

# From Beast of the Wild Wood to Prophet of Reform: Changing Roman Catholic Perceptions of Martin Luther<sup>1</sup>

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In October 2017 Pope Francis and the President of the Lutheran World Federation signed a joint declaration, expressing gratitude for ‘the spiritual and theological gifts received through the Reformation’ and for fifty years of fruitful ecumenical engagement. In the same year the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America listed a series of thirty two consensus statements between Catholics and Lutherans, and identified key doctrinal issues, such as justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the presence of Christ in the eucharist, as no longer ‘church-dividing’.<sup>2</sup>

This edifying unanimity of Catholic and Lutheran ecumenists was satirized on an Australian Anglican website, which published what purported to be a leak by a disgruntled Curial insider, who was horrified that Pope Francis was planning to mark Reformation Day 2017 by canonizing Martin Luther. Last minute details were still to be finalized, according to the report, but plans were being drawn up 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, 1 April, and the Latin title of the proposed *Motu Propriu* embodying all this, whose opening words were to be *Stultus Aprilis*.<sup>3</sup>

Such ecumenical reconciliation is in contrast to the age old Catholic default mode of rabid denunciation. The tone for most Catholic writing about Luther was set by Leo X in the 1520 Bull of Excommunication, *Exsurge Domine*; where 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>4</sup>

This tradition of invective against Luther persisted for a further three hundred years, and even when serious Catholic Luther scholarship got off the ground in the early Twentieth Century, that scholarship remained relentlessly hostile. In 1911, for example, the Jesuit Hartmann Grisar published the first part of a serious multi-volumed psychological biography of Luther, rejecting older Catholic denunciations of Luther’s sexual depravity, but offering instead a portrait of a troubled neurotic, morbidly pessimistic about human nature in general and his own sinfulness in



particular. Grisar's Luther is coarse, quarrelsome, obstinate and dogmatic, and Grisar deployed a good deal of psychological analysis to prove that the reformer's theology originated in a pathologically disordered personality. He charted in detail Luther's volcanic anger, his rabid hostility to the Jews, the psychopathology of his abusive language and his imperviousness even to legitimate criticism.<sup>5</sup>

However, in the years before the Second World War a profound shift took place in German Catholic theology, as theologians turned to patristic and early medieval sources for a renewed Catholicism. A parallel shift in attitudes to Luther was led by Fr Joseph Lortz, whose *History of the Reformation in Germany*, published in 1939, was a watershed in Catholic attitudes towards Luther.

Lortz is a complex figure, not least because he was a member of the Nazi Party until 1938. Nevertheless, Lortz more or less singlehandedly brought about a revolution in Catholic thinking about Luther's reformation, which had profound and continuing implications not only for the ecumenical movement, but also for modern Catholic theology.

Lortz portrayed the Catholic Church in Germany 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 medieval theological synthesis created by giants like Aquinas. The chief villain of Lortz's story was William of Occam, whom Lortz thought had made God a distant, arbitrary and angry judge, unknowable by human reason, and who had taught that believers could fulfil the commands of God as revealed in scripture, a practical Pelagianism which Lortz condemned as 'uncatholic to its very roots'.

The Reformation had therefore been a tragic necessity, 'caused by the disintegration of the fundamental principles and basic forms on which the Middle Ages were built'. So Luther's reformation originated not as wanton rebellion against the holy church, but as an indignant and fundamentally religious response to a radical crisis within Catholicism.

Lortz's Luther was a deeply religious but troubled man, brought to despair by fear of an arbitrary God whom he mistakenly imagined was the God preached by the Church, and struggling to find a truly Catholic solution to his profound sense of sin. His discovery of justification by faith was a personal recovery of a medieval Catholic doctrine. What was novel, and where Luther was profoundly mistaken, was his overwhelming sense of the utter helplessness of the human will in this process, a pessimism rooted in his own psycho-pathology. Combined with a radical subjectivism which subordinated the doctrinal and sacramental system of the church to purely subjective experience, that pessimism led Luther beyond the genuine Catholic truths 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'.

Lortz went on developing his portrait of Luther into the age of Vatican II, and the Council's more scriptural, expansive and less narrowly propositional theological style moved him towards an ever 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'. 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'.

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*.

The key work here was the young Hans Kung's *Justification, the doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, in which Kung claimed to have demonstrated the fundamental compatibility between Catholic teaching on Justification, rightly understood, and that of the greatest living protestant theologian, Karl Barth. This claim was vigorously contested from both sides of the reformation divide, but Barth himself endorsed it, and it was to prove hugely important in ecumenical discussion.

The large scale recasting of Catholic theology after 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 onesidedness of many Catholic formulations can be legitimately complemented so that the Catholic element expands ... to include a previously ignored ... biblical fullness'.<sup>6</sup>

The ambivalent feelings 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, this 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>7</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 the first defiant blast of the trumpet of protestant reformation against papal tyranny. But according to Iserloh, Luther had intended no defiance: he had first sent the theses privately to his bishop and had intended only a debate within the normal conventions of university



theology. So, the Catholic authorities themselves, by their inaction on the one hand, and their repudiation of Luther on the other, must bear a large responsibility for the outbreak of the Western schism.

Whatever Iserloh's intentions, this Catholic portrait of a 'reformer without a hammer' was seen by many as an attempt to neuter Luther's protest. As my doctoral supervisor Gordon Rupp grumbled rather sourly, 'It can alas be no accident that as the 450th anniversary [of the Reformation] looms, that 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 .... Yet under the surface they still exploit Luther rather than sit down under him, and support the old thesis that what is true in Luther is Catholic, so that the over-all effect is pre-Vatican II.'<sup>8</sup>

It was certainly true that not all modern Catholic attention to Luther had friendly intent. Even in the ecumenical 1960s and 1970s, there were voices insisting on the fundamentally uncatholic nature of Luther's legacy. In 1966 the controversial indologist, Paul Hacker, a layman and himself a convert from evangelical Protestantism,<sup>9</sup> published a polemic against Luther, the drift of which was evident in its title – *Das ich im Glauben*, translated as *The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion*.<sup>10</sup>

Hacker's fundamental accusation was that Luther had preached what Hacker called 'a reflexive faith', which '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 contrasted the overwhelming predominance of first person singular pronouns and corresponding possessive adjectives in Luther's exposition of the Apostle's Creed, with the entire absence of such pronouns and adjectives in the text of the creed itself. In Luther, Hacker maintained, '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*.'

On the contrary, the consciousness of salvation in apostolic times was not individualistic 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 ...'. So Luther had produced an account of faith 'alien to Scripture and to all Christian spirituality and teaching before his time'. Authentic Christian tradition offers none of the false, subjective and self-reflexive certitude which Luther and Lutheranism regard as 'the essence of Christianity'.<sup>11</sup>



1983 saw the fifth centenary of Luther's birth, prompting a stock-taking of the generation of modern Luther studies that had flowed forth since the 1960s, much of originating with Roman Catholics. Among those taking stock was the recently appointed Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI. In the autumn of 1984 the journal *Communio* printed an extended interview with Ratzinger, in which he reflected on fifty years of Catholic Luther scholarship, and its significance for practical ecumenism.<sup>12</sup> While appreciative of its achievements, Ratzinger discerned in the Lortz tradition a dangerous tendency to trivialize the reformation divide: 'It seemed simple enough, following Lortz's work ..., 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.'

This, Ratzinger thought, 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'. Unity could not be achieved by 'interpretative tricks' minimizing real differences, ecumenism involved 'insights which will overcome the past', not the remodeling of the past to explain away fundamental disagreements.

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 which gave birth to Bach, and which Catholics could share with gratitude. But on the other hand, to approach Luther 'on the basis of his revolutionary break with tradition' is to 'arrive at quite a different overall view'.

For Ratzinger, one of Luther's most radical departures from Catholic truth lay in his effective dissolution of any effective ecclesial magisterium: '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.'

Ratzinger's sombre text was a prognostic of what Karl Rahner dubbed the 'ecumenical winter', which, despite real advances, like the 1999 Joint Declaration on Justification, deepened 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. We must hope that this Reformation quincentenary, coinciding as it does with the open-hearted pontificate of Pope Francis, will open the way to a more hopeful Catholic re-engagement with one of the giants of the Christian tradition.

### Notes

- 1 A greatly expanded version of this talk can be found in *New Blackfriars*, March 2018, pp 147-62.
- 2 Text available online at <https://www.elca.org/Declaration-on-the-Way>.
- 3 See online at <http://liturgy.co.nz/pope-francis-to-make-martin-luther-a-saint-on-october-31>.
- 4 English text available online at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo10/110exdom.htm>.
- 5 English text available online at <https://archive.org/details/grisarsluther01grisuoft>.
- 6 Lortz, Joseph, 'The Basic Elements of Luther's Intellectual Style', in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther* (Wicks, Jared, ed.) (Loyola University Press, 1970), pp 3–33, at p 32.
- 7 Iserloh, Erwin, *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).
- 8 Rupp, Gordon, review of Iserloh in *The Journal of Theological Studies* New Series, Vol 19, No 1 (April 1968), pp 360–369.
- 9 Bagchee, Joydeep and Adluri, Vishwa P., 'The passion of Paul Hacker: Indology, orientalism, and evangelism' in *Transcultural Encounters Between Germany and India: Kindred Spirits in the Nineteenth Century* (Miyang Cho, Joanne, Kurlander, Eric, McGetchin, Douglas T, eds.) (New York, 2013), pp 215–229.
- 10 Hacker, Paul, *Das ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther: Der Ursprung der anthropozentrischen Religion*, (Gratz, 1966), translated as *The ego in faith: Martin Luther and the origin of anthropocentric religion*, (Chicago, 1970).
- 11 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.
- 12 '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.

