

EDITOR'S PREFACE

WAS LUTHER A SAINT GEORGE who fought the dragon of the Church of Rome, or a villain who destroyed the unity of Western Christendom? (Eastern Christendom, of course, had never enjoyed any unity.) Protestants usually present Luther as a kindly man, a good husband and father, and a religious thinker who was on the whole as right as the papacy was wrong. But his admirers, like his detractors, generally have extraordinarily little feeling for Luther. In fact, he was a man almost anyone who reads enough of his writings is bound to admire and detest in turn. He was neither dull nor moderate, but radical in speech and action. It will not do, however, to make a hero of the young Luther while admitting that the old Luther wrote some deplorable tracts against the German peasants and the Jews. The man was of one piece, and the writings that shock modern readers involve no betrayal of the principles on which he based his Reformation.

When the peasants revolted, Luther wrote in 1525, a mere four years after what is widely considered the high point of his career, his refusal to recant at the Diet of Worms: "There are to be no bond-slaves since Christ has freed us all? What is all this? This makes Christian freedom carnal! . . . Read St. Paul. . . . This article goes straight against the Gospel and advocates robbery so that each robs his master, who owns it, of his body. For a bondsman can be a Christian and have Christian freedom just as a prisoner and a sick man can be Christians even without being free. This article wants to make all men equal and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly, external kingdom, which is impossible."

In the same vein, Luther admonished Christian prisoners of war who had been reduced to slavery by Turkish Muslims that they had no right to seek their freedom: "You are robbing and stealing your body from your master who has bought it or acquired it in some other way so that it is no longer yours but his property, like cattle or other possessions."

Liberal Protestants could scarcely believe that a great Christian could have written things like these. But the assumption that such sentiments are incompatible with Christianity and that Christianity entails twentieth-century liberalism is a twentieth-century superstition, of a piece with the notion of Christians in other climes and times that Christianity entailed *their* views. Luther's firm conviction that Christianity entailed *his* views was actually less naive and thoughtless, for he knew the Bible as few liberals have ever known it, the New Testament as well as the Old, book for book, having translated the whole of it and weighed every word.

It is a measure of the naiveté of legions of his admirers that few of his stands have been applauded more than his refusal to recant unless he should be refuted from Scripture—as if Scripture said with one voice: man is made just by faith alone—faith in Christ's expiation of our sins—and not at all by any works whatever. Luther took his cue from his reading of Paul's Epistles to the Romans and Galatians, where Paul interprets Habakkuk as having said that. But the Epistle of James, also in the New Testament, says: "Man is justified by works and not by faith alone." Says Luther: The Epistle of James is utter straw!

Luther chose what fitted his aims and denounced what did not. But he did not do this piecemeal, picking a verse from here and a half verse from there. In his theology he had little use on the whole for the Old Testament and none at all for the Mosaic and prophetic concern with what is often called social justice. Nor did he have very much use for the first three Gospels. The moral demands of the Sermon on the Mount, he said, were intended only to show us our incapacity for good works. The saving words are to be found in Paul's epistles, notably including Romans 13 and I Corinthians 7: "Let every one be subject to the authority that has power over him, for there is no authority that is not from God. Whatever authority there is, is from God. And whoever opposes authority, opposes the order of God, and those who resist will be judged accordingly." "Let every one remain in the state in which he was called. If you are called as a slave, have no care."

Why, then, did Luther rebel against ecclesiastical authority? Because his primary concern was not with *this* world but with salvation,

and one could suffer and be oppressed in this world and be saved; but the Church, he thought, had falsified the Word of God and kept from men the tidings that they needed to be saved. He stated his position clearly in 1520 in his treatise *On Good Works*, one of the major works of the Reformation. In his discussion of the Mosaic commandment to honor father and mother, he said:

"The third work of this commandment is to be obedient to temporal authority, as Paul teaches us in Romans 13 and Titus 3, and Saint Peter in I Peter 2. Be subject to the king as the supreme authority, and to princes as his ambassadors, and to all orders of temporal authority. . . . For suffering wrong does not corrupt anyone's soul; nay, it improves the soul though it diminishes the body and one's possessions. But doing wrong does corrupt the soul even if it should succeed in this world. . . . This is also the reason why there is not so much danger in temporal power as there is in spiritual power when it does wrong. For temporal power may do no harm because it has nothing to do with preaching and faith and the first three commandments. But spiritual power does harm not only when it does wrong but also when it neglects its office and does other things, even if these should be better than the very best works of the temporal power. Hence one must resist it when it does not do right, and not resist the temporal power even when it does wrong."

A few pages earlier, Luther begins his commentary on the commandment to honor father and mother by saying of "obedience to and service of all who have authority over us [that] Therefore disobedience is a greater sin than murder, unchastity, theft, deception, and whatever may be included in that." It should be noted how remote this New Testament ethic is from the ethos of Elijah and the prophets who risked their lives defying kings.

As for Luther's frequent lack of kindliness and his impassioned wrath and hatred, he believed—like the Christ of the Gospels—in hell and damnation, and his God was no more liberal or moderate than Luther himself. Among earlier treatments of Luther I am most impressed by Ernst Troeltsch's great book on *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*. (The English version of this work obscures one of its greatest virtues by turning "Teachings" into "Teaching," as if all the Churches had offered the same message.) But Troeltsch's tome comprises a thousand pages, of which roughly one hundred deal with some aspects of Lutheranism.

There has long been a need for a new full-length portrait of Luther. To bring that off, his biographer must have highly unusual qualifications—including three that are rarely found together. First, one must know Luther's world: the age and the intellectual climate

in which he lived, his contemporaries and the whole setting. Then one must know religion not only from books but also firsthand—and not only the milk of human kindness that sometimes passes for religion in the modern world. Finally, one must love language and be sensitive to its power, or one cannot begin to appreciate Luther's achievement; for his translation of the Bible went far toward creating the modern German language.

Richard Marius possesses all three of these qualifications in the highest degree. As a professor of history, he has prepared scholarly editions of one of Luther's most renowned contemporaries: Sir Thomas More. But while he is at home in Luther's world, his only book so far has been *The Coming of Rain*, a novel that is remarkable for its prose, its emotional depth, and its understanding of human passion. Clearly he had the gifts and the background to write an outstanding intellectual biography of Luther. Here it is: a compelling portrait of a man who did whatever he did with his whole heart and soul and power. Richard Marius has succeeded in bringing to life the man who made the Reformation.

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