Luther the urban legend

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Fortress Press

2009


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Important historical figures are often surrounded by a hagiography in which their deeds, personality and teachings become equipped with an aura of omnipotence. They are compared with other great men and women of the past with whom they show more or less obvious likeness. Martin Luther is no exception in this regard. He emerges as a new apostle Paul or as a new Augustine who shows the church the right path leading to the future. Luther appears as a forerunner of modernity who has grasped the importance of individual freedom as well as the fundamental equality of all human persons. Modern Lutheran practices, like comprehensive education, health care, and social aid, can be interpreted as later extensions of Luther's original ideas.

Historical and theological scholars need to find their way through this hagiography and urban legend. The category of "urban legend" is often understood to denote a story which is assumed to be true while in reality it is not. It is more accurate, however, to define an urban legend as a story which is transmitted as a true story whereas the participants do not know its actual truth-value. Urban legends are characterized by their superficial nature, that is, they are told and believed without much critical concern regarding their actual origins. They may describe some modest event in spectacular terms or present a side remark as a profound innovation which has shaped the life of many generations. Thus they may contain seeds of truth but often in a distorted fashion.

Irrespectively of their truth-value, urban legends can serve as important factors of history and group identity. Given that a large group steadfastly believes a certain story to be true, it plays an important role in the behavior of this group. Urban legends and stories are fascinating but complicated building-blocks of historical and contemporary identity. The heroes are often not innocent regarding the legends concerning them. They are themselves very concerned with how the next generations will remember them and consciously aim at shaping this memory.

In the following I will discuss some urban stories circulating around the person and thought of Martin Luther. Because so many different aspects of Luther's person and thought are wrapped in legend, it is impossible to attempt a comprehensive view. I can only undertake a series of exploratory drillings into different soils so that we can see the samples in their rich variety. I will make my own evaluations and judgments, not in order to close the discussion but rather to continue the rich history of interpretation.

Martin Luther denies an easy access. He was a complex and many-sided personality and his enormous literary output contains elements which can be used for different purposes. To illustrate in which ways this is the case, I will first investigate a well-known story which relates Luther to the Christian past, and then proceed to other stories which relate Luther's name to more recent historical and contemporary currents.

Paul, Augustine and Luther: The Conversion

The biographies of great religious leaders typically contain some decisive moments of kairos

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during which a radical change takes place. On the way to Damascus, Saul receives a vision of light and an audition in which he is told that he has persecuted Jesus. (Acts 9:3-5) Saul is converted into a follower of Jesus and becomes the apostle Paul. In his search for Christianity, the church father Augustine also receives a vision and an audition. Mother Continence appears to him and advises him not to stand by way of his own strength but to cast himself on God. Augustine then receives an audition under the fig tree, saying: _tolle et lege_, take it and read it. He reads a passage from Romans and is converted so that the light of full certainty is infused into his heart (_Confessions_ 8,11-12). A religious conversion is, in this manner, preceded by vision and audition which underline the dramatic nature of the event. This paradigm of conversion continues to shape our understanding of decisive religious experiences.

In the case of Martin Luther, the obvious counterpart to this paradigm is the decision to enter the monastery of Erfurt. On the 2nd of July 1505 Luther experiences a severe thunderstorm in Stotternheim.² Terrified by the lighting and thunder he cries out to Saint Anna for help and promises to become a monk if he is saved. We again have audition and vision, this time in the form of lightning and thunder. Luther's father is skeptical and considers the possibility of delusion. But, as we all know, Luther enters the monastery.

Like Paul, Luther walks on the road and meets there his moment of kairos. Like Augustine, he is a young man thirsty for life and does not think of monastic celibacy or “continence” in only positive terms. In the urban legend, the stories of Paul, Augustine, and Luther are united so that a fusion of different religious horizons occurs. Sometimes we do not remember which person read Romans, who was struck down by lightning and which of the three met Jesus. The legend brings Paul, Augustine and Luther into a close encounter not only with God, but also with each other.

A theologian who reflects on the matters more closely may have some reservations concerning the story. Luther promised to become a monk and went into the monastery. But the decisive issue in his later life was to leave the monastery and to criticize the life of monks and nuns. Given this, was Luther's father finally right, namely that the thunderstorm was not a real vision and audition, but a delusion? A theologian easily begins to qualify the story in a new manner, for instance: Luther became religious as a result of a thunderstorm, but not yet in a proper manner. But if this is the case, then the analogy to Paul and Augustine breaks down. Both Saul and Augustine were extremely religious before their conversion: the point of their conversion story was to show how they came into a right and proper faith.

A modern Lutheran theologian may also have some difficulties with visions and auditions. Generally speaking, visions and audits are not highly respected among Lutherans. Good Christians should rely on word and sacrament, not on visions and auditions. On the other hand, Luther's conversion in a thunderstorm does have some obvious pedagogical appeal: it is a dramatic event which children and young people remember more easily than the articles of the _Augsburg Confession_. It also joins Luther with good company, with the two greatest heroes of early Christianity.

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The story of conversion in a thunderstorm is a many-sided event containing both exemplary and problematic aspects. What really happened on the 2nd of July in 1505? A historian first tells the obvious fact that nobody was recording Luther's life at that time; we only know of this event from Luther's later recollections and from some comments by his friends. The Table talks mention this event several times, but in them Luther is already creating his own legend of the beginnings. Two earlier records stem from 1519 and 1521; they are generally considered to be the most reliable sources. The first of these is the letter of Crotus Rubeanus to Luther in 1519. In it Rubeanus, a student friend, remarks that “the heavenly lightning struck Luther down as a second Paul and moved him to the corner of the Augustinians [i.e. the monastery of the Augustinian eremites]”. In this earliest report of the occasion we already have all three heroes: Luther, Paul, and Augustine. Luther scholars have also noticed that Luther was called “the second Paul” already before 1519, although not in this context. The fusion of the religious horizons of Luther and Paul had already occurred in the very first historical records of Luther's conversion.

In his own report of the event in De votis monasticis (1521) Luther compares himself to Augustine. As in the case of the church father, the passions of youth were burning in the young student when the lightning struck him down. Afraid of sudden death, he decided to go into a monastery, although his father thought that this experience was not a vision, but a delusion. The father would have liked Luther to marry rather than to base his life on a vision and a vow of celibacy. The two early records thus mix Luther's experiences with those of Paul and Augustine. One person is, however, missing in the early stories: they do not mention Saint Anna. She only comes into the picture much later, in the table talk stemming from 1539. Luther's late table talks tell the same story but with different accents. In his table talks, Luther is generally critical of his early decision to enter the monastery. In the later reflection, the invocation of Saint Anna contains a grain of sarcasm: “In my fear I cried: help me, Saint Anna, I want to become a monk. But God understood this promise in a Hebrew manner. Anna os a name that means: under grace, not according to the law. Afterwards I repented of this promise ...”

In this very first occurrence of the name of Saint Anna, Luther already interprets it to suit his purposes. The table talks draw a picture of the monastery as a place under the law; the invocation of St. Anna was a cry which God paradoxically understood contrary to the intentions of the young student. In this manner St. Anna finally served the purpose of evangelical freedom rather than the captivity of the monastery.

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3 All this evidence is listed and discussed in Lindner 2007.
4 WABr 1, Nr. 213.
5 WA 8, 573-574.
6 WATr 4, Nr. 4707.
The very first recollections of Luther's conversion unite him with Paul and Augustine, thus creating an aura of greatness to this event. The later recollections are, however, self-critical and relativize the importance of this decision. In his autobiography of 1545 Luther does not mention the event of conversion. He only says sarcastically that in the monastery he remained rather Saul than Paul. Thus Luther already in his lifetime gave some ground both for the upgrading of his conversion as well as for downgrading this event.

The story of Luther's conversion introduces us into the complex world of narrative reports. It would be misleading to claim that there was first a naked event which was later wrapped in legend but which the historian can again uncover and expose. Historical analysis is not a process of disclosure; it rather shows the enormous complexity and multi-perspectival nature of the past. History is interwoven with narratives which not only interpret the events but constitute them.

The event of Luther's conversion is not exhausted by an analysis of the external facts pertaining to the 2nd of July 1505. This event is first created by the later recollections and interpretations. A conversion may be momentary, but the meaning of this conversion only emerges over a longer period of time. The whole meaning of the event can include contrary elements: on the one hand it brought Luther to the right path, but it also brought him to the wrong path. Luther's father wrongly interpreted this event as delusion, but he was also right in criticizing it. Luther followed the example of Paul and Augustine, but he also created a distance to the conversion narratives which stress visions and auditions.

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Luther and Shakespeare: The Different Mentalities

One genre of stories connects the great man with his predecessors, like Luther is connected with Paul and Augustine. Another genre connects the hero with his followers and other later figures. When we discuss Luther's global impact this second genre is particularly important. Later currents of thought have either identified themselves with Luther or taken a conscious distance from his views.

For better or worse, Luther is a typically German figure. Although the German state did not exist in the 16th century, Luther's writings gave the German language much of its later form and established many important aspects of German cultural identity. If we aim at discussing the global Luther, we have to develop an opinion concerning the relationship between the German and the non-national or cross-cultural aspects of his thought. This is not an easy task and my paper only begins this discussion through relating Luther with some other cultural mentalities. I will start with the easiest point of comparison, namely the mentality of the English-speaking culture.

Which early modern figure would an average English-speaking college or university student of today be most familiar with? If we look at literary texts, William Shakespeare is the obvious answer. Shakespeare has the great advantage of being the most creative force in the development of English language and literary culture. In that sense he can be compared with Luther's cultural significance. In short, Shakespeare has been formative to the English mindset in ways that resemble Luther's importance for the German-speaking people.

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Let us imagine how a truly sympathetic reader of Shakespeare would evaluate the relationship between the English poet and the German reformer. The following picture might emerge: Shakespeare can see the life and fates of people in their manifold variety. Life is both comedy and tragedy; it is good to be sympathetic to suffering people, but one-sided seriousness is not the adequate relationship to life in its fullness. Religious people, like Luther, have a tendency to disregard the great variety of life, because they believe to have found an absolute answer to all questions. But in reality they only ask a very limited set of questions. Religious people tend to be hypocritical and they lack a sense of humour. Shakespeare shows the positive value of good emotions; he can appreciate divine powers but does not claim to have a normative vision or control over religious issues. Therefore he is a much better guide for modern people than the narrow-minded professor from Wittenberg.

This story claims something about Shakespeare and Luther, and maybe also something about English and German mentality. Its claims are sweeping claims, and thus it is difficult to discuss them properly. What can be done is some historical groundwork regarding the impact of Luther on Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's comments on Luther and Lutheranism have often been seen to take place in Hamlet. As observed from England, Denmark is the nearest Lutheran country. The prince of Denmark is mentioned to have studied in Wittenberg. More importantly, the melancholy character of Hamlet has been seen in connection with Luther. Luther's heroic melancholy was underlined in the 16th-century literature; both Luther and Hamlet are compared to Hercules who is the classical symbol of heroic melancholy. The best-known allusion to Luther's reformation in Hamlet is the word-play relating to the emperor at the 1521 Diet of Worms. Hamlet responds to the question about where he put the body of Polonius as follows: “Not where he eats, but where he is eaten; a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots” (Hamlet 4,3).

Hamlet's depression and temptations as well as his criticism of philosophy, exemplified in the famous line “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (Hamlet 1,5), match well with this picture of Luther. Luther and Hamlet are united in their view of the hiddenness of God, Deus absconditus who is concealed under the opposite and cannot be reached by means of philosophy.

But finally, Shakespeare is in Hamlet only showing that the story told above is true: there is something rotten in the continental European spirit which remains depressed and fixated on the dark side. The urban story is not merely a product of later times but it has some foundation in the original texts.

The most Lutheran play of Shakespeare is not, however, Hamlet but Measure for...
Measure. This claim has its textual justification in the circumstance that Shakespeare's plot is evidently taken from Luther, namely from his Of Worldly Authority (1523). Luther tells the story as follows:

A certain nobleman took an enemy prisoner. The prisoner's wife came to ransom her husband. The nobleman promised to give back the husband on the condition that she would lie with him. The woman was virtuous, yet wished to set her husband free; so she goes and asks her husband whether she should do this thing in order to set him free. The husband wished to be set free and to save his life, so he gives his wife permission. After the nobleman had lain with the wife, he had the husband beheaded the next day and gave him to her as a corpse. She laid the whole case before duke Charles. He summoned the nobleman and commanded him to marry the woman. When the wedding day was over he had the nobleman beheaded, gave the woman possession of his property, and restored her to honor.13

For Luther, the story exemplifies the flexibility of worldly authority which should not “make reason a captive of letters” but is called to keep “written laws subject to reason”.14

In Shakespeare's version, the relationship between law and reason is more complex. The heroine of Measure for Measure is Isabella, a young nun who first pleads for the liberty of her brother, arguing that mercy is greater than punishment. The nobleman in charge of the prisoner wants to lie with the nun. He turns Isabella's own merciful argument against her: because she so sincerely believes in grace and mercy, she could without problems excuse herself so that she and her brother need not feel guilty in paying this price for his freedom. Isabella is, however, more firm than the wife in Luther's story and refuses to sleep with the nobleman. Now the nobleman accuses her of failing to act according to her own principles: the nun first claims that grace and mercy are greater than the law, but she cannot apply this claim to her own moral situation.

The dialogues between Isabella and the nobleman are deep theological treatises which investigate the relationship between law and gospel, justice and mercy. Shakespeare is well aware of the Lutheran claims following from the distinction between law and gospel. He is sympathetic to this distinction but also critical of it. Through the confusion of Isabella, Shakespeare aims at showing that the people who proclaim the superiority of mercy and grace do not understand its relationship to justice and the law.15

A careful reader of Measure for Measure realizes that the relationship between Luther and Shakespeare is more complex than any superficial story of the differences between German and English mentalities assumes. Shakespeare may be critical of Protestantism, but he understands very well the fine distinctions between law and mercy. The heroine of Measure for Measure is a very Lutheran character; her only fault is that her Lutheran theology is not as consistent as she first believes. The male hero of this play is the Duke who only appears in the end of the play to solve the situation and to punish the nobleman. In doing this, the Duke does not use arguments. Although Isabella's reasoning has been seriously defective, it is nevertheless the best reasoning performed in the play.

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13 WA 11, 279-280; LW 45, 128-129.
14 WA 11, 280.
15 I have analysed the theology of this dialogue in more detail in a Finnish article: Saarinen, “Luterilainen seksuaalietiikka, Luther ja Shakespeare”, in: Kirkko ja usko tänän päivän Suomessa, ed. A. Visala, Helsinki: STKS 2007, 72-91. See also Fabiny 2006.
The dialectic between law and gospel, justice and mercy finally transcends the boundaries of nationality and mentality. Shakespeare is extremely interested in this dialectic and also competent to discuss it in detail. The underlying issue is the perennial question: how can we find a merciful God, or: how can we understand which actions can count as merciful? Shakespeare can show that the finding of merciful actions may be even more difficult than Lutherans generally believe. But in Measure for Measure he asks the same questions regarding mercy or grace. The continuous asking of these extremely difficult questions may be one of the most important global impacts of Martin Luther.

Luther and Kierkegaard: The Individualist Faith

Another great thinker who has reflected on the deep waters of mercy is Sören Kierkegaard. Like Shakespeare, he is a prominent example of the interrelated problems of nationality, mentality, and Lutheranism. In Northern Europe, it has been customary to see Kierkegaard as a true representative of Lutheranism. Lutheran Pietists in particular have welcomed Kierkegaard as their patron saint, seeing in him the struggle of individual conscience and the genuine way of being a Christian in the modern era. When we discuss Martin Luther's relationship to the legends of modernity and individualism, Kierkegaard's thought is a place to start.

The assumed likeness between Luther and Kierkegaard is due to the so-called Lutherrenaissance, a German movement of the 1920s which admired Kierkegaard's individualism and saw Luther through the eyes of modern philosophical schools. In the writings of Karl Holl and some later scholars, for instance Lennart Pinomaa and the young Jaroslav Pelikan, the professor from Wittenberg emerges as a 16th-century Kierkegaard who struggles with his own conscience and performs a leap of faith against the rest of the world. According to this type of Luther research, the German reformer is not primarily a forerunner of modernity, but an almost postmodern figure who does not believe in grand narratives but constructs his own existence through the inner struggle with anxiety, desperation, and temptations.

Luther scholars have employed Kierkegaard as a guarantor for a religious world-view which draws back from nationalism towards subjective freedom and sees religion as an individual and private conviction. This understanding has had obvious appeal for both European and American Lutherans. Even Karl Holl, who is known for his conscientious research, can make a sweeping claim in this regard: “Luther comes to the issues which the great way-opener Paul had foreseen and for which first Sören Kierkegaard in the 19th century, as well as Nietzsche, have shown an understanding.”

Holl here refers to Luther's struggle with genuine penitence, the so-called act of contrition. One problem with Holl and his followers is that they are for the most part discussing the earliest monastic texts of Luther. In these texts the inner struggle sometimes receives extreme dimensions. Luther aims at renouncing everything, attempting, as he formulates the issue, to nail himself so high on the cross that his own feet would no longer touch the earth. Holl here refers to Luther's struggle with genuine penitence, the so-called act of contrition. One problem with Holl and his followers is that they are for the most part discussing the earliest monastic texts of Luther. In these texts the inner struggle sometimes receives extreme dimensions. Luther aims at renouncing everything, attempting, as he formulates the issue, to nail himself so high on the cross that his own feet would no longer touch the earth.

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touch the ground. In this uncompromising attitude he does display some Kierkegaardian and Pietist features.

At some point Luther realizes, however, that this path does not lead to real renunciation but rather to self-righteousness. Nailing himself always higher on the cross, he aims at ascending rather than descending. Contemporary Luther scholars point out that the so-called Demutstheologie, theology of self-humiliation, remains a transitory phase in Luther's development. Later, at least since 1518-1519, he realizes that the world is God's good gift which needs to be affirmed and not merely renounced. More importantly, Luther realizes that the very process of renunciation cannot be absolutized. From a certain point onwards, the process of renunciation becomes self-righteous. A person in this process does not trust in God but aims at justifying himself or herself through ascetic means.

Unlike the Kierkegaardians of the 20th century, the Danish philosopher himself is much more reserved in his understanding of Luther. The younger Kierkegaard appreciates Luther's honest struggle with conscience and temptations, but over the years he increasingly considers Luther's relationship to both world and society to be problematic. For Kierkegaard, the ascetic lifestyle inevitably belongs to true Christianity. When Luther left behind the exaggerated ascesis and began to affirm worldly structures, he compromised his own reformatory ideals. Luther's marriage in particular was for Kierkegaard a false move which showed complicity with the world. Luther did not finally have the proper rigor to follow the existential dialectics. In this manner Kierkegaard understood his own fundamental difference to Luther much better than the Luther scholars who remain enchanted by the Danish radical.

Luther and Modernity: The Affirmation of Ordinary Life

The connections between Luther and modernity concern a much broader range of topics than the issue of individualism or subjectivism alone can make visible. In the 19th and early 20th century Luther was often joined with Kant who was seen as the philosopher of Protestantism par excellence. Still today Luther's conception of freedom, in particular his view of the freedom of conscience, is seen as a forerunner of modernity. Prominent scholars like Gerhard Ebeling and Hans Reiner claim that Luther is the first thinker to have formulated the phrase “liberty of conscience.”

This claim is false: the phrase already appears in late antiquity, in the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius as well as in Cassiodorus. But again, the false claim contains a grain of truth. Freedom of conscience was only rarely mentioned in medieval Latin, but after

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18 WA 1, 102, 40 - 103, 2: “Hoc autem est suspendi in cruce, ubi nusquam tangit terram in qua confidat; haec est via proficientium.” Cf. Bo Holm, Gabe und Geben bei Luther, Berlin: de Gruyter 2006, 57.
19 For a detailed documentation of this development, see Holm 2006.
20 See Bornkamm 1970, 95-100.
23 Boethius, De consolatione philosophiae 1, prose 4 (“conscientiae libertas”); Cassiodorus, Variarum libri XII, 1, 4, 5 and 9, 12, 1 (“libera conscientia”).
Luther and Calvin it became a prominent topic which guided the discussion on individual freedom and basic human rights. Luther did not invent the phrase but he made it prominent. At the same time it should be noticed that the prominence of the phrase did not imply any consistent understanding of the phenomenon of respect or toleration. The radical reformers did not enjoy the same freedom of conscience which was claimed for Lutherans or Calvinists.24

The end result is thus complex: Luther did not invent the freedom of conscience: the term is older, the phenomenon younger than the Reformation. And yet, Luther contributed to the emergence of this phenomenon as well as to the understanding of the term in its current meaning. Some other issues which relate Luther to modernity and individual rights yield similar results. The rights and practices pertaining to sexual ethics are a good example.

Because Luther allowed pastors to marry and because he wrote influential treatises on marriage, many historians and theologians have evaluated his contribution as an affirmation of human sexuality and as liberation from oppressive practices.25 At the same time, however, a careful reader of Luther's treatises may obtain a different picture. Luther often denies the human possibility to control one's own sexuality. It is better to marry than to burn; celibacy only leads to more grave sins because positive control cannot be reached. In Luther's view, living with a woman without having sex with her is more difficult than waking the dead.26

But if Luther radicalizes Augustine's view of sexuality as an uncontrollable power, it would be difficult to say that his sexual ethics affirms eros as a positive power. It is rather the case that his view is so negative that he simply needs to allow marriage to everyone as the lesser evil. As a result, marriage is not something controlled by the free will of the spouses, but it is an institution controlled by the broader society. Given this, the secularization of marriage in the Lutheran Reformation need not be read in terms of healthy affirmation of created powers, but rather as a concession to the problematic power of sex.

This understanding of sexuality is concomitant with the control power which Luther ascribes to worldly and ecclesial authorities. Even Christians are so weak that they need to be governed by the external ordinances of the surrounding society. The consent of the spouses is not enough to constitute marriage, but parental consent and a public notice of the intended marriage are also needed. Christianity had for 1500 years adhered to the Roman practice of regarding marriage as a contract between the two partners. The Lutheran Reformation made it additionally dependant on the public authorities. This innovation was probably the only matter which the Council of Trent took over from the Reformation.27

Lutherans do not normally interpret Luther's view of sexuality and marriage in this

24 On the complex history of toleration, see e.g. Benjamin J. Kaplan, Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 2007.


26 LW 7, 84; WA 44, 362, 29-30: “Habitare enim cum muliere, et eam non cognoscere, plus est quam mortuos excitare.”

manner, but it is entirely possible and historically adequate to do so. Luther's relationship to the modern views of marriage and sexuality therefore remains ambivalent. It is likely that the institution of marriage became socially upgraded as a result of the Reformation, but human sexuality continued to be understood in Augustinian terms. Luther's global impact in this respect remains to be studied and better understood.

It is not Luther's affirmation of human sexuality which makes the difference, but rather his affirmation of ordinary life. The term “ordinary life” comprises one's family life as well as one's profession. Among contemporary thinkers, Charles Taylor has highlighted the importance of this phenomenon as a connection point between the Reformation and modernity. Taylor claims that the Reformation was characterized by the affirmation that the fullness of Christian existence was to be found within the activities of this life, in one's calling and in marriage and the family. The entire modern development of the affirmation of ordinary life was, I believe, foreshadowed and initiated, in all its facets, in the spirituality of the Reformers.28

Like Karl Holl, Gerhard Ebeling and many other scholars, Charles Taylor sees the Reformation as a forerunner of modernity. But he does not consider this role to consist in a Kierkegaardian subjectivity, in the freedom of conscience or in a new view concerning sexuality. What the concept of modern selfhood, the main topic of Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, receives from the Reformation is no individualistic feature but a communitarian virtue of partnership and active participation in the worldly calling.

To make his point clear, Taylor elaborates on the concept of renunciation. While Socrates and the Stoics claimed that they do not in fact lose anything in renouncing the world, Christians have always experienced that in renouncing the world they really lose something of God's good creation. Thus “Christian renunciation is an affirmation of the Goodness of what is renounced.” Renunciation and ascetism are therefore ambivalent phenomena which may lead into a real loss of good life. In Taylor's view, the Protestant reformers were very conscious of this ambivalence. They preached a sort of asceticism, but it was meant for an inner-worldly asceticism in which the ordinary life was not renounced but emphatically affirmed.29

Taylor's ideas can be applied to Luther's monastic experiences. Luther first renounces his worldly life, but in his later recollections he is also driven to renounce this first renunciation. Only after this second renunciation can he affirm the evangelical freedom and the goodness of ordinary life. The second renunciation does not, however, extinguish the very idea of renunciation but continues it in a new manner, making possible the affirmation of ordinary life.

Taylor's description of modernity is very different from those interpretations of Luther which see modernity in Kierkegaardian terms. The Danish philosopher remains on the path of first renunciation which is hostile to ordinary life. In Kierkegaard, the individuality of the subject emerges at the cost of the surrounding world which is seen as banal and dull reality. But in Luther's theology, ordinary life with its manifold callings, roles, and tasks receives a clear positive value in spite of the continuing rule of sin and the bondage of the will. If we look at Luther's treatises on marriage, it is the multitude of everyday situations vis-à-vis the


community rather than any teaching on individual sexual ethics which is innovative. In this regard, too, Luther is closer to Shakespeare than to Kierkegaard. Shakespeare's eye for the tiny details of ordinary life as well as his sense of relationships within the community, are in this Taylorian sense Protestant phenomena.

The Global Luther: Lessons to Be Learned

Some basic ideas have emerged from our exploratory drillings into the rich soil of Luther and his historical impact. The communitarian understanding of Luther's theology has been emphasized. Luther's thought provides cultural insights which make a dialogue with poets like William Shakespeare and philosophers like Charles Taylor important. In keeping with this emphasis, the linking of Luther with an individualistic understanding of human rights or with a subjectivistic understanding of philosophy can be criticized. Luther finally learned to appreciate the ordinary life with its communitarian ideals. This was not his weakness, as Kierkegaard claimed, but his strength. The most important global impacts of the Reformation are found in this affirmation of ordinary life, with its ideals of good education, social equality and readiness to love and help one's neighbour.

Having said this, I have no intention of being a cultural Protestant. I am not pleading for a superficial accommodation of Luther's theology with various cultural externalities. What I want to say is that a careful historian and a careful theologian can see many significant points of contact between the Reformation and modern Western culture. It is also the case that the urban legends and stories surrounding the Reformation are important for our grasp of modernity. These stories are often as old as the events they aim to illuminate--and conceal. The stories and legends belong to history as its constitutive elements.

Charles Taylor's view has the additional advantage of offering some trans-cultural possibilities in understanding the concept of reformation. This concept is important when we address the issue whether other confessions or even religions can have reformations. Some recent discussions concerning the “Islamic reformation,” for instance, consider that the emergence of mass education and mass communication constitutes a new situation in which the larger group can become a subject of religion in a stronger sense than before. 30 Although this analogy remains vague, it is noteworthy that the European Reformation can also be characterized in terms of mass education and mass communication. An affirmation of ordinary life makes civil society a responsible subject in a new sense, since it promotes education as well as the exchange of goods and information.

It is even more difficult to address the issue whether we could have “Martin Luthers” in other confessions and religions. Although there is some discussion regarding the possibility of an “Islamic Luther,” the evidence I have been able to consult is not very illuminating. 31

Proceeding from the ideal of affirming the ordinary life, we may obtain another analogy which is no less ambivalent. I am thinking of the role of Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer and Opus Dei in 20th-century Spain. Opus Dei has promoted the affirmation of ordinary life and good education in civil society, thus contributing to the social and educational rise of Spain. The autonomy of professional life as well as its understanding in terms of religious calling are

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31 A variety of recent views with a bibliography is offered in Roman Loimeier, “Is there something like 'Protestant Islam'?" Die Welt des Islams 45, 2005, 216-254.
ideals which Opus Dei shares with the Reformation. Most contemporary Lutherans as well as most Opus Dei members would, however, be embarrassed by this comparison.

Charles Taylor connects the Reformation with the emergence of Puritanism, a liaison with which not all Lutherans are comfortable. But maybe modern Lutherans have been too allergic regarding the “reformation of life” preached by Calvinists and Puritans. If we proceed from the affirmation of ordinary life as a central tenet of the Reformation, we obtain a picture in which Calvinists and Puritans are following Luther's cultural insights. This picture can also be helpful if we aim at understanding the contemporary quasi-Puritan reformation movements in Catholicism and Islam. They do not pertain only to doctrines but also, and perhaps primarily, to the comprehensive renovation of life.

At the same time, the ideals of true mercy and reflected renunciation remain vital. One-sided asceticism and moralism need to be left behind in order that mercy and affirmation of the created world may prevail. In this manner the finding of a merciful God is an anti-individualistic, cross-cultural and, finally, global challenge.

A Final Remark: The Masks behind the Man

When we read Luther today we often regard him as a companion or friend. We have the unprecedented possibility to search for his comments about all possible matters from our cd-roms or book indexes. Through random searches we can almost have a dialogue with this friend from the distant past, asking his opinions on various matters. The modern biographies often emphasize Luther's personality and lifestyle, depicting him as a human being among equals.

This is not, however, the way Luther wants to be understood in his texts, where he aims, rather, at appearing in some very conscious roles. He is not speaking to us as a friend and companion, but he is, so to say, wearing his coat of arms and his war paint. He approaches the hearer as an authoritative professor in a lecture room, or as an ordained pastor in the pulpit, or as a famous polemist and best-selling author, as a media celebrity. To understand his message properly, he should not be regarded as a companion with a human face, but as a person in a certain role, as a mask rather than a face.

One great hermeneutical assumption of modernity is that a person is more genuine when he or she speaks without a mask, as himself or herself. But this is just another urban legend. We are not interested in the speeches of George W. Bush as himself, but we listen because he is an important officeholder. We should not listen to a sermon because the pastor is a nice person, but because he occupies a certain role and task. But our modernity stresses the primacy of the face instead of the mask. The masks remain unrecognized behind the person.

In the 16th century, both the social rules of the community and the rhetorical rules of composing texts underline the ethos, that is, the specific role and authority of the speaker. Lutheranism in particular was very conscious of the different roles in which the speaker appears, whether as pastor, as paterfamilias, as worldly authority or simply as citizen. The whole notion of a genuine self “behind” these roles remains undeveloped. And we should not read it into the 16th-century texts. It is a very difficult issue whether the “genuine self” is an illusion. I am not postmodern enough to claim that it is a mere illusion, but old texts are to

32 About Opus Dei see e.g. John L. Allen, Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church. New York: Doubleday 2005.
be read as representative of the social roles and positions they exemplify rather than as personal diaries.

The theme given to me, *Luther: the Urban Legend*, in its own way already calls for a neat distinction between facts and legends. But in the world of historical texts there is no clear distinction between the two. As we saw in the example of Luther's conversion, the earliest records of that event already interpret it in terms of Paul's and Augustine's conversion. A modern person tends to think of an individual experience which was later covered with interpretations.

But it is also possible to think of this event as a fusion of horizons: because Christians knew from the Bible and from Augustine what a conversion is, they could identify their own experiences in terms of conversion through applying those texts to them. What they had read, the *legenda*, served as the matrix of identification. There is first the legend which is then applied to personal experiences so that, as a third step, definite events could emerge. In this sense the matrix or the mask is primary; the face is then shaped to suit the mask.