

Faith against Reason

Reflections on Luther's 500th

THOMAS PFAU

In keeping with the event for which these remarks were originally prepared, what follows will use rather broad brush strokes in an effort to identify some of the long-term effects that may plausibly be linked with Luther's intervention in 1517.¹ Bearing not only on Christianity but, inevitably, also on the secular realm, these effects were often unintended by Luther himself, at times contradicting his avowed goals and concerns at the time. Perhaps nobody put the matter more poignantly than the great 20th century Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Letters from Prison*:

Today [31 Oct. 1943] is Reformation Day, a feast which in our times can give one plenty to think about. One wonders how it was Luther's action led to consequences which were the exact opposite of what he intended, and which overshadowed the last years of his life and work, so that he doubted the value of everything he had achieved. He desired a real unity both for the Church and for Western Christendom, but the consequence was the ruin of both. He sought the »Freedom of the Christian Man,« and the consequence was apathy and barbarism. He hoped to see the establishment of a genuine social order free from clerical privilege, and the outcome was the Peasants' Revolt, and soon afterwards the gradual dissolution of all real cohesion and order in society...Kierkegaard said more than a century ago that if Luther were alive then he would have said the exact opposite of what he said in the sixteenth century. I believe he was right – cum grano salis.²

No doubt, Bonhoeffer's grim assessment was colored by German Protestantism's disastrous alliance with the Nazi regime after 1933. Ten years on, with Bonhoeffer awaiting execution in prison, both the official *Reichskirche* under Bishop Müller and the so-called *Confessing Church* that had sought to oppose at least the worst horrors of the Nazi regime had effectively been devoured by

1 | Originally delivered as a plenary lecture at Purdue University, 9 Nov. 2017. For their helpful drafts on earlier versions of this paper, I wish to thank David Aers, Tricia Ross, and James Simpson.

2 | Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Letters and Papers from Prison. In: Idem: Works. Vol. 8. Trans. Isabel Best et al. Minneapolis 2010, p. 172 f.

the Fascist Leviathan. Unsurprisingly, then, several of the antitheses structuring Bonhoeffer's summation of Luther's contradictory legacy can also be read as a covert indictment of the Nazi regime, whose specious quest for absolute freedom had produced limitless barbarism and whose attempts at organizing society around an omnipotent man-god had issued not in order and cohesion but in chaos and global war.

Naturally, speculation about long-term effects of an event as complex as Luther's Reformation remains fraught with considerable risk. To begin with, the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy looms large wherever we seek to pinpoint the »unintended« effects of a historical event. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere with reference to Brad Gregory's controversial book, it is but a small step from arguing for an unintended Reformation to concluding that its entailments were not only calamitous but also inevitable.³ Yet to frame Luther's Reformation in consequentialist, perhaps even determinist language risks producing a self-confirming story of decline, one whose underlying, fatalistic conception of history the practicing Catholic (such as Brad Gregory or myself) should resist on theological grounds no less than conceptual ones.

A more prudent approach, which I favor even as I cannot unfold it in any detail here, would take the form of patient, finely-grained hermeneutic analyses. Rather than attempting a high-altitude survey of the Reformation's presumptive historical legacy, intended or otherwise, we should begin by scrutinizing motifs central to Luther's theology, sift their logical implications, and then, cautiously, trace their effective history during the centuries following the Reformation. To do so is to part ways with axiomatically secular modes of historical explanation such as construe religious practice, spiritual concerns, and theological issues as mere epiphenomena of socio-economic, cultural, and geo-political forces. For »when the world was still five-hundred years younger,« as Johan Huizinga so poetically put it a century ago, the very intelligibility of life hinged on deeply internalized and formally cohesive religious practices and on people's implicit acceptance of the theological foundations for these practices. Luther upended these foundations, mainly, by fundamentally redefining the concepts of faith and divine omnipotence and, in so doing, leaving both Christianity's self-understanding and its role in the *saeculum* dramatically altered. I will return to this point shortly. First, though, let us recall some basic, not to say obvious, contexts for Luther's momentous intervention without, however, construing ambient historical factors as being outright determinative *causes* for his new theology.

While there are many reasons to view the long-term effects of Luther's Reformation, and the eventual schism it produced, with misgivings, there can be no doubt that the young Augustinian monk had ample cause to urge a compre-

3 | Thomas Pfau: »Botched Execution« or Historical Inevitability: Conceptual Dilemmas in Brad S. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*. In: *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 46 (2016), No. 3, p. 583–602.

hensive reform of the Church. Various forms of corruption – already detailed in Dante’s *Inferno* two centuries before – had only blossomed further, such that by 1500 the late-medieval Church’s entanglement with worldly interests and powers, as well as internal corruption (simony, indulgences) in some parts of Europe, Germany in particular, had reached dismal proportions. Yet in promoting lay spirituality and what he eventually came to call the priesthood of the believers, Luther went far beyond the inward and private turn of the *devotio moderna* of the previous century. Indeed, by promoting literacy for all (including women) and, crucially, translating the Bible into the vernacular, Luther not only »created the German language« (as the poet Heine was to put it in 1833); he also laid the groundwork for a seemingly unmediated type of faith.

Luther’s increasingly vituperative indictment of a corrupt Church and the »populist sophisters and schoolmen« committed to its defense aimed to make the case for extensive reform of an institution that in his view had betrayed its core mission.⁴ In more restrained language, Erasmus and the young Thomas More had actually voiced similar concerns. At the same time, it ought to be kept in mind that, even around 1500, large swathes of the Church remained dynamic and attentive to the needs of the general populace, as has been shown, for example, by Eamon Duffy and John van Engen in their landmark studies of a flourishing fifteenth-century religious culture in England and new forms of popular piety (esp. the *devotio moderna*) in Flanders, respectively.

AXIOMS

Momentous about Luther’s intervention and ultimately causing his early attempts at reform to mutate into a full-fledged schism, was his decision to reinterpret concerns of a practical-institutional nature as symptoms of a deep-seated doctrinal crisis. As became clear during his contentious cross-examination by Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg (in October 1518) and by Johann Eck at Worms (in January 1521), Luther’s institutional critique had mutated into comprehensive theological dissent. As his famous *Hier steh’ ich und kann nicht anders* at the Diet of Worms made clear, Luther’s startling notion of what Paul Hacker has termed »reflexive faith« effectively ruptured a fifteen-hundred-year tradition of exegetical practice, theological argument, ecumenical councils, and papal decrees.⁵ His startling claim that »if [a man] believes, he is blessed; if not, he is condemned,« and that »as he believes, so he has [God]« redefines faith as positively effecting the believer’s salvation. A subject-centered, reflexive faith – which not only affirms what one believes *in* but also posits that it »has happened for *me*« – must

4 | Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings. Ed. by John Dillenberger. New York 1962, p. 127.

5 | Paul Hacker: Faith in Luther. Steubenville (OH) 2017, see esp. p. 8–21.

eo ipso reject all doubt, ambiguity, or even the possibility of incremental growth and progressive hermeneutic discernment.⁶ Instead, what Luther terms »apprehensive faith« claims revelation and redemption both instantaneously and in their totality.

In rejecting as a matter of principle the validity of a dynamic tradition of liturgical practice and theological discernment – indeed going so far as to assert that »he who does not accept my doctrine cannot be saved« – Luther put Christianity on a substantially new footing.⁷ His doctrine of freedom anchored exclusively in the faith of the individual believer encourages an antinomian stance (sometimes thought to be rooted in a misreading of Paul’s letters) that would lead some contemporaries and many of his theological heirs to reject all ecclesial authority, sacramental practice, and good works. The theology that Luther proceeded to formulate, beginning with his exegeses of Scripture after 1517 and intensifying with his 1525 writings on Christian freedom, set into motion a dynamic well beyond anything he could have imagined. Thus, his sweeping assertion that »a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none« would soon be taken as a warrant for rejecting political as well as ecclesial authority.⁸

At the same time, we should not think of Luther’s theology as emerging out of nowhere. His conception of God as omnipotent will, wholly invisible and inscrutable, builds on similar arguments found in Ockham, Autrecourt, and Biel during the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Consider, for example, Luther’s injunction that the true Christian needs »to know nothing whatsoever of the law or of works, but to know and to believe this only, that Christ is gone to the Father and is not now seen«⁹. To put it thus is to institute an ontological chasm separating finite, visible nature from the numinous, supernatural realm – a split dating back to the Origenist controversies of the third century and reopened in a new key when Franciscan theologians at Oxford and Paris began to draw formal distinctions between God’s divine power (*potentia absoluta*) and the meaningfully ordered cosmos (*potentia ordinata*) in which the divine *logos* had found expression. Yet those distinctions were not, at that time, to call into question that the order of creation was intrinsically good and rational.

By the time that Luther arrives on the scene, this distinction had blossomed into a sharp antinomy, reflected in his quasi-Manichean opposition of nature and grace, of »two kinds of righteousness« and »two worlds,« an »active« one centered on works and the law, and a »passive one« whose nature it is »to do nothing, to hear nothing.«¹⁰ Yet to drive a sharp wedge between creator and

6 | *Ibid.*, p. 13.

7 | Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimar 1883 ff., vol. 10, Pt. 2, p. 11.

8 | Luther: Selections from his Writings, p. 53.

9 | *Ibid.*, p. 105.

10 | *Ibid.*, p. 104.

creation naturally atrophies incarnational theology and undermines the fundamental conception of the human being as *imago dei*. Inasmuch as there is, in Luther's theology, no mediation between the two domains, theological reflection and religious culture are losing their narrative dimension. Spiritual life is no longer conceived as an *itinerarium in deum* (as Bonaventure had called it) but, instead, as a timeless and invariant struggle between abject (human) nature and the inexplicable, unilateral interventions of transcendent grace.

For Luther, there is no mediation between the two, nor is the polarity itself meaningful as such. In construing corporeal, visible nature as sinful and, hence, as the antagonist of true faith, Luther broke with the century-old (in origin Platonist) understanding according to which, »in divine fashion, it needs perceptible things to lift us up into the domain of conceptions«¹¹. This view – which had been an integral feature of Patristic and a good deal of medieval theology from Basil and Gregory of Nyssa via pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus, and John of Damascus all the way to Bernard, Bonaventure and Cusanus – Luther categorically rejects, maintaining instead as a matter of principle that »no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom.«¹²

Luther's conception of faith as a type of auto-affection and his formalist view of grace effectively robs either term of any phenomenology. We cannot witness their outward development or progression (there being none). Faith, that is, no longer stands in any relation to the intelligible realm. It cannot be understood but can only be asserted as *fides apprehensiva* – a quasi-performative utterance whereby the believer stakes a claim on salvation as effectively coincident with the act of faith itself. What faith affirms thus is nothing other than the subject's putative righteousness (*Rechtshaffenheit*). Yet such righteousness now seems unconnected to any practical experience and any epistemology by which finite beings might seek to understand their existence. In defining faith as »a lively and undoubted belief that makes a man absolutely certain of his being pleasing to God,« Luther drove a sharp wedge between Jerusalem and Athens, between his new, reflexive faith and what he contemptuously calls »the imaginations of reason, which teaches that a right judgment, and a good will [...] is true righteousness«.¹³

CONSEQUENCES

The institutional and disciplinary divide that has ever since been widening between theology and philosophy, to the detriment of both fields, has in our time

11 | Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works. Trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem. New York 1987, p. 199.

12 | Luther: Selections from his Writings, p. 54.

13 | Ibid, p. 131.

resulted in a paradoxically doctrinaire conception of knowledge as an inherently secular pursuit. If Luther's theology had insisted on God as the only cause in the universe, effectively denying Aristotle's and Aquinas' theory of finite, secondary causation, it was only a matter of time before a wholly transcendent God would cease to engage the interest of humans living their contingent lives on earth. The position of categorical transcendence is being supplanted by a strictly immanent, naturalist frame, one for which only secondary causes – observable, quantifiable, verifiable – are of any relevance. Few have put the dangers of Luther's radically one-sided theology more astutely than Erich Przywara in the 1920s:

The Lutheran doctrine of God is, so to speak, loaded with explosives. The human spirit refuses to be violated by a one-sided transcendence; immanence can be struck only at the cost of its violent return, but it is a return now no longer, as it was before, in the form of a dynamic unity [*Spannungseinheit*] with transcendence, but rather in the form of a radical overturning [*Umschlag*] of transcendence. Instead of the Catholic unity-in-tension between transcendence and immanence, we have, beginning with Luther, a transcendence that converts into immanence, only to convert once again into transcendence. At one point man is disenfranchised and everything is about God and God alone; at another, God is disenfranchised and everything is about man and man alone. In this sense Nietzsche is the most obvious consequence of Luther: for his *Übermensch* is nothing but man as God.¹⁴

Such long-term developments would arguably have been difficult to foresee for the various permutations of Lutheran and Calvinist theology – such as the radical dissenters of 17th century England; late 17th and early 18th century German Pietism; Methodism; Pentecostalism, et al. – all of which stress the unconditional, self-certifying nature of faith as *iudicium interius* («inward judgment»). On Luther's account, the self is both the sole originator and, soteriologically speaking, the sole beneficiary of its act of faith. As a result, faith constitutes itself not only *independent of* but, potentially, *against* the reality of other persons. With the relational model of the Trinitarian theology fading, Lutheran faith supervenes on, indeed displaces, love, »because love, the most distinguished interpersonal relationship, consists in a movement that runs precisely counter to that of reflexive faith.« While it shows gratitude for God's grace, »love [for one's fellow beings] makes you servants of men and takes the place of a servant.« Hence, »faith shall have lordship over love, and love shall yield to it.«¹⁵ By 1535, in his commentary

14 | Erich Przywara: *Ringen der Gegenwart*. Gesammelte Aufsätze, 1922–1927. 2 vols. Augsburg 1929, vol. 2, p. 555 (transl. by John Betz).

15 | *Martin Luthers Werke XVII*, p. 53 and 5.

on Galatians, Luther thus will go so far as to curse charity and humility (*maledicta sit caritas, maledicta sit humilitas*).¹⁶

This disaggregation of Lutheran faith from any outward, practical acts in the interpersonal realm of *caritas* and dialogue has had a vexed effective history of its own. With Calvin's theology also wielding considerable influence here, the long-term effects are plainly legible, for example, in Locke's *Letters concerning toleration* (1693). There, faith risks devolving into little more than so much *private* speculation regarding the subject's afterlife; for if the affirmations of such faith were to be projected, with a force befitting its intrinsic certitude, into the realm of actual, communal life, rational community would likely be once again vanquished by sectarian antagonisms as it had been during England's civil war.¹⁷ The result, still with us to this day, is the polarity of religious quietism and political theology, between a fideism preserving the purity of its tenets by withdrawing from the heteronomous realm of public life, and a theological liberalism of the sort that would redefine much of nineteenth-century Protestantism. Yet both scenarios are characterized by a widening chasm between faith and reason, and by a conception of »private judgment« (as J. H. Newman calls it) at the very least detached from and indifferent to philosophical inquiry and, more often than not, altogether quarantined from the sphere of public reason. This partitioning of faith from *logos* must be accounted one of the more enduring and troubling aspects of Luther's effective history.

To be sure, Luther did not single-handedly bring about what Benedict XVI has described as an accelerating »dehellenization« of theology in the modern era. Elements of an anti-rationalist conception of faith already inform the chiliasm of Joachim of Fiore. They also underlie Bishop Stephen Tempier's 1277 proscription of certain Dominican teachings in Paris; a particularly strident anti-rationalism also fuels Ockham's disaggregation of divine power (*potentia*) from divine reason (*logos*) in his *Quodlibetals*; and, to judge by the refusal of many white American Evangelicals today even to consider scientific findings, the anti-rationalist strain of Protestant fideism remains alive and well. As Benedict XVI was to observe in his 2005 Regensburg Address, »God does not become more divine when we push him away from us in a sheer, impenetrable voluntarism; rather, the truly divine God is the God who has revealed himself as *logos* and, as *logos*, has acted and continues to act lovingly on our behalf.«¹⁸

Now, even as Luther construes man's faith as both the *prima facie* manifestation of grace and the assurance of the believer's eventual salvation, he need not

16 | Ibid XL, p. 26.

17 | On Locke's Nominalist and private concept of religious faith, see Thomas Pfau: *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge*. South Bend (IN) 2013, p. 309 ff.

18 | Benedict XVI: *The Regensburg Lecture*. Ed. by James V. Schall. S. J. South Bend (IN) 2007, p. 138.

necessarily be altogether opposed to Benedict's view. In fact, as early as 1525, Luther found the movement that he had launched to be rapidly outgrowing and deviating from his original concerns and objectives. Thus, his arguments on core doctrinal issues gave rise to developments, both short- and long-term, that he most definitely did not take himself to have intended, and some of which – such as the Peasant revolt and the radical Biblicism of the Anabaptists – he came to renounce with characteristic vehemence. What Luther came to experience first-hand, then, is the sheer persistence and intractable complexity of hermeneutics, of interpretations attaching themselves to words ostensibly spoken or written with very different, even diametrically opposed intentions. Thus, his theology succumbs to a contingent ebb and flow of competing interpretations that, rather naively, Luther had believed could be avoided by predicating his theology entirely on the believer's unmediated encounter with scripture, her wholly unmediated faith, and a strictly transcendent and unfathomable conception of grace. The aftermath of what we call the Reformation is a protracted case of history, which Lutheran faith and grace had sought to overleap, reasserting itself.

One cannot but marvel at the improvidence of an assertion that effectively converts the deregulation of spiritual hermeneutics into a theological axiom of sorts: »I acknowledge no fixed rules for the interpretation of the Word of God, since the Word of God, which teaches freedom in all other matters, must not be bound.«¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, then, a Protestant theology that by 1520 was still very much in flux would barely a century later find itself fragmented into competing and often militantly antagonistic denominations. At the same time, the cascade of doctrinal schisms and antagonisms that characterizes Protestantism to this day also had a profound impact on the Catholic Church. Thus, rightly worried about the incalculable effects of a religious culture principally defined by the subjective assertion of reflexive faith and an apparent loss of traditions guiding scriptural exegesis, the Catholic Counter-Reformation took defensive measures that, in the event, often ended up mirroring the Protestant ethos against which the Church sought to defend itself. One might point here to the doctrinal and pastoral realignments made both during and following the Council at Trent, the rise of Ignatian spiritual discipline, and the hyper-Augustinian soteriology promoted by 17th century Jansenism. Thus, it is not simply the rise of Protestant denominations but the theological realignment within Catholicism that forms part of Luther's effective history. Let me close, then, by adumbrating some of the long-term effects arising from Luther's repudiation of exegetical tradition, magisterial doctrine, and sacramental practice that, until about 1520, had mediated the naturally tension-fraught relationship between *ecclesia* and *saeculum*.

19 | The Freedom of the Christian. In: Luther: Selections from his Writings, p. 50.

SOME CONSEQUENCES

- Luther consolidated the genre of religious polemic, which remains with us to this day. That his 1518 examination by Cajetan deteriorated into a shouting match hints at a fundamental antagonism between inward faith and dialogic reason. Gone is the Platonic model of dialectical argument, which does not proceed from supposedly secure first principles but, on the contrary, accepts that our knowledge of such principles is at best insufficient and, thus, needs to retrieve them through a sustained hermeneutic effort conducted in joint humility.
- The assertion of faith no longer subject to liturgical mediation and evolving theological reflection and explication for others, risks isolating the believer. As the radicalism of 17th century antinomian movements, German pietists, 18th century Methodists, and 19th and 20th century Pentecostals and fringe Evangelical movements shows, an increasingly hermetic faith, a strictly notional understanding of grace, and a numinous model of God ineluctably wielding power over man (i. e., Luther's doctrine of divine *Alleinwirksamkeit*), in time caused Western religious culture to collapse into outright fideism. Increasingly, that is, the affirmations of Luther's spiritual heirs appear bereft of any intelligible relation to the practical, cultural, and scientific objectives of this world. As the absolute transcendence of Luther's God begets a compensatory, equally absolute immanence, the finite and sinful human beings confined in the temporal world respond to practical concerns by disaggregating faith and knowledge and, as regards the latter, relying on resources of their own devising. The immanent logic and aggressive secularity whereby an epistemological naturalism has migrated from the natural sciences into fields such as political economy, social and political theory, philosophy, history, and aesthetics are the paradoxical entailments of a Reformation that, from its very beginning, had a vexed relationship to the saeculum: at once wishing to engage and transform the world, and at the same time recoiling from its perceived threat to the integrity of faith. Luther's absolute affirmations regarding faith and grace substantially weaken the possibility of reasoning with those who do not share these principles. Walter Ong and Michael Buckley have variously shown how the concept of modern method, based on first principles, has fundamentally obscured the inherent value and potential of dialogic reasoning. Here, too, the separation of theology from philosophy, already in plain view in Luther's strident anti-Aristotelianism, had consequences the Reformer could scarcely have foreseen or wished. Thus, it was only a matter of time before that which Protestant faith professed was construed as a seemingly gratuitous and, from a new philosophical perspective, untenable assertion. For once theology had defined its relation to philosophy in adversarial terms, philosophy

returned the favor by espousing a strictly immanent conception of human existence that in time would sponsor utilitarian and existentialist explanatory schemes that, beginning with Hume, A. Smith, and Bentham all the way to Heidegger and contemporary reductionism have disaggregated the work of reason from the three theological virtues.

- Finally, Luther’s interesting qualification of his polemic against »works« points to yet another long-term entailment of his theology. Thus, he admits that ceremonies cannot be abandoned outright but, for the time being remain a necessity, just »as models and plans [...] among builders and artisans are prepared, not as a permanent structure but because without them nothing could be built or made. When the structure is complete the models and plans are laid aside.«²⁰ Yet to put it thus gives rise to an implication that the young Luther would almost certainly have rejected: viz., that the eschaton is not beyond time but can be envisioned as the conclusion and fulfilment of historical time. For the past century, this notion of an intra-mundane eschaton, prepared for by a stadial conception of history, has been known by the name of political theology, a movement that (as the movement of 1980s Catholic liberation theology has shown) ultimately entails the self-secularization of religion. Similarly, the segment of contemporary white America that remains firmly pledged to a notion of »manifest destiny« and some version of the prosperity gospel offers a particularly troubling case of an inner-worldly eschatology first intimated when Luther refused to consider faith and reason as a polarity to be endured as such, rather than being unilaterally resolved. His often-polemical language thus inadvertently furnishes arguments for a political theology – which per definitionem is bad theology – whose misplaced, self-regarding affirmations continue to damage our society and, indeed, humanity at large.