In sinu Patris. The merciful Trinity in Luther's exposition of John 1:18

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In late medieval art the Trinity was portrayed in manifold ways. Francois Boesflug has recently observed that the 15th century saw the strong emergence of a new pictural type. In this type the Father holds the dead Jesus in his arms and the Holy Spirit appears as a dove between the two. This motif is sometimes called "pietà of the Father", but Boesflug labels it as "the compassion of the Father". This label may comprise some theological difficulties, since patrpassianism belongs to the ancient heresies. According to Boesflug, however, the motif aims at saying that the Father is capable of compassion.¹

Boesflug is not able to identify the theological background of the new motif. This portrayal of the Trinity, however, emerged as a common phenomenon during the 15th and 16th centuries. It was popular in North and Central European painting, including the art of the Lutheran Reformation. Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach as well as many later Protestants employ this motif. Its popularity stretches from Spain and Italy to the American churches.²

1. "The bosom of the Father" and the context of a merciful God

Without entering deeper into the details of art history one can apply the results of Boesflug to the history of the Reformation. The "compassion of the Father" portrays Christ as Schmerzensmann, a suffering person. The many pictures analysed by Boesflug always visualise the wounds of Christ (ostensio vulneris), a typical aspect in the portrayals of Schmerzensmann. In addition, the motif is closely connected with two other trinitarian pictures: (a) with the so-called throne of grace (Hebr 4:16) in which the Father shows the crucified Christ to the spectators; and (b) with the icon of paternity in which Jesus is pictured as an infant "in the bosom of the Father" (in sinu patris, John 1:18). The compassion of the Father likewise portrays Jesus in the bosom of the Father, but it does not display the pre-existent Logos nor the incarnated infant, but the dead Christ.³

When compared with the icon of paternity, one can ask whether the compassion of the Father likewise employs John 1:18 as its biblical and theological background. Boesflug does not suggest this, but the use of the phrase in sinu patris in late medieval theology and in Luther seems, as will be shown below, to support this conclusion. Given this, the compassion of the Father could be interpreted as a compilation or melting together of three motifs: paternity, Schmerzensmann and the throne of grace. We will not, however, aim at verifying this proposal; to accomplish that task, a deeper analysis of 15th- and 16th-century art would be necessary.

It is clear that the "compassion" of the Father has nothing to do with patrpassianism. The motif rather aims at a visual portrayal of the mercy of the Father. The theological theme

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² Boesflug 2000, 91-92
of mercy is prominent in the period leading to the Reformation. The Father cannot suffer, but he can show mercy. The phrase *misericordia Domini* (Ps 33:5) was known to medieval and early modern Christians above all as the name of the second Sunday after Easter, in which the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-16) was read as the gospel text. Boesflug does not pay any specific attention to the church year, but he occasionally remarks that the phrase *misericordia Domini* accompanies the paintings.4

Berndt Hamm has shown how the theme of mercy permeates the piety, theology and art of the fifteenth century.5 According to Hamm, the mercy of God can be characterised as the main theme of late medieval piety.6 Hamm and David Steinmetz7 have investigated the pre-reformation theology of piety and its significance for Martin Luther in detail. Their studies do not, however, deal with trinitarian theology.

In the following it will be shown how trinitarian theology, for its part, became shaped by this piety. Trinitarian reflections were probably not among the major topics of the theology of mercy. But the popularity already enjoyed by the pictorial motif of the compassion of the Father shows that the actual major topics, in particular the suffering of Christ and the mercy of the Father, were not indifferent with regard to the trinitarian reflection. The biblical verse John 1:18 is employed in the following as a clue for the understanding of the merciful trinity in Martin Luther.

To say that the Son is "in the bosom of the Father" is an innertrinitarian description. One could therefore claim that this phrase would not belong to the context of incarnation and passion of Christ, but that it only depicts the pre-existent status of the second person. John 1 lends support to this claim insofar as it speaks of the pre-existent Logos. On the other hand, John 1:18 does mention the revelation and our knowledge of God: "No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son (*unigenitus*), who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made him known."

This emphasis on revelation and knowledge may have contributed to the fact that the scholastics exposed John 1:18 in the context of the incarnation. According to Thomas Aquinas, God became human in order that human beings could perceive the divine instruction. After the incarnation of Christ humankind received a clearer instruction concerning God's message. The only Son, who lies in the bosom of the Father, transmitted this message.8

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7 David Steinmetz, Misericordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes Staupitz in its Late Medieval Setting. Leiden: Brill 1968.
8 So Thomas, Summa contra gentiles 4.54.4: "... oportuit igitur hominem, ad perfectam certitudinem consequendam de fidei veritate, ab ipso Deo instrui homine facto, ut homo, secundum modum humanum, divinam instructionem perciperet. et hoc est quod dicitur ioan. 1-18: Deum nemo vidit unquam: unigenitus, qui est in sinu Patris, ipse enarravit. et ipse dominus dicit, Ioan. 18-37: 'ego ad hoc natus sum et veni in mundum, ut testimonium perhibeam veritati.' Propter quod videmus post Christi incarnationem evidentius et certius
Bonaventure emphasizes this link between incarnation and John 1:18 in an even stronger fashion. He holds that the Word became human but nevertheless also remained in the bosom of the Father. In the incarnation, the Logos appeared according to the manner perceptible for the human senses. But, at the same time, the innertrinitarian realities remained unaltered: the Father generates the Son and the Son remains in the bosom of the Father. Bonaventure compares this event with the relationship between internal and external word. In the act of speaking, the word becomes audible, but the mental word is not lost because of the external act of speaking.  

The examples of Thomas and Bonaventure show in which sense the incarnated Christ remains in the bosom of the Father. The icon of paternity illustrates this theological reality with the incarnated infant. One can assume that other motifs, like the throne of grace and the compassion of the Father, also entail an allusion to the descent of Christ and to John 1:18.

We will now shift our attention to Martin Luther and his understanding of John 1:18. This verse has found little interest in Luther studies, probably because the verse does not belong to the pericopes of the church year which were employed in regular preaching. For this reason, only one thematical exposition of this verse can be found in Luther's works. But the new printed registers and the effective search functions of the online version of the critical edition of Luther's works enable the researcher to document Luther's usage of this verse in detail.

2. Luther's use of John 1:18

2.1. Ps 73:11 in Dictata super psalterium (1513-15)

Luther's first longer reflection on John 1:18 occurs in the First Lecture on the Psalms, namely in the context of Ps 73 (74):11. Luther says that the final part of this verse, "de medio sinu tuo", seems to be redundant or unclear. But, he continues, these words contain a metaphor:

hominès in divina cognitione esse instructos: secundum illud Isaiæ 11-9: repleta est terra scientia Domini."

9 Bonaventura, De reductione artium ad theologiam, 16: "Si sermonem consideremus in respectu ad loquentem, sic videmus, quod omnis sermo significat mentis conceptum, et ille conceptus interior est verbum mentis et eius proles, quae nota est etiam ipsi concipienti. Sed ad hoc quod fiat nota audienti, induit formam vocis, et verbum intelligibile mediante illo indumento fit sensibile et auditur externus et suscipitur in aure cordis audientis, et tamen non recedit a mente proferentis. - Iuxta hunc modum videmus in Verbo aeterno, quod Pater aeternaliter ipsum concepit generando, secundum, illud Proverbiorum, octavo: 'Nondum erant abyssi, et ego iam concepta eram'. Sed ad hoc, quod homini sensuali fieret cognoscibile, induit formam carnis, et 'Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis', et tamen remansit 'in sinu Patris'."

10 WA 46,665-674 (Auslegung des ersten und zweiten Kapitels Johannis,1538) See below.

11 Cf. WA-Sachregister, s.v. sinus and luther.chadwyck.co.uk, s.v. sinu-, schos-. We have found 50-100 matches having to do with John 1:18.

12 Vulgata: Ut quid avertis manum tuam et dexteram tuam de medio sinu tuo in finem. Luther (WA 55/II, 478, 420-421) translates: "Hebreus sic: Convertis manum tuam et dexteram tuam in medio sinu tuo consumens."
the one who conceals his hand in the bosom, refrains from doing anything and does not offer help.\textsuperscript{13}

With the help of this metaphor the verse wants to say that Christ conceals his divinity before the Jewish people so that they do not know him. The Son of God sits at the right hand of the Father (\textit{dextera Dei}), but he also remains in the bosom of the Father. When the Father hides his right hand in his bosom, the people do not recognize Christ as the Son, but they only know God the Father and Christ as a human being. At the same time, this act of concealment is a reaction. The people have first hidden their own hand in their own bosom, that is, they have converted the spirit into the letter, and thus hidden their faith before God. As they have acted towards God, so too does God react towards them.\textsuperscript{14}

In this way Christ remains hidden in the bosom. His humanity conceals his divinity from those people who think of him as only human and thus do not affirm his divinity. Among these people the divinity of Christ remains hidden in the depth of the human bosom of Jesus, in the intimacy of his humanity. "We", the Christians, can now recognize this right hand, the divinity of the Son, but "they", the Jews, cannot.\textsuperscript{15} Because of this concealment the non-trinitarian monotheists falsely assume that they can worship God properly, but in reality they cannot. If this dynamics of concealment is understood properly, the end of Ps 73 (74):11 is neither unclear nor redundant. It describes the hiddenness of God among his people and tells us why God has not revealed the divinity of the Son to them. These people have not wanted that God would sustain them.\textsuperscript{16}

After this exposition Luther distinguishes among three meanings of the term "bosom". According to his divinity, Christ is in the bosom of the Father (1). With regard to his humanity, Christ is in the bosom of Mary (2). Thus we may distinguish between the divine-spiritual and the human-carnal bosom. The bosom of Christ (3) is, accordingly, a twofold one: human and divine, literal and spiritual. The Hebrew text can only grasp the literal meaning of \textit{sinus}, whereas the Christian-Latin text can affirm the spiritual meaning. We, the Christians, can understand the spiritual sense of the Latin verse (74:11: \textit{aversis manum tuam et dexteram tuam de medio sinu tuo}) as follows: From the middle of your bosom (3), which is the bosom (1) of the Father, you avert your right hand, that is, the divinity. With this act you do not reject your own, but those other people. For they have not believed that you are in the bosom (1) of the Father. Thus you have averted this fatherly (1) depth or

\textsuperscript{13} WA 55/2, 478, 419-424.

\textsuperscript{14} WA 55/II, 478, 426-434: "Veruntamen occulto indicio vult, quod Christus abscondit (non suo, Sed eorum vitio) divinitatem suam ab eis, ut eam non agnoscant. Nam 'dextera Dei' est filius Dei, Et ipse est in sinu patris sui. Ideoque 'Convertere dexteram suam in medio sinu suo' Est divinitatem suam abscondi ab eis in patre, ut illi non filium, Sed solum patrem Deum putent, ipsum tantum hominem. Sicut manus in sinu posita non videtur, sed tantum sinus. Hoc autem non faceret eis, nisi ipsi prius dexteram suam in sinum suum averterent, spiritum in literam intruderent et fidem absconderent coram Deo."

\textsuperscript{15} WA 55/2, 478, 437-443: "Vel certe 'in medio sinu suo' i.e. in humanitate sua coram eis abscondit eo, quod ipsi Deum non credunt eum esse, Sed tantum hominem. Sic enim ab Isaia vocatur 'Deus absconditus valde'. Humanitas enim gratiotissima Christi est sinus iste, formatus de mundissimo panno carnis virginee; et in medio eius, in intimo inquam illius humanitatis absconditus est. Et aversa dextera eius ab illis, Sed non a nobis."

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 443-454.
middle of your bosom (3) away from those people. They have only grasped the Hebrew, literal meaning of the verse, according to which you have turned into the middle of your human-motherly bosom (2).  

After this somewhat complicated differentiation of the term "bosom", the verse can be exposed as follows. The Psalmist complains: Why do you, Christ, hold yourself back from the Jews so that they do not acknowledge you as God? For how long will they only see you as human and cannot see your right hand and your grace? In this way the Psalmist expresses the hiddenness of God "in the bosom" and asks why this state of affairs continues. In what follows, Luther makes further reflections about Abraham's bosom, into which all knowledge of faith is received. We will restrict our discussion, however, to the trinitarian dimension.

With regard to the trinitarian dimension, Luther is engaged with the explanation of the hiddenness of the divinity of Christ. Dextera Dei and in sinu Patris depict the revealed and the hidden or concealed Christ in his innertrinitarian relation to the Father. Non-trinitarian monotheists can only recognise Christ as human, because his divinity remains hidden in the bosom. In the middle of the bosom of Christ, the bosom of the Father is concealed. This fatherly bosom is spiritually the divinity of Christ, whereas the bosom of the mother represents his humanity. Therefore it is important not only to consider Christ in the bosom of Mary or among other humans, but in addition the expositor of Ps 74:11 should recognise that the innertrinitarian bosom of the Father (John 1:18) is also meant.

In the first lecture on the Psalms the phrase in sinu patris is occasionally employed as description of the being of Christ before the incarnation. As we have seen in the cases of Thomas and Bonaventure, this description does not entail the idea that the innertrinitarian relationship would change in the incarnation. As a whole, however, the phrase in sinu patris does not appear very often in the early writings of Luther. The exposition of Ps 74:11 is fruitful because of its trinitarian reflections, but the motif of mercy does not appear. One could rather say that the emphatic topic of concealment and hiddenness of God does not leave room for the idea of mercy.

2.2. Sermons and biblical expositions 1524-1538

Since the mid-1520s Luther begins to employ the phrase in sinu patris more frequently, though not very often. In an Exposition of Zachariah (1524) the prophecy concerning Messiah is interpreted so that the "man who is next to me" (Zach 13:7) becomes a typos of

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17 Ibid., 454-458, 468-473: "Unde quod ait 'in sinu tuo', videtur distinguere sinum patris a sinu suo. Quia secundum divinitatem est in sinu patris, Sed secundum humanitatem in sinu matris. Sed sinus patris est divinitas Et sinus matris caro; illam de patre, hanc de mater habet. ... Et sic duplex est sinus Christi: litera et spiritus, virgo mater et Deus pater. De primo loquitur hebreus textus, de altero noster, qui dicit: 'de medio sinu tuo' i.e. de sinu patris avertis dexteram tuam, non tibi, Sed illis. Quia illi non credunt te esse in sinu patris; ideo eis es aversus de medio isto sinu tuo. Et es conversus in sinu tuo medio, scil. matris (i.e. carnis)."


20 WA 55/2, 354, 4.
Jesus in the bosom of the Father. The beloved son is sent to his death in the same way as the good shepherd of Zach 13:7 is killed.  

This verse is, according to Luther, a prophecy which cannot be understood with human reason.

In Luther's *Sermons of 1525* two features ought to be noted. In the Sunday *Quinquagesima* Luther explains the atonement of Christ. He stresses the ineffability of the incarnation. God has left the bosom of the Father and has appeared in the bosom of Mary. The apostles did not understand this event. Even today we can hardly believe it with our own reasoning powers.

In the Sunday before St. Michael Luther connects John 1:18 with the idea of a merciful God. It is mercy that motivates Christ to his salvific deed. The reformer quotes Ps. 33:5 (*misericordia Domini*) several times. It belongs to the miracles of mercy that we may regard death as ashes (*favilla*). The flesh cannot understand this but, for the believer, death remains mere ashes. With a view to the salvific deed of Christ the suffering to death disappears like ashes that vanish into the sea. One aspect of these secrets of mercy is that the Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, is killed as an act of mercy, in order that the secrets may be revealed. God loves us even in our most difficult tribulations. This is an example of the "naked grace, God's mercy".

In Luther's later expositions of John 1:18 the idea of mercy as well as the distinction between philosophical (the law) and theological (the gospel) way of speaking become emphasized. The ineffability of divine action is highlighted with the help of this distinction. In an *Exposition of Matthew* 11:27 (1538) Luther remarks that Matthew here speaks in a Johannine manner and quotes John 1:18. In both verses the biblical author aims at reaching a way of speaking which is not philosophical but a properly theological description of the

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21 WA 13, 666, 27-32: "Hoc est, qui est apud me vel iuxta me, sicut et Ioannes ait: filius, qui est in sinu patris, ipse enarravit nobis. Est ergo sententia: Dilectissimum filium meum, qui est in sinu meo, quem constitui regem, unigenitum meum sic percutiam, ut scandalizetur in eo totus mundus. nam per crucem et mortem parabit sibi regnum illud aeternum et gloriosissimum."

22 WA 13, 666, 27-32: "Hoc est, qui est apud me vel iuxta me, sicut et Ioannes ait: filius, qui est in sinu patris, ipse enarravit nobis. Est ergo sententia: Dilectissimum filium meum, qui est in sinu meo, quem constitui regem, unigenitum meum sic percutiam, ut scandalizetur in eo totus mundus. nam per crucem et mortem parabit sibi regnum illud aeternum et gloriosissimum."

23 WA 17/1, 58,19-59,1: "Quis intellexit unquam, quod pro meis peccatis deus sol leiden et deo auss der schoss fallen in sinum matris? Si apostoli non intellixerunt, et hodie wirds sauer, quando praedicatur. Statim dicitur, sed non facile creditur." A variant reading in 58,34-35: "Qui hoc potest cogitare unquam, ut filius ex sinu patris decidens pro mea peccata satisfaciat ..."

24 WA 17/1, 419,12; 419,25; 420,29.

25 WA 17/1, 421, 12-14.

26 WA 17,1,421,26-33: "Ille filius mortuus est in media vita, quia deus habet eum in sinu, quia hat yhm willen, quod velit resuscitare, est favilla de morte und umbringt misericordia, et iam revelatur, quod prius occultum. Sic certissime nobiscum agit. Discendum, qualis deus, nempe, qui amplexatur nos etiam in maximis tribulationibus. ... Habes exemplum non fidei, sed nudae gratiae, misericordiae dei."
knowledge of God. The Son does not "know" the Father philosophically, namely regarding the substance of God, but the Son knows the will and the intention of God. To know God means knowing his will and thoughts (consilium et voluntatem). Because, in his divine being, the Son "understands" like the Father (cum patre idem sentiat in divinitate), the Son can transmit the knowledge and will of God to human beings. The theological knowledge endows us with an understanding of the magnificence of God's will and the richness of his mercy, so that poor sinners can be saved in faith.

The Exposition of John 1-2 (1538) contains a long thematic interpretation of John 1:18. Luther first asks whether it is proper to speak of the "bosom of the Father" in the German language. Then he claims that one must distinguish between two ways of knowing God. God can firstly be known through the law and reason. All humans have this cognitio legalis, since reason can observe the existence of God and natural moral law. Also philosophers know God through the law.

But God "has given two doctrines, namely law and gospel, in order that he can be known through these". The second way of knowing God, the gospel, "does not grow in our garden, the reason does not know anything of it". Knowledge through reason is like the left hand, whereas the gospel is "the proper way to acknowledge God so that one employs one's right hand and knows what God thinks and what is his will". This knowledge does not come through reason, but it is obtained "through the Son of God". It is the knowledge of the atoning deed of Christ, "that God's Son, who is in the Father's bosom, has become human, has died and is resurrected from death".

In this way John 1:18 describes the proper knowledge of God. Because the Son is in the bosom or arms of the Father and therefore knows God intimately, the Son can reveal the true will of God. The philosophers can only know the law of God, while Christ is the doctor of grace and truth. The philosopher can shed light on the left side of the knowledge of God, but the proper face and will of God is only revealed in Christ. If one wants to obtain and know the mind of God, one has to trust in Christ, since only Christ knows God properly.

God's mercy is misunderstood if it becomes reflected within the boundaries of the law.

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27 WA 38, 525, 28-43.
28 WA 38, 526, 30-35.
29 WA 46,665,34-666,10.
30 WA 46,666-668.
31 Ibid., 667, 9-10; 669, 9-10.
32 Ibid., 669, 10, 19-21, 29.
33 Ibid., 669, 4-6.
34 Ibid., 672, 14-23: "Woher komet die erkentnis Gottes der gnade und warheit? der eingeborne Son des Vaters, der bringets, der Son Gottes, den Gott inwendig hat und selbr Gott ist, der gehört dazu, denn er weis, was war ist, und er komet vom Vater, sonst ist kein Doctor, Meister noch Prediger denn der einige Doctor, Christus, der inwendig in der Gottheit ist, in seinem Arm, der Vater hat jn in Menschlicher weise im arm sitzen und hertzet jn, und er ist im Göttlichen wesen und steiget zu uns von Himel und wird Mensch, wer wolts uns sonst offenbaret haben? Sihe sonst aller Juristen Gesetz, aller Philosophen und Heiden Bücher an, so komen sie nicht weiter denn bis zu dem erkentnis des Gesetzes Mosi ..."
35 Ibid., 672, 24-28, 30-32.
The law requires human works, but it does not reveal the final will of God regarding our destiny. John 1:18, however, speaks of mercy in the proper manner. It stresses the grace and truth of Christ and thus communicates the right knowledge of God. In fact, John 1:18 expresses a summary of Christian doctrine, namely that Jesus Christ is man and God and that God can only be revealed through Christ, since in the Father's bosom Christ can know the heart of the Father. Luther even claims that John 1:18 contains "the whole message of Christian doctrine and life".

The connection between John 1:18 and the idea of mercy is also presupposed in the expression in sinu misericordiae which is employed twice in the Enarratio Psalms LI of 1532/38. These expressions refer to the being of the Christian and are thus soteriological. The person who is saved remains a sinner, but he or she is also in the bosom of the merciful God. The parallel to John 1:18 is visible here but it does not contain any explicitly trinitarian reflection.

2.3. Disputations and other late writings (1536-1545)

In Luther's late disputations the expression in sinu is likewise sometimes employed in a soteriological sense. In the disputation Contra missam privatam (1536) Luther speaks of the "bosom of mercy" into which the sins of the Christian are drowned and thus forgiven. In this sense the community of Christians, the church, is not without sin, but the church is nevertheless a holy community in the sense that its members begin to become purified of sin. Luther illustrates this state of affairs with a picture of a dirty child who can nevertheless sit in the father's arms and become cleansed there.

The interconnection between the trinitarian relationship of the Father and the Son on the one hand and soteriology on the other can lead Luther to say that, in the process of cleansing and sanctification, the Christian can identify himself in some way with Christ. Then the Christian can also find himself in the bosom of the Father. In the Third Disputation against Antinomians (1538) Luther describes the "heavenly mercy" by holding that the Christian can

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36 Ibid., 673,4-7: "Also hat Moses die Barmherzigkeit Gottes rücklings gesehen, als im Göttlichen Wort, sonst wuste Moses wol, was er thun solte, aber wie Gott gegen sich gesinnet were, und was Gott thun solte, das hat er nicht können sehen."

37 Ibid., 673,25-30: "Derhalben so locket uns S. Joannes hie her, das wir die Barmherzigkeit Gottes und Christum nicht aus den augen lassen, denn es stehet alles auf jm. Las sich die Cartheuser rhümen, so ists doch alles vergeblich, wo die gnade und warheit Christi nicht kömet, das leben ist allein in der gnade und warheit des lieben Sons Gottes, unsers Herren Jhesu Christi, und wer bey jm bleibt, der erkennet allein Gott."

38 Ibid., 673,38-674,4: "... und daraus gelernt gleich die summa der gantzen Christlichen lere und Glaubens, nemlich, das Christus warhaftiger Gott und Mensch sey und dazu komen in die welt, auff das wir durch seine Gnade auch gnade erlangen und aus seiner Fülle alles nemen. Also gantz und gar stehet alles auff dem Son, das auch niemand von Gott etwas wisse, es offenbare jm solches denn der Son, welcher des Vaters hertz gar weis."

39 Ibid., 674, 9.

40 WA 40/2,340,16 und 350,12.

41 WA 39/1,147, 12-25. "In sinu misericordiae": text B, ibid.147,14.

42 WA 39/1, 165, 12-16.
spiritually dwell in the Father's bosom or in the bosom of grace, although he or she carnally remains in the earthly reality.\textsuperscript{43} The Christian is spiritually in the bosom of grace, but carnally he remains under the power of sin.\textsuperscript{44} In the 31st thesis of the \textit{Disputation of Palladius and Tilemann}, Luther holds that the beginnings of the new creation are already found in this bosom, although they are only perfected in death and resurrection.\textsuperscript{45}

In addition to this soteriological dimension, the late disputations also employ John 1:18 in a trinitarian manner. In the disputation \textit{De veste nuptiali} (1537) Luther claims that our faith in the Son of God, who dwells in the Father's bosom, enables the forgiveness of sins.\textsuperscript{46} We can be certain of God's mercy and benevolence because the Son who is in the Father's bosom has revealed this truth regarding God's will.\textsuperscript{47}

In the third thesis of \textit{Disputation of Theodor Fabricius} (1544) Luther returns to the topics of his first lecture on the Psalms. Jews and Moslems are monotheists, but they do not know the true God who has revealed the Son and the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{48} One can argue against this thesis by holding that nobody can investigate the essence of God. Therefore Jews and Moslems do not sin when they do not affirm the Trinity which they cannot know.\textsuperscript{49} But Fabricius defends Luther's thesis and holds that God in his mercy has in fact given us the right knowledge. Christ, who is in the Father's bosom, has revealed the true intention of God's merciful will. Therefore we can know the trinitarian God from the revelatory narrative of Christ.\textsuperscript{50} John 1:18 thus serves as the epistemic ground of possibility of our knowing the trinitarian God in faith. In Christ, God has revealed that \textit{misericordia} is the true will of God.

In the \textit{Disputation of Petrus Hegemon} (1545), the respondent employs John 1:18 in order to explain Luther's view of the two kinds of knowledge regarding God. With the first kind of

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\textsuperscript{43} WA 39/1, 521,5-13: "Homo credens in Christum est reputatione divina iustus et sanctus, versatursque est in coelo, circumdatus coelo misericordiae. Sed dum hic ferimur in sinu patris vestiti veste optima, pedes nostri mihi extra pallium descendunt, quos quantum potest mordet satam, dar zappelt das Kindelein et clamat et sentit, se adhuc carnem et sanguinem habere et diabolum adhuc adesse, qui iam exercet, donec totus homo sanctus fiat et eriapatur ex hoc saeculo nequam et malo. Sic itaque sumus sancti et liberi, sed in spiritu, non in carne, sub umbra alarum, id est, gallinae nostrae versantibus nobis in sinu gratiae, ..."

\textsuperscript{44} WA 39/1, 522, 11-15: "Nam sicut saepe iam diximus, christianum et vivere et mortuum esse, peccatorem et sanctum. Pius autem est mortuus legi neque servit legi, in quantum talis in sinu gratiae est et reputatione divina. Sed quantum est in carne, servit legi cuinam? Peccati, ut ait sanctus Paulus ..."

\textsuperscript{45} WA 39/1, 204,5-6: "31. Interim fovemur in sinu Dei, tanquam initium creaturarum novae, Donec perficiamur in resurrectione a mortuis." - Vgl. 252, 8-15.

\textsuperscript{46} WA 39/1, 327, 9-11; 24-27.

\textsuperscript{47} WA 39/1, 330, 18-20: "Nam oportet nos esse certos et non dubitare de Dei erga nos misericordiam et bona voluntate, quae nobis per filium, qui est in sinu patris, revelata est."

\textsuperscript{48} WA 39/2, 260,10-15.

\textsuperscript{49} WA 39/2,269,1-20.

\textsuperscript{50} WA 39/2,269, 7-9, 18-20: "Sed Deus per suam immensam misericordiam nobis revelavit propter Christum, ut possimus vere agnosceres, quis et qualis sit, ... Quantum ad essentiam et voluntatem Dei attinet, non possimus ex humana ratione cognoscere Deum, sed ex verbo revelato possimus, sicut dicit: Filius, qui est in sinu patris, enarravit nobis."
knowledge we can discover that God is the creator and can also know certain moral truths. But this knowledge does not help in our salvation. The second and final knowledge, the gospel of salvation, has been revealed to us by Christ who is in the Father's bosom.\(^{51}\)

In these two disputations the true and final knowledge of God's mercy thus again becomes highlighted. The knowledge of mercy serves the purpose of explaining the justification by faith and the salvation of human beings. It is remarkable that a trinitarian motif, namely the being of the Son in the Father's bosom, is employed by Luther as the ground of possibility for the revelation of ultimate and salvific knowledge of God. On the one hand, the Lutheran Reformation taught that unnecessary speculation about the Trinity is futile. But, at the same time, Luther not only formally affirmed the trinitarian dogma, he also employed the idea of an inner-trinitarian communication between the Father and the Son. This communication, as expressed in John 1:18, enables human beings to grasp the ultimate will of God which is merciful and aims at the salvation of humans. Due to this inner-trinitarian communication, Jesus can reveal the Christian God as a merciful God, whereas the non-trinitarian monotheists can only obtain theological information by means of the first or natural knowledge concerning God's law.

In addition to the disputations, the so-called Dialectica (1540) ascribed to Luther contains some elements which display an affinity with our topic. In the context of John 1:18 it is said that the definition of God's essence and will is only possible with the help of the revelation given in Holy Scripture and expressed through the church's witness.\(^{52}\) The different ways of knowledge, the mercy of God in the gospel, the distinction between law and gospel as well as the knowledge of God in the Old Testament are explained.\(^{53}\) On two occasions, it is said that Christ has already revealed \textit{ex sinu patris} some elements of trinitarian knowledge to the prophets of the Old Testament.\(^{54}\)

Finally, in his Lectures on Genesis (1535-1545) Luther sometimes mentions John 1:18 in trinitarian contexts. In the exposition of Jacob's dream (Gen 28:12-14) the hierarchy of creation is explained. Luther wonders that human beings can, in this hierarchy, be situated both \textit{in sinu patris} or \textit{ad dexteram patris} and under the power of the devil. Parallel to this dualism or ambivalence, Christ can represent both the greatest and the smallest in creation when God lies in the cradle.\(^{55}\) From this ambivalence of being human Luther deduces

\(^{51}\) WA 39/2,4-23: "Cognitio Dei duplex est, una est ex creaturis visibilibus, cum agnoscimus Deum creatorem, quod sit mens aeterna, sapiens, iusta, a quo omnia sunt condita et omnia conservantur. Sic et Plato eum cognovit. Haec cognitio non iuvat nos ad justificationem. Deinde est altera cognitio Dei, quae est ex eius verbo, per quod se Deus nobis revelavit, ex quo solo cognoscimus voluntatem Dei. Illam cognitionem habemus ex evangelio Filii Dei. Ipse, qui est in sinu Patris, enarravit nobis. Sic illa prima cognitio Dei non facit ad justificationem. Est enim tantum ex creaturis cognitio sumpta, sed altera, quae fit per evangelium, requiritur."

\(^{52}\) WA 60,145,26-29: "At cum 'Deum nemo vidit' [Joh. 1,18] et in verbo Filii nobis revelatus est, itigur definitiones de essentia et voluntate Dei, de distinctione personarum simpliciter ex scripto verbo Dei et testimoniiis Ecclesiae omnium temporum loquendum est."

\(^{53}\) WA 60, 145ff, lines 121-124, 143-149, 362, 345.

\(^{54}\) WA 60, 159-161, lines 411-413, 453-455.

\(^{55}\) WA 43, 579, 20-21, 25-26: "Ista sunt admiranda, videre hominem ad dexteram patris, elatum supra omnes Angelos, videre eum in sinu patris et mox subiectum Diabolo ..."
elements of trinitarian theology and christology. He stresses that the presence of such opposites in Christ cannot be understood by reason alone. The true doctrine of God can only be grasped by means of receiving its message in faith. In this way the Trinity remains ineffable, although we should also understand that, precisely because of the innertrinitarian mediation, the Son can reveal to us the final will of God.

3. Trinity, mercy, knowledge of God: the systematic structure of Luther's exposition of John 1:18

We have, above, presented some trinitarian expositions of John 1:18 by Luther. Given the enormous quantity of Luther's works, we cannot claim that these expositions would be of decisive importance for his theology as a whole. But at the same time it is possible to draw some conclusions with regard to Luther's trinitarian theology on the basis of the texts presented.

The expression sinus Patris, "the bosom of the Father", and related phrases do appear several times and their basic content remains rather coherent. Thus we can speak of a relatively stable theological interpretation of John 1:18 in Luther's works. In this interpretation, five elements are theologically significant. (1) The bosom of the Father is a place in which the divinity of Christ remains hidden. And yet the phrase reveals an intimacy in which Christ appears as God and knows the will of the Father. (2) The ultimate will of the Father is the gospel which cannot be understood with natural reason. The gospel is only revealed through the Son who is in the bosom of the Father.

(3) Thus the trinitarian understanding of John 1:18 has to do with twofold knowledge: law and gospel, and in particular with the proper understanding of the gospel, namely the mercy of the Father. The trinitarian knowledge concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son is thus no futile speculation, but it serves the message of salvation. (4) Within the boundaries of non-trinitarian monotheism people are necessarily bound to the cognitio legalis, that is, knowledge of the law, and thus cannot grasp the ultimate will of God. From the perspective of the law the message of salvation necessarily remains unreachable and even offensive. (5) In this manner, faith in the Trinity is closely connected with the idea of a merciful God. God can be understood as merciful only when the mediation between the Father and the Son is presupposed. For this reason does the idea of mercy appear so often in the context of John 1:18. For the same reason Luther can sometimes speak, in soteriological terms, of the new being in Christ as being in sinu misericordiae, "in the arms of mercy".

In Luther studies the theology of the Trinity has recently been discussed in some detail. Among various scholars, Tuomo Mannermaa, Christine Helmer, Markus Mühling-Schlapkohl and Pekka Kärkkäinen have emphasized the role of love in Luther's understanding of the

Videre in eadem una persona summa et infima coniunctissima: Summum Deum iacentem in praesepi."

56 WA 43, 580, z.B. 2-3: "communio [!] idiomatum", 6-7: "duplex quidem est natura, sed persona non est divisa", 11: "coniunctionem et unionem", 13-14: "articulus ille, quo offenditur totus mundus, ratio et Sathan, sunt enim in eadem persona maxime contraria".

57 WA 43, 580, 14-24.

58 Tuomo Mannermaa, Hat Luther eine trinitarische Ontologie?, in: Luther und Ontologie, hg. A. Ghiselli et al., Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society 1993, 9-27; Christine
Trinity. In two joint articles with Simo Knuuttila I have myself attempted to show that Luther prefers to speak of generations or emanations in God rather than of relations and that his trinitarian theology would thus resemble Franciscan rather than Dominican currents of thought. Some new evidence in favor of this view has been presented by Russell Friedman in his study of Gabriel Biel's trinitarian theology. According to Friedman, Gabriel Biel sketches in his Collectorum "a late Franciscan style of trinitarian theology", a style which probably influenced Luther's immediate theological context.

A common methodological problem of all these studies is, however, that Luther does not treat trinitarian issues in detail. He only seldom expresses his opinion concerning specific trinitarian problems. For this reason, Luther's views on innertrinitarian matters can only be indirectly deduced from the broader context of his writings. Luther's general view of the Trinity remains between two extremes. On the one hand, it cannot be concluded that the concentration on the doctrine of justification would lead to the neglect of trinitarian theology as futile speculation. On the other hand, however, it is also true that Luther develops explicit trinitarian theology only insofar as it contributes to his reformatory programme and the acute controversies related to it.

Luther's exposition of John 1:18 is a good example of this phenomenon. The relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity is of great theological significance, since human beings can only be informed of the mercy of God through this relationship. But the acknowledgment of the importance of this relation is, in turn, subordinated to the primacy of soteriology. The trinitarian constitution of God as such should not be the object of our curiosity. What we need to know is the ultimate, salvific and merciful will of God which can only be grasped through the mediation of the Trinity. In the context of this soteriological perspective, we cannot actually discuss, for instance, whether relations or emanations are constitutive of the being of the divine person.

Due to his soteriological concentration, Luther sometimes describes the bosom of the Father in rather anthropomorphic terms. Thus concrete descriptions of the relationship between the Father and the Son are preferred, while more conceptual scholastic topics remain in the background.

We may note briefly that in his Lectures on Genesis Luther evaluates the anthropomorphic understanding of biblical revelation in a surprisingly positive manner. He claims that the theological questions regarding the majestetic nature of God should be avoided, since God is ineffable. The Holy Scripture seems to follow this principle when it

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63 WA 42, 293, 29-296, 34.

64 WA 42, 293, 29-30; 294, 18-19.
describes God with the help of concrete and anthropomorphic pictures. No human can behold the divine majesty and stay alive (Ex. 23:20, cf. John 1:18). Because of this, God communicates with humans through visible forms (*forma visibilis*), such as dove, water, bread and wine. The visible form represents God and mediates the divine to humans. Because the form remains concrete and observable, it is not taken for God in any problematic sense. In the same way, the naked and immediate will of God (*voluntas beneplaciti*) remains ineffable in itself. Human beings need to follow the will of God which is mediated through visible signs (*voluntas signi*). The fact that the immediate will of God is merciful (*voluntas gratiae*) can only be revealed through the mediation of Christ.

This dynamics of divine will shapes also Luther's exposition of John 1:18. Human beings cannot know the merciful will of God through abstract reasoning; that will can only be mediated through Christ and received by faith. Because of this dynamics it is pointless to explain the divine majesty in abstract terms. The ordinary Christian as well as the theologian should stick to the visible and anthropomorphic biblical pictures which God has revealed to us. The proper theological knowledge can be reached through these concrete biblical expressions.

This way of knowing can be illustrated with the help of the artistic portrayals of the Trinity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is important to be aware of the development of the idea of perspective in the early modern paintings. New pictorial motifs, such as the compassion of the Father, employ the perspective and thus predetermine the viewpoint from which the painting can be approached by the spectator. The dead Son of God is shown by the Father to the spectator. The Trinity becomes visible in the background, but in the foreground the crucified Jesus or the *Schmerzensmann* is highlighted. This portrayal seems to say that the spectator can only become aware of the Trinity through the mediation of the crucified Jesus. The Christian perspective to the Trinity is thus the perspective of the crucifixion.

In this manner the pictorial representation opens a means of knowledge. Analogically, Luther's wrestling to find the proper way of knowing God can be understood as a quest of the right perspective. How does the trinitarian God give himself to be known by humans? Not through abstract truths, but through the visible forms available in the biblical images, in particular through the concrete death of the Son. The proper viewpoint of the human person to look at the Trinity is that perspective from which the suffering Christ appears in the foreground, with the Father and the Spirit in the background.

Luther is particularly engaged with the right way of knowing God. The evangelical *cognitio dei* leads to the portrayal of the merciful Trinity. In this portrayal the relationship between the Father and the Son is the ground for our possibility to know God rather than a description of the inner constitution of the Trinity. In this sense John 1:18 can be called a

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63 WA 42, 294,20-295,16.
64 WA 42, 296,3-13.
65 I am using the word "perspective" here as a systematic construct. In Luther's times, *perspectiva* had predominantly the old meaning "to see properly" which was slowly becoming replaced with the modern meaning. Cf. G. König, Perspektive, HWP 7, 363-375. On the relationship between optics and epistemology, cf. Katharine Tachau, Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham, Leiden: Brill 1988. - In Luther's texts, "perspectiva" is insignificant, but the terms "aspectus" and "coram" are important. Cf. e.g. Gerhard Ebeling, Cognitio dei et hominis, in: Lutherstudien 1, Tübingen: Mohr und Siebeck 1971, 221-272.
statement "in perspective": we can only know God, whom no one has seen, through Christ. The incarnation belongs to this perspective, since it enables the portrayal in visible form. But also the being of the son "in the bosom of the Father" is a necessary aspect of it, since it endows the human nature of Christ with the intimacy which is needed to know God's ultimate will.

In this manner one can understand why and how Luther's exposition of John 1:18 is primarily interested in the problem of obtaining right knowledge. For Luther, proper theological knowledge is a cognitio in which the viewpoint of the human being in salvation history is of decisive importance. The hiddenness of God has certainly to do with the arrogance of humans, but it is important to see that God has very consciously concealed his own will from other monotheists who share in the same natural reason.

The perspective of Christians is, accordingly, not a viewpoint of reason, but a perspective of faith. At the same time, it is important to see that the different perspectives do not indicate any relativisation of knowledge. God has revealed himself in such a manner that the human person can know God as Trinity from the specific viewpoint of justifying faith. This perspective of the gospel is not a perspective among others, but it is the right and proper perspective, because God wants to reveal himself according to this viewpoint. Only from this proper perspective can humans know the ultimate will of God, namely the merciful will.