MARTIN LUTHER
CONFESSOR OF THE FAITH

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

ROBERT KOLB
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Any inspection of recent theological monographs makes plain that it is still thought possible to understand a text independently of its context. Work in the sociology of knowledge and in cultural studies has, however, increasingly made obvious that such divorce is impossible. On the one hand, as Marx put it, 'life determines consciousness'. All texts have to be understood in their life situation, related to questions of power, class, and modes of production. No texts exist in intellectual innocence. On the other hand, texts are also forms of cultural power, expressing and modifying the dominant ideologies through which we understand the world. This dialectical understanding of texts demands an interdisciplinary approach if they are to be properly understood: theology needs to be read alongside economics, politics, and social studies, as well as philosophy, with which it has traditionally been linked. The cultural situatedness of any text demands, both in its own time and in the time of its rereading, a radically interdisciplinary analysis.

The aim of this series is to provide such an analysis, culturally situating texts by Christian theologians and theological movements. Only by doing this, we believe, will people of the fourth, sixteenth, or nineteenth centuries be able to speak to those of the twenty-first. Only by doing this will we be able to understand how theologies are themselves cultural products—projects deeply resonant with their particular cultural contexts and yet nevertheless exceeding those contexts by being received into our own today. In doing this, the series should advance both our understanding of those theologies and our understanding of theology as a discipline. We also hope that it will contribute to the fast developing interdisciplinary debates of the present.
Martin Luther

Confessor of the Faith

Robert Kolb
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In 2000 the American magazine *LIFE* placed Martin Luther third among the one hundred most important figures of the millennium, following Thomas Edison and Christopher Columbus. *LIFE* heralded his posting of his Ninety-five Theses as the third most important event of the period, behind Gutenberg’s invention of movable type and Columbus’s landing in the Americas. In 2003 a German television network drew more votes than national elections for a contest that found Martin Luther the second greatest German of all time, after Konrad Adenauer. Such surveys flaunt their own subjectivity, but nonetheless Luther looms large in the public’s imagination in parts of the Western world even yet.

One of Luther’s own students ranked him higher:

Everyone who heard him knows what kind of man Luther was when he preached or lectured at the university. Shortly before his death he lectured on...Genesis. What sheer genius, life, and power he had! The way he could say it!...in my entire life I have experienced nothing more inspiring. When I heard his lectures, it was as if I were hearing an angel of the Lord....Luther had a great command of Scripture and sensed its proper meaning at every point. Dear God, there was a gigantic gift of being able to interpret Scripture properly in that man.

So said Cyriakus Spangenberg, preaching on ‘the great prophet of God, Dr. Martin Luther, that he was a true Elijah,’ on 18 February 1564, Luther’s eighty-first birthday, one sermon in a series Spangenberg preached twice-yearly on Luther’s birthday and deathday from 1562 to 1573.

His opinion differed from that of Luther’s contemporary, Johannes Cochlaeus, theologian and bureaucrat in the service of Duke George of Saxony, who concluded the first (albeit polemical) biography of Luther.

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Let the pious consider what Luther accomplished through so many labors, troubles, and efforts of his depraved intention, by whose rebellious and seditious urging so many thousands of people have perished eternally... and through whom all Germany was confused and disturbed, and let go all its ancient glory....

In his own time Martin Luther was a personality who divided the spirits. Whether Spangenberg's angel or Cochlaeus's 'enraged hornet', 'triple-jawed Cerberus', or 'disgraceful, infamous, and damned heretic', this (at least initially) modest professor from a new university off the beaten path has won fame and blame ever since as an individual who changed the way many Europeans and others around the globe think. In the intervening five centuries he has been interpreted in many ways but has seldom disappeared from the stage of Western history. In the past half-century historians and theologians have tried to bring him into dialog with other contemporary or historical thinkers and, through translations of his works, with readers in the two-thirds world.

Following his death his own heirs and other Evangelical theologians attempted to interpret Luther anew; the effort continues at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As with every historical figure, these interpretations often tell more about the interpreter than the object of the interpretation. However interpreted, Luther's paradigmatic shift in defining what it means to be human and how God works in his world did create new agendas for public teaching within Christendom. He initiated reforms within the church, and his ideas impacted broader social trends that were developing in his time. This volume focuses on his theology, but his redefinition of God and the human creature cannot be separated from his impact on society and culture.

Like most historic figures, Luther worked as a member of a team. Each in the group gathered around him at the University of Wittenberg took on specific assignments in promoting their common reform program.

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5 Ibid., 238, 240, 259.
6 See the annual bibliographies in Luf and ARG.
Luther provided the spark and many of the ideas for this group; they in turn helped refine his thinking. His most valuable colleague, Philip Melanchthon, developed their common thought with his own creative insights on the basis of a different education and background. A study of Wittenberg theology as a whole is much needed. Nonetheless, ‘Wittenberg theology’ arose first of all from Luther’s own thinking; therefore, this overview concentrates on his own writings.

The reception and processing of Luther’s ideas began before his death, for example in disagreements with his own student Johann Agricola over the distinction of law and gospel.\(^\text{10}\) The debates that erupted after his death over his theological legacy found some solution in the ‘Formula of Concord’ of 1577. A majority of his heirs found large areas of agreement in its summary of his thought (although disagreement and theological experimentation continued throughout the age of Lutheran ‘Orthodoxy’). Throughout the next two centuries Roman Catholic critics continued Coelhæus’s appraisal of Luther. Calvinist opponents of Lutheran theology were gentler in their criticism but rejected certain decisive elements in his thought. His Lutheran followers gloried in his name, reproduced or echoed many elements of his thought, and defended his right to reform the church. But their dogmatic works addressed issues involved in the wider ecumenical exchange, and they cited him surprisingly sporadically. By the later seventeenth century a lay scholar and governmental advisor, Veit Ludwig von Seckendorf, defended Lutheranism with a masterful history of the Reformation but provided some historical criticism of the story’s hero.\(^\text{11}\) Lutherans of the Pietist movement treasured Luther and enlisted citations from the reformer for their own program of reform.

Enlightenment thinkers in Germany carried on the tradition of praising Luther. However, their flight from historical concretization led them in the opposite direction from that Luther had trod as he abandoned his instructors’ scholastic abstractions. Thus, the praise of Lutherans like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing lionized their champion of personal liberty and courage, but largely for reasons that betray a misunderstanding of his concerns. Their view of God and humanity took more from the thought-world of Luther’s teachers than from his rejection of their dependence on Aristotle’s image of humanity. That image envisaged the human being without God in the picture; Luther found too many remnants of this conception in the theology he had learned. Therefore, the halcyon years of German philosophy at the turn of the nineteenth century


\(^{11}\) Commentarius historicus et apologeticus de Lutheranismo, sive De reformatione religionis doctori D. Martini Lutheri, Frankfurt/Main/Leipzig, Gleditsch, 1688–92.
produced new ways of thinking, in some cases, such as Immanuel Kant, with little recourse to Luther's insights, in others, such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, with his ideas forced into an alien framework.  

Eighteenth-century evaluations focused on Luther's gifts to the development of German language and literature and the human quest for freedom. Some nineteenth-century German Romantics, entrenched by the Middle Ages, labeled Luther the destroyer of Western Christian unity, who also undermined public order, an interpretation in line with Roman Catholic renewal of Cochlaeus's interpretation in works published in the half-century after 1875 by Johannes Janssen, Heinrich Denifle, and, with emphasis on Luther's disturbed personality, Hartmann Grisar. But the revival of serious historical study in this period served to support a return to reading Luther from the original sources, by Protestant thinkers of various theological commitments. All profited from the fresh editing of the corpus of Luther's writings.

Luther has accompanied thinkers throughout the world during this half-millennium through republication of his works. Enterprising printers gathered his early treatises into the first printed 'collected works' of a living person (1519/20). Before his death, over his protests, Wittenberg colleagues initiated German and Latin series of his oeuvre (1539/1545–59/1557). Debates over the proper construal of his thought elicited a rival edition produced in Jena (1555–58), which dominated the market until the appearance of the Altenburg (1661–4) and Leipzig (1729–40) editions. Johann Georg Walch issued a translation in eighteenth-century German (1740–53), updated by Albert Friedrich Hoppe (1880–1910) for North American pastors. An edition in the original German and Latin, the Erlangen (1826/1829–1857–1886), reflected new German standards for editing historical texts. In turn, the Weimar edition set even higher standards for scholarly treatment of texts and served as the basis for twentieth-century Luther scholarship. More limited editions for special purposes and audiences appeared over the twentieth century, the most helpful the 'Study Edition' of the Evangelische Verlagsanstalt (Berlin).

In every era and every land different accents, reflecting different concerns, have shaped the agendas of those who study Luther and attempt to

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12 On Kant and later Kantian interpretations, see R. Saarinen, Gottes Wirken auf Uns. Die tranzendentale Deutung des Gegenwarts Christi, Motivs in der Lütherforschung, Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1989. U. Asendorf, Luther and Hegel, Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1982, argues that Hegel's epistemology, not his metaphysics, is useful for presenting Lutheran theology today.

13 Kolb, Luther, 137–50.


bring him into dialog with their contemporaries.\textsuperscript{18} Setting the tone and standards for this fresh look at the reformer were the theology of Luther and a biography of the reformer by a co-founder of the Weimar edition, Julius Köstlin, professor in Breslau and Halle, and the theological analysis of Theodosius Harnack, professor in Dorpat (Tartu) and Erlangen. Both reacted to the Roman Catholic criticism of Denifle and others, and they strove to make the significance of Luther’s thinking for their time clear. In their wake arose a ‘Luther Renaissance’, developed under Karl Holl, church historian in Berlin, after World War I. Concerned about the crisis of German self-confidence following the defeat of 1918, Holl gradually moved away from the views of his mentor, Adolf von Harnack, and the ‘Liberal’ interpretation of Luther of Albrecht Ritschl, which focused above all on an abstract concept of God’s love that paid little attention to the structure and the specific elements of Luther’s thought.\textsuperscript{19} Provoked both by Denifle’s misrepresentations of Luther’s positions and by the ‘Liberal’ dismissal of his relevance for the twentieth century of Ernst Troeltsch, Holl initiated a new wave of Luther research, based on the Weimar edition and focused on the doctrine of justification. The presuppositions he had absorbed from nineteenth-century Liberal theology led Holl, concerned about ethical performance, to reject a ‘forensic’ interpretation of Luther’s teaching on the restoration of human righteousness in God’s sight as a legal fiction. Holl and his students argued that Luther taught an ‘effective’ justification of the sinner instead of merely a ‘verbal’ pronouncement of righteousness. They failed to understand Luther’s presumption that the ‘verbal’ pronouncement that conveys God’s re-creating action of justification provides the firmest kind of reality there is.\textsuperscript{20}

Holl’s work elicited wide discussion and further research throughout Germany and beyond. Some of his students pursued Holl’s agenda more faithfully than others; some fell into support for National Socialism. Others followed Karl Barth’s dialectical theology, with varying utilization of Luther’s ideas, and still others disciplined their historical work through a commitment to the Lutheran confessional documents. These, such as


\textsuperscript{19} D. Lotz, \textit{Ritschl and Luther}, Nashville, Abingdon, 1974.

\textsuperscript{20} J. Stayer, \textit{Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther}, 1917–1933, Montreal/Kingston, McGill-Queens University Press, 2000, 3–47.
'Angel of the Lord' or 'Damned Heretic'

Erlangen theologians Werner Elert, Paul Althaus, and Hermann Sasse, also probed new approaches to applying Luther's insights to their world. Their work continued after World War II, alongside the newer existentialist construal of Luther's thought of Gerhard Ebeling and others, who took seriously the dialectical tension that Luther made central to theological practice and his definition of God's Word as a word that accomplishes his will as it creates and upholds reality.21

For many in the period from Holl's initial work into the 1980s the most pressing and controversial question about Luther sought to determine when he had come to his own theological position. The revolutionary defiance of the 'young Luther' seemed more intriguing than the mature thought of the older Luther. The search for the date of the 'evangelical breakthrough' or the 'reformational discovery' reflected a Romantic concern for mastering the inner workings of this brilliant mind, a project regarded in this period as more interesting than assessing his impact. Initial attempts tended to try to find the evangelical aspects of his thought as early as possible, partially as a result of ignoring late medieval proponents of various concepts of grace. From the 1960s on, arguments for a later dating have won more support. The date claimed for the critical moment in Luther's theological development reflects more about the scholar's own definition of what element in Luther is most important than it does about Luther's actual maturing as a theologian, a process that, as with all thinkers, took place in fits and starts, in progress and regress, over a longer period.

Luther scholarship did not remain the province of ecclesiastical historians. Marxists continued Friedrich Engels' attempt to force Luther into Karl Marx's theories of history. First condemned as an enemy of proletarian revolt by the peasants (1525), he won rehabilitation as a bearer of the early bourgeois revolution through the work of Russian historian Moisei Smirin and Germans such as Max Steinmetz.22 Heavily biased, Marxist contributions to the discussion of the social and economic setting of Luther's thought have commanded significantly less interest since 1989.

However, Western social and ecclesiastical historians have not ignored the larger social context of Luther's Reformation. Church historian Bernd Moeller provided a model of how the social setting of late medieval German cities influenced the Burghers' choices in the effort for reform.23

21 e.g. G. Ebeling, Lutherstudien, 3 vols., Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck, 1971–89.