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Christine Helmer

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Martin Luther and the Creation of the Myth of Modernity

Christine Helmer¹

Martin Luther is one of a handful of persons who has attained world-historical recognition. He hammered the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church and sparked a religious reformation. Luther refused to back down when pressed by Cardinal Cajetan, considered the most important Catholic theologian of the sixteenth century. Luther refused to recant his writings in front of the twenty-one year old Emperor, Charles V. When compared with Rome's intrigues and the empire's global reach Luther was the proverbial underdog. He has also become a commodity. His Playmobil figure became a top-selling toy in 2017. People who have visited Wittenberg return home wearing socks inscribed with "here I stand" and suitcases full of neon Luther figurines to be used as paperweights.

The story of how Luther sparked the Protestant reformation is a tale of how a humble Augustinian friar toppled the church and destabilized the political order. Yet a closer look reveals that Luther's story has been told with a particular goal and agenda. Luther may have posted the Ninety-five Theses to the church door. Historical evidence shows that he most likely *mailed* (not nailed!) them to the Archbishop of Mainz, who had authorized the selling of indulgences to pay for his archbishopric. Luther was undoubtedly summoned to Augsburg in 1518 in order to dispute Cardinal Cajetan. But the disputation record of the encounter shows Luther struggling to articulate his theological position in the face of his brilliant interlocutor. Only years later, in 1520, did he reach a clear understanding of how the literal word of the gospel really and truly forgives the sinner's sins. Another episode in the story tells of how Luther refused to recant his writings when ordered to do so by the emperor's lackey. But the famous "here I stand" response is not recorded in the official protocol of the Diet of Worms from that fateful day in April 1521. Luther's story was embellished with these words in order to portray him as a bold reformer, undeterred by imperial power.

If one digs below the surface of the common story, a very different Luther appears. Behind the Protestant façade we see a late medieval friar and ordained Catholic priest who was concerned with the burdens placed upon ordinary Christians by the priests. People had come to Luther, anxious that they had violated the demands of the divine justice and terrified at being condemned to hell for all eternity. Luther's own conscience was particularly sensitive. He too feared eternal damnation as the divine judgment placed upon an unforgiven sin. Yet he saw how the priests paraded their authority for all to see. They did not communicate Christ's kindness to those in need of comfort, but took upon themselves the prerogative to oppress ordinary Christians. Luther responded by separating Christ's work of freeing humans from the church's work in holding people captive. Luther preached the gospel of divine mercy in Christ, a message at the center the Christian religion since the writing of the New Testament. With his preaching Luther freed his parishioners from

¹ Christine Helmer is Professor of German and Religious Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and author of the recently published book, *How Luther Became the Reformer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

Catholic ideas that had kept them subservient to the clerical authorities. He freed Christians for life in Christ.

The story of Luther has come to stand for much more than his reform program. Luther's story is told as the freedom of the *modern* Christian. Luther's story is told as the efforts of one person to set an entire era free from captivity to medieval institutions. Through sheer brilliance and study of the Bible, he wrested himself from Rome's grip and opened the door to modern freedom. Luther has thus come to stand at the origins of the modern freedom to think for oneself, to speak without fear of censorship, to choose religion and lifestyle without discrimination. Luther, the herald of freedom, is a powerful image that has inspired—and continues to inspire—activists fighting for religious and political rights. We know that a Baptist minister from Georgia, Michael King Sr, changed his name and the name of his eldest son after a visit in 1934 to the Luther sites in Germany. Martin Luther King Jr. would go on to become the leader of the American civil rights movement in the 1960s.

How did the story of Luther as modern reformer come to be *the true story* told about him? To answer this question one must turn to a few Lutheran theologians working in Berlin at the turn of the twentieth century. These Lutheran theologians – some of the most famous names in twentieth century Protestant theology like Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Rudolf Otto, and Karl Holl – rallied together with other intellectuals of the day around a few issues. One was political. How could Germany become a modern nation? The military general of the 1860s to the 1870s, Otto von Bismarck, had embarked on the goal of creating a new German empire. He united the German states under the Prussian flag through military maneuvers and initiated a vast system of infrastructure, health care, centralized bureaucracy, and other hallmarks of modern German society.

Another issue that concerned the early twentieth-century intellectuals and politicians was culture. How could Germany's cultural unity be symbolized? Luther quickly became the right answer. A statue of Luther that had been created in the 1820s by the German sculptor Johann Gottfried Schadow was erected in the 1880s in many German marketplaces, usually alongside busts of Bismarck. The famous statue portrays Luther as a modern leader. He wears an academic robe billowing in the wind, He stands tall on the pedestal, holding the Bible in his hands. The Bible is the symbol par excellence of Protestantism. Its translation into the vernacular was Luther's triumph against a Catholic church that forbade its reading by the laity and that had nailed the book to podiums tucked away in dark corners of monastic libraries. Luther made the Bible accessible to all. His translation became the publishing success story of the early sixteenth century. With his translation, Luther gave the German people their language and a cultural artifact that would later unite the nation.

A final issue preoccupying the Lutheran theologians was academic. The turn of the twentieth century was one of the most fertile intellectual periods that Germany had known. These were the years of Bauhaus and the *avant garde*, atonal music and expressionism. These years saw new developments in philosophy and theology. The philosophical movement of neo-Kantianism would lay the groundwork for analytic philosophy. Theologians turned to history as their conceptual model for explaining how doctrine develops over time. New disciplines emerged as intellectuals wrote ground-breaking books. Georg Simmel, a friend of Max Weber and the founder of modern sociology, wrote his famous book on the philosophy of money. Martin Buber founded a journal, *Die Kreatur*, in order to bring together intellectuals interested in the new study of religion. Max Weber published his account of how Calvinism was responsibility for shaping modern capitalism that shed new light on the relation between religion and the modern worldview. With conversation

partners in the disciplines of history, religion, and sociology, theologians were drawn into new ways of conceptualizing their subject matter. Theology would no longer be the study of doctrine, but the study of how religion emerged under the conditions of modernity.

Luther was at the epicenter of these discussions. How could the theologians do their part to claim Luther as cultural unifier of modern German? They first needed to clear away a difficulty in order to perform their work. Luther had been a Catholic theologian, a member of a vowed religious order and an ordained cleric. The theologians quickly extricated Luther from his Catholic inheritances. Luther's marriage to an escaped nun, Katharina von Bora, sealed his exit from Rome and entrance into the new German cultural institution of the *paterfamilias*. The historians among the group began to study Luther according to the historical methods that had come to dominate the humanities. Until then Luther had been regarded as a theologian whose writings were important for later Lutheran theologians who built systems of theology around his work. By the late nineteenth century, the historical method had become indispensable in all areas of theology. The historians paid attention to Luther's biography. They were interested in how Luther arrived at a new understanding of God's mercy in Christ.

For these Protestant theologians it was important that Luther's discovery could be discerned in his exegetical writings. The Bible that Luther held high in marketplaces all over Germany had been his academic preoccupation. Particularly his lectures Romans from 1515-1516 would serve the purpose of showing how Luther discovered a new meaning of the term "gospel" while also conveniently placing Luther in a line of theologians who had experienced a conversion to Christ, beginning with the author of Romans, namely the Apostle Paul, but also none other than one of the major figures of the church, Augustine. The German Lutheran theologians put Luther's lectures on Romans at the center of Luther's story. By the time they published the story – the notable example is Karl Holl's *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?* from 1917² – they had forgotten that Luther was a reformer of the late medieval Catholic Church. Instead they told the story of how Luther became the reformer who initiated the modern age.

The Luther Renaissance is the name of the movement that told this particular story of how Luther became the reformer. This movement is not well known. But it should be. It identifies some Lutheran theologians working at the turn of the twentieth century in Germany, particularly in Berlin, and then later in the Scandinavian countries, who sought to update Luther in the categories of modern history and religion. The German version is particularly significant in contemporary Lutheran circles, especially in North America. The law/gospel dialectic, the certainty of faith, and faith as the creation of the external word of justification are ideas that the proponents of the Luther Renaissance came to identify with Luther's reformation breakthrough. These concepts are so ingrained in contemporary Lutheran theology in Germany and (for the most part) in America that it is difficult to see Lutheranism in any other terms.

The Luther Renaissance soon took a sinister turn. The four-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant reformation was celebrated in 1917. German scholars of Luther wanted to continue to celebrate Luther as world-historical figure even as Germany was losing the First World War to the Allies and even after the humiliation imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The story of how Luther became the modern reformer would have to

² Karl Holl, *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?* ed. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense, tr. Fred W. Meuser and Walter R. Wietzke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

reflect a new kind of triumphalism, even in defeat. This Luther, a Luther inflected with German nationalism, would emerge alongside the rise of fascism in the 1930s. Luther's words from 1543 preaching violence against Jews would be used by the Nazis to promote the November pogrom (known as *Kristallnacht*) that they staged on the eve of Luther's birthday, November 9, 1938.

When we tell Luther's story today we must acknowledge that this familiar story was created by the proponents of the Luther Renaissance. These early twentieth century German theologians told the story of how Luther became the reformer with distinctive political, cultural, and academic interests at stake. We must know that this story – particularly its violent polemic against Jews – was coopted by the Lutheran theologians who aligned themselves with Nazi interests.³ We must furthermore know that the image of Luther as modern reformer is closely associated with modern values, but also its dangers. As we confront modernity's waning and imminent climate catastrophe, we must study the story that explains its origins in the first place. We must rewrite Luther's contribution to it. Luther's polemic against Jews must be critically assessed and a Christian theology that promotes peaceful co-existence between Christians and Jews must be constructed. The study of Luther as Catholic reformer would correct the Protestant triumphalism that figures centrally in the story of modernity. Finally, Luther's theology of creation must be retrieved in order to mitigate against current apocalyptic thinking that seeks to hasten modernity's decline. If the story of how Luther became the reformer is indeed a story that is resilient and adaptable to new interests, then we must find new ways of telling it today with the interest of preserving a world that might soon be lost.

³ For compelling histories of these theologians, see the following two important books: Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); James Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917-1933*, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion (Montreal/Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2000).