

10. Luther and the Reform of Authority

A great deal of new thought and a number of new experiments in Christian living arose between Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Martin Luther (1483-1546). In Aquinas' own lifetime a very talented scholar, Duns Scotus (1266-1308), criticized Aquinas' too-easy synthesis between Aristotle's philosophy and Augustine's creative authoritarianism. The result of Scotus' thought was to render philosophy less "religious" and theology more thoroughly dependent on authoritarian doctrine. This direction was further developed by William of Ockham (1288-1347), leaving rational concepts as a mere naming of particular experiences emptying reason from what Paul Tillich called its "theonomous" potential, that is, its capacity to house symbolic meanings that reach into talk about Ultimate matters. Such "nominalism" left Christian theology even more dependent upon the sheer authority of the Church, rather than on an intuitive, scholarly reasoning for its verification.

In Luther's lifetime another great thinker, Desiderius Erasmus, created what Diarmaid MacCulloch suggests was a reasonable layman's Christianity somewhat in the vein of C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*.¹ Erasmus was skeptical of rigid authoritarianism, irrational mysticism, Augustinian pessimism about the human fall, and Luther's radical Christian reforms. In spite of the fact that the Roman Inquisition tried to ban all Erasmus' writings, he skillfully made himself popular among the lay royalty and escaped persecution in spite of doing some controversial Biblical translation and promoting a thoroughgoing pacifism in that violent age.²

In another post-Aquinas thread, the German theologian, Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), developed a rather controversial and "too-wild-for-Erasmus" mysticism. Many other mystics preceded him and followed in his wake. During Luther's lifetime in the wildly violent and enthusiastically religious Spain, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and John of the Cross (1542-1591) also developed Christian mysticism as a powerful option that was supportive of the Roman Catholic Reformation and also manifested overlaps with Luther's Protestantism.

Luther was an original voice, even though he learned much from earlier challenges to the authority of the Roman Church. Here are two key precursors to Luther's reform: (1) A Britisher, John Wycliffe (1330-1384), was a thoroughgoing Augustinian but critical of Roman overreach and the oppression of lay thinking. He promoted the first translation of the Bible into English. With enthusiastic support from prominent laity he lived to a nonviolent death, but the Roman Church dug up his bones and burned them. His followers, the Lollards, had to live in hiding from a reactive scourge. (2) The Bohemian (Czechoslovakian) priest Jan Hus or John Huss (1374-1415) similarly supported lay Biblical literacy, translated the Bible, and most controversial of all distinguished himself by serving both the bread and the wine to the laity. He was burned at the stake mostly because of that liturgical change. But his followers kept an underground movement alive and their influences were not ignored by Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther was the beginning of a new type of Christian Reform movement. He was advantaged by the reform movements and other ferment that happened before his time and by an increasing restlessness in the German speaking region with the Rome-based authorities. He was also helped by the invention of the printing press which enabled a widespread and quick distribution of his writings and his Bible

¹ MacCulloch, Diarmaid, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Penguin Books: 2009) page 599

² op. cit: page 602

translation. Nevertheless, it was the foundational level of his critique of Roman Christianity that made his Reformation a deep turning point, picked up by other competent reformers, and carried forward to this day. I will focus on this core level of his Reformation in Christian understanding and practice.

Let us begin with his redefinition of faith. Rather than meaning *belief* in a set of authoritarian dogmas, “faith” was recast, with help from Paul, as an act of the will, better called “trust” than “belief.” Here are some words of Luther quoted by H. Richard Niebuhr in Niebuhr’s essay “Faith in Gods and in God.”

Trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol . . . For the two, faith and God, hold close together. Whatever then thy heart clings to . . . and relies upon, that is properly called thy God.

This means that if your nation, right or wrong, is what your heart clings to, then that nation is your God. If the “racial superiority” of your race is what your heart clings to, then the “honor” of being that race is your God. If wealth and the privileges of wealth is what your heart clings to, then wealth is your God. If the authoritative teachings of your religious group are what your heart clings to, then those teachings or that group is your God.

So how does Luther spell out what it means to have faith in the “Reality” that Luther holds to be the God of Christian faith? Here is a quote from his essay “A Treatise on Christian Liberty.”

It is a further function of faith that it honors him whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard, since it considers him truthful and trustworthy. There is no other honor equal to the estimate of truthfulness and righteousness with which we honor him whom we trust. Could we ascribe to a man anything greater than truthfulness and righteousness and perfect goodness? On the other hand, there is no way in which we can show greater contempt for a man than to regard him as false and wicked, and to be suspicious of him, as we do when we do not trust him. So when the Soul firmly trusts God’s promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted. When this is done, the soul consents to his will. Then it hallows his name and allows itself to be treated according to God’s good pleasure for, clinging to God’s promises, it does not doubt that he who is true, just, and wise will do, dispose, and provide all things well.

This passage cannot come alive for us until we are clear what Luther means by the word “God” in addition to the devotional meaning he is giving this word. Luther assumes as his and the true Christian object of worship, the same Reality that we explored in the earlier chapters with the aid of Isaiah, Second Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas. So what does Luther mean by this God who does all things well? We can assume without doubt that he means the same Sheer Mystery that we viewed in the writing of Aquinas, Augustine, Paul, Jesus, and both Isaiahs. That is, “God” points to: the metaphorical “King” of the universe, the Final Reality, the Reality that is present in every event. *So in each and very event of our lives we are facing a Mysterious Power that is true and just and wise and will do dispose and provide all things well.* Whether you are confronting the birth of your grandchild or the death of your daughter, you are confronting the God who does all things well. Whether you are confronting the success of your political revolution or the seeing your nation carried off into exile, you are confronting the God who does all things well. This is the trust that saves you from despair and transforms you into a blessed state of life. You allow yourself to be treated according to that Sheer Mystery’s good pleasure – to be born in the century in which you are born, to live with the gifts and limitations that are being given to you, to face and deal with the challenges that you face, and to die on the day given to you to die. This trusting surrender does not mean a fatalism toward some

already determined destiny. Your choices matter. Your actions can change the course of history. You are a co-creator of outcomes over which you do not have full control, but for which you do bear responsibility. This “God-given” freedom, this responsibility is also part of the good pleasure given to you by the Sheer Mystery that is doing all things well. This radical trust is the “revolutionary thing” upon which Luther is founding his Reformation of Christianity. Such trust is both humbling and strengthening – for no power is greater than the Power so trusted. This trust leads not only to freedom, but to the universal love that the commandments can describe but cannot awaken. According to Luther, trust alone awakens both love and freedom.

Luther, in accord with Augustine and Paul, understands that faith is a gift, not an accomplishment. Such an understanding permits him to see faith as predestined from the foundations of creation. We have nothing whatsoever to do with the accomplishment of faith. By grace we are saved from our estrangement with the Realty in relation to which we are estranged. Reality must break through to our bound will and release it into its freedom to love Reality. But this grace is lived through faith, through the freedom that is part of this faith. So it remains for John Wesley to later insist that faith is 100% our action as well as 100% the gift of God. Wesley’s insistence undermines the wooden sort of interpretation that later Calvinists gave to a belief about predestination. It is also true that no support is given in Luther’s thought for living a passive Christian life. Faith for Luther meant action, such as: “Here I stand” in opposition to the entire Roman Church. He experiences his conscience to be utterly captive to The Word of God: “I can do no other.”

This clarified foundation for Christian understanding has far reaching consequences. First of all, it means that healing or salvation is a God-given opportunity offered directly to each individual person. The relation with God is personal, direct, and without need of an authorized priesthood passed along since Peter. This did not square with the then current Roman Catholic belief that such “grace” comes only through the institutions of the Church and its sacraments. Further, grace, as seen by Luther, was no longer conceived as a fluid substance that flowed into the believer who is eating the Eucharist or attending a ritual, or hearing a sermon. Luther provided a new understanding of grace. Everything about salvation or the healing of the soul was seen as a personal relationship with the Almighty who meets each of us everywhere, in nature, in history, as well as in the Church’s witnesses, teachings, and rituals in so far as those witnesses and rituals were properly embedded in the original breakthrough recorded in the Scriptures. This need not mean an idolization of the Bible into which so many later Protestants have fallen. Luther understood that the Word of God was in the Bible, not that the Word of God was the Bible. Luther did not have the benefit of modern historical criticism of the Scriptures, but he was critical of certain books of the Bible, especially those he found moralistic. He likened the book of James to straw.

So, the Word of God in the Bible was not the literal words of Latin or Greek or German, but a cosmic message of Good News that your life was being blessed with forgiveness from all your wayward thinking and living, that your past was being approved as your now unchangeable given, that a fresh start in living was being offered to you for your future, and that everything that is going on now or will go on in the future is being provided by THAT which does all things well. You had only to accept this WORD, trust it, and keep on trusting it through thick and thin. This is a courageous life, but it was not a self-constructed life. It is the grace of God alone that is moving you to find and respond in this faith, and that sustains you in this faith. You did not create faith or invent it or anything of the sort. You were destined to it from the foundations of time. Or we might say that this faith is simply the REAL YOU coming into its own.

With a great deal of consistency and careful thought, Luther reestablished the

practice of Christianity from this starting point. His “priesthood of all believers” was a rejection of the laity-clergy split, replacing it by defining laity and clergy as different but complementary functions. His service of both bread and wine undergirded this direction. He reduced of the sacraments to Baptism and Eucharist – that is, to (1) an affirmation of the basic nature of the entry into faith and (2) the nurture of faith for the rest of your life. Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination and Extreme Unction remained useful rituals for enriching these key life passages. Protestant practice would continue ministering to people during these turning points of their lives, but Luther felt that “sacrament” was too powerful a term to signify these practices. And he saw the established understanding of Penance to be so wrapped in clericalism that the role of confessing our sins needed a whole new understanding. Luther believed that sin was such a vast sea of estrangement that we never know everything for which we need forgiveness. Therefore confessing to a priest was too narrow to be an all purpose ministry for our need to confess the fullness of our estrangement.

Also, Luther left the monastery and married a Lutheran convert among the many previous nuns – thereby again rejecting any clergy/laity split in levels of holiness. Luther also accepted from the wider critique of traditional practices – anything he felt did not fit into his profound rediscovery of the roots of faith. He also saved what he viewed as core heritage and practices. He gave preaching a more prominent place. And he was a joyous companion at table talk among feasting companions. He was far from alone in making the Reformation happen, but he deserves his central place of honor in this turning point in Christian history.

Reformation Implications

The Reformation was a glorious reinvigoration of Christian practice, but it also had tragic consequences: leading to both unnecessary, as well as necessary, trans-European warfare between Protestant and Catholic regions, costly civil wars in some places, and much rigidification on both sides of this divide. Also, the implications of Luther’s radical faith and freedom were taken up by wave-after-wave of reform movements, which were then persecuted by earlier versions of Protestantism itself. Such fragmentation of Christian religious practice was not altogether new, but it was vastly increased by the Reformation, and this fragmentation has its downside. It set the stage for hearing in our times cries for unity and commonality among religious bodies who have so often emphasized one part of the vast truth of the Christian revelation and neglected parts that other groups preserved. Creative dialogue is now needed to counteract the negative aspects of this dispersion.

Protestants and Catholics of all sorts have tended to preserve the image of authority, both the authority of Scripture and the authority of each institutional system. A deeper test of truth is now seen as needed – deeper than what “my group” says or what “my group” says about Scripture. Such a test has always been there, but hidden and secondary. Authenticity was always there competing with authority to be the final test of Christian truth. But seeing authority as valid only if it breathes authenticity was not yet established by the Protestant Reformation. Luther reformed authority, but he did not end it. Authenticity was not yet fully clarified and made the primary judge of Christian practice. This development did happen, however, in the work of my next selection of a major turning-point figure in my abbreviated history of Christianity: Søren Kierkegaard.