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## MARTIN LUTHER

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Martin Luther, the man whose defiance of the Roman Catholic Church inaugurated the Protestant Reformation, was born in 1483, in the town of Eisleben, in Germany. He received a good university education, and for a while (apparently at his father's suggestion) he studied law. However, he did not complete his legal education, but instead chose to become an Augustinian monk. In 1512, he received the degree of Doctor of Theology from the University of Wittenberg, and soon thereafter joined its faculty.

Luther's grievances against the Church arose gradually. In 1510, he had taken a trip to Rome, and had been shocked at the venality and worldliness of the Roman clergy. But the immediate issue that stimulated his protest was the Church practice of selling indulgences. (An indulgence was a remission, granted by the Church, of the penalties for sin; it might include a reduction of

the time that a sinner would have to spend in purgatory.) On October 31, 1517, Luther posted on the door of the church at Wittenberg his celebrated Ninety-five Theses, in which he strongly denounced Church venality in general, and the practice of selling indulgences in particular. Luther sent a copy of his Ninety-five Theses to the Archbishop of Mainz. In addition, the Theses were printed, and copies were widely distributed in the area.

The scope of Luther's protests against the Church rapidly broadened, and he soon came to deny the authority of the Pope, and of general Church councils, insisting that he would be guided only by the Bible and by plain reason. Not surprisingly, the Church did not look kindly upon these views. Luther was summoned to appear before Church officials, and after various hearing and orders to recant, he was finally pronounced a heretic and an outlaw by the Diet of Worms (1521), and his writings were proscribed.

The normal outcome would have been for Luther to be burned at the stake. However, his views had found widespread support among the German people, and among quite a few of the German princes. Though Luther had to go into hiding for a period of about a year, his support in Germany was strong enough to enable him to avoid any serious criminal penalties.

Luther was a prolific author, and many of his writings proved widely influential. One of his most important works was a translation of the Bible into German. This, of course, made it possible for any literate person to study the Scriptures himself, without relying on the Church or its priests. (Incidentally, the superb prose of Luther's translation had an enormous influence on German language and literature.)

Luther's theology, of course, cannot be fully described in a short space. One of his key ideas was the doctrine of justification by faith alone, an idea derived from the writings of St. Paul. Luther believed that man was by nature so tarnished with sin that good works alone could not save him from eternal damnation. Salvation comes only through faith, and only by the grace of God. If this were so, it was obvious that the Church practice of

selling indulgences was improper and ineffective. Indeed, the traditional view that the Church was the necessary mediator between the individual Christian and God was in error. If one followed Luther's doctrines, the whole *raison d'être* of the Roman Catholic Church was wiped out at a stroke.

In addition to questioning the essential role of the Church, Luther also protested against a variety of specific Church beliefs and practices. For example, he denied the existence of purgatory, and he denied that the clergy should be celibate. He himself, in 1525, married a former nun, and they had six children together. Luther died in 1546 while on a visit to his home-town of Eisleben.

Martin Luther, of course, was not the first Protestant thinker. He had been preceded a century earlier by Jan Hus in Bohemia, and by the fourteenth-century English scholar John Wycliffe. Indeed, the twelfth-century Frenchman Peter Waldo might well be considered an early Protestant. But the effect of



*Luther nails the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg.*

each of those earlier movements had been basically local. By 1517, however, discontent with the Catholic Church was so common that Luther's words promptly ignited a chain of protests that spread rapidly through a large part of Europe. Luther, therefore, is rightly considered to be the man chiefly responsible for the commencement of the Reformation.

The most obvious consequence of the Reformation, of course, is the formation of the various Protestant sects. While Protestantism is only one branch of Christianity, and not the most numerous branch at that, it still has more adherents than Buddhism, or, in fact, than most other religions.

A second important consequence of the Reformation was the widespread religious warfare in Europe which followed it. Some of these religious wars (for example, the Thirty Years' War in Germany, which lasted from 1618 to 1648) were incredibly bloody. Even aside from the wars, political conflicts between Catholics and Protestants were to play a major role in European politics for the next few centuries.

The Reformation also played a subtle but very important role in the intellectual development of western Europe. Before 1517, there had been a single established church, the Roman Catholic Church, and dissenters were branded as heretics. Such an atmosphere was certainly not conducive to independent thinking. After the Reformation, as various countries accepted the principle of freedom of religious thought, it became safer to speculate on other subjects as well.

Another point is perhaps worth noting. More persons on this list come from Great Britain than from any other country. Germans are the next most numerous people. Indeed, the list as a whole is strongly dominated by persons coming from the Protestant countries of northern Europe and America. However, one notices that only two of those persons (Gutenberg and Charlemagne) lived before 1517. Prior to that date, most of the persons on this list came from other parts of the world, and the peoples living in what are now Protestant countries made a comparatively small contribution to human culture and history. This



*"Luther before the Diet of Worms," by E. Delperee.*

obviously suggests that Protestantism or the Reformation may in some way be responsible for the fact that there have been such a large number of eminent persons from these regions in the last 450 years. Perhaps the greater intellectual freedom existing in these areas has been an important factor.

Luther was not without his faults. Though himself a rebel against religious authority, he could be extremely intolerant of those who disagreed with him on religious matters. Possibly, it was partly due to the example set by Luther's intolerance that the religious wars were far fiercer and bloodier in Germany than they were, say, in England. In addition, Luther was ferociously anti-Semitic, and the extraordinary viciousness of his writings about the Jews may have helped to pave the way for the Hitler era in twentieth-century Germany.

Luther frequently stressed the importance of obedience to lawful civil authority. Probably, his principal motivation for this was his objection to the Church's interfering in civil government. (It should be borne in mind that the Reformation was not just a theological dispute. To a considerable extent, it was a nationalist German revolt against the influence of Rome, and it was partly for this reason that Luther received so much support from German princes.) Regardless of Luther's intentions, however, his statements seem to have led many German Protestants to accept absolutism in political matters. In this way, too, Luther's writings may have helped prepare the way for the Hitler era.

Some people may question why Martin Luther is not placed even higher on this list. In the first place, although Luther may seem very important to Europeans and Americans, he seems far less important to the inhabitants of Asia and Africa, relatively few of whom are Christians. As far as most Chinese, Japanese, or Indians are concerned, the differences between Catholics and Protestants are quite insignificant. (Similarly, not many Europeans are interested in the differences between the Sunni and the Shiite branches of Islam.) In the second place, Luther is a comparatively recent figure in history, and has influenced a much smaller span of human history than have Muhammad, Buddha, or Moses. Furthermore, during the past few centuries religious belief has been declining in the West, and the influence of religion on human affairs is likely to be far smaller during the next thousand years than it was during the preceding thousand. If religious belief continues to decline, Luther is apt to appear far less important to future historians than he does today.

Finally, one should remember that the religious disputes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not, in the long run, affect as many persons as did the scientific advances which occurred during the same period. That is the main reason why Luther has been ranked behind Copernicus (who was his contemporary), even though Luther played a larger *individual* role in the Protestant Reformation than Copernicus played in the scientific revolution.