

A Significant Silence in Luther's Early Theology of Suffering

New Evidence for an Initial Reformational *Umbruch*¹

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Martin Luther had a great deal to say about the role of suffering in the Christian life. The Wittenberg reformer thought that evangelical theology, in general, and justification by faith, in particular, had profound implications for how Christians were to understand and contend with affliction, whether of the soul or the body. He made preaching and writing about these implications one of his top priorities—Luther sought to effect what I have elsewhere called a »reformation of suffering,« that is, a fundamental shift in the way Christians understood and sought to cope with affliction.² In this article I want to take a somewhat unorthodox approach to the study of Luther's theology of suffering: I want to focus on something he *did not* say about suffering. I want to consider an important *silence* about suffering in his early works. Not only will this approach help us to understand better what Luther *did* have to say about suffering, especially during the Indulgence Controversy, a central focus of the 2017 Luther Congress; this approach will also provide new evidence for an important and very early reformational *Umbruch* in Luther's development,³ and thus contribute to

1 I am grateful to Berndt Hamm and Volker Leppin for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

2 Cf. R.K. RITTGERS, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (OSHT), 2012.

3 Cf. B. HAMM, *Naher Zorn und nahe Gnade. Luthers frühe Klosterjahre als Beginn seiner reformatorischen Neuorientierung* (in: *Luther und das monastische Erbe* [SMHR 39], hg. v. C. BULTMANN / V. LEPPIN / A. LINDNER, 2007, 111–151). This article also appears in DERS., *Der frühe Luther. Etappen reformatorischer Neuorientierung*, 2010, 25–64. (I will be citing from this latter version.) English: *Impending Doom and Imminent Grace:*

our understanding of the nature and timing of his so-called larger »Reformation Breakthrough.«⁴

In his works leading up to the Indulgence Controversy Luther never refers to suffering as a penance for sin—this is the silence that so impresses me.⁵ Despite the importance of the suffering-as-penance doctrine in the later Middle Ages, to my knowledge, Luther never invokes it in his early letters, sermons, and lectures, which is rather remarkable. There is also very little scholarship on this topic—there is a scholarly silence about Luther’s early silence on the suffering-as-penance doctrine. My goal in this article is to remedy this situation.

*I Suffering as Penance in Late Medieval Theology and Devotion*⁶

Much of what late medieval theologians had to say about suffering was shaped by the Church’s penitential system. While late medieval penitential theology was by no means monolithic,⁷ there was widespread agreement among theologians that suffering could function as a penance for sin. This teaching was ubiquitous. Working with the widely accepted distinction between the guilt of sin (*culpa*) and the penalty for sin (*poena*), which may

Luther’s Early Years in the Cloister as the Beginning of His Reformation Reorientation (in: IDEM, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. by M.J. LOHRMANN, 2014, 26–58).

4 For overviews of the scholarship of Luther’s Reformation Breakthrough(s), see B. LOHSE, *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther* (WdF 123), 1968, and DERS., *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther. Neuere Untersuchungen* (VIEG 25), 1988. See also O.H. PESCH, *Hinführung zu Luther*, 32004, 91–116.

5 I have mentioned this silence in passing in my previous work. See RITTGERS, *Reformation of Suffering* (see n. 2), 90.106.

6 Portions of this section draw on IDEM, *Luther’s Reformation of Suffering* (Seminary Ridge Review 19,2, Spring 2017, 1–17), and on IDEM, *Reformation of Suffering* (see n. 2), 24–32.

7 On the variety of theologies relating to the late medieval sacrament of penance, see T. TENTLER, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, 1977, and R.K. RITTGERS, *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, 2004, 23–46.

be traced back to Anselm,⁸ theologians held that priests, by virtue of their possession of the power of the keys, not only forgave *culpa* through absolution as a gift of grace;⁹ priests could also transform the *poena* one deserved to suffer for one's sins in Purgatory into a more bearable form of penance one could endure in the here and now. This penance, or work of satisfaction, typically took one of three forms: fasting, prayer, or works of mercy.¹⁰ These three were held to fulfill the definition of a work of satisfaction, which involved making amends for past sins, providing healing for the effects of sins, and protecting against future sins.¹¹ Late medieval penitential theology taught that whereas prayer restored proper order in the penitent's relationship to God, and works of mercy did the same with regard to neighbor, fasting brought order to the penitent's relationship with himself, primarily by battling concupiscence of the flesh. *Theologians viewed suffering as a species of fasting—this is the key point.* As with other forms of penance, suffering only rendered satisfaction because it cooperated with Christ's satisfaction.¹²

One finds the connection between suffering and fasting in some of the most popular and important theological and pastoral works of the period. Thomas Aquinas cites the connection in the *Summa Theologiae*,¹³ as does

8 Cf. RITTIGERS, *Reformation of Suffering* (see n. 2), 25, n. 91.

9 This priestly absolution was not efficacious until the assigned penance was performed. See loc. cit., 37.

10 Cf. S. THOMAE AQUINATIS (hereafter AQUINAS), *Doctoris Angelici, Summa theologiae, tertia pars et supplementum*, ed. by P. CARAMELLO, 1976, 49 f (= Supplementum, q. 15, a. 3). It should be noted that Aquinas did not write the *Supplementum*, rather it is a later work gathered largely from his *Scriptum super sententiis*. On the three forms of penance, see J. GOERING, *The Internal Forum and the Literature of Penance and Confession* (in: *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period, 1140–1234: From Gratian to the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX*, ed. by W. HARTMANN / K. PENNINGTON, 2008, 379–428), 401.

11 Cf. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* (see n. 10), 40 f and 42 f (= Supplementum, q. 12, art. 3 and q. 13, art. 2).

12 Cf. MAGISTRI PETRI LOMBARDI *Parisiensis Episcopi, sententiae in IV libris distinctae* (*Spicilegium Bonaventurianum* 4), 1971, vol. 3, 121, 17–23 (= *Liber III: Dist. 19, cap. 4*), and AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* (see n. 10), 282 f (= *Tertia Pars*, q. 49, art. 3).

13 Cf. loc. cit., 49 f (= Supplementum, q. 15 a. 3, Reply to objection 5).

Johann von Freiburg in his *Summa confessorum* (1287/8),¹⁴ Guido de Monte Rocherii in his *Manipulus Curatorum* (1483),¹⁵ Johannes Auerbach in his *Directorium curatorum* (compiled ca. 1420, printed 1469),¹⁶ and Angelus de Clavasio in the *Summa angelica* (1476). Angelus expresses nearly verbatim what these other works have to say about suffering and fasting: »all works of [bodily] affliction are to be referred back to fasting« (*omnia opera afflictionis ad ieunium reducuntur*).¹⁷

It should be noted that these and other late medieval theological and pastoral works employed an expansive definition of suffering. Johann von Freiburg includes all manner of tribulations and illnesses in his treatment of penitential suffering, not simply self-imposed or clerically imposed works

14 »Sicut vigilie peregrinationes discipline et omnia opera carnem affligentia reducuntur ad ieunium.« Johannes de Friburgo [JOHANNES VON FREIBURG], *Summa confessorum*, 1476, Liber III, Titulus XXXIII, Questio cv, Herzog August Bibliothek (hereafter HAB) A: 16.2 Theol. 2°. (There are no folio numbers in the edition I worked with at the HAB.) On the popularity of the *Summa confessorum* in the later Middle Ages, especially in Germany, see L.E. BOYLE, *The Summa Confessorum of John of Freiburg and the Popularization of the Moral Teaching of St. Thomas and of Some of His Contemporaries* (in: *Pastoral Care, Clerical Education and Canon Law, 1200–1400* [CStS 135], ed. by IDEM, 1981), III: 248 and III: 258; IDEM, *The Quodlibets of St. Thomas and Pastoral Care* (in: loc. cit., II: 253.) (The articles in this volume appear with their original pagination and a roman numeral beforehand indicating their place in the present volume). See also TENTLER, *Sin and Confession* (see n. 7), 34.

15 Guido asserts that »omnes afflictiones corporales« are included in fasting. See GUIDO DE MONTE ROCHERII, *Manipulus Curatorum*, 1483, viii^{r-v}, HAB A: 493.5 Theol. 2° (1). On the popularity of the *Manipulus curatorum*, see M. MILWAY, *Forgotten Best-Sellers from the Dawn of the Reformation* (in: *Continuity and Change: The Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History. Essays Presented to Heiko Oberman on his 70th Birthday*, ed. by R.J. BAST / A.C. GOW, 2000, 143–162), 117.128f; GUIDO OF MONTE ROCHEN, *Handbook for Curates: A Late Medieval Manual on Pastoral Ministry* (Medieval Texts in Translation), trans. by A.T. THAYER, 2011, xviii–xxiv.

16 Johannes Auerbach similarly maintains, »Nam vigilie, peregrinationes, omnia opera carnis afflictiva reducunt ad ieunium.« See *Directorium Curatorum*, 1469, f. V^r, Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg (Egidienplatz), Inc. 115. 2°.

17 ANGELUS DE CLAVASIO, *Summa angelica de casibus conscientiae*, 1488, CCLV^r, HAB A: 397.4 Theol. 2°. On the influence of the *Summa angelica* in Germany, see TENTLER, *Sin and Confession* (see n. 7), 35. The anonymous *Summa rudium* is nearly identical: »Sic vigilie peregrinatores et omnia carnem affligentia reducuntur ad ieunium.« See *Summa rudium*, 1487, k 3^v, HAB E 363 Helmst. 2° (1).

of satisfaction.¹⁸ Penitential suffering also includes suffering imposed directly by God; the *Summa confessorum* has a *questio* devoted to such affliction. Here Johann von Freiburg follows Aquinas, arguing that such scourges can only be counted as a penance if they are received and endured patiently and willingly as a purgation of sins, and thus made one's own work of satisfaction.¹⁹ One finds the same perspective in the works of Johann von Paltz, Johann Ulrich Surgant, Jean Gerson, Marquard von Lindau, and Johann Herolt.²⁰ In a highly significant move, Johann von Freiburg directs confessors to count as a penance whatever evil (*omnia male*) a penitent has patiently endured.²¹ In this way, afflictions of all kinds could contribute to salvation by reducing the *poena* one deserved to suffer for sins both in this life and the next. Suffering was salvific—an extremely powerful idea.

A number of vernacular works also taught that suffering could function as a penance for sin. The popular *Rechtssumme* of the thirteenth-century Dominican »Bruder Berthold« of Freiburg, includes this teaching,²² as does

18 JOHANNES VON FREIBURG, *Summa confessorum* (see n. 14), Liber III, Titulus XXXIII, Questio cviii.

19 Loc. cit., Liber III, Titulus XXXIII, Questio cix. If one does not receive the scourges willingly, the afflictions are to be seen as divine punishment for sin. See also AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae* (see n. 10), 48 (= Supplementum, q. 15 a. 2).

20 See JOHANNES VON PALTZ, *Werke*, Bd. 2: Supplementum Coelifodinae [SuR 3], hg. v. B. HAMM / C. BURGER / C. MARCOLINO, 1983, 289,27–290,1; JOHANN ULRICH SURGANT, *Manuale curatorum predicandi*, 1506, CVIII^{r-v}, Center for Research Libraries, Microfilm 7726 r 395 (<http://catalog.crl.edu/search~S1!/Ysurgant&searchscope=1&SORT=D/Ysurgant&searchscope=1&SORT=D&SUBKEY=surgant/1%2C5%2C5%2CB/frameset&FF=Ysurgant&searchscope=1&SORT=D&3%2C3%2C>), German Books Before 1601, reel 352, item 3; JEAN GERSON, *Opus [or Opusculum] tripartitum de præceptis decalogi, de confessione & de arte moriendi* (in: JOHANNES GERSON, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 1,3, ed. by L.E. DU PIN, 1987), 447f; *Der Hiob-Traktat des Marquard von Lindau. Überlieferung, Untersuchung und kritische Textausgabe* (MTU 68), hg. v. E. GREIFENSTEIN, 1979, 199,655–658; I.D.K. SIGGINS, *A Harvest of Medieval Preaching: The Sermon Books of Johann Herolt*, OP (Discipulus), 2009, 50f.

21 JOHANNES VON FREIBURG, *Summa confessorum* (see n. 14), Liber III, Titulus XXXIII, Questio cviii.

22 Die »Rechtssumme« Bruder Bertholds. Eine deutsche abecedarische Bearbeitung der »Summa Confessorum« des Johannes von Freiburg. Synoptische Edition der Fassungen

the anonymous *Peycht Spiegel der Sünder* (1510). The author of the latter work specifically instructs penitents to ask their confessors to count as a penance »all the sickness and adversity I have suffered« (*alle mein kranckheit und widerwertikeit die ich leid*).²³

The Latin church wanted laypeople to view suffering as a kind of penance and instructed them to embrace its spiritual benefits—this was a crucial part of the Christian view of suffering that church leaders wanted to commend to their contemporaries. This view was supposed to help Christians make sense of suffering; it was supposed to render suffering plausible, even meaningful, as part of a holy and merciful God's good plan to redeem humanity. Suffering was not simply punishment for sin; it was also an expression of divine grace, because it provided one with an opportunity to shorten one's stay in Purgatory and also to be conformed more closely to the image of Christ and the saints.²⁴

We should finally note that theologians who had a direct influence on Luther also promoted the suffering-as-penance doctrine. Gabriel Biel supported it in his *Collectorium circa quattuor libros Sententiarum*,²⁵ repeating the traditional view that afflictions could function as a form of fasting.²⁶ Luther's spiritual mentor, Johann von Staupitz, did the same. In his 1517 *Lenten sermons* in Nürnberg, Staupitz maintained that if a Christian bears his suffering patiently it can act as »a penance and remission of his sins« (*ain puß vnd ablegung seiner sunden*) that reduces time in Purgatory and thus hastens his journey to God. This is not the highest form of Christian suffering, according to Staupitz, but it is still valid. He identifies two higher forms: suffering for the sake of eternal merit and thus one's reward

B, A und C, Bd. 3: Buchstabenbereich H – P (Texte und Textgeschichte 13), hg. v. G. STEER u. a., 1987, 1560, 15–1562, 24.

23 *Peycht Spiegel der Sünder*, 1510, L2^{r-v}, Houghton Rare Books Library, Harvard University, Houghton Typ 520.10.201.

24 For evidence of lay appropriation of this doctrine, see M.D. LUNDIN, *Paper Memory: A Sixteenth-Century Townsman Writes His World* (HHS 179), 2012, 147.

25 Cf. GABRIELIS BIEL, *Collectorium circa quattuor libros Sententiarum*, *Libri quarti pars secunda*, hg. v. W. WERBECK / U. HOFMANN, 1977, 381, 1–7 (= *Liber IV Dist. XVI, Q. 2, Dubium 7*).

26 Cf. loc. cit., 361, 3–7 (= *Liber IV Dist. XVI, Q. 2, Notabile 2*).

in heaven, and suffering motivated by the love of God with no thought of merit or reward.²⁷

II Luther's Silence on the Suffering-As-Penance Doctrine²⁸

Luther was certainly familiar with the suffering-as-penance doctrine, but, again, he nowhere mentions it in his early sermons, letters, and lectures. Given the ubiquity and importance of this doctrine in late medieval Christianity, Luther's silence about it is quite significant and requires explanation. This is especially the case because well into the Indulgence Controversy he was still operating with some of the underlying theological assumptions that informed this doctrine, even if he was in the process of rethinking and redefining a number of them. These assumptions include the distinction between the guilt of sin and the penalty for sin and the existence of Purgatory, both of which will be discussed below.

First, it is important to explore briefly how Luther interpreted suffering in his early works. In the *Dictata super psalterium* he argues that suffering helps to produce the *humilitas fidei* that is so important to the deeply earnest version of Christianity that he sought to commend to his student auditors in Wittenberg.²⁹ He compares the »scourges and crosses« (*flagella et cruces*) that God places on Christians to the Word that shows them their sins. He writes of these tribulations, »When they come upon us, they are like the Word of the God who accuses and opposes our sin. Therefore, they must be received with all fear and humility, and we must confess to Him, for He is righteous in His works« (*que cum super nos veniunt, dei velut verbum sunt peccatum nostrum arguentis et contestantis. Atque ideo cum omni timore et humilitate suscipienda: et confitendum ei, quia iustus est in operibus suis*).³⁰ According to Luther, suffering mortifies the »old man«

27 Cf. JOHANN STAUPITZ, Von den Graden des leydens Vnuerdinter Widerwertigkait Wie die ordenlich Vnd Volkommenlich mogen gesetzt warden (in: Johannes von Staupitzens Sämmtliche Werke, Bd. 1: Deutsche Schriften, hg. v. I.K.F. KNAAKE, 1867, 21 f), 21.

28 This section draws on ch. 4 of RITTGERS, Reformation of Suffering (see n. 2).

29 On the importance of *humilitas fidei* in the *Dictata*, see: The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety: Essays by Berndt Hamm (SHCT 110), ed. by R.J. BAST, 2004, 153–178.

30 WA 55,2; 275,213–276,216 = LW 10,242.

by persuading the Christian afresh of his wretchedness and nothingness before God, along with his subsequent ongoing need to receive all things, especially righteousness, from God.

Suffering also accomplishes other purposes in the *Dictata*. Luther argues that it enlarges (*dilatatio*) the soul of Christians and thus allows them to understand Scripture better, to grow in virtue, and to value the comfort only God can give to the afflicted.³¹ Luther likens affliction to a winepress that »squeezes out and squeezes together our flesh« (*exprimit et comprimit nostrum carnem*),³² by which he means that the bearing of the cross mortifies the flesh and tests and proves virtue.³³ Luther repeats this argument in his *Lectures on Romans* (*Römervorlesung*), adding that suffering also causes one to love God for His own sake rather than for His gifts.³⁴ For all of these reasons, suffering is not to be avoided but embraced for all of the good that it accomplishes in the life of the Christian.³⁵ In the *Lectures on Romans* Luther exhorts his student auditors to »long for suffering« and to »seek it like a treasure and to bring it about« (*desiderare, querere et prouocare tribulationes velut thesaurum*).³⁶

Luther rarely mentions fasting in his early works, and nowhere does he make a connection between fasting and penance.³⁷ He can say in the *Dictata* that God in His mercy transforms the eternal punishment for sin into a temporal punishment, because sin must still be punished,³⁸ but, significantly, Luther makes no mention of penance in this context. The divinely-sent affliction functions to produce humility along with the other important benefits we have mentioned above; it does not atone for sin.

Why this silence about suffering and penance in Luther's early sermons, letters, and lectures? The answer has to do with the fact that the Luther we

31 Cf. WA 55,2; 55,20–22 and 57,5–7 = LW 10,49; WA 55,2; 58,3f = LW 10,49, and WA 55,2; 58,12–59,2 = LW 10,50.

32 WA 55,2; 597,34f = LW 11,102.

33 Cf. LW 11,139, n. 11.

34 Cf. WA 56; 304,20–26 = LW 25,291; WA 56; 305,10–14 = LW 25,292, and WA 56; 305,14f = LW 25,292.

35 Cf. WA 55,2; 384,13–22 = LW 10,351.

36 WA 56; 304,3f = LW 25,291.

37 For Luther's allegorical interpretation of fasting, see WA 55,2; 839,155–158 = LW 11,358.

38 Cf. WA 55,2; 944,1513–1515 = LW 11,468.

meet in these sources has little interest in works of satisfaction as such, at least as a means of seeking reconciliation with God. There was a time when Luther believed penance had salvific value,³⁹ but it seems that he came to despair of his own works of atonement quite early on. In the famous *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* (*Vorrede zum ersten Bande der Gesamtausgaben seiner lateinischen Schriften*, 1545), he writes, »Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely troubled conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction« (*Ego autem, qui me, utcunque irreprehensibilis monachus vivebam, sentirem coram Deo esse peccatorem inquietissimae conscientiae, nec mea satisfactione placatum confidere possem*).⁴⁰ This section of the *Preface* is notoriously difficult to date and may well contain simplifications or conflation caused by a faulty memory or by Luther's desire to present a stylized account of himself.⁴¹ But there is at least some cause for suggesting that it might refer to his experience before the *Dictata*, for in the early Psalm lectures Luther seems to have given up on the idea of penance entirely. As a »monk without reproach« he was almost certainly fasting, praying, and engaging in works of mercy, but there is no hint in the *Dictata* that such works, including suffering, can atone for sin, and it seems that Luther had at least begun to find some peace for his conscience at this time.⁴²

Luther does say in the *Dictata* that suffering can increase the merits of those who do good,⁴³ but he also insists that forgiveness is »without merits« (*sine meritis*).⁴⁴ There is of course the ongoing scholarly debate about whether it is within the fallen human being's capacity in the *Dictata*

39 Cf. HAMM, *Naher Zorn* [see n. 3], 41 (= IDEM, *Impending Doom* [see n. 3], 39).

40 WA 54; 185,21–23 = LW 34,336.

41 Cf. LW 34,325f and V. LEPPIN, »Omnen vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit«. Zur Aufnahme mystischer Traditionen in Luthers erster Ablassthese (ARG 93, 2002, 7–25), 12.

42 See the discussion below of Luther's 1518 cover letter to Staupitz, in which he discusses how he came to devalue works of satisfaction.

43 Cf. WA 55,2; 142,11 = LW 10,122.

44 WA 55,2; 177,30 = LW 10,146.

to produce *humilitas fidei* in response to the accusing Word.⁴⁵ But even if one wishes to argue with the early Heiko Oberman, Alister McGrath, and Volker Leppin that Luther was still operating with a modified version of *via moderna pactum* theology in the *Dictata*,⁴⁶ it remains the case that he nowhere speaks of the humility of faith—or any other human work—as rendering atonement for sin.

By the time we get to the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther makes it clear that Christ alone renders satisfaction for sin quite apart from all human contribution or cooperation. When commenting on Romans 3:24, Luther agrees that God demands satisfaction for sin but then asserts that God has »given Christ as the one who makes the satisfaction for us, so that He thus may still freely give His grace to those who make satisfaction through another« (*Sed satisfactorem Christum pro nobis dedit, Vt sic satisfaciētibz per alium ipsis tamen gratis gratiam daret*).⁴⁷ A little later Luther states that Christ's blood is fallen humanity's place of propitiation (Rom 3:25), which provides full satisfaction for sin to those who receive it by faith apart from all merits.⁴⁸ We know that Luther believed in Purgatory when he

45 For Luther's comments on the relationship between faith and humility in the *Dictata*, see WA 55,2; 438,133–146 = LW 10,404 and WA 55,2; 849,242 = LW 11,363.

46 Cf. H.A. OBERMAN, *Facientibus Quod in se est Deus non Deneget Gratiam: Robert Holcot O.P. and the Beginnings of Luther's Theology* (in: *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. by S.E. OZMENT, 1971, 119–141), 29 and 132; A.E. MCGRATH, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough*, 2011, 120–123; V. LEPPIN, *Das ganze Leben Buße. Der Protest gegen den Ablass im Rahmen von Luthers früher Bußtheologie* (in: *Ablasskampagnen des Spätmittelalters* [BDHIR 132], hg. v. A. REHBERG, 2017, 523–564), 534–536. (I am grateful to Leppin for sharing this article with me prior to its publication.) For an important counter-argument, which maintains that Luther, while using the language of Biel's *pactum* soteriology in the later *Dictata*, actually rejects this theology of salvation, see B. HAMM's forthcoming article, *Verinnerlichung und Außenorientierung. Luthers reformatorische Neuorientierung bis 1518* (in: *Lutero 500 anni dopo. Una rilettura della Riforma Luterana nel suo contesto storico ed ecclesiale*, ed. by PONTIFICIO COMITATO DI SCIENZE STORICHE, 2018/2019), section 12. »Affinität und Gegensatz zur franziskanischen Tradition der freien Selbstbindung Gottes.« (I am grateful to Hamm for sharing this article with me.) See also nn. 68 and 71 below.

47 WA 56; 37,26–28 = LW 25,31, n. 24.

48 Cf. WA 56; 37,17–38,2 = LW 25,32.

was lecturing on the Psalms and Romans, as he would for some time, but it seems that he already held the view that he would later defend in the *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (*Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute*): Purgatory was a *purgatorium* where self-love was purged and replaced by love of the divine will, not a *punitorium* where one rendered satisfaction for sin.⁴⁹ The Luther of the early sermons, letters, and lectures never advocated the latter view.

Why this lack of interest in works of satisfaction and thus in suffering functioning as a penance for sin? Part of the answer has to do with Luther's early and persistent critique of spiritual laxity, which already in the *Dictata* included indulgences.⁵⁰ Luther associated many popular works of satisfaction with an easy and merely external religion that sought to avoid the cross rather than being willing to take it up and be crucified on it. This easy religion failed to appreciate how serious God was about perfecting fallen human beings in love of the divine will, a process that required much suffering and sacrifice.⁵¹ But the more important answer, which also helps explain Luther's critique of spiritual laxity, relates to an early important change in Luther's penitential theology and concomitant theological anthropology. Here it is helpful to draw on the work of Berndt Hamm.⁵² I believe that Luther's silence regarding the suffering-as-penance doctrine provides new and important evidence to support aspects of this work.

In an article that originally appeared in 2007, *Naher Zorn und nahe Gnade. Luthers frühe Klosterjahre als Beginn seiner reformatorischen Neuorientierung*, Hamm argued against those who insist on a single and rather late Reformation Breakthrough, maintaining that one may discern reformational themes in Luther's theology even in his early Erfurt and Wittenberg years.⁵³ Hamm argued that well before Luther began to lecture on

49 Cf. WA 1; 560,26–30 = LW 31,133; WA 1; 561,28f = LW 31,135, and WA 1; 562,22 = LW 31,137. The fifteenth-century theologian Wessel of Gansfort held a similar view of Purgatory. See C. KOSLOFSKY, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany* (Early Modern History), 1450–1700, 2000, 29f.

50 Cf. WA 55,2; 384,18 = LW 10,351.

51 Cf. WA 56; 391,17–28 = LW 25,381.

52 Cf. HAMM, *Naher Zorn* (see n. 3).

53 Cf. OBERMAN, *Facientibus* (see n. 46), 132, also commented on how »fruitless« it is to seek to arrive at one definitive date for Luther's *Turnerlebnis*. Additionally, Oberman

the Psalms, he had arrived at the theological and existential conclusion that he would never achieve salvation by way of any *iustitia activa* arising from his own natural powers.⁵⁴ His uniquely intense experiences of *Anfechtungen* had persuaded him of his utter spiritual impotence. Hamm describes Luther's arrival at this position as »ein erster Umbruch von reformatorischer Tragweite« that signaled »de[n] Beginn einer reformatorischen Neuorientierung,« a slow process that consisted of several breakthroughs.⁵⁵ Hamm says that Luther came to this first radical change gradually, initially experiencing only despair in his *Anfechtungen* and then seeing in them a way out of his hell that had been provided by the Holy Spirit: by confessing his complete spiritual emptiness he could be filled with the divine grace he so earnestly sought.

Central to this early reformational *Umbruch* was a new understanding of *poenitentia*.⁵⁶ In Luther's cover letter to the *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (May 30, 1518), he refers to the »most delightful and helpful talks« (*iucundissimas et salutares fabulas tuas*) in which Staupitz, his spiritual mentor, taught him that true repentance does not lead to the love of God and His righteousness; rather, it proceeds from them. Human beings were not obliged to achieve love of God and His righteous acts, including tribulation, through their own natural efforts, as Nominalists like Gabriel Biel had taught;⁵⁷ rather, God's love and grace conveyed through Christ's wounds enabled such penitence and love within them. Luther records in this letter, which he addressed to Staupitz, that the word *poenitentia* has now become sweeter than all other words to him.⁵⁸

believed that one could discern reformational themes in Luther's early theological development. See n. 72 below.

54 There had been theologians in Luther's Erfurt monastery who had similarly criticized the more optimistic theological anthropologies and soteriologies of the period, although there is no evidence that Luther had read their works. See A. ZUMKELLER, *Erbsünde, Gnade, Rechtfertigung und Verdienst nach der Lehre der Erfurter Augustinertheologen des Spätmittelalters* (Cass. 35), 1984, 297.463.503.

55 HAMM, *Naher Zorn* (see n. 3), 47.45 (= IDEM, *Impending Doom* [see n. 3], 44.42).

56 Cf. loc. cit., 52–56.48–50.

57 On Biel's penitential theology, see R. SCHWARZ, *Vorgeschichte der reformatorischen Busstheologie* (AKG 41), 1968, 125–137.

58 Cf. WA 1; 525,4–23 (quotation, 525,4 f) = LW 48,64 f.

Volker Leppin has dated Staupitz's talks to early summer of 1515, just months before Luther completed the *Dictata* (fall 1515).⁵⁹ He has argued that these *fabulas* provided an impetus to a crucial change in Luther's penitential theology that occurred early in 1516 in conjunction with his reading of Tauler's *Sermons* (*Predigten*) and the *Novum Instrumentum* of Erasmus: Luther rejected the subjectivist, contritionist, and sacramental view of repentance he had encountered in Biel, along with its assumptions about human agency, which he had supported up to this point.⁶⁰ Hamm, however, argues that these talks took place before Luther began the *Dictata* (summer of 1513), for he finds a Staupitz-influenced theology of penitence in these lectures, although he concedes that the lectures do not include all that Luther said he had learned about biblical repentance in this letter.⁶¹ Hamm argues that in the early Psalm lectures penitence has become sweet to Luther, which is why the friar-professor teaches that sinners should embrace, affirm, and love God's righteous judgment of them as sinners.

59 Cf. LEPPIN, *Omnen vitam* (see n. 41), 12, 14. It should be noted that Leppin recommends caution when using this source to understand Luther's early theological development, for it is a stylized reconstruction designed to serve theological purposes. Still, Luther produced this reconstruction not long after the events to which it refers took place, and therefore it remains a valuable, if limited, source, especially when compared to the famous 1545 Preface.

60 Cf. LEPPIN, *Das ganze Leben Buße* (see n. 46), 537–540.

61 Cf. HAMM, *Naher Zorn* (see n. 3), 53 (= IDEM, *Impending Doom* [see n. 3], 49). Hamm notes that Luther actually identifies four key changes in his understanding of penitence leading up to the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Hamm argues that it was only the first of these four, the view that penitence begins with love of God rather than concludes with it, that took place prior to the *Dictata*. Luther does in fact lay out a chronological progression in his cover letter to Staupitz, stating that first the consoling talks took place, and »post haec« he found confirmation for the new view of penitence when he discovered that *poenitentia* is the Latin translation of *metanoia*, a Greek word that entails a change of mind and disposition, something that could not be reduced to the Sacrament of Penance. Thus, it is not necessary to date the *fabulas* to which Luther refers to the time when he encountered Tauler's *Predigten* or the *Novum Instrumentum*. In any case, Luther does not say that he learned about the difference between *metanoia* and *poenitentia* from Erasmus; he simply refers to the »studio et gratia eruditissimorum virorum, qui nobis graeca et hebraea officiosissime tradunt.« These learned men may or may not have included Erasmus. Cf. WA 1; 525,24–30 = LW 48,66f. Luther was familiar with at least some Greek before the appearance of the *Novum Instrumentum*.

Hamm concedes that it is difficult to determine exactly when Luther arrived at this new penitential theology and anthropology, for relevant sources are not especially plentiful.⁶² He finds evidence for the beginnings of this first reformational *Umbruch* in Luther's early letters⁶³ and also in his marginal comments on Lombard's *Sententiae* (1509/10). In these comments Luther attacks traditional *habitus* theology, insisting with Lombard that the Holy Spirit is Himself the source of love in the Christian's life; there is no question of human beings cooperating with grace in the production of virtue, for Luther argues that all things depend entirely on divine mercy.⁶⁴ As we have seen, Hamm finds this new reformational theology throughout the *Dictata*.⁶⁵ For example, following Heiko Oberman,⁶⁶ he interprets Luther's emphasis on the humility of faith in the early Psalm lectures not as a kind of virtue or good work but as a confession elicited by the Word of what is true about fallen human beings, namely, that we are totally spiritually empty and have nothing to offer God, save sin.⁶⁷ Hamm has also elsewhere argued that already in the *Dictata* faith (*fides*)—or the *humilitas fidei*—has taken over the central place of love (*caritas*) in the traditional scheme of salvation, which he sees as further evidence of this first *Umbruch*.⁶⁸

While I believe this early *Umbruch* took place, it is not clear to me that Luther applied the insights that attended it consistently in the *Dictata*. Even in the later lectures he can still speak of sinners needing to prepare themselves for grace by doing what it is in them (*facienti quod in se est*). Such statements, however, are rare and are overshadowed by the far more frequent assertions of complete human spiritual impotence. These statements also allow for very little human agency.⁶⁹ Already in the earlier

62 Hamm sees the *Dictata* as »der theologische Ertrag der Klosteranfechtungen.« HAMM, Naher Zorn (see n. 3), 49 (= IDEM, Impending Doom [see n. 3], 45).

63 Cf. WAB I; 17,41–46, Nr. 5.

64 Cf. WA 9; 42,35–43,8 and WA 9; 70,32–71,3.

65 Cf. HAMM, Naher Zorn (see n. 3), 49 (= IDEM, Impending Doom [see n. 3], 45).

66 Cf. H.A. OBERMAN, Wir sein pettler. Hoc est verum. Bund und Gnade in der Theologie des Mittelalters und der Reformation (ZKG 78, 1967, 232–252), 241.250.

67 Cf. HAMM, Naher Zorn (see n. 3), 46 (= IDEM, Impending Doom [see n. 3], 43).

68 Cf. BAST, Reformation of Faith (see n. 29), 153–177.

69 See the *scholion* to Vulg. Ps 113 (WA 55,2; 876,72–877,103 = LW 11,396f), and n. 46 above. While Luther here asserts with reference to God, »Nihil enim nisi preparationem

lectures, Luther seeks to distance himself from »our theologians today« (*nostris hodie theologis*), claiming that they fail to appreciate how essential it is for fallen human beings to acknowledge their utter nothingness before God.⁷⁰ These kinds of assertions provide important evidence for Hamm's thesis about a first reformational *Umbruch*. So, too, does the fact that Luther parts company with Biel and the entire late medieval tradition in at least one important way in the *Dictata*: he does not affirm the suffering-as-penance doctrine. We do not have to wait until the *Lectures on Romans* for Luther to begin to move away from Biel's *Bußlehre* and its assumptions about human agency in salvation.⁷¹

requisivit, ut essemus capaces doni illius,« he appears to have an extremely minimalistic kind of preparation in mind. Luther compares this preparation to a murderer or a thief who has been promised 100 florins by a gracious prince or king out of sheer mercy. This beneficent ruler simply requires the criminal in some way and in some sense to be prepared (*paratus*) and then to wait at a designated time and place for him and his gift. The criminal has very little agency and no merit. Luther is clear on this latter point: the ruler gives irrespective of merit—»Hic patet, quod rex ille debitor esset ex gratuita promissione sua et misericordia sine merito illius, nec demerito illius negaret, quod promisit.« The recipient of the generous gift is a murderer or thief, after all. Whatever preparation the criminal is able to muster seems to be elicited by the promise of the gracious ruler. There is also a suggestion that the gracious prince or king may be harmed by the criminal, for Luther refers to the criminal as »suo latroni aut homicide,« which makes his promise and generous gift all the more remarkable—he is an extraordinarily gracious and merciful ruler. But Luther still insists on preparation, asserting that God »iubet nos vigilare, paratos esse et expectare eum.« Placed in the context of Luther's larger concerns in the *Dictata*, it is plausible to interpret this preparation as the self-accusation or humility that arises in response to the Word and divinely sent affliction, and that is so central to his purposes in these lectures. As Hamm and Oberman have argued (see nn. 66 and 67 above), this *praeparatio* is clearly not something a human being can produce of his or her own accord, it is not a good work that can merit grace; rather, it is a confession of one's utter spiritual impotence along with a desperate cry for grace that God must draw forth from the sinner. Again, whatever human agency Luther assumes in the *Dictata* in the spiritual realm—and it does appear that he assumes some—is extremely limited. See RITTIGERS, Reformation of Suffering (see n. 2), 91.

⁷⁰ Cf. WA 55,2; 36,23 = LW 10,34.

⁷¹ Cf. LEPPIN, Das ganze Leben Buße (see n. 46), 543 and 563, argues for substantial continuity between Biel and Luther in the *Dictata* in terms of their respective theologies of penitence.

The foregoing discussion yields the following conclusion: Luther never refers to the suffering-as-penance doctrine in his early works because his early penitential theology was already reformational in some important respects.⁷² Luther's silence about suffering as a penance for sin thus provides important corroborating evidence for Hamm's thesis about a first and very early reformational *Umbruch* that contributed to the larger and more gradual *reformatorisches Neuorientierung*. One must be careful about placing undue weight on such silences in one's interpretation of the past, and I wish to make it clear that my argument is therefore more suggestive than conclusive. Still, one does have to account for such silences, especially when they are as significant as the one under consideration in this article. I believe that Luther's silence on suffering as a means of penance helps to suggest that quite early on he rejected all theologies of human potential and cooperation in salvation, even if this rejection is not evident on every page of his early works, and even if other important parts of his mature reformational theology—including his fully evangelical view of repentance—had yet to appear.

III *Luther's Rejection of the Suffering-As-Penance Doctrine*⁷³

The important developments we have seen in Luther's early penitential theology and anthropology eventually led beyond silence regarding suffering as a means of penance to an explicit rejection of the traditional position. This rejection, arising from Luther's initial *Umbruch*, was also influenced by his growing desire to distinguish true from false penitence,⁷⁴ along with

72 Cf. OBERMAN, *Facientibus* (see n. 46), 134, similarly argued for an early reformational development in the »youngest Luther,« demonstrating how even before he began the *Dictata* he had rejected the nominalist application of the *facientibus quod in se est Deus non deneget gratiam* position to the relationship between faith and reason while retaining this position's understanding of the relationship between the will and grace until 1515 or 1516. DERS., *Wir sind peccator* (see n. 66), modified this latter assertion about the early Luther retaining a nominalist view of the will and grace.

73 Portions of this section draw on ch. 4 of RITTIGERS, *Reformation of Suffering* (see n. 2).

74 As LEPPIN, *Das ganze Leben Buße* (see n. 46), 543.549.563, and DERS., *Omnem vitam* (see n. 41), *passim*, has argued, Luther's reading of the Rhenish mystics clearly shaped this desire.

the implications that this distinction held for papal and ecclesiastical authority. Additionally, his discovery of the certainty of forgiveness via faith in the Word *extra nos* was important in this rejection.⁷⁵

Already in his *Sermon on Indulgences* (*Sermo de indulgentiis*), which may be dated to Lent of 1517,⁷⁶ Luther confesses that he can find no scriptural warrant for sacramental penances being instituted by divine law (*iure divino*). By way of contrast, he argues that true evangelical penitence, which Christ has ordained, involves inward self-mortification over the course of one's life.⁷⁷ In the *Ninety-Five Theses* (*Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum*) this emphasis on life-long penitence, which is of course the central concern of the treatise, unfolds into a thoroughgoing critique of the church's jurisdiction over departed souls in Purgatory. It is not necessary to rehearse this critique here and how it entailed a very important distinction between divine *poena* and its human counterpart. In short, Luther argues that the penalty that the church imposes in the form of works of satisfaction has nothing to do with the next life; the performance of such penances reconciles one to the church but not to God.⁷⁸ Papal authority over human souls is limited to this life only. But the divine penalty remains and falls well beyond the papal purview to remit.

In *A Sermon on Indulgence and Grace* (*Ein Sermon von Ablass und Gnade*; preached in October 1517; published in March 1518⁷⁹), Luther finally explicitly severed the connection between suffering and penance. He continues to stress the difference between divine and human penalty for

75 Cf. E. BIZER, *Fides ex Auditū. Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther*, 31966; O. BAYER, *Promissio. Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (FKDG 24), 1971; K.-H. ZUR MÜHLEN, *Nos Extra Nos. Luthers Theologie zwischen Mystik und Scholastik* (BHTh 46), 1972.

76 WA 1, 94–99. On the dating of this sermon, see LEPPIN, *Omnen vitam* [see n. 41], 20. This is not the disputed *Tractatus de indulgentiis per Doctorem Martin ordinis s. Augustini Wittenbergae editus*, on which, see F. POSSET, *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The Life and Works of Johann von Staupitz*, 2003, 215–220. For the text of this latter tractate, see WA 1, 65–69.

77 Cf. WA 1, 98, 31–99, 5.

78 Cf. B. HAMM, *Die 95 Thesen – ein reformatorischer Text im Zusammenhang der frühen Bußtheologie Martin Luthers* (in: DERS., *Der frühe Luther* [see n. 3], 90–114), 91.

79 WA 1, 239.

sin, and he continues to restrict the church's jurisdiction to the latter. He then goes on to argue that God requires no penalty or satisfaction (*peynn adder gnugthuung*) for sin beyond sinners' »heart-felt and true repentance or conversion« (*hertzliche und ware rew adder bekerung*) along with their intention to take up the cross of Christ,⁸⁰ all of which Luther attributed to divine grace by this point.⁸¹ Nothing more is required to receive the free gift of divine forgiveness, and those who think differently, that is, those who think that they can atone for sin through works of satisfaction or indulgences, are engaged in »a great error« (*eyn großer yrthum*).⁸² Luther teaches in his sermon that Christians should seek to endure the tribulations sent by God, not because they render satisfaction for sin but because they contribute to Christians' spiritual improvement, which he argues is God's purpose in sending them. Luther criticizes certain »modern preachers« (*ne-wen prediger*) who make a distinction between two kinds of penalties for sin: curative (*medicativas*) and satisfactory (*satisfactorias*). He rejects the latter category and places all divine penalty in the former one. He insists that »all penalty, indeed, everything that God lays upon Christians is edifying for them and able to be borne by them« (*dann alle peynn, ja alls was gott aufflegt ist besserlich und tzutreglich den Christen*).⁸³

We should pause to note just how radical Luther's rejection of suffering as a means of penance was. As we have seen, a number of months before Luther preached *A Sermon on Indulgence and Grace*, Staupitz had supported the traditional view, stating in his Nürnberg sermons that suffering could atone for sin, although he also made it clear that this was not the highest form of suffering. There were other late medieval theologians who had very little to say about suffering as a means of penance. For example, it is difficult to find such references in mystics who influenced Luther,

80 Cf. WA I; 244,15–19.

81 Cf. *Hebräervorlesung / Lectures on Hebrews* (WA 57,3; 101,19–22 = LW 29,112 f).

82 WA I; 245,21–23, quotation at line 21.

83 WA I; 244,40–245,4. In the *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* Luther similarly writes against those who believe that their sins can be forgiven through their own sorrow for sins and works of satisfaction. (WA I; 542,34–38 = LW 31,103).

especially Tauler.⁸⁴ But I am not aware of any outright rejections of the suffering-as-penance doctrine prior to Luther. My hunch is that even the most earnest theologians would have supported Staupitz's position: affliction could atone for sin, but there were loftier ways of viewing the role of suffering in the Christian life.

Luther's critique of sacramental works of satisfaction only increased as the Indulgence Controversy wore on. He did not explicitly reject them at this time, but he consistently downplayed their importance as he continued to stress the need to embrace the divine penalty for sin in lifelong repentance. Luther also stressed the importance of forgiveness of guilt, especially as one faced suffering—this was a key part of his reformation of suffering. In *For the Investigating of Truth and the Consoling of Fearful Consciences* (*Pro veritate inquirenda et timoratis conscientiiis consolandis*, early summer 1518), he argued that the certainty of forgiveness of guilt received via the external Word by faith freed one to embrace the divine penalty for sin with a peaceful conscience, because one could know that such penalty was not an expression of divine wrath—a very powerful evangelical idea. Luther asserts, »Where guilt and conscience have been forgiven there is no pain in punishment, but there is joy in tribulations« (*Remissa culpa et conscientia, nulla pena est in pena, sed gaudium in tribulationibus*).⁸⁵ Affliction is an occasion for joy rather than for despair. The journey that Luther had begun in the years leading up to the *Dictata* has reached its end, something that is clearly attested by his rejection of the suffering-as-penance doctrine. As we have seen, this rejection was directly informed by his initial reformational *Umbruch*, as well as by his growing desire to distinguish true from false penitence and the concomitant curtailment of papal and ecclesiastical authority. It was also influenced by other reformational discoveries, including the certainty of forgiveness via the Word *extra nos*. Each of these breakthroughs was essential to Luther's radical rejection of the traditional suffering-as-penance doctrine.

84 Such references can be found in Henry Suso, although we have no evidence that Luther read Suso. See HENRY SUSO, *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit* (in: Heinrich Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften*, hg. v. K. BIHLMEYER, 1961, 196–325), 258.

85 WA 1, 630, 13f, thesis 5.

IV Conclusion

Luther's silence on the suffering-as-penance doctrine and eventual rejection of the same not only provides insight into his reformational breakthroughs; this silence and this rejection also help us understand Luther's attitude toward suffering itself in the Indulgence Controversy and beyond. Because he was unwilling to view suffering as a means of penance, he had to develop other ways of interpreting and coping with it. As we have seen, he especially came to see suffering as a divine gift that produced *humilitas fidei* in the Christian and conformed her to Christ. Luther was by no means alone in holding such a view, but his negative attitude toward the suffering-as-penance doctrine made him hold to it more firmly than many others, for early on he had forfeited a crucial and widely popular way of coping with affliction.⁸⁶ His silence and eventual rejection of the suffering-as-penance doctrine helps to explain in part why he argues so strenuously for the position he does in the Indulgence Controversy.

Luther developed an additional way of interpreting suffering that would characterize his mature evangelical view of the matter. Because so much in the evangelical life rested on faith, Luther came to understand tribulation increasingly as a test of faith.⁸⁷ He thought that such purified faith provided one with superior insight into the will of God in the midst of suffering, a key source of his growing prophet-like certainty.⁸⁸ Early on

86 Not all of Luther's early followers understood the importance of this rejection and continued to hold on to the suffering-as-penance doctrine even as they sought to embrace Luther's teaching. See R.K. RITTIGERS, Productive Misunderstanding in the Early Reformation Revisited: The Case of Lazarus Spengler's A Consoling and Christian Instruction and Medicine in All Adversities (1521) (R&RR 12,1, 2010 [2011], 19–42).

87 One finds this emphasis of suffering testing faith especially in Luther's *Lectures on Hebrews*. See WA 57,3; 132,1–5 = LW 29,138 and WA 57,3; 236,1–3 = LW 29,238. It should be noted that Luther did not invent the view that suffering tests faith. It is found in Scripture (e.g. 1 Pet 1,7) and throughout the ancient and medieval periods. But Luther did emphasize this traditional way of interpreting suffering more than anyone before him, making it central to his view of affliction in the Christian life. See RITTIGERS, Reformation of Suffering (see n. 2), 120.

88 For a new approach to Luther's prophetic self-understanding that examines his theological anthropology, see IDEM, The Word-Prophet Martin Luther (SCJ XL 48,4, Winter 2017, 951–976).

in the *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521), Luther claims that in his day the wisdom of the cross has been »hidden in a deep mystery« (*abscondita in mysterio profundo*),⁸⁹ because most people rely on their own reason to understand suffering, inevitably concluding that God is against them. Only faith could see God's goodness hidden under its contrary—only faith could see what was *really* going on in the midst of suffering.⁹⁰ This claim of superior insight into the divine will and its purposes regarding suffering, which was so important to the reformation of Christianity that Luther proposed to his contemporaries, may also be traced back at least in part to Luther's early silence on the suffering-as-penance doctrine. It seems that very early on Luther saw that this doctrine could not be reconciled with the wisdom of the cross that he was just beginning to discover in his early letters, sermons, and lectures.

89 AWA 2; 136,17–20.

90 Cf. AWA 2; 179,22–180,3.