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# “Invectivity” and Theology: Martin Luther’s *Ad librum Ambrosii Catharini* (1521) in Context

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**Abstract:** Luther’s treatise is presented as an answer to attacks from the Italian Dominican Ambrosius Catharinus. The language is highly invective, and Luther’s argument culminates in a comprehensive biblical verification of a terrifying truth: that the pope is the Antichrist foreseen in several biblical texts. The papal Curia is part of the Antichrist’s realm. Relating to Heiko Oberman’s thoughts on the theological roots of Luther’s “invectivity,” the article offers a closer look into Luther’s radically offensive language in his early years, arguing that it was closely linked to his central theological convictions at least since 1520/21.

**Keywords:** Martin Luther, Ambrosius Catharinus Politus, Silvester Prierias (Mazzolini), Roman Curia, Antichrist, heresy

## 1 The Controversy

In 1520 the Florentine Dominican Friar Ambrosius Catharinus Politus published a comprehensive theological attack on some of the views recently put forward by the German Augustinian hermit Martin Luther. Ambrosius Catharinus was the same age as Luther, born in 1484 as “Lancelotto de Politi.” He had studied Law in Siena, and was promoted to *Doctor utriusque iuris* at the age of seventeen in 1501, the same year that Luther entered the Augustinian convent in Erfurt. Ambrosius Catharinus did not join the Dominican order until 1517, when he became a member of the San Marco community in Florence. In 1520, when the Curia had started their investigation of Luther’s possibly heretic theology, Catharinus was still a novice in San Marco. Nevertheless, he was challenged by his superiors to contribute to the task of refuting the views of Luther. He was regarded as a better rhetorician and a better polemicist than his senior Dominican colleague Silvester

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Prierias. Prierias, seen as a quite rigid Thomist, had already written against Luther several times.<sup>1</sup>

Ambrosius Catharinus published his *Apologia pro veritate Catholicae et apostolicae fidei ac doctrinae adversus impia ac valde pestifera Martini Lutheri dogmata* in Florence in 1520, just a few months after he had been challenged to accept this task. It is a long treatise (344 pages in the *CCath* edition), dedicated to the German Emperor and written in the style of traditional anti-heretic theology. Even though the author starts out with a *captatio benevolentiae*, introducing himself to the Emperor as a humble and poor friar who has no other agenda than seeking the truth, he is well aware of the imbalance of power involved in the case: Catharinus represents the inner circles of the Roman Church, and for him, there is nothing to fear. Luther, on the other hand, is about to be charged as a heretic, and is presented by Catharinus as a German outsider. His “impia et pestifera dogmata” are to be refuted as erroneous.

When Ambrosius Catharinus’ treatise was published late in 1520, the pope had already made up his mind with regard to Luther’s teachings.<sup>2</sup> It was now up to the Emperor during the upcoming Diet to deal with the issue at stake. So, for Ambrosius Catharinus it was most appropriate to address him in his preface.

Luther had to deal with the Roman Curia as well as the Diet and Emperor from the position of the accused. He received Catharinus’ book on 7 March, and completed his response within the next 24 days. On 1 April, Luther’s *Ad librum eximii magistri nostri, magistri Ambrosii Catharini, defensoris Silvestri Prieratis acerrimi, Responsio Martini Lutheri. Cum exposita Visione Danielis. viii. De Antichristo*<sup>3</sup> was submitted for publication, and the next day he left for Worms to confront the charges of being a heretic that were to be made during the Diet taking place there. Luther’s treatise was published in July.

In the title of his work Luther refers to Silvester Prierias, whom Ambrosius Catharinus was supposed to support and defend in his book. Silvester Prierias, a man of 63 years in 1520, had been the first prominent Roman theologian to attack Luther. His treatment of Luther as a heretic is summed up in the comprehensive *Errata et argumenta M. Lutheris [sic] recitata, detecta, repulsa et copiosissime trita*<sup>4</sup>

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1 See the comments on Prierias on p. XII of Joseph Schweizer’s introduction to: Ambrosius Catharinus, *Apologia: Apologia pro veritate*, ed. Joseph Schweizer, *Corpus Catholicorum* 27 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1956). Quoted as: *CCath* 27.

2 The bull *Exsurge Domine* against Luther had been issued by the Curia 15 June.

3 *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (WA)*, ed. Joachim K.F. Knaake et al., vol. 7 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1897), 705–78.

4 Silvestro Mazzolini, *Errata et argumenta Martini Lutheris recitata, detecta, repulsa et copiosissime trita* (Rome: Antonio Blado, 1520), see <https://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de/title/BV012705331> (accessed 17 January 2023).

from 1520. The treatise was – without an introductory expression of humility – dedicated to Pope Leo X, and was probably published before the *Exsurge Domine* bull. In terms of style and rhetoric, Sylvester Prierias demonstrates an attitude similar to Catharinus: he leans on the power and the authority of the Roman Church, and deals with Luther as a man of errors. There is no need for rude and invective language. It is sufficient, within an ecclesiological framework and supported by a number of references to biblical quotations, to demonstrate “copiosissime” that Luther is wrong.

Luther had already written against Sylvester Prierias on two occasions.<sup>5</sup> In *Ad librum Ambrosii Catharini* he deals with Catharinus as another polemicist of the same ilk as Prierias. In a short and rather informal preface, Luther addresses his old friend Wenzeslaus Link, at the time General Vicar of the Augustinians, who had sent him Ambrosius Catharinus’ *Apologia*. Luther blames him for this:

Why did you actually send him to me, instead of throwing him into the Pegnitz or rather right into the fire? I could have saved all the hours spent on reading; hours that I’d rather have used on playing and drinking. Instead I had to drag myself through this dung heap of empty and damned Thomistic words, so that I, poor soul, almost perish in excrement.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 The Broader Context: Luther as Joshua

Luther’s treatise against Catharinus is a text of radical “invectivity.” There appear to be no limits as to how far the author is prepared to go. His attacks against the Roman Curia and its defenders are institutional as well as personal, and they are accompanied by a biblically confirmed diagnosis of the historical situation Luther has been put into.

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5 First in *Ad dialogum Sylvestri Prieratis [...] responsio*, completed at the end of August 1518. This is a *responsio* to Sylvester Prierias’ *Dialogus*, a treatise in defence of the Pope’s power, handed over to Luther three weeks earlier together with a citation to come to Rome to be questioned there. In August 1520 Luther once again responded to the attacks from Prierias in his preface and his additional remarks to Prierias’ *Errata et argumenta*.

6 *WA* 7 (1897), 705, 17–23: “Et tu quid illum ad me misisti ac non mox Pegnitio tuo aut Vulcano commendasti? ne tot horas mihi in eo legendo perderes, quas melius fuissem partitus in ludum aliquem Circulatoris aut computatiunculam, ut sic Italo sale me ipsum salliam, quam, dum sterquilinum verborum verbosissimi et maledicissimi Thomistae perlustro, in caeno isto pene pereomiser.” – Pegnitz is the river running through Nürnberg, where Wenzeslaus Link stayed when he sent the book to Luther. In his work *Der entlarvte Lutherische Heilge* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1756), Johannes Nicolaus Weislinger comments on the passage quoted above and criticises Luther for his incorrect way of spelling “Pegnitz” in Latin. According to Weislinger, 94, footnote 27, the Latin name of the river is “Pegnesus” or “Pegnissus.” Thanks to Dr. Vemund Blomkvist, University of Oslo, for the reference to Weislinger.

In the treatise from April 1521, the attacks against Catharinus are combined with an exposition of Daniel 8: “Cum exposita visione Danielis viii. De Antichristo,” as marked on the title page.<sup>7</sup> Through this exposition, Luther fulfills a promise made to his readers a few months earlier, in *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae*, where he had approached the same conclusion: that the pope had to be identified as the Antichrist.<sup>8</sup> Through 1520, Luther had hesitated to draw this conclusion. But the issuing of the *Exsurge Domine* in June 1520 seems to have contributed to a change. It was increasingly difficult to excuse the pope himself and instead blame the Curia for the attacks against Luther. At the end of *De captivitate Babylonica*, published 6 October 1520, before the bull had reached Wittenberg, Luther writes ironically about *De captivitate* as the first part of the revocation expected from him by the ecclesiastical authorities:

I hear rumours about bulls that once again are being prepared against me; bulls of the most terrible papistic kind, where I am urged either to renounce or to be declared a heretic. If this is correct, I would like this treatise to be the first part of my future revocation. [...] In due time, I will also publish the remaining part, and I will – with Christ’s support – do it in a way different from everything that the Roman Chair so far has ever seen or heard of. There, I shall prove my obedience abundantly. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.<sup>9</sup>

During the following months the controversy accelerated. On 10 December, the deadline set for Luther’s revocation, the *Exsurge Domine* bull was burnt in Wittenberg together with the Canon Law and several papal treatises written against Luther. The performance was staged to demonstrate Luther’s disgust with the papacy: it was held just outside the city walls, at a place where executed people used to be buried. At nine o’clock professors and students were summoned to take part in the happening, and it culminated with Luther throwing the *Exsurge Domine* into the fire with the words: “Since you have offended the Lord’s saint: let the fire consume you!”<sup>10</sup>

7 Martin Luther, *Ad librum eximii magistri nostri, magistri Ambrosii Catharini, defensoris Silvestri Prieratis acerrimi, Responsio* (Wittenberg: Melchior Lotter d.J., 1521) (VD16 L 3706).

8 Quotations follow Martin Luther, *Studienausgabe*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Delius, vol. 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982), here 220, 18.

9 “Auditum enim audio, paratas esse denuo in me Bullas, (et) diras Papisticas, quibus a revocationem urgear, aut haereticus declarer. Quae, si vera sunt, hunc libellum (= DCB) volo partem esse revocationis meae futurae. [...] relinquam partem propediem editurus sum talem, Christo propitio, qualem hactenus non viderit, nec audierit Romana sedes, oboedientiam meam abunde testaturus, In nomine domini nostri Iesu Christi, Amen,” Luther, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, 259, 13–18.

10 “Weil du den heiligen des Herrn betrübt hast, so verzehre dich das ewige Feuer!” These words refer to biblical passages from Jos 7:25; Mark 1:24 and Acts 2:27. See WA 7 (1897), 153. See also Thomas Kaufmann, *Die Druckmacher: Wie die Generation Luther die erste Medienrevolution entfesselte* (Munich: Beck, 2022), 139–40.

Luther was well aware of the significance of this performance, and of his speech act accompanying the burning of the bull. The words he pronounced refer first of all to the story about Joshua and the destruction of Jericho in Joshua 6 and 7. In Jos 7:25, Joshua, the leader of the Israelites after Moses, says to Achan, the son of Serah: “Since you have troubled us, the Lord will bring trouble on you today.”<sup>11</sup> Immediately after he was put to death by stoning and burnt in a fire. The reason for this severe punishment is explained in Joshua 6: the Lord had commanded Joshua to destroy the city of Jericho. Everything in the city should be banned.<sup>12</sup> Joshua’s men were not allowed to take anything with them from the city: “But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it” (Jos 6:18).<sup>13</sup> For breaking the ban and disobeying this order, Achan was punished accordingly.

Luther applies this story to his own situation: what is banned is not Luther and his books, but the Canon Law and the books against Luther. They threaten to destroy the Christian community and must be burnt and destroyed to avoid contamination. Luther enters into the position of Joshua and pronounces the speech act of condemnation. The act was performed in public, with a considerable audience, and was accompanied by performative words of condemnation.<sup>14</sup>

Not everyone approved, and it was important for Luther to defend his actions. He did so both the next morning at the beginning of his lecture on the Psalms and at the end of the month when he published the short pamphlet *Warumb des Papsts und seiner Jungern Bucher von D. Martin Luther verbrannt sein*.<sup>15</sup> Here he referred to the old custom of burning dangerous books as testified in Acts 19.<sup>16</sup> He also defended his actions as a matter of duty, given his position as a doctor of Scripture

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11 “Weil du vns betrübt hast/ So betrübe dich der HERR an diesem tage.”

12 “verbannet.”

13 “Allein hütet euch fur dem Verbanten/ das jr euch nicht verbannet/ so jr des verbanten etwas nemet/ vnd machet das Lager Jsrael verbannet/ vnd bringts in vnglück.” Here and in the following, the translations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

14 Gerd Schwerhoff’s concept of “invectivity” does not only include invective language, but also nonverbal acts of communication: “Als deren gemeinsame ‘invektive’ Qualität soll verstanden werden, dass hier stets mittels verbaler (mündlicher oder schriftlicher) oder nonverbaler (gestischer oder bildlicher) Kommunikationsakte Bewertungen von Personen und Gruppen vorgenommen werden, die geeignet sind, ihre soziale Position negativ zu verändern, sie zu diskriminieren und gegebenenfalls auszuschließen.” See Gerd Schwerhoff, “Invektivität und Geschichtswissenschaft: Konstellationen der Herabsetzung in historischer Perspektive – ein Forschungskonzept,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 311 (2020), 1–36, here 11–12.

15 *WA* 7 (1897), 161–64. The text is offered both in the German original version and in a Latin translation.

16 The episode where after having been converted, magicians in Ephesos burnt their black books.

and a preacher of the word of God, obliging him to seek the truth and defend it against heresy.

Since Luther refused to renege after having received the *Exsurge Domine*, the Curia issued the final bull of excommunication, the *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, on 3 January. Here Luther was formally declared a heretic, but still had a chance to renounce his actions at the Diet in Worms. Normal procedure in dealing with heretics would be that the banning by the Church would be confirmed by the secular powers, and that Luther would then be treated accordingly.

The answer to Catharinus is presented – as promised at the end of *De captivitate* – as the second part of his renouncement. Rather than entering into discussions and dialogue, Luther continued his strategy of radical confrontation. He had entered the role as the leader of the faithful people of God, and found the necessary biblical support for his acceptance of the task in the book of Joshua. Now he simply needed to carry on and stand up against the enemy.

### 3 Polemical Treatises 1519–1521

Bearing a broader range of Luther's publications from the previous years in mind, it seems reasonable to suggest that his use of invective language radically increased after the disputation with Eck in Leipzig in the summer of 1519. At this time there is also a sharp increase in the number of publications by Luther in the polemical treatises genre (in German: *Streitschriften*). This literary genre was not at all important in Luther's authorship prior to the disputation in Leipzig. In 1518 he had published a number of *Sermones* in the German language aiming at a broader readership.<sup>17</sup> Alongside these publications, Luther had concentrated on the genres most relevant and closest at hand for his professional duties: university lectures on biblical texts (Psalms, Genesis, the letters to the Romans and to the Galatians) and disputation theses. These texts – and especially the disputation theses and the lectures – are certainly not free from polemics against theological and ecclesiastical opponents. But the polemical treatises from 1520 to 1521 take the use of "invectivity" a long step further, and are generally much more radical in this respect.

One important reason for this is that they are personal: most of them are directed against one particular person and respond to an attack by this particular

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<sup>17</sup> Following Berndt Hamm, these publications may be classified as "Frömmigkeitstheologie," i.e. theology intended to support and relate to practical piety. See Berndt Hamm, *Frömmigkeitstheologie am Anfang des 16. Jahrhunderts: Studien Johannes von Paltz und seinem Umkreis*, Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie 65 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1982).

person against Luther. One of the first attacks of this kind was the *Dialogus de potestate Papae* written by Prierias in the summer of 1518, and forwarded to Luther early in August the same year together with the letter from Cardinal Cajetan. Here, Luther was summoned for the first time to Rome to answer accusations of heresy and disrespect of Papal authority. He was threatened with a ban unless he appeared in Rome within 60 days. Luther immediately wrote a reply, published on 31 August, and entitled *Ad dialogum Sylvestri Prieratis [...] responsio*.<sup>18</sup> A number of polemical treatises followed between this one and the treatise against Ambrosius Catharinus almost three years later. The opponents are both Germans and Italians, and the culmination period of these treatises comprises the most dramatic months of the papal proceedings against Luther in 1520 and the early months of 1521.<sup>19</sup>

It is also worth mentioning that most of the invective treatises from this period are written in German. In this respect the answers to Ambrosius Catharinus, and to Sylvester Prierias, are exceptions. The use of Latin in the treatises against Prierias and Catharinus is relevant for understanding the intended audience. These are texts directly addressing people close to the Roman Curia and written in their own language. Luther no doubt had this in mind when he wrote the texts. And even though he tends to start out – both against Prierias and against Catharinus – with a remark about how uninteresting they are as academic opponents and what a waste of time it is to discuss with them, Luther indeed expends quite some time on writing extensive answers. This is particularly true regarding the quarrel with Catharinus. He had been selected by the Curia as a better choice than Prierias when it came to adequately attacking and hopefully defeating Luther with theological arguments.

Luther, on the other hand, knew in April 1521 that he was fighting not only for what he held to be the truth, but also for his life. The “words at war” context between Luther and the Roman Curia had radically accelerated.

An important general observation can be made from the radical growth in Luther’s use of the polemical treatises genre during these dramatic months: not only the treatise of Catharinus, but also the other attacks directed against him came from people in power, people confident of being supported by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Luther also had his supporters, but his position – politically as

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<sup>18</sup> WA 1 (1883), 647–86.

<sup>19</sup> These publications include several treatises against Johannes Eck (e.g. *Von den neuen Eckischen Bullen und Lügen* from 1520); several treatises against Hieronymus Emser in Leipzig with a particularly radical invective language in the *Auf des Bocks zu Leipzig Antwort* from 1521; the similarly quite radical invective treatise *Von dem Papsttum zu Rom wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig* against the Franciscan Friar Augustin Alfeld from May 1520. See the article by Markus Wriedt in this volume.

well as ecclesiastically – was much more fragile. In this first period of radical “invectivity” in Luther’s authorship, his point of departure was an overwhelming experience of not being heard, not being paid attention to, not being respected by Church authorities, even though he was a professor and doctor of theology (which he explicitly refers to on several occasions during these years).<sup>20</sup>

## 4 Use of the Bible

Instead of surrendering, Luther chose to fight his theological opponents. His use of radical invective language can be interpreted and investigated from different angles. He was not alone among his contemporaries in turning to “invectivity” in theological debates. But Luther went further in this respect,<sup>21</sup> and it is interesting to try to understand why. His critical situation in the period when invective language escalated may be part of the answer, but this line of argument may perhaps also be taken a step further.

The burning of the bull and the Canon Law in December 1520 represented both an act of provocative invective language, and at the same time a particularly provocative action undertaken in public.<sup>22</sup> In his defence of this action, it was important for Luther to find biblical legitimation for what he had done.

For him, verifying and legitimizing theology with reference to the Bible was not only necessary in discussions about justification by faith or about ecclesiastical authority. The “dark sides” of theology, too, had to be developed and explained with

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<sup>20</sup> Augustin Alfeld as well as Hieronymus Emser are looked upon by Luther as intellectually inferior, and initially not worth the effort of writing a reply to. The same was the case with Ambrosius Catharinus. The most promising opponent in this period seems to have been Cardinal Cajetan, but Luther’s meeting with him – to his disappointment – turned out to be more of an interrogation than a discussion. See Kurt Victor Selge, *Normen der Christenheit im Streit um Ablaß und Kichenautorität 1518 bis 1521*, Erster Teil, *Das Jahr 1518* (Habil. Theol., Heidelberg 1968).

<sup>21</sup> A broader contextual interpretation of Luther’s invective language has also been presented in Schwerhoff, “Invektivität und Geschichtswissenschaft,” 20–35. A recent contribution to interpreting Luther’s radical “invectivity” in terms of linguistic theory is Markus Hundt, *Sprachliche Aggression bei Martin Luther: Argumentationsformen und -funktionen am Beispiel der Streitschrift “Wider das Papsttum zu Rom vom Teufel gestiftet” (1545)*, *Lingua Historica Germanica* 27 (Berlin and Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2022). Not only Hundt, but also Schwerhoff give priority to interpreting texts from Luther’s later years. The church historical context of Luther’s invectivity in these latest periods of his life was also elaborated in Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics 1531–1546* (Leiden: Brill, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> See Schwerhoff, “Invektivität und Geschichtswissenschaft,” 11–12. When Johannes Eck planned to burn Luther’s books in public in Ingolstadt in 1520, he was persuaded by colleagues (influenced by Johannes Reuchlin) not to do this.



reference to the Bible.<sup>23</sup> For him, the enemies of the Church were elaborately described in the Bible,<sup>24</sup> and his treatise against Catharinus clearly displays the links between a radicalized invective language and a radicalized exposition of biblical texts about the enemies of the Church. In Luther’s view, the conclusion that the pope is the Antichrist needs to be grounded on biblical references. And these references have to be solid. In the text against Catharinus, they emerge as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. Instead of turning to the New Testament *locus classicus* of late medieval Antichrist discourse (2 Thess 2:3–4), Luther concentrates his attention on a text from the Old Testament Book of Daniel to give biblical proof to the dangerous conclusion he has been forced to draw. For Luther, this text, meticulously interpreted in the treatise against Catharinus, is the biblical verification of his new experiences with the papacy. And this insight also gives support to his invective language against the representatives of the reign of the Antichrist. In this way, the term “diabolic” becomes more than a label among others that may be attached to an enemy: through the biblical proof it turns out for Luther to be a new kind of reality.

## 5 The *Modus Loquendi* of Ambrosius Catharinus

Ambrosius Catharinus addresses Luther as a heretic, and the text of the *Apologia* is characterized by traditional anti-heretical language. “A certain Martin with the name Luther” has raised his voice and is spreading “new teaching,” the Emperor is told in Ambrosius Catharinus’ dedication. Luther appears to Catharinus to be “very impertinent and obstinate.”<sup>25</sup> In the preface, Luther is further addressed as a presumptuous person advised or persuaded by the devil to direct his highly profiled public attacks on the Holy See.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The “enemies of the Church” had been an important topic in Luther’s lectures given to the Wittenberg students not least in his exposition of the Psalms: in *Dictata super Psalterium* 1513–1515 as well as in *Operationes in Psalmos* 1519–1521. In *Dictata* this topos is treated more in general terms, in *Operationes* the most dangerous enemy of the Church, the papacy, is addressed more directly. See Tarald Rasmussen, *Inimici Ecclesiae: Das ekklesiologische Feindbild in Luthers Dictata super Psalterium (1513–1521)*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 44 (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Luther also states this explicitly in his treatise against Ambrosius Catharinus, at the turning point of the text where he leaves the direct discussion with Catharinus and starts his biblical exposition of the misery of the papacy and everything related to it. See *WA* 7 (1897), 722, 20–22: “Ego tamen non nego Papticam Ecclesiam neque potentiam eius, cum in scripturis novi praesertim testamenti de nulla re (excepto Christo) tantum habeamus testimonium, nec parum in veteri.”

<sup>25</sup> “Martinus quidam Lutherus nomine, novorum dogmatum sator perversus et *audax nimis atque pertinax propagator*,” *CCath* 27, 3, 26–27.

<sup>26</sup> “[...] excitatum in Germania temerario ausu diabolicoque suasu hominem, qui nonnulla in medium proponere, disputare atque in publicum, aeditis etiam commentariis adversus sacrosanctae

The *modus loquendi* of Catharinus is fundamentally authoritative and overbearing.<sup>27</sup> Luther is sometimes described in the third person, but frequently he is also directly addressed in the second person. He is treated as a case to be dealt with by the ecclesiastical and imperial authorities. Catharinus will contribute to identifying another heretic and advise the Emperor to take adequate action. Luther's lack of humility towards ecclesiastical authorities seems to be particularly irritating to him:

It is also ridiculous that you seem to look at yourself as particularly wise, as a theologian, as a theologian of law, as a philosopher, as a dialectician, as an expert in Greek, Hebrew and Latin, as a most eloquent rhetor, as an excellent poet, in short: as a man lacking knowledge of nothing, and unwilling to be obedient to any prelate, unless perhaps he would happen to have the same faith, hope, love, the same baptism and the same sacraments, grace, death, life and glory as you have.<sup>28</sup>

## 6 Luther's Response

In the first section of his response, Luther deals directly with Catharinus and his treatise. Like his opponent, he alternates between addressing Catharinus directly in the second person and characterizing him in the third person. This first part covers eighteen pages,<sup>29</sup> and Luther applies several rhetorical strategies to insult and deride his opponent. Common to all of them is that they connect to the unequal or opposite positions of the two authors involved: Catharinus as *Italian*, Luther as *German*; Catharinus as *human being*, Luther as *beast* or *animal*; Catharinus as accepted *theologian*, Luther as *heretic*. Luther shows no restraint in ridiculing Catharinus when he develops his characteristics of him as an Italian, a human being or a theologian. And he excels in humiliating his opponent by additionally also putting him into the opposite roles: with Catharinus as the real heretic or the actual animal. Some examples of this are that Luther commences with a general

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Romanae ecclesiae potestatem eiusque sanctissimum caput [...] doctrinam pertinaciter asserere non vereatur," *CCath* 27, 5, 5–10.

<sup>27</sup> In Markus Hundt's classification of types of argument, the dominating categories would be "Abwerten des Gegners" along with "Aufwerten der eigenen Gruppe/Position." Hundt, *Sprachliche Aggression*, 211–14. Ambrosius Catharinus mainly turns to authorities (biblical texts, councils, Church fathers, papal bulls and decrees) to support his argument, and to derogatory language to discredit Luther.

<sup>28</sup> "Ridiculum igitur et hoc est, cum tu sis (ut tibi videris) valde sapiens, theologus, iuristatheologus, philosophus, dialecticus, graecis, hebraicis, latinis eruditus, rhetor facundissimus, poeta clarus, vir denique nihil nesciens, ut praelato cuiquam subiicariis, nisi quod fortassis in te eadem fides, spes, charitas, idem baptisma, eadem sacramenta, gratia, mors, vita, gloria non sit," *CCath* 27, 224, 36–225, 2.

<sup>29</sup> See *WA* 7 (1897), 705, 1–722, 27.

statement about the widespread tendency among Germans to uncritically welcome anything coming from Italy:

I wish we could just laugh at the foolishness of this Italian, and that no German would be contaminated by his stupid words. But for the time being the situation is unfortunately that we, foolish as we are, swallow anything presented to us as if it were something divine, as long as it has a connection to Italy or to Rome. These unbelievably conceited and arrogant people are aware of this, and behave as if Germany were for them forever a term of abuse.<sup>30</sup>

However, Luther is not afraid, and he is ready to quarrel with the complacent Italian. For Luther, the Italian Dominican sent by the Roman Curia is no longer (as Cajetan had to a certain extent been in Augsburg in 1518) a person worth listening to; he is a person to wage war against. Consequently, metaphors of war and combat dominate in Luther’s introductory passages.

The war he is fighting is seemingly a war between an Italian and a German, between a learned Dominican Thomist and a friar from a distant university without much reputation, and recently convicted as a heretic. This obvious point of departure is twisted and rhetorically turned around by Luther. On the one hand, he presents the proud Italian as an animal – concretely: as a donkey<sup>31</sup> – since Catharinus as a Thomist is occupied with nothing else than devouring the texts of Thomas Aquinas and “transubstantiating” them into himself.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, Luther stages himself as an animal ready to fight against a real human being (= Catharinus). He suggests that from the perspective of Catharinus, it would be fair to give certain concessions to the counterpart as long as Luther is nothing more than a beast and a barbarian, fighting against a real human being:

How much fairer would not it be to forgive me, a beast and a barbarian, all my errors if I were in accordance with just one of the articles of the Catholic teaching, and on the other hand, in the case of this hero and extremely humane human being apply the rule that if he is failing in just one single issue, he is to be reckoned as failing in everything! But in order for the Italian human being to see that the German beast is not totally without humanity, I will ask for

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30 “[...] utinam, ut ridenda est huius Itali stoliditas, ita Germanorum nullus serio talis insipientiae contagione corripetur: at cum hactenus, quicquid vel Italiae vel Romae nomine iactaretur, incredibili stupore loco numinis adoraverimus, Idque homines illi egregie fastuosi et superciliosi sentirent, quasi perpetuum illis Germania ludibrium futura sit [...],” *WA* 7 (1897), 705, 29–706, 2.

31 On the donkey-metaphor as the dominating anti-papal metaphor in Luther’s *Von dem Papsttum zu Rom* (1545), see the instructive analysis by Hundt, *Sprachliche Aggression*, 129–34 and the essay of Isabelle Stauffer in this volume.

32 “Ego autem plane illud verum nunc video, Thomistam purum esse Asinum verum, sive sit Italus sive Germanus. Et quid aliud fierent, qui non nisi unum Thomam legunt, vorant et in se (quod dicunt) transsubstantiant?,” *WA* 7 (1897), 706, 17–19.

nothing more than that we at least enter the fight with equal conditions, since it is impossible for us to confront each other as equal persons. This means that I, too, must be allowed to hold Catharinus as a heretic in everything if he is conquered by the beast in only one single issue.<sup>33</sup>

On the following pages,<sup>34</sup> Luther concentrates his efforts on refuting Catharinus' exposition of the *locus classicus* in support of papal authority: Matt 16:18. Catharinus had defended a traditional understanding of this crucial passage against Luther's attacks, and Luther starts out by ridiculing the "stupid" argument of his opponent.

I also know, that if you compare what he has said (i.e. on Matt 16:18) with what I have said, any man of just modest understanding would find his argument ridiculous and stupid. So I will say something new, and in a new way, in spite of the fact that the extremely rational Catharinus would not be able to observe it, even if he had been devouring the whole tree of Porphyry with all its fruits.<sup>35</sup>

In his "new" way of arguing, Luther continues the flow of invective speech along with references to formal logic. He concludes his first discourse on Matt 16:18 by "reducing everything he has said so far" to six syllogisms so he can state his position in a perfectly clear manner, and at the same time demonstrate how far off his opponent is when it comes to understanding the biblical text.<sup>36</sup> And he concludes: "Do you see, most excellent Thomist: also the beast can be a dialectician. Do you find anything invalid in all these syllogisms?"<sup>37</sup>

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33 "Quanto iustius erat, mihi Bestiae et Barbaro omnes errores condonari propter unam sententiam Catholicam et Italum istum Heroa et humanissimum hominem potius ea lege teneri, ut uno errore comprehensus totus erroneus haberetur! Tamen, ut videat homo Italus, et Bestias Germaniae non nihil habere humanitatis, nihil aliud peto, quam ut aequa saltem conditione pugnemus, quando aequi antagonistae esse non possumus, Et mihi Catharinus quoque sit in totum haereticus, si, caeteris omnibus dilutis, una aliqua per Bestiam fuerit convictus," WA 7 (1897), 707, 3–10. In Markus Hundt's classification of different ways of arguing, this passage could perhaps be seen as an example of "fiktives Argument," Hundt, *Sprachliche Aggression*, 34–39.

34 WA 7 (1897), 708, 15–722, 19.

35 "[...] cum sciam illius dicta meorum comparatione, modo mediocre ingenium observet, mire ridicula et stulta commenta inveniri. Ad nove dictum dicendumque venio, quod Catharinus rationabilis, etiam si arborem Purphyrianam cum fructibus vorasset, non observasset," WA 7 (1897), 708, 21–25. The "tree of Porphyry," deriving from the third-century philosopher, served in the Middle Ages as an introduction to the works of Aristotle.

36 WA 7 (1897), 712, 8–35. One of the syllogisms (712, 20–22) runs like this: "Omnis Ecclesia peccans cedit portis inferi. – Ecclesia Papae peccat. – Ergo: Ecclesia Papae cedit portis inferi." In Markus Hundt's above-mentioned types of argument, Luther here turns to formal logic, *modus ponens* (Hundt, *Sprachliche Aggression*, 24–25).

37 "Vides, excellentissime Thomista, et Bestiam esse dialecticam? in his omnibus syllogismis quid negabis?," WA 7 (1897), 712, 29–30.

## 7 Proof from the Bible

After expressing confidence that he has conquered Catharinus on this essential point, the exposition of Matt 16:18 (and – according to his own logic – at the same time having proved Catharinus to be a heretic),<sup>38</sup> Luther moves on to what seems to be his main concern in the treatise: the biblical proof that the pope is the Antichrist. This is by far the most extensive part of the treatise.<sup>39</sup> It is no doubt also meant to be a continuation of the response to Catharinus, even if the second person speech is abandoned. The exposition of this text – Dan 8:23–25 – is not just presented as a final proof of an essential religious truth. It is at the same time a rather detailed exposition – verified through the exegesis of the text – of the reign of the Antichrist in all its different aspects – including, not least, theologians like Catharinus. Luther introduces his exposition of Daniel 8 as follows:

Why shouldn't I continue, in honour of my beloved Catharinus and in reverence of the pope, the most sacred in Christ and God's deputy, and reveal his realm by means of abundant and solid scriptural testimonies, – and at the same time shut the mouth of everyone who denies that this reign can be proven from Holy Scripture? I shall present a really thorough and strong proof. And the first one who presents himself to me is Daniel, who – translated from Hebrew – says in Chapter eight: [...].<sup>40</sup>

What follows in the rest of Luther's treatise, is – compared to e.g. Luther's simultaneous biblical exposition in the *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521) – a quite remarkable piece of work. Obviously, Luther is firmly convinced of the fact that the words in Dan 8:23–25 are being verified and historically fulfilled before his very eyes. For the first time in the history of Christianity, Daniel's prophecies have come true. The much shorter classical Antichrist text in 2 Thess 2:3 is only briefly mentioned.<sup>41</sup> The more comprehensive text in Daniel 8 provides him with a more adequate point of departure for revealing and characterizing the enemy of the Church, including his opponent Catharinus.

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**38** An example of traditional anti-heretic language applied against Catharinus can be found in the introduction of the treatise, *WA 7* (1897), 707, 17–19: “Iam ubi constat unanimi Thomistarum, Scotistarum, Modernorum, Albertistarum sententia (Est enim aliqua cauda, in qua vulpes istae convenient) [...]” The image of the heretics having different faces, but being tied together by the tail appears in Gregory IX's legislation against heretics: “[...] facies quidem habentes diversas, sed caudas ad invicem colligatas.” See Kurt Victor Selge, *Texte zur Inquisition* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1967), 41.

**39** *WA 7* (1897), 722, 20–777, 8.

**40** “Et cur non pergam in gratiam Catharini mei et in obsequium sanctissimi in Christo Papae, vicarii dei, copiosis et solidis scripturae testimoniis eum principatum ostendere et plane os oppilare omnium, qui negant eum divinis literis probari? probabo ergo fortissime. Et primus mihi prodeat Daniel, dicens c. viii. ad verbum ex hebraeo: [...],” *WA 7* (1897), 722, 22–27.

**41** *WA 7* (1897), 722, 39.

Just a few short glances into Luther's argument will be made here to give a small impression of his way of characterizing his enemy through this new biblical proof. The text in Daniel starts with the following line (Dan 8:23a): "A king shall stand forth, strong by appearances."<sup>42</sup> Luther uses the word "facies" as a key concept for revealing the essence of the papacy: it is nothing but an empty appearance, lacking any substance behind it.

The power of this terrible king is certainly amazing. It is a power based neither on horns nor on cloves, neither on iron nor on weapons. Instead, he is "strong by appearances," and consequently extremely different from all others.<sup>43</sup>

Luther's exposition on this first part of v. 23 covers ten pages in the *WA* edition, and includes a discussion on twelve different types of "facies sacrae." The first eleven, related to persons, powers and rituals, are introduced with the headline "titulum exempli." The most dangerous "facies," however, is number twelve, introduced with the headline "titulum verbi." This particularly frightful part of the reign of the Antichrist is to be found at the papal universities, and Luther devotes a long passage (five pages in *WA*) of commentary on them.<sup>44</sup>

To further verify and describe these most dangerous "facies," Luther also draws upon an additional biblical text: "It seems to me that these *facies* also have been foretold to us in Rev. 9, and it seems appropriate to quote and briefly explain this text here."<sup>45</sup> The text from Revelation referred to by Luther includes passages like these:

1 The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. 2 When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. 3 And out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. [...] 9 They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. 10 They had tails with stingers, like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. 11 They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek is Apollyon (that is, Destroyer) (Rev 9:1–11).

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42 "Stabit rex potens faciebus."

43 "Mira vero potentia huius regis monstrosi, qui non cornibus neque unguibus, nec ferro nec armis, sed 'faciebus potens' est, ceteris omnibus dissimilis nimio," *WA* 7 (1897), 729, 5–7.

44 *WA* 7 (1897), 736, 8–740, 27.

45 "Hanc [...] faciem nobis praedixisse mihi videtur et Apocalyp. ix. [Rev 9:1–11], cuius verba dignum est hic recensere et paucis explicare," *WA* 7 (1897), 736, 35–36.

Again, all of this also relates to Catharinus. Luther makes this clear at the end of his Daniel exegesis, when he declares himself the winner of the battle. It is war, and the expositions of the texts from Daniel 8 and Revelation 9 have been the decisive weapons to grant him this victory:

Yet, even if there should be something reasonable and sensible in it [i.e. the treatise of Catharinus], my Daniel destroys the complete reign of the Antichrist with one single blow. And hence, he will also easily destroy this Catharinus, who in every respect leans himself on this reign. What value is there in one single leaf against a wind that takes away the whole tree as well as its roots?<sup>46</sup>

On the last page of the treatise Luther also adds some remarks on the intended readers. He addresses them as “homines loquaces and scribaces,”<sup>47</sup> and he is not sure what their reaction will be: either they will have plenty to do with reading and responding to the book, or – as he hopes – the book will finally convince them of his persistence.<sup>48</sup> In that case, he expects them from now on to attack him with “nothing but outcries, fury, fraud and violence” as if he were “a heretic worse than anything they have seen through all ages.”<sup>49</sup> The latter is not only the reaction he expects, but also what he hopes for.

## 8 Bible and “Invectivity”

Luther’s exposition of the passages from Daniel 8 and Revelation 9 is loaded with invective language aimed at his enemy, who is now expanded to not only being Catharinus, but most of all the theologians supporting the reign of the pope. However, his argument culminates in applying precisely these biblical texts on his enemy. These texts are the ultimate weapons in Luther’s “words at war” against Catharinus and his allies.

A final look at the function of these biblical texts may be of interest. Luther’s way of using the Bible is here somewhat different than what is included in Markus Hundt’s otherwise valuable book on Luther’s way of arguing in *Wider das Papsttum zu Rom*. Hundt presents a thorough analysis of Luther’s different ways of using the

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<sup>46</sup> “Quod siqua in eo esset etiam vis ingenii et eruditionis, tamen cum Daniel meus universum Papistarum regnum uno impetu devorarit, facile et hunc Catharinum eo regno maxime nitentem simul devorat. Quid faciet unicum folium adversus ventum arborem cum radice evertentem?,” *WA 7* (1897), 777, 28–32.

<sup>47</sup> *WA 7* (1897), 778, 6.

<sup>48</sup> “perseverantia.”

<sup>49</sup> “[...] solis clamoribus, furiis, fraudibus, viribus deinceps in me sint grassaturi, ut in haereticum, qualem omnia secula non viderint,” *WA 7*, 778, 8–9.

Bible when arguing against the papacy in 1545, and proposes his analysis as a possible model for investigating Luther's argument in other *Streitschriften* as well.<sup>50</sup>

One may ask, however, if Hundt's model is sufficient for identifying the specific character of Luther's use of Scripture in the treatise against Catharinus.<sup>51</sup> What Luther undertakes in his exposition of the texts from Daniel 8 and Revelation 9, goes beyond referring to Scripture and commenting on it to support his own position and polarize the difference between himself and his opponent (the main categories of relevance in Hundt's scheme).

His exposition is rather closely related to an extremely dramatic personal as well as ecclesiastical and political context. For Luther, the new reading of these texts is equal to the experience of dramatic prophetic visions from the Bible coming true before his eyes. The prophetic texts from Daniel and Revelation find their verification when applied to Ambrosius Catharinus and his other theological opponents. They turn out to be weapons to be used against the enemy, or invective biblical language coming true when applied to the papacy.<sup>52</sup>

This is the theological bottom line of Luther's argument that has to be paid attention to if one is to adequately interpret the radicalization of his invective language. For Luther, no language is more true than the language of the Bible. The challenge is to understand it and interpret it adequately. In April 1521, right before the departure to the Diet in Worms, Luther is reassured that he has been able to do this in his treatise against Catharinus. This new reading of the passages in the Bible is for him a licence to make unrestricted radical attacks against his Roman enemies.

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50 The main function of arguing from the Bible is, according to Hundt, either "Aufwerten der eigenen Gruppe/Position" oder "Polarisieren: Wir versus Die" and not "Diskreditieren der gegnerischen Position/Gruppe." Hundt, *Sprachliche Aggression*, 191–205. Hundt's four labels used for identifying different forms of using the Bible as authority are "Schriftadäquatheit, Bibelstellenverweis, Bibelgeschichte, Bibelinterpretation," Hundt, *Sprachliche Aggression*, 50–66.

51 Hundt marginally touches on similar ways of using the Bible in his comment on Luther's reference to 2 Thessalonians 2. Hundt, *Sprachliche Aggression*, 64.

52 Oberman comments on Luther's invective language in the paragraph "Das göttliche Wort in dreckiger Sprache" in Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1983), esp. 112–15, and underlines the theological roots of Luther's "invectivity." Oberman's reflections on this question are also referred to and followed up on a general basis in Schwerhoff, "Invektivität und Geschichtswissenschaft," 26–27.