From Luther to Lutheranism

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ABSTRACT

Lutheranism is one of the Christian denominations that grew out of Luther's contestation of the Roman Church in the early sixteenth century. While its name refers to the famous reformer, the establishing of doctrine and structured churches was nevertheless not his act alone, and stabilized only toward the last quarter of the century. The identity of Lutheranism nonetheless remains highly marked by the figure of the reformer, whose central theological and pastoral reflections were ultimately preserved: salvation through faith in a merciful God, the authority of Scripture alone, the belief in consubstantiation, preaching in the vernacular, the importance of song in expressing faith, the break with Rome, and the authority delegated to political authorities to organize territorial churches.

Lucas Cranach the Youger, John Frederick of Saxony and the Reformers, 1543,

In 1517, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a monk at the Augustinian monastery of Wittenberg (Saxony). Like many Europeans of his time, he was fearful for the salvation of his soul. He had doubts regarding the means the Church offered for going to heaven, especially the system of Indulgences, which offered to lighten the penitence incurred by sinners in exchange for good deeds or, especially, money. He diffused therefore 95 theses against this practice. The doctrinal debate quickly became public, with laypeople and clergy seizing upon it, and eventually turned into an affair of state. Luther was excommunicated, and was heard in 1521 by the Empire's highest authorities in Worms, before being banished by Emperor Charles V. He received protection from the Duke of Saxony and German princes, which enabled him to continue his work.

The term *Luthertum* appeared in German as soon as 1520 to designate the movement that claimed to follow Luther. It was also used by his opponents to refer to a large spectrum of dissidence, sometimes with no connection to the Augustinian monk from Wittenberg. Beginning with the second half of the sixteenth century, the word referred more specifically to the religious family stemming from Luther's reformation, in order to distinguish it from other movements, such as Calvinists or Anglicans. Luther immediately emerged as the common denominator of this particular path taken by the Reformation, despite the fact that he did not want to build an autonomous movement, but rather to reform the Universal Church. He had little interest in ecclesiology, and died without providing instructions for his successors, leaving others with the care of organizing the new Church.

Princes at the head of Churches

In 1520, Luther proclaimed that everyone could freely gain access to God. He denied the existence of a hierarchy in the Church, as well as the validity of its laws. His ideas were collected and transposed to the social and political field by the knights of the Rhineland and peasants, who revolted against their princes. Terrified by these excesses, the reformer had to clarify his thought.

He restricted the Christian's liberty to the religious sphere. Echoing Saint Paul, for whom all power came from God, he established compliance with and obedience toward civilian authorities as an absolute duty. In order to enable pastors to concentrate on preaching the gospel, Luther entrusted political authorities—princes and the magistrates of free imperial cities—with the practical organization of Churches and worship. The conversion of Scandinavian kings and Baltic princes (1525-1536), in addition to the official recognition of Lutheranism in the Empire and the right granted to princes to choose the denomination of their territory (Peace of Augsburg, 1555), consecrated the dominance these "bishops of assistance" had over Lutheran churches.

Political and religious authorities were tasked with upholding discipline—primarily the Ten Commandments—so that the community could show on a daily basis the honor in which it held God. Moral control of the faithful emerged as an essential issue, and justified the rapid reconstruction of a dignified and respected clergy. Even though the latter no longer enjoyed fiscal and legal exemptions, and pastors could marry, they continued to be a specific category of society that set an example for others. Within territorial Churches they became agents of the state, which often saw them as tools for better controlling the faithful.

At the Diet of Augsburg (1530), Philip Melanchthon—who was one of Luther's closest collaborators and drafted many normative Lutheran texts—presented Lutheranism as the "true" Church, which had reverted to its early composition. In the late sixteenth century, Lutheran communities, which were organized into territorial churches, were quite far from the liberty enjoyed by the churches of early Christianity.

The doctrine: Between Luther, his enemies, and his disciples

The distinction between Lutheranism and other Protestant movements was not immediate. In his treatises, Luther used cutting language to draw a sharp line between himself, Rome, the humanists, and radical reformers. Two points polarized the opposition: the sources of Revelation and the Eucharist. Luther made the Bible the central authority of Revelation. He opposed not only Rome, which defended the tradition accepted by the councils, but also the *Schwärmer* (fanatics) of his former disciple Karlstadt and the Swiss man Zwingli, who emphasized the inspiration of the believer by the Holy Spirit. He held an original position regarding the Eucharist—consubstantiation, or the "coexistence of substances" in the bread and wine—that also distinguished him from Rome and the radicals. In 1525, he finally broke with the evangelical and humanist branch of the Catholic Church represented by Erasmus, by denying the role of free will in salvation.

Between these foils, the field of Lutheranism remained broad. The death of Luther and the attempt at religious compromise imposed by the emperor during the Augsburg Interim (1548) fostered the divisions that were already taking shape. Two factions fought over Luther's heritage. In Wittenberg and Leipzig, Melanchthon and his supporters (the Philippists) wanted to move toward a more symbolic conception of the Eucharist, and a partial return to the notion of free will and salvation through good works. In Jena and Tübingen, those who called themselves true (*gnesio*) Lutherans wanted, on the contrary, to continue in the steps of the founder of the Reformation.

In the end, the *Formula of Concord* (1577) provided a common basis for Lutheranism by deciding in favor of Eucharistic consubstantiation and salvation through faith only—with good deeds following inner conversion, but without determining salvation. Finally, in 1580 the *Book of Concord* fixed the Lutheran canon. It brought together the three ecumenical *Credos*, Luther's two catechisms (1529), the *Augsburg Confession* and its apology (1530), the *Smalcald Articles* (1531), and Melanchthon's *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* (1537) and *Formula of Concord* (1577). The territorial churches nevertheless retained a certain liberty of interpretation.

Luther: A figure of identity?

Lutheranism was built and diffused in a relatively flexible and autonomous manner. Civilian authorities could organize their Churches as they saw fit, and proceed with liturgical and doctrinal adaptations. For instance in Scandinavia, the episcopal organization of the church was conserved, while in Finland the belief in purgatory was not rejected. It was the figure of Luther that brought these communities together more than any theological principle. The reformer's eloquence, which was diffused by the printing press throughout Europe, won over the crowds, while the diffusion of engravings representing the "Stout doctor" made Luther into an icon. Considered coarse by his detractors, he inspired the confidence and solidity of Lutherans—the backbone of Lutheran churches in the face of Rome.

Yet making reference to the "pope of Wittenberg" was not always without difficulties, as his transformation into a national Germanic hero during the nineteenth century left German Catholics in an awkward situation. His verbal violence, the crudeness of some of his expressions, and his anti-Semitic treatises have been disavowed or obscured today by Lutherans themselves.

This central role played by the figure of Luther made Lutheranism an essentially Germanic phenomenon: the reformer spoke and wrote in German, while his translations of the Bible and liturgical choices sought to make Holy Scripture accessible to Germans. In 1555 the movement won over two thirds of Germany, and spread to other countries in the broader Germanic world, in addition to the north (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Friesland, Finland) and the east (Prussia, Livonia, Bohemia, Hungary, Transylvania, etc.). Other communities were later established outside of Europe in America as well as Africa with the help of missionaries, however the proportions were not comparable with Germanic and Scandinavian Lutheranism.

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