

Luther, the Papacy, and the Quest for the Absolute

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ABSTRACT: Luther's rejection of papal authority was never really about papal authority. Luther's revolutionary theological route was led by another, more important motivation: his fundamental, all-important "quest for the absolute." Luther was animated by an obsessive desire to find a sure, certain, and unflinching basis for the Christian life- "the absolute." This was his primary spiritual impulse, which he had acquired during his days as an anxious, guilt-ridden monk. Knowing his own sin, Luther despaired of finding an absolute basis for salvation in himself. Likewise, discovering the Church to be "merely human," he found it necessary to untether the Christian life from any reliance upon the institutional Church. It was then only natural for Luther to reject the claims of absolute authority made by that Church's head, the pope. This essay examines Luther's radically changing views on the papacy during the critical period between October 31, 1517 (Luther's publication of the Ninety-Five Theses) and December 10, 1520 (Luther's burning of *Exsurge Domine*- the papal bull of excommunication). This transformation was not so much an evolution into something new, but the unfolding realization of something already present. Luther's ultimate rejection of papal authority was implicated in his restless commitment to finding an absolute basis for the spiritual life and salvation. Historical circumstances merely provided the external occasion for him to flesh out the logic of this internal quest. This paper employs philosophical, theological, psychological, and historical insight to get at this deep, largely ignored component of Luther's attitude towards the papacy.

KEYWORDS: Luther, Reformation, Authority, Anxiety, Philosophy, Theology, Psychology, History

“The papacy is indeed nothing but the kingdom of Babylon and of the true Antichrist.”

Martin Luther, 1520 (Hendrix 1981, 111)

How did Martin Luther, a faithful and devout Catholic monk, become this: “the radical Luther”? The answer is that Luther did not set out to attack the papacy. His road to a radical anti-papalism was more indirect. We might even go so far as to say that Luther’s questioning of papal authority was never really about papal authority. From the original Ninety-Five Theses of 1517 to his eventual excommunication just three years later, Luther’s revolutionary theological route was led by other, more important motivations.

Chief among these influences may have been Luther’s fundamental, all-important “quest for the absolute.” Luther was animated by an obsessive desire to discover a sure, certain, and unfailing basis for the spiritual life- “the absolute.” For this paper’s argument, we can define “the absolute” negatively (almost apophatically) as: that which lays beyond the contingencies, uncertainties, and limitations of man- a finite creature Luther knew to be utterly weak, and an untrustworthy thing upon which to rest our faith. The opposite of “the absolute” is the realm of the “all too human.” Knowing his own sin, Luther despaired of finding an absolute basis for salvation in himself. Likewise, discovering the Church to be “merely human,” he found it necessary to untether the Christian life from all reliance on the institutional Church. It was then only natural for Luther to reject the claims of absolute authority made by that Church’s head, the pope. In this way, Luther’s challenge to the papacy was always “inadvertent.” It was never his primary aim or intention.

My essay examines Luther’s evolving views on the papacy during the critical three-year period between 1517 and 1520. But though this time is my primary focus, to understand this period, we must first understand Luther’s most fundamental spiritual impulse, which was developed during his earlier years as a monk. It is this impulse that would ultimately lead to his radical estrangement from the institutional Catholic Church and his sharp antagonism towards the pope. Oddly then, if we want to best understand Luther’s later beliefs on the papacy, perhaps we must start by looking elsewhere than his explicit ideas about the papacy itself. I will spend an almost inordinate amount of time explaining this early period, because it is critical you understand this deep impulse I am suggesting animated Luther.

1. The Early Luther

The most pivotal point in all of Luther's thought was the question of salvation. Luther's personal spiritual journey in this regard embodied and exposed the weaknesses inherent to late-medieval Catholicism. His internal spiritual wrestling revealed the limits and contradictions within this period's understanding of salvation. The Church of Luther's day largely held to an "extrinsic" conception of sin. Its all-encompassing religious system was built around this understanding, reflected in its distinctive interpretations of mortal sin, the state of grace, penance, absolution, and so on. The Church's understanding of mortal sin and the state of grace often dwelt upon the idea of sin as a definite, easily locatable moral fault that could just as easily be expunged through moral effort and the appropriate sacramental means. This stood in contrast to Luther's more pervasive, holistic, all-encompassing, and (dare I say) insightful sense of "Sin," which did not permit of such an easy solution.

Luther experienced "Sin" as an intrinsic condition that pervades all human existence, not an extrinsic act limited to a definite set of expressions. This is what the psychologist William James, quoted in Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*, describes as the Germanic tendency to envision "Sin in the singular, and with a capital S...ineradicably ingrained in our natural subjectivity, and never to be removed by any piecemeal operation" (Erikson 1962, 215). It was this discrepancy between Luther's more pervasive sense of "Sin" and the Church's more limited, extrinsic understanding that would be an unending source of anxiety for the young monk. If "Sin" (that which alienates us from God and His salvation) is "*ineradicably ingrained in our natural subjectivity*," than the quest to find salvation (overcoming this alienation) involves an impossible battle against the weaknesses and failures inevitable to human existence. Seeking salvation thus becomes a maddening, futile attempt at defying our very condition as human beings. This situation provided the young Luther with a ceaseless source of anxiety and guilt. This was not an *ab-normal* anxiety (i.e., a neurotic anxiety solely reflective of his own personal failures, shortcomings, or weaknesses), it was, to use the phrase of the 20th German theologian Paul Tillich, an *existential* anxiety (i.e., it related to the intrinsic condition of being a finite human creature) (Tillich 2000, 41).

The late-medieval religious system was ill-suited to soothing the conscience of an individual tuned to the depths of their own subjectivity. Luther knew himself (which is to say, the plight of all imperfect finite beings) too well to rest at peace with this salvific system. Whatever prescribed outward actions Luther did, he could always question his inner motives and sincerity. Luther thus continually, obsessively berated himself as a monk: "You didn't do that right. You weren't contrite enough. You left that

out of confession” (Hendrix 1981, 8). The outward religious forms of consolation the late-medieval Catholic system offered him could not correspond to his inward sense of that “Sin” which pervaded his deepest being. This led him to despair of finding salvation in anything “human”: whether his own works or a mere outward fulfillment of the Church’s piety. For the all-important matter of salvation, he could find a reliable hope in the grace of God alone: the only thing Luther could trust as being certain and absolutely dependable. For Luther, this Divine grace must also be unconditional, operating utterly independent of anything “all too human.” It must be a salvation *in* the inherent weaknesses and failures of our humanity (of our sinful subjectivity). Anything short of that was a hopeless effort at defying our human condition.

These early struggles with the question of salvation formed the beginning of Luther’s quest for an *absolute* basis to the Christian life- beyond all the hopeless shortcomings inherent to imperfect finite creatures. However embryonically, in his rejection of a salvation that is in any way dependent on man, we can detect the foundations for Luther’s eventual rejection of the papacy, which he would come to regard as a “merely human,” non-absolute authority that hindered the individual’s full pursuit of salvation. In this early stage, we can see Luther’s strong sense of the need for a Christianity totally grounded in “the absolute”: something rising beyond the hopeless level of the “all too human.”

2. The Revolutionary Period

Central to Luther’s interpretation of Christianity is his basic intuition that believers’ salvation must rest upon something utterly independent of all that is human, contingent, and uncertain. We can see this throughout his critical, three-year revolutionary period. In the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther insists on the believers’ ability to attain remission of guilt “even without indulgence letters” (Luther 1517, Th. 36). Instead, they should simply rely on the forgiveness that is immediately accessible through repentance before God. Luther had little patience for any “human doctrine” that made salvation even the slightest bit dependent upon the uncertain contingencies of the human Church, including that Church’s human pope (Luther 1517, Th. 27). This leads him to claim that “it is vain to trust in salvation by indulgence letters,” though the pope himself were to “offer his soul as security” (Luther 1517, Th. 52). With his relentless disdain for the idea that papal indulgences could forgive sin, even “the very least of venial sins,” Luther is not lofting a frontal attack on the papacy (Luther 1517, Th. 76). Rather, this inadvertent check on papal power merely follows from the unstoppable momentum of his primary concern, which is to lead Christians towards their absolute,

unquestionable source of forgiveness in God. For something as crucially important as salvation, human destiny does not rely upon the whims of the ecclesial authorities.

We can see Luther taking this idea even further in his 1518 sermon on excommunication. In the months following the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther realized that he was facing the very real possibility of excommunication from the Church- an act that was then held to have ultimate, salvific implications. In short, it was believed that to be cast out of the institutional Church was to be cast out of God's salvation. This threat forced Luther to articulate a new theology of excommunication in this sermon. Luther here went even further in freeing Christian salvation from any dependence upon the fickle contingencies of human beings, including those human authorities who determined Church excommunication.

The way Luther accomplished this was by severing the supposedly unbreakable connection between the "spiritual" Church and the "earthly" Church. These were not in fact identical. One's membership in the "spiritual" Catholic Church was determined in relation to the perfect, unquestionable judgement of God, while one's membership (or exclusion) within the "earthly" Catholic Church could be determined by ever-questionable, all too human actors. Excommunication from this "earthly" Church did not necessitate excommunication from the real, "spiritual" Church. As the theologian Herman Amberg Preus rightly suggests, this sermon is "important in the development of [Luther's] doctrine of the Church," for it "reveals the comfort of the doctrine that the Church is not an organization which can condemn your soul to hell, but a spiritual communion of believers, into which only God can bring you and out of which only He can drive you" (Preus 2008, 61). Luther thus liberated the conscience from its dependence upon anything short of God: the only absolute reference point in the Christian hope of salvation. Having fully severed the true "spiritual" Church from the "official" institutional Church, there was now *nothing* preventing Luther from taking the demarcation of these two to the furthest possible extreme. And driven by external factors and historical necessity, this is exactly what we see playing itself out in the following years.

In the Augsburg debate (Fall of 1518), Luther became even further disillusioned with the Church, and his beliefs about the implicit, hypothetical possibility of an opposition between the "official" Church and the true "spiritual" Church started to gain credibility. All the while (in this period of growing disillusionment), Luther had little animus towards Pope Leo himself (the man actually behind the papacy). He even gave the papacy an exalted place within his vision of a reformed Church, but he "could maintain respect for the papacy only at the cost of dissociating the salvation of the people from the question of papal authority" (Hendrix 1981, 78). Luther was

willing to grant high privileges to a “merely human” pope so long as these privileges only touched upon “merely human” matters (such as maintaining temporal church order and unity). But on ultimate questions like salvation or Gospel truth, he thought we must have a more absolute foundation than the feeble level of the “merely human.” As it was, the papacy was attempting to “tyrannically” lord its “merely human” prerogatives over the spiritual life of the faithful, and that is where Luther stood firm in resistance.

In 1519, largely driven by Johann Eck at the Leipzig debate, Luther’s skepticism of the Church and the papacy became even more dramatic. By 1520, Luther had observed the radical failures of the Roman Church and fully understood the implications. These failures included the Church’s suppression of the Gospel (i.e., a salvation by Divine grace independent of human contingencies), as well as its condemnation of “evangelical” preachers of the Gospel like himself and Jan Hus of Bohemia a century before. Thus, consistent with his personal tendency towards extremes and apocalypticism, Luther took the already mentioned theoretical distinction between the “official” Church and the “spiritual” Church to its furthest extreme. Luther believed that in history the “official” Church had become the enemy of the very thing it was called to serve: the Christian Gospel. The institutional Church had become the enemy of the “spiritual” Church. We might thus even call it “the Anti-Church.” From there it only followed that the head of this institutional Church was nothing less than the arch-nemesis of Christ and His Gospel- that is to say, the Anti-Christ.

Starting with the obscure Augustinian monk of Wittenberg, faithful and devout, we have now arrived at “the radical Luther” of 1520. At this point, his anti-papal fervor was unlimited. For the rest of this year, Luther spared none of his characteristically colorful language in trumpeting against the Roman Church and its head, the pope. This culminated in his dramatic burning of the papal bull of excommunication in December of 1520, by which he implicitly claimed that the pope himself was the true heretic. For the remainder of his life, Luther continued to believe he must do all that he could to warn Christians of the great truth: “The papacy is indeed nothing but the kingdom of Babylon and of the true Antichrist.”

Conclusions

As we have established, Luther was animated by the quest for an absolute basis to the spiritual life. This led him to dissociate the individual Christian’s spiritual life from the non-ultimate authority of the all too human Church. The pope was never integral that quest, he was just an annoying, “merely human” hindrance that conflicted with this primary impulse. Through his early experience as an anxiety ridden monk

seeking to attain certain salvation by his own efforts, Luther came face to face with the intrinsic limits that define weak, finite creatures. He simply perceived the plight of being a feeble creature who could by nature never defy the failures and shortcomings inherent to human subjectivity. His theoretical severance from the institutional Church was only the consistent, inevitable outgrowth of this fundamental realization about human existence, although, non-inevitable historical circumstances did encourage him to follow this reasoning to its logical conclusion and champion its most extreme possibility- namely, that the “official” Church had pitted itself against the Gospel in history, and was therefore “the Anti-Church,” and that consequently this Church’s head, the pope, was, at least for Luther, nothing short of the Anti-Christ.

In this way, I hope you have seen the supreme logic behind “the radical Luther,” who should not be dismissed as the product of mere personal exaggeration or fanatical extremism. Instead, the historical equation for creating the radically anti-papal Luther was simply his key insight into the nature of imperfect finite human existence, together with the unique historical circumstances that forced him to realize the full implications of his relentless, all-important “quest for the absolute.” It was ultimately this quest for a certain, unflinching, absolute basis to the spiritual life that created the world-historical figure of Martin Luther: bitter critic of the institutional Catholic Church, and equally, arch-enemy of the pope in Rome.

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