

Concordia Theological Monthly



OCTOBER



1956

Nietzsche's Final View of Luther and the Reformation

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[EDITORIAL NOTE: This article by the renowned professor of German at Yale University appeared in *PMLA* (March 1956), the publication of the Modern Language Association of America. We acknowledge gratefully the permission by the editor of *PMLA* and the author to reprint it for our readers.]

N IETZSCHE began as an admirer of Luther and the German Reformation. The age of Luther ranked as high in his early opinion as the age of Goethe and Beethoven. From *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* on, this favorable attitude toward Luther underwent a strong transformation. In the five years from 1878 to 1883, Nietzsche's second creative period, Luther emerged as a highly questionable figure, even as a most regrettable event in the history of German and European thought and civilization. But all these severe pronouncements on Luther were only a prelude to the scathing denunciations to come in Nietzsche's post-Zarathustra writings.¹

In these last years of his literary life, when Nietzsche's ultimate philosophy had evolved as fully as his tragic circumstances allowed, his picture of Luther is similarly as completely developed as his brief career permitted. Whatever we may think of Nietzsche's final view of Luther, it is as full and definite as any reader could expect. We know exactly where Nietzsche stands. He expressed himself in such vigorous and unmistakable terms that the student of Nietzsche can hope to present something like a definitive story of Nietzsche's exciting if unbalanced relationship to one of the abiding figures of the Christian tradition.

More than is true of his intermediate period, Nietzsche in his final period sees and evaluates Luther against a vast background of human civilization as a whole, at least so far as Nietzsche's view

¹ My previous articles on this general topic are: "Das Lutherbild des jungen Nietzsche," *PMLA*, LVIII (1943), 264—288; "Nietzsche's Idea of Luther in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*," *PMLA*, LXV (1950), 1053—68; "Nietzsche's View of Luther and the Reformation in *Morgenröthe* and *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*," *PMLA*, LXVIII (1953), 111—127.

of man and culture extended. All questions of detail are somehow subordinated to Nietzsche's main consideration of how Luther fits into the largest scheme of things which Nietzsche could survey.

Whoever is but moderately familiar with the wider implications of Nietzsche's philosophy can almost anticipate his final attitude toward Luther and the Reformation. The man who subjected Christianity to one of the most violent intellectual attacks it has yet endured could not but launch a withering assault on one of the most distinguished and influential representatives of this religion. What is, briefly, Nietzsche's fundamental view of Christianity? It is first of all just one of many historical religions. It has no claim to special consideration and occupies no favored place among them. It is as perishable as any other past, present, or future religion. It, too, is made of earthly stuff. But beyond this impermanence and relativity there is another factor in Nietzsche's picture of Christianity. He feels that it is in unalterable opposition to all values that are close to his heart. It is basically against making this earth the only place that matters in man's destiny. Christianity refuses to let human life rest on its own merits by supplying a metaphysical framework. It is the entire Christian interpretation of existence which called forth from Nietzsche some of the severest objections ever expressed in the Western tradition.

Seen against the background of such a hostile attitude toward Christianity as a whole, the Reformation as an integral part of Christian thought cannot be expected to be treated less harshly by the mature Nietzsche. As a matter of fact, the Reformation fares even worse, if that is really possible. It held the fate of modern Europe in its hands and failed miserably. At a time when the Renaissance was in full swing, the Reformation, this unfortunate "recrudescence of Christian barbarism" (XVIII, 68),² turned the clock back and spoiled the victory of the reborn ancient world over the decaying medieval outlook. The backward men of the backward north of Europe were not ready to follow the exciting leadership of the forward-looking men of the progressive south. Instead, they rebelled against it and, what is worse, they succeeded in re-Christianizing re-paganized Europe. Nietzsche outdoes himself in

² All quotations are from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke* (München: Musarion Verlag, 1922 ff.).

heaping invectives upon such an unhappy event, such boorish resumption of a "dead" past.

It goes almost without saying that such a negative approach to the Reformation bodes ill for Nietzsche's final view of its protagonist, Martin Luther. Nietzsche would have been far less interested in Luther if the Reformer had been a less influential figure. He really pays him a very high compliment, indirectly and unwillingly to be sure, by crediting him with achieving, single-handed at the beginning, what amounted to a complete reversal of the direction in which Renaissance Europe was going. Nietzsche believed sufficiently in the decisive significance and power of individual genius to be convinced that it was the iron will of one man that was ultimately responsible for this comeback of medievalism. He seems to assume that the Reformation might never have happened if it had not been for the dynamic personality and incredible perseverance of one man. That is why Nietzsche singles him out with such violence and pounces upon him with such vehemence. When he attacks Martin Luther, he is attacking the man who above all others killed, for several centuries at least, the magnificent flowering of the modern spirit that was bursting out all over Europe except in the hopelessly retarded barbarous north.

Thus Luther is selected by Nietzsche to bear the brunt of his vicious and thoroughgoing assault on the historical fact of the rechristianization of Europe in the sixteenth century. So far as Nietzsche is concerned, there are but two preeminent figures in the entire history of Christianity: Paul and Luther. The former is for him the real initiator of historic Christianity, the man who succeeded in putting Christianity on the map. The latter is its chief restorer after it had practically run its course in Europe and paganism was re-triumphant in the Renaissance. Nietzsche hates both for what they perpetrated. While Paul would seem to bear the greater responsibility for having started it all, Nietzsche is actually just as hard, if indeed not harder, on Luther for having revived what he calls a dying movement. Paul and Luther are held to be in fundamental agreement in all basic religious issues. After the gradual weakening of Paul's concepts of grace and faith in the course of the Middle Ages, Luther not merely restored but even intensified the full Pauline message, eliminating the various concessions to

reason made by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. What Paul and Luther stressed in unison was the utter and complete indispensability of divine grace to the exclusion of human achievement. It is this rigorous depreciation of man's unaided effort that Nietzsche scores in the strongest terms. He is less incensed at the Roman Catholic doctrine of grace *and* works, which allows some freedom to the human element in the process. The Pauline and Lutheran rejection of even this limited freedom of moral man cannot but be anathema to the thinker who had eliminated the divine agent completely and given the reins wholly to the human agent.

Nietzsche was utterly opposed to the idea of grace. This attitude is of course consistent with his final philosophy. His conception of man was that of a self-sufficient, self-determining individual, who is definitely and irrevocably committed to running his own life. Nietzsche's ideal in the final stages of his thought was what he called "die vornehme Seele." This human aristocrat is inordinately proud of his independence and autonomy. He cannot brook any interference with it. Grace, on the other hand, implies human inadequacy and theonomy, looking for help from some other, divine source. The aristocratic soul, sure of its own adequacy, refuses pointblank to accept the gift of grace: "Geschenke von Oben her gleichsam über sich ergehen zu lassen und . . . durstig aufzutrinken: . . . für diese . . . Gebärde hat die vornehme Seele kein Geschick" (xv, 239). This attitude is in consonance with its deep-rooted tendency of not looking "up" in the first place: "sie blickt ungern überhaupt nach 'Oben.'" The aristocratic soul has an invincible desire to look straight ahead or down below: "entweder *vor* sich . . . oder hinab." What inspires this position is the aristocrat's proud realization that it is he who occupies the heights from which to survey the world. He is not in the habit of looking up but of being looked up to. The most he is willing to do is to recognize equals: these he looks squarely in the face. The majority of men he looks down upon. There is no one, either "god" or man, that he looks up to: "Die vornehme Seele . . . weisz sich in der Höhe." It is therefore in permanent and inevitable conflict with the Lutheran view, according to which the highest things in life are humanly unattainable and must hence be appropriated as gifts from above, as grace: "hier gilt das Höchste als unerreichbar, als Geschenk, als

'Gnade'" (xvii, 191). This essential depreciation of man Nietzsche finds utterly unacceptable. Since it found its greatest and most influential "modern" Christian representative in Martin Luther, Nietzsche felt constrained to take him to task for thus undermining the place of man on earth.

Closely related to grace is faith. Faith, in Luther's view, is the human response to divine grace. Thus faith can escape Nietzsche's censure as little as grace. What both have in common is a fundamental distrust of human reason and human achievement. The man of reason must studiously eschew the non-rational realm of grace and faith. He must see in them according to Nietzsche the very antithesis of human dignity and autarchy. Luther, he charges, failed to accept reason as an adequate guide in all matters affecting man. Reason, when fully applied, cannot but find the tenets of revealed religion totally unacceptable. It cannot grasp such things as the incarnation and redemption. Faith is an indispensable requirement to have access to these. In order to appropriate them faith in what is rationally absurd cannot be circumvented. Nietzsche charges all men of faith, including Martin Luther, with a total collapse of their rational faculties: they end, whether they are fully aware of it or not, by espousing Tertullian's well-known principle of *credo quia absurdum* (xxi, 151). Faith is a dangerous shortcut, a procedure not permissible to rational minds eager for truth. "Der Glaube ist eine Eselsbrücke" (xviii, 142). Mature men would not be seen on it. They prefer their longer and more circuitous road to truth.

But Nietzsche is not satisfied with heaping abuse on Luther on intellectual grounds alone. He finds moral deficiencies in him that contributed materially to his choice of faith over reason, over good works. Nietzsche accuses Luther of being far less capable of achieving good works than other Christians who placed less emphasis on faith than he did. In other words, a major cause for Luther's praising faith to the skies is his pronounced inability to produce moral deeds. Faith, for him, was but a convenient way of disguising his powerful passions, passions more violent than those felt by the less "faithful" men of pre-Reformation Christianity. Nietzsche insists that Luther was ruled by the lowest instincts. These made it next to impossible for him to achieve even a modicum of ethical living. Nietzsche goes so far as to claim that Luther, in a realistic analysis

of himself, reached the conclusion that he needed a different prescription from the traditional one to cure the ills from which he and his fellow-reformers were suffering. The solution he found was faith, faith alone, *sola fides*. But this, Nietzsche insists, was but a cloak, a curtain, behind which Luther's unbridled passions continued their dominion over him: "Der Glaube war . . . bei Luther nur ein Mantel, ein Vorwand, ein Vorhang, hinter dem die Instinkte ihr Spiel spielten — eine kluge *Blindheit* über die Herrschaft gewisser Instinkte" (xvii, 216). In this "interpretation" Luther the man of faith emerges as the man who was really and fundamentally without good works. Faith with him did not lead to good works; it merely covered up for their conspicuous absence in Luther's life, a life characterized by uncontrolled and uncontrollable passions.

On the face of it this pitiless attack on Luther might appear to be in flat contradiction with Nietzsche's next charge that Luther was essentially a moral fanatic. But this is not necessarily the case. Even though he was uncommonly subject to violent passions, he was nonetheless somehow concerned with morality and moral problems, Nietzsche is willing to grant. Nietzsche admits that it was just because of Luther's self-confessed inability to live up personally to the demands of the moral law that he called upon divine grace for help. It was this realization of the unattainability of the moral life that drove him to take refuge with a gracious God (xvi, 323). Luther fooled himself, it is true. His mind played a trick on him in that he really thereby escaped the difficulty of good works, but he himself was probably sincere in looking for a way out of his peculiarly harassing situation.

There is another reason why Nietzsche looked upon Luther as a moral fanatic. The Reformer fully accepted the moral ideals of the past and in no way made a philosophical analysis of the problem of morality as such. In other words, Luther's fault was that he did not anticipate Nietzsche! He mentions him in the same breath with Plato and Savonarola (xix, 177), men who adhered to strict views on morality. Thus this particular attack is not so much an attack on Luther individually but an attack on Luther as a man standing in a long tradition of more or less established or even intensified ethical values. Nietzsche hates Luther for his tradi-

tional conscience, which is to him a sign of disease and clear evidence of the collapse of an aristocratic approach to the whole problem (XIV, 220). Luther was troubled by anxieties, by insecurity, and self-contempt (XVI, 323), inner difficulties characteristic of non-aristocratic man. Only such a despicable person could descend to the depth of accusing the Renaissance of being the "non plus ultra der Corruption" (XIX, 177). The unsparing vehemence of this assault can be grasped only if one is aware of Nietzsche's evaluation of the Renaissance as one of the highest points of human development. His bitterness against Luther knows no bounds just because he restored, successfully at that, a moral view of things. The fact that he himself was torn by violent passions did not alter his concern with established moral values. The gist of Nietzsche's attack lies in the latter concern rather than in the former "fact." Luther's passions are a personal foible pointed up by Nietzsche; but it was Luther's ideal of morality as the supreme goal of life that influenced the world of the sixteenth century and broke up the "immoral" Renaissance. It is this turning back of the clock that Nietzsche can never forgive.

The root of the trouble is the simple fact that Luther was a priest. Now the priest is for Nietzsche an unfortunate but dangerous individual, ill-adjusted, clamoring for redemption. The priest commits the sin of sins: he despises himself. Luther ran true to form. Nietzsche fully identifies Luther's deepest feeling with Pascal's dictum of "Le Moi est haïssable." Whoever is seeing himself in such a light can have but one aspiration in life: to get away from himself. This attitude is the complete antithesis of what Nietzsche stressed as desirable: to accept the ego in ever fuller terms. Luther failed to do justice to man. He did not dare to look at himself without prejudice and was thus guilty of a profound intellectual dishonesty, an accusation that Nietzsche hurled against priests as a body (XII, 179).

Nietzsche clearly turned against Luther as one of the most influential of all Christian leaders. This is somehow the burden of the charge. Nietzsche rejected him as he rejected Christianity itself as the most unfortunate and distressing incident in the history of man. But in addition Nietzsche attacked Luther also on less exalted, more restricted grounds. Luther was, he claims, in some ways less

mature than the wiser and more experienced Roman church. He was really an immature romantic dreamer who played havoc with the carefully devised realism of the older church. It was irresponsible romanticism to undermine good works and to put faith on the pinnacle. Nietzsche grants of course that Luther did not actually plan to interfere with good works when he introduced this "innovation." But Nietzsche is primarily concerned with the practical results of this primary postulate of the Reformation. He is surely on solid ground here, and the aging Luther himself would have agreed that he was a sadder and wiser man after the Reformation had been initiated and there was little evidence that the emphasis on faith led to any visible increase of good works. As a corollary of this basic matter, Nietzsche also scores Luther's depreciation of saints: when the stress on works is removed, the primary agents of good works also find the ground slipping from under them. Again the outcome was a steadily diminishing emphasis on serious Christian living.

Nietzsche was also of the opinion that it was a grave error of judgment on the part of Luther to give as much freedom and decision to the individual as he did. Luther was guilty of overestimating the intellectual and spiritual responsibility of the man with whom he was dealing. He failed to see that he was really dealing with the mob, thus far held in check by the church. By mistaking the herd for responsible individuals, which they so obviously were not, he let loose a reign of irresponsibles who were in no way ready for the difficult role Luther had in mind for them. They could not maintain the relative freedom Luther handed over to them but fell prey to another master, a master perhaps worse than the one they served before. Liberated from servitude to the church they surrendered to the state and the princes, petty and wretched rulers of largely ignoble interests (xvi, 327).

These then are the main points of the record. They are negative from the most comprehensive viewpoint, that of human civilization, and from the much more restricted viewpoint of organized Christianity. There was no health in Luther so far as Nietzsche is concerned.

However, this negative attitude does not prevent Nietzsche from wanting to examine the psychology of Luther. He was intensely

interested in determining how Luther became what he was. Luther, he insisted, was a victim of his "profession." As a Christian and particularly a priest he inherited powerful feelings of guilt and an equally strong experience of the holiness of God. This was his professional equipment. He took the guilt of man and the purity of God as seriously as possible, going as far in these matters as Paul and further than Augustine. A man coming from this tradition and appropriating it as fully as he did would have to be the very opposite of what Nietzsche held precious and desirable. It is the related pair of human guilt and divine holiness, stretched to their utmost, which accounts for Luther's personality and outlook. In addition to this tremendous burden he was carrying Luther had other persistent problems and characteristics: there was a large measure of cruelty in his makeup. Again he was but the victim of his priestly calling. Nietzsche holds that in Christianity it is no longer external cruelty which is primary as in older stages of religion. Cruelty has become internalized. It is no longer so much man against man as man against himself. Luther is represented by Nietzsche as torn between the demands of reason and faith. Only with the utmost cruelty is Luther said to have suppressed his rational nature. But living wholly in the religious tradition as formulated by Nietzsche he probably took some delight in this otherwise painful process. This conflict, a strange mixture of pain and pleasure, inevitably led to the formation of a personality completely warped by the continuous efforts to subject reason to the unyielding demands of faith. Besides this permanent inner struggle between irreconcilable claims, there is in Luther the basic human impulse of the will to power, and this was present in him in an unusually high degree. Again this did not find normal outlets but had to run a devious subterranean course as it does in all priests officially dedicated to humility. All these factors — guilt of man, holiness of God, cruelty against self, will to power — could not but contribute to produce the strange and erratic figure that Luther was for Nietzsche.

And yet, in spite of all these defects from Nietzsche's point of view, there are aspects of Luther which very much appealed to his bitter critic. Nietzsche never denied that Luther was after all one of the Western world's mightiest figures, a man very highly endowed and supremely gifted. But this grudging recognition of Lu-

ther's genius does not prevent Nietzsche from attacking him ferociously for what he did, or rather did not do, with the marvelous intellectual and volitional powers at his disposal. Nietzsche cannot escape a sense of keen disappointment and even futility in looking upon what seemed to him an utter waste of superb native and acquired ability. A great intellect and a powerful will were literally thrown away on matters of absolutely no significance in Nietzsche's interpretation of the world. Seldom, he complains, has a man of comparable stature used his extraordinary gifts on more inconsequential problems: "was für abgeschmackte Hinterwäldler-Probleme" (xviii, 256). A potential *Übermensch* gone astray because of his ill-fated religious heritage and background! Nietzsche is almost beside himself with disappointment and rage when he compares sixteenth-century Germany with sixteenth-century France: Germany's Luther turning the clock back toward the religious past, on the one hand, and, on the other, France's Montaigne resolutely facing the irreligious future and helping to shape it himself. Luther is definitely to be counted among the reactionary forces of the world.

However, there is one aspect of Luther's achievement on which Nietzsche was always ready to shower lavish praise. From his earliest utterances on Luther to the very end Nietzsche expressed his great admiration for the supreme master of the German language. In a famous letter to Erwin Rohde (22 February 1884) Nietzsche tried to sum up his view of his own place in the artistic development of the German language. There are three major stages, the last of which Nietzsche assigned to himself. Luther and Goethe he recognized as his two most distinguished predecessors in the task of shaping the marvelous tool for expression which this language has finally become. Nietzsche never wavered in his appreciation of Luther's mastery of his native language, though he did remark in the letter to Rohde that Luther tended to be rather too boisterous at times. Luther's Bible is the best German book thus far produced. Compared with this work all other books written in German are somehow inferior: so far only Luther's Bible has really impressed itself upon German hearts (xv, 205—206). It is primarily Luther's matchless German which produced this fact, which Nietzsche does not like but which he recognized just the same.

Language and a powerful though warped personality — these are things which Nietzsche was quite prepared to accept, with restrictions to be sure. Beyond these two large areas there is one single event in Luther's life that Nietzsche also approved of heartily. This was an act by which Luther took himself right out of the medieval world and placed himself into the new age. The man of the Reformation for once behaved like a man of the Renaissance. What Nietzsche admired was Luther's marriage. He credits Luther with sufficient courage to recognize the sensual part of his nature and to provide for its satisfaction. It is this deed which Nietzsche calls one of the most influential and significant steps Luther ever took. Here the Reformer showed himself as "wohlgeraten, wohl-gemut" (xv, 372), a man who broke through the medieval contempt of the body. This was for Nietzsche one of Luther's few exemplary actions.

It is obvious that, taken as a whole, Luther's demerits far outweigh his merits for Nietzsche. Despite his unquestioned literary eminence and his mighty personality, which was potentially of Renaissance dimensions, Luther emerges in Nietzsche's final estimate as the greatest single force that ruined Europe's most important chance of throwing off the Christian yoke it had borne for more than a thousand years. Since Christianity is in Nietzsche's view essentially an affair of the mob ("Pöbelangelegenheit," xvi, 33), and since Nietzsche is violently opposed to the mob, it goes without saying that the man who restored a basic aspect of mob-life must be after all a mob-man himself and must therefore be considered one of the most backward and fatal of all influential European figures. He held the fate of Europe in his hands, and he chose to regress rather than to progress. He was really a sick man looking for a cure, not a healthy man eager to live more abundantly on this earth. He and the movement he saved and reinitiated are a blot upon the intellectual record of Europe. Without Luther and the Reformation Europe would have started much earlier on its road to intellectual independence which to Nietzsche lay in the direction of Montaigne rather than of Luther. The worst that Nietzsche could say about Luther was that he blocked the way toward the *Übermensch* for the space of a century or so.

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