

Martin Luther



I HOPE that I have already made it clear that I do not intend to give anything like a biography of Luther. The biographer ought to record all the known facts of a man's life, important the unimportant, pleasant and unpleasant and then it should be the task of the reader to form his own judgment on the character of the man who has been described to him. True, especially in the case of Luther, this has often not been observed; and so-called biographers have been at pains to portray a reformer who was almost a saint, ignoring all his weaker and weakest points. There are, however, some quite excellent biographies of Luther, and to those who are concerned with getting a complete and unbiased picture, I would wholeheartedly recommend Funck-Brentano's work, "Martin Luther", from which incidentally I shall quote quite often.

The task of the commentator is quite different from that of the biographer. The commentator does not even attempt, or pretend, to give a full picture. He takes some particular points and analyses and discusses them in detail in order to prove, or disprove whatever the case may be a particular theory. This is what I am trying to do. And since it is my object to trace Luther's influence on German political and social development, I shall discuss merely the factors which seem to me to be relevant.

I know of hardly any other man in history on whom it would be more difficult to talk than on Luther, for I fully realise that every statement of mine may be contradicted. First of all, this is because people find it very difficult to look at Luther in an unbiased way. Some glorify everything he has done, others vilify everything.

Take for example quite apart from our subject Luther's influence on the German language. Heinrich von Treitschke, the famous German historian, stated: "Luther invented the New High German in one day, at one stroke, he created it." But the historian Janssen (who wrote sixteen volumes on German history in the Middle Ages) states quite definitely that "Luther created no new German language", that Luther had no influence whatsoever on the development of German.

Now both these historians are scholars. But Treitschke is an ultra-national Lutheran, who sees in Luther a kind of god. Whatever Luther thinks and says is a miracle. Like God Himself he created a new language with one stroke. Janssen, on the other hand, is a Roman Catholic who sees no good whatsoever in Luther, and even the thought that the man who split the Catholic Church might have had some beneficial influence on his native tongue is abhorrent to him.

The truth lies probably, in this case, somewhere in the middle; but it will be seen how careful we have to be in accepting statements about Luther, however comment may be and will be contradicted.

Luther, admittedly, helped his commentators tremendously by his own writings. For these were a mass of contradictions. He was quite likely to affirm and to deny the same fact or phenomenon within a very short while; and thus he made it possible for "authorities" to quote whatever side they preferred. But it is just this wealth of contradictions which gives us the first clue to Luther's character. "For, like his doctrines and his writings, Luther's

life was a mass of contradictions arising from the neurotic temperament” (Funck-Brentano).

From early youth, Luther was a very neurotic character. He had an extremely strict upbringing and tells us himself that “ My mother flogged me until I bled on account of a single nut”. At school and university it was not much better. He was whipped by his teachers as often as fifteen times a day, all for ridiculous offences. “ The undue severity of which he was the victim as a little boy left its mark on his character; he always remained somewhat timid, wild and mistrustful.” His friends already remarked then that young Luther “ suffered from an uneasiness of spirit” and psychological abnormality”. He began very early in life to suffer from melancholia, and there can be no doubt that “ his whole nervous system was strained”.

It is interesting to remember how he decided at this period to enter the Church. “ On July 2, 1505, as the young man was returning from a visit to his parents at Magdeburg, a violent storm overtook him not far from Erfurt. As he was travelling alone near Stotterheim, a bolt of lightning struck in his immediate vicinity and laid him prostrate on the ground. ‘ Help me, help me! If thou helpest me, St. Anne, I will become a monk!’” So it was that he entered the monastery.

Nothing could have been worse for that frightened, nervous, emotional, unstable young man than the rather hard and monotonous life of a monk. Thus it is not surprising that his monastic life was full of strange incidents. “ One day when Luther was present at High Mass in the monks’ choir, he had a fit during the Gospel, which, as it happened, told the story of the man

possessed. He fell to the ground and in his paroxysms behaved like one mad, shouting ' I am not possessed, I am not possessed'." We often hear in his later life that " hysterical weeping and sobbing overwhelmed him". While he was still in the monastery, " the other monks often thought that he was possessed by the devil."

Complete mental instability remained the keyword to his life. He tried to overcome his depressions by overwork or too much prayer, always overdoing things, with the result that his mental state deteriorated. There are many passages in his own writings which give us a good insight into Luther's psychological processes. Here is where he is overworking himself. " I need two secretaries. I do practically nothing all day long but write letters. . . . I am Preacher of the Convent and the Refectory; and vicar in the district, and therefore elevenfold Prior; I am responsible for the fish-ponds at Leitzkau; I am agent at Torgau in the suit for Herzberg parish church; I give lectures on St. Paul, I am collecting notes on the Psalter. I rarely have time to recite my Office and say Mass." " Physically I am fairly well, but I suffer in spirit," he would confess. " For more than the whole of last week I was tossed about in death and hell, so that I still tremble all over my body and am exhausted. Billows and tempests of despair and blasphemy assailed me and I had lost Christ almost entirely" (Luther's Letters, Enders Edition, vol. 1, pp. 66, 67, and vol. 6, page 71).

At other times he does nothing at all. " I am here in idleness," he writes in 1521, " alas neglecting prayer and not sighing once for the Church of God. I burn with all the desires of my unconquered flesh. It is the ardour of the

spirit that I ought to feel. But it is the flesh, desire, laziness, idleness and sleepiness that possess me" (ibid. vol. 3, page 189).

So it goes on and on; and the more we read Luther, the more we find how justified are those biographers of his who say: " It seems difficult to dismiss here the hypothesis of neuropathic disorder "(Maritain). Others describe his sufferings as " delirious hallucinations" (Funck-Grentano), " religious fanaticism" (Professor B. Schoen), or describe him simply as " mentally deranged" (ibid).

Even his greatest admirers and apologists have to admit that he suffered from " religious melancholia", " mania for persecution", or " a mania for greatness"(Professors A. Hausrath, J. Husslein, A. Harnack).

The older he grew, the worse he got. He suffers from " temptations" and especially from " devil-mania". Everything he disliked, everybody who disagreed with him, was inspired by the Devil. " He was subject to numerous strange hallucinations and vibrations which he attributed invariably to the direct action of Satan. Satan become, in consequence, the dominating conception of his life." " It is one of the chief characteristics of Luther that in his intellectual life, in his social intercourse, in speech, in writing, and in preaching he always brought in the Devil attributed far more influence and importance to him that is warranted by Scripture, and by his writings gained for him in Germany a popularity which he had never before enjoyed. . . . All the slumbering germs of superstition both among the rude masses and the higher circles were by this means awakened and set in motion."

Luther's sayings on the subject are too numerous to be quoted. But it certainly is true that he forced back upon Germany a belief in miracles, superstitions, mysticism, a fanatical belief in evil powers which under the influence of the Renaissance were rapidly losing ground.

Here it must be mentioned that there is something which makes it difficult to quote his sayings, not merely on the Devil, but on many other subjects. This is his language. "Satan sleeps with me much more than my wife does", is a relatively harmless remark. Other quotations can be given only with dashes indicating unprintable indecencies.

Luther's language was indeed something quite abominable and indescribable. "He is obsessed with filth and obscenity", writes Maritain. To call it "revolutionary journalism" is an understatement. "He would be furiously angry, and when he was angry he fairly vomited filth. He wrote things one cannot quote in decent English," is much nearer to the mark. This again, was only the natural outcome of his neurotic character. There was nothing godlike or holy about him, there was little patience or human understanding; he loved to scream, shout and blaspheme in the manner of the most vulgar German politician, such as our generation has seen more than enough. With pride he himself exclaimed; "Rage acts as a stimulant to my whole being. It sharpens my wits, puts a stop to the assaults of the Devil and drives out care. Never do I write or speak better than when I am in a rage. If I wish to compose, write, pray and preach well, I have to be in a rage" ("Table Talk," 1210).

It is particularly interesting to note what he understood by "praying well". "If I can no longer pray, I can at least curse. I will no longer say 'Hallowed by Thy Name', but 'Curse and blast and damn the name of Papist'. I will no longer say 'Thy Kingdom come', but will repeat 'Curse and damn the Papacy and send it to perdition'. Yes, that is how I pray, and I do so every day of my life and from the bottom of my heart" (E25, 108).

It may be argued that the language of the Middle Ages knew different standards from that of our own time. But, "in this respect Luther went far beyond the custom among educated men of his time, shocking his friends and leaving his opponents speechless with rage and amazement at his audacity."

It may be urged that a man who said and wrote so many lovely things, might well be entitled to overstep the limit occasionally in the other direction. But Luther's writings were rarely beautiful, and most of them display "an undignified vulgarity, spiced with sexual allusions." I fully agree with one of his commentators (H. Hallam) who says of his language that "Its intemperance, its coarseness, its negligence, its inelegance, its scurrility, its wild paradoxes menaced the foundations of religious morality and were not compensated by much strength and acuteness and still less by any impressive eloquence" ("Introduction to the Literature of Europe").

This mythical, mentally unbalanced, diseased character was the hero of the Reformation. His intemperance, his persecution mania, his varying moods, were the origin of his permanent contradictions. There was nothing reasonable in him. Indeed, he admitted himself that he hated reason, and



that he was guided merely by his passions, by his violent temper. More than once he condemned in his violent language, reason and a reasonable approach to matters. "Reason is the Devil's greatest whore; by nature and an manner of being she is a noxious whore; she is a prostitute, the Devil's appointed whore; whore eaten by scab and leprosy who ought to be trodden under foot and destroyed, she and her wisdom. . . . Throw dung in her face to make her ugly. She is and she ought to be drowned in baptism. . . . She would deserve, the wretch, to be banished to the filthiest place in the house, to the closets" (E16, 142-148). There are many more sayings in the same sense, though not always so dirtily phrased. "Usury, drunkenness, adultery these crimes are self-evident and the world knows that they are sinful; but that bride of the Devil, 'Reason', stalks abroad, the fair courtesan, and wishes to be considered wise, and thinks that whatever she says comes from the Holy Ghost. She is the most dangerous harlot the Devil has." "Reason is contrary to faith", he writes elsewhere. "Reason is the whore of the Devil. It can only blaspheme and dishonour everything God has said or done" (E29, 241) So it goes on and on.

It is here, in Luther's teachings, in his personality, in his hatred of reason, that we find the seeds of the German belief in a romantic world, of the distrust of anything logical and reasonable. Luther's violent language and temper, his inability to speak and think like a rational being, made him distrust and dislike reason; and his nation who accepted this new Christianity only too willingly believed in it and welcomed it as a modern religion.

It is interesting to compare how two great scholars, utterly different in outlook and views, interpret this anti-rational hysteria of Martin

Luther, Nietzsche, the free thinker, and Jacques Maritain, who so nobly attempts to make an unchristian world more Christian.

Nietzsche quotes Luther's "If we could conceive by reason that God who shows so much wrath and malignity could be merciful and just, what use should we have in faith?" and the philosopher continues: "from the earliest times, nothing has ever made a deeper impression upon the German soul, nothing has ever tempted it more, than that deduction, the most dangerous of all, which for every true Latin is a sin against the intellect: *credo quia absurdum est.*"

Maritain for his part gives quotations in which Luther expresses his dislike of reason; and the Catholic philosopher continues: "I have quoted these passages because it is instructive to discern in the beginning, in its authentic tone and quality, the false anti-intellectualist mysticism which was to poison so many minds in more subtle and less candid guises in the nineteenth century. . . . Luther delivered man from the intelligence, from that wearisome and besetting compulsion to think always and think logically."

How few people do realise the deep and permanent connection between religion and politics, faith and world-affairs! So many English people indulge in wishful thinking. They argue according to their own logic. They assume that the Germans adopt the same logic. They try to show a light to the Germans which the Germans do not only not want, but which they despise. Their Christ, their God, their Messiah Martin Luther taught them to hate reason and intelligence, and they followed willingly and ever since.

Some people might be surprised, or indeed shocked, if I called Luther “Germany’s Christ” but that is just what he tried to be himself, an attempt which was only too successful.

“ It was not long before Luther’s pseudo-mysticism translated itself into deeds. He persuades himself that he is guided in all his actions and resolutions by a sort of Divine inspiration.” He first began to explain, in a new fashion, “ God’s Word”. But it soon became apparent that “ by ‘ God’s Word’ Luther of course always meant his own interpretation of Scripture, his own doctrine, which he prided himself has been revealed to him by God.”

“ When I am angry, I am not expressing my own wrath, but the wrath of God”. Luther knew that he was superior to any man or saint. “ St. Augustine or St. Ambrosius cannot be compared with me.” “ They shall respect our teaching which is the word of God, spoken by the Holy Ghost, through our lips”. “ Not for a thousand years has God bestowed such great gifts on any bishop as He has on me” (E61, 422). “ God has appointed me for the whole German land, and I boldly vouch and declare that when you obey me you are without a doubt obeying not me but Christ” (W15, 27). “ Whoever obeys me not, despises not me but Christ.” “ I believe that we are the last trump that sounds before Christ is coming”. “ What I teach and write remains true even though the whole world should fall to pieces over it.” (W18, 401). “ Whoever rejects my doctrine cannot be saved.” “ Nobody should rise up against me”.

“ No mortal ever spoke of himself as Luther did”. His persecution mania turned with advancing years into a mania of self-glorification, of grandeur. He really and truly believed that he was God’s representative upon earth. He

did not refrain from saying and teaching, "I am Christ"; and he exclaimed, almost in the same breath, "I am the prophet of the Germans, for such is the haughty title I must henceforth assume."

Thus I cannot think that I said too much when I called Luther "the German Christ" for such is what he wanted to be, what he believed himself to be, and what, unfortunately, his fellow-countrymen accepted him to be.

Luther's God and Luther's Christ had to be blamed and this is a natural consequence of the Reformer's character, views and manias for every wrong Luther himself committed. "If God is concerned for the interests of His son He will watch over me; my cause is the cause of Jesus Christ. If God careth not for the glory of Christ, He will endanger His own and will have to bear the shame."

Thus, quite naturally, Luther does not always see eye to eye with God or Christ. "I have greater confidence in my wife and my pupils than I have in Christ," he said on one occasion quite shamelessly ("Table Talk", 2397b). "When I beheld Christ I seemed to see the Devil". I had a great aversion for Christ". "Often I was horrified at the name of Christ, and when I regarded Him on the Cross, it was as if I had been struck by lightning; and when I heard His name mentioned, I would rather have heard the name of the Devil" (see Janssen \*\*, 72; also Maritain, "Three Reformers", p. 169). "I did not believe in Christ," wrote Luther in 1537. The example of Jesus Christ Himself very often meant nothing to Luther (see E29, 196).

God, on the other hand, seemed to him “ a master armed with a stick”. “ God did mischievously blind me”; “ God often acts like a madman”; “ God paralyses the old and blinds the young and thus remains master”; I look upon God no better than a scoundrel”; “ God is stupid” (“ Table Talk”, No. 963, W1, 48)

Strange sayings from the mouth of the reformer! But stranger still are his references to God and Christ when it comes to Luther's own shortcomings. We shall see later his own attitude to sex and morality. But he excused his own adultery to quote merely one more example by the teachings of Christ. “ Christ”, says Luther, “ committed adultery first of all with the woman at the well about whom Saint John tells us. Was not everybody about Him saying: ‘ Whatever has he been doing with her?’” Secondly, with Mary Magdalene, and thirdly with the woman taken in adultery whom He dismissed so lightly. Thus even Christ, who was so righteous, must have been guilty of fornication before He died” (“ Table Talk”, 1472) (W2, 107).

I have quoted chiefly Luther's own words, and have shown his character as I believe it was. To my mind this is the infinite tragedy of Luther and Germany, that he himself believed in his manias, in his mission from God, in his replacing Christ and that his countrymen believed it, too. Who will ever decide whether a country produces her outstanding men, or whether these outstanding men have a revolutionary influence on their country? In Luther's case probably both are true. Nowhere else but in Germany, which was not yet as civilised as the Latin countries, could a man like Luther have been born and bred. And nowhere else could a man like Luther hysterical, irrational, irreligious have been followed by the whole nation for centuries. A

nation which found it easy to accept a character like Luther as Christ, could not find it difficult to accept a man like Hitler as Messiah.

I have tried to give a glimpse and in the space at my disposal I cannot do more of the unbalanced mind of the "reformer". It now remains to see according to what principles Luther conducted his own life.

True Christians have pointed out more than once that Christianity in its best and only possible sense is not a dogma, not something detached from life, but a moral code which we ought to apply to all our actions and thoughts. Only if we lead a truly Christian life, only if we try to commit no sins and translate His principles into action, imitate His example only then can we achieve the aim of real Christianity.

It is here that I have found Luther's teaching so very surprising. According to Luther, what we do and how we act does not matter in the least. All that matters is our belief. He came to this staggering, and in my view thoroughly unchristian, doctrine by the addition of one single word the word "alone" in His German translation of the Bible. In Rom. iii, 28, Luther makes the Apostle say: "Thus we hold that a man is justified by faith alone without the works of the law." (This, incidentally, is one of his many falsifications of the Bible).

"It does not matter what people do; it only matters what they believe." "God does not need our actions. All He wants is that we pray to Him and thank Him." Even the example of Christ Himself means nothing to him. "It does not matter how Christ behaved what He taught is all that matters" (E29, 196), is Luther's subtle distinction.

Since Luther had this curious idea that our actions have no connections whatsoever with our thoughts, and that as long as we think in a Christian way, we need not behave accordingly, it is not surprising that he did not hesitate to authorise the commitment of sins. "What does it matter whether we commit a fresh sin?" he asks sarcastically. "Faith cancels all sin" is his simple counsel. "No other sin exists in the world save unbelief," is his doctrine. Indeed, his old enemy, Satan, is once more coming to light in order to give an excuse to sinners. "Sometimes it is necessary to commit some sin out of hatred and contempt for the Devil." "What matters if we commit a sin?" (E16, 254).

But then again, he sometimes consoles himself with the thought that it was God who ordained sins. "You must say my sins are not mine; they are not in me at all; they are the sins of another' they are Christ's and are none of my business" (W25, 330). "What a consolation for pious souls to put Him on like this and wrap Him in my sins, your sins, the sins of the whole universe, and consider Him thus bearing all our sins." "Christianity is nothing but a continual exercise in feeling that you have no sin although you sin, but that your sins are thrown on Christ." "From the moment when you acknowledge that Christ bears your sins, He becomes the sinner in your stead."

A strange doctrine! Indeed, he frequently demands that one ought to commit a sin. "Be a sinner, and sin boldly, but believe more boldly still." Not only men, but the Saints and Apostles must be sinners. "The Saints must be good, downright sinners." "The Apostles themselves were sinners, yea, regular scoundrels! believe that the prophets also frequently sinned grievously" (E62, 165).

This, then, is Luther's somewhat curious interpretation of Christianity an interpretation which he translated into full practice in his own life, as I shall attempt to show.

Christianity, to my mind, is a totality, a total state of mind, a total way of living. It is not open to us to accept just what pleases us, and to reject what we dislike. There are only two possibilities: either we accept (or at least we try to accept) the complete code of Christian ethics, or we quite frankly admit that we are no Christians. Anything between the two is utter and shameful hypocrisy. I have no hesitation in saying, as a schoolmaster, that I infinitely prefer a good pagan to a bad Christian.

It is for this reason that I am fully convinced that our permanent pretences to live in a Christian world lack the necessary foundation of honesty.

Christianity demands so much; and most people are merely prepared to pay lip-service to some of its demands, blindly ignoring the rest.

A certain attitude to sex, an attitude to temperance, an attitude to truth, are fundamental pillars (often ignored) on which Christianity rests. To ignore them is to act willfully in an unchristian way. Even if we may make allowances for ordinary human beings who commit some sins of that kind, hoping that they will improve, the case is certainly different with a man who has the reputation of being a reformer of Christianity, a man who is reputed to have saved the Christian Church from the evils and anti-Christian ways into which both the "pagan" Renaissance and the misguided Roman Church had led it.



It is therefore necessary not merely to look at Luther's more theoretical sayings on sin, but to see how the Reformer lived himself, for it is his example which the Germans were taught to follow and followed. I shall thus try to show, in turn, Luther's attitude towards temperance, sex, and truth three subjects on which true Christian ethics can know no compromise, and without which no Christianity, in any sense, seems possible to me.

One of the outstanding reasons why Luther has been able to obtain such an unparalleled popularity in Germany is that the average German feels completely at ease with Luther, much more than with any other great figure of history or the Bible. The explanation is simple: Luther encourages them in their vices. True, at times he lectures and gives them moral " pep talks", but his own life was so typically German, without any restraint, that it is more than convenient and agreeable to the average German to look up to the Reformer as a shining example with whose habits he is only too willing to comply.

Nobody will deny that lack of temperance in the widest sense of the word is a German characteristic. Here I shall merely refer to intemperance in drink.

I doubt whether " drink" has really a beneficial effect in any country, but I do not think that such wines as the Latin peoples consume regularly but in moderation (I am generalizing now) have had any ill effect. In Germany, however, drink has never been considered as a stimulant and something enjoyable, but rather as a means of getting into a state of drunkenness. The Germans betray as in so many other spheres a complete lack of self-control when it comes to drink. I can compare my own student days in England,

France, Spain, and Switzerland, with those spent in Germany. We students drank everywhere and I must confess that in all the countries mentioned I have seen intoxicated students. But the regularity and utter senselessness with which the German students drink is something which cannot be explained to anybody who has not witnessed it.

Their "students'-unions" (Corps and Burschenschaften) have as their main aim the getting hopelessly drunk every night. It is a habit amongst German students to consume up to twenty pints per night. It has been rightly observed that drunkenness is a typical German characteristic.

It would be interesting to investigate the influence which drink has had on German history. Already in 843, in the Treaty of Verdun, Louis the German insisted on keeping the towns of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz "on account of their richness in wine". Montaigne tells us that only heavy drinkers could be appointed ambassadors to German courts, since otherwise they could achieve nothing. A very popular song in Germany is Kopisch's "Blucher on the Rhine". Its scene is laid in the year 1813. "Should we advance?" is the question of the day. The opinions are divided. Then old Blucher looks at a map. He sees the champagne country. He does not hesitate any longer. "It is better to drink the wine where it grows," he says, and decides to cross the Rhine. As a well-known French scholar Paquier comments on this bit of poetry: "It is the only instance in world's history of drink being considered a 'war aim'". During the last war and the present the alcoholic excesses of the German soldiers have been proverbial.

Nobody knew better of this German vice than Luther himself. In strong language he protested against it. " Our poor German land is chastised and plagued with this devil of drink and altogether drowned in this vice, so that life and limb, possessions and honour, are shamefully lost while people lead the life of swine, so that, had we to depict Germany, we had to show it under the image of a sow. . . . Unless God strikes at this vice by a national calamity everything will go down to the abyss, all sodden through and through with drink."

Stern words for a reformer of morality. But then, as Luther admitted himself, " I know that I don't practise what I teach" (Enders, 2, 312). The Germans preferred to imitate Luther's practical example and to ignore his teachings. And Luther himself drank a good deal. Far be it from me to make out that Luther was a habitual drunkard, such as some of his opponents tried to make out; I shall merely try to prove that Luther himself drank, occasionally in excess, and showed no moderation whatsoever, set no example which the Germans could possibly follow.

More than once Luther says that he drinks in excess. " I am here," he writes from the Warburg, " idle and drunk" (Enders III, 154). At other times he states, " I am not drunk" (Enders III, 317; E30, 363). In 1532 he writes: " We eat and drink to kill ourselves, we eat and drink up to our last farthing." In 1540 he states: " God must count drunkenness as a minor sin, a small daily sin. We can really not stop it." At another time he feels more guilty. "

According to the saying, we have to comply with the habit. The days are bad, people are worse, our acts more than bad. Up to now drunkenness has prevented me from writing, or reading anything readable; living with men, I

had to live as they do." It is abundantly clear that Luther liked drinking and often not within reason. " I have brought on headache by drinking old wine in the Coburg, and this our Wittenberg beer has not yet cured. I work little, and I am forced to be idle against my will because my head must have a rest." " If I have a can of beer, I want the beer-barrel as well". " I am but a man prone to let himself be swept off his feet by society, drunkenness, the movements of the flesh" (W9, 215, 13). And again, " What is needed to live in continence is not in me".

Once more it is out of hatred of the Devil that Luther takes to drink. When he has a thundering headache, he wonders whether this is due to over-drinking or to the Devil. " We behave like scandalous disgusting brutes, thinking all day and night of nothing but how we can fill ourselves with drink and get rid of all our reason and wisdom." " Why, do you think, do I drink too much wine . . .? It is when the Devil prepares to torment me and mock me and that I wish to take the lead."

His bad state of health in his later years, he ascribed himself to drink. " For almost a month past I have been plagued not only with noises but with actual thundering of my head, due, perhaps to the wine, perhaps to the malice of Satan." " I am troubled with a sore throat such as I never had before; possibly the strong wine has increased the inflammation, or perhaps it is a buffet of Satan." The opinion of his contemporaries on the subject is unmistakable. They all agree that Luther " was addicted to over-drinking" (Th. Brieger: " Alexander and Luther", pp. 170, 307).

One may say that it is a small point whether Luther drank or not.

Admittedly and not one worth while to discuss in too much detail or to write whole books about. But it seems clear to me that Luther was anything but temperate, that by his example he made things worse in Germany than they were before as far as drunkenness is concerned. What I have tried to illustrate by this episode most of all is that Luther was a very ordinary German, acting contrary to his words, lacking temperance certainly not himself leading the life a true Christian should attempt to lead, and having no right to claim to be a reformer of morals, much less of Christianity.

After this relatively harmless excursion into the Reformer's alcoholic excesses, we come to his views and behaviour in the matter of sex and married life a subject infinitely more important to Christian ethics than the problem of drink.

## LUTHER AND MARRIAGE

As a general rule Luther is considered as the man who rescued western civilisation from the immorality which during the sixteenth century prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church. He is painted as the man who not only gave a shining example by his delightful family life of the rightful place of the family in Christian society, but (much more) as the man who put married life in its proper place, and by his teachings made it possible for the emancipation of woman to become an accomplished fact.

It is quite true that Luther said some very lovely and laudable things about women and married life. He himself was quite convinced that he was not merely a reformer of the Church but also of morals and ethics. " Not one of

the Fathers," he wrote with his usual lack of modesty, "wrote anything notable or particularly good concerning the married state." He himself believed as so many still do today that he was the first to have restored married life "to its rightful state as He had at first instituted and ordained it." "Before my day nothing was known, not even what parents or children were, or what wife and maid."

But if we look in detail at Luther's writings and his own life, we find once more a most contradictory picture; and on the whole we are forced to say that just the very opposite of what Luther was supposed to say, think and do on the subject is much more prevalent than what I should like to call the legendary interpretation.

Perhaps the simplest explanation is that Luther himself lacked any self-control, and suffered from neurotic sex-troubles. When he was calm and normal, he wrote the very things we know and love. But at other times, we can merely shudder.

"I am but a man prone to let himself be swept off his feet by society, drunkenness, the torments of the flesh" (W9, 215, 13), I have quoted already. There are many similar passages. "Instead of glowing in spirit, I glow in the flesh." "I burn with all the desires of my unconquered flesh" (Enders 3, 189). "I rarely pray. . . . My unruly flesh doth burn me with devouring flame. In short, I who should be a prey to the spirit alone am eating my heart out through the flesh, through lust, laziness, idleness, and somnolence."

Of course, our old friend the Devil was to blame for it. "I know it well how it is when the Devil comes and invites the flesh." "It is a horrible struggle; I

have known it well and you must know it too; oh, I know it well when the Devil excites and inflames the flesh" (W9, 215, 46). What a painful confession when he exclaims, " Pray for me for I am falling into the abyss of sin" (Enders, 3, 193).

But, as we have seen before, he has always a very easy way out. It just does not matter whether we commit a sin or not. " You owe nothing to God except faith and confession. In all other things He lets you do whatever you like. You may do as you please, without any danger of conscience whatsoever." Thus a remedy for his " burning flesh" is easily found. " The sting of flesh may easily be helped so long as girls and women are to be found." " The body asks for a woman and must have it"; " to marry is a remedy for fornication" (see Grisar, " Luther", vol. iv, p. 145).

I am reluctant, more than reluctant, to quote some of his sayings; and yet I have to do it if I want to be complete. For the degradation of womanhood and the taking away of all the sacred character of marriage is one of the main reasons why Germany with Luther began its unchristian way down the hill. " Since wedlock and marriage are a worldly business, we clergy and ministers of the Church have nothing to order or decree about it, but must leave each town and country to follow its own usage and custom." In other words, Luther is not interested in it. Marriage is to him just like any other manual labour, something to be ruled by local traditions, without any kind of Christian standard. " Marriage," he says, " is an external bodily thing, like any other manipulation." " Know that marriage is an outward material thing like any other secular business." " The body has nothing to do with God. In

this respect one can never sin against God, but only against one's neighbour"(W12, 131).

But here we come to one of his most contradictory attitudes. For what is usually called " the matrimonial duty", or " the matrimonial act", he considers contrary to the Scripture and Christian ethics as a great and everlasting sin. The true Christian attitude is best formulated by St. Augustine, who said: " The matrimonial act in order to produce children or to comply with matrimonial duties contains neither guilt nor sin." This is only logical. For marriage, according to Christian teaching, has been instituted by God in order to propagate humanity, and the commandment of creating children has been given by God a commandment which cannot be obeyed without a matrimonial act. From this it is quite clear that to obey the will of God can never be a sin in the Christian sense.

Luther is quite opposed to this. " In spite of all the good I say of married life, I will not grant so much to nature as to admit that there is no sin in it . . no conjugal due is ever rendered without sin." " The matrimonial duty is never performed without sin." The matrimonial act is, according to Luther, " a sin differing in nothing from adultery and fornication" (W8, 654).

An unbelievable attitude! And since it is sinful, what then is its point? No love or the creation of a family, but merely the physical necessity of satisfying one's sexual cravings. " Marriage ought to be contracted by a boy not later than the age of twenty, and a girl when she is from fifteen to eighteen years of age. Then they are still healthy and sound and they can leave it to God to see that their children are provided for." " A young fellow should be simply



given a wife, otherwise he has no peace." " It is true that he who does not marry must lead an immoral life, for how could it be otherwise?" " Though womenfolk are ashamed to confess it, yet it is proved by Scripture and experience that there is not one among many thousands to whom God gives the grace of chastity."

Nothing sacred about marriage Luther knows of. But what he has to say about women is still worse. " The word and work of God is quite clear, viz. That women were made either to be wives or prostitutes" (W12, 94).

I know of no more loathsome saying. Throughout Luther's writings I have found the same spirit. " God does not take from man and woman their special fashioning, sexual organs, seed and its fruit; a Christian body must generate, multiply, and behave like those of birds and all animals; he was created by God for that, thus where God performs no miracle, man must unite with woman and woman with man."

What happens to the woman is of no consequence to Luther. " Even though they grow weary and wear themselves out with child-bearing, it does not matter; let them go on bearing children till they die, that is what they are there for"(E20, 84).

But the Reformer surpasses himself when he says: " If you do not want, someone else does. If the wife does not want, take your servant" (E20, 72).

From this is only a step to Luther's permitting his followers " to satisfy their desires outside marriage, when they were not married, in order to give relief

to natural feelings which they could not resist." He says quite plainly: " It is not forbidden that a man should have more than one wife" (E33, 327.).

These teachings Luther did not fail to translate into practice in his own life. In accordance with his teachings against monasteries and convents, he and his disciples began systematically to undermine the mentality of the nuns. We have authentic proof that those who pretended to free the nuns from the bondage of the Catholic Church were inspired by anything but humanitarian or Christian motives. " After a rape of nuns which took place on the night of Holy Saturday, 1523, Luther calls the citizen Koppe, who organised the exploit, a ' holy and blessed robber'".

Luther himself has several of these escaped nuns living with him. But he does not intend to marry. In November, 1524, he writes: " Not as though I do not feel my flesh and my sex, for I am neither of wood nor of stone, but I have no inclination to marry." One of these nuns, Catherine von Bora, tried to marry one of Luther's friends. But it is clear that his own relations to her were anything but blameless. In April, 1525, he refers to himself as " a famous lover" who has " three wives" but " no intention whatsoever to marry".

Less than two months later, without any warning, he most suddenly decided to marry Catherine von Bora. Why, can only be left to the imagination. " The Lord plunged me suddenly while I still clung to quite other views into matrimony," he confesses. " God willed that I should take pity on her," is another of his explanations. He is even frank enough to say that he had " no

love nor passion for her". Lastly, his usual excuse for his strangest actions is not lacking. " I married in order to spite the Devil".

It is quite obvious that there was a good deal of scandal about Luther's relations with Catherine before they married. " Your example is permanently quoted by those who visit brothers," is one of the typical comments. Even his best friend, Melancthon, has to admit with a sigh that " Luther was more than a reckless man".

Some time later Luther explains: " I have shut the mouth of those who slandered me and Catherine von Bora." Though, at other times, the Devil is once more the main explanation of this unholy marriage. " I too am married, and to a nun. I could have refrained had I not special reasons to decide me. But I did it to defy the Devil and his host, the objectors, the princes and bishops, since they were all foolish enough to forbid the clergy to marry. And I would with willing heart create an even greater scandal, if I knew of anything else better calculated to please God and to put them in a rage."

I give few comments. I let the Reformer speak for himself. I shall not give any details of the way he behaved after he was married. But surely Luther's attitude in his writings and his personal behaviour towards women and marriage are rarely found even in the most depraved men, never in any human being who pretended to lead anything like a Christian life not to speak of a " reformer".

The results of this teaching in Luther's own times were obvious. As Heinrich Heine said, German history at that time was, thanks to Luther's example, almost entirely composed of sensual disturbances. Looking at the devastated

state of Germany, one of Luther's contemporaries spoke the truth when he shouted at the Reformer: " This is due to your carnal teaching and stinking example." To enumerate or give a clear picture of the abhorrent state of affairs of the morals in Germany, would take pages and volumes. The important factor is that "" Luther not merely robbed marriage of its sacramental character, but also declared it to be a purely outward carnal union, which has nothing whatsoever to do with religion and church" (Janssen: " History of the German People", vol. 16, page 137).

This view has prevailed in Germany ever since. As I have already said, to my mind Christianity has to be taken in its entirety. By denying and negating one of the most important aspects of Christian ethics, Luther paved the way for a new religion, which to the everlasting confusion of the development of mankind still called itself " Christianity", but not only had it nothing to do with Christianity but it was indeed contrary to its teaching and practice in respect of one of its most fundamental principles. This is why I am investigating these points, which may appear petty, unimportant, and slanderous. I cannot repeat it often enough. Christianity, if ever it should work, cannot be applied in convenient bits and piecessuch as going to Church and Holy Communion. It is a total code of life and morals, thought, and action. Nothing is " important" or " less important". Either we lead, or try to lead a thoroughly Christian lifeor we quite frankly admit that we are not interested in Christianity. Luther's views on sin, temperance, sex, are not small and minor points; with his attitude to these, he cannot claim to be a Christian, much less a Christian reformer. However contradictory, however lovely some of the things he wrote and thought, said and sunghe cannot get

away from the quotations (which are by no means isolated) I have given. He abandoned Christianity, and gave something new. A new religion, which was taken up by his fellow-countrymen. But before we come to a definite conclusion on the question whether Luther, in his own life and actions, could claim to be a Christian, let us end our investigation of Luther's character by trying to see which attitude the Reformer took towards one of the most fundamental commands of Christian ethics, that to be truthful and honest.

### LUTHER AND THE TRUTH

One of the most fundamental, if not the most fundamental, principle of Christian ethics is to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Absolute and complete truthfulness is demanded. Without it there can be no Christianity.

The familiar picture which we have of Luther shows us the Reformer as the upholder of truth and truthfulness. "Luther the truthful", he has been called more than once. And many of his sayings on the subject are indeed lovely and beautiful. "To my mind," he said once, "there is no more shameful vice on earth than lying."

But once more a close study of his teaching and behaviour will show us that he contradicts himself, to what an extent the very opposite is true. And to my mind, this opposite attitude of Luther's towards truth was not merely the usual one, but one which appealed most to the Germans.

Already in his early years when he was at war with the Catholic Church he frankly admitted that it was not necessary to stick to the truth. "I consider

everything allowable against the deception and the depravity of the Papal antichrist," was his excuse. " Vows have only to be kept as long as it is psychologically possible. If it is no longer possible, one is allowed to break them." Moreover, in order to prove his interpretation of the Scripture, he is quite prepared to falsify it. " His worst offence is that he does not resist the temptation arbitrarily and intentionally to falsify a large number of passages in support of his new doctrine," says the historian Janssen. And he continues to speak of Luther's " intentional perversion of the apostolic language." It would take us too far to prove in detail that in many Bible passages he purposely inserted or omitted words, in order to suit his purpose. Besides, it has already been done in great detail by famous scholars, whose research seems to me beyond doubt, so that it would merely be the repetition of other people's work (see, e. g., Janssen, op. Cit. Vol. 14, pages 418ff).

It may be said that one cannot expect Luther to act correctly and truthfully in such a deadly fight as that in which he was involved with the Catholic Church. Very well then, let us look in detail merely at one example of his teaching and his acting which has nothing whatever to do with his quarrel with Rome. I am referring to the marriage of the Landgrave Philip of Hesse, surnamed the Magnanimous. He was a great supporter and important patron of Luther.

Philip was married and had a number of sons and daughters. He was anything but faithful to his wife, and in the year 1539 when he was 35 years of age he wanted to marry a lady called Margaret von der Saal. He asked Luther's advice, and tried to obtain his permit for a bigamous marriage. He wrote to the Reformer, telling him that he (Philip) was " unable to refrain

from fornication unchastity and adultery"; his own wife, he said, " he had never loved, she was rude to him, ugly, and stank." " I am forced to commit fornication or worse with women," he complained; and his own sister Elisabeth had " already advised him to take a concubine in place of so many prostitutes. However, he did not want yet another concubine, but desired Luther's authorisation to take a second wife.

The Reformer was in a dilemma, for Philip wanted his permission in writing. But Dr. Martin easily found a way out. He said that there was nothing whatever against a bigamous marriage, since in this case it would help the Landgrave to get over his physical and psychological troubles. The only condition Luther imposed in his written document was that the marriage ought to remain an absolute secret, for otherwise he himself and the Landgrave might get into trouble. This famous document was signed by Luther in December, 1539, and armed with the Reformer's written authority, the Landgrave married bigamously and officially in March of the following year. In gratitude for the helpful testimonial, Philip sent Luther a large barrel of wine.

But too many people were in the secret, and all the parties to it got scared. According to the " Carolina" which was a code of law capital punishment was still prescribed for bigamists, and neither Philip nor his adviser knew at first what to do.

A contemporary chronicler reported " that Philip is much upset, and Dr. Martin full of thought." At first it seemed that Brother Martin did not know how to extricate himself. But then he had an idea. He would point out that

the advice he gave was given under confession (here he most conveniently returned to Catholic doctrine), and therefore ought to remain absolutely secret. Moreover, he argued in truly German fashion that this secret permission never implied a public permission. "A secret affirmative cannot become a public affirmative; a secret 'yes' remains a public 'no', and vice versa" (de Wette, 6, 263), is his very odd argument. "All that had passed between him and Philip on the subject of the bigamy was sacred under the rule of the confessional. He became for the occasion a Roman Catholic monk again," remarks the Lutheran scholar Lipsky.

So far for his position. His advice to the Landgrave was something quite different. "If hard-pressed the Landgrave should deny the whole affair and declare to the Emperor that he had merely taken a concubine." "Keep the prostitute but deny it, counselled the reformer of morals.

And here we come to Luther's typical attitude. I am quoting the relative passages literally, as is my usual method:

"What harm could it do if a man told a good lusty lie in a worthy cause and for the sake of the Christian Churches?" (Lenz: Briefwechsel, vol. 1, page 373).

"To lie in a case of necessity or for convenience or in excuse such lying would not be against God; He was ready to take such lies on Himself" (ibid, page 375).

This was too much even for the not too moral Philip. "I will not lie," he wrote back to Luther, "for lying has an evil sound and no apostle or Christian has



ever taught it, nay, Christ has forbidden it and said we should keep to yea and nay. I refuse to declare that the lady is a whore. I should surely have had no need of your advice to take a whore, neither does it do you credit." Luther replied with his typical dignity: " When it comes to writing, I shall be quite competent to wriggle out of it and to leave your Grace in the lurch."

This is all in the case which concerns us. It is dreadful. " By degrees Luther reduces the lie of convenience or necessity to a virtue," writes Professor Grisar.

Luther's attitude in Philip's case is by no means unique. There are many, too many cases in his own life and his own writings where he advises a lie. " Lying is a virtue if it is indulged in for the purpose of preventing the fury of the Devil, or made to serve the honour, the life, and the welfare of one's fellow-men." " The lie of service is wrongly termed a lie . . . it may be called Christian and brotherly charity," is one of many similar sayings by the Reformer. " The world will be deceived," he used to exclaim, and he acted accordingly. I have, reluctantly, come to the conclusion that Luther's biographer was utterly right when he said: " The general conclusion must be that Luther was a man to whom the idea of truth for truth's sake meant nothing at all." Luther's theory of truth always reminds one of what Cicero said about Homer, *Humana ad deos transtulit; divina mallem ad nos.* (He gave human shortcomings to the gods; why did he not rather give divine qualities to human beings?)

Those who do not fully understand the history of German thought have often wondered what a strange coincidence it is that in Frederick, miscalled the

Great, Bismarck (the Ems Dispatch!), William II, Hitler, and many others there has always been that love of lying, that double-dealing, that lack of truth and honesty. They have rarely thought that it might be part of a German religion, preached by the lying monk of Wittenberg for the first time over four centuries ago, supplanting Christian ethics, and putting German religious ideas in its place. " We consider everything allowable against the deception and depravity of the Papal antichrist." I have quoted earlier. Replace the phrase " Papal antichrist" with whomever Germany happens to consider at a given moment her mortal enemy and there is left nothing mysterious about German ethics. It all becomes clear, clear if we do not look at the isolated facts but at the underlying spiritual forces which are found first of all in Martin Luther.

I may have shocked people's feelings a little in the picture I have given so far about the Reformer. It is a picture which in no way coincides with the one painted in legends and by wishful thinking.

The strange thing is that if one looks at actually painted pictures and reproductions of his face, one will find a still greater surprise.

Neither Holbein nor Durer ever painted Luther which is odd since they were his contemporaries. On the other hand, we have many pictures of Luther by Lucas Cranach, who was an ardent admirer of Dr. Martin. These pictures, showing a gentle, smiling, benevolent, slender, and scholarly saint are familiar to most of us. Hundreds of thousands of reproductions exist all over the world. On German stamps and buildings we see the portrait. But the

drawback is that "Cranach suppressed what he considered to be defects in his sitter."

Let us take a glance at Luther's death-mask, a representation that cannot be faked, obtained by a method of portraiture which has left us many a lovely picture of great men. In Luther's case we get a shock. Funck-Brentano speaks with much restraint of Luther's "aggressive vulgarity". And Maritain, who certainly is not given to polemical language, says he looks "surprisingly bestial. Anger, calumny, hatred and lying, love of beer and wine, obsession with filth and obscenity it all pours out in a flood."

If we can judge people by their appearance a dangerous process Luther was anything but a saint. I would not draw attention to this fact, if his physical as well as his moral portrait had not been so greatly falsified for four centuries.

## CHAPTER III: LUTHER'S POLITICAL DOCTRINES

### MARTIN LUTHER AND THE STATE

WE have seen how contradictory was Luther's character, how differently he often acted from what he taught. But nowhere is contradiction stronger, or at least does it appear more marked than in Luther's political teachings. The reason for this seems to me obvious. For all we usually look at is the young Luther, the Luther who fought so bravely the Church of Rome, the Luther who acted (even if the words are merely a legend) according to the principle, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me, Amen."

The later Luther is so often ignored. The change which took place once he had achieved his aim, once he was a national hero, a dictator of morals,

politics, and religion, is rarely taken into account. And yet it is the later Luther who had (anyhow in my interpretation) so much greater an influence on Germany than the young rebellious monk.

In no sphere is this so clear as in Luther's attitude towards the State, as in his commands governing relations between the ruling class and the working classes. The line of demarcation is clearly the year 1525. And before we attempt a more theoretical interpretation of Luther's political teachings, let us look for a short while at the historical facts.

We are always inclined to interpret present-day history as something new. We are always tempted to see the sufferings of our own times as something unheard of, as something more modern and more important than any other period in history. To me it seems that the problems are, at least to a certain degree, always the same. One of these great problems which we are facing at the moment is the relationship between the "capitalists" or "upper class", and the "working classes", or proletariat. But this struggle, this conflict of interests is nothing very new. Indeed, as long as there has been human history, there has been class-struggle. The only difference is that the various classes appear at different periods under different names. Thus, in the Germany of Luther, the upper classes were "the princes", the working classes were "the peasants". This ought to be remembered, for I shall refer quite often to "the princes" and "the peasants" a traditional but not quite correct terminology.

The suppression which the "princes" imposed upon the "peasants" early in the sixteenth century is something almost unbelievable. Taxes, rents, rates,

work, and so forth were unbearable. The working classes were treated in a loathsome way and there was much, very much justifiable grumbling and discontent. But these poor oppressed creatures, whose life was less than worth living, could not see a way out of their tragedy; they lacked leadership, they lacked ideas; nobody seemed to be able or willing to help them, nobody seemed to possess the necessary courage and conviction to oppose the cruel treatment which they received from the princes.

Then there came Martin Luther. He acted like a great and courageous man. He showed no signs of fright. He said what he thought. He brought the true idea of Christianity back to the oppressed masses. His preachings of "Christian Freedom" were eagerly read and learnt by those thousands of "peasants" who had merely been waiting for a man of Luther's greatness, honesty, fearlessness, true Christianity.

Luther encouraged these exploited creatures as much as he could. "Among Christians", he told them, "no authority can or ought to exist, but everyone should be subject to all." Moreover, Luther was fearless enough to tell the oppressing princes what he thought of them, what would happen to them. "God Almighty," he wrote, "has struck our princes with madness so that they imagine they may treat and command their subjects just as they please; and the subjects too are crazy enough to think that it is their duty to obey all that is commanded them." "God has delivered the princes up to a perverted mind, and means to make an end to them. . . . All the princes could do was to rob and oppress the people, heaving tax upon tax, and rate upon rate." He warned the princes that they would soon be destroyed. "The princes" he continued, "are the greatest fools and the worst scoundrels on earth. The

people cannot, will not any longer, endure your tyranny and your presumption.

It is thus not surprising that the peasants in Germany looked to Luther, to Christian teaching, to the Bible, as their one and only hope. " All the peasants of Germany were soon united in the immense hope to reconstruct society on Christian ideas." Revolt was in the air; it was unavoidable. And Luther was not merely the born leader of this great movement of liberation, but he had purposely put the common hatred of the princes into words and had threatened action. The revolution which was about to break out in 1525 is known in history as " the Peasants' War", and on its eve Luther was the avowed champion of the most oppressed class in Germany. " Luther was the creator and leader of the whole movement" no historian has ever doubted this fact.

The term " Peasants' War" is, as I have indicated already, somewhat misleading. " It is difficult to generalise a movement so widespread as this. We might call it a social revolution based on the ' divine justice' as revealed in the Bible," says Professor MacKinnon, Luther's most recent, most complete biographer and apologist. And he continues: " The phrase ' rising of the peasants' is strictly speaking insufficient as a designation of the insurrection of 1525, in view of the wider discontent which coalesced with the movement."

The discontented peasants published their grievances in a memorandum consisting of twelve articles. It is a very calm and moderate document. They state their claims and express their discontent. Michelet, the great French

historian, calls it “ a model of courageous moderation”. Professor MacKinnon says: “ The moderate persuasive tone of these articles is surprising. The peasants will not use force except in the last resort and against glaring abuses, which were really indefensible from the Christian standpoint. . . . Brotherly love and the Gospel are to decide in all contentious matters.” “ The Christian liberty which proclaimed was applied directly to temporal questions.”

What now was Luther’s attitude in these crucial hours? The peasants looked at him as their leader. They felt confident that he, the great lover of Christian freedom and brotherhood, could be relied upon. But Luther’s reply to the twelve articles was somewhat ambiguous. He gave to this reply the title “ Exhortation to Peace regarding the Twelve Articles”. “ Brother Martin here showed the greatest circumspection. His reply to the overlords as well as to the peasants, in its fundamentals at all events is neither fish nor fowl. The peasants were certainly wrong, but the overlords were not right” (Funck-Brentano).

Luther calls the peasants “ dear brothers” and the princes “ dear masters”. And while he urges the peasants not to revolt, explaining that “ never did rebellion end in good” (Friend Martin was forgetting his own rebellion”), he continues to state the injustice of the princes. “ Since it is certain that you govern tyrannically and savagely, fleecing and oppressing the common people, there is no comfort or hope for you but to perish as those like you have perished.”

Obviously, the peasants took these hints much more seriously than Luther's demand to them "to suffer in a Christian manner, and to be ready to endure persecution and even oppression willingly." In any case, matters had gone too far, and Luther's exhortation meant nothing either to princes or peasants. "He states the case for the peasants and then runs away from it," as MacKinnon expresses it. But the rev