



LUTHER'S PHILOSOPHICAL BEQUEST

David Hockenbery

As we move toward the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses, it is timely to investigate the influence of Luther on European intellectual history, particularly on Continental philosophy. While there are some obvious connections between the development of British philosophy and Continental philosophy, the absence of a theological reformation in England in the sixteenth century made for a radically divergent path in British philosophy. On the Continent, however, the Reformation begun by Luther had consequences not only for theology but for philosophy as well.

If it is true that more has been written by and about Martin Luther than any other historical figure, then surely there must be a great deal already written about the topic at hand. Apparently, though, professional philosophers and historians of philosophy consider Luther but a minor figure in their field. Perhaps it is a mere oversight that the professionals have never noticed that Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche were all Lutheran students who formally studied some Lutheran theology in Lutheran seminaries at Lutheran universities. Almost all were the sons of Lutheran pastors. This could, of course, be sheer coincidence. But it is at least worth looking into the idea that Luther's thought had more than a modicum of influence on the intellectual development of the above-named key players in Western philosophical development.

There have been some few attempts to address this question. One of the first to call attention to Luther's influence on German philosophy after the advent of modern philosophy was the romantic poet Heinrich Heine. Writing in exile in France, Heine penned a disjointed, unfinished, and sometimes odd little gift to the French literary world in 1831, entitled *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, for the purpose of "interpreting Germany to the Frenchmen." His premise was that one could not understand the German people without knowing something of the impact of Luther on German society. His book was to be a corrective to the prejudices of the French against the Germans. While often insightful, Heine's work was not systematic and never finished.

In more recent times Jaroslav Pelikan, also in exile (this time from Czechoslovakia, taking refuge in the United States), published in 1950 a tome entitled *From Luther to Kierkegaard* that emerged from his experience of teaching in the philosophy department at Valparaiso University. One might also say of this book that it was unfinished. While well versed in the history of Lutheranism and Lutheran thought, Pelikan's interest was as a theologian. His opening paragraph belies the authors' admitted bias in the study, "Luther's great accomplishment was not philosophical, nor yet theological, but evangelical."

Aside from these two works, almost nothing has been devoted to the topic at hand in English. As one might expect, German scholars have devoted considerable attention to the intellectual history of Lutheran thought. But one might also say of these scholars, as Pelikan said of himself, that their interest in Luther is primarily theological, religious, and evangelical rather than philosophical. One can cull a great deal on the topic, however, from reading the great German Lutheran historians of the twentieth century, especially Werner Elert, Heinrich Bornkamm, and Gerhard Ebeling.

But let us now turn to Luther himself. To understand Luther, and ultimately his ideas, one must acknowledge two essential aspects of his person. First, Luther was, as characterized by the psychoanalyst Erik Erickson, a *homo religiosus*. He was one who agonized over the question of human existence and who suffered with and for the suffering world around him. For Luther, this world simply did not make sense and human existence was indeed meaningless. It should be said, to correct the anachronistic potential here, that Luther's concerns were religious and theological, not psychological.

Secondly, Luther was a person of enormous intellect. There were two intellectual giants of the early sixteenth century in Europe, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther. One of the greatest errors made in attempting to appreciate if not fully understand Luther is to underestimate his enormous intellectual capacity. His contemporary enemies also made that mistake, and it was disastrous for the church. His references to Aristotle, that "damned" pagan,

and to reason, “the devil’s whore,” don’t mean that Luther didn’t understand Aristotle. Quite the contrary.

There were three major influences afoot in northern Germany that had a profound influence on Luther’s intellectual development. They were lay piety and mysticism, humanism, and scholastic nominalism.

Lay piety was a largely urban movement of an educated middle class. It emphasized ethical communal life based upon Christ’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Its greatest influence was from Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Considering Luther’s view of himself as a sinner, one can imagine how remarkably unsuccessful he felt in imitating the life of Christ. In fact, his inability to be like Christ, prior to and then in the monastery, only worsened his feelings of worthlessness and meaninglessness, what Luther called his *Anfechtungen*—anxiety, trials, despair.

On the other hand, lay piety had an intellectual, if not fully philosophical, underpinning that gave substance to its existential way of life. This was mysticism, as expressed most notably in Johann Tauler. Another important source was an anonymous work which Luther discovered and published in 1516 as the *German Theology*, calling it the most important influence on him outside of Scripture and Augustine. The students and faculty at the University of Erfurt, where Luther studied as an undergraduate, were steeped in this late medieval German mysticism. I would suggest that the underlying Platonic nature of those works had an intellectual influence on Luther as well.

Humanism, like lay piety, was a movement of the urban laity. The focus of humanism was on ethics and aesthetics. Humanists found the answers to their questions not in the theology of the medieval church but in the philosophy of the pre-Christian classical Greeks. In the process, they recovered and reconstructed virtually all of the Platonic dialogues known to modern scholarship and much of the

works of Aristotle. Of course, discovering the works of the Greeks is one thing, reading them is something else. The humanists had to learn Greek and in the process became masters of language study and linguistics. In the movement known as Christian humanism, the study of classical Greek necessarily turned to the study of Koine Greek and, finally, to the study of Aramaic and Hebrew.

The Platonic influence in Christian humanism culminated in the “philosophy of Jesus” of Erasmus of Rotterdam. The identification of Christ as the love of God in Christian humanism had a major influence on Luther and allowed the Christian humanists to understand Luther’s interpretation of Augustine’s views. The traditional view that Luther hatched the egg that Erasmus laid is not without merit, but the egg was fertilized by real philosophical understanding on the part of Christian humanism and Luther.

The third influence on Luther was nominalism. When Luther went to Erfurt, he came under the influence of nominalism. Nominalism was developed by William of Ockham, a Franciscan scholar in England (1280–1349), on the basis of the Aristotelianism of John Duns Scotus, another Franciscan Englishman. Nominalism, or the *via moderna*, stood against scholastic realism or the *via antiqua*, which reached its culmination in the great synthesis of the Dominican scholar, Thomas Aquinas. As Thomistic theology/philosophy became the orthodox norm of the Roman church, nominalism was suppressed. In the rebellious atmosphere of fifteenth-century Germany, it was revived by Gabriel Biel, holding sway at the University of Erfurt when Luther arrived as a student.

Underpinning Luther’s theology is a synthesis of these three intellectual movements of the early sixteenth century. I would contend that that Luther’s synthesis is also a philosophical synthesis underpinning the development of Continental, especially German, philosophy.

Take, for instance, the debate

between the realists and the nominalists on the nature of reality and epistemology. When there is a contradiction between what we know through sense perception and what we know through revelation, the scholastic realists posited that revelation accepted through faith is superior to knowledge gained from reasoning through sense perception. Scholastic realism believed that all apparent contradictions between reason and revelation could be reconciled through the correct application of Aristotelian logic. Neoplatonism, positing that reality stems from the participation of individual things in the *a priori* idea, or the ultimate reality, became the cornerstone of the

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scholastic synthesis. The existent universe was ontologically necessary, part of the nature of God’s being. Things were what they were because they were part of or participated in the very nature of God and could not be otherwise.

Nominalism, as developed by William of Ockham and then by Gabriel Biel, argued that we only learn through sense perception. Or better, the only things we know for sure is what we learn through sense perception. What is beyond sense perception we ought not to believe. For the nominalists, the concept of *a priori* ideas cannot be proven, nor are they necessary. The only *a priori* idea that matters is God and trying to define God is impossible because we cannot know God in reality. The only reality we can know is in particular things, which we know from sense perception. Particular things are what they are only because God

will them that way. The created universe is contingent upon God's will. To speculate beyond this is to detract from the reality of things and, more importantly, to suggest that the power of God is limited.

Luther's philosophic synthesis begins with the acceptance of the nominalist position. God in His majesty is beyond human comprehension; He is unknown and unknowable to the human's limited sense perception and reason. For Luther, all we can know of God is what He revealed of Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, in this world, is the only way that we can think about God. We accept Christ as the love of God in faith. We know Christ as portrayed in Scripture. This is central to Luther because it is only Christ, the love of God, who gives meaning to individual existence. Everything else is knowable only through sense perception.

With the widespread acceptance of this religious position in Europe, there

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are profound and immediate philosophical consequences. Two are most profound.

First, there is the role of civil law and civil authority. The revealed God, namely Christ, only teaches me how I should live in relation to my neighbors, or rather, how I am to live when I have accepted Christ in faith. It says of nothing of how secular soci-

ety should best be organized or governed. In 1520, Luther informs the secular authorities of Europe that it is their responsibility to establish civil authority. It is possible to extrapolate much about civil life from Christian teaching, but ultimately it must be a rational construct. Luther conceded that this is one thing that Aristotle was pretty good at, thereby opening the door to the true study of Aristotle. It is not coincidental that Luther's first assignment at the University of Wittenberg was to lecture on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Second, there is the matter of science. When Luther asserted that you can only learn about reality through sense perception, he sanctioned the development of modern science. It is rarely remarked in the history of science that Copernicus's *On the Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies* was first published and introduced in 1543 by Andreas Osiander, whom many consider the first theologian of Lutheran orthodoxy. While Luther personally thought Copernicus's cosmology was wrong, he could hardly argue with Osiander's position, following Luther himself, that it is incumbent upon us to understand the created universe in exploring the "kernel of the nut and the germ of the wheat and the marrow of the bone." This support and encouragement of empirical study by Lutheran theology was a blessing to humanist scientific inquiry, already being scrutinized by the inquisitors of the Roman church.

Nominalism lived on through Luther; his anticipated the radical nominalism of Thomas Hobbes in England. It was always a logical option for Luther that if we can only know for certain what we learn through sense perception, perhaps the only reality is what we know through sense perception. Indeed, that this was a logical step in the nominalist argument was a major contributing factor in Luther's

continuing *Anfechtungen*. His table talk is replete with his questioning of his own theology. "Who knows," he would say, "if it is true." That also means Luther's concept of faith became a desperate act of affirming individual meaning. If you will, Luther's concept of faith in the context of his continuing despair more than anticipates "the leap of faith" expressed in Kierkegaard's later philosophy.

What enabled the emergence of radical nominalism was Luther's destruction of the authority of the Roman church. England quickly followed suit in eliminating the authority of Rome in England, but the English Reformation was never truly enacted as a theological or religious movement. Thus Luther's theology could not act as a restraint against the emergence of radical nominalism and its ultimate triumph in the form of British empiricism, as it did on the Continent, where his theology could refute any ultimate conflict between science and religion and could ameliorate the gross materialism that must follow from the pure empiricist tradition.

Simply speaking, Luther's theology could not be systematized in the Aristotelian sense. However, his philosophic synthesis and different aspects of his thought can be seen not only in Melancthon, who was left to attempt a synthesis of Luther's thought, but in Lutheran thinkers from Leibniz to Nietzsche. Indeed, Luther's tremendous influence on German thought affected non-Lutheran thinkers as well. Further investigation into Luther's impact on these thinkers will bear much fruit in understanding these thinkers and their ideas in a fuller context. LF

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