

Martin Luther

Martin Luther. With Martin Luther, born more than a century after Meister Eckhart, the 'new modern world' began to include significant new perspectives in religion. While Eckhart, remaining orthodox, opened the soul to new kinds of direct confrontation with the God within, Luther went farther, and much more publically, toward modifying public understandings of the Christian enterprise. In a word he opened a movement toward reform, in the Catholic Church, which was to have widespread effect on European, we might say world, culture to this day.

The Reformation. Martin Luther (1483-1546) was born in Eisleben, the son of a miner, was sent to primary school where he learned the trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic; a combination he found equivalent to Hell and Purgatory combined, then entered an Augustinian priory as a monk, in 1505, and three years later accepted a Professorship in theology at Wuerttemberg. (In other words he, like Eckhart or Saint Augustine, was academically precocious.) From this significant post he three years later paid a visit to Rome, which was to be influential for him. He was shocked by the corruption of the clergy, and inwardly formulated careful resentments against the intrusion of the Papal world onto the simple message of Christ. For this priest professor, the turning point was encountering head on the 'sales of indulgences,' which were as he saw it being peddled by the Catholic hierarchy—in particular by one Dominican bigwig, Johann Tetzel-- for such purposes as beefing up the building fund for St. Peter's Cathedral. (The galling instance was the monetary sale to parishioners, by the priesthood, of remissions from time due to be spent in Purgatory.) The events consequent on Luther's new perception, and rebellion, were to be the first effective steps toward 'reform' within Christianity, and though reformers like Jan Hus had preceded Luther, and paid for it with their lives, the Luther world was in significant ways more flexible toward individual expression than had been the late mediaeval world of Eckhart.

Luther's boldness and excommunication. In 1517 Luther reached some kind of expressive crisis, in one way or another 'posted his 95 theses' on church and religious matters, for all members of his order to read. Whether or not the posting was done on the Cathedral door is unclear, and is part of the personal mythology that surrounds many of Luther's actions—like throwing an inkwell and pen at the Devil. The upshot of the posting, for sure, was rapid retribution from the Church hierarchy. In 1520 Pope Leo X demanded that Luther retract all his writings to date—they were already voluminous; both as prof and priest Luther was prolific—and on being rejected the Holy Roman Emperor stepped in and excommunicated Prof. Luther. At this point, not only forbidden the rites of the Church, but considered an outlaw, Luther was saved from serious punishment by a cadre of his supports, especially his influential religious friend, Philip Melancthon, and was spirited away (in a cloak and dagger intervention) to the Castle of the Wartburg in Thuringia, where he was safe and protected. It was in that setting that he started to undertake his translation of the Bible into vernacular German, an achievement of vast importance to the German language, to its literary vigor, and to world culture.

Luther's later life. Luther's later life is one of vast productivity, as he began to concentrate on the creative religious works that have given their meaning to the Reformation. It must first be said that he renounced his monasticism (1525) and that in 1530 he married a former nun. In 1535 he and many fellow spirited friends founded the Augsburg Confession, in which they formally abandoned Catholicism. Among the many powerful literary texts Luther left behind him were a rich variety of prose tracts and sermons, vigorous in language and thought, and a collection of some thirty seven hymns, which remain as lasting treasures of Christian worship.

Reading

Primary Source Reading

Dillenberger, John, *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, 1958. (Reprint updates; outstanding.)

Secondary Source Reading

Erickson, Eric, *Young Man Luther*, 1953 (A towering classic of insight.)

Further Reading

Oberman, Heiko, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 2006.

Original language reading

Arnold, Heinz Ludwig, ed. *Martin Luther*, 1983.

Suggested paper topics

Luther was born more than two hundred years after Meister Eckhart. Please indicate some of the major differences between the two thinkers as those differences relate to the conception of God. (Both men were critical of the organized Church, though one remained within it, while Luther staged a 'rebellion.')

Do the differences in their views of God reflect the huge cultural differences that were occurring in Germany in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?

Luther's translation of the Bible into German was immensely influential, as was the King James version of the same book into English, a century later. Why was a Bible translation a text of such great potential cultural importance? Luther's contemporary, Erasmus (next entry), was famed for his translations of the New Testament into both Greek and Latin. What would you see as the motivation of such a herculean effort? Whom would Erasmus reach by that work?

Excerpt Martin Luther Table Talk <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9841/9841-h/9841-h.htm>

Proofs that the Bible is the Word of God.

That the Bible is the Word of God, said Luther, the same I prove as followeth. All things that have been and now are in the world, also how it now goeth and standeth in the world, the same was written altogether particularly at the beginning, in the First Book of Moses concerning the Creation. And even as God made and created it, even so it was, even so it is, and even so doth it stand to this present day. And although King Alexander the Great, the kingdom of Egypt, the empire of Babel, the Persian, Grecian, and Roman Monarchs, the Emperors Julius and Augustus, most fiercely did rage and swell against this Book, utterly to suppress and destroy the same, yet notwithstanding, they could prevail nothing; they are all gone and vanished; but this Book, from time to time, hath remained, and will remain unremoved, in full and ample manner, as it was written at the first. But who kept and preserved it from such great and raging power; or, Who defendeth it still? Truly, said Luther, no human creature, but only and alone God himself, who is the right Master thereof; and it is a great wonder that it hath been so long kept and preserved, for the devil and the world are great enemies unto it. The devil doubtless hath destroyed many good books in the Church, as he hath rooted out and slain many saints, concerning whom we have now no knowledge. But, no thanks unto him, the Bible he was fain to leave unmeddled with. In like manner Baptism, the Sacrament, and the Office of Preaching have remained among us against the power of many tyrants and heretics that have opposed the same. These our Lord God hath kept and maintained by his special strength. Homer, Virgil, and suchlike are profitable and ancient books; but, in comparison of the Bible, they are nothing to be regarded.

By whom and at what Times the Bible was translated.

Two hundred and forty-one years before the humanity of Christ, the Five Books of Moses, and the Prophets, were translated out of the Hebrew into the Greek tongue by the Septuagint Interpreters, the seventy doctors or learned men then at Jerusalem, in the time of Eleazar the High-priest, at the request of Ptolemeus Philadelphus, King of Egypt, which King allowed great charges and expenses for the translating of the same.

Then, one hundred and twenty-four years after the birth of Christ, his death and passion, the Old Testament was translated out of Hebrew into Greek by a Jew, named Aquila (being converted to the Christian faith), in the time of Hadrian the Emperor.

Fifty and three years after this Aquila, the Bible was also translated by Theodosius.

In the three-and-thirtieth year after Theodosius, it was translated by Symmachus, under the Emperor Severus.

Eight years after Symmachus, the Bible was also translated by one whose name is unknown, and the same is called the Fifth Translation.