

1 ■ Weigel's Life

Curriculum Vitae

Weigel's existence has suffered eclipse in the tradition in which his work is a pivotal landmark. In the history of German mysticism, he stands halfway between Paracelsus (1493–1541) and Sebastian Franck (1499–1542) who were his dissenting forerunners and Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) who was the most important dissenter to follow after and resemble him. Compared to their flamboyant lives and reputations, Weigel's is uneventful and lacking in any colorful or memorable detail. Nothing in Weigel's life can rival the legendary wandering of the physician Paracelsus or Boehme's famous illumination when, as a troubled shoemaker, he is said to have discerned in the gleam of a pewter vessel the secret divine meaning of nature.²⁵

Weigel's eclipse is made all the more complete by the fact that his writing, though considerably clearer, lacks the mystery and bravado of theirs. His style is as open and translucent as theirs was polychrome and opaque. However, his lucidity enhances the value of his work, qualifying it as a key to shared purposes less clearly articulated by them. Relatively isolated in his own time, the transparent sense of his writings allows him to speak all the more clearly to ours.

He was born in the Saxon city of Hayn or Großenhain, three years after the Augsburg Diet of 1530 had established the basic document of Lutheranism, Melanchthon's *Confessio Augustana*, and six years before the Reformation was able to spread (as a result of dynastic succession) from its heartland in Ernestine Saxony to the still Catholic rival and neighboring territory of Albertine Saxony, where Valentin was presumably christened under the old faith. The two Saxonies had been split up between two branches of the Wettins in the fifteenth century. Rivalry between the two branches played a role both in frustrating the spread of the new faith until the death of Duke Georg in 1539 and in transforming its conditions

during Weigel's lifetime. As we shall see, the remarks critical of political rulers in Weigel's writings are acerbic but relatively rare. On the whole, princely prerogative in the sphere of politics is an unquestioned given. His remarks of political or social criticism contrast with his more strident critique of the clergy and university.

A curriculum vitae written by Weigel in Latin survives to present an encapsulation of his life, circumstances, and academic studies:

I, Valentin Weigel from Hain, have devoted myself from early youth to the academic disciplines, in my home city for about six years. Thereupon, I was commended to the illustrious Prince's School in Meissen by my earliest sponsor, Electoral Councillor Kommerstadt. There I was faithfully instructed without interruption for six years by my teachers, Director Georg Fabricius, Hiob Magdeburger, and others. After that, with the support of Elector August, I attended the University of Leipzig for nine years, and acquired the dignity of a baccalaureate and a master's degree. Finally, again with the support of Elector August, I attended the famous Wittenberg University for nearly four years and was summoned then upon command of the Elector to become the pastor of this city of Zschopau and was ordained by the reverend Paul Eber in Wittenberg, my teacher, whom I revere as a second father.²⁶

This steady course through life was also a traversal of the storms and transitions of his times. Weigel was only approaching school age when the death of Duke George and the accession of Duke Heinrich in 1539 permitted the new Albertine ruler to implement the Lutheran reform. He did so on his own initiative but also on the urging of the Ernestine Elector Johann Friedrich and with active support from the theological-clerical resources of the sister territory under the assertive leadership of Luther, Melanchthon, and Jonas. Against the advice of the moderate Landgrave Philipp of Hessen who favored a gradual transition, the change of confession was implemented as rapidly as possible in the Albertine territory.

The Ernestine clergy at first assumed the roles of architect and chief inspector.²⁷ Rather like the failed East German state that was taken in hand by West German advisers and administrators after the recent precipitous reunification, Albertine Saxony was placed under the impatient tutelage of the Ernestine Wittenberg clergy.

Thus to Weigel's home city of Großenhain was assigned as pastor and executor of the new faith a certain Johannes Reimann, who had been given leave from Ernestine Werdau for this mission. It would be naive to suppose that the conversion of an entire province proceeded without perceptible instances of compulsion. The late Catholic ruler Duke Georg had offered asylum to priests who had been expelled from other Protestant territories. Many of them preferred exile to conversion.²⁸ What resistance there was came mainly from nuns, such as the Magdalenes of Großenhain.²⁹ From Wittenberg, Luther observed—and criticized—the progress of the Albertine church reform, urging a more thorough and forceful implementation and reacting with impatience when the neighboring ruler decided to rely on his own theologians and councilors.³⁰

No matter how Weigel's family experienced the reform, the young Valentin benefited from the resultant pressing need for a locally trained Albertine clergy. Of a less than wealthy family, he received patronage for his attendance at the Prince's School (the Fürstenschule of St. Afra in Meissen) from 1548 or 1549 to 1554, and at the University of Leipzig beginning at age twenty-one in the summer semester of 1554.³¹

Valentin Weigel would have been only about eight years old when Duke Heinrich died and his twenty-one-year-old son Moritz succeeded him in 1541. Religiously indifferent but politically audacious, Moritz twice upset the balance of power in the Empire, each time gaining status and influence for his territory. Either despite his preference for power politics over religion or because of it, Moritz strove to consolidate Lutheranism in Albertine Saxony. In 1542, he called for sanctions that included expulsion for those subjects who continued to celebrate by the Roman rite receiving communion in one form only.³²

Weigel was old enough to take an interest in such matters during the turbulent period that saw the victories and meteoric ascent of Moritz beginning with his defeat of the coreligionist powers of the Protestant Schmalkaldic League at Mühlberg in 1547. His victory won for him new territories and the title of Elector Prince at the expense of the Ernestines. Victory in an alliance with the Emperor also led to the crises of the Augsburg Interim, the religious compromise arrangement that pushed Lutherans under pressure from the Emperor to make theological concessions, which in turn led to bitter Lutheran intraconfessional controversies. During

the war and the Interim, Saxons under the leadership of the Lutheran theologians and pastors began to resist the policies of their ruler or conqueror Moritz. During the war, the court preacher Johann Weiß demonstratively took leave of Moritz's camp before the gates of Zwickau. Several Albertine superintendents either resigned in protest or were dismissed for oppositional sentiments. Lutheran popular resistance was encouraged by the church authorities. It culminated in the noncompliance of the city of Magdeburg with the terms of the Interim. This pressured Moritz to proffer repeated reassurances of his loyalty to the Lutheran faith of his father and his subjects.³³

The situation was again transformed in 1552 when Moritz turned against and defeated his ally Emperor Charles V, thereby saving the day for all Lutherans and preparing the ground for the Peace of Augsburg that stabilized the religious status quo within the Empire. Moritz, however, did not live to see this outcome. He was mortally wounded in his victorious battle against Albrecht Alcibiades of Brandenburg-Kulmbach in the year 1554, just before the Peace of Augsburg (1555) put an end to the founding struggles of the Reformation and initiated the new epoch of consolidation.

We cannot know how the young Weigel reacted to these events. Certainly, in light of the wars over dynastic power that marked the first decades of his life, his comment from his late *Dialogus de Christianismo* acquires some poignancy: "No Christian kills a Christian, nor a non-Christian; no sheep goes to war, but only the wolves, lions, dogs, bears, that are *extra ecclesiam, extra fidem, extra dilectionem*" (*kein Christe todtet den Christen, auch nicht den Vnchristen; kein Schaff zeicht in Krieg, nur die Wolffe, Löwen, Hunde, Beeren, welche extra ecclesiam, extra fidem, extra dilectionem seint—*ZW 4:71). But we have no way of knowing how the young Weigel experienced the cataclysmic events of his early years. Did he sympathize more with his ducal patron, or with the hard-pressed Evangelical opponents of power politics? Or was his measure of sympathy and censure divided between both? Did he favor a return to Luther's early strictness in distinguishing between the unequal realms of religious faith and worldly power, postulating nonresistance to legitimate power on the one hand and noninterference of the worldly powers in the freedom of the spirit on the other? This would have been closest to his later thinking. But, as we shall see, worthy precedents existed for any of these reactions.

Beginning with the Interim, the Lutheran world was shaken by doctrinal controversies that could not be ignored by any student of religion. After his victory, Moritz was magnanimous with the clergy that had opposed him. In the formerly electoral Ernestine territory, he encouraged the return of Wittenberg theologians who had fled occupation by the Emperor. However, this conciliatory attitude was accompanied by the expectation that the theologians would advise him in working out a temporary religious arrangement satisfactory both to his subjects and to the Emperor, until such time as the general council favored by Charles V could work out a religious settlement laying to rest the disagreements of Papists and Protestants. Melanchthon and some of his associates complied in working on the proposal which came to be known as the Leipzig Interim, an agreement said to have been Lutheran in its doctrines but with a strong, objectionable appearance of Roman Catholic recidivism in its rites.³⁴ At the core of the negotiations stood the attempt to distinguish between those doctrines that admitted of no compromise and differences of lesser consequence (the so-called *adiaphora*), which could be overlooked in the interest of an agreement.

Melanchthon encountered opposition from a group known as the "genuine Lutherans" (*Gnesio-Lutheraner*). They were led by the uncompromising theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus. Their bastions were in the free imperial city of Magdeburg and in the Ernestine University of Jena. The beginning and duration of Weigel's studies coincided with the resultant Gnesio-Lutheran controversies. The resultant bitter and multifaceted quarrels had a tragic impact on the generation of Weigel's teachers, some of whom had been veterans and participants in Luther's founding struggle. Georg Fabricius, the Humanistic rector of Weigel's school, attempted to mediate in the conflict between Flacius and Melanchthon and was dismissed for his objectionable views on the Eucharist. The codirector, Hiob Magdeburger, was dismissed in 1569 as a Flacian. He was subsequently accused of Manicheanism. Deprived of his office, he ended in obscurity.³⁵

Although the controversies affected Weigel's development as a student of theology, inferences concerning his own allegiances are nonetheless not a reliable guide to his writings. Nor is it advisable to accept the partisan outlook held by the adherents of either side of these disputes. Courageous acts of resistance as well as senseless

fanaticism characterized the Gnesio-Lutherans; and good will, as well as accomodation, the Melanchthonian side. By embracing the partisan tradition that presents Melanchthon as more of a Humanist and “Crypto-Calvinist” than a Lutheran, or the Flacians as “rabid theologians,” one not only risks distorting the historical record; one also obfuscates the doctrinal aporie to which Weigel’s mystical theory responded. Insofar as these men of good will and shared scriptural premises were altogether unable to arrive at any agreement on the fundamentals of their confession, descending instead into unforeseen depths of hatred and recrimination, the authority of the evangelical faith was eclipsed. Weigel’s reaction, his resort to mystical paradox, must be understood with respect to this religious disaster.

Nothing is really unusual in Weigel’s course of studies (or his career). At Leipzig, he studied natural science and read the works of Aristotle, but he adhered to a geocentric cosmology even as it was being questioned in Lutheran circles. He conducted and attended disputations, those remnants of the medieval academic order. The theses from one such disputation³⁶ (winter semester 1558–59, on the topic of the lunar eclipse) have been preserved, as has his student’s copy of the *Confessio Augustana*, bearing annotations apparently from his own hand.³⁷ With satisfaction, scholars have noted that as a student Weigel was elected to the responsible office of *curator* at the Paulinum where the students of the Bavarian “nation” were quartered³⁸—clear evidence, if any were needed, that he was a trusted and serious student, no rowdy.

Completing his studies at Albertine Leipzig, Weigel went on to the University of Wittenberg in 1563. Wittenberg had been the great center for theology, internationally famous as the origin of Luther’s Reformation.³⁹ More will be said about the nature of the doctrinal controversies during this period. However, we do not have to imagine Weigel as the adherent of any party in order to surmise that he might have been confronted with a contrast of bygone greatness and unity of purpose with present pettiness and rancor. Compared with the past, the university was in decline. The head of the theology faculty was Paul Eber (1511–1569), the successor to Luther and Melanchthon. Wittenberg was still under the aegis of Melanchthonian theology; however, quarrels with the Gnesio-Lutherans over such issues as the Eucharist were growing uglier.⁴⁰ There were also complaints of riotous student revelry and

criminality.⁴¹ It is difficult to judge the effect of such tendencies on the mind and aspirations of a gifted nonconformist, just as generalizations about the narrow-mindedness of the strict Lutheran orthodoxy can be misleading. In the year of Weigel's death, 1588, after much further decline and internal bickering, upon the return of the pro-Calvinist party, the exile Giordano Bruno departed strict Lutheran Wittenberg with words of warm praise for his Lutheran hosts.

Could Weigel have harbored hopes of an academic career? And could failure to secure a position or perhaps disappointment with the debased life of the spirit at Wittenberg, or his decision in favor of pastoral work, have channeled his intellectual impulses into his protest against academic theology that later appeared as the writings of a mystic, aloof from the concerns of common life? Pfefferl has gathered evidence suggesting that Weigel experienced a brief teaching career at Wittenberg. The documentary evidence indicates that he married in 1565 around the age of thirty-two, while still at the university. This would have been impossible for a student without means. Moreover, some congratulatory poems printed in honor of his wedding celebration appear to be the contribution of his students. Weigel's bride was a pastor's daughter, Katharina Beuche, who hailed from his home region. They soon had three children (born 1569, 1571, and 1573).⁴²

In November 1567, Weigel was installed in office as pastor of the Saxon city of Zschopau by Paul Eber. In 1571, Weigel gained a deacon or assistant pastor named Benedikt Biedermann. Biedermann was a young man with strong and compatible educational credentials who was to become a literary collaborator of the author. Supported first by his like-minded deacon and several years later by the similarly sympathizing cantor, Christoph Weickhart, Weigel was to remain in office for twenty-one years until his death in 1588.

According to August Israel, the parish at Zschopau was especially well endowed. Weigel's predecessors in office had served in the subordinate role of deacon for ten years or longer before taking over the higher office.⁴³ This commends Weigel, but again only as a normal man of his career. It casts no light on the subversive thinker of interest here. Israel mentions the typical duties of organization and reorganization undertaken by the new pastor during his second year of office: poor relief (of particular importance during

the years of famine and inflation in the early 1570s), accounting for and utilization of donations, and official consultations with the superintendent in Chemnitz.⁴⁴

Presumably, the first years in Zschopau as a new pastor and as the head of a young and growing family were taken up with the normal matters of his life and position. This has implications concerning the circumstances of his beginnings as an author: it lends weight to the likelihood that Weigel arrived in Zschopau already thoroughly familiar with most of the materials that would shape his writings, or at least with the contacts that would furnish such knowledge. This is also borne out by his earliest writings: he displays a familiarity with his key theological and mystical sources. In the slightly more than two years between his arrival in Zschopau and the first of his dated writings, he could scarcely have been able to carry out the research that informs even his earliest work. He obtained his knowledge of these sources either during his years of study or from contacts made during his time as a student, in any case probably not from immediate contacts in Zschopau. At the same time, it is possible that Biedermann's entrance supported Weigel's authorship in any number of ways. In all events, the available evidence indicates that the new pastor's conduct was exemplary and that he enjoyed the confidence of his congregation and superiors at least until the shifting tides of doctrinal allegiance cast suspicion on many who were formerly regarded as unimpeachable.⁴⁵

Two Key Episodes

Two passages from Weigel's writings have been interpreted by scholars beginning with Israel⁴⁶ as significant autobiographical references. The first is a passage from chapter twenty-four of *Der güldene Griff* (*The Golden Grasp*), intimating the conditions of Weigel's key spiritual insights. The passage appears to offer a subdued but plausible spiritual curriculum vitae of the author. The author recollects that before arriving "at the beginning of true faith," he had professed to believe so as "to please the crowd." He had been concerned about this or that article of faith. He therefore turned to the books of many authors without finding satisfaction in them. Disappointed in his hope of thus arriving at the truth, he

recognized the deplorable darkness in which his fellows groped and foundered. There were so many sects and beliefs, even among those who sought certainty and protection in Holy Scripture (that is, Protestants), that he came to discern "our Tower of Babylon." Thus, one spoke of faith and another of good works. A third claimed that the sacraments were necessary; a fourth that one had to take faith from the sacraments; a fifth that faith had to precede the sacraments, while a sixth incurred accusations of "Enthusiasm" or "Sacramentalism" for professing that only faith in Christ could justify and confer grace. Moreover, the author observed how one believer would denounce another to the worldly authorities to be imprisoned or banished on account of such questions as original sin, free will, or the person of Christ. The author complained to heaven of this blindness and incessant strife among men. His prayers were answered when his eyes were opened so that he could discern and judge all things more clearly than when instructed by external teachers and books. His new source of understanding was, so he claimed, the very source from which all books had been written from the beginning of the world. This source was within him and all other human beings, young or old, great or small, learned or unlearned. Indeed, many among the learned themselves denied this source and instead cleaved to the dead external letter, rejecting the book of life inscribed by the finger of God in all hearts.

Like his hereticized former teacher Georg Fabricius, Weigel desired harmony, a goal ever frustrated by Lutheran controversies concerning good works (Majorism), free will (Philippism), the sanctity or necessity of the sacraments and the nature of Christ (the controversies with the adherents of Zwingli, Schwenckfeld, and Osiander). Weigel of course had his own opinions on such doctrinal matters; and like other controversialists, he argued his views by citing the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the great reorienting shift at the root of his work is his recognition that it is not merely the opposing positions but rather the underlying assumptions about reality that perpetuate divisiveness. This shift involves the sense of an inner authority coinciding with a devaluation of the "letter" and of its correlatives, "self-will," the "historical," and the "external."

In the years of Weigel's ending academic career and early pastorate, the forces pressing toward conformity were on the increase. Doctrinal conflict evolved as a struggle between a Gnesio-Lutheran

University of Jena under the Ernestine Duke of Weimar and Melanchthonian Wittenberg under the Albertine Elector August. Like Moritz, August was thoroughly opportunistic in his relations with both Calvinists and Catholics. However, his resolve to consolidate his power and increase his influence drove him to authorize and then enforce increasingly stringent standards of doctrine.⁴⁷ Between 1568 and 1572, recriminations were sallying back and forth between contending factions. In the latter year, the struggle took a decisive turn when the death of Duke Johann Wilhelm led the Saxon Elector to reach for domination over Weimar. One point of leverage utilized by the Elector was the demand for doctrinal conformity. He summarily expelled 111 pastors who refused to sign a doctrinal statement (the *Consensus Dresdensis*) that had been drawn up by Melanchthonian theologians in Wittenberg.⁴⁸ In the hands of this determined prince, the doctrinal sword cut both ways. August subsequently proceeded against several highly placed subjects, nominally Melanchthonian, whom he charged with conspiring to introduce Calvinist teachings into his domains. The Elector's personal physician and the son-in-law of Melanchthon, Caspar Peucer, remained in prison on a life sentence until 1586. The alleged "Crypto-Calvinist traitor," Chancellor Cracow was imprisoned and died in 1575 from injuries incurred in torture.⁴⁹ More will be said about the nature of the doctrinal disputes.

In 1572, Weigel was forced to address a defense of his own Lutheran orthodoxy to the superintendent in Chemnitz. The work has been preserved. (Its full title, *A Little Book on the True and Saving Faith, How Adam Must Decline and Die Within Us and Christ Must Arise and Live Within Us, Ein Büchlein vom wahren seligmachenden Glauben, wie Adam in uns untergehen und sterben müsse und Christus dargegen in uns solle auferstehen und leben*, will either be abbreviated as *On Faith* or, following Zeller's custom, circumscribed as the *Defense*). Assumedly, there had been allegations or denunciations based on Weigel's sermons of the preceding years: a complaint had been lodged by Pastor Matthias Seydel in Augustusburg.⁵⁰ What may be most revealing about this event is how smoothly Weigel weathered the storm. Nevertheless, the terms of his *Defense*, as well as the fact that he signed the obligatory declaration of loyalty to the Formula of Concord at mid-point in his career in 1577,⁵¹ raise questions about his sense of obligation to respond truthfully to the authorities.

Our object can hardly be to pass judgment on his behavior. If Weigel can be said to have recanted to save his position, this no more disqualifies the content of his writings than Galileo's recantation does his. What is certain is that he went on writing his critical treatises. He did so with a deepening defiance and sense of community with others of a similar spirit. His loyalty was to an invisible church universally present but everywhere, it seemed, oppressed by official falsehood. In his evolving corpus of writings, expressions of protest and community intensified and became more articulate until his death in 1588.

A second, presumably autobiographical, passage is thought to express Weigel's rationalization of his signing of the Formula of Concord. It is found in the *Dialogus de Christianismo* of 1584. In this long dialog, the opponent is called the *Concionator*, the Preacher; the voice of the author is taken to be the *Auditor's*. Asked by the Preacher how he could have "signed the books" despite his nonconformist beliefs, the Auditor replies:

I did not subscribe to their teaching or human books, but rather since their intention was aimed at the apostolic Scripture and the same is to be preferred to all human books, as it should be, I could suffer it. But had they placed one single other book above the Scriptures of the prophets and apostles, I would not have agreed to it. Besides, it all [happened in] a rush or an overhastening, so that one wasn't permitted to think it over for several days or weeks. Instead, in a single hour they read off the entire convolute and demanded a signature right away. Third, I poor Auditor didn't see fit to prepare and serve a feast for the devil, [knowing] that the whole lot would have cried out: "There, there, we knew it all along: he is not in conformity with our doctrine!"

Nicht irer Lehre oder Menschenbüchern habe ich mich unterschrieben, sondern dieweil sie iren intent haben auf die apostolische Schrift vnd dieselbige allen Menschenbüchern vorziehen (wie billich), konte ich das wol leiden. Hetten sie aber ein eynig ander Buch iber die Schrifften der Propheten und Aposteln gesetzt, würde ich nicht zugeplatzt haben. Zudeme war es eine schnelle Vberhuiung oder Vbereylung, das man nicht ettliche Tage oder Wochen solche Dinge eynem jeden insonderheit

zu uberlesen vergönnete, sondern nur in einer Stunden dem gantzen Hauffen vorgelesen vnd drauff die subscription gefodert. Zum dritten wolte mir armen Zuhorer nicht geburen, dem Teufel ein Freudenmal zu machen vnd anzurichten, das der ganze Hauffe geschrien hette: Da, da, wir habens wol gewust, er sei nicht vnserer Lehre gemeß! (ZW 4:59–60)

To sum up the arguments of this apology: first of all, the Auditor acknowledged the “intent” of the Formula of Concord to represent Holy Scripture, even while disputing the fact it did so adequately. Second, the signature was exacted under duress. And third, nothing would have been gained by refusing, except to give satisfaction to the crowd and confirm their prejudices. One can accept or reject this explanation as one will, but one should not overlook who it is that gives voice to it: the Auditor as layman.

Weigel was himself a preacher and by some accounts popular with his congregation. Even his most critical tracts often assume the form of sermons. His chapters consist of brief and moving disquisitions that might have been suitable for oral delivery; typically, they end with a summation or prayer for the bespoken gifts or blessings. Was Pastor Weigel then a divided soul, forced against his will to sign the Formula of Concord, yet secretly animated by a self-hatred so violent that his *Dialogus* was compelled to consign his professional counterpart to hell?

In Weigel scholarship, the context of oppression and dissent has often been too narrowly equated with the fact that Weigel was pressured to sign the Formula of Concord on pain of losing his office and livelihood. By the standards of either his time or ours, a vocational prohibition or *Berufsverbot* is not necessarily the worst degree of persecution. Even when Weigel’s successor in office, Biedermann, incurred an open break with the authorities, they reacted with surprising leniency by punitively transferring him elsewhere. It would have been an extreme hardship, and yet still a possibility, for Weigel to renounce the cloth and go his own way. The erstwhile Lutheran pastor Sebastian Franck and the reformer and lay leader Caspar Schwenckfeld had accepted exile as the price of independence. So too, had countless contemporary Protestant and Catholic recusants who left behind their homes and property and emigrated for the sake of their consciences. As we shall see, in Weigel’s *Dialogus* the conscienceless *Concionator*-Preacher justifies

his own shallow orthodoxy on the grounds of being threatened with expulsion from office. The conclusion confirms that this reasoning appeared insufficient to Weigel. By contrast, what the Auditor risks is more than loss of office. The Preacher concedes that whoever speaks of the “inner word” places his very life at risk:

For where ever one hears anyone make a peep about the inner word or hearing, about the inspiration of the spirit, about the invisible church among all peoples, one immediately denounces him as an Enthusiast, heretic, seducer, Schwenckfeld, Anabaptist, heavenly prophet, etc, and [he] is hardly sure of his life.

Denn wo man einen horet mucken von innern Worte oder Gehör, von der Eingebung des Geistes, von der unsichtbaren Kirchen unter allen Volckern, so schreyet man ihn alsbalt aus fur einen Schwermer, Ketzer, Verführer, Schwenckfelt, Wiederteufer, himlisch Propheten etc. vnd ist kaum sicher seines Lebens. (ZW 4:52)

The concluding judgment of Christ (*Mors*) upon the *Concionator* who has signed *and* served the Formula of Concord functions as a kind of Dantesque retribution upon the judging and condemning Lutheran orthodoxy. Beyond the doctrinal definitions of the Formula, the Preacher has championed its false authority by subscribing to the tenet that only the clerically qualified may interpret Scripture, and that the unqualified must therefore accept doctrines through *fides ex auditu*—interpreted as the received word of the sermon preached from on high. It has too often been overlooked in the literature on Weigel that his protest against authoritarianism is written from the point of view of the laity, the nonclerical subjects of the hierarchy. It is necessary to bear in mind that the commoner, not the pastor or theologian, is at the center of Pastor Weigel's writings, even in his pastoral and theological disquisitions.

2 ■ The Historical Background

Power against Faith

The sinister chord sounded in the warning that whosoever speaks of the inner word or the inspiration of the spirit risks condemnation and death echoes the contemporaneous condemnations of dissenters. The Preacher's pronouncement has its clear historical counterparts. The researches of Wappler, Paulus, Köhler, Kühn, Lecler, and others have explored the issues of tolerance in the Reformation and documented a perennially underestimated Lutheran repression that prevailed in the Saxon territories during Weigel's lifetime.⁵² Lecler, a French Jesuit writing not long after World War II, might be thought to exonerate medieval Catholicism in comparison with Reformation-era German Protestantism. His study is certainly valuable to us for having proceeded from the discussion of the Scholastic sources of tolerance to the problem of Lutheran intolerance. Lecler does not deny the repressions of heretics during the Middle Ages but rather argues that some of the best minds among the Scholastics articulated grounds for restraint. For example, Peter Abelard recognized the problem of the erroneous conscience in *Scito te ipsum*, arguing for a morality based on intention and thereby obviating condemnation of erroneous actions committed in sincere conviction or from false knowledge. Alexander of Hales contended with respect to Romans 14:23 ("For all that is not of faith is sin") that the *non ex fide* could be equated with the notion of *contra conscientiam*, thereby supporting a subjective morality similar to Abelard's.⁵³ These arguments tended to favor the toleration of beliefs or actions that differed from the orthodox standard of medieval theology. In the more radical inwardness of Weigel's theories, the very locus of theology, the discernibility of God, would be shifted inward.

A further source of medieval toleration was the theoretical distinction of church and state which was subverted by both sides during the Middle Ages in the struggles between popes and secular rulers. It was a merit of Luther's so-called doctrine of the two

kingdoms to reassert the separation by rendering spiritual faith autonomous and by depriving the ecclesiastic establishment of its rightful utilization of a force reserved for the worldly sphere only. As a doctrinal corollary of Luther's *sola fide*, the autonomy of the spiritual domain was to be inalienable. However, in practice, Luther and his associates and successors encouraged both the use of force and the exercise of state intervention in matters pertaining to faith (as indeed the reform of Weigel's Albertine Saxony demonstrated). We shall see that the author's mystical inwardness responded to common experience in a manner resonant of a long historical tradition.

Luther's often-recounted transition from his early generous proclamations of Christian liberty to his support for a forceful suppression of dissenters largely preceded Weigel's birth, though the repercussions certainly manifested themselves throughout the age. For the reformer who confronted the emperor at the Diet of Worms, Scripture, conscience, and human reason were the sole criteria for judging the faith of the individual. Luther's early writings on Christian liberty and on government denied secular authority the right to intervene in religious affairs or matters of faith. Even after resorting to calls for state suppression, Luther was cited by dissenters in self-defense. A significant example for the present context is the reformer's drawing of a distinction in 1521 that would soon be recollected by Protestant dissenters after him down to the great defense of heretics by Gottfried Arnold: "I am not frightened because a great number of powerful men persecute and hate me. This rather consoles and strengthens me for, according to all the Scriptures, the haters and persecutors are always wrong and the persecuted always right. The majority always supports a lie, the minority the truth."⁵⁴ This became the ethos of dissenters from Franck to Weigel and beyond.

Lecler has argued that the shift to state enforcement in religious matters led to the exclusive status of Scripture (or, to be more exact, of one particular interpretation of Scripture) over conscience and reason.⁵⁵ Precisely this shift is essential for the understanding of the context in which Spiritualists such as Franck or Weigel rejected the "dead letter" in favor of the "inner word" or the "spirit." It should remind us that what was meant by this distinction was in no small measure a return to an earlier Lutheran standard. By the 1530s, Luther and Melancthon were pronouncing in favor of

punishing many heretics, including even peaceful Anabaptists, by death, and the followers of Zwingli who denied Christ's real presence in the Eucharist at least by banishment.⁵⁶ The precedents for persecution included the third Commandment (prohibiting blasphemy) and the Justinian legal code.⁵⁷ True to the Scriptural-Pauline contrast of letter as law and spirit, the dissenters were confronted with a rule of oppressive law.

The modern consciousness tends to overlook the true character of such persecutions for a variety of reasons. One reason is that according to a longstanding view Lutherans never had recourse to the measures infamously employed by the Catholic Inquisition, and indeed only sanctioned harsh punishments when the errors of faith led to open insurrection, as happened with Müntzer and the rebels of the Peasant Wars. Long refuted by the studies initiated in Germany in the early years of this century, this view by now verges on irresponsibility, particularly in light of Luther's infamous outbursts against Jews.

Another reason for misunderstandings about Reformation-era persecution has to do with the modern assumption that intolerance is a matter of a "prejudice," overcome when misperceptions are rectified and the "humanity" of those previously "dehumanized" is accepted. Along with this view of intolerance as misapprehension and dehumanization goes the tendency to subdivide those affected into groups, each with its own distinct history of victimization. Modern approaches to Reformation-era persecutions of particular groups can disguise the historical rationale for such actions by absorbing the facts into seemingly unrelated narrative histories of the oppression of Jews, women, Anabaptists, or peasants.

The major contribution of German historians such as Wappler or Paulus earlier in this century lay in their demonstrating the religious premise and the generalized rationale for persecution. Dissenting sectarians were vilified and persecuted with the same rigor that characterized the persecution of Jews or witches in an era of epidemic witchhunts. Counter to compartmentalization, a recent account argues that the trend toward confessionalization which is of interest here went hand in hand with the persecution of witches:

Once mainstream Protestantism and Tridentine Catholicism had begun to settle into confessional blocs, witch-hunting resumed across Christendom. Luther applauded the execution

of four witches at Wittenberg in 1541. John Calvin encouraged Geneva's magistrates to "extirpate the race of witches" from a rival district in 1545, resulting in eight trials and three deaths. The general resumption of witch-hunting around 1560 . . . took place on a totally unprecedented scale.⁵⁸

Luther's outbursts against Jews might seem to fall into the distinct category of the history of Antisemitism, particularly since its scope includes a whole people. However, the people is objectionable to Luther for its perpetuation of what he condemns as a theological error. Jews, Catholics, and "false brethren" are condemned on much the same grounds: as blasphemers offensive to God. Some Lutherans might find solace in insisting on the nonracial, religious character of Luther's stance. But this is not at all heartening when one examines Luther's later outbursts against the Jews, urging that their synagogues be burned, their houses razed and destroyed, their religious writings taken from them, their rabbis forbidden to teach, their guarantee of safe passage rescinded, and their property confiscated. The religious character of this vicious attack is betokened by Luther's advice that the confiscated property of recalcitrants be retained for those of their brethren who see the light and convert.⁵⁹

Of the various studies of Reformation-era intolerance, those of Wappler and Paulus document conditions in Saxony and provide us a more individualized portrait of the historical experience of the Lutheran laity in Weigel's time. In Luther's part of Saxony, there were executions for the offense of rebaptism as early as 1527 (before the imperial mandate of 1529), and afterward in the years 1530, 1532, and 1538.⁶⁰ Unlike the milder regime in Hessen, where as a rule only the openly rebellious dissenters were sentenced to death, the Wittenberg reformers soon came to support capital punishment even against peaceful heretics.⁶¹ A Wittenberg court verdict of 1539 cited as the first among the heresies and blasphemies of condemned Anabaptists in Eisenach their opinion that the Holy Scripture was but "a dead letter." The malefactors recanted under torture and were pardoned,⁶² but persecution for the broadly interpreted offence of blasphemy continued in Saxon lands during Weigel's lifetime. In 1557, at the behest of the Lutheran orthodoxy, Elector August of Saxony pronounced in his General Articles that "false teachers" were no longer to be suffered in his domain. The

same articles made the attendance of Sunday religious services mandatory. By 1580, those who refused worship and communion had been threatened with dire fines, confiscation of property, exile, and even with forced church attendance in chains.⁶³

Such matters occupied the academic elite. A contemporary of Weigel who received his doctorate in law in Wittenberg in 1558 was the influential jurist Matthias Coler. As a law professor in strict-Lutheran Jena until his death (one year prior to Weigel's in 1587), Coler proposed that recalcitrant heretics be sentenced to death by fire. To purge the territory, malefactors were to be interrogated under torture before execution in order to discover others guilty of the same offenses. According to Carpzov, death sentences for heresy were handed out in Leipzig in 1574 and 1583.⁶⁴

These details give the reader an idea of the severity and extent of repression. To understand the antitheses of Weigel's critical adherence to Lutheran articles of faith, one also needs to take into account the steps by which the reversal of freedom was effected. The glorious prelude to the historical tragedy was the liberation of Luther's proclamation of the freedom of faith coinciding with his formulation of justification by faith and salvation by grace alone based on the sole authority of Scripture and conscience and subject to the universal priesthood of a laity authorized to read and interpret the Bible on its own. The emancipatory impulse of the early Reformation is expressed in Luther's dictum that to burn heretics is against the will of the Holy Spirit. His *Letter to the Nobility* of 1520 calls for fighting heresy with writings, not with fire.⁶⁵ According to Luther's treatise of March 1523 *On Governmental Authority* (*Von weltlicher Obrigkeit*), the secular powers have no right to extend their sway over the soul and its faith, just as the Christian has no right to resist by force the power of legitimate government. Faith can only be decided by individual conscience. Theological disagreement is to be settled without interference from the state.

Though Luther initially maintained these views even in the face of widespread rebellion,⁶⁶ he began to lose confidence that error could be vanquished simply by preaching the pure Gospel against false teachings. Already in February 1526, he addressed an opinion to Elector Johann of Saxony that in order to prevent rebellion only a single teaching should be preached in any single dominion.⁶⁷ Visitations were instituted by the Elector in order to enforce this rule; their jurisdiction was soon extended from the clergy to the laity,

despite Luther's initial hesitation.⁶⁸ Gradually, however, the reformer came to interpret any deviation from correct teachings either as a rebellion against the worldly authority and protector of the church, or as "blasphemy" against which the Old Testament called for a penalty of death. There is evidence that as early as November 1529 Luther and Melanchthon sanctioned the death penalty for Anabaptists in an opinion to their Elector in response to the imperial mandate.⁶⁹ What followed was a vicious circle of opinions and measures that encouraged governmental supervision of religion and at the same time equated theological error with rebellion against government. Thus Luther's interpretation of Psalm 82 in the summer of 1530 discerned two kinds of heretics: those who professed doctrines inimical to government and those who contradicted a universally and publicly maintained article of faith. The first were to be punished as rebels and the second as blasphemers.⁷⁰ Ultimately he extended the notion of offending against binding articles from such cardinal heresies as teaching the nondivinity of Christ to the highly controversial article of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. Since God could not be divided, any questioning of articles of faith was wholly deviant.⁷¹

According to Köhler, this reversal of freedom of faith led to an increased reliance upon mandatory confessional formulas, to the transformation of the ministry from a pastoral office to a guardianship of doctrinal purity, and to the elevation of the territorial prince to a leader of the church who could enforce practices and exert a powerful influence on the enunciation of doctrine. In the Goslar *Kirchenordnung* of 1531, Nikolaus von Amsdorf had simply sworn preachers to adhere to "the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ without addition"; however, beginning in 1533 Luther, Jonas, and Bugenhagen began to pledge their pastors to obey creeds, the Apostolic, Nicean, Athanasian Creeds, and the Augsburg Confession.⁷² In the process, the role of the preacher shifted from the first among equals and from the representative of a community authorized by its own universal priesthood. The pastorate acquired an increasingly official character. In 1530, Luther encouraged Justus Menius to emphasize, in writing against the Anabaptists, that they lacked properly ordained preachers, a clear sign that they were "servants of the devil."⁷³ In 1531, Melanchthon addressed an opinion to Elector Johann of Saxony that the Anabaptists were guilty of "blasphemy and sedition," not necessarily because they overtly fomented rebellion,