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MARTIN LUTHER

Introduction

Martin Luther was the most decisive protagonist of the Reformation, the religious revolution of the early 16th century that transformed not only the ecclesiastical but also the political structures of Western Europe. Starting from a critique of the church’s penitential system, Luther ended up with questioning ecclesiastical institutions and eventually the papal church as such, until he was no longer willing to recognize its authority in spiritual as well as in secular matters.

In the territories that joined the Reformation, a fundamental transformation of all those areas that had hitherto been under ecclesiastical jurisdiction was the result, provoking reforms that affected not only church and state in general, but also social welfare, penal legislation and public order. Luther’s theologically motivated Reformation proved thus to be a catalyst for a series of reform tendencies that had marked the politics of the German Empire since the late Middle Ages, and it merged in particular with the claims of the princes and free cities, raised against the emperor and the pope, to govern autonomously in their territories.

For Luther himself, these secular concerns were secondary, but he early recognized that his religious reforms could only be implemented with political support, which is why he addressed a wide variety of political actors in numerous writings and letters and also intervened politically himself by writing proposals for the organization of Protestant communities.

Biography

Born in Eisleben (Saxony) in 1483, Luther grew up in a family operating in the mining industry. Intended by his father to become a lawyer, Luther studied the liberal arts at the University of Erfurt, before enrolling, after graduation in 1505, to the law faculty for a few months. In a personal crisis, however, he abandoned the intended path without the consent of his parents and entered the Augustinian Order. There he was assigned to the priesthood and designated to study theology in Wittenberg, where he received his theological doctor in 1512. In the same year, he accepted the university’s chair of biblical studies, and from 1514 on, he also worked as a preacher at the Wittenberg city church.

For both offices, he intensively engaged with Scriptures, through the study of which he arrived at his basic Reformation insight: a person could not contribute to his religious salvation by actions of his own, but rather depended solely on free divine grace (*sola gratia*). This brought him into conflict with the common practice of penance and indulgences, which he considered a form of human participation in salvation, and which he opposed thus in a number of sermons and university disputations (the most famous being the *95 Theses on Indulgences* of 1517). Since he fell on interested ears in large circles, where his theses were spread and printed, he got into an open conflict with the church hierarchy.

In 1520, after intense debates, the conflict culminated in Luther’s excommunication, to which Luther responded, however, by staging a counter-excommunication of the pope whom he now regarded as the incarnate Antichrist. In response, the imperial ban was imposed on Luther at the Diet of Worms in the spring of 1521, but since the Saxon Elector Frederick the Wise continued to support Luther (he had him taken into protective custody at Wartburg Castle in 1521-22, where

Luther began his German translation of the Bible), the Reformation was able to take its course from Wittenberg, and thanks to the political support of other princes and, above all, of urban citizens, it spread farther and farther.

Luther was therefore increasingly preoccupied with questions of how to profile the Reformation, so that he had to confront no longer the Roman Church alone, but also proponents of differing reforming ideas: Luther broke with the humanist Erasmus, with representatives of a radical Reformation aiming at a far-reaching social restructuring, and with the Swiss center of the Reformation around Huldrych Zwingli. In the peasant revolt of 1524/25, which partly invoked the new evangelical freedom, Luther also clearly backed the princes who brutally suppressed the uprising.

In the face of these conflicts, but also because Luther continued to be an outlaw outside of Saxony, he increasingly left political and practical issues to his colleagues – first and foremost to Philipp Melancthon – and concentrated on his duties as an exegete and preacher, without ceasing whoever to publish a wide variety of treatises, commentaries and pamphlets. In addition to his Bible translation, his canticles and catechisms in particular had a broad impact on the shaping of protestant societies. As political tensions increased, so did the apocalyptic undertones in Luther’s thinking, leading to some harsh late writings, some of them with antisemitic undertones. Luther died in 1546 in his native town of Eisleben.

The Theology of Grace

Influenced by the Augustinian revival of the late Middle Ages, Luther’s thinking was driven by the tension that God grants access to eternal salvation only to those who are found righteous, but that human beings after the Fall always remain entangled in sinful actions. Given the impossibility of achieving good works – that is, morally good actions and deeds of justice – human beings could therefore contribute nothing to their religious salvation; rather, in order to nevertheless be found righteous by God, they were dependent solely on His merciful grace. In the Bible, however, Luther saw the promise that God was ready for this gift of grace, which is why he taught that all that remained for human beings to do was to faithfully trust in this promise (justification by faith alone).

With the rejection of the salvific value of human activity, however, went a radical disavowal of any human institutions and traditions in matters of faith, as long as they were not attested in the Bible as the only warrant of the divine will (principle of *sola scriptura*). While this primarily led to a fundamental critique of the medieval church and theology, it also placed human activity within the secular realm in a new light.

The Two Kingdoms

To map out the relationship between the spiritual and secular spheres, Luther developed – inspired again by Augustine – his doctrine of the two kingdoms: God had ordained two realms or governments, “the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that [...] they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace” (*On Temporal Authority* [1523], 91). The temporal kingdom, encompassing all humanity, is governed by secular authorities through law and coercion in order to maintain a basic social and political order. However, its laws “extend no further

than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul” (*ibid.* 105). The soul rather belongs to the spiritual kingdom, the realm of salvation, which is governed by Christ and his word in order to grant mankind access to salvation.

A Christian therefore lives in both realms simultaneously: as a citizen of the spiritual realm, he is called to follow his conscience and to live in the light of God’s word, but at the same time, he is bound by the laws of the secular realm and obliged to obey the natural orders and offices that God has ordained for the governance of the earthly kingdom.

The Uses of Law

In order to determine more precisely what was the use of political order, Luther elaborated a doctrine of the “uses of law.” For Luther, every law – whether divine, natural, or positive – served to guide human behavior within the secular realm. On the one hand, he identified thus a “civil” or “political” use, based primarily on the fear of punishment and intended to make possible “a life in which we can dwell together without devouring one another as we would were Law, fear and punishment lacking” (*Church Postil* [1522], 271).

He distinguished from this a “theological use”, for it was by means of the laws and the impossibility to completely observe them that human beings were made aware of their inability to do truly righteous works, and thus, “humbled in consequence of such knowledge” they “come to the cross, yearning for Christ, longing for his grace, despairing of themselves and placing all their hope in Christ” (*ibid.* 272). Following St. Paul’s theology of the law (Rm 7, Gal 3), legal corpora were therefore meant to bring about an insight into one’s own sinfulness and total dependence on God.

In Luther’s environment, moreover, a third use was quickly taught, one that Luther himself had never developed, but which he did not reject either: the so-called “pedagogical use”, intended for Christians who were already aware of their need for salvation, pointing them the way to a virtuous and godly life. This legal doctrine, and the idea of a “civil use” in particular with its emphasis on the need to “restrain the wicked” was to become one of the foundations for modern theories of legal positivism (Berman 76).

Freedom of Conscience

Regarding the spiritual regiment, on the other hand, Luther insisted on its being unaffected by secular laws and instead emphasized the freedom of conscience. In his famous treatise on “the Freedom of a Christian” of 1520, he therefore developed the paradoxical-sounding idea that a Christian is “a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none” and at the same time “a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all” (*Freedom of a Christian* [1520], 344): the servitude referred to the “outward man”, which (ultimately in the sense of the pedagogical use of the law) had to obey and be conformed to the inward man with “reasonable discipline”, since every Christian as a bodily being remained inscribed in the conditions of a sinful world (*simul iustus et peccator*, *ibid.* 358f. [WA 7, 60]). He remained free, however, with regard to his conscience that was obliged to the divine word alone.

In matters of faith, therefore, all were equal before God, and Luther developed this into the doctrine of universal priesthood that he also presented in political tones in a writing to the German

nobility of the same year: given the equality before God, “there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status” (*To the Christian Nobility* [1520], 129, cf. *Freedom of a Christian* 356).

This freedom of conscience, however, should not be taken too quickly as a precursor of modern notions of freedom: however much Luther removed conscience from the grasp of earthly authorities, he always believed it to be bound by the authority of the divine word. In addition, with regard to the outward man, Luther vehemently rejected a political understanding of this concept of freedom, as would become particularly clear in the peasant war of the mid-1520s. Emphasizing the God-giveness of secular authorities and civil order, Luther insisted on the duty of obedience, and even if, over the years and in face of the growing conflict between his secular protectors and the Emperor, he developed a differentiated position to the question of the duty of obedience of princes in particular, the Lutheran tradition thereafter remained very reserved toward a general right of resistance, which in Germany had an effect even into the theological debates about the toleration of the Nazi regime in the 20th century.

Cross References

Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, Erasmus of Rotterdam

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