



## Making The Most of It, Counting the Cost: Some Catholic Perspectives on Luther's Revolution

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### Abstract

Against the background of greatly improved ecumenical relations between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches, this article discusses Catholic scholarship on Martin Luther, from the four centuries after the reformation, when Luther was subject to consistently hostile distortions of his character, to more positive twentieth century approaches by Joseph Lortz and his followers, who saw Luther as a reluctant dissenter, essentially orthodox on the contested issue of Justification, but forced by circumstances to call for the reform of a corrupt and theologically decadent Church. But more recent reformation scholarship has called into question Lortz's negative view of pre-reformation Catholicism, while some post-Lortzian Catholic Luther scholarship has highlighted the reformer's radical departures from Catholic orthodoxy, consequently entailing a less optimistic reading of the doctrinal divisions between Lutherans and Catholics.

### Keywords

Grisar, Iserloh, Hacker, Ratzinger, Luther, Catholic scholarship, Denifle, Lortz, Richard Rex

For half a millennium the posting of Luther's 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on Halloween 1517 has been seen as one of the few precisely datable turning points in world history. Luther was the catalyst for the ideological explosion that shattered western Christendom. Without him there would have been no reformation, so to discuss the theme of reformation involves discussing him.

Roman Catholics have been sharing the celebrations of the Reformation quincentenary in ways that would have been unimaginable even thirty years ago. Luther detested the papacy: "I believe the pope is the masked and incarnate devil", he declared, "because he is the

Antichrist. As Christ is God incarnate, so the Antichrist is the devil incarnate. . . . The kingdom of the pope really signifies the terrible wrath of God, namely, the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place.”<sup>1</sup> But last October Pope Francis travelled to Lund in Sweden to join in the Lutheran celebrations of Reformation Day 2016. During his visit he and the President of the Lutheran World Federation signed a joint declaration, expressing gratitude both for “the spiritual and theological gifts received through the Reformation” and for fifty years of fruitful ecumenical engagement. The document acknowledged the wounds inflicted on the unity of the Christian Church by both traditions, and committed both sides to a renewed striving towards full communion.<sup>2</sup> In the same year the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America endorsed the *Declaration on the Way*, a document listing a series of thirty-two consensus statements between Catholics and Lutherans, including the most important of these, the 1999 Joint Declaration on Justification. The Declaration identified key doctrinal issues, including justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which the ELCA considered to be no longer “church-dividing”.<sup>3</sup> And all of this had been preceded back in 2013 by the jointly agreed guidelines for a common celebration of the Luther Quincentenary, “From Conflict to Communion”, sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which offered an agreed outline of reformation history, listed the milestones and significant documents in Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, and laid down guidelines for future engagement.<sup>4</sup>

This edifying unanimity of Catholic and Lutheran ecumenists was satirized earlier this year on an Australian Anglican website, which published what purported to be a leak by a disgruntled Curial insider, horrified that Pope Francis was planning to mark Reformation Day 2017 by canonizing Martin Luther. Last minute details were still being finalized, according to the report, but there was to be a Vatican City Stamp with Luther’s portrait, a sure sign of sanctity, and the various recent doctrinal agreements between Roman Catholics and Lutherans were being drawn on to clarify exactly how the intercession of Saint Martin would be called upon for example, “to aid the suffering souls in Purgatory”. The report elicited a great deal of indignant spluttering from outraged conservatives in both camps, but the game was given away by the date of the alleged leak, and the

<sup>1</sup> *Luther’s Works*, vol.54, *Table Talk*, No.4487, p. 346.

<sup>2</sup> Text available at [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/10/31/pope\\_and\\_president\\_of\\_lwf\\_sign\\_joint\\_statement/1269150](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/10/31/pope_and_president_of_lwf_sign_joint_statement/1269150).

<sup>3</sup> Text available at <https://www.elca.org/Declaration-on-the-Way>.

<sup>4</sup> Text available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_2013\\_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html).

Latin title of the proposed *Motu Propriu* embodying all this, whose opening words were to be *Stultus Aprilis*.<sup>5</sup>

Whether bogus or authentic, all these symbolic gestures have been keyed to the Halloween anniversary of the posting of the 95 theses. So it is ironic that, as many of you will know, the story of Luther nailing the theses to the Castle church door is almost certainly a myth: to quote the title of a famous and still controversial Catholic book, “the theses were not posted”. So this momentous anniversary commemorates a non-event, and I will have more to say later about the careful historical deconstruction of that myth by Fr Erwin Iserloh in 1966, and its religious significance.

In fact my theme is not so much Luther himself, but what Catholics over the last century or so have come to think about him. For it is really only over the last one hundred years that Catholics have attended to the father of the Reformation with anything approaching open-mindedness.

The tone of the Catholic default mode of rabid denunciation of Luther was set by Leo X in the 1520 Bull of Excommunication, *Exsurge Domine*. In that document, Luther features as a ravaging and destructive beast: *exterminate nititur [Ecclesiam] aper de silva, et singularis ferus depasci eam* - the wild boar from the forest seeks to destroy [the church] and every wild beast feeds upon it.<sup>6</sup> As late as the mid-1870s Gerard Manley Hopkins could paraphrase the rhetoric of *Exsurge Domine* by alluding to Luther in the Wreck of the Deutschland as the “beast of the waste wood”.

Violent abuse was the staple of Catholic language about Luther for centuries, and the decisive figure in the shaping of sixteenth-century Catholic polemic against Luther was Johan Cochlaeus, himself one of Luther’s earliest theological opponents, whose 1529 tract, *Seven Headed Luther*, with its brilliantly effective frontispiece portraying Luther as the dragon of Revelation, traced the reformer’s degeneration from monk to crazy visionary to murdering robber, Barabbas. In 1549 Cochlaeus published a major biographical study of Luther which raked together everything bad that could be said about him, a well of falsehood and misunderstanding into which most subsequent Catholic polemicists would dip their buckets, in quest of mud to sling.<sup>7</sup>

Serious Catholic study of Luther’s life and writings was a late Victorian and Edwardian phenomenon, but in its early stages it too was a product of this rancid polemical tradition. Catholic Luther-scholarship got off the ground in 1904 with the publication of the

<sup>5</sup> <http://liturgy.co.nz/pope-francis-to-make-martin-luther-a-saint-on-october-31>.

<sup>6</sup> English text available at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo10/110exdom.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> *Commentaria de actis et scriptis Martini Lutheri Saxonis chronographice ex ordine ab anno Domini 1517 usque ad annum 1546 inclusive fideliter conscripta* (Mainz, 1549).

first volume of Heinrich Denifle's pioneering *Luther and Lutherdom from Original Sources*.<sup>8</sup>

Denifle, a Dominican who became sub-prefect of the Vatican Library, was a world authority on medieval scholasticism. The abiding value of his multi-volumed and ultimately unfinished book on Luther, in reality a collection of essays on various aspects of Luther's life and works, was its massively learned contextualization of Luther's early thought against the late medieval theological background. Denifle was a meticulous scholar, but he was also a gladiator for ultramontane Catholicism, unrelentingly hostile to Luther, whose decline from a talented and conservative reformer into a heretical moral pervert he attributed to egotism, drunkenness, and undisciplined sensuality.

Denifle searched the reformer's published and unpublished works for evidence of heresy, ignorance and moral turpitude – as the American Luther scholar Preserved Smith remarked, Denifle's great work was “a day of judgment in which Luther is called to account for every idle word, and he said many”. Denifle even drew on Victorian criminological theories to suggest that the reformer's face was of the “criminal type”.<sup>9</sup> In Gordon Rupp's words “the climax of the work is the cry “Luther, there is nothing of God in you!” The trouble is that, by the time Denifle has done with him, there is nothing of man in Luther either. His caricature, liar, blackguard, clown, sot, lecher, knave is a monster fit only for the records of criminal pathology”.<sup>10</sup>

The massive if malign scholarship of Denifle's work would force Protestant defenders of Luther to raise their game and strive for new levels of accuracy and realism. Even hostile protestant reviewers recognized that Denifle's book marked a milestone in Luther scholarship, which had given the *coup de grace* to a long tradition of Protestant hagiography.

Hard on Denifle's work, another Catholic scholar-priest brought outstanding scholarship to bear on Luther's failings. In 1911 Hartmann Grisar, a German Jesuit papal historian based in Rome published the first part of a multi-volumed psychological biography of Luther. Grisar was both formidably learned and formidably honest – when his unflinching “warts and all” history of Rome and the Papacy in the Middle Ages was published it was said that novenas were offered all over Rome for Fr Grisar's conversion to Catholicism. If Grisar was harsh on the medieval popes, he was a good deal kinder to Dr Luther than Denifle. Grisar devoted chapters to disproving ancient Catholic calumnies about the reformer, and he rejected Denifle's

<sup>8</sup> H. Denifle and A M Weiss, *Luther und Lutherthum in der ersten Entwicklung quellennässig dargestellt* (Mainz 1904).

<sup>9</sup> Preserved Smith, review of Denifle in *The American Historical Review* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Jan., 1910), pp. 367-369.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (London 1953) p. 23.

allegations of Luther's sexual turpitude. Instead, Grisar substituted a picture of a troubled neurotic, morbidly pessimistic about human nature in general and his own sinfulness in particular. Grisar's Luther is coarse, quarrelsome, obstinate, dogmatic, lacking in humility, failings which help to explain his ultimate apostasy, and Grisar deployed a good deal of psychological analysis to proving that the reformer's theology had its origins in a pathologically disordered personality. Grisar did include a long chapter on what he called "Luther's better features", which paid tribute to the reformer's intellectual abilities, his kindness to friends and pupils, his courage and his love of simplicity. But it was immediately followed by an even longer chapter headed "Luther's mode of controversy a counterpart of his soul", which explored Luther's anger, his rabid hostility to the Jews, the psychopathology of his abusive language, and his conviction of his own greatness and superiority to criticism.<sup>11</sup>

Both Denifle and Grisar were men of the nineteenth-century, products of the church of Pius IX for whom Protestantism was simply a great apostasy, and Luther a guilty heresiarch. But in the aftermath of the Modernist crisis in the years before the Second World War, a profound shift took place in German Catholic theology, as theologians sought to escape the rigidities of Ultramontane ecclesiology and explored the patristic and early medieval periods as resources for a renewed Catholicism. This shift, represented in theology by figures like Romano Guardini and Erich Przywara, had momentous consequences for Catholic attitudes to the Reformation and the major reformers, Luther among them, of course. The key historians in this shift were Hubert Jedin, biographer of Cardinal Seripando and historian of the Council of Trent,<sup>12</sup> and Joseph Lortz, the first volume of whose *History of the Reformation in Germany* appeared in 1939, an event that represented a watershed in Catholic attitudes to Luther.<sup>13</sup>

Lortz is a complex figure: his work played a major role in the evolution of Catholic ecumenism in Germany, and he was an influence on Vatican II's Ecumenical decree, *Unitas Redintegratio*. But he was also, in contrast to Jedin, Przywara and Guardini, an advocate of accommodation between the Catholic Church and National Socialism, and he did not resign his membership of the Nazi Party until 1938. His significance for our story lies in the fact that, more or less singlehandedly, he brought about a revolution in Catholic thinking about Luther and the Reformation, with profound

<sup>11</sup> English text available at <https://archive.org/details/grisarsluther01grisuoft>.

<sup>12</sup> Heribert Smolinsky, *Die Erforschung der Kirchengeschichte. Leben, Werk und Bedeutung von Hubert Jedin (1900-1980)* Münster 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Translation by Ronald Walls, Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: Herder and Herder, 1968.

and continuing implications not only for the ecumenical movement, but also for Catholic theology.

Volume 1 of Lortz's *Die Reformation in Deutschland* (1939) contained a profoundly negative assessment of the state of the late medieval church, and an extended discussion of Luther's development and career as a reformer up to 1525. Both aspects of the volume were to prove almost equally influential. Lortz portrayed the Catholic Church in Germany and beyond on the eve of the Reformation as dominated by a corrupt hierarchy, promoting a mechanical and materialistic popular piety remote from the Gospels, and adrift from the patristic and high medieval theological synthesis created by giants like Aquinas. Among the chief villains of Lortz's story were Occam and Occamism, the latter a system that Lortz thought had distanced God to become an arbitrary and angry judge, unknowable by human reason, and that had also taught that believers could fulfil the commands of God as revealed in scripture, thereby propagating a practical Pelagianism that Lortz condemned as "wurzelhaft unkatolisch", "uncatholic to its very roots". The Reformation, therefore, was a tragic necessity, "caused by the disintegration of the fundamental principles and basic forms on which the Middle Ages were built". Because of its flawed origins and equally flawed agents, the Protestant Reformation would evolve into "a denial of the visible church, rooted and grounded in the objective teaching authority and in the sacramental priesthood", which it replaced with a subjective appeal to the individual conscience. In that sense, the Reformation was itself not a remedy for but a manifestation of the breakdown of the medieval Catholic synthesis. But, however badly directed, Luther's reformation originated not as wanton rebellion against holy church, but as an indignant and fundamentally religious response to a radical crisis within late medieval Catholicism.

Lortz's Luther was a deeply though anxiously religious man, brought to despair by fear of the Occamist God whom he imagined was the God preached by the Church, a man struggling to find a truly Catholic solution to his profound sense of sin. Lortz believed that Luther's rediscovery of that solution in the healing righteousness of God, appropriated by faith alone, was a personal breakthrough into a true perception, but Luther had not in fact discovered a new doctrine. It had been taught, Lortz insisted, "by all the exegetes of the Middle Ages". What was both genuinely new, and profoundly mistaken in its extremism, was Luther's overwhelming sense of the utter helplessness of the human will in this process, a pessimism that was rooted in his own psycho-pathology. That pessimism, combined with a radical subjectivism that reduced the objective reality of salvation within the doctrinal and sacramental system of the church to a purely personal experience, led Luther beyond the genuine Catholic truths that he had rediscovered and into heresy. Lortz summed all this up in



a lapidary formulation: “Luther overcame in himself a Catholicism that was not Catholic”.

You may have spotted in Lortz’s emphasis on “objective teaching authority and in the sacramental priesthood” the essentially ultramontane character of his theology in 1939. For all his receptivity to positive aspects of Luther’s life and work, the propositional Catholicism distilled into the pages of Denzinger remains the yardstick against which Luther’s theological revolution was being measured. But Lortz would go on developing his portrait of Luther into the age of Vatican II, and the Council’s more scriptural, expansive and less propositional theological style did move Lortz towards an even more positive view of Luther. He remained certain that Luther was the victim of a “strained and tormented conscience”, a “Doctor Hyperbolicus” who thought and wrote “explosively and eruptively”, too readily swayed by emotion, and whose teaching was accordingly often distorted by his reaction to particular situations or opponents. Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s Lortz was insisting that “Luther is in fact more Catholic than I realized”, and that “this great believer, who led a constant and rich life of prayer, belongs . . . among the great pastors”.

It is worth pausing at this point to register the precise extent to which Lortz sought to rehabilitate Luther as a theologian with something vital to say to the *Catholica*, and the limits of that rehabilitation. Lortz conceded that the Reformation was a tragic historical necessity, because the late medieval church, institutionally corrupt and theologically and spiritually decadent, had lost its hold on fundamental truths of the faith such as justification by faith, and was in thrall to a nominalist misunderstanding of God as arbitrary and unknowable. Luther, he believed was a genuinely religious and intensely earnest Christian, a theological genius driven by conscience to see through the materialism and practical Pelagianism that were poisoning and enfeebling Catholic piety, and a man of “astounding vitality . . . captivated by the spirit of scripture”, who had rediscovered for himself and proclaimed the sovereignty of grace. But deep flaws in Luther’s own personality, his “strained and tormented conscience”, his subjectivity and ego-centrism, his tendency to fly to extremes in order to best his opponents, his violent and combative language, all these had combined to propel him into error. Lortz pointed in particular to the disastrous influence on Luther of a passage from the writings of the fifteenth-century conciliarist Cardinal Nicolo de Tudeschi, known as Panormitanus (the man from Palermo) who had argued that “in matters concerning the faith, even the statement of a private individual might be preferred to that of a pope if the former is guided by better reasons from the Old and New Testaments than the latter.” Luther, Lortz insisted, had seized on this principle, abandoning the constraints of obedience to church and magisterium that had kept Panormitanus within the bounds of orthodoxy, and had

set his own brilliant but subjective interpretations of “my Gospel, my Bible” over against the universal testimony of the church.

Lortz’s growing sense that, underneath the egotism and heretical overstatement, there was a Catholic Luther to be rediscovered, owed something to the fact that by the mid-1960s many theologians had come to believe that there was fundamental agreement between Catholics and protestants on *the* contested issue of Justification, for Luther the *articulum stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*. Lortz wrote in 1964 that “Today the doctrine of Justification is hardly anywhere considered to divide Protestants and Catholics”. This breath-taking claim had been made possible by a generation of scholarship by Jedin and others on the debates leading up to the Tridentine decree and anathemas on Justification, and on related matters such as the relationship between scripture and tradition, and a new interest in the ideas and importance of the generation of Catholic theologians in the circle of Cardinals Contarini and Pole, who had been favourable to some of Luther’s views.

Crucial triggers for this shift were two books published in the mid-1950s: Louis Bouyer’s *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, which argued for the Catholic orthodoxy of Luther’s rediscovery of justification by grace alone, and the young Hans Küng’s *Justification, the Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, in which Küng claimed to have demonstrated the fundamental compatibility between Catholic teaching on Justification, rightly understood, and that of the greatest living Protestant theologian, Karl Barth. Küng’s claim in particular was vigorously contested from both sides of the Reformation divide, but Barth himself endorsed it, as did both Rahner and Von Balthasar, and it was to prove hugely important in ecumenical discussion.

Küng himself notably did not engage Luther directly, and Barth was not of course a Lutheran. Nevertheless, the 1999 joint declaration on justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church would have been unimaginable without Küng’s distinctive exposition of Catholic teaching on justification, and from the early-1960s, widespread interest in Küng’s contentions promoted Catholic receptivity to Luther. And the large-scale recasting of Catholic theology and ecclesiology in the wake of the Council seemed to point in the same direction. As Lortz wrote in 1964 “The Second Vatican Council has taught us to see or to sense that the deplorable one-sidedness of many Catholic formulations can be legitimately complemented so that the Catholic element expands... to include a previously ignored... biblical fullness”.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Lortz, “The Basic Elements of Luther’s Intellectual Style”, in Jared Wicks, (editor) *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, Loyola University Press 1970, pp. 3-33, at p. 32.



The ambivalent feelings that this new Catholic receptivity aroused on the other side of the Reformation divide was highlighted by the furore over the claim by one of Lortz's brightest students, Fr Erwin Iserloh, that Luther had never in fact posted the 95 Theses on the door of the University Church in Wittenberg. First floated by Iserloh in a lecture in 1961, the claim was developed in a short book, *The Theses Were Not Posted, Luther between Reform and Reformation*, published in 1966, the year of Iserloh's premature death.<sup>15</sup> There ensued a flood of rebuttal, recrimination and outrage. Iserloh was, of course, by no means the first scholar to cast doubt on the heroic myth of a dauntless young Luther defying the world by nailing his colours more or less literally to the door of the Castle Church. What made his book controversial was the ecumenical spin he gave his claim. Both Protestant and Catholic tradition had interpreted the posting of the theses as a deliberate act of defiance, the first blast of the trumpet of Protestant reformation against the papal tyranny. But according to Iserloh, Luther had intended no defiance. He had punctiliously first sent the theses privately to his bishop, the accepted procedure for initiating a theological debate, and had intended only such a debate within the normal conventions of university theology. As my old supervisor, Gordon Rupp, commented, if Luther did not make what Iserloh repeatedly calls 'a scene', "then we have Luther as an obedient rebel indeed", one whose theological protest a good deal of modern Catholic theology could support, so that the Catholic authorities themselves, by their inaction on the one hand, and by their repudiation of Luther on the other, must bear a large responsibility for the outbreak of the western schism.

However commendable Iserloh's intentions were, not all Protestants were delighted. The fact that his book had appeared on the eve of the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the posting of the theses did not go unnoticed, and this Catholic portrait of a "reformer without a hammer" was seen as an attempt to tame Luther and defuse his protest. As Gordon Rupp grumbled rather sourly, "It can alas be no accident that, as the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary looms, it should be Catholic historians who have called in question the historicity of this event..." At first sight, Lortz and his pupils mark the end of an old, bad polemic tradition. In a manner that would seem strange, say, to Catholics in Ireland, they dwell on Luther's great virtues – and are frank to the point of daring about the faults of the medieval church – the practical abuses, the theoretic errors of individual theologians, above all that "Unklarheit" of culpable vagueness of fifteenth-century theological definition. Yet,

<sup>15</sup> Erwin Iserloh, *Luther zwischen Reform und Reformation. Der Thesenanschlag fand nicht statt*. Münster 1966: translated as *The Theses Were Not posted, Luther between Reform and Reformation*, London 1968.

under the surface they still exploit Luther rather than sit down under him and they support the old thesis that what is true in Luther is Catholic, so that the over-all effect is pre-Vatican II.”<sup>16</sup>

The remarkable flowering of positive Catholic Luther-scholarship in these years ranged from essentially historical studies, like John Todd’s remarkably good 1964 Luther biography,<sup>17</sup> to major theological reassessments, like Otto Pesch’s 1972 comparative analysis of Aquinas and Luther on Justification, which suggested that Thomas’s sapiential theology was complemented, not contradicted, by Luther’s more existential engagement with scripture. Despite Rupp’s barb about the pre-conciliar assumptions underlying the work of Iserloh and the Lortz School more generally, a major part of the energy from all this came from the post-Conciliar theological ferment, and an optimistic drive towards church unity. So, for example, the most notable North American Catholic Luther-scholar, Jared Wicks SJ, was and is a distinguished ecumenical theologian, heavily involved in national and international Lutheran-Catholic dialogues.

However, by no means all Catholic attention to Luther had such friendly intent. Even in the newly ecumenical 60s and 70s, there were dissenting voices warning against what they insisted was the fundamentally unCatholic nature of Luther’s poisonous legacy. This sourer note was struck by Remigius Baumer, who revived some of Denifle’s moral charges against Luther, and by Theobald Beer, who argued that many of Luther’s key ideas had pagan roots in Gnosticism and neo-Platonism. Perhaps the most insistent and influential of these voices was that of the controversial Indologist, Paul Hacker, a layman and himself a convert from evangelical Protestantism.<sup>18</sup> In 1966 Hacker published a polemic against Luther, the drift of which was evident in its title – *Das Ich im Glauben*, soon translated as *The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion*.<sup>19</sup>

Hacker’s fundamental accusation against Luther was that he had preached what Hacker called “a reflexive faith” that “bends back upon its own subject in its very act”. According to Hacker, Luther located the certitude of salvation in the believer’s own self and “the consoling conviction of being in God’s favour”. Hacker illustrated what he

<sup>16</sup> Gordon Rupp, review of Iserloh in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, Vol. 19, No. 1 (April 1968), pp. 360-369.

<sup>17</sup> John Todd, *Martin Luther: a Biographical Study*, London 1964.

<sup>18</sup> Joydeep Bagchee, Vishwa P. Adluri, “The Passion of Paul Hacker: Indology, Orientalism and Evaangelism”, in: Joanne Miyang Cho, Eric Kurlander, Douglas T McGetchin (editors.), *Transcultural Encounters Between Germany and India: Kindred Spirits in the Nineteenth Century*. New York 2013, pp. 215–229.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Hacker, *Das ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther: Der Ursprung der anthropozentrischen Religion*, Graz 1966, translated as *The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion*, Chicago 1970.

considered the in-turned subjectivity of Luther's teaching by contrasting the overwhelming predominance of first person singular pronouns and corresponding possessive adjectives in Luther's exposition of the Apostle's Creed, against the entire absence of such pronouns and adjectives in the text of the creed itself. In Luther, Hacker maintained that "The doctrine of God the Father means first and above all that God has created *me* and everything that belongs to *me*. The salvation wrought by Christ means that the Saviour has redeemed *me*. The third article means that the Spirit has called *me*". Hacker pointed to passages like Romans 8:31-9, which since Luther's time had been interpreted as expressing this individual certitude, but where in fact Paul repeatedly and pointedly speaks of salvation as a communal reality: "If God is for US, who is against US": the consciousness of salvation in apostolic times was not individualistic, as in Luther, Hacker insists, but universal, "comprised within the consciousness of being the people of God". In this Apostolic preaching, the individual's salvation was "inconceivable outside the primary comprehensive relationship of the Lord to his Mystical Body . . ." Luther had thus "twisted the texts" of the New Testament to produce an account of faith in which "the ego bends back upon itself", an understanding "alien to Scripture and to all Christian spirituality and teaching before his time". Authentic Christian tradition offers none of the false and self-reflexive certitude which Luther and Lutheranism regard as "the essence of Christianity". Even beyond Christianity, the effects of the destructive novelty of Luther's teaching lived on even in a secular world in the subjectivism of some forms of German Idealism and Existentialism.<sup>20</sup>

The early 1980s saw elaborate Luther celebrations for the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980 and the fifth centenary of Luther's birth in 1983. These anniversaries prompted an accompanying stock-taking of the generation of modern Luther studies, much of it by Roman Catholics, which had flowed since the 1960s.

Among those taking stock was the recently appointed Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. In the autumn of 1984 *Communio* printed an extended interview with Ratzinger, in which he reflected on two generations of Catholic Lutheran scholarship, and its significance for practical ecumenism.<sup>21</sup> While appreciative of its achievements, Ratzinger discerned in the Lortz tradition a dangerous tendency to trivialize the Reformation

<sup>20</sup> Hacker provided a convenient distillation of his main contentions in his essay "Martin Luther's Notion of Faith" in Wicks, *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, pp. 85-105, from which the quotations in the text have been drawn.

<sup>21</sup> "Luther and the Unity of the Churches", *Communio* vol 11, Fall 1984, pp. 210-226, available online at <http://www.communio-icr.com/files/ratzinger11-3.pdf> from which the following quotations are taken.

divide. “Though Lortz did not minimize the deep rift which really began to take shape in the controversies of the Reformation, it seemed simple enough, following his work and by simplifying his statements, to develop the thesis that the separation of the churches was, really, the result of a misunderstanding and that it could have been prevented had the church been more vigilant.”

However, Ratzinger thought that this was to patronize the people of the past, “a form of rationalistic arrogance which cannot do any justice to the impassioned struggle of those men as well as the importance of the realities in question.” Emphasizing the work of scholars like Hacker and Beer, who had rejected the eirenicism of the Lortz school, Ratzinger pointed to Luther’s deep and considered repudiation of much that was fundamental to Catholicism. He said that “there exist not only Catholic anathemas against Luther’s teachings but also Luther’s own definitive rejections of Catholic articles of faith which culminate in Luther’s verdict that we will remain eternally separate”. Unity could not be achieved by “interpretative tricks” that minimize real differences, ecumenism involved “insights which will overcome the past”, not the remodeling of the past to explain away fundamental disagreements. In a distinction that was, in essence, derived from early Lortz and perhaps even Grisar, Ratzinger discerned two Luthers, an earnest and Christ-centred devotional genius on the one hand, and a radical theologian whose personality and intellectual radicalism led him into heresy on the other. “With his catechism, his songs and his liturgical directives, Luther created a tradition of ecclesiastical life, in the light of which we can both refer to him as the “father” of such an ecclesiastical life and interpret his work with evangelical churchliness in mind”. This was Luther as the founder of the tradition that gave birth to Bach, and which Catholics could learn from and share with gratitude. But “on the other hand, Luther also created a theological and polemical opus of revolutionary radicality“, and to approach this Luther “on the basis of his revolutionary break with tradition” is to “arrive at quite a different overall view”.

Ratzinger saw examples of these radical and decisive departures from Catholic truth in Luther’s exclusion of charity from the act of faith, in his fundamental lack of any theology of a visible universal church as distinct from the church as the local congregation, and in his effective dissolution of any effective ecclesial magisterium. “The history of reformed Christianity very clearly illustrates the limitations of exegetic unity: Luther had largely abandoned the line separating the teachings of the church from theology. Doctrine which runs counter to exegetic evidence is not a doctrine to him. That is why, throughout his life, his doctorate in theology represented to him a decisive authority in his opposition to the teachings of Rome. The evidence of the interpreter supplants the power of the magisterium. The learned academic (Doctor) now embodies the magisterium, nobody

else.” But the unity derived from scholarly consensus “is essentially revisable at any time”, whereas “Faith is a constant”.

That distinction led Ratzinger to pour scorn on the eight-point proposals for practical unity put forward in 1982 by Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries. With Lutheran-Catholic unity in mind they had suggested acceptance of the scriptures and the creeds as a sufficient basis for church unity, together with an agreement that none of the uniting churches would overtly repudiate any doctrinal formulary accepted as binding by another uniting church. This, Ratzinger suggested, was ecumenism by political trickery, a mere papering over the cracks, imposed from above, and doomed to failure: “the unifying effect of theological pluralism is . . . only temporary and sectional. There is inherent in pluralism the inability ultimately to become a basis for unity.”

Ratzinger’s sombre text was a warning against unrealistic expectations that a more positive scholarly assessment of Luther would translate directly into ecclesial convergence. It was also perhaps a prognostic of what Rahner dubbed the “ecumenical winter” that, despite real advances like the 1999 Joint Declaration on Justification, would deepen perceptibly throughout the pontificate of John Paul II. Certainly the extraordinary expansion of Catholic scholarship on Luther, which was so remarkable a feature of the 1960s and 1970s, slowed down in the 1990s and the early second millennium. More recent Catholic studies of Luther, including those triggered by the quincentenary, have been notably reticent and, on the whole, less sanguine about any likely ecclesial impact. Some of this no doubt can be attributed to the draining away of the post-Conciliar ecumenical euphoria and the marked change of theological ethos in the pontificates of Papa Wojtyła and Papa Ratzinger. But it also reflects important changes that had taken place in the writing of Reformation history more generally.

Ratzinger had declared in his 1984 interview that “there cannot be any Luther scholarship which does not at the same time involve research into his theology. One cannot simply approach Luther with the distant eye of the historian”. That perception owed something to the fact that in Germany Reformation history was almost exclusively studied and taught within theology faculties, and most European Catholic church historians were priests, in whose training and interests theology loomed large. From the 1990s onwards that was changing, and Reformation history was increasingly studied and taught by scholars without overt religious commitments, as much or more interested in the social and political dimensions of the Reformation as the theological. Increasingly, the success or failure of the German Reformation was assessed not on whether or not “true” religion triumphed over false, but in terms of the success of the reformers and their successors in suppressing traditional Catholic beliefs and

replacing them with different doctrines, practices and sensibilities. One way or another, the result was a reduction of ideological investment in Luther's story.

A key figure here was the left-leaning Irish-Australian historian Bob Scribner, firmly lapsed for most of his career, though he returned to the church during his final illness. Both as a former Vatican II enthusiast and as a secular-minded social historian, he was unimpressed by the Lutheran pieties that had dominated German Protestant scholarship about Luther, and that had influenced even Lortz and his school. Scribner rejected the religious value judgements that had sanctified Luther's revolt even in the eyes of Catholics like Lortz. For Scribner all religion was religion, none of it worse or better, none more or less authentic than any other kind. In this perspective, the narrative framework in which Luther featured as a purifier of corrupt religion disappeared, relativized by the anthropological techniques Scribner brought to bear on the religious life of late medieval and Reformation Germany. He demonstrated, for example, that Luther's startling popularity with his German contemporaries largely depended on the extent to which the "cult" of the reformer borrowed from, rather than simply repudiated, the Catholic cult of the saints.<sup>22</sup> Scribner's work initially faced real hostility from the German academic establishment, but he established himself as a formidable voice offering fruitful new approaches, and he was hugely influential with a new and more secular-minded generation of Reformation historians.

There is a broader point here about the confessional underpinnings of Reformation historiography. It was a fundamental presupposition of the whole Lortzian school that Luther's reformation, whatever its shortcomings from a Catholic perspective, was in some sense necessary and even legitimate, because of the woeful state of the late medieval Catholic Church. Lortz and his followers conceded the theological and religious decadence of fifteenth-century Catholicism, as well as the feebleness of the defence of traditional religion mounted by Luther's opponents. So Catholic historians did not question that, at least till Trent, Luther had all the best theological tunes, and the new religious style made such progress because it had more to offer than the debased and debilitated Catholicism that it challenged.

Now, until the late 1980s, much the same assumptions had conditioned writing about the English Reformation also. But a generation of revisionist historians, some though by no means all Catholic, contested that basic assumption, arguing for the vigour and secure social embedding of religion in late medieval England. As that contention gained traction, the English Reformation, and the religious stature

<sup>22</sup> R.W.Scribner, "Incombustible Luther: the Image of the Reformer in Early Modern Germany", *Past & Present*, Volume 110, Issue 1, 1 February 1986, pp. 38–68.



of the sixteenth-century English reformers came to look different.<sup>23</sup> Even now, the historiography of the German Reformation has yet to undergo a similar large-scale revision.<sup>24</sup>

Some recent Catholic treatments of Luther have reworked some of the basic contentions of Lortz and his followers. One example is the question-begging subtitle of Peter Stanford's recent popular biography of Luther where he is characterized as a "Catholic Dissident".<sup>25</sup> But different and more Ratzingerian notes are sounded in a much more scholarly recent study of Luther by my friend and colleague Richard Rex: *The Making of Martin Luther*.

Rex is best known as an historian of the English Reformation but his doctoral work was on the theology of John Fisher, and Fisher's writings against Luther were among the most influential early Catholic responses. Rex's new book is a pacey and vivid exploration of Luther's theological evolution to 1530, by which time all his distinctive positions were in place. Rex recognises Luther's genius as a polemicist, religious activist, and expositor of scripture. His book is in no sense a hatchet job but he is equally clear that many of Luther's distinctive teachings represented a decisive break with a millennium of Catholic teaching, and not merely with late medieval misunderstandings of that teaching. "Luther's problems" he writes, "were medieval problems, but his solutions were new solutions. The big novelties in his thought were the invisible church, the ineradicable persistence of sin in this life, and the certainty of grace (through justification by faith alone). Each of these central ideas directly contradicted the presuppositions of a thousand years of Christian writing and preaching – and, ironically, contradicted Luther's favourite ancient Christian writer, Augustine of Hippo."<sup>26</sup> And, according to Rex, the man in the pew pre-empted modern historians in recognizing that this was not the religion of Luther's and their forefathers. He writes, "Ordinary people, as witnessed by everyday speech and usage, had a clear idea of what was going on. What they saw in Luther's movement . . . was novelty . . . as much a novelty in sixteenth-century Germany as Islam in seventh-century Arabia or Mormonism in nineteenth-century America".<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For a useful overview see Peter Marshall, "(Re)defining the English Reformation", *Journal of British Studies* 48 (July 2009): pp. 564–586.

<sup>24</sup> Both David Batchi's *Luther's Earliest Opponents*, Minneapolis 1991, and John Frymire's *The Primacy of the Postils: Catholics, Protestants and the Dissemination of Ideas in Early Modern Germany*, Brill 2010, suggest that a more extensive re-evaluation of the theology and pastoral effectiveness of the church in pre-Reformation Germany might challenge the received narrative.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Stanford, *Martin Luther, Catholic Dissident*, London 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Rex, *The Making of Martin Luther*, Princeton 2017, p. 223.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Echoing Lortz, Rex argues that Luther's deployment of "the Panorimitanus Principle" was "profoundly corrosive because it was profoundly individualistic".<sup>28</sup> Along with "the personal certitude of divine favor which grew out of the doctrine of justification by faith", that principle would lead ultimately to the triumph of subjective private judgement as the only judge of truth within the Reformation. There is also an echo of Baumer in Rex's contention that "the deployment of peace of conscience as a practical yardstick of doctrinal truth amounted to an assertion of the self, shrouded beneath a professed subjection to scripture . . . the egotism of his rhetoric drowned out the intrinsic individualism of his logic."<sup>29</sup>

Sadly, there is no space here for a longer exploration of Rex's take on Luther. I commend it as a learned, entertaining and challenging read for anyone with any interest in the subject. Rex of course writes as an historian, not a theologian, but he engages vigorously with Luther's key ideas. He is clearly much closer to Ratzinger than to Lortz on the question of the compatibility of Catholicism with Luther's key doctrines. His Luther is, in the end, a heretic, not a Catholic dissident. This brand-new product of a century of Catholic Luther scholarship is far more measured, more objective and more receptive to Luther than the character-assassinations of Denifle and Grisar with which I began. But they would have recognized some of Rex's key points, and his book certainly points us in a very different direction from the work of Lortz and those who followed Lortz. Pope-Emeritus Benedict will probably enjoy it.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.