

## LUTHER AND EUROPE

MASSIMO FIRPO\*

### ABSTRACT

The article suggests an interpretation of the long-term significance of the Reformation in European history, bringing out how profoundly different the outcomes were to the original aims behind Luther's formulation of his dramatic protest. Unleashed by the desire to restore the doctrinal basics of a faith that the Church of Rome had betrayed, the Reformation quickly led to a religious fragmentation of Europe that saw the final decline of christianitas and the rise of religious pluralism. The result of bloody wars of religion, this pluralism finally forced States to recognize the principles of tolerance and, later, religious freedom, which constitute an essential aspect of European civilization and its cultural heritage. In short, the story is a classic example of the heterogenesis of ends.

**Keywords:** Europe; Reformation; Liberty of Conscience.

Throughout Europe 2017 was the year of Luther, the 500th anniversary of the ninety-five theses of Wittenberg, throbbing with authentic Christian faith and moral indignation against the scandalous preaching of indulgences and the distant pope in Rome who was responsible for it. Luther's rebellion is still a lively and living heritage, if everywhere there was a need to evoke the origins of the Reformation, to reflect on the dramatic moment of its birth, and to weigh its historical significance. The exhibitions, conferences, seminars, monographs and collections of essays were satisfying more than just a specialist interest in the great issues linked to the caesura that was carved into Europe by the Augustinian friar who had found in *iustitia ex fide* both the answer to a personal religious crisis and the theologi-

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\* Accademia dei Lincei. Address for correspondence: massimo.firpo@unito.it.

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cal certainty that could make him God's tool to bring down the Anti-Christ on the throne of Peter. "When I was sleeping and drinking beer in Wittenberg [...] the Word of God did such things to bring the papacy down, that no prince and no emperor would have been able to do", the Saxon reformer would complacently tell the students he hosted in his home years after. In almost every country of the world that I am aware of there are Lutheran Churches or Churches with various Reformation connotations (Methodist, Calvinist, Anglican, Baptist, Mennonite, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Quaker, Seventh-day Adventist, Pentecostal, Unitarian, etc.) to which around 700/800,000,000 Christians belong, almost a third of the total. This is an imposing fact, then, a decisive factor in European history, a fundamental feature of identity for men and women the whole world over, but above all in the western world, and Germany in particular, an inescapable yet precarious keystone of the process of constructing that European unity which is now in a state of deep crisis.

If we turn to the past, if we re-read Luther's theses or his other seminal writings, if we try to understand the significance of the Reformation and the epoch-making historical change it set off, what seems most distant and threadbare to us is the essential thing for which Luther was fighting. And this was the theological truth that *sola Scriptura* had allowed him to understand, i.e. *sola fides*, justification by faith alone (with the consequent negation of the value of works), as the main foundation of a new Christianity in the individual conscience of the believer and in the Church at large. Europe divided on this and *christianitas* fell apart, and, with it, the longstanding medieval political model that saw the emperor and the pope as the two highest authorities, one responsible for temporal and the other for spiritual government. It was the theory of the two suns formulated by Dante in *De monarchia*, with his conception of two authorities, both appointed by God and both sovereign in their distinct ambits. And, on closer inspection, it was the reflection of an original seed of Christianity, what has been called its structural "dualism", clearly expressed in Christ's words, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things which be God's" (*Matth.* XXII, 21), which has always prevented the sacred from being wholly absorbed in the sphere of the political and, vice versa, the political in the sphere of the sacred. Hence, among other things, the fundamental distinction between inner forum and outer forum, between conscience and law, between sin and crime. Unlike the other great monotheistic religions, in fact, precisely because it emerged from the Roman Empire with its mighty legal and institutional structures, Christianity was aware from its origins (not ontologically, but historically) of the limits drawn by public law and political power, even though the edict of Theodosius (380) rapidly replaced the edict of Constantine (313). In short, Church and State never

became one in the West, despite the many attempts over the centuries to sacralize temporal power or extend the power of papal hierarchy to the temporal sphere. Obviously, the abstract model of the separation of powers underwent many variations, depending on the constantly changing balance of power actually in force at any given time. Sometimes secular power asserted its authority over papal power, as during the Avignon captivity, or the reverse, as in the *Dictatus papae* of 1075, in which Gregory VII peremptorily asserted that “*solius papae pedes omnes principes deosculentur*” (as two years later he would force Henry IV to do at Canossa), that “*illi liceat imperatores deponere*”, that “*sententia illius a ullo debeat retractari et ipse omnium solus retractare possit*”, and that “*romana Ecclesia nunquam erravit nec imperpetuum Scriptura testante errabit*”.

Charles V, who forced Luther to retract his doctrines at Worms, may have been the last emperor to interpret his role of supreme political authority in this way, with all the responsibilities and duties involved, in a Christendom that was falling to pieces. Significantly, in the last days of his life, at Yuste, he wanted to see Titian's extraordinary painting known as *La Gloria* (now housed in the Prado), in which he is depicted kneeling in prayer at the feet of the Trinity on the Day of Judgment, after laying on the ground his imperial crown, apprehensively awaiting a response on how he had exercised the enormous power God had conferred on him. Of course, there were many political and religious reasons that created difficulties for the supreme authority of the Holy Roman Emperor, which harked back to that of the Roman Caesars in the ancient world. Not the least of these difficulties was the rise of the new absolute monarchies and embryonic nation States such as France and England, while Spain remained divided in its various historical kingdoms over which the crown exercised powers that were far from homogeneous. It is significant that, during the Thirty Years' War, the Count-Duke of Olivares planned an armed invasion of Aragon to eliminate its ancient privileges and the *fueros* that exempted it from royal taxes. It was Castile, with its American silver and its invincible *tercios*, that bore the immense weight of Charles V's empire and its constant wars, becoming the heart of the Austro-Burgundian dynasty, even transforming the Flemish dance into the Andalusian *flamenco*. One need only read the protocol of any of Charles V's diplomas to realize how varied and fragmented his powers were, regulated by a myriad of rules and customs, different from case to case, founded on an infinitely complex web of historical and personal loyalties, so much so that they needed always to be listed one by one and *in toto*:

Carlos V, por la divina clemencia emperador de los romanos, siempre augusto, rey de Alemania, de Castilla, de Aragón, de León, de las Dos Sicilias, de Jerusalén, de Hungría, de Dalmacia, de Croacia, de Navarra, de Granada, de Toledo, de

Valencia, de Galicia, de Mallorca, de Sevilla, de Cerdeña, de Córdoba, de Córsega, de Murcia, de Jaén, del Algarve, de Algeciras, de Gibraltar y de islas Baleares, islas Canarias, Indias y tierra firme del mar Océano, archiduque de Austria, duque de Borgoña, de Lorena, de Brabante, de Estíria, de Carinthia, de Carniola, de Limburgo, de Luxemburgo, de Gueldres, de Württemberg, de Calabria, de Atenas, de Neopatria, conde de Flandes, de Habsburgo, de Tirol, de Barcelona, de Artois y Borgoña, conde palatino de Henao, de Holanda, de Zelanda, de Ferrete, de Friburgo, de Namur, de Rosellón, de Cerdeña y Zutphen, landgrave de Alsacia, marqués de Burgovia, de Oristán y Gociano y del sacro romano Imperio, príncipe de Suevia y Cataluña, señor de Frisia, de la Marca esclavona, de Puerto Naón, de Vizcaya, de Molina, de Salinas, de Trípoli y Malinas etc.

It is worth reading this long list of kingdoms, duchies, marquisates, counties, principalities and seigneuries, to which other titles and dominions are added in other documents, which reflects better than anything else the indecipherable mosaic of Charles V's power. He was a sovereign of Spanish, Italian, German and Flemish peoples in permanent battle with the France of the Valois, whose mother tongue was nevertheless French (he was born in Ghent). His chancellors, ministers, generals and confidants had such names as Granvelle and Gonzaga, Hurtado de Mendoza and Savoia, Egmont e Gattinara, Croÿ and Manrique de Lara, Lannoy and Doria, Álvarez de Toledo and Medici, and were bound together by loyalty to the dynasty and the insignia of the Golden Fleece they displayed on their chests. The list, however, contains an embryonic idea of Europe: a supranational Europe, compactly Christian and papal in religious terms (apart from the widespread Jewish presence and the Spanish *moriscos*), whose confines coincided with those of the Ottoman Sublime Porta on the Mediterranean and in the Balkans, and disappeared into the endless Sarmatian plains, where Ivan the Terrible strengthened the Russian and Orthodox presence and took the title of Tsar, proclaiming himself heir of the Byzantine Caesars. On the contrary, politically speaking, the fall of the Roman Empire and the migrations of peoples in the high Middle Ages had fragmented the powers in a sort of ever-changing galaxy that centuries of history had shaped and re-shaped. In this context, between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, new and increasingly robust States were emerging, and what remained of the Holy Roman Empire could not compete with them. Far from uniting Europe, the great absolute monarchies would give life to a fierce political and military competition, fed first by the dynastic structural expansion of the crowns and then by economic rivalry, colonialist imperialism, and the opposing and ever more extreme nationalisms fed by Romanticism until the terrible tragedies of the twentieth century. From all this – very late in the day – there finally emerged the premises for a new European dimension, which is now under fire from the crude forms of populism that are spreading everywhere.

It was, indeed, the Reformation that gave the *coup de grâce* to the historical reality and the sacred myth of the Empire. It would block and finally make impossible the birth of a powerful Austro-German State and transform Germany into a myriad of atomized powers that were finally reabsorbed into the *Reich*. This process was set off by the secularization of the huge landed estates of the Teutonic Order and the Livonian Brethren of the Sword by the prince-electors of Brandenburg, who would gradually become dukes of Prussia, kings of Prussia and finally emperors of Germany. Charles V himself had to recognize his failure to compete with all his adversaries (France, the Schmalkaldic League, the Ottoman Empire), and his powerlessness to rule that German world, whose religious pluralism was partially acknowledged in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. He decided to divide his kingdoms, leaving his brother Ferdinand the task of handling the ungovernable German world and assigning his son Philip those more or less uncontaminated by heresy, even though the revolt of the Dutch Calvinists would not be slow to explode. For more than a century, the so-called “iron century”, Europe was to be swept into the maelstrom of religious wars: civil wars as in France, wars of subjects against sovereigns as in Flanders, wars of States against States, down to the barbaric and tragic shambles of the Thirty Years’ War. For centuries Catholic and Protestant controversialists wove endless webs of biblical and patristic citations to refute their adversaries’ doctrines, oppose *auctoritas* to *auctoritas*, rail against each other with insults and anathema, convince the mighty of the land to fight in defense of one truth or other, unleash wars, justify atrocious violence, and send heretics of every kind to the stake.

Now, however, those who once cursed each other as Lutheran heretics or wicked papists, as the worst enemies of God and the den of every vice, have become long-lost brothers watched over by a congregation of cardinals, while another congregation works on ecumenism, embracing every faith in the world, representatives of which meet each year in Assisi to reaffirm their shared commitment to peace. The Sovereign Pontiff of Holy Roman Church embraced the female Lutheran pastor of the Swedish city of Lund, while in Regensburg a few years earlier theologians – always ready to supply good reasons for any cause and bend the unchangeable word of God to the prosaic needs of the present – hastened to explain that the break between Catholics and Lutherans was merely a misunderstanding and, in the end, they had always seen things the same way – more or less. In any case, as is well known, what is impeding the ecumenical dialog is not this or that theological doctrine, but above all the question of the power of the pope and ecclesiastical hierarchy. *Pace* God, however, in the long run it is not theology that judges history (as it has always claimed, and sometimes still does), but, fortunately, history that judges theology. We should there-

fore rejoice that the age of anathema was substituted by one of hugs and prayer meetings, but we should also note – if only *sotto voce* – that Europe became a bloodbath in the name of these anathema, and so it would be proper to assume a modicum of responsibility in recognizing one's errors and one's fallibility in judging men and historical events.

One of Luther's heresies was the denial of the sacrament of confession made to a priest – something Roman theologians never tired of execrating, only to be forced to accept now that this sacrament has been largely abandoned by many practicing Catholics, convinced by their conscience, and not by Luther, that sins are to be confessed to God alone, who alone can forgive them. This is one of the many consequences of the gradual secularization of religious faith of every stamp, which – like it or not – has been increasingly removed from the moral control (and, still less, the repression) of the ecclesiastic authorities and the custodians of theological orthodoxy. The same goes for sexual morality, for how one conceives the family, and for the right to life and death. In all of these ambits we are witnessing an enlargement of the space for conscience and the religious and moral sensibility of each individual man and women, in the name of a Christianity that seems to be experienced less and less as a code of beliefs, and more and more as an inner faith, a force inspiring choices coherent with the Gospel message of loving one's neighbor, a historical and liturgical framework in which to place one's sense of living and dying. To put it in a nutshell in a way that takes us back to the sixteenth century, many Christians who claim to be Protestants or Catholics do not seem to identify so much with the faith of Luther or Bellarmine, as that of Erasmus, although he was execrated and condemned by both sides.

As the Reformation spread further and further, the institution of the Church tottered, old certainties became blurred by new doubts and anxieties, and Luther's protest set off political and social tensions, many had looked to Erasmus as the supreme humanist and master of knowledge. He had insisted on an incisive reform of the Church, while also landing lethal satirical blows on friars and popes in works such as *Iulius exclusus*, *The Praise of Folly*, the *Colloquia* and *Ciceronianus*. But on Luther, the bold "Eleutherius" as he called him, he avoided taking up a position and remained silent for some time, aware that contributing to his condemnation and siding with the papal militias risked cancelling all hope of renewal. He did not allow himself to be caught up in the furious polemics on indulgences, purgatory, the veneration of saints, vows, pilgrimages and other "trifles", as Luther called them, but when he did intervene, in 1524, with the *De libero arbitrio*, he did so on the crucial point that made his ethical Christianity incompatible with Luther's theological Christianity. The latter had no problem in accepting the logic of predestination in his *sola gratia*,

something that Erasmus abhorred. Hence his insistence on a *modica theologia* and his impassioned defense of a Christianity that found in free will the foundation of mankind's moral responsibility, made the search for peace and harmony a religious duty, and entrusted eternal salvation to the "immense mercy of God".

There is no doubt that this Christianity, the Christianity of Erasmus, is closer to a modern sensibility, that it is the outcome of a long historical process whose development actually coincides with the gradual secularization of the State and of ethics, culture and science, and that the Reformation played a decisive, if involuntary, role in this. And it is in this perspective – in my view – that we can find Luther's authentic modernity, the umpteenth confirmation of that heterogenesis of ends whose very unpredictability constitutes a sort of general rule of history and its main motor forces. When Luther fixed his ninety-five theses to the door of the church of the castle of Wittenberg (always supposing it actually happened) he could have been imagining anything but what then happened. He thought he was combating Friar Johannes Tetzel's brainless and unscrupulous preaching on indulgences and the false ideas of the Christian faith it insinuated among believers. He thought he was exhorting the cardinal, archbishop and Elector of Mainz Albrecht von Hohenzollern and the Elector of Saxony Frederick the Wise to do something to prevent the abominable practices of simony, of which the sale of indulgences was just one of the many manifestations. He thought he was carrying out his task as a pastor of souls who had realized the falsity and impiety of the ideas being instilled in the faithful and could not remain silent, as he wrote to the cardinal of Mainz. He thought he was raising a serious theological problem to the professors who were his colleagues in other universities. He did not think he was reforming the Church, and when he realized the historic significance of his doctrines, thought the end of times was imminent and that it was urgent to reform belief, not the Church.

Still in 1521, after publicly burning the year before Pope Leo X's bull *Exsurge Domine*, in which he had been condemned, and the *Corpus iuris canonici*, he appeared before Charles V at the Diet of Worms dressed as an Augustinian friar, just as Lucas Cranach depicted him in the first portrait of him. It was the immediate, enormous success of his writings and the thirst of the German princes to take possession of the immense goods of the Church that changed this obscure Saxon friar into the *Hercules germanicus* capable of withdrawing the whole of Northern Europe from papal obedience and finally smashing European Christendom to pieces. It was the speed with which the new art of the press spread his religious message, the consensus he acquired by virtue of the terrible crisis of moral credibility in the clergy and the ecclesiastical authorities, the widespread

religious unease this unleashed in ordinary Christians, and the unheeded appeals for renewal that had long been urging a profound reform *in capite et in membris* that transformed his indignant protest against papal indulgences into a landslide that made *tabula rasa* of the old Catholic Church. But it was also the readiness with which Luther consigned the fate of his preaching to the German princes, justifying what was called a “campaign of banditry” against Church property, no less, and above all taking on the role of tutor of their authority, condemning and combating any ferment of rebellion, raising obedience to the highest Christian virtue. This was also how, for good or ill, he left a profound mark on German history in the following centuries.

Nevertheless, as we know, the end of times did not arrive, while other, more radical reformers promptly appeared on the scene alongside Luther, and still more were to come in future. Toward 1520 Huldreich Zwingli set in motion an incisive reform of the Church in Zurich that did not depend on the terrible inner tensions of a friar tortured by his anxiety over salvation and dissatisfied by the *via perfectionis* of ascetic practices, as Luther had been till 1515-16, but on a rigorous need for philological consistency between the dictates of Scripture and the rules of theology. Other Swiss and Rhenish cities followed his example, and in 1530 no fewer than three Protestant confessions were presented at the Diet of Augsburg: the Augustan, the Helvetian and the Tetrapolitan. Meanwhile, since the 1520s the populace had been shaken by the preaching of the Anabaptists and their appeal for radical evangelical witness, and for a return to the apostolic Church of its origins. The obvious social and political implications of this suggested the most severe repression throughout Europe. Only a few years had gone by since the theses of Wittenberg, but already the Protestant world was divided, while in Rome – despite the terrible Sack of 1527 – all prospect of reforming the Church still seemed very distant.

The appearance on the scene in Geneva of the steely John Calvin brought a new expansionist phase of the Reformation, but at the same time would see the rise of new heresies, starting from the anti-Trinitarian one of Miguel Servet. When Servet was burnt at the stake on Calvin’s orders in 1553, this welded indissolubly anti-Trinitarian theology with the defense of tolerance and freedom of conscience. One of the figures who conducted this battle was the great Savoyard Sebastian Castellio, who deserves credit for affirming with limpid clarity that “killing a man is not defending a doctrine, but is killing a man”. Alongside him were, above all, some Italian exiles *religionis causa*, Lelio Sozzini, Giorgio Biandrata, Giampaolo Alciati, Matteo Gribaldi, Valentino Gentile (also condemned to death in Switzerland a few years later) and many others, who in the end had to flee toward the countries of Eastern Europe, where political power was weak

enough to guarantee some margins of freedom. Here, anti-Trinitarianism, fed by biblical philology and religious rationalism, would finally find an institutional dimension in the so-called *Ecclesia minor fratrum polonorum* and a guide of profound religious and theological depth in Fausto Sozzini. It finally became Socinianism, the *bête noire* of every kind of Protestant theologian, and which, through the close relations that had existed since the early seventeenth century with Arminians and, later, the Dutch Remonstrants spread throughout Europe as an anti-dogmatic form of Christianity that was latitudinarian, rationalist and tolerant. It was the Christianity of Sir Isaac Newton and Jean Leclerc, John Locke and the young Voltaire, Samuel Clarke and much of the Anglican High Church in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Meanwhile, still in England, from the bubbling magma of Oliver Cromwell's first revolution and the New Model Army, there emerged a dizzying myriad of new sects, whose shared matrix in Congregationalism – which claimed the right to choose freely which Church and which pastor to follow – became the clear premise of the free political association of citizens, while in 1644 John Milton argued for the abolition of all censorship in his *Areopagitica*.

The Protestant galaxy became more and more fragmented and divided, and already in the sixteenth century Lutheranism itself saw a bitter conflict opening up within it, between the so-called Philippists (heirs of the moderation of Philip Melancthon, Luther's right-hand man, whose love of learning earned him the title of *praeceptor Germaniae*) and the Gnesio-Lutherans – the pure followers who were intransigently tied to their master's words. In short, in just a few years the Reformation world was to become a plural world, divided between various confessions and sects and riven by bitter conflicts, theological hatred and mutual condemnation. As an Italian exile in Basle wrote in 1550, "Satan is not only in Italy, the Anti-Christ is not only in Italy, and not only in Italy is the cause of all crimes, all impiety, and all evil: the papacy". But in the end that plural world was to become pluralist: Catholics and Protestants, Anabaptists and Quakers, Calvinists and sometimes Jews would gradually learn that one can trade profitably, honor a contract, and do excellent business with people of different beliefs, that one can talk about politics, have a beer and even make arrangements for marrying one's children with those who think differently about the Eucharist or honor their God on a day other than Sunday.

The *ius reformandi* of Saxony in the 1530s – the right to reform the Church according to Lutheran theology and liturgy, and so forbid the impious and superstitious papist cults – would become in Hugo Grotius' Holland *ius circa sacra* – the right of the political authorities to legislate on religious matters to halt the brawling and overbearing of the theologians. Half a century later, in the England of the Glorious Revolution, the Tolera-

tion Act was promulgated in 1689 under the guidance of Locke's *Epistola de tolerantia*. This work had asserted the general principle (one still valid now) that no form of behavior can become legal or illegal because some want to give it a religious value, and that opinions, beliefs and faiths are therefore freely allowed as long as they do not violate the laws of the land. One need only consider that, until the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church continued to launch its anathema against freedom of conscience as mere freedom to err. For his part, Luther was certainly not a champion of tolerance and was wholly in agreement with Zwingli on the desirability of condemning the Anabaptists to death by drowning. Yet he had been the first to disobey, to burn Leo X's bull, and to tell Charles V to his face at Worms *Hier stehe Ich* – here I stand – claiming that he could not retract what he had written without going against his conscience. It was he, a man of order *par excellence*, who involuntarily justified all future religious disorder, which would always be able to appeal to his example.

And it is here that we can see the modernity of the medieval figure that Luther was in many respects. It was an unintentional modernity, one might say, because, in the end, from his legacy, that *Hier stehe Ich*, derives a founding pillar of modern Europe. Not the monolithic Europe of medieval *christianitas*, but the Europe that had learnt from its religious fragmentation to live alongside difference, that talked about religious tolerance and then freedom of conscience, that looked with curiosity and interest at other cultures and civilizations and learnt to compare itself with them, even if with a view to conquest and dominion which would assert itself brutally during the long season of colonialism. Jacques Benigne Bossuet, the preceptor of the French dauphin, was wrong, then, when he explained in his *Histoire des variations des Églises protestantes* of 1688 that the main weakness of the Protestants lay in their rejection of papal authority, which meant abolishing the only possible judge of religious truth. The result was their breaking up into a myriad of small Churches and sects, forever ready for new divisions, new variations, which were grafted onto each other in an endless spiral. Actually, far from weakening the new Churches that arose with the Reformation, those variations would justify themselves by giving life to a plural Christianity in the ambit of a single society. Being unable to present itself as a State religion, it thus became a motor force of the process of secularization. And there is another, no less relevant aspect that forces us to look at Luther as a bearer of modernity, whatever his intentions were. For good or ill, it was he, or rather the landslide caused by his protest that determined, however slowly and laboriously, a reaction of the Catholic Church itself. At first, the reaction was merely repressive, with the Holy office of the Roman Inquisition and the *Index* of forbidden books, but later it developed in a pastoral, liturgical and missionary form in the long sea-

son of the Counter-Reformation, whose very name evokes a commitment to conflict, anti-heretical militancy, and ideological clashes encouraged by Rome before, during and after the Council of Trent. Whether one likes it or not, it was due to Luther and the Reformation that a process of renewal began in the Catholic Church too, one that would interest the whole of Europe that had remained loyal to the papacy.

A few years ago politicians argued about tracing the roots of Europe's identity – Christianity, the legacy of classical culture, the Enlightenment – while we need to understand that its true identity lies precisely in its multiple diversity. In its emerging from the bloody wars that devastated it uninterruptedly until the last century, and in discovering that pluralism, tolerance, democracy, political and religious freedom, the separation of Church and State, the protection of minorities, and the assertion of human rights can only emerge from difference and the conflict that brings, and from the resulting need to regulate it. And what is normally described as European civilization consists precisely of this. It is a civilization that Europe itself has often betrayed internally as well as in its conquest of the world, but Europe alone has been able to create it, and the defense of it coincides today with protecting its political and cultural survival. That is why it is still useful to reflect on Luther, on his legacy and on the historical role of his theses of 1517.