered a God who by his “dreadful hidden will” elected only some and left the others to hell. Might their trust in God’s promises have been misplaced? Might the “real” God be a tyrant who routinely broke his promises? Might they finally turn out to be among the reprobate? All four felt cast off by a terrible God. This God’s promises seemed to be meant only for others.³⁶

What did these deserted believers do? Distaught, terrified, and overcome with a feeling of helplessness under the gaze of a wrathful God, did they abandon hope? No. Although there appeared to be no reason for it, they still clung desperately to the promises God had once made. The Syrophenician woman turned her eyes from Christ’s rejection and clung firmly “to the good news she had heard and embraced concerning him.”³² Despite all evidence—Luther emphasized her “nakedness” as she relied on the “bare word”—she believed that God would keep his promises.³³ Jacob, too, believed despite God’s apparent enmity, clinging to the conviction that “I have the promise.”³⁴ Abraham went so far as to bind Isaac to the altar and hold the knife above his head, trusting that God would somehow still make his promise good.

These four anguished believers had had no way of knowing that God was actually testing them. The terror they felt was real enough, but God had not actually taken his grace and favor away. He was only concealing it for a time. Luther explained that God was “playing games” with believers, withdrawing his favor so they would seek it the more desperately.³⁵ “God does not tempt to kill but to renew, establish, and strengthen.”³⁶ “Such examples teach us,” he concluded, “that faith should not

²⁶ Quid si Deus mutavit sententiam, me reiecit, et fratrem recipit in gratiam? W. A. 44:99 (probably 1542); *Genesis* 6:133; Deus, qui ostendit se adversarium, quasi velit eum occidere et privare promissionibus et benedictione, eamque tradere fratri Esau. Ibid.

²⁷ Sentit se derelictum a Deo, aut Deum sibi adversari et irasci. W. A. 44:100; *Genesis* 6:134. In ipso sensu irae Dei: . . . W. A. 44:103; *Genesis* 6:139

²⁸ Tentatio maxima. W. A. 43:200 (1539–40); *Genesis* 4:91. Gravius igitur tentatur Abraham, quam Maria Hierosolymis amittens filium. W. A. 43:203; *Genesis* 4:94.

²⁹ Sine dubio poenitet Deum promissionis, alioqui sibi non contradiceret, vel ego insigno aliquod peccatum commisi, quo Deum graviter offendi, ut retractet promissionem. W. A. 43:202; *Genesis* 4:92–93.

³⁰ Deus, qui antea summus amicus videbatur: nunc videtur factus inimicus et Tyrannus. W. A. 43:202; *Genesis* 4:94. Odit me Deus, quod desperationis est occasio. W. A. 43:202; *Genesis* 4:93.

³¹ Colludit [Deus] hic cum suo Patriarcha et eius filio, . . . W. A. 43:218; *Genesis* 4:115. An eum diligamus super omnia, et possimus eum iratum sic ferre, sicut libenter ferimus beneficientem et promittentem. W. A. 43:202; *Genesis* 4:93.

³² Sie thut solch unfreundlich und hart geberde Christi aus den augen, lesst sich das alles nich yrren, nympts auch nicht zu synn, sondern bleybt stracks und fest ynn yhrer zuversich hangen an dem guten gerüchte, das sie von yhm gehort und gefasset hatte, und lesst nicht abe. W. A. 17/2:201–2; *Sermons* 2:150.

³³ Das sie sich soll so nackt ausziehen und lassen alles, was sie fület, und alleyne am blossen wort hangen, ibid.

³⁴ Impugnabatur quidem, et tentabatur fides eius. Sed defintionem tamen firmiter tuebatur: Ego habeo promissionem. W. A. 44:100; *Genesis* 6:134.

³⁵ Deus cum sanctis suis ad exemplum Iacob aliquando solet colludere, quod ad ipsum attinet, lusu prorsus puerili. Nobis autem longe aliter apparet, quos ad hunc modum tentat. W. A. 44:97; *Genesis* 6:130.

³⁶ Non enim tentat Deus, ut occidat, sed ut recreet, confirmet, corroboret. W. A. 44:101; *Genesis* 6:136.

yield or cease urging or pressing on even when it is already feeling God's wrath."³⁷ In other words, divine wrath might ultimately be a teaching technique, designed to

³⁶ Steven Ozment suggests that "it was popular religious practice, centered on the sacrament of penance and known to Luther from his childhood, and the traditional theology taught at Erfurt [where Luther received his bachelor's and master's degrees], both the dominant Ockhamism and the persisting Thomism, that magnified for him, as it did for so many others, the tension between divine mercy and divine wrath." *The Age of Reform 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1980) 227.

reveal more fully the nature and necessity of faith and so to strengthen it. Luther often called it God's "strange work" (*opus alienum*); the apparent wrath would serve God's "proper work" (*opus proprium*), the granting of life and salvation.³⁸

But Luther also made it clear that the person being tempted would never know whether God was "teaching" or ultimately rejecting. "God chastens in two ways," he wrote.

At times He does so in grace as a kind Father, temporally; at times He does so in wrath as a stern Judge, eternally. Now when God seizes man, man is by nature weak and disheartened, because he does not know whether God is taking him in hand out of anger or in grace.³⁹

The paradox of "strange" and "proper" work is not quite identical to that of the "hidden" and "revealed" will, but they are closely related. Luther insists that a person in this situation would experience God's anger as rejection even if God's ultimate intent were acceptance.

So what ought people to do when they felt rejected of God? Since they could not know whether God was playing or damning, they were to follow the example of the biblical exemplars in his preaching and cling to God's promises even when God seemed to withdraw them.

Wherever we experience the opposite of a promise, we should maintain with assurance that when God shows himself differently from the way the promise speaks, this is merely a temptation. Therefore we should not allow this staff of the promise to be wrested from our hands . . . What else should you do in this situation than say: "I know that I am baptized and that God, for the sake of His Son, has promised me grace. This promise will not lie, even if I should be cast into utter darkness."⁴⁰

In extreme temptation, one's only hope was to hang on the promise, not to "allow this staff of the promise to be wrested from our hands." As Brian Gerrish suggests, Luther proposes a pastoral, practical solution—trust in scriptural promises—that does not actually solve the theological problem—whether "God in heaven" has included a particular person in the reach of those promises. Even the strongest faith would never escape the nagging question as to God's ultimate intentions.⁴⁶

The historian Steven Ozment approaches this same impasse from another direction. In the classic Protestant understandings, he writes, God's freedom and sovereignty transcended his goodness and love. Using Luther as his primary example, Ozment explains that "one approached such a God not with the offerings of good works expecting fairness, but in simple faith and trust hoping for mercy . . . Everything in religion hinged on *God's* keeping his word and proving to be as good as the Bible portrayed him."⁴⁷ But what if God broke his word? What if his promises were not finally reliable? What if he had secretly numbered one among those predestined for damnation? If God were a liar and his promises ultimately unreliable, might he be more worthy of anger rather than of trust?

³⁷ Talia exempla docent nos, quod fides non debet cedere nec cessare urgendo et instando, etiam in ipso sensu irae Dei: . . . W. A. 44:103; *Genesis* 6:139.

³⁸ E.g., quasi dicat: cum sit deus vitae et salutis, et haec opera eius propria, tamen ut haec operetur, occidit et perdit, quae sunt opera ei aliena, quo perveniat ad opus sum proprium. Operationes in Psalmos. 1519–1521, W. A. 5:63–64; English translation in *Works on the First Twenty-Two Psalms, 1519–1521*, (composite trans.) *Luther's Works* 14:335.

³⁹ Gott strafft ynn zweyerley weyse, Ein mal ynn gnaden als eyn gütiger vater, und zeytlich. Das ander mal ynn zorn also eyn gestrenger richter, und ewig. Wenn nu Gott den menschen angreyfft, so ist die natur so schwach und verzagt, darumb das sie nicht weis, ob sie Gott aus zorn oder gnaden angreyfft, . . . Die sieben Bußpsalmen, W. A. 18:480; English translation by Arnold Guebert in *The Seven Penitential Psalms, Luther's Works* 14:140. It would have been more accurate to translate the German "Mensch" as "person" rather than "man."

⁴⁰ Sic in omnibus aliis tentationibus faciendum est, ubicunque enim contrarium a promissione experimur, certo statuamus, cum se aliter ostendit Deus, quam promissio sonat, esse eam tantam tentationem, nec ideo hunc baculum promissionis patiamur nobis extorqueri e manibus. . . . Hic quid aliud facias, quam ut dicas, scio me baptisatum, et promissam mihi a Deo propter filium gratiam? Haec promissio non mentietur, etiamsi in exteriores tenebras abiciat. W. A. 43:203; *Genesis* 4:94–95.

□ The Hidden God in the English Reformation

For the most part, Luther's followers backed away from the extreme Augustinian theology of *De Servo Arbitrio*. But by the end of the sixteenth century a Reformed version of that theology, including the tension between God hidden and revealed, came to dominate academic discourse at the University of Cambridge. In the extraordinarily influential writings of William Perkins, one can find Luther's hidden God taking a prominent place alongside the God who reveals himself in the Bible, and Perkins does not hesitate to explain that the hidden God's intentions often contradicted the intentions of the revealed God.⁴¹

⁴⁶ Gerrish, "To the Unknown God," 137.

⁴⁷ Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 198–200. As noted above, the notion that a person's salvation depended entirely on the trustworthiness of God's word of promise, rather than primarily on any quality in her that might "deserve" God's favor, was a part of the Ockhamist heritage that Luther continued to uphold. See Ozment, *The Age of Reform*, 244, 61–62.

Perkins adopted the traditional distinction between God's *voluntas beneplaciti* and God's *voluntas signi*—"the pleasure of GOD within himselfe, and the significations thereof to his creature"—but understood it in his own way. He explained that "the ministry & dispensation [of the Gospel] is the signifying wil of God. For by it God signifies his pleasure touching the saluation of men."⁴² He went on to say that this *voluntas signi* was subordinate to the *voluntas beneplaciti*; "this signifying wil is not indeed the will of God properly, as the wil of his good pleasure is."⁴³ He argued that the wills were not ultimately contradictory, but he conceded that they might appear to be: "God sometime wils that in his signifying will, which he wils not in the will of his good pleasure."⁴⁴ This was the case with Jesus's words in Matt 23:37:

There is but one will in God: yet doth it not equally will all things, but in diuers respects it doth will & nill the same thing. He willeth the conuersion of Hierusalem, in that he approoueth it as a good thing in it self: in that he commands it, & exhorts men to it: in that he giues them outward means of their conuersion. He wils it not, in that he did not decree effectually to worke their conuersion.⁵²

As Perkins described it, there was nothing warm and fuzzy about the will of God's good pleasure. He compared God's forsaking the reprobate to a farmer's killing an ox or a sheep for his own use. To God, a human being was not worth so much as a fly was to that human being.⁴⁴

Perkins's critics found this version of extreme Augustinianism simply outrageous.⁴⁵ To take one notorious example, in 1594 Samuel Harsnett (who would eventually become Archbishop of York) mounted the public pulpit at Paul's Cross, London, to preach on Ezek 33:11: "As I live (saith the Lord) I delight not in the death of the wicked." Harsnett took direct aim at the God Perkins had embedded in his theology. What kind of God, asked Harsnett, could "*designe many thousands of soules to Hell before they were . . . to get him glory in their damnation*"?⁴⁶ Was this God's desire for glory through the punishment of the reprobate any different than the ambition of a Prince who would say, "I will beget mee a Sonne that I may

⁴¹ David Hoyle writes of Hooker's Cambridge as "a university dominated by the reformed protestant theology of William Perkins." *Reformation and Religious Identity in Cambridge, 1590–1644* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007) 25. Peter Iver Kaufman takes for granted that Perkins was "the most influential English theologian" at Cambridge during the late 16th century. "Much in Prayer": The Inward Researches of Elizabethan Protestants," *JR* 73 (1993) 163–82, at 166. For Perkins's overall influence see the statistics in the appendices in Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000). Patrick Collinson called Perkins "the most widely read of English divines," "England and International Calvinism, 1558–1640," in *International Calvinism, 1541–1715* (ed. Menna Prestwick, Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 197–223, at 222. In the opinion of Charles Hambrick-Stowe, Perkins was "the greatest theologian of the [Puritan] movement," "Practical Divinity and Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (ed. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008) 191–205, at 194. Popular libels against Perkins led Arnold Hunt to conclude that "he was regarded as the main English exponent of predestinarian theology, and that his name. . . had become popularly associated with a particular school of theology not just in academic circles but in the consciousness of many who had never read his writings." *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590–1640* (New York: Cambridge University, 2010) 364.

⁴² Perkins, *A Treatise of Gods Free-Grace and Mans Free-will in Works* 1:725.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 724. ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 726 ⁵² *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, in *Works* 1:287; Nos enim ipsi in quotidiana bestiarum mactatione & laniena iniusti esse nolumus, neque reuera sumus: Dei tamen respectu non sumus tanti, quanti bovis vel culix est; *De Predestinationis Modo et Ordine* (Cambridge: John Legatt, 1598) *NSTC* 19682, 25, in *Works* 2:611. See also *A Godly and Learned Exposition of Christs Sermon in the Mount*, where Perkins compared God to a man who had a flock of sheep and might "sende some of them to the fatting for the slaughter, and others keepe for breede." "The basest and least creature is something in regard of man," he continued, "but man is nothing vnto God." *Works* 3:251, see also 63, and *A Godly and Learned Exposition vpon the Whole Epistle of Iude in Works* 3:597.

⁴⁵ Later Lutherans like Jacob Andreae and Neils Hemmingsen found it "unjust and cruel": verentes fortasse ne deum iniustum & crudelem facerent, cited in *Armilla Aurea* (Cambridge: John Legatt, 1592) *NSTC* 19656, 337, in *Works* 1:107: "uuiust and vnmerciful." A few pages later Perkins calls his own doctrine *duriorem*. *Armilla Aurea* 348, in *Works* 1:110.

⁴⁶ Harsnett, "A Sermon Preached at S. Pauls Cross," in *Three Sermons Preached by the Reverend, and Learned D^r Robert Stuart, . . . To which is ad[d]ed, a fourth Sermon, Preached by the Right Reverend Father in God, Samuel Harsnett, Lord Arch-Bishop of Yorke* (London, 1656) *Wing* S5527, 133 (italics in original).

kill him, that I may so get mee a name"?⁴⁷ Luther and Perkins argued that the purpose of God's commandments was to convince people of their utter inability to fulfill them, but Perkins's God nevertheless denied grace to "many thousands of soules," knowing that without it they could do nothing but sin and be worthy of punishment. To justify his son's death, Harsnett's imaginary Prince would reason "I will beget him without both his feet, and when he is growne up, having no feet, I'll command him to *walke* upon paine of *Death*: and when he breaketh my *commandement*, I'll put him to *death*."⁵⁷

Was not this God, the one in whom Luther had urged Erasmus to trust, the same God who treated his human creatures like restrained inmates in an asylum?

If you should take a sound strong man (that hath power to walk and to lie still) and bind him hand and foot (as they do in *Bedlam*) and lay him down; and then bid him *Rise up and Walke*, or else you will stir him up with a Whip; and he tell you that there be chains upon him, so that he is not able to stir: and you tell him again, that that is no excuse, for if he look upon his health, his strength, his legs, he hath power to walk or to lie still; but if upon his chains, indeed in that respect he is not able to walk:....

"He that should whip that man for not walking," concluded Harsnett of this God, "were well worthy to be whipt himselfe."⁴⁸

Was such a God—the same God in whom Luther had placed all his confidence—trustworthy? Was he not in fact a liar? Then Harsnett turned to Matt 23:37 and made the same argument that Erasmus had made seventy years before. When Jesus lamented, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thee together, as an hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not," was he not shedding "Crocodiles teares"? Had he conveniently forgotten that, along with God the Father, his divine nature had been totally complicit in the eternal decree of election and reprobation, so that he knew full well that he had already destined many of Jerusalem's inhabitants to eternal perdition? Had he been truthful, Christ would have needed to say, "But ye *could* not, for *I* and my *Father* have sate in councell in *Heaven*, and from all eternity have made a decree, that ye should never come to *heaven*, though I my selfe a thousand times should be crucified for you."⁴⁹

Harsnett spoke for many in the Church of England in condemning the notion that God could go back on his own promises, but the weight of theological opinion would remain with Perkins for some time to come.⁵⁰ Ten years after Harsnett's Paul's Cross sermon Thomas Hooker arrived at Cambridge for his fourteen-year tenure (1604–1618) as student and then Fellow to find a University still under the spell of Perkins writings.

By the time Hooker took up his lectureship in Chelmsford, he had developed a homiletical strategy that the social historian Jean Delumeau has called *surculpabilisation*. *Surculpabilisation*, the creation by the clergy of an overwhelming sense of sin and guilt in their lay audiences, involved picturing God as *le dieu terrible*, a deity furious at the sinfulness of his human creatures and ready to consign them to unendurable punishment (unless, argues Delumeau, they submitted to church control).⁵¹ Hooker preached a Protestant version of that *dieu terrible*.

Indeed, Hooker's terrifying God not only consigned most members of the human race to hell before they were born but even took pleasure in their eternal torment. God would "laugh at [a damned man's] confusion," he preached, "and shall rejoyce when hee executes his judgements upon this man to his everlasting destruction." "The Lord will laugh at [the reprobates'] destruction," he said on another occasion, "and mocke when their feare commeth." The *deus absconditus* had been brought into the strong light of day. It was his calling as a preacher, Hooker told his hearers, to fling "hell fire in your face."⁵²

The God of Hooker's imagining could exact whatever torments he pleased on his human creatures: "If we had dropped out of our mothers wombe into hell, and there been roaring . . . it had been just."⁵³ He had deliberately made the reprobate immortal in order to increase their suffering: "the Lord by death takes away a poor creature, and drags him down to hell . . .

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 141. ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 136–137. Peter Lake, "The 'Anglican Moment'?: Richard Hooker and the Ideological Watershed of the 1590s," in *Anglicanism and the Western Christian Tradition* (ed. Stephen Platten; Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2003) 90–121, 229–33, at 109, argues for the importance of this sermon, as do Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547 – c. 1700* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007) 84–85. William Perkins repeatedly tried to refute this argument, e.g., *Works* 1:287–88; 3:63; 3*:298.

⁴⁹ Harsnett, "Sermon," 163–65, emphasis on "could" mine.

⁵⁰ Harsnett seems to have drawn some of his ammunition from second-generation Lutherans like the Danish theologian Neils Hemmingsen, see Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 20, 38–39, 59.

⁵¹ Delumeau, *Le catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1971); English translation as *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire* (trans. Jeremy Moiser; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), *La Peur en Occident (XIVe–XVIIIe siècles): Une cite' assie'ge'e* (Paris: Artheme Fayard, 1978), *Le Péché et la Peur: la culpabilisation en Occident, XIIIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Artheme Fayard, 1983); English translation as *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture 13th–18th Centuries* (trans. Eric Nicholson; New York: St. Martin's, 1990).

⁵² Hooker, *The Soules Humiliation* (London, 1637) *NSTC* 13728, 88; *Soules Preparation*, 216; *The Vnbelevers Preparing for Christ* (London, 1638) *NSTC* 13740, 183; *Soules Humiliation*, 206; *Soules Preparation*, 86.

⁵³ *The Paterne of Perfection: Exhibited in Gods Image on Adam: And Gods Covenant made with him* (London, 1640) *NSTC* 13726, 202.

and saith, Thou hast sinned and deserved wrath, and thou canst not beare any wrath here; therefore thou shalt die and be made immortall, that thou maist beare it for evermore.”⁵⁴

For it was in the just destruction of the damned that God had chosen to magnify his glory. “A God holy and just,” imagined Hooker, “if I had perished and beene damned, might have tooke glory by my destruction.”⁵⁵ Hooker imagined Jesus joining in the torment: “The Lord is comming to execute judgement upon all that worke wickednesse, and those that have spoken against him. So that when the Church of Christ, and the Angels in heaven, and the divells in hell have conspired to torment a man, then also the Lord Jesus will come to torment him.”⁵⁶

In a notorious sermon later published as *The Danger of Desertion*, Hooker’s threats reached a fever pitch:

Thou shalt one day be deprived of his presence, and shut up with the haters of God and goodnesse in the blacke Tophet, where the worme never dyes, nor the fire never goes out, then thy crying will doe thee no good. God will be God in thy destruction, he will spurne thousands, and ten thousands such as thou art downe to hell, where thou shalt be an everlasting object of his never dying wrath.⁵⁷

To be sure, Hooker had an agenda: an unbeliever’s fright as she heard these and similar “uses of terror” could drive her to Jesus. But even those eager for divine mercy could not expect to be gathered into loving arms. Hooker’s God was glorified in the degradation of potential converts as well as in the punishment of the reprobate: “Herein is the glory of his Name greatly exalted,” said Hooker, “that hee makes a poore wretch to come, and creepe, and crawl before him, and beg for mercy at his hands, and to be at his dispose.”⁵⁸ This God seemed to take pleasure in humiliating his prospective followers: “he will make thee lie in the dust, and wait for mercy, & come groveling for his grace.”⁵⁹

“Judicious Perkins” had maintained that sinners could never trust God’s mercies until they had despaired of their own abilities (what Perkins termed *desperatio de propriis viribus*). A person who saw the “foulenesse” of his sins and felt the “burthen” of them would be “brought downe, as it were to the very gates of hell,” even “heartily acknowledging himselfe to haue deserued not one onely, but even ten thousand damnations in hell fire.”⁶⁰ But Hooker’s descriptions of this despair, and the terror that provoked it, go further. A hearer’s conscience, given authority by God, would “teare your flesh for this, and rend your hearts in peeces with horror.”⁶¹ To a hearer in the grip of such terror, even sleep would offer no refuge. Undoubtedly thinking of his own experience at Emmanuel, he told his listeners that while such a man was asleep in bed, “conscience awakens him and terrifies him.”⁶²

Using a favorite metaphor, Hooker imagined God working through a prospective convert’s conscience as if the conscience were a King questioning “a Traytor after his conspiracy is discovered.” If the traitor refused to confess, he would be “brought upon the rack, and then one joynt is broken, and then he roares by reason of the extremity of the payne.” Should his confession be incomplete, “then he is hoysed upon the rack the second time, and then another joynt is broken, and then he roares againe.” The torture could be prolonged, for the King “never leaves racking and tormenting of him, untill he hath discovered and layed open the whole treason.”⁶³

In just this way a condemning conscience would “bring the soule of a sinner upon the rack” until “he cryes and roares for anguish of spirit.” “The Lord lets in horror, and anguish, and vexation into the conscience, and sets the very flashes of hell fire upon his face.”⁶⁴ In another lecture Hooker spoke of God’s coming “to make rakes in the hearts of such as he meanes to doe good unto.”⁶⁵

So utterly subservient to his will did Hooker’s God intend his followers to be that he expected them to accept their own damnation if he should wish it. Over and over, Hooker insisted that if it were God’s will, a convert should be prepared to

⁵⁴ *The Soules Exaltation A treatise containing the soules union with Christ, on I Cor. 6. 17. The soules benefit from vnion with Christ, on I Cor. 1. 30. The soules justification, on 2 Cor. 5. 21* (London, 1638) NSTC 13727, 234.

⁵⁵ *The Vnbelevers Preparing for Christ*, 36.

⁵⁶ *The Soules Implantation* (London, 1637) NSTC 13731, 242.

⁵⁷ *The Danger of Desertion: Or A Farvvell Sermon of Mr Thomas Hooker, Sometimes Minister of Gods Word at Chainsford in Essex; but now of New England. Preached immediately before his departure out of old England* (London, 1641) Wing H2646 (reprinted in *Thomas Hooker: Writings in England and Holland, 1626–1633*, ed. George H. Williams, Norman Pettit, Winifred Herget, and Sargent Bush Jr. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975]) 12.

⁵⁸ *Soules Humiliation*, 88.

⁵⁹ *The Soules Preparation for Christ* (London, 1632) NSTC 13735, 216.

⁶⁰ Perkins, *Of the Calling of the Ministerie: Two Treatises in Works* 3:*434. *A Treatise Tending unto a declaration*, in *Works* 1:365.

⁶¹ *Unbelievers Preparing*, 49.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁵ *Soules Preparation*, 27.

endure eternal punishment. “Bee thou glorified,” he expected such a person to pray to God, “though I be damned forever.”⁶⁶ Other preachers might imagine a humbled hearer admitting that he deserved “nothing but hell” for his sins; Hooker insisted on more: “The soule despairing of all succour in himselfe, it falls downe at the throne of grace, if the Lord will damne him he may, and if he will save him he may.”⁷⁷ “If it were possible to be in hell, free from sinne, he were a happy man.”⁷⁸ In so many words, Hooker preached that “the heart truly abased, is content to beare the estate of damnation.”⁷⁹

Theologians had a term for this unsettling doctrine: *resignatio ad infernum*.⁸⁰ Hooker did not use the Latin term in his popular preaching, he spoke of “desperate discouragement” or “holy despair.” But there could be no doubt of his meaning: prospective converts would be so completely subservient to the divine will that they would accept even their own damnation.⁶⁷

Quite simply, Hooker was casting doubt into hearers’ minds and hearts about the authenticity of their faith. Many who had confidently trusted God’s promises— but had never imagined that that trust should include the possibility of their own damnation—began to wonder whether they would find at the Last Judgment that their confidence had been misplaced. What they imagined as “true” faith might finally be revealed as false, something other than the faith at the heart of the Protestant gospel. This was the very fear, in fact, that had possessed Hooker on

⁷⁷ *The Soules Humiliation*, 6, see also 107–108 and 112.

⁷⁸ *The Soules Preparation for Christ* (London, 1632) NSTC 13735, 159, see also *The Application of Redemption* 10:700 and 10:409.

⁷⁹ *The Soules Humiliation*, 112. This last citation comes from sermons that Hooker himself prepared for the press.

⁸⁰ The doctrine had surfaced periodically during the medieval centuries, particularly in mystical circles. In a fascinating recent dissertation, “The Deconstruction of Hell: A History of the Resignatio ad Infernum Tradition” (Ph. D. diss., Syracuse University, Department of Religion, 2013, <http://surface.syr.edu/reletd>), Clark West has explored the periodic recurrence of what he terms a “parrhesiastic” version of *resignatio ad infernum*. In parrhesiastic *resignatio ad infernum*, Christians defy God’s wrath by their willingness to share the pains of hell in solidarity with the damned. This was a tradition on the edges; West finds that most Christian exegetes found ways of side-stepping the implications of Paul’s willingness in Rom 9:3 to be cut off from Christ for the sake of his brothers. The few mainstream thinkers who, like Hooker (and Luther, as we shall see), took Paul’s outcry seriously generally preached what West calls a “domesticated” *resignatio*. Rather than offering a means whereby an individual could participate in a communal challenge to God’s authority, the domesticated version confined its application to her personal salvation or damnation. For a brief discussion of what West terms a domesticated *resignatio ad infernum* see pp. 300–308. Garry Wills explains *parrhēsia* briefly in *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 308–9.

that fateful night at Emmanuel College. Until that night, Hooker had thought he enjoyed God’s favor. His terrifying God shattered that confidence! After such an experience, one learned to trust God’s revealed promises despite knowing that the hidden God lurked in the shadows.

As appears in his biblical exegesis, Luther understood faith in a comparable way. Mature faith had encountered the hidden God and had endured the *Anfechtungen* that that encounter inevitably provoked. Faith trusted the revealed God’s promises despite knowing that another God, one with different intentions, might be hiding behind him.

But had Luther’s own encounter with the hidden God driven him so far as to teach *resignatio ad infernum*? Ever since the discovery and publication of his 1515–1516 lectures on Paul’s letter to the Romans, it has become clear that it had.⁶⁸ When he reached chapter nine in early summer 1516, he encountered Rom 9:3, the apostle’s outcry on behalf of those Jews—the great majority—who had declined to accept his Christian gospel. Paul saw them as his “kinsmen according to the flesh,” now in danger of being excluded from eternal salvation. For their sake, writes an anguished Paul, “I could wish that [I] myself were accursed from Christ.”

Tellingly, the young Luther read this passage to mean that all believers must be as selfless as Paul. Those who truly love God, he told his students, “submit freely to the will of God whatever it may be, even for hell and eternal death, if God should will it.” “No one knows whether he loves God with a pure heart,” he continued a little later, “unless he experiences in himself

⁶⁶ *The Soules Implantation*, 168; see also *The Soules Vocation or Effectual Calling to Christ*. (London, 1638) NSTC 13739, 212, 498; *Soules Implantation*, 97.

⁶⁷ Students of American religion will recall that Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803) embedded *resignatio ad infernum* into his doctrine of “disinterested benevolence.” Hopkins famously wrote that a Christian “cannot know that he loves God and shall be saved until he knows he has that disposition which implies a willingness to be damned, if it be not most for the glory of God that he should be saved.” *A Dialogue between a Calvinist and a Semi-Calvinist*, included in *Sketches of the Life of the Late Rev. Samuel Hopkins* (ed. Stephen West; Hartford, 1805) 150, cited in Joseph Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981). Conforti discusses disinterested benevolence on pp. 109–24, but see also Peter Jauhiainen, “Samuel Hopkins and Hopkinsianism,” in *After Jonathan Edwards: The Course of the New England Theology* (ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Swaney; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 107–17 at 114–16.

⁶⁸ *Diui Pauli apostoli ad Romanos Epistola*, W. A. 56:1–528; English translation in *Luther: Lectures on Romans*. The Library of Christian Classics 15 (trans. Wilhelm Pauck; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

that should God want it so, he does not wish to be saved or refuse to be damned.”⁶⁹ Almost a decade before the publication of *De servo arbitrio*, the hidden God had risen to the surface in the young Luther’s theology.

One must recognize, as scholars like Wolfhart Pannenberg have demonstrated, that although the hidden God continued to haunt his preaching throughout his life, Luther did eventually change his mind about *resignatio ad infernum*. He took the advice he had given in *De servo arbitrio*—to “keep in view His Word and leave alone His inscrutable will”—and rejected his endorsement of the notion that one must learn to accept damnation should that be God’s will. Around the dinner table in December of 1532, he told his companions that his former colleague Andreas Karlstadt had once said that even if he knew God was going to damn him, Karlstadt would “trot right along into hell.” Without admitting that he himself had once taught the same thing, Luther said that Karlstadt had spoken “wickedly.” God asked believers to “do and believe what I tell you, and leave the rest to me.”⁷⁰ Trust the *deus praedicatum* to keep the *deus absconditus* at bay.

Luther imagined a God who deliberately used *Anfechtungen* to produce the *humiliatio*, the sense of total worthlessness and radical need, that allowed faith to arise. *Anfechtungen* would occur when people began to fear that a *deus absconditus*, who did not will the salvation of everyone, lurked behind the loving, nurturing God they imagined. Pastors like Hooker shaped that theology into a program: he would preach the *deus absconditus* to terrify his hearers into the kind of *humiliatio* that would eventually lead to faith. Rather than imagine Hooker’s *resignatio ad infernum* as the result of an idiosyncratic personal experience, I believe it must be understood as an intensification of the tradition he learned at Cambridge, one that goes back to Luther himself. And unlike Luther, Hooker never abandoned *resignatio ad infernum*.

Throughout this article, I have discussed deep anxiety over the intentions of a hidden God as a particularly Protestant characteristic. But was anxiety over the apparent contradiction between God’s *voluntas beneplaciti* and *voluntas signi* exclusively Protestant? Did it not, as Ozment suggests, extend back at least as far as the writings of William of Ockham? Why did a similar anxiety not characterize Catholic practice both before and after Luther?

I suggest that we are seeing the influence of the much-maligned penitential system. Has the spell of Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, the image of a patronizing church whose comforting rituals sheltered the simple minds of lay people from the terrors of existence, too often caused us to undervalue the positive psychological value of the medieval sacraments? Despite their shortcomings, which Protestant reformers were only too willing to denounce, its seems likely that the sacraments, and in particular the sacrament of penance, in large part succeeded in preventing this anxiety from arising.⁷¹ Of course there were exceptions, a hyper-sensitive Luther in the monastery being the most famous, but confession of sin, absolution by a priest, and performance of an appropriate work of satisfaction were intended to bring a sinner back into the good graces of God. Even if only at the last rites, God, through his priest, certified a Christian’s status. There was no hidden God behind the one whose priest absolved a lay penitent.⁸⁶ Luther and his fellow Protestants stripped away what till then had been a guarantee of how one stood before God.

Although it would not be difficult to find the terrifying God lurking in the pages of the many surviving diaries and other spiritual writing in early seventeenth century England, this article attempts to show only that the preaching of one prominent godly preacher, Thomas Hooker, reveals the same deep anxiety about God’s ultimate intentions that is present in the preaching and writing of Martin Luther, the person who is generally considered the archetypical Protestant.⁸⁷ Thirty years ago, Brian Gerrish forcefully argued that “there is an unresolved dialectic in Reformation faith corresponding to a dialectic in the conception of God.”⁸⁸ That dialectic was still at work in the career of Thomas Hooker.

⁶⁹ Tales enim Libere sese offerunt in omnem voluntatem Dei, etiam ad infernum et mortem aeternaliter, si Deus ita Vellet tantum, . . . Nunc autem nemo scit, an Deum pure diligat, Nisi experiatur in se, Quod etiam salutari non cupiat Nec damnari renuat, Si Deo placeret. *W. A.* 56:391; *Lectures* 262, see also *W. A.* 56:388; *Lectures* 255.

⁷⁰ Carlstadius aliquando dixit: Si scirem, das mich unser Herr Gott wolt verdammen, so wolt ich in die hell hinein traben. Sed est impie dictum. Deus dicit: Thue und glaub, was ich dir sage; das ander las mich machen. So wollen sie es vor wissen sine ad extra verbum. *W.A. Tischreden* 1:174–75 no. 403; English translation by Theodore G. Tappert in *Luthers Works* 54:64. On Luther’s change of heart see Pannenberg, “Einfluß des Anfechtungserfahrung,” 126–30.

⁷¹ Richard Muller would concur that the abolition of the penitential system provoked Protestant concern about personal assurance of salvation. “The use of a practical syllogism, namely, of various aspects of the doctrine of salvation that could be framed syllogistically for the sake of personal assurance, arose in a context in which a Protestant language of the order and pattern of salvation challenged churchly authority and removed the security once afforded by the more externalized aspects of late medieval understanding of penance, good works, and merits.” *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 245. Speaking in particular of clerical celibacy, Peter Brown suggests that “there is a tendency to view the history of Christianity in the early Middle Ages in terms of a top-down model. On this top-down model, clerical power is seen as always triumphing over the laity—and usually with results of which we disapprove. Such a view is to be strongly resisted.” *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 A. D.*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) 519. Brown suggests (p. 515) that it was pressure from the laity, who insisted that the church create some mechanism “to obtain the forgiveness of one’s sins through the intercession of others,” that led eventually not only to clerical celibacy but to a penitential system through which a priest could intercede with God to guarantee the penitent’s favor in God’s eyes. The scholarly literature on the effectiveness of the late medieval sacrament of penance is enormous, but one could do worse than begin with the conclusions of Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 363–70.

⁸⁶ One never knew, of course, whether one might “fall from grace” in the future, but one could count on God’s favor at least at the moment of the priest’s absolution.

⁸⁷ In 1670, for example, Giles Firmin, who had known Hooker in New England, wrote that the writings of the godly lineup of Hooker, his son-in-law Thomas Shepherd, his mentors Perkins and John Rogers, and Daniel Rogers, had “caused great troubles among Christians” because in their explanations of the origin and nature of faith, they required something akin to *resignatio ad infernum*. Firmin, *The Real Christian, or a Treatise of Effectual Calling* (London, 1670) *Wing* F963, sig. B3’.

⁸⁸ Gerrish, “To the Unknown God” 147. Gerrish goes on to suggest that people today experience the hidden God “in the dark possibility that [they are] lost in a boundless and senseless universe.” In grasping “the possibility of affirming the meaning of life in spite of this anxiety” they “come closest to the faith of Luther and Calvin” (148).