

Introduction

‘To be great is to be misunderstood’ and I suppose it follows from Emerson’s dictum that the great must suffer the attentions of generations of biographers all claiming to understand them. Martin Luther was a seminal figure in the progress of western thought, as intensely controversial in his own day as his ideas have been controversial ever since. He was a massive mountain dominating the historical landscape so that it is impossible to ignore him and equally impossible to deny his significance. His own internal struggle to find meaning and purpose in life became so dramatically externalised as to make him a representative man for the ages. His intellectual depth was combined with a vigorous journalistic style so that he could bring profound truths within the mental compass of the common man. He was one of those rare individuals who single-handedly forced the march of time into a new direction. He helped to shape sixteenth-century Europe and, therefore, seventeenth-century America, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial societies worldwide, and the political ideals upon which western-style democracy rests. As such, he has not escaped the efforts of writers over the last four and a half centuries. For much of that time he was the victim of Catholic enemies who set out to vilify him and also of Protestant friends intent on rejecting every slur on their hero’s character. But Brother Martin was always too big to be monopolised by the Church and certainly too big to be made captive by one section of it. He has been claimed as a great German nationalist, as a proto-Marxist who freed ordinary people from ecclesiastical tyranny and even, in John Osborne’s play, *Luther*, as a free-thinking, coarse-mouthed role model for anti-establishment youth.

My own objective in *Out of the Storm* is simple but certainly not modest. I want to provide the non-specialist reader with an account in English of the life of Martin Luther, warts and all, and an assessment of his impact on his own time and subsequent ages. The first part of that function has hitherto been admirably fulfilled for millions of people by Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand*. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, this American scholar produced a sensitive and sympathetic religious biography of one of the greatest of all Germans, a man widely regarded in his own country as one of the fathers of German nationalism. Bainton's work originated in lectures delivered to theology students at Yale, Hartford, Bonebrake and Gettysburg seminaries but it worked for non-specialists because it broke out of the prison of dry, earnest, partisan controversy which still dominated intellectual debate and told the heroic story of a great individual.

So, why reinvent the wheel? I believe there are two compelling reasons for retelling the Luther story in popular format for a new century: the world has changed and Reformation scholarship has changed. The students for whom Bainton wrote – and the same doubtless holds good for many outside the lecture hall who read and enjoyed *Here I Stand* – were men and women of religious commitment. They were raised in a Christian environment and, therefore, understood something of the profundities of sin, faith, righteousness and justification with which Luther struggled. We live now in a secularised age and for most people these theological issues are incomprehensible and, probably, irrelevant. Western man today is switched off by 'religion'. But not by spirituality. Church attendance has declined dramatically throughout Europe and even in the USA it is not as common as it was in the 1950s. However, as has been frequently observed, spirituality tends to increase in almost inverse proportion to the decline of organised religion. People need some outlet for their sense of the sacred and will always seek answers to the fundamental questions of existence. Hence the proliferation since the 1960s of New Age movements, transcendental meditation, eastern mysticism and a bewildering variety of cults. Luther is significant in this situation because he was bent on a similar quest. His overpowering spiritual longings were not being met by conventional religion. Step by painful step he set out on his own pilgrimage towards an individual understanding of eternal truth. His story, therefore, is relevant in a new way to a new age.

Reformation historiography over the last half century has been a battlefield of new interpretations and revisionist theories. Once upon a time the

conflict was a simple one; it was waged between those, on the one side, who believed that Luther's movement delivered Europe from a decadent, power-crazed, theologically bankrupt medieval church and those on the other who extolled the virtues of undivided Catholicism and could not forgive Luther for breaking it up. The same partisan viewpoints continued in evidence, though expressed with greater sophistication and backed by new research, in the writings of, among many others, A. G. Dickens (*The German Nation and Martin Luther*), Steven Ozment (*The Age of Reform; The Reformation in the Cities*; etc.) and Heiko Oberman (*Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*) and Catholic apologists such as Eamon Duffy (*The Stripping of the Altars*, etc.), Richard Marius (*Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*) and Christopher Haigh (*English Reformations*). At the same time and much in the spirit of the ecumenical movement other authors were looking at the Reformation and Counter-Reformation from a different angle, stressing what they had in common, rather than what divided them. They saw continuity between medieval and sixteenth-century movements to purify the Church and revitalise its message; e.g. A. D. Wright, *The Counter-Reformation*. Another academic initiative, spearheaded by Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, proposed that all Reformation historiography was barking up the wrong tree; the real sixteenth-century conflict was not between rival Christianities but between Christianity and a multi-faceted, primitive folk religion. Any reliable new biography must, without becoming bogged down in detail or sterile argument, sift the grains of gold from the silt of academic controversy and use them to adorn the narrative.

To claim that Martin Luther is everlastingly relevant is not to disguise the difficulty faced by the reader in making the transition from the twenty-first century to the age of the reformer. As Oberman pointed out, 'We must be prepared to leave behind our own view of life and the world: to cross centuries of confessional and intellectual conflict in order to become his contemporary' (*sic*).¹ But, like all hazardous adventures, the rewards outweigh the difficulties. I hope that the reader, like me, will find himself caught up in the exciting adventures of this most human of all intellectual celebrities, a man who, to use modern jargon, not only talked the talk but walked the walk. He was that rare phenomenon, a man of total conviction who had the courage to follow his beliefs wherever they led. Thanks to the huge volume of his written works which have survived – books, pamphlets, sermons and letters – and which are augmented by the detailed observations of contemporaries, we can obtain a remarkably detailed picture of Luther. He emerges

not as a remote figure, to be admired or despised from afar, but as someone we can readily understand – a rumbustious enthusiast given to occasional bouts of depression, a practical joker, an affectionate husband and father, a preacher of thundering oratory, a man who enjoyed life and was certainly no puritanical killjoy. Luther possessed the faults that mirrored his virtues – stubbornness to match courage; vulgarity to match humanity; impatience with others to match his own self-discipline; generosity which matched his own indifference to creature comforts; a warm heart for friends which matched his unflagging hostility towards his opponents. To get to know this man is a rewarding experience.

Having done that, we have to move from the particular to the general. We must face questions of interpretation: what difference did Luther make in his own time? what has been his impact on history? in what ways has he moulded western thinking? *Out of the Storm* is the second in a series of books in which I am trying to suggest some answers to the question ‘What is Europe?’. In *Charlemagne: The Great Adventure* I laid out the parameters of the subject, showing how an empire which scarcely outlived the life of its founder had yet lodged an idea in the common consciousness. Throughout the High Middle Ages missionary, military, political and cultural endeavours brought into being ‘Western Christendom’, founded on the reality and the myth of Charlemagne’s achievement. It was a society bound together by common worship, common religious beliefs, a common language spoken by all the leaders of its intellectual life, and by allegiance to the pope and (in part) the Holy Roman Emperor. But this unity was only apparent. The triple-crowned pope claimed universal overlordship as Christ’s representative and the sustainer of a common Christian culture. Yet increasingly the princes of Europe regarded him as a territorial magnate, like themselves, but one who had tax-paying subjects in every realm and representatives who interfered in regional politics. It was their misfortune that they could not deal with the pope on a purely political level. As long as his agents, the clergy, had control of the means of grace and, therefore, man’s eternal destiny, it was a brave ruler who would openly oppose him. Medieval history has many examples of such confrontations, of which the best known to British readers is that of Henry II and Becket. In 1515 Henry VIII might optimistically assert that, ‘kings of England in time past have never had any superior but God only’ but the fact was that the odds were heavily weighted in favour of Rome. From time to time influential religious thinkers had emerged who had urged the exclusion of the Church from earthly wealth and temporal dominion but protestors such as Wycliffe,

Hus, the radical Franciscans and the Fratricelli had all been branded as heretics and dealt with accordingly.

It was Martin Luther who succeeded where others had failed. He evolved a theology which absolved territorial rulers from Roman overlordship just as it delivered individual souls from the tyranny of the sacramental system. As a result Western Christendom ceased to be a recognisable entity. The Holy Roman Empire was henceforth a title without substance. Expressed in crude terms, Luther created a 'North-South divide'. The supreme irony is that all this happened at precisely the time when the Emperor Charles V had succeeded in building up the largest continental empire since Charlemagne's.

Such devastating upheaval was well beyond anything that Luther wanted, planned or hoped for. He would have been appalled at the disintegration of Europe, the proliferation of Christian sects and the bloodshed of the so-called 'wars of religion'. He would have disclaimed responsibility. In his – essentially medieval – mindset ultimate causation lay with God and the devil. Chaos resulted when Satan triumphed. What Luther claimed to have done was release into the world the countervailing word of God. The formula may not have been quite as simple as Luther proposed but his evaluation of his own lifework was, in essence, right. Potentially he placed a vernacular Bible in every household. It was that free access to the source book of the Christian faith that forever freed Protestants from the institutional church and encouraged free thought in every area of life. If we clearly grasp that, we are at least some way towards understanding Martin Luther.