

Young Man Luther

A Study in Psychoanalysis and History

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*Vivendo, immo moriendo et dammando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo, aut speculando*¹

Luther is the heroic rebel, who by nailing in wrathful indignation his 95 thesis to the door of the *Schloßkirche in Wittenberg*, (blows that of course echoed all over Europe) he brought down the Catholic Church and brought the Bible down to the common people (and in the process creating the German language). Perhaps not quite. Nailing an announcement on a public door as an invitation to a disputation was common practice at the time, and alas, recent historical forensic research throws doubts on whether this nailing to the door really actually took place. And the Catholic Church was not brought down, shaken maybe, but was eventually able to contain the movement to the periphery of the North. Lutheranism became the State Church, but only in the Nordic countries, and although it found a firm foundation in northern Germany, Catholicism remained a tolerated minority. What was the real nature of Luther's theological breakthrough and what was its lasting political ramifications? The author does not really address those issues head on, he is more interested in the psychology of Luther the man, than Luther as a historical personage, although his status as the latter, obviously furnished an irresistible impetus for the former. Erik H. Erikson German of Danish ancestry and making his career in the States was a psychoanalyst, whose contribution to psychoanalysis was the identification of the sequence of seven crises that characterize the life of an individual, especially, the by him as the identity crisis identified process that strikes people in late adolescence, and which in particular gifted and disturbed individuals, such as Luther, can continue into their thirties.

I naturally heard about Luther at an early age, in particular I identified with his childhood fear of God, thereby finding in him a kindred soul. This might be seen as somewhat pretentious, which it no doubt was, on the other hand historical personages play the same role as fictional characters in the imaginative life of a sensitive child, thus actually meant to serve as models of identification. The reason for his fear of God, Erikson naturally, (and what else can you expect from a psychoanalyst?) lays at the door of the oppressive character of his father - Hans Luder, who as tradition was at the time, did not spare the rod, lest he spoiled the child. To Freud, the notion of God is nothing else but a projection of a father figure, so if this is interpreted vulgarly and literally, it is easy to jump to such conclusions, although there is nothing *per se* in Freud's conception to force such an interpretation, because the notion of a towering father figure could simply be innate in the mind of the child. This leads to the truly fascinating approach to religion as being

¹ A theologian is born by loving, nay dying and being damned, not by thinking, reading and speculation.

a manifestation of the deeper currents of the psyche, and Erikson indeed credits Luther with many deep psychological insights antedating those of Freud with four hundred years. Erikson writes thus not as a believer, nor as a philosopher but as a psychologist, and thus, according to his critics, he simply releases theology from the clutches of philosophy only to have it embraced and swallowed by psychology, if ever a case of going from the frying pan to the fire.

Of the book I must have already have heard shortly after it came out. The idea of treating ant- Luther as a disturbed individual both shocked and intrigued me and most importantly reassured me that psychological anguish is no impediment to future greatness; and this is of course the whole point of Erikson's study, which almost makes the contrary point that greatness presupposes anguish. A few years later at Harvard I encountered the book by a girlfriend was intrigued as at the time I was very much anguished about my future, what I ought to do, and how to optimize my life making the most of my gifts (if any), preoccupations which can easily become overwhelming and paralyze you. A few years later I must have bought the book myself, and judging by a bookmark, must have read most of it, although if so I remember very little of it, save for some intermittent passages. Maybe because I found the book boring, maybe because the issues that had initially propelled me had by that time mostly died out.

So what is the book about? It is about the coming of age of Luther, Luther as he was before he became famous, and indeed very few people became as famous as he did in his days, and his fame was not based on the kind of vulgar stardom that now monopolizes the attention of the multitudes, but because he was an intellectual, posing as one who ministers to the soul. Of Luther's childhood very little is known, and in order to make a coherent narrative you have to resort to speculation to fill out the gaps. Erikson, with the psychoanalysts flair for interpolation followed by daring extrapolations, makes no excuses for reconstructing on slender evidence a scenario in which the young boy initially found comfort and emotional nourishment from his mother (from where else did he learn the joys of music which would play such an important role in his life?), but in which he soon became dominated by his ambitious father. The father was ambitious because he had broken away from his peasant origin and made a career as a miner². For his son he had even greater ambitions. He had clearly at an early age recognized in him a talent for study and seen the potential for a secular career in the legal profession. Like many gifted and dutiful sons Luther followed in the path staked out for him by his father entering the university at Erfurt, but so at the age of twenty-one in the summer of 1505, he rejected it all and much to the consternation of his father entered a monastic order. As the story goes it was not an outright rebellion, instead according to the story promulgated by Luther himself, he was surprised by a sudden and violent thunderstorm and so much scared by the lightening that he he truly feared for his life and promised the saint Anna³, that would he survive, he would take the vows of a monk. It is one thing to make such an impulsive vow in desperation, quite another thing to act on it. Decisions are usually made over a longer

² Erikson characterizes him even as an emergent capitalist and industrialist, and says that any attempt to classify him as a peasant would either be sentimental or contemptuous.

³ Incidentally the patron saint of his father, the kind of detail a psychoanalyst is honed to make the most of.

time period, and extraordinary events may only serve to make you conscious of decisions which have finally formed after a period of gestation, not to instigate them. That the decision would go against his fathers wishes he must of course have been very well aware of and been in two minds of, hoping also to get his fathers blessings. And, as Luther later acknowledged, he had no burning desire to become a monk, and had regretted his impulse afterwards, claiming that he nevertheless felt bound by it. Now the decision to become a monk might not have been such a radical deviation from his assigned path. Nowadays religious institutions are on the periphery, in those days they were very much in the center. A monastic order such as that of the Augustinians constituted in addition the most sincere and least corrupt part of the church, and in particular provided an alternative route to an academic career, and Luther certainly pursued its scholarly opportunities, eventually becoming a doctor of theology. Yet the emphasis is of course on the anguish, Erikson describes his time as a moratorium, during which he had no idea of what he wanted really to do but was more or less paralyzed by indecision simply marking time. A state of affairs very common to gifted adolescents, at least according to the author, who has met many cases in his clinical practice. A kind of somnambulant state, in which the patient keeps resisting doing what he or she most ardently is cut out for⁴. A monastic life with its rigid structure both supported an individual adrift as well as indoctrinated him. (Erikson even compares it with the alleged practice of brainwashing, and speculates that it might have subdued his rebellious impulses). Luther himself has referred to the period as the one in which he tried to his outmost to be an exemplary monk and servant of God, going to every kind of extreme in devotion and penitence⁵. In short a desperate attempt to achieve salvation and inner peace, only to be frustrated. But maybe more significantly a regression. The compulsion of which he made a virtue is something that you would associate with the superstitious immaturity of a child rather than the growing sophistication of an emerging adult. What saved him from perishing altogether? A fate not uncommon among young adults in crisis who may end up never to live up to their credentials, and by early death or permanent mental impairment have their lives reduced to mere fragments. The name of Staupitz is often mentioned, a high official and able administrator of the order, who acted as his mentor and was able to divert his perverted energies into more fruitful channels. Erikson speculates that he might in the young Luther have nostalgically found a creativity he once himself had possessed in his adolescence, but whose vanishing he now bemoaned. It is clear though that Luther treasured him and exaggerated his gifts and virtues, and was for him the one authoritative figure relations with which never soured.

Traditional legend has it that Luther eventually disgusted by the life of a monk and shocked to his core by the open commercialization and the unabashed practice of indulgences he encountered later in Rome, rejected the established form of Christianity and instead proposing a more genuine approach shorn of the corruption and excesses which marred the former. Now history is not quite as simple as Erikson is at pains to point out. Luther did indeed walk down to Rome in the fall of 1510, incidentally one of the rainiest

⁴ Erikson refers to G.B.Shaw, who claimed that of literature he had no dreams of at all, as little as the duck has of swimming

⁵ In particular his confessions were reported to be elaborate exercises in self-denigration

on record⁶, but it was not the pivotal event in his life, that legend has made it out as. Luther was not incensed, he was more of the enthusiastic tourist, busy visiting and praying at as many churches as possible. In fact it is hard even in retrospect to identify any kind of pivotal event which made overnight out of Luther a rebel⁷. The oft made comparison with Saint Paul en route to Damascus is inappropriate. But nevertheless he did accomplish something. In fact one wonders why Luther succeeded where earlier reformers like the English Wycliffe and the Bohemian Huis had failed, the latter being burned on the stake as a heretic. Maybe because he did not act alone, that he had from the beginning many followers and supporters, that he was protected from above (especially by the Elector, the Prince Fredrick the wise), and that his theological ideas had political ramifications eagerly seized upon. Certainly the time must have been ripe for Luther, and Erikson sees him working in the tradition of the Renaissance, although he was a stranger to many of its main thrusts and influences, and could hardly be thought of as a classical Renaissance man. In fact the author sees him even as one of the guiding lights that eventually led to the age of enlightenment.

What was the leading theological idea of Luther? Erikson is a psychologist and is more interested in the psychological aspect of awakening and claiming an identity, of releasing suppressed mental energy and the unfolding of dormant potentials, than in chartering esoteric theological details, so on this issue he does not spend much time. Yet Luther made a splash, not only within his professional circle. He wrote much and he preached extensively⁸ and everything was published and disseminated, a process greatly facilitated by the rather recent (and convenient) invention of the printing press, and certainly it must have struck a chord. It is true that it may not have been so much Luther's theology which made an impression, but his act of rebellion, his standing up to the Pope and other towering authoritative figures, which might have caught the imagination of his contemporaries. Maybe indeed, as the ensuing peasant rebellion indicated, a rebellion that counted on the support on Luther, but he which he failed to give⁹, it was really the political implications which fired the enthusiasm.

⁶ A physical achievement Erikson notes as undercutting the claim that the young man suffered from ill-health as a consequence of his monastic life.

⁷ Especially, as mentioned above, the nailing of the theses never really took place. On the other hand, as the author points out, legend is a creative reworking of history, possessing in psychological truth what it might be lacking in factual.

⁸ And Luther the preacher was a transformed man, Erikson writes, standing manly and erect, enunciating slowly and clearly with a powerful voice. Still it is intriguing to note that one of Luther's returning nightmares was one of facing a congregation without a 'Konzept'. Something that strikes a chord with many an academic lecturer.

⁹ In recent years much censure has been leveled against his anti-Semitic outbursts which are seen as totally unacceptable and offensive, at least to our modern sensibilities. But Luther was for most of his mature adult life a polemic, who indulged in violent diatribes, the more excessive and outrageous the better. Erikson refers to him of having the greatest capacity for dirt-slinging wrath, the Pope being the target more often than not. However, when it came to the peasants rebellion, he chose sides and saw with satisfaction its crushing. From a moral and legal point his stand on this is far more devastating to his statue than his anti-Semitic rantings, which I believe had no immediate and practical effects, although

The theology of Luther sprung out of the medieval scholastic tradition, with their rather sophisticated, (some would say desperate) approaches to accommodate both faith and reason, way above the head of the ordinary pieties. Occam is singled out by the author, as maybe the most decisive theological influence, on the other hand it is difficult to see why the nominalism of Occam would have been central to his concerns. His theology can be summarized as making the practice of religion essentially a personal affair. While the Catholic church provided a framework in which man could achieve salvation by means of good deeds carefully catalogued and structured¹⁰. Luther claimed that a man cannot achieve salvation by deeds, in fact only the grace of God can do that, and you can only hope to benefit from Gods infinite and undeserved grace if you have a deep personal faith in him. This basic faith lacking and you are lost. As he put it 'The just should live by faith'. In particular he rejected the notion of a Last Judgement, when God would review your record and judge you on the balance, instead this judgement was everywhere here and now, not in a future. Thus instead of having the church mediate between you and God, you needed to have a direct personal relationship to him, because only then does faith make sense. As a consequence Luther also emphasized the role of the personal conscience, yet another aspect of taking direct responsibility for your acts. Acts are not sinful in the sense that they violate some coda, they are sinful because they are intrinsically so, and the personal conscience provides the means for us to appreciate this uncodifiable aspect distinguishing virtue from sin¹¹. A man is just not because he does just things, but the things he does are just because he is a just man.

All of this taken abstractly has a wider application than to a mere traditional pursuit of religion, it does in fact present an attitude to life, which no doubt vibrated way beyond the exclusively religious sphere. Your attitude to truth e.g. as something you want to personally ascertain, or something you would take on conventional trust? Thus it is not surprising that Luther had a *bona fide* spiritual influence going beyond the political, and thus served as an inspiration to many avowedly secular thinkers¹². Indeed if you take Luther's religion seriously, you may wonder what is the role of ritual and an institutional church, could that not be abolished as well? And in fact some of Luther's more adamant followers would propose exactly that, but Luther, fearful of the forces he had unleashed, reined them in. In fact the church was reformed not abolished, rituals were preserved if curtailed. Man is a social animal, and the religious attitude is not immune to his social instincts.

In every rebel there is a strong conservative streak, thus any successful rebel is apt to conserve his triumph. Luther's transformation from an earnest young man to a fat,

recent critics make the case that they helped to legitimate institutional anti-Semitism in the 20th century. Erikson, although of Jewish descent, makes very little of this aspect, maybe because at the time of the 50's it was not such a big deal. And besides one should not be blinded by the excesses to some of his very legitimate criticism of Judaism, especially as to its excessive righteousness expressed in meticulous observance, which went counter to his theological philosophy.

¹⁰ not unlike a doctoral student being led to his degree by following a carefully led out trail

¹¹ William James contrasts the Latin peoples conception of sin as a multitude which can be eradicated piecemeal, with that of the Nordic races who think of Sin in singular spelled with a capital 'S'.

¹² One think of Marx, maybe the only other intellectual with a comparable public influence

self-satisfied, conservative bastion, liable to pontificate on everything should come as no surprise. The greatest achievement of Luther may after all have been his influence on the German language through his celebrated translations of the Bible. Erikson claims, and I suspect few people would contradict him, that Luther's impact on the German language can only be compared to Shakespeare's on the English. True, Luther wrote no sonnets, nor did he pen any drama; but his verbal mastery spanned a wide spectrum, from the lyrical to the downright vulgar, and whose work was nevertheless performed with a regularity and sincerity that outstripped that of Shakespeare, namely from the pulpit. Luther was one of those true disciples of the Word, as the author points out in a memorable passage, who did not know what he thought until he wrote it down, and did not know the depth of his convictions until he was challenged and opposed. And it might be typical that Luther set greater store at the ear than at the eye, and one may speculate why music plays a much more important role in the Lutheran ritual than images, of which the churches were to a great deal ridden of. Erikson the psychoanalyst cannot help reveling in the earthiness of the mature Luther, who made the sow his favorite animal, and who had such an enduring obsession with farting and letting wind and especially for the hind quarters, with which you could keep the devil at bay¹³. Naturally Erikson provides a host of explanations, ranging from his long tradition of suppression of impulses to his dietary habits and digestive problems. As to his sexual ability, Erikson has only praise. His father had wanted him to marry young, maybe because of this hygienic aspect, but Luther had preserved as a monk. Yet his sustained celibacy in his youth¹⁴ did not prevent him from achieving a satisfying sexual union in his middle age. Anyway the earthiness of Luther is seen as a source of strength and especially resilience which might partly explain that he could prevail where others had failed. The demands made on him were overwhelming, after all he did stand up to authority and defied bulls and very real threats to his life; and through it all he displayed an awesome capacity for work. His Bible translations were made in record time, without being works of haste.

How was Luther as a physical presence? In the modern media age the physical charisma of a person is often a crucial element of his celebrity status. In a footnote above we have referred to his charisma as a preacher, what about his physical appearance? His painted image is well-known to us, many of the major players of the reformation were painted by Lucas Cranach (including Luthers own parents). In the iconic pictures a rather fat older man is projected, although there are also some paintings of Luther as a younger man (Junker Jrg as he was called during his exile in Wartburg). Erikson concentrates on the eye-witnesses reports on his eyes, which must have been truly fascinating, the author speculates, and refers to his brown eyes, which at times could appear large and prominent,

¹³ The devil was a very real presence to Luther, in fact his repeated appearances seems to have been hallucinated by Luther, the most famous apparition at which he allegedly threw an ink-pot occurring at his confinement in Wartburg. It is then rather ironic, maybe even tragic, to declare that the devil does no longer exist, as the Lutheran theologians of the Swedish church have voted. But maybe he exists and thrives abroad?

¹⁴ No record of voluntary solitary indulgence in that respect survives, and Erikson suspects that they might have been none, except alluring thoughts and involuntary nocturnal emissions, which sometime during times of intense stress may turn out to be diurnal as well.

at other times small and hidden. Sometimes unfathomable, at other times twinkling like stars,. Sharp as a hawk, terrible as lightning, or possessed as was he insane. The reports are contradictory and points to indeed a fascinating complexity. It might be noteworthy that Luther disliked being looked at in the eyes, and avoided it as much as possible¹⁵. Furthermore Erikson talks about his warmth and wit and childlike candor, concluding that he must have been utterly disarming in private.

A psychological study of Luther is bound to be intriguing, yet the book in spite of many good insights, suffers from being rather verbose. Erikson reminds you of a guest at a dinner party, who just cannot stop talking, if for no other reasons than to keep up momentum and monopolize your attention. As noted above, he has at times but a scarcity of material to work on, but this does not stop him, on the contrary it provokes him to chew things over and over again. Thus for long stretches the book tends to be rather boring.

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¹⁵ Something similar was at play with Freud, who supposedly designed the psychoanalytic session on the couch, with his back to the patient, to avoid such personal eye-to-eye contact.