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FOUR CENTURIES OF LUTHER

1517-1917

By CANON WILLIAM BARRY, D.D.*

I

ALL HALLOWS EVE, October 31, 1517, has ever been noted with grief or thanksgiving as the birthday of the Reformation. To Catholics it is a date that belies its name, for the ninety-five "Theses" which Luther nailed up on the door of the Castle-church at Wittenberg were so many death-knells, announcing that saints and sacraments, with all which those solemn words implied, were leaving the lands once hallowed in and through them. The visible Church was to disappear from the nations of the North. There was to be no longer a united Western Christendom. The Communion of Saints itself should cease to bear henceforth any tangible significance. Such was Luther's achievement, and to us the recollection cannot be joyful. But those who till yesterday were called Protestants—the title is not so much in favour now—have kept its centenary age after age with shouting. The friar of Wittenberg seemed in their eyes a second Paul, and his works a re-publication of the Gospel. To which we must answer sadly that wherever the Lutheran spirit has prevailed the Gospel, torn to pieces by critical unbelief, is become a heap of fragments. Luther's intended Reform has destroyed historical Christianity in the hearts of millions, root and branch. "He could do no other"; that was his essential task and its necessary effect on every man that trusted in him. But as the Church faded out of men's daily life and conduct, the State grew more and more to be the real

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constraining social power, supreme, unassailable, absolute. As "faith" was the whole of the Christian's inheritance, it followed that politics, ethics, art, literature, business, became altogether in aim and ideal secular. Yet some outward semblance of a Church lingered like a ghost where the Catholic reality had flourished so long. Over this pale simulacrum the "Prince," as Luther held, was by divine right the "summus Episcopus," the one true Pope in his own territory. But the Prince was a layman. And so the Reformation in German countries, while it abolished the Roman Primacy, the hierarchy and the priesthood, gave to the secular State divine prerogatives. All Hallows Eve, 1517, ushered in, not the reign of the Saints, but the Royal Supremacy. Philip of Hesse, or Henry VIII, or Frederick II of Prussia, or the Kaiser of to-day, was by God's grace empowered to rule the Church as he ruled the State. In the words of Cranmer, who faithfully echoes Luther, the King was the very overseer, the very shepherd, whom the Holy Ghost had appointed and to whom the expressions of St. Paul, in the Acts of the Apostles, applied. He, and not St. Peter's successor, was Vicar of Christ.

II

Thus did Luther bring in the new territorial Cæsaro-Papism to replace the old united Catholic Christendom which he rejected. He was the greatest breaker-up of Europe, civilized and Christian, that ever lived. Gibbon observes that "the furious spirit of Luther, the effect of temper and enthusiasm, has been forcibly attacked"—by Bossuet in the "History of the Variations of Protestant Churches"—"and feebly defended"—by men like Seckendorf. That is true. The furies, indecencies, unseemly language, insane arrogance, which make the writings of this "German St. Paul" such painful reading, need no further proof or illustration than he himself affords. His was "the mightiest voice that ever spoke to Germany." To his own generation he rose up as their champion, their hero,

the nation personified in its revolt from Rome. His vehement tracts did much to shape their political action; his commentaries on Scripture formulated their new religion; and in his German Bible he gave them a standard of speech that has conquered all its rivals. Not only so. Luther's "Table Talk," his correspondence, and the multitude of personal confidences which go towards making of his works an autobiography, leave us in presence of a man in whom the Teuton world finds its type and consummation. Neither Roman nor Humanist, he stands like the colossal statue of Hindenburg high above the people, and they adore him. Even Catholics need some self-restraint not to join in that worship. Lessing, who was no Lutheran, appeals to him; Goethe frowns, but cannot deny his claims; and Heine, the modern Jew, laughs and mocks in sly fashion while he admires him; but his portrait of Luther is the best ever drawn. Luther, he tells his French readers, was "not only the greatest but the most German man in our history; in his character all the virtues and failings of the Germans are welded together in the grand style. . . . He was a dreamy mystic and a practical man of deeds. His conceptions had not only wings but hands; he spoke and he acted. He was not merely the tongue but the sword of his time. He was a cold, scholastic word-spinner, and an inspired, God-intoxicated prophet." Heine celebrates the "divine brutality of Brother Martin," whom Huxley qualified as a "genial ruffian." In short, to Heine this "man of Providence" looms up entirely original, compounded of things high and low, but always unconquerable and a demonic force. Yet he began a revolution, the scope of which he did not in the least anticipate. For Heine affirms, with superfluous irreverence, exactly what I have stated above, that when the Communion of Saints was denied, free thought entering in would sweep away the whole Christian creed. But he adds, and it is much to the purpose, that "free thought" in the German universities of his own day was sinking into a dependence on the Ministry, and even the police.

III

Here we light upon a strange problem, already extant in Luther's middle period, if we should not declare it to be involved in his procedure from the first. Against the Roman authorities this daring innovator maintained that every Christian, being "taught of God," needed no earthly teacher, and must interpret the Bible for himself. But when the Anabaptists took him at his word, only to follow their own judgment, which did not agree with his, Luther hounded on the German princes to slay and to exterminate the Anabaptists. What became then of free thought, the unfettered Christian conscience, the right of the individual to understand Scripture as he listed? The outcome, after wars which made a wilderness of Germany, was remarkable. On the one hand, each territorial sovereign fixed by his own will the religion of his subjects; and thus the creed of the Palatinate was changed four times, but always by the Count Palatine, in twenty years, between 1562 and 1582. But, on the other, speculation in matters religious and philosophical might go to very great lengths, provided that it never went counter to the State authority. When it did so, the Government, as in the well-known instances of Kant and Fichte, speedily called upon the adventurous thinker to change his tone. For my own part, I do not question that the extreme obscurity of Kant's metaphysical writings was dictated by dread of the royal censure. "*Cujus regio, ejus religio*"; the King of Prussia was his Pope. So it is now; and we have seen the Lutheran clergy joining with the University professors of the Fatherland in manifestoes to all the world, which bind religion no less than philosophy, literature, and science, to the Kaiser's chariot wheels. In these men Luther lives and triumphs—or crouches before the throne. His theological dogmas are forgotten; his curiously submissive spirit towards the German State governs the pulpits and the press, the teaching and the preaching, of a nation which can only be

described as "gens in servitutem nata." This I have termed elsewhere the "spirit of the Tribe," and Luther was its perfect example.

IV

This peasant of genius, Saxon-born, had nothing universal or cosmopolitan in his nature. Of all the famous men who belong to the period which we own, not undeservedly, to have been a new birth of literature and a return to the Greeks, Luther was the least finely touched by Attic influences. He scarcely grasped the meaning of reason; he could only rail at Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. The Dominican scholar, Father Denifle, has proved with abundance of citations that this disciple of Ockham did not know the great Masters of scholastic method. But if he had known them, his contempt for the human intellect would have provoked in him disdain of Christian philosophers who could value reason so highly. With a cynicism which reminds us of Swift and Swift's horrible creation, the Yahoos, Luther perceives in man, apart from the fantastic power he calls "faith," only a blind lust, a complete impotence of will, and an utterly depraved mind, incapable of reaching the truth. Such, I say, pretty nearly, was Swift's Yahoo, cunning, vicious, and craven of soul. But when we have come thus far in our account of the human animal, according to Luther, the last word is fear, an overmastering cowardice in presence of the Supreme Reality. Now that fear made the very heart of Luther's own spiritual life and religion. The justifying faith to which he clung so desperately never was aught else than the attempt, for ever renewed and for ever failing, to transform fear into trust. Many agonized pages in those old black-letter volumes of his inditing reveal how Luther struggled, and with what sadness and terror, to escape from the Law and take refuge in Christ. The cloud which has visibly overspread Protestant Europe during centuries was poured forth from this doubting heart first of all.

V

In his rebellion Luther was bold, yet wary. When he stood up at Worms and defied Charles V, he knew that he could reckon on the German princelings to back him up or shelter him, and that the discontent of the nation with foreign exactions, too long unheeded by the Curia, was a force more powerful than distant Rome. There is a passage which comes last in Newman's Anglican volume on "Justification," and which draws out "the great moral of the history of Protestantism"—so far as Luther is concerned. I may be permitted to quote its chief points, since, allowing for a certain exaggeration of phrase which I need not do more than indicate, the summing up is profoundly just. "Luther," said Newman, "found in the Church great moral corruptions countenanced by its highest authorities; he felt them; but instead of meeting them with divine weapons, he used one of his own. He adopted a doctrine original, specious, fascinating, persuasive, powerful against Rome, and wonderfully adapted, as if prophetically, to the genius of the times which were to follow. He found Christians in bondage to their works and observances; he released them by his doctrine of faith; and he left them in bondage to their feelings. He weaned them from seeking assurance of salvation in standing ordinances, at the cost of teaching them that a personal consciousness of it was promised to every one who believed. For outward signs of grace he substituted inward; for reverence towards the Church contemplation of self."

Most true and searching. But I say that when Luther gazed into the deeps of his own being, he discovered therein nothing but fear and doubt. He strove hard, yet he never could overcome that doubt or cast out that fear. His religion took no hold of facts, but fluctuated to and fro in a sea of emotions. To him feeling was of necessity all he knew, all he could grasp. Reason failed him; the Catholic tradition he abhorred. Even the Scriptures, though God's own dictation, spoke to

him only here and there ; as the record of history they could bring him no relief. How from this fountain-head of an all-embracing scepticism, to be vanquished by feeling alone, the various schools of German free thought have been derived, is a large inquiry. But I have yet to conclude my general survey of Luther himself.

VI

When Luther began the destruction of historic Christianity in October, 1517, he had nearly completed his thirty-fourth year. He was born at Eisleben on November 10, 1483. During those years he, like Catholics everywhere, had become familiar with the demand, repeated by councils, popes, and preachers of the first rank, for a thorough "reformation of the Church in head and members." Reform implies abuses, and all men admitted their existence on a very great scale. The question was how to get rid of them. A widespread movement, with saints, scholars, and here and there a statesman leading it, had already done much, notably in Spain, towards bringing about the happy change of which the Council of Trent later on was to be so remarkable an evidence and instrument. But Catholic Reform took the Church itself to be the ground, the principle, and the divine resource of those energies on which it relied. St. Ignatius of Loyola helped victoriously to end the scandal of worldly-minded popes by enhancing men's belief in the Papacy and heightening their reverence for the Holy See. New types of Religious Orders sprang up, but the ideals and vows of Monasticism took a fresh lustre from them. Bishops were not abolished ; the decrees of Trent acknowledged them as an essential part of the Church's Constitution, but they were now compelled to do their duties. Religion, in short, underwent a restoration in the faithful who had received it from the Church ; but the faith was ever the same. Luther set about his work the clean contrary way. By putting on that word "faith" a significance hitherto undreamt of he dissolved the whole vast scheme of ages into mist and fog,

so that where distinct, visible objects once caught the eyes of mankind, there was vacancy ; and feeling, or sentiment, or imagination, or some system—Luther's own, to begin with—framed by individual caprice, usurped the name of Revelation, while the Church of history could no more be found. All this happened under such violence of wars, confiscations, executions, and universal disorder that religion seemed to be not a messenger from on high, but a "Fury slinging flame," until immense multitudes turned away to unbelief, or sank into indifference, and the agnostic joined hands with the secularist to banish the Christian creed from public life altogether. And Luther is the great Anarch to whom we are immediately indebted for this breaking up of Western society into hostile Churches, fanatical sects, and utterly divided nations, at the very time when, by the discovery of America, new worlds could have been added to it in the one faith. Never, perhaps, did a single man do so much harm to civilization by voice and pen.

VII

From an early stage he knew that he was the destroyer. In his pamphlet of August, 1520, to the German nobles he wrote, "Three walls have been built round the Church"—the distinction between clergy and laity, the right of the Church to interpret Scripture, the right of the Pope to summon a Council. These walls, he went on to say, built of straw and paper, must be overthrown. For all Christians are priests ; all have an equal right to expound Scripture ; and the temporal powers ought to call a Council, so that Germany may be set free from "the Roman robber and his shameful and devilish rule." Then he bursts forth in a postscript, the language of which might have come yesterday across the Rhine : "The only salvation left is that the Emperor, kings, and princes take up arms and attack this pest of the earth, and thus bring matters to a conclusion, no longer by words but by steel. . . . Why should not we, with all our weapons, assail these teachers of corruption, these popes, cardinals, and all the rabble

of the Roman Sodom, and wash our hands in their blood?" Well, that is, in effect, the thing which came to pass. Ten years, 1517-1527, saw Luther move on from criticizing the system of Indulgences to a new religion, armed, whereby he took away the Mass, made the Episcopate superfluous, pulled down Monasticism, declared good works of no avail to salvation, defined the Pope to be Antichrist, and raised up disciples who joined the Constable de Bourbon in taking and sacking Rome (May 6, 1527), six years after Charles V had put the recalcitrant monk to the ban of the Empire. Now, then, Protestant Germany was full-born. Four years previously, in 1523, Luther, by his interview with the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, Albert of Hohenzollern, had laid the foundations of modern Prussia. Nothing that he did after 1527 equalled his achievements in these ten years. His death, on February 18, 1546, closed an era without exciting much notice. The world was rushing headlong into chaos down the path which he had broken open. He had finished the work he came to do.

VIII

That work revolved round a positive and a negative pole. Hence we may view it in contrary aspects. When Luther brought religion down to a man's personal conviction that he was saved by his faith, to all intents he created, as we now say, "Individualism" of an extreme type, and, logically enough, the ego has been ever since dominant in German thought, whether theological or metaphysical. If there is a God, then the ego is that God; if none, or none that we can affirm, still the ego remains and is the supreme reality. It constitutes the whole value of things, even as Luther's justifying faith, and that alone, was Luther's redemption. Seen over against the Catholic Church, this doctrine appears to be a mere negative, which has no content. Strip it of the Christian garb in which it first came upon the scene, it has not lost anything of its own; it survives in philosophic shape, and dwells in the world of Kant's *a priori* forms, or in Fichte's self-conscious states, or in Hegel's

dialectic process—the same spider, spinning a web of slightly varied patterns. “The Lutheran system,” said Lord Acton, quoting his master, Döllinger, but with entire truth of statement, “was looked on by the Germans with patriotic pride as the native fruit and special achievement of the genius of their country.” But what did this mean? Surely that it was not original Christianity, which grew up in another clime, under the sun of Palestine. So the event has proved. For no one will pretend that Germans hold Luther’s dogmas in the New Testament setting which he did his utmost to give them. How many years is it since Mr. Baring Gould spoke on evidence of the grass-grown paths leading, but no longer drawing any large congregations, to the Lutheran “Evangelical” Churches in the Fatherland? No, Lutheranism lies in its grave. But the heart of Luther, German to its last fibre, is beating still in those armies which, by attempting to ruin our Western civilization, are attacking our Faith as inherited from Christendom of old time. It was Luther, multiplied, like Southey’s monstrous creation, Kehama, into a myriad of furious assailants, that burnt Louvain, shattered Rheims, and desecrated nearly thirteen hundred Catholic churches in its onset, East and West. For negation with arms in its hands cannot fail to be destructive. This “justifying faith” in the virtues of Teutonism, which wrought havoc all round four centuries ago, to-day strikes hard, strikes without pity, at our Christian monuments. It has not spared French cathedrals; it aims, with malice worthy of Luther himself, at St. Mark’s, Venice. And who believes that it would show mercy to Rome, if it could take the Holy City by assault, now, in November, 1917, any more than it did in May, 1527? Rage knows no law. And it cannot stay to argue. “Why should we not wash our hands in the blood of popes and cardinals?” was Luther’s top note in the diapason of his fury. “If any man resists me, him I will smash,” exclaimed the Kaiser, while Germany heard and trembled. The Teuton ego is feeling, not reason, will rather than law. Under one aspect we may call it, as in old Catholic

controversy, "private judgement"; but judgement is not the word. Luther's unconverted man was all "concupiscence," lust, or greed; his justified man was greed still, apprehending the merits of Christ while he had none of his own deserving; but, first and last, feeling ruled. Leave Luther and come to Goethe—we hear the eternal refrain, "Gefühl ist alles," feeling is all. Infinite moods; dogma, science, only dreams; the mind, a flowing river; and who has ever dipped into the same wave twice? Such is the negative pole, the individual solely singular, who spins his world of shining cobweb out of himself. He is the phenomenal or transcendent ego, for ever shut within his proper being.

IX

But there is an opposite pole, as Luther knew. He was, after all, a Saxon peasant, a miner's son, in whose blood ran the feeling, age after age, that those to whom Germans look up as "die Heerschaften," gentlemen born, were a race apart, with divinely given prerogatives to rule the world. Lord Acton says of him that "in thus taking refuge in the arms of the civil power," as Luther did from 1525 onward, "purchasing the safety of his doctrine by the sacrifice of its freedom, and conferring on the State, together with the right of control, the duty of imposing it at the point of the sword, Luther reverted to his original teaching. The notion of liberty, whether civil or religious, was hateful to his despotic nature, and contrary to his interpretation of Scripture." In this point of view he was eminently German. So far as I can recall, there has never been during the whole course of German history a democratic uprising against its princes. When, therefore, Carlyle says of Luther at Worms, "It is the greatest moment in the modern history of men," and that "English Puritanism, England and its Parliaments, Americas, and vast work these two centuries . . . the germ of it all lay there," we feel entitled to ask why Germany itself did not breed these Puritan rebels; why has it never given birth to an English Parliament, and much less to an American Constitution? I prefer Lord

Acton's account of Luther's policy: "He bribed the princes with the wealth of the Church, independence of ecclesiastical authority, facilities for polygamy, and absolute power." These were, at all events, the fruits of his teaching. He revolted from Rome; he invented the doctrine of unlimited divine right in kings and passive obedience in their subjects. Add to this kind of philosophy, which anticipates Hobbes, the total separation of morality from the Gospel, and its merely civic value, will it be difficult to understand how German soldiers in Belgium should take their officers' word of command as superior to the Ten Commandments? "We always do what our princes tell us," said mocking Heine. But Luther said it seriously three hundred years before Heine.

X

It will be seen, accordingly, that I agree with Dr. Sarolea, whose admirable observations on the heresiarch have stirred up so loud a controversy in Edinburgh, as regards the four centuries of Lutheranism just completed. Those centuries exhibit side by side "a pure political despotism, and a pure religious idealism." These were the positive and negative poles of one very terrible, anti-Christian system, peculiar to Germany, not to be confounded with Anglicanism or Calvinism, but *sui generis*, which in Luther became incarnate, in Prussia forged its sword, and in the distracted anæmic Europe of the twentieth century seemed to have discovered its prey. Luther was not the champion of freedom, either Catholic or Protestant. He was the voice of Germanism, which dreams that as religion, culture, government, and race, it should be master of mankind. Civilization, our human estate inherited from antiquity, is Christian and Catholic. Germanism is neither one nor the other. It is the enemy of both. And it must be conquered, or the end of genuine freedom is at the doors.

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