

SP23

Luther

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The Development of Luther's Religious Experience:

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Together with his thought on the church, and scripture.

There is perhaps no other man whose religious experience so influenced history, than Martin Luther. In this great reformer we have a man whose own thinking was greatly coloured by his religious experience, and whose thinking was the leading influence in the German reformation. Thus in studying this man's religious experience we are not indulging simply in some biographical curiosity, but we are attempting to analyse one of the elements of the reformation movement. His religious experience was highly influential in shaping the thought and the practical emphases which characterise the reformation. Especially in Germany.

What things were in the youth of this man to form a background ^{for his} against which the religious experience in the convent at Erfurt? It must be remembered that these factors were not determining. However they do condition his reaction. There was much in his youth to point in the direction of his experience.

There was first the simple piety of the religious life of his home. From what evidence we can find it is most obvious that the average German peasant home and, undoubtedly Luther's, was filled with religious quality deeply serious and unadorned. He was taught the creed, the Lord's prayer, a few simple old hymns. From the popular hymns of the day, and even ballads we can catch some of the quality of this home religion. In many ways some of it could be called belonging to the Reformation even before it occurred officially. Certainly the interpretation of Jesus in these hymns is not cluttered up with much of the ecclesiasticism that was displayed in other quarters of the medieval church.

This quality of almost honest piety also characterizes several of the lay religious movements. Throughout Germany at this time several of the monastic orders were gaining a popularity that was rivalling the parish priests. The people came to the lay religious orders because they found sincerity there and no matter how often the church insisted that the character of the priest in no way influenced the administration of the sacraments, the people preferred this service to that of the priest. This state of affairs existed during Luther's youth and no doubt influenced him greatly. It is most significant that in his search for peace of soul he joined himself to one of these orders. ... The Augustinian Eremites at Erfurt. None was one of the many anti-ecclesiastical influences which existed in Germany in Luther's day. Without a doubt they all exerted a strong influence on the young Reformer as his ideas were taking shape.

along with these there were influences which led in the other direction. Some of them against which he reacted and some of which he held to the end. The conception of Jesus which the church then held was one of a stern judge. Jesus was to be feared as a judge. The religious art of the period is mostly concerned with this aspect of the son of God. Martin Luther who so much was much more imaginative and spiritual than it was speculative and theological was no doubt full of these sentiments. For him, Jesus was a being to be feared. He was waiting to judge and condemn for every sin. Jesus was a name to strike terror. Practically the whole of religion was geared for the purposes of intercession. In some ways ecclesiastical religion had no other function. Its purpose was to get one or other of the saints or may the mother of our lord to intercede with the stern judge on behalf of the devotee. Not only were most of the prayers made to Mary but also many came to be made to her mother. Jesus could be reached out through the church and it could reach him only through the saints. Christ was in danger of being completely cut off from the people.

One result from this way of thinking was that religion was mainly based on fear. A great revival took place in Germany at Luther's time, based on this motive. For several years there had been cross fire, the Turk constantly threatened the borders of Europe. Within Europe there were councils wars. Out of the uncertain times there grew a religious revival. It took the form of innumerable pilgrimages. Some of these pilgrimages going through a town would expiate many of the townspeople into joining them. There were several notorious children's pilgrimages of this kind. People engaged in all manner of penances. Indulgences were secured on every hand. Out of the tension of the times grew the religious zeal with all its gross manifestations. Luther grew up denning its height. It no doubt helped to disgust him that religion should exploit the piety of the people.

No doubt hastened on by this revival based on fear the penance system of the Roman church became more elaborate and complex. Indulgences were converted from being an act to prove the penitent nature of the confessing sinner, into being the purchase of absolution from guilt, regardless of the sincerity of the sinner. Penance became a sacrament rather than an institution. The result was the salving of the consciences of the common man. It weakened morality. However it made money for the church. The connection with the sacrament, good works were demanded. Hence we have not so much a medieval insistence on the ethics of Jesus, but a reversion to some of the old magical qualities of paganism. This type of good work was engaged in not because it was good but because in some mysterious way of so engaging a person could bring about his salvation. Salvation came to be a thing that could be manipulated. Good works was the mechanism. The result in the social psychology was the same as that of paganism.

it developed the concept of control. Religion was magic, not loyalty.

There is one more thing we should mention which had a strong influence upon the young Martin Luther. For all the non-ecclasiastical religion of the time and for all Luther's part in it, ecclesiastical religion had a strong hold on the young man. This was one of the reasons for his conservatism. Luther was never an all out radical. From the beginning the church had a strong hold on his life. For him the church was the Father's house. He would have preferred to reform the Roman church. He did not break with it until it was evident that the reforms he demanded could not be executed without a break. When the reformation movement did result in the formation of a new church it is significant that the Lutheran wing was most conservative of all. Only those elements which were definitely opposed to Reformation ideas were dropped.

The Martin Luther we have a deeply sensitive man, interested in practical religious matters who grew up within the milieu we have just described. He became early convinced of his own unworthiness before God. Following this his life was a search for the means of salvation. He sought for solace in all the expressed sources to which the medieval church could point. He left off his pursuit of the profession of law and entered the convent of Augustinian Eremites at Erfurt. Among the monks, then considered the highest example of Christian piety, he was the most pious. In a place which spends very much time a description of Paul his inspiration "If monks could save a man Martin Luther could be one of the highest heaven." Yet peace did not come to him. Doubt as to his own increased his devotion. He confessed to his superiors in all sincerity sins that they considered trivial. So much so that they asked him to stop. Still no peace came. In his study he was encouraged to read the Bible especially Paul's epistles, of that great educator St. Augustine. The superior urged him to forget his troubles & helping in the work of God. Finally this peace came to him. Not of any manipulating of ecclesiastical machines, but simply through his whole hearted belief in the mercy of God as demonstrated of the saving work of Jesus. He found that his experience of communion with Christ in which Christ's goodness was attributed to him for all his sin, was reached immediately and not through the intermediation of the church. All those other elaborate channels he found to be worthless. A trip to Rome further demonstrated the uselessness of those methods of salvation for which the staff of life stood. He was completely disgusted with the corruption and loose living in the Papal court. The time arrived some definite crisis which would crystallize Luther's anti-Roman opposition. This crisis was brought about by the advent of Tetzel in Wittenberg to sell indulgences. When the Papal messenger arrived to open his great campaign it was very obvious that the practice of indulgence selling was appealing and popular. A great parade welcomed him in to the city. Many people were delighted with his performance. Most of all Luther who immediately resented his kindly - fine things. Here is announced the idea that indulgences remove guilt. True repentance brings pardon from God without the help of indulgences. This repentance was demanded of all times

Christianity. With the publication of these sentiments, the break came. A humble German monk had challenged the Pope.

Luther's basic doctrine, the one from which all others spring was justification by faith. It arose naturally out of his own experience. Like Paul before him, he experienced his peace of soul, not through any formal dogma or ecclesiastical manipulation, but through a direct experience of the love of God. His explanation of the experience was the doctrine that the just shall live by faith. This doctrine was not without what we would now like to call magical qualities. To Luther, somehow through the work of Christ, his goodness was attributed to the truly repentant sinner, although imperfect in the sight of God, man is considered good because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. To receive this justification from God man does not do something. Good works do not avail him this service. To receive this new status, man must have faith. Faith is not intellectual consent following a more or less convincing argument. Faith is trust; trust which throws all on the knowledge of the love of God; trust which risks everything on the forgiveness of God and gives itself up to believing of God those things which are said of him.

Here we have the spirit of the reformation. In spite of the elements of magic which seem to us to be part of the Christology, the doctrine is an essential part of Christianity. Philosophy, ethics and practical experience all point to the importance of a doctrine of this kind. Religion has basically to do with attitude. A man is saved a man realizes his highest self, not through adherence to a moral code or by taking part in cultic rites, but by possessing himself of the right attitude. Given this, the other things follow. The basic Christian attitude is that at the heart of the universe is perfect good. That man as yet is imperfect: that which he strives to be perfect he must realize also that at the heart of the universe is forgiving love. A God who demands perfection while forgiving imperfection is the only ultimate being satisfying ethics and practical living. The Reformation movement was a step in this direction away from the pagan tendencies of the medieval church. Luther's religious experience is that movement writ small.

Most of Luther's further beliefs were logical deductions from his interpretation of his experience of salvation. Because he realized that there was no need for a priest to intercede with Christ on behalf of man, the main function the members of that medieval profession was denied them. All Christians were Priests. Each man himself communed with Christ directly. Each man was to aid his brother in that communion. Luther put forth the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

From this his views on the church naturally followed. As with the Roman church he held that the Christian church was the body of Christ: - that invisible body of goodly men: - the communion of saints: - a fellowship of all through fellowship of Christ. However unlike the Roman church

as an agency for handling out or changing the salvation of Christ. The United Church was wherever the word of God was proclaimed. Where the promises of God were made known - there was the church visible. The test for a Christian church was whether it proclaimed the word and demonstrated the faith. In assisting the church in this work a ministry was to be set up. This body in no way was to be a priesthood. It had no special powers or privileges. It was simply that men were set aside to put their full attention on the spiritual needs of the people.

Luther's view of the function of the church and its ministry influenced his view of the relations of church and state. In this connection at least two biographical factors added their influence. The first was the fact that the hallows movement could never have succeeded had it not been for the Territorial services which championed its cause. These princes not only sheltered both personally when it seemed as though the young Reformer was going to meet an early end, but also gave great impetus to the movement. Motivated partly by a feeling of opposition to a foreign ecclesiastical power these men joined their forces to the Reformation. The fact that it succeeded was largely due to this intervention. The fact that the hallows movement had to depend on these princes for its life meant that it made great concessions (if they can be called that) to civil power. In each state the Territorial ruler was the controller of the church in all its political and administrative aspects.

The Reformers unfortunate attitude to the Peasant's Revolt threw him out the more into the arms of these local rulers. With this calamity he then abandoned any ideas he might have had of the freedom of religion & its separation from the state. The common man was not to be trusted. He might do all manner of unexpected things. The civil authorities were the only ones who could be trusted with the responsibility.

However too much emphasis can be placed on these various causes of Luther's lack of revolutionary principles in connection with the churches relationship to the state. When he denied Papal or any other ecclesiastical authority in political & civil matters, he had to show that authority somewhere. It was only natural that living in the time that he did, that that authority be placed with the existing civil authorities. Ecclesiastical policy had been terribly corrupt. Placing authority in the hands of civil authorities would be as good a reform as any. Further, Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers led naturally to this stand. A priest had no privileges and no special authority, if he did his work well, or lived loosely, he was to be reprimanded, just as was a stevedore or a blacksmith. Thus the civil ruler could appoint or dismiss a minister as he chose. This was a very natural development at times such as these. The church had its function, but no political power. All ministers were as much subject to civil authority as were any men. The result was however that the church began to lose its independence. It became just one aspect of civil control.

It has been said countless times that the Reformation movement placed an infallible book in the place of an infallible Pope. Certainly the protestant movement did greatly emphasize and renew the scriptures. However it gave it a different kind of infallibility than the medieval church gave to the Pope. In the scriptures the protestants saw a personal rather than a dogmatic revelation. They commenced with God in the Bible. - It was not a book of laws and exact statements which needed an authoritative church's interpretation to insure infallibility. Because of a different conception of the nature of religion, the reformation movement did not need that kind of infallibility. Because it was in the beginning at least with Luther, Protestantism saw in scriptures, the revelation of God in history. It was a personal book. - Luther himself emphasized certain excellents and considered others worthless. His was no literalism. The discovery of a few mistakes or contradictions did not bother him. He saw in the Bible the evidence of human literature. The word of God, whose if men come to know of God is forgiving nature was a thing distinct from scriptures. It was infallible in the sense that it was undeniable. Scriptures was a record which conveys this word. Thus although Luther attached great importance to scriptures he was bound to it by no literalism. To him it was not an authoritative book in that sense.

It is true that later Protestantism did come to hold to a literalism in that sense. It is also true that Luther himself in many a controversy quoted those biblical passages which supported his thesis in no uncertain authority. However basically Luther's view of scriptures was not one of tightly bound literalism. This spirit has been preserved. Perhaps the best evidence that it was present from the beginning of reformation times is the emphasis that movement gave to critical study of the Bible. An impetus which is still part of our heritage.