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Editors’ Note

The year 2019 marks the 500th anniversary of the Leipzig Debate (or Leipzig Disputation). In Leipzig at the Pleissenburg Castle, Luther's colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt debated John Eck from June 27 to July 3 on grace, free will, and justification. From July 4 to 8, Luther took Karlstadt's place and debated with Eck especially on the question of whether the pope was established by God as head of the Church. Our first two articles commemorate this debate. They were presented originally at the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at CTSFW, which was held Jan. 16–18, 2019. They remind us of what was at stake, and what we still joyfully affirm: Christ as the head of the Church, and God's Word as the sole infallible authority.

Luther and Liberalism: A Tale of Two Tales (Or, A Lutheran Showdown Worth Having)¹

Korey D. Maas

When originally asked if I might speak to this Symposium on some subject concerning Luther's theology, I replied that I might indeed be interested in addressing what has come to be called his "political theology." Almost immediately, however, I began to question the wisdom of doing so. Not only because, as Harro Höpfl has rightly noted, it is "impossible to give . . . a brief summary of his political theology,"² but also because, as the cliché has it, politics and theology are the two subjects one ought to avoid in polite company. Addressing both at the same time, then, seems doubly unwise. Yet despite contentious, perhaps even unanswerable questions concerning the nature and relevance of Luther's political theology, I do take small comfort in the conviction that, precisely because such questions are contentious, they remain incredibly important—perhaps especially so in our own context and at this particular juncture of the American experiment, which only coincidentally overlaps with an important anniversary of the Reformation.

Before turning to Luther himself, however, I would like, by way of introduction, to summarize a debate taking place among some Roman Catholics, as it might helpfully highlight the sorts of questions and concerns with which Lutherans ought also to be more intentionally wrestling. Perhaps the most useful entrée to this debate is a much-discussed essay written two years ago by Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen, titled "A Catholic Showdown Worth Watching."³ The showdown in question is not the frequently covered contest between so-called liberal and conservative Catholics, but between two factions of what most would colloquially call conservatives. The one is united, according to Deneen, by a shared belief that

¹ The present essay is a version of remarks presented as the keynote address for the Thirty-Ninth Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, on January 21, 2016. I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. David Scaer and the Symposium organizers for their kind invitation.

² Harro Höpfl, "Introduction," in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xxii.

³ Patrick J. Deneen, "A Catholic Showdown Worth Watching," *The American Conservative*, February 6, 2014, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/2014/02/06/a-catholic-showdown-worth-watching/>.

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there is “no fundamental contradiction between liberal democracy and Catholicism,”⁴ that they are not only compatible but in fact mutually beneficial.

This line of thought will undoubtedly be familiar to you, as it has been on prominent display in recent debates about the contraceptive mandate, public accommodation of gay and transgender individuals, and similar controversies. In all cases, the unsurprising response of those affected has been an appeal to that very important aspect of America’s own liberal democracy: the constitutional protection of religion’s free exercise. Perhaps more surprising and more interesting, though, are those narratives which have attempted to portray religious liberty and freedom of conscience as having always and everywhere been constitutive of Catholicism. Writing in *First Things*, for example, George Weigel characterized the 1648 Peace of Westphalia—which brought to an end the Reformation-era “wars of religion,” and is often identified as having birthed the modern idea of the nation state—as having reversed a policy of religious toleration stretching back nearly two millennia to Constantine’s Edict of Milan. As such, he offers, it was, “in fact, the West’s first modern experiment in the totalitarian coercion of consciences.”⁵ More officially, by way of inaugurating the now annual “Fortnight for Freedom,” the US Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement on “Our First, Most Cherished Liberty,” lauding Catholics for having been pioneer defenders of religious liberty and freedom of conscience (without, of course, highlighting a history of inquisitions, heresy trials, European Crusades, or Catholic confessional states).⁶

On the other side of Deneen’s showdown worth watching is what he dubs “radical Catholicism,” which “rejects the view that Catholicism and liberal democracy are fundamentally compatible.” It is, he notes, “wary of the basic premises of liberal government” because “liberalism is constituted by a substantive set of philosophical commitments that are deeply contrary to the basic beliefs of Catholicism.” Therefore, and most pointedly: “Because America was founded as a liberal nation, ‘radical’ Catholicism tends to view America as a deeply flawed project,” the philosophical commitments of its founding “leading inexorably to civilizational catastrophe.”⁷

Now, to be sure, this is not likely what most American Catholics are hearing from their pulpits, but neither is it novel or necessarily fringe. If one of the central principles of liberalism, for example, is a religious liberty such as that codified in a

⁴ Deneen, “A Catholic Showdown.”

⁵ George Weigel, “The ‘Edict of Milan,’ 1,700 Years Later,” *First Things*, June 26, 2013, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/06/the-edict-of-milan-1700-years-later>.

⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, “Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement on Religious Liberty” (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2012).

⁷ Deneen, “A Catholic Showdown.”

separation of church and state, it must be admitted that this is not, contrary to Weigel, a long-held or “basic” Catholic belief. It was a principle explicitly rejected as “absolutely false” and “a most pernicious error” by popes as recently as the twentieth century.⁸ In the previous century’s *Syllabus of Errors* was reiterated the traditional proposition that “the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship.”⁹ The Second Vatican Council notwithstanding, a number of contemporary Catholic scholars understand such proclamations to remain prescriptive. Indeed, King’s College London philosopher Thomas Pink, among others, has argued with some persuasive force that the careful wording of Vatican II’s *Dignitatis Humanae* does not—and cannot—reverse the traditional Catholic teaching of both popes and councils that the state is obligated to act, when circumstances allow, as the “police department of the Church.”¹⁰ Journalist John Zmirak recounts visiting a small Catholic college and conversing with a student who very excitedly explained to him this interpretation: “So that means the Pope has the right to throw any Lutheran in jail?”, I asked skeptically. ‘I know, *right?*’ he said, beaming a smile.”¹¹

And so we come, at last, to the Lutherans. But what does any of this have to do with Luther himself? As will have become obvious, the Catholic showdown worth watching is a showdown over the very legitimacy of what Deneen calls “liberal democracy” and “the basic premises of liberal government.”¹² As I hope is also obvious, by “liberal” Deneen does not simply have in view the Obama administration or the readership of *Mother Jones*; he uses the term in its more traditional sense, to encompass virtually the whole of the modern western understanding of the origins, nature, and purpose of our political life—and its relation to religion—as articulated most influentially by seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke. As such, “liberal” might be understood simply as a synonym for “modern.” What this has to do with Luther, then, concerns the relation of Luther to the rise of liberalism, or the origins of western modernity.

⁸ Pope Pius X, *Vehementer Nos* (February 11, 1906), § 3.

⁹ Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* (December 8, 1864), § 77.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Thomas Pink, “The Right to Religious Liberty and the Coercion of Belief,” in *Reason, Morality, and Law: The Philosophy of John Finnis*, ed. John Keown and Robert P. George (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 427–442. The characterization of the medieval state as the “police department of the Church” derives from John Neville Figgis, *Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius, 1414–1625* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), 8, but is also accepted, e.g., by William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 84.

¹¹ John Zmirak, “Illiberal Catholicism,” *Aleteia*, December 31, 2013, <http://aleteia.org/2013/12/31/illiberal-catholicism/>.

¹² Deneen, “A Catholic Showdown.”

This is a long-debated question, perhaps most famously engaged in the early twentieth century by Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Holl.¹³ I will touch briefly on the Troeltsch thesis in a bit, but it now approaches consensus that it did not prevail in that debate. And perhaps it could not have been expected to, as by that time Holl's portrayal of Luther as "the pivotal figure for the emergence of modernity" had a good deal of momentum behind it.¹⁴ As early as the eighteenth century, Luther was being hailed as "a veritable guardian angel for the rights of reason, humanity, and Christian liberty of conscience."¹⁵ In the nineteenth century, Heinrich Geffcken could claim that "it remains an everlasting title to glory of the Reformation that political liberty . . . first became possible through its principles."¹⁶ An early twentieth-century work called *The Political Theories of Martin Luther* concluded by insisting that "we must recognize in Luther not merely a prophet, or a forerunner, but the founder of the modern theory of the state."¹⁷ Later in that century, Gerhard Ebeling offered that "in the long history of the concept of conscience, since the days of classical antiquity, the phrase 'freedom of conscience' appears first . . . in Luther."¹⁸ And recently Joseph Loconte wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*, "The European states endured a long season of religious violence and political absolutism, drenching much of the continent in blood, until Luther's vision of human freedom quickened the conscience of the West. In this sense, whatever our religious beliefs, we are all Protestants now."¹⁹

I will forego comment on that conclusion, but would like to point out that when he is not writing opinion pieces, Loconte's research interest is not Martin Luther, but John Locke.²⁰ This is worth noting because, just as Locke is widely regarded as the "father of liberalism," it is regularly asserted that "Locke's political philosophy is

¹³ Cf., e.g., Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1912), and Karl Holl, *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation*, trans. Karl Hertz, Barbara Hertz, and John Lichtblau (New York: Meridian, 1959).

¹⁴ As Holl's thesis is summarized by Hans J. Hillerbrand, "The Legacy of Martin Luther," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 236.

¹⁵ Friedrich Germanus Lüdke, *Über Toleranz und Geistesfreiheit* (Berlin, 1774), 204; quoted in Hillerbrand, "The Legacy of Martin Luther," 234.

¹⁶ Heinrich Geffcken, *Church and State: Their Relations Historically Developed*, 2 vols., trans. Edward Fairfax Taylor (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1877), 1:309.

¹⁷ Luther Hess Waring, *The Political Theories of Martin Luther* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1910), 278.

¹⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, "Zum Gegensatz von Luther-Enthusiasmus und Luther-Fremdheit in der Neuzeit," in *Lutherstudien*, vol. 3 (Tubingen: Mohr, 1989), 385.

¹⁹ Joseph Loconte, "When Luther Shook Up Christianity," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/when-luther-shook-up-christianity-1446159795>.

²⁰ See Joseph Loconte, *God, Locke, and Liberty: The Struggle for Religious Freedom in the West* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

grounded in Martin Luther's.²¹ It is tempting to brush aside such claims by pointing out that Luther as a theologian, and an exegete more especially, simply did not develop or embrace a "political philosophy." And there is of course something to this. But we should also be willing to acknowledge that this was not exactly Luther's own opinion. Instead, he would proclaim—more than once—that before his own writing "no one knew anything about temporal government, whence it came, what its office and work were,"²² and that "not since the time of the apostles have the temporal sword and temporal government been so clearly described or so highly praised as by me."²³

Moreover, when he does "clearly describe" temporal government, he regularly does so in what can sound astonishingly like Lockean terms. To note only some of the most obvious examples: As Locke will do in his *Second Treatise of Government*, Luther would insist that "temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs."²⁴ Therefore, as Locke would do in his published *A Letter concerning Toleration*, Luther counseled that temporal authorities should "let men believe this or that as they are able and willing," in part because, just as Locke would argue, it is "impossible to command or compel anyone by force to believe."²⁵ Finally, and despite his early and firm rejection of any right of resistance, Luther, like Locke, would eventually acknowledge and advocate a right to resist even duly elected authorities.²⁶ In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that contemporary scholars regularly conclude that it is "largely right to argue for a connection between Protestant theology and the emergence of political liberalism."²⁷

Now, if one appreciates the advantages of political liberalism, with its emphases on individual rights, religious liberty, free markets, and governments contracted

²¹ Charles D. Arthur and Philip A. Michelbach, "He Jumbles Heaven and Earth Together: John Locke, Martin Luther, and Political Theology," unpublished paper presented at the 2009 National Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association (Chicago, Illinois), 2.

²² Martin Luther, "On War against the Turk" (1529): vol. 46, p. 163, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

²³ Luther, "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved" (1526), AE 46:95.

²⁴ Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed" (1523), AE 45:105.

²⁵ Luther, "Temporal Authority," AE 45:108, 107.

²⁶ See, e.g., the brief summary of Luther's development on this question in W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, *The Political Thought of Martin Luther*, ed. Philip Broadhead (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984), 102–103.

²⁷ Brad Littlejohn, "The Two Kingdoms: A Guide for the Perplexed, Pt. 1," *Political Theology Today*, October 25, 2012, <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/kingdoms-guide-perplexed-pt-1/>.

of, by, and for the people, there is a great temptation at this point to wax Whiggish and give three cheers to Luther for getting the ball rolling. And so it is precisely at this point that we might want to pause and consider whether doing so is warranted. I want to suggest three reasons why it may not be. The first is simply that, especially for committed Lutherans, such a triumphalist narrative smacks of the very “theology of glory” that Luther himself denounced. A second is that, among those who do embrace a triumphalist account of liberalism, plenty have argued that its origins are better traced to Catholic—or Reformed, or Enlightenment—thinkers and institutions.²⁸ The particular reason for hesitation I would like to emphasize, however, is that precisely the same Luther-to-liberalism story told by liberalism’s loudest cheerleaders is told also by its most vociferous detractors.

The most recent example, with which many of you will be familiar, is Brad Gregory’s 2012 tome, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*.²⁹ Its thesis, greatly expanding on Sheldon Wolin’s evaluation of Luther’s thought as “ominously modern,”³⁰ has been summed up succinctly: “Protestants created the modern world; Brad saw it and it was not good.”³¹ The teleological history of the liberal narrative remains, but it is, as Victoria Kahn observes, a teleology in reverse.³² Or, in Mark Lilla’s more memorable characterization, “Its method is an inverted Whiggism—a Whiggism for depressives”³³—for depressives because, from the vantage point of modernity critics such as Gregory, the world wrought by liberalism can only be cause for depression. It is constituted, he notes, by

a hyperpluralism of divergent secular and religious truth claims[,] . . . individuals pursuing their desires whatever they happen to be[,] . . . Highly bureaucratized sovereign states wield[ing] a monopoly of public power[,] . . . The hegemonic cultural glue [. . . of . . .] all-pervasive capitalism and consumerism. . . . There is no shared, substantive common good, nor are there any realistic prospects for devising one.³⁴

²⁸ For an example of the Catholic narrative, see e.g., Thomas E. Woods Jr., *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2005).

²⁹ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³⁰ Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 194.

³¹ William Storrar, “Blame It on Scotus,” *Commonweal* 139, no. 12 (2012): 24.

³² Victoria Kahn, “Get Over It,” *The Immanent Frame*, September 16, 2013, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/09/16/get-over-it/>.

³³ Mark Lilla, “Blame It on the Reformation,” *The New Republic*, September 14, 2012, <https://newrepublic.com/article/107211/wittenberg-wal-mart>.

³⁴ Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 377.

And we eventually arrived at this point because Luther's doctrine of *sola scriptura* could lead only to irresolvable doctrinal disagreements, which ineluctably led

to war, which led to the creation of confessional states, which led to more wars. Modern liberalism was born to cope with these conflicts. . . . But the price was high: it required the institutionalization of toleration as the highest moral virtue. . . . It thus left . . . us to sink ever deeper into the confusing, unsatisfying, hyper-pluralistic, consumer-driven, dogmatically relativistic world of today.³⁵

And that, as Lilla wryly summarizes Gregory's book, is "how we got from Wittenberg to Wal-Mart."³⁶ That is also why Alasdair MacIntyre, a great influence not only on Gregory but on all the "radical" Catholics with whom we began, would conclude that "only by going back before the fall—before Luther—can modernity be healed."³⁷

Now, without endorsing nostalgia for a golden age that never was, we can certainly acknowledge that all is not well in the modern West. If individual rights are understood to include, for example, a right to murder the unborn, if capitalism inevitably cultivates a consumerism driven by—and stirring up—our basest passions, and if religious liberty increasingly means a liberation from religion and any public influence it might have, then perhaps liberalism is not all it was cracked up to be. Whatever our ultimate assessment of liberalism, however, the fact remains that from the eighteenth century into the twenty-first, some of the most dominant narratives of both its proponents *and* opponents tend to begin with Luther. And, with respect to Luther, the only alternative narrative given much attention is that popularized especially by Troeltsch, echoed in the Marxist historians, and culminating in what is still sometimes called the "Shirer thesis." That is, rather than being a progenitor of liberalism, Luther—in reaction to the Peasants' Revolt, for instance—undermined it (in the words of Friedrich Engels) "as no bootlicker of absolute monarchy had ever been able,"³⁸ and so encouraged the kind of illiberal authoritarianism issuing eventually in the Third Reich.³⁹

What we have on the table, then, are three interpretive and evaluative options. Characterized with gross simplicity, they are as follows:

³⁵ Lilla, "Blame It on the Reformation."

³⁶ Lilla, "Blame It on the Reformation."

³⁷ As summarized by Joshua Mitchell, "Luther and Hobbes on the Question: Who Was Moses, Who Was Christ?" *The Journal of Politics* 53, no. 3 (1991): 681.

³⁸ Friedrich Engels, "The Peasant War in Germany," in *Marx & Engels on Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 108.

³⁹ See, e.g., Uwe Siemon-Netto's treatment of this narrative in *The Fabricated Luther: The Rise and Fall of the Shirer Myth* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995).

1. Luther was a proto-liberal, and that's a good thing.
2. Luther was a proto-liberal, and that's a bad thing.
3. Luther was not a proto-liberal, and that's a bad thing.

If for no other reason than symmetry, though, a fourth option deserves to be in the mix, which is that Luther was not a proto-liberal, and that's a good thing. So far as I am aware, however, no one is setting forth in any serious or sustained fashion the argument that (to revise Deneen) "liberalism is constituted by a substantive set of philosophical commitments that are deeply contrary to the basic beliefs of Lutheranism," and therefore we ought to be "wary of [its] basic premises."⁴⁰ Perhaps it is an argument that cannot convincingly be made. Or perhaps it can be, but we have so accommodated ourselves to liberal modernity that we would rather not entertain it too seriously. That it is not currently being made, however, means that there is at present no "Lutheran Showdown Worth Watching." But I leave you with the suggestion that it is a showdown very much worth having.

⁴⁰ Deneen, "A Catholic Showdown."