

# Luther: Objectively and/or Subjectively

## LUTHER AT FIRST GLANCE

In our part of the world Martin Luther is one of those historical entities everyone has heard about, but only a few people can say anything more precisely. That is certainly true for the bulk of our society; probably it is equally true of the situation within the churches themselves, at least the Lutheran church. In Catholic theology and the Catholic Church the Reformer is occasionally perceived as an authentic witness to Christian existence despite the remaining dogmatic reservations in his regard, but within our own ranks he is often approached with a certain bewilderment.

Evidently there are difficulties in gaining access to Luther, and also a certain suspicion that it might not be worthwhile. Important authors have played their part in spreading a negative cliché about the Reformer. In his famous Washington speech of 1945, Thomas Mann asserted that “Martin Luther, a gigantic incarnation of the German spirit, was exceptionally musical. I frankly confess that I do not love him. Germanism in its unalloyed state, the Separatist, Anti-Roman, Anti-European shocks me and frightens me, even when it appears in the guise of evangelical freedom and spiritual emancipation; and the specifically Lutheran, the choleric coarseness, the invective, the fuming and raging, the extravagant rudeness coupled with tender depth of feeling and with the most clumsy superstition and belief in incubi, and changelings, arouses my instinctive antipathy. I should not have liked to be Luther’s dinner guest. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Is Martin Luther really a medieval German lout who has no place in today’s civilized Europe, with its absence of internal boundaries and its lively economic and intellectual exchanges? It could seem that way. Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, found at the beginning of World War II that the German people suffered “from the heritage of a paganism that is mystical and that is in consequence unrestrained, unwise and illusory. And it suffers, too, from the heritage of the greatest Christian of Germany, from Martin Luther’s error on

the relation between Law and Gospel, between the temporal and the spiritual order and power. This error has established, confirmed and idealized the natural paganism of the German people, instead of limiting and restraining it. . . . Hitlerism is the present evil dream of the German pagan who first became Christianized in a Lutheran form. . . .”<sup>2</sup> Are these the words of the disappointed theologian and professor who experienced the beginnings of National Socialism and as a result lost his professorship, or is this an indictment of a genuinely false development in Protestant theology?

At the beginning of the twenty-first century negative judgments like those expressed by Thomas Mann or Karl Barth are scarcely comprehensible—for lack of a comparable state of knowledge. Luther has become an unknown. Even fifty years ago someone could speak about “fear of Luther.”<sup>3</sup> Nowadays if there is any fear, it is fear about Luther: is he a disgrace to Protestantism? What remains true, in any case, is that he either attracts or repels those who occupy themselves with him. Anyone who takes him seriously must adopt a position; you can’t just shrug your shoulders at Luther or you haven’t really encountered him.

The uneasiness many feel toward the Reformer may also be rooted in the fact that he is so hard to classify. Obviously he is not a saint like Francis of Assisi, who is able to win the hearts even of modern people with his sympathetic naïveté; Francis is lovable, undemanding, not a figure subject to aesthetic or spiritual approval or disapproval! Just compare the cheerful atmosphere of Assisi, which today still manages to glow with the spirit of the Poverello, with the grey everydayness of the northern German provincial city of Wittenberg. The tourist business, no matter how hard it tries, can’t make much business out of Luther! His life and work are connected with an atmosphere of struggle and resistance: “I was born to go to war and give battle to sects and devils and to fall in the field”; hence, he says, his books are stormy and bellicose. “I must root out the stumps and trunks, hew away the thorns and briars . . .”; he was the one, he said, who had to “pioneer and hew a path.”<sup>4</sup> It is not always evident that a cheerful, ironic humor underlies such pithy words: “I eat like a Bohemian and drink like a German, thanks be to God for this. Amen.”<sup>5</sup> In saying this Luther wanted to reassure his worried wife Katherine that he was really in good health. Often such boorish language is actually used for a theological purpose that can turn your stomach. Characteristic of Luther is “the decisive alternative, the exclusive either-or.”<sup>6</sup> We will have to deal with that later. “There is no middle kingdom between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.”<sup>7</sup> Are these the words of a reflective theologian or of an incurable fundamentalist? Luther is not a saint, but he is also not a broad thinker like Thomas Aquinas or Descartes, who offered models for interpreting the world and mastering the problem of being that were subject to discussion. Why should we bother with him? The crisis of dealing with Luther in some sense reflects the crisis of

Protestantism: it is not a pious movement intended to improve the world through meditation and ascetic forms of life, nor is it a secular ideology providing ideological perspectives and advice for political action. There is no path from Reformation piety to esoterica, and the secular and secularizing elements of Protestantism do not gain it the sympathy of intellectuals, not anymore at least. Protestantism represents a “third way” whose dangers and opportunities become clear especially in dealing with Luther.

### OBJECTIVE OBSERVATIONS

In the public imagination Luther stands behind a portentous development in Western history that probably would have happened without him but is ineradicably connected with his name: the division of Christianity, the collapse of the unity of a socio-economically shaped culture and religious determination of meaning, pluralism, individualization, the rise of a modernity whose blessings appear highly dubious to us today. Certainly 1517 by no means marked the first division within Christianity; in the year 1054 the Latin church had separated from the East, and the paths between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christianity had already diverged as a result of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. There never was a unity of the church like that dreamed of by romantic ecumenists today; we only need to think of the abundance of competing and mutually combative movements in the ancient church or the multiple voices in the New Testament. Nevertheless, Luther’s name is connected to the awareness that the unity of Europe is broken. Even if one should be inclined to minimize his role in this development, there remains the notion that (though without really intending it) he “founded” a Christian confession. He is thus regarded as the instigator of a confessionalism we today find offensive and in need of overcoming, involved and involving itself in political entanglements. Even within Protestantism itself it was difficult for a long time to convey that the Protestant church did not have its beginning in 1517, but in the New Testament! Likewise, the political position of the Reformer is designated, with very little regard for subtlety, in terms of the labels “Peasants’ War” and “servant of princes.”

It is true that Luther’s statements on the Jews are a horrible strain. Julius Streicher, the Gauleiter of Franken and one of the worst anti-Semites of the Third Reich, said during the Nuremberg trials that if Luther were alive he would be taking Streicher’s place in the dock. Hans Asmussen asked in 1947: “Does Luther have to go to Nuremberg?”<sup>8</sup> Of course, none of the anti-Semitic Nazis read Luther to find out how to behave toward the Jews. To that extent we can only speak in a very indirect sense of the influence of Luther’s anti-Jewish sayings in history. But it is bad enough that anti-Semites could appeal

to applicable sayings of Luther at a time when he was still regarded as an authority in Germany!

All the difficulties we have listed as standing in the way of a positive relationship to Luther probably weigh little in face of the fact that no self-reflective person focused on his or her own self-realization is able to be fully open to the fundamental concern of Luther's theology: the idea of the grace of God as the basis of all things and controlling all things. The eschatological horizon that was taken for granted by Luther and most of his contemporaries, which oppressed them on the one hand and consoled them on the other, has vanished. What we regard as important is not what may happen after death but what happens before it. The idea of a last judgment, hell, and eternal damnation seems medieval and passé. What we are looking for is help with living, not "forgiveness of sins." "That free will is nothing" (from the German translation of Luther's *De servo arbitrio*), that human fate could itself be "nothingness," is an idea those unconcerned with religion as well as our ecclesially socialized contemporaries set entirely aside, and yet in fact it calls for discussion.

### SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES

What might still make us want to concern ourselves with Luther? Why is it that he has repeatedly accompanied people throughout their lives, in person so to speak, and that even I have wrestled with his thought for decades and am now writing a book about him? Luther's theology, and still more intensely Luther's faith, were impressed on me as things that would strengthen and deepen my own faith, and for that reason I seem to have a need to communicate both to others. Occupying myself with Luther has always somehow done me good. I have been increasingly disturbed by the detritus that has to be removed in order to get to the source, and yet I constantly find it is worth it.

I probably met Luther first in my father's study. A reproduction of the famous painting by Lucas Cranach, showing Luther in the pulpit of the church at Wittenberg, hung there: in the center the crucifix, on one side Luther in the pulpit with his arm outstretched and pointing to Christ, and on the other side the sermon's audience. Luther was certainly not the primary subject, but he was part of it. As a university student in my fourth semester I heard Paul Althaus's lectures on Luther's theology that became his book on the subject.<sup>9</sup> That was the only lecture series I carefully studied during my university years. I went to the library and looked up the passages in the Weimar edition of Luther's works that Althaus had cited. That gave me not only intellectual but in a sense physical contact with Luther's works. Besides that, it was during these years that I met someone who, as I sensed, lived wholly in the spirit of Lutheran devotion: the elderly Frankish dean, Friedrich

Graf, in Thalmässing. Luther's Small Catechism was his book of devotions; every day, from Monday to Saturday, he meditated on one of the major parts, from the Ten Commandments to the "Table of Duties." He took Sundays off because on those days he preached. I was uncomfortable when he asked me about particular passages in the catechism and saw that I did not know them correctly. But I know he didn't want to expose me; he wanted to call my attention to something that for him was the bread and elixir of life. In the end he gave me the hundred-volume Erlangen edition of Luther with commentary, which he greatly preferred to the Weimar edition because one could take its handy little volumes to bed, something that was impossible with the mighty Weimar volumes. His love for Luther was probably the impulse that caused me ultimately to write my dissertation on Luther's theology.<sup>10</sup> I would criticize that book in many respects today, for at that time I did not possess sufficient distance from the subject. That has changed. I find Luther's statements about the Jews simply unbearable, in spite of all the well-known theological and historical attempts at explanation. Luther's views on women and their roles in the church, as progressive as they may have been at the time, are obviously altogether inadequate today. But above all the utter fixation on sin and forgiveness, the radical Christocentrism that in Luther's time had a legitimate and necessary function, today represents a reductionism that must be reintegrated in the whole of trinitarian faith; that is something I learned in the course of my ecumenical work.<sup>11</sup> I have discovered yet another new context through my encounter with the world religions, and yet there also Martin Luther remained for me a guiding presence and source of orientation.<sup>12</sup>

In most depictions of Luther the Reformation is presented as a great theological conflict, a struggle for the truth that was about life and death. That, of course, is not wrong. But I would like to put the accent somewhere else. In my view the Reformation was primarily a pastoral movement. The struggle was not about correctness but about the truth that makes free and sustains freedom. Hence Luther's theology has to be presented, considered, critiqued, and communicated from a pastoral-therapeutic perspective.

Anyone who has worked with Luther's theology has entered into the innermost heart of Christian faith. Much of what the Reformer has to say is "edifying" in the best sense of the word. It is an impulse to spiritual growth and an aid in personal crises. In that sense, for example, Luther's writings belong not on the desk but on the nightstand. Those who occupy themselves with Luther arrive unexpectedly at the center of the Christian church and have no chance of busying themselves in the niche of a "Lutheran sect." In Luther we encounter a person who had no fear for the church and therefore was ready to criticize it radically. Luther knew that "we are not the ones who can preserve the church, nor were our forefathers able to do so. Nor will our successors have this power. No, it was, is, and will be he who says, 'I am with you always, to

the close of the age.”<sup>13</sup> Luther would not bother to conduct constant polling and study the affinity profiles of the church members, as the Lutheran Church in Germany has, in its anxiety, repeatedly attempted. Nor was Luther satisfied with the results of the Reformation he had set in motion. But he knew that he had to surrender himself to God’s project. “God’s word and grace” was, in his experience, “a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been.”<sup>14</sup> The Reformer was realistic in his view of the church without being gloomy.

Those who occupy themselves with Luther get to the center of Christian theology. From here one can understand and unlock the whole; here, as in a kaleidoscope, the most important problems are brought together. Erwin Mühlhaupt has written a book called *Predigten mit Luthers Hilfe*;<sup>15</sup> I can also imagine a book called *Dogmatik mit Luthers Hilfe*.<sup>16</sup> Anyone who has understood Luther has, at any rate, “broken through” to a place, has found a lead by which to orient herself or himself in life. Certainly the crucial break in European intellectual history was completed not with the Renaissance and Reformation, but in the Enlightenment. This naturally raises the question of the extent to which Luther’s theology can still be relevant to modern Protestantism, which is clearly shaped by that rupture. One can critique Luther from the point of view of modern Protestantism, but in turn one can also put modern Protestantism under a critical microscope from Luther’s point of view. Both procedures make sense, and they are mutually productive.

But in spite of every precaution, any author who presents a version of “Luther’s theology” is also in some way presenting “his” or “her” Luther.<sup>17</sup> Love for Luther may excuse this in individual cases. Still, there are enough different interpretations of Luther to make a mutual questioning and correction possible.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from Glaser/Stahl 1983, 286. English: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *Thomas Mann’s Addresses Delivered at the Library of Congress, 1942–1949* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2003), “Germany and the Germans,” 45–66, at 52.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted from Glaser/Stahl 1983, 262–63. Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, “Über die Reformation hinaus? Zur Luther-Kritik Karl Barths,” 33–75 in Joachim Heubach, ed., *Luther und Barth* (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1989). English: Karl Barth, *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland* (London: The Sheldon Press, 1941), 36–37, as cited in Charles E. Ford, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Resistance, and the Two Kingdoms,” *Lutheran Forum Reformation* (1993): 28–34.

<sup>3</sup>Kurt Ihlenfeld, *Angst vor Luther?* (Witten and Berlin: Eckart-Verlag, 1967).

<sup>4</sup>WA 30/2, 68, 12–16; cf. WA 30/2, 650, 16–17. Published English translations vary.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Luther to his wife Katherine, 2 July 1540, LW 50, 208 (WA.Br 9, 168, 5–6).

<sup>6</sup>Jörg Baur, “Extreme Theologie,” in idem, *Luther und seine klassischen Erben* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1993), 8.

<sup>7</sup>LW 33, 227 (WA 18, 743, 33-34).

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Glaser/Stahl 1983, 8.

<sup>9</sup>Althaus 1962 (1981).

<sup>10</sup>Barth, Hans-Martin 1967a.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Hans-Martin Barth, *Begegnung wagen—Gemeinschaft suchen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

<sup>12</sup>Barth, Hans-Martin 2008a.

<sup>13</sup>LW 47, 118 (WA 50, 476, 31-35).

<sup>14</sup>LW 45, 352 (WA 15, 32, 7-8).

<sup>15</sup>Erwin Mülhaupt, *Evangelisch leben! Predigten mit Luthers Hilfe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958).

<sup>16</sup>Respectively (and somewhat loosely) “Luther Helps you Preach” and “Luther Helps you with Dogmatics.”—Trans.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Nikos Kazantzakis, *God’s Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi: A Novel*, trans. P. A. Bien (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1975).