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CONTENTS

Ein Prediger muss nicht allein *weiden*, also dass er die Schafe unterweise, wie sie rechte Christen sollen sein, sondern auch daneben den Woelfen *wehren*, dass sie die Schafe nicht angreifen und mit falscher Lehre verfuehren und Irrtum einfuehren.

Luther

Es ist kein Ding, das die Leute mehr bei der Kirche behaelt denn die gute Predigt. — *Apologie, Art. 24*

If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? — *1 Cor. 14:8*

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The Social Ethic of Martin Luther

(This study, so vitally connected with current thought trends, was presented to the Pastoral Conference of Greater Los Angeles and recommended by vote of that body for publication in the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY. It is herewith submitted in a shorter form prepared by the author.)

Introduction

In the present effort to trace the fierce currents of Europe's political ground swells to their source, many writers wish to discover the first rising of the tide in the thought channels of Martin Luther's ideas on religion, politics, and social problems, away back in the sixteenth century. Able thinkers, like McGovern, who have sent their searching gaze into the dim years of history in the hope of discovering the precursors, either men or ideologies, of the present world-wide eruption, have held to a theory of history in which men like Luther are given a lion's share in the responsibility of starting thought processes which now at last have broken through the floodgates to overwhelm the entire world. The very title of McGovern's book *From Luther to Hitler* holds the implication of an intimate relationship between Martin Luther, the sixteenth century prophet of a new day, and Adolf Hitler, the twentieth-century high priest of a new order. The political philosophy of Martin Luther is summarized thus:

Luther started with a plea for reform in the concept of the church and ended with a reform in the concept of the state. He started with a plea for individual liberty and for freedom of conscience; yet his doctrines led directly to a belief in the divine right of kings and to the belief that monarchs have a right to dictate religious dogmas to the private individual. He started as an internationalist with a message to the peoples of all nations; he ended by formulating the doctrine of all-powerful national states in perpetual antagonism to one another. He started with the doctrine of the basic equality of all men, and ended with the doctrine that all men should be subject to the iron will of their secular lord.[1]

1) William Montgomery McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler* (Cambridge, The Riverside Press: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941), p. 31.

Although an attempt may have been made to state the case fairly and justly, as a historian should, there is a very conspicuous lack of acquaintance with the sources of this period. McGovern is only one of many interpreters of the sixteenth century Reformation who have fallen into the snare of blandly accepting the popular view which makes Luther a fervid nationalist, whose primary interest it was to liberate his countrymen from the yoke of foreign enslavement. Thus Peter Viereck in his *Metapolitics* falls in line with the accepted order of the day when, for example, he asserts that "the spirit of Hermann and the Saxons staged its third great revolt against Rome in the time of Luther's Reformation."[2] While Viereck admits that Luther was more aroused by Christian than by nationalistic motives, he regards the Reformation as essentially a nationalistic movement, designed to give economic and social liberation to the people of Germany. For this reason he suggests that we return to the sources "to read such powerful champions of Luther as his friend Ulrich von Hutten, and you will find far more tribal German patriotism against the Mediterranean civilization than interest in Christianity."[3] It is true, Hutten's witty shafts were aimed particularly at the evils that flourished in the papal system — the sale of offices and benefices, corruptions, immoralities. Hutten openly and fearlessly gave his support to Luther, to whom he wrote: "We are fighting for a common freedom to liberate an oppressed Fatherland.[4] Through him the Humanistic culture employed its full strength for the success of the Protestant cause. But despite the truth of all this, it does not follow that Luther was a proponent of ideas that have given rise to the present maelstrom of disorder.

In addition to well-meaning historians who have made Luther the distant father of the monster of nationalism now grinding Europe underfoot, the very champions of the present disorder do solemnly accept such fatherhood. Jahn, whose influence in shaping Nazi ideology has been second perhaps only to that of Herder, holds that Luther was a champion of a "Northern Christianity."[5] Alfred Rosenberg, regarded as the leading antichristian philosopher in the world today,[6] together with Goebbels and Hitler, worships the very ground on which Luther walked. Their emphasis, of course, is not upon Luther the Christian, but upon Luther the great

2) Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), p. 13.

3) *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

4) Alexander Clarence Flick, *The Decline of the Medieval Church* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), Vol. 2, p. 258.

5) Peter Viereck, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

6) *Op. cit.*, p. 282.

nationalist German who raised his fist against the Mediterranean usurpers and the foreign exploiters ravaging Germany's economic life. Together with Wagner and Frederick the Great, Hitler regards Luther as a spiritual comrade. These three are his chief heroes.[7] Houston Chamberlain, who lives on in Rosenberg, openly declares that Luther is, above all, a political hero rather than a religious hero, that he founded "the future of German nationalism by emancipating the Nordic from the international Rome."[8] Rosenberg chimes in with this sentiment when he declares: "Luther shattered the alien crust over our life."[9] But all of this seems utterly out of harmony with the treatment currently accorded by these men to the followers of Luther's faith. When, for example, Lutheran pastors of Germany prepared to attend the international Christian conference in Oxford, 1937, they were fiercely attacked by the men who claimed to be motivated by such ardent love for Luther. Rosenberg issued a pamphlet entitled *Protestant Pilgrims to Rome,* which had a circulation of 620,000, in which he alleged that Luther would himself be a Nazi if he were alive today. He denounced Lutheran churches as racial traitors.[10]

This strange paradox is explained in part by the faulty presentation of the true Luther on the part of many writers, especially those who admired Luther's person and character but knew little of his spirit and faith.

It is the burden of this study to show something of that spirit and faith which was the dominating principle in Luther's life and the driving force in his productive career. To be sure, Luther gave out social theories aplenty, but these were all by-products of his great discovery of faith in the vicarious atonement of Jesus and the justifying grace of God, and of his new concept of the true dignity of the human soul renewed by faith.

Our problem is to trace Luther's idea of faith and of the Church from the era of storm and stress through his mature years. How did he place his concept of the Gospel into the framework of the state and of organized society? Did he bend the framework to suit his ideas? And what were the social and moral effects of the views he espoused? Did he want the Gospel to become a directive for a new political order? Is it true that he was unbelievably stupid in the way of earthly diplomacy and statecraft? No one will deny that Luther with his overpowering personality could have dominated every city council from Wittenberg to Koenigsberg. But this was not in his interest. Luther thought of the Gospel as a precious

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7) *Op. cit.*, p. 283.
8) *Op. cit.*, p. 283.
9) *Op. cit.*, p. 283.
10) *Op. cit.*, p. 283.

pearl, and the realm of the human soul as the setting of that pearl. These jewels strung together were the Church. The Church was precious in the sight of God. How it appeared to the world made little difference to him. The external organization of the state and of human society interested him only in so far as it provided a clear channel for the growth and expression of faith and the full development of the whole man. In the *Apology* of the Augsburg Confession it is clearly held that Christ is not, in His essential nature, a lawgiver, and that the Gospel cannot "present new laws concerning the civil state," but it "permits us outwardly to use legitimate political ordinances of every nation in which we live." [11] These are some of the questions and problems to which the following pages address themselves.

Chapter I

Various Interpretations of the Reformation

The current none-too-complimentary association which Luther enjoys has grown directly out of an interpretation which, to say the least, fails to draw the true and full picture of the whole career of the great Reformer. By one school Luther is regarded as the colossus of the sixteenth century, the great hero who deserves to be named with Goethe and Bismarck. This view magnifies Luther as a person while it dwarfs the universals of truth which he was destined to bequeath to the world. Luther would hardly have recognized himself from the many verbal portraits which have been drawn from the angle of the hero complex. Those who share this view invariably pass over the years of Luther's activity from 1530 on. Luther's own readiness for martyrdom, so frequently expressed, shows that he did not consider himself the indispensable man. He protested vehemently against the use of his name as a designation of his followers. "How should I, poor stinking carcass that I am, come to have the children of Christ call themselves by my pitiful name? Not so, dear friends: Let us do away with party names and call ourselves Christians after Him whose teachings we have." [12] He knew that he had not called a new Church into existence, but had only purified the one which had always existed by the Gospel. It is a demonstrable fact that the true teachings and views of Luther fade out of the picture in the same degree that undue emphasis is given to his person.

Nor can the true Luther be discovered in the interpretations in which Luther becomes the author and champion of a new culture. The Reformation was indeed an emancipation. But in

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11) *Concordia Triglotta,* The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 331.

12) *Luthers Werke,* Weimar Edition, Vol. 8, p. 685.

its essence it was not the kind of emancipation that is ordinarily thought of — the beginning of a new cultural epoch, the opening of a new path for the progress of civilization. No historian will deny that the Reformation had a great influence on the modern world. Luther indeed liberated a great part of the world from domination by the medieval Church; but he desired to place the world under a new control, the inner control of faith in the Gospel of redemption, a control which the culture champions have quite disowned. It is true, culture arose in Europe, like the phoenix from its ashes, after Luther's hammer blows shattered the sarcophagus of dormant forces. But the cultural risings that followed the Reformation are at best the by-products of Luther's views. As a matter of fact, Erasmus is far more deserving as a candidate of the honors which the culture-historical school of interpreters would bestow upon Luther. It was Erasmus, not Luther, who believed in the divine endowment, the greatness and freedom, of the natural man. And Luther realized the difference that existed between himself and Erasmus. He felt that the attacks of all others were as pin pricks in comparison with those of Erasmus, "who has assailed me at the throat." Erasmus fought against Luther for the acknowledgment of man's dignity as a creature of God. Luther had an entirely different understanding of the Gospel from that of Erasmus, and he drew from the Scriptures an entirely different doctrine of man: the doctrine of the total depravity of man through original sin. "This doctrine is the premise on which everything that Luther taught and everything that he worked for as a reformer, rested." [13] This makes it quite clear that the Reformation, in the eyes of all followers of Erasmus, was a deliverance from that which to Luther was the truth about man. While the Reformation was one of the most severe jolts ever experienced in the inner life of the world, yet it was in essence not a waking of the world out of its cultural sleep, but out of the long sleep of moral and spiritual dormancy.

More common than either of these views of Luther is the interpretation which makes him a great national hero. Most certainly the Reformation gave to the German people a liberation hitherto unexperienced. True, Martin Luther was a German by birth, but in spirit he belongs to all nations. He was just as much interested in Tyndale's English translation of the Bible as he was in his own German translation. When he fought against the Church of Rome, he fought not, primarily, as a German, but as a Christian. He was indeed interested in Germany as a nation, and

13) Hermann Sasse, *Was heisst lutherisch?* Translated under the title *Here We Stand* by Theodore G. Tappert (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1938), p. 31.

he had a deep resentment against domination by an alien power. What he objected to was not primarily the alien language, not the alien culture, but the alien and specious religious spirit. He always felt himself more closely drawn to kindred souls in Italy or Sweden than to those of his own German countrymen who were pawns of the hierarchy. Had Luther been a political opportunist, he could have made alignment with the restive powers that were ready to strike strong blows in the interest of national liberation. Had he been an unscrupulous syncretist, he could have welded the various political and cultural factors of Germany into a formidable power, which could have defied Pope and Emperor. Had that been his interest, Luther could have antedated Bismarck by three and one half centuries. But his spirit moved on a higher level.

Chapter II

Luther's New Moral Principles

The faith struggles which were fought out in the soul of Martin Luther in the quiet of his lonely monastery cell produced new spiritual life principles of great clarity and vigor. At first his new discoveries in the realm of religion were hemmed in by the traditional religious viewpoints, but their vital force soon hurdled the traditional confines and ultimately caused a complete separation from the old ecclesiastical order and achieved a character of independence. In wrestling with the universal problems of humanity in the religious realm, Luther at length discovered an original approach. Through the fierce combat of thoughts that were tantamount to soul struggles he pressed on to spiritual frontiers from which he viewed a new land of evangelical glory. His discovery seemed to him as the very gates of Paradise. In the supreme quest to save his soul and to win the assurance of God's pardon he was driven into the convent in the hope of finding reconciliation with God by means of the most approved method of his day. The monastic escape soon seemed to him a contradiction. In the final analysis, monasticism required that a man must work out his own salvation. To withdraw from the world because the world is inherently evil did not solve the problem for him. With the force of assaults the perplexing paradox of religion and life, sin and grace, Law and Gospel, tugged at his anguished soul. He was not able to tone down the force of God's Law, as others had done, so that man's moral guilt could be diminished. It soon dawned upon him that the monastic philosophy was an effort to adjust God's Law to man's ability to keep it. He saw in this both the dishonor of God and a false pride in man.

Luther's triumph over these perplexing problems was discovered in the domain of the human will or attitude. All virtue

or vice is to be judged here. The Christian victory is determined in man's attitude and will toward God. There can be no clearing of the mental ray until faith in the sin-forgiving God has claimed man's trust. Man's approach to peace through justification has its first step in the realization of his moral failure and guilt before God. This discovery of the doctrine of man's moral obligation to God is as important as the discovery of the doctrine of God's moral imputation of righteousness to man. Thus Luther's experience as a monk became a steppingstone rather than a stumbling block. He rediscovered the high ideals of absolute obedience to God. To him this obedience is demonstrated in its ultimate force in the willing acceptance of the divine gift of salvation.[14]

In Luther's thought all true morality and the very essence of the soul life is to feel one's self a tool of God and in all one's duties to be conscious of His honor. Only the doctrine of justification can liberate man from an egotistic philosophy. It is the persuasion that God is willing to serve man and ready to forgive man that makes man ashamed of his self-seeking ways.[15] Naturally, what God gives by grace, man needs no longer to seek by his own merit. When God wins man to Himself by the gift of Christian faith, man immediately comes into a relationship with God which calls for a joyful and willing service of God. This new will of man in harmony and union with God's will is something higher than law. Its function is entirely in the realm of love. Luther's Christian piety was a return to the purely religious character of the Christian ethic. There is only one truly ethical religious relationship to God, one of complete self-surrender to God in faith. Out of this relationship the whole Christian ethos will evolve quite naturally. Thus the one great moral imperative is to be wholly before God. "Faith is the highest and the most real moral demand, and at the same time it is a gift of grace." [16] This is the high paradox and the leading idea of the religious ethic of Martin Luther. Man's obligations to God are taken out of the domain of must and transferred into the sphere of willing service.[17] Now the laws of the church become distasteful. Their effect is destructive because they force a man to do a work in the hope of receiving the assurance of God's love before the love of God has made him willing to do the work out of free response.

All moral life has its impetus in God or in self. To Luther

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14) Weimar, I, p. 227, 27.

15) Karl Holl, *Luther*, Gesammelte Aufsaetze zur Kirchengeschichte (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr), Vol. I, p. 207.

16) Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), Vol. 2, p. 495.

17) Weimar Edition, VI, p. 27, 10.

only that moral life which is inspired and determined by a filial relation to God is good.[18] To make one's thoughts and works subservient to Him in whom we live and move and have our being, to anchor one's human powers in Him, and to direct all questions of life by this principle — this is the moral force that arises in man as a result of the assurance of forgiveness. This living unto God was the secret of Luther's heroic faith and the constant source of his courage. Thus in his attitude towards the world, in his personal duties as a social being, in his relationship to earthly ambitions and occupations, to the sorrows and joys of life, the believing child of God was given a range of liberty and assurance hitherto unknown and sharply distinguished from the Catholic and later Reformed views. The thesis which Luther established in his essay *On the Freedom of a Christian Man:* that a Christian is a free lord, subject to no one, but at the same time a servant of all, gives man a freedom of decision bound by no external law but directed only by that inner necessity which is the fruit of fellowship with God. This condition always produces a true desire to serve one's fellow man and to contribute to the uplift of social life. In the faith which claims God for self Luther saw the power to cleanse the heart and to produce true Christian integrity.[19] If faith is the power that brings man into contact with the living God, there will follow the resolve to put off whatever is out of harmony with that union and willingly to do that which this communion necessarily impels.[20] Luther's rise to this high power of religious consciousness was his unique contribution to the world.

These new principles were the basis of a new order. He himself lived by these new convictions, and he won others to them. Thus he became the champion of a new truth. His principles had the power of setting new goals and establishing new motives for life.

The common people were indeed not able to appreciate fully the principles involved in Luther's soul struggles. But they saw clearly that his ideals expressed their own fondest aspirations. Man essentially longs for peace with God. The common people in Luther's day were not interested in the speculations of the Scholastics. They were interested in the peace and harmony of their own lives. This explains why Luther's 97 Theses on Scholasticism drew hardly any attention, while his 95 Theses on Indulgences, relating to the secret of man's peace with God, written only a few weeks later, stirred the soul of the world to its depths.

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18) *Op. cit.*, I, p. 427, 19.

19) *Op. cit.*, VII, p. 26, 13. 20) *Op. cit.*, V, p. 159, 38.

When men saw Luther's principles at work, they felt themselves bound to him with the closest ties of loyalty. His program struck a loyal response in the hearts of the common people, for it aroused aspirations which had long been subdued. Luther had attained the freedom of a Christian man. Through his unbounded faith in the love and care of God, revealed in the pardoning grace of a divine Savior, he had come to a joy in living which was far deeper than that of Humanism. Religion for Luther has thus stepped out of the material, substantial sphere, which was merely accompanied by thought and feeling, and has entered into the intellectual, psychological, spiritual sphere.[21] He became a leader of men. His joyous faith delivered him from all fear of man, of the hierarchy, of Pope and emperor. And it was fear that had weighed down the consciences of men for generations.

Such were the directive forces that motivated Luther in all his actions. They were the secret of his social views. Had they been on a lower level, his cause would soon have been corrupted by an inordinate syncretism with the existing political and social forces of his day. He was resolved to preserve at all costs the ethics of this pure faith. There should not be any sphere of human life and work to which the Christian standards should not be applicable. Had his religious ethic been less vigorous and creative, his movement would have resulted in the quietism of the Orient or the narrow fanaticism of a sect.

Chapter III

The Moral Necessity of Luther's Ethic

When, on December 10, 1520, Luther cast the Summa Angelica, the most highly respected Catholic confession, into the fire, he voiced his protest against the moral order of the Church. Already at this early date he was breathing the free air of a moral ethic in which the willing obedience of faith becomes the only fulfillment of the divine Law. His argument is that only Christian faith can give that which God primarily requires of man, namely, willing obedience.[22] Scholars have dwelt on some of Luther's striking sayings on this point.[23] The importance of faith and trust in God, based on the Word, for a truly sanctified life is given tremendous emphasis by Luther.[24] Thus the impulse of the individual conscience becomes the new rule for conduct, and the religious spirit which issues from faith exerts control over all the directions of life. It is

21) Ernst Troeltsch, *op. cit.*, p. 469.
22) Weimar Edition, VII, p. 26, 13.
23) Cf. Karl Holl, *op. cit.*, p. 222.
24) Ernst Troeltsch, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

true, the channel in which this new spiritual principle moves is still the law of the Decalog and of the New Testament because these constitute the formula of the natural moral standard. This means that every truly moral force issues from faith. With Luther the religious relation itself was the absolute value and the ultimate source of all God-pleasing progress. All moral values, whether in the realm of self-cultivation or in the relation to one's fellow men, have their origin in this free, willing, joyful appropriation of God. It is this God-given spirit which now blossoms out and sends forth the fragrance of a God-pleasing life. To use Luther's own words, "Out of all this we come to the conclusion that a Christian man lives not in himself but in Christ and his neighbor: in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. Through faith he goes out of himself into God; from God he again descends through love and yet remains always in God and in the divine love." [25] Thus the believer who knows himself a beneficiary of God's unbounded love becomes a sort of Christ to his neighbor. This principle becomes a moral necessity in relation to man. It is the seed thought of all Luther's social theories. The love of God to man inspires the love of man for man. This is Luther's powerful social principle. It is this moral direction as a pure necessity of Luther's religious ethic that constitutes a most formidable social principle. This contribution makes Luther one of the truest religionists of all times. His convictions were not motivated by social or economic relations. They arose simply out of the development of the religious thought itself. "They were based essentially and independently upon the religious idea, which alone gave rise to social, economic, and political consequences." [26] Social, economic, and political causes had nothing whatever to do with the source and nature of Luther's struggle. The primary cause was the religious idea, pure and simple. "For that very reason it is impossible to connect the Reformation world of thought with any particular social class." [27]

About the only connection that can be detected between Luther's struggle and the character of the world about him may be found in the growing tendency of the age to emphasize the value of personal religious experience. Some historians saw in the growing independence of national states, the rise of city civilization, and the expansion of economic interests a setting that led to greater religious independence of thought.

It is this creative force in Luther that makes him a living person today. His struggles produced universals of thought that

25) *Op. cit.*, p. 495.
26) *Op. cit.*, p. 466. 27) *Ibid.*

exerted tremendous influence on institutions and principles of a universal character. Had this not been so, Luther would have been merely the founder of a new sect or a new religious order.

In contending for this idealistic ethic which finds its life and force in God, Luther studiously steered clear of fusion with sectarian thought which would disturb this principle. The idea of God's grace which was capable of winning man to a complete love and trust of God meant so much to Luther that he was unwilling to give too much emphasis to the earthly expression of that life. He did not want the effect to obscure the cause. He feared that human achievement would come in for too much honor and that it would become the criterion by which the true spiritual life is judged. The pure grace of God is appropriated simply by trust. It is not to be bound by, dependent upon, or made subservient to, any earthly consideration. The spiritual life in and through the free grace of God must objectively precede and produce everything else.

A pure ethic in relation to God must produce a pure ethic in relation to man. Luther held that the love of the neighbor is to have a place in the stead of self-love, not alongside of it. A love which first seeks self is a sinful love. For this reason he condemns the excessive, rich bequests for the support of altars, the Mass, churches, and cloisters. This cannot be God's will. His voice is pitched high as he condemns this wastefulness in the midst of human need and characterizes it as self-honor in the last analysis. Works of love toward the fellow man are more God-pleasing than all this outward show, even as God loves man more than wood and stone.[28] The ideal of achieving the common good becomes a hallowed principle in his social ethic. Whatever activity in life has no element of contributing for the common good has no justification for existence. The monastic life is to be condemned because it robs society of a useful activity. The estate of marriage is to be honored by all because it improves social life and thus enhances the advancement of society.[29]

Such were the considerations that led to Luther's clear-cut principles of the *Beruf*. A person who robs society of the benefit of his work by being idle is living on the sweat and blood of others. To find honest joy in work because it is God's order is a mark of a Christian in the midst of a world where work is generally regarded as a necessary evil. A Christian would work even if he had more than he needed.[30] A man cannot have God without the

28) Weimar Edition, II, p. 280, 12.
29) Karl Holl, *op. cit.*, p. 259.
30) Weimar Edition, XXIX, p. 441, 19.

desire to do His will. Human work is the channel by which God achieves His will. Thus God's command to work unites with man's desire to work.[31] The daily inspiration of the Christian man in striving to be faithful to his calling is produced by the conviction that one's work accomplishes God's honor and the neighbor's welfare.[32]

Such attitudes run through the entire structure of Luther's social views. His interest is not primarily in the social pattern but in true social motives. For this reason his tireless activities in the field of education both for children and adults characterized Luther's life to the very end. His deep concern was in the building of the individual personality which has the "mind of Christ" in all social relationships. A Christian society is unthinkable without the training of the individual in Christian motives and attitudes. The external order of political, economic, and social life does not produce this inner change. Luther knew that it is impossible to solve the social problem without solving the problem of the human heart.

Chapter IV

Luther's Social Theories in Their Practical Expressions

Luther's social views were the imperative and directive flowing from his religious convictions, but he never fell into the error of confusing a pure ethic in relation to God with the social expression of that ethic in relation to man. His religious convictions would not allow him to confuse salvation and sociology. He knew too well that the essence of religion lay in an upward direction, a relation to God predicated upon the love and merit of Christ. He who had liberated the true religious principle from the mass of subjective processes in which it had been implicated, would never bring his new liberty into another kind of enslavement. Luther was resolved to preserve the objectivity of grace at all times and under all circumstances. He knew that the certainty of salvation did not depend upon any condition in man. For this reason Luther's social theories are always thought of as the necessary and inevitable result of his religious ethic. He believed that all the fruits of the social life were the result of the right relationship between the Redeemer and the redeemed soul. In this point he never wavered. All of Luther's social theories begin with the individual who as a renewed being has the power to influence and affect society. Luther guarded himself against the error of believing that society could be permanently improved by anybody else than renewed individuals. The social Gospel was distasteful

31) Weimar Edition, XX, p. 152, 6.
32) Karl Holl, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

to him because it envisioned the improvement of society without the improvement of the individual.

But the virile force of Luther's religious ethic produced social interests far more liberal and wide in scope than is evident in a social awareness in Luther's followers. From the time Luther framed the Ninety-five Theses until he acted as arbiter in a feud between the Counts of Mansfeld a few hours before his death, Luther revealed an interest in the betterment of society which towers above the social conceptions of any of his predecessors. The forty-third of his Ninety-five Theses is a dim flash of that social principle which was infolded in the nature and spirit of his faith: "Christians should be taught that he who gives alms to the poor does a far better work than he who purchases a letter of indulgence." Luther's piercing eye fell upon the social injustices of his day, and he did not hesitate to uncover the source of social perversion, to attack and condemn the ruthless debauchers of society, and to prescribe the corrective. In this respect Luther surpassed the Fathers of the early Church, whose contempt for the world produced a detachment in which we look in vain for a definite social philosophy.

Luther probably never thought through the ideas of social freedom as applied to the whole of society. Certain it is that he did not hitch his conception of Christianity to any existing social order. He did not take a functional or utilitarian view of Christianity by which patronage is offered to a specific social system as essential to the Christian life. But he was confident that evangelical Christianity would raise society to levels in which the religion of the Cross would achieve "a mystical elevation of mankind," as Troeltsch calls it.[33] To be sure, Luther was conscious of no gap between his social theory and practice. His approach to the whole problem of social morality is essentially spiritual. He never employed any kind of power strategy in order to secure himself or his cause in a position in which he was safe or successful. His social teaching centers in the *theologia crucis* which is a sort of "sacrificial interpretation of social duty."[34] What Christ has done for us, that we must do for others, even when it involves persecution, danger, death.

Hope for a renewed world society was not in the sphere of Luther's thinking. He was primarily otherworldly. Christ's children are in the world but not of it. Their affection is set on things above. "In illness or public crisis his mind readily turned to apocalypticism."[35] And yet, the Christian, according to Luther,

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33) Quoted by John T. McNeill, *Christian Hope for World Society*, p. 107.

34) *Op. cit.*, p. 108. 35) *Op. cit.*, p. 109.

does not flee human society. The Christian, whose life is higher than its surroundings, is to purify society. The Christian has a solemn duty to use every lawful method to bring about a worthy social life for the common good and in harmony with the expressed will of God. While Luther disallows the dream of a Christian world order, his own expectation of the renovation of the Church carried along with it, to a degree which he was not concerned to define, the hope of a spiritual transformation of society. He himself took the lead in condemning social evils. His interest in the order of the social life never wavered. The very nature of the religious force he was seeking to release in the world implies the renewal of social life. Luther had tremendous confidence in the moral force of faith, which, as he said, "ever increases through its own works." [36] The child of God, blessed with the bounty of God, cannot be other than honest and liberal in his social dealings since "God is rich enough." [37] Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of believers implied a social force of the first magnitude. While the priesthood of believers as affirmed by Luther has often been held to imply individualism, it in reality signifies mutuality and communion in religious and social duties. All Christians are priests, "worthy to pray for others, to teach one another," and "every Christian is to give himself to his neighbor" that we may be "Christs one to another." [38]

This principle leads to an acceptance of the world as the opposite of monastic seclusion from the world. "It is precisely in the spirit of mutual service within the life of the world that Christian love is demonstrated." [39] Luther's distinctive ideas of the *Beruf* implies an acceptance of the world and of faithfulness in one's particular vocational activity as an act of willing obedience to God and unselfish service to man. These new social conceptions of Luther penetrated into many different areas of human interest, as we shall now show.

Luther's ethic of labor called for a willing acceptance of work on the principle that this is the divine order. True enough, the Christian in pursuing his labor also has an interest in the upkeep of his family and home, but the difference between the Christian workingman and a non-Christian one is that the former labors in faith, that is, in the faith that God will bless his work. The Christian labors as though everything depended on his work; he believes that everything depends on God. "You supply lock and door and let God make them secure; you labor and let Him bestow the fruits on your labor; you rule and let Him give success to your efforts; . . .

36) *Op. cit.*, p. 108.
37) *Ibid.*
38) *Ibid.*
39) Ernst Troeltsch, *op. cit.*, p. 471.

you preach and let Him make hearts pious; you eat and drink and let Him strengthen and nourish you. In all our doings it is He who must do all things and who deserves all honor." [40]

The principle of labor unions Luther regarded as essentially right, and he refused to give his support to those who objected to the guilds in which the interest of the laboring man was sought. But he publicly demanded that the guilds conduct their business according to Christian principles.[41] He does not hesitate to use his pulpit to condemn the closed-shop idea of certain guilds in his day, whom he accuses of assuming a despotic rule over business. The social spirit of Lutheranism is demonstrated in other evidences of interest in the welfare and protection of the laborer. In a report of the Saxon visitations of the year 1555 a complaint of servants who cannot attend church because of working hours is upheld and employers are admonished to correct this condition. In another order of the year 1580 employers are held to eliminate Sunday work for servants and no longer to pay the weekly salary on Sundays. These are the early beginnings of laws enacted for the betterment of working conditions.

Luther's interest in the forgotten man is one of the brightest rays that shone through the prism of his soul, now renewed by the love of God. The existing relief program of the Church he held to be altogether inadequate because the emphasis was placed on the donor and the gift rather than the need to be met. He gave a new emphasis to adequate provision for the person who found himself in financial straits. The new principle he introduced called for such relief and assistance as would actually lift the needy person to self-maintenance instead of strengthening him in indolence. Since the days of St. Francis begging enjoyed a coloring of sanctity. The mendicant orders had the full benediction of the Church. But Luther held to the new ideal that poverty should be entirely removed and that the forgotten people should be reclaimed to become decent and self-respecting members of society. The doctrine of the priesthood of believers and the bond of brotherhood among them impelled this view. The high point of Luther's social program in respect to relief was reached when he had the courage to suggest — and this was a bold step in a day of guild-controlled orders — that relief be extended not only to the sick and weak but also to the straitened business man and the ambitious youth who aspires to a profession. He felt that general taxation should provide the funds for such needs. There is on record a lengthy document in which Luther opens to view for the first time his idea of a com-

40) Weimar Edition, XXXI, I, p. 436, 26.
41) Weimar Edition, XVIII, p. 536, 1.

munity chest under the administration of cities. His suggestions for the community chest in Wittenberg and Leisnig expressly called for loans to be extended to the farmer and the little businessman.

Luther's social views on wealth and business were clear-cut. To him the possession of wealth and the service of God were not mutually exclusive ideas, but he saw clearly the danger of unconsecrated wealth and the power of money to control the heart and estrange the soul from God. Any kind of enslavement to earthly values, whether by rich or poor, he considered a snare of the devil. But wealth accompanied by the liberty of faith offers opportunity for a rich service to mankind. Luther no longer holds to the medieval poverty ideal, and he regards the possession and investment of money as compatible with the Christian spirit. His friend Lucas Cranach, one of the heaviest taxpayers of the city of Wittenberg, had heavy investments from which he lived. But there is evident in Luther's thinking a strong distrust of the money lords who live in far-off cities and exercise a mechanical control of the market, thus destroying the local communal and co-operative order. This he feared would disturb group loyalties and tend to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. He condemns the interlocked money powers and the control which they exert in reducing the little businessman to subservience. It was never Luther's idea to Christianize the ethics of business without Christianizing the individual agents who were responsible for outrageous conditions. He knew that the world would never be guided by the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, because all had not faith. "I have often contended," he writes, "that the world cannot be ruled with the Gospel and the power of Christian love, but by rigid laws and discipline and authority, for the world is against the Gospel and is not ruled by Christian love." [42] But he never failed to condemn business practices which violated the Law of God. Small wonder that he lifted his voice against excessive interest. He relates that in Leipzig a 30-per-cent rate of interest was charged. In Naumburg it was 50 per cent. "That means," he remarks, "that a peasant or a merchant is devoured in one year." [43] He felt that the loaning of money on interest has Christian sanction only under certain circumstances. It is never right to charge interest when money is loaned to a needy fellow man. He always held to the principle that the Christian cannot keep for himself what he does not need so long as the neighbor has need. This allows the lending of money with interest only to one who has more than he needs, in which case the loaning of money benefits both parties. The amount of interest to be required Luther felt should be proportioned to the profit

42) Weimar Edition, XV, p. 306, 28.
43) Weimar Edition, LI, p. 364.

realized on the loan. The possibility of the destruction of a crop by the elements should be taken into consideration.[44] In the conviction that the needy person should be able to borrow money without interest he never wavered. To take advantage of the need of the neighbor by requiring interest seemed to him to be against the spirit of the Gospel.

The Christian has a right to conduct business and to own property. He writes: "If a Christian is to give, he must have. If he has nothing, he can give nothing; and if he is to give tomorrow or the day after or a year from then, for Christ demands that we give as long as we live, then he is not to give everything away today." [45] But every Christian will regard his property as entrusted to him by God and as belonging to the neighbor. Money in itself is neither good nor bad. It all depends upon the way it is used. That which a man possesses becomes a *Gut* (in the original meaning of the German word used for property) only when it serves to bring happiness and blessing to many, especially the needy, and is not used to pile up a fortune.

The very spirit of capitalism seemed to Luther to be incompatible with the Christian life. Every man should work for the love of work. It is no sin to be ambitious and to strive to get ahead in earthly things, but the true motive must never be lost sight of. The desire for gain for the sake of gain cannot have God's benediction. Luther looked with suspicious eyes on the growing power of capitalism, and he felt it would spell the collapse of the little businessman. He publicly condemned monopolizing, forming a ring, feigning bankruptcy, as trickery of the capitalists who take advantage of the poor. In his pamphlet on Trade and Usury he declares that the companies have learned the trick of placing such spices as pepper, ginger, and saffron in damp vaults in order to increase their weight. There is not a single article out of which they cannot make an unfair profit through false measuring, counting, or weighing, or by producing artificial colors. He accuses them of conducting business on the principle that the price is to be as high as possible, which violates the very essence of Christian ethics. The principle of credit seemed to Luther to be both foolish and wicked. Those who sell for as high a price as they wish, who take or give credit, are the sources of all sorts of wide-spreading wickedness and trickery. He made the constructive suggestion that price levels be determined on the basic standard of the daily wage of the common laborer.

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44) Weimar Edition, VI, p. 12.

45) Weimar Edition, LI, p. 384, 4.

The doctrine of the separation of the Church from the State never meant for Luther a doctrine of the separation of the Church from society. One hand of the Christian is uplifted to receive the pardoning grace of the divine Savior; the other is outstretched to the needs and burdens of mankind. Thus a pure religious ethic produces a pure social ethic in relation to man.

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