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Luther Research in America
and Japan

Lewis W. Spitz
and
Morimichi Watanabe

Luther was familiar with the idea of a *translatio imperii*, westward the course of empire wends its way. The scepter of power was handed on from the Babylonians to the Assyrians, to the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. He translated the idea into a *translatio evangelii* motif, for the torchlight of the gospel was carried from the Jews to the Greeks, to the Romans and to the Germans. If the Germans were ungrateful for the Gospel, the Lord will take it away and give it to peoples in the West who will appreciate it. Luther referred at least twice to the New World as newly discovered islands where the natives had not as yet heard the gospel. The imperial document declaring him an outlaw, in fact, referred to the Indian possessions of Charles V. It is possible that the Indian princes who had come to the court of Charles V were present when Luther gave his famous speech at the imperial diet in Worms in 1521. So, too, has Luther research moved westward. It is not that the homeland of the Reformation has in the least abated. The quintessential Quincentennial of Luther's birth has, in fact, produced an avalanche of publications on nearly every facet of Luther's life, thought, and place in history. But the torch of learning has been lit to the west, in America and in recent years most impressively westward, across the broad Pacific, in Japan.

It is high time that the fascinating contributions of Japanese scholarship to Luther research be taken into account. In this article we propose to offer a summary of trends in American Lutheran interpretations, not a bibliographical reckoning, to present a succinct bibliographical account of Japanese Luther scholarship, and in conclusion to venture some comparisons of American and Japanese approaches to Luther research with some comparison with German scholarship. Not only can General Motors and the Toyota company build cars together in California, but also Luther scholars can practice that Zusammenarbeit that has made much German scholarship so outstanding.
Trends in American Luther Research

A number of articles on American Luther scholarship offer detailed bibliographical accounts so that it is not necessary to recapitulate the authors and titles in this paper. At the most one or the other new book may be referred to as an example. The late Albert Hyma of the University of Michigan once commented that more has been written about Luther than about any other person in the history of the world with the exception of Christ. The Catholic biographer of Luther, John M. Todd, writes: "A major part of the phenomenon of Luther is the extraordinary corpus of writings, over one hundred volumes in the Weimar edition. In most big libraries, books by and about Luther occupy more shelf room than those concerned with any other human being except Jesus of Nazareth." G.R. Elton, Regius Professor at the University of Cambridge, raised a cautionary note: "Luther and Reformation are naturally linked, but they are not in fact identical: the history of the Reformation in Europe is not the same as the history of Luther in Germany. But in the quincentennial year of Luther's birth it's a bit much to expect people to make that distinction." In America, as in Germany, the quintessential Quincentennial of Luther's birth is adding many new titles, a good number of them by younger American scholars.

American Luther scholarship has contributed especially in four areas to a more comprehensive picture of the man and of his historical significance through biographical studies; through theological studies; through a closer examination of the intellectual, cultural and social context within which he developed and acted; and through the analysis of his impact on subsequent ecclesiastical and secular history. At the First International Congress for Luther Research, Aarhus, 1956, the late Heinrich Bornkamm of Heidelberg cautioned scholars against an almost positivistic preoccupation with every detail of Luther's theology which threatened to reduce Luther scholarship almost to a mere adjunct to systematic theology. During the years since then scholars have corrected this situation. By way of illustrating the American contribution to Luther's biography one might cite the two books of Mark U. Edwards on Luther's relation to brethren who betrayed the cause, as he saw it, and the polemics of his last years.

The Germanist H.G. Haile's study of Luther's life from the visit of the papal nuncio Vergerio to Wittenberg in 1535 to Luther's
death, while popular and not done by a specialist, is rich in suggesting the nature of Luther's personal actions and reactions. He understands the aging process, the accumulation of psychic hurts, and the growing physical disabilities, suggesting that the uremic poisoning that nearly took Luther's life at Schmalkald in 1537 took its toll in subsequent irascibility and psychic swings between confusing and lucidity.

Intimately related to biography is the application of psycho-history to Luther's life, a development which can properly be called an American contribution or aberration. Two centuries ago the German historian Wegelin (1721-1791) argued for the need to understand the psychology of rulers and the psychological bond with their people, the necessity of penetrating their obscure wishes and passions. In the polemical Catholic period Joseph Sprieszler, Heinrich Denifle, Albert Maria Weiss, Hartmann Grisar, Paul Reiter and others sought to undercut Luther's credibility by pointing to physical illness or psychological instability such as excessive eroticism or manic depression. But the honor of making the first scientific attempt to apply Freudian analysis to the younger Luther goes to that giant among Reformation historians, Preserved Smith. In an article entitled "Luther's Early Development in the Light of Psychoanalysis," *American Journal of Psychology* 24 (1913), 360-377, Smith provided a primer of Freudian analysis complete with an alcoholic father and oedipal rage, obsession with the demonic, a thanatous preoccupation, harsh home discipline, involvement in concupiscence, and recurrent depressions. At the American Historical Association meetings in December, 1957, the renowned diplomatic historian William L. Langer took the audience by surprise with his presidential address entitled "The Next Assignment," in which he spoke of the "urgently needed deepening of our historical understanding through exploitation of the concepts and findings of modern psychology."

He was referring to psychoanalysis and its later developments in terms of "dynamic" or "depth psychology." He used Luther as his prime case study. Since then psychobiographies have been squirting out all over. The best of those concerned with Luther, though the best is none to good, is that of Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958). It is an attempt at posthumous psychoanalysis applying to Luther's case Erikson's concept of the stages of man's psychic development and concentrating on
the identity crisis. His picture of Luther was pirated by the playwright John Osborne, Britain’s “angry young man,” in his play Luther (New York: Signet, 1961), naively used by Lutheran Colleges for dramatic production, possibly for the lack of anything better. The obvious flaws on Erikson’s knowledge of the facts and his arbitrary imposition of his pet schema on Luther have been pointed out by a number of serious Luther scholars. But on the positive side, psychohistory and psychobiography do provide some countervalence to the ghosts of social scientific and economic deterministic abstractions.

American scholars have also contributed to the deeper understanding of Luther’s theology along with their European colleagues. During the nineteenth century few Europeans did extensive or in-depth studies of Luther’s theology, nor did Americans. On the German side only Theodosius Harnack and Ignaz Dollinger did volumes on Luther’s theology, although he received much attention in history of dogma books. In America C. F. W. Walther and only a few others worked with Luther’s theology in the nineteenth century, but with the twentieth century younger American scholars wrote important monographs, often based on theses and reflecting the interests of their doctoral advisers such as Wilhelm Pauck, George Williams, Roland Bainton, Jaroslav Pelikan, E. Harris Harbison and others. One thinks of the studies of John Dillenberger on the Deus absconditus, Uuras Saarnivaara on Luther’s evangelical breakthrough, Heino Kadai on Luther’s theology of the cross, Egil Grislis on the wrath of God, Brian Gerrish on grace and reason, John Headley on Luther’s views of church history, Edgar Carlson on the Swedish interpretation of Luther, Ian Siggins on Luther’s doctrine of Christ, Kenneth Hagen on Luther’s Lectures on Hebrews, and the like.

Of the very recent books on Luther’s theology one may single out a few for special commendation. The first of these is that of Marilyn J. Harran, Luther on Conversion (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983) in which the author describes the varying modalities of the concept of conversion from Luther’s notes on Lombard’s Sentences, 1509, through the Psalms and Romans Commentaries to the more mature theology of 1518 and 1519, a critical decade in Luther’s theological development and therefore in the history of the entire Christian church. In the concluding chapter she brings the development of Luther’s thought on conversion to bear upon the tormented question of Luther’s own “conversion” as recounted in the story of his
tower experience, considering the nature and the time of that experience. Two books which have not as yet attracted the attention they deserve because of their original and almost personal approach to basics in Luther’s religious thought are John A. Loeschen, *Wrestling with Luther: An Introduction to the Study of His Thought* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976) and *The Divine Community: Trinity, Church and Ethics in Reformation Theologies* (Kirksville, Missouri: The Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1981), comparing and contrasting the major theological systems of the Reformation. Steven Ozment has written on Luther and mysticism, Scott H. Hendrix on Luther’s ecclesiology, most recently in his excellent book *Luther and the Papacy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), and Michael Baylor on conscience in Luther’s theology, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977). David Steinmetz of Duke Divinity School has done two books on Staupitz, most recently *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1980). An independent thinker, Steinmetz questions the highly dubious assertions about the significance of the *via Gregorii* and the existence of a late medieval Augustinian school or tradition allegedly mediated to Luther by Staupitz. These examples illustrate the nature of American contributions toward understanding the theology of Luther.

A third area in which American scholars are actively contributing is that of the intellectual, cultural, and social context within which Luther developed and acted. While some European writing follows a well-trodden path in stressing and exaggerating the importance of scholastic theology for Luther, Americans have seen the radicality of his break with scholasticism quite clearly and have stressed the importance of Biblical exegesis, the evangelical thrusts, and the influence of Renaissance humanism on Luther’s cultural, educational, and religious ideas. Typical of this newer emphasis is the work of Jaroslav Pelikan on Luther’s exegesis, of Kenneth A. Strand on Luther’s relation to the Devotion Moderna and Maria Grossmann on humanism in Wittenberg. The study of the Renaissance and of German humanism has long flourished in this country and it is not, therefore, surprising that the importance of humanism for Luther and his cause would receive greater attention here than in Germany, where the *Historische Zeitschrift* in its review section has gone directly from the late
Middle Ages to the Reformation. American activism and societal concern have inspired an impressive number of works on Luther’s response to a wide variety of ethical and social problems.

Finally, American scholars have contributed significantly to the analysis of Luther’s impact on subsequent ecclesiastical and secular history. One cluster of books have related Luther to the Lutheran confessional tradition. Another group of studies take up Luther studies from a Catholic or Protestant ecumenical point of view such as John Dolan, *History of the Reformation: A Conciliatory Assessment of Opposite Views* (New York, 1965), or Harry McSorley, *Luther Right or Wrong?* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969).


We have focused upon four major subjects in order to illustrate the nature and quality of the American contributions to Luther studies. Many other topics could be included in this
survey such as educational reform, printing and pamphleteers, Luther and the German language, Luther as a publicist, pulpits, rhetoric and preachers, popular piety, the peasants’ revolt, Luther and the Jews, Luther and the urban reformation, the princes, Luther and Marx, Luther and the radical reformation, and the like. There are books and significant articles on all of these subjects by American scholars. It is time now, however, to return to Luther in Japan.

TRENDS IN JAPANESE LUTHER RESEARCH

There are three useful bibliographical essays which, taken together, show the extent and nature of Luther studies in modern Japan. Kenji Masuda, “Luther Studies in Japan,” Church History, 31 (June, 1962), 227–230, covers the period from about 1900 to 1962; Yoshikazu Tokuzen, “Luther in Japan,” Luther: Zeitschriften der Luther Gesellschaft, 39 (1968), 85–89, discusses briefly Luther studies in Japan from 1874 to 1967; and Yoshikazu Tokuzen, “Die Lutherforschung in Japan seit 1967,” Luther-Jahrbuch, 44 (1977), 89–104, deals with the period between 1967 and 1977. In this article, we shall briefly discuss trends in Japanese Luther studies during the past two decades. The topic will be analyzed under three headings: Luther’s works, Luther biographies, and Luther’s theology and thought.

Luther’s Works in Japanese Translation

The publication of the Japanese translation of Luther’s works, initiated in 1963 and designed to appear in thirty-six volumes, is proceeding slowly. Of the twelve volumes in Part I, which contains the works of Luther in chronological order, nine volumes (1–3, 5–10) have so far been published. Part II in twelve volumes, which includes Luther’s commentaries, and Part III in another twelve volumes, which contains his table talks, sermons, and letters, will presumably appear after the completion of Part I. The significance of the translation for the future development of Luther studies in Japan cannot be overemphasized. There is also a “pocket-book” edition of Luther’s works in translation which was begun in 1967. The eight published volumes include such works as The Large Catechism (Vol. 2, 1967), The Address to the German Nobility (Vol. 4, 1971), and The Babylonian Captivity of the Church
Two books have thus far been published in a third series, called the Selected Works of Luther. Many other works of Luther are also easily available in three widely distributed anthologies. It should be noted that Luther’s “Table Talks,” which Shigehiko Sato first published in 1929 in translation, has just been reissued with some emendations and style changes.

Biographies of Luther

Although Luther has widely been regarded in Japan as “a great reformer” and “a giant in world history,” only a comparatively small number of biographies by Japanese authors have been published in recent years. Some biographies that should be mentioned are: Kazah Kitamari, Martin Luther (Tokyo, 1951), Ken Ishiwara, The Reformer Luther and His Surroundings (Tokyo, 1967), Osamu Komaki and Shuzaburo Izumiya, Luther: The Man and His Ideas (Tokyo, 1970), and Osamu Naruse, Luther and the Reformation (Tokyo, 1980). There have also been some recent translations of important biographies by non-Japanese authors. They include Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (Nashville, Tenn., 1950), Franz Lau, Luther (Berlin, 1959), C. W. Gheorghiu, La jeunesse du Docteur Luther (Paris, 1965), and Richard Friedenthal, Martin Luther: Sein Leben und seine Zeit (Munich, 1967). Together with the older, well-received translation of Henri Strohl, Luther, sa vie et sa pensees (Paris, 1953), they have made the life of the reformer more accessible to Japanese readers than before.

Luther’s Theology and Thought

There is as yet no comprehensive study of Luther’s theology by a Japanese scholar. This is probably due to the fact that until recently, the Japanese study of Luther’s theology tended to concentrate on the doctrine of justification. Shigehiko Sato’s classic study, The Fundamental Ideas Of Luther as Manifested in His Commentary on Paul’s Letters to the Romans (Tokyo, 1933), played an important role in developing this tradition. (Its third edition was published in 1976). Kazoh Kitamori’s work, The Theology of the Reformation (Tokyo, 1960), is another important study of Luther’s doctrine of justification. Professor Kitamori is also the author of The Problem of Freedom in Love:
Concerning Luther’s ‘Freedom of the Christian Man’” (Tokyo, 1966) and of Theology of the Pain of God (Richmond, Virginia, 1965; in Japanese, 5th revised edition, Tokyo, 1958), which owes much to Luther’s theology. The translations of works by non-Japanese scholars, such as Walther von Loewenich, Luthers Theologia Crucis (Munich, 1929), Lennart Pinomaa, Voittaya usko (Helsinki, 1959), and Brian A. Gerrish, Grace and Reason: (Oxford, 1962), further contributed to the growth of Japanese scholars’ interest in the topic and Luther’s theology in general.21

In the historical, intellectual, and institutional study of Luther and the Reformation, Dr. Ken Isiwara played a dominant role from the 1930s to his death in 1979. Two recent publications related to him show the scholarly level which Japanese Luther research has reached. Volumes 5 and 6 (The Reformation, I and II) of The Works of Ken Ishiwara (Tokyo, 1979) contain all of his essays and articles on the Reformation published in 1931–1967. Reformation Studies (Tokyo, 1968), a Festschrift dedicated to him by thirteen scholars, deals with Luther, Luther’s influence on later centuries, and the Swiss Reformation, reflecting his diverse interest in the Reformation era.22

Indeed, there are signs that young Japanese scholars, influenced especially by the works of Ishiwara, have seriously begun to study Luther’s theology and thought from a wider point of view than a focus only on his doctrine of justification. For example, Haruo Kaneko published a large volume entitled Luther’s Anthropology (Tokyo, 1975), which won the 1976 prize of the Japanese Academy of Sciences. His recent book, Luther’s Religious Ideas (Tokyo, 1981), is an attempt to interpret Luther’s religious thought from an anthropological or existential point of view. Susumu Imai has contributed a perceptive introduction to his anthology23 in which, while presenting a short history of Luther research in Japan and abroad, he has emphasized the influence of mysticism on Luther’s ideas. We must note in this connection that translations of notable works by Heinrich Bornkamm, Jaroslav Pelikan, Regin Prenter, and Vilmos Vajta contributed to a diversification of Japanese Luther studies.24 Mention may also be made of a recent translation of Willem J. Kooiman, Luther en de Bibel (Baarn, 1958).25

In the area of Luther’s political thought, Hiroshi Aruga wrote a scholarly work entitled The Reformation and German
Political Thought (Tokyo, 1966), in which he discussed the development of German political ideas in connection with Lutheranism. The publication of a Japanese translation of Karlheinz Blaschke, Sachsen im Zeitalter der Reformation (Gutersloh, 1970) also reflects Japanese scholarly concern about the political and institutional studies of the Reformation. But it must be noted that the drama of "campus disturbances" in the 1960s awakened and strengthened interest not only in the "Radical Wing of the Reformation," but also in the political and social ideas of Luther. This is perhaps best seen in Isao Kuramatsu's study, Reform and Development in the Thought of Luther (Tokyo, 1973). His long-standing interest in Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms is shown in his other books, Luther and Modern Times (Tokyo, 1968), The Basic Structure of Luther's Theology and His Social Theory: A Study of the Doctrine of Two Kingdoms (Tokyo, 1977), and Luther: His Faith and Theology (Tokyo, 1982). Another notable recent development related to Luther's thought is the increase in the number of works on Luther's relations with other reformers. Naomichi Kodaira, ed., Luther, Zwingli, Calvin (Tokyo, 1969) and Isao Kuramatsu, Luther, Muntzer, Karlstadt (Tokyo, 1973) are of this type. Akira Demura's studies of Zwingli and other Swiss reformers, Studies in the Swiss Reformation (Tokyo, 1971) and Zwingli: His Life and Thought (Tokyo, 1974), have developed from his doctoral work at Princeton Theological Seminary. Needless to say, Thomas Muntzer received considerable attention in the 1960s, as is reflected in the publication of Taira Kuratsuka et al., eds., The Radical Wing of the Reformation (Tokyo, 1972). We might note in this connection that Robert Stupperich, Melanchthon (Berlin, 1960) was translated into Japanese in 1971 and Roland H. Bainton, Erasmus of Christendom (New York, 1969) in 1972.

Luther research in Japan has entered a period in which, under the influence of Ishiwara and others, great effort will be made to understand Luther's life and thought in relation to the historical, social, political, and ecclesiastical conditions of the Reformation period. The age of "Luther ohne den geschichtlichen Kontext" in Japan is definitely over. The establishment of the Japanese Luther Academy in 1971 as a clearing house for scholars marked the maturity of Luther research in modern Japan. It has been announced that a commemorative volume of essays, Luther in History and Modern Times, will be published in 1983 on the five-hundredth anniver-
sary of Luther’s birth. It will also contain a detailed Luther bibliography (in German) covering works on Luther published since 1977.30

CONCLUSION

The year 1983 marks the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther’s birth and the one hundredth anniversary of the death of both Richard Wagner and Karl Marx. The year 1984 will be notable for the five-hundredth anniversary of Zwingli’s birth and the advent of George Orwell’s cataclysmic year. In this article we have taken note of trends in American and Japanese Luther research up to the quintessential Quincentennial of his birth. It may prove useful in conclusion to venture a few comparisons.

1. In the nineteenth century Luther was in America depicted either as a hero, the mighty oak of Saxony, by the Protestants or as a reprobate monk and hereiarch by the Catholics. For understandable historic reasons, with Japan first emerging from its self-imposed isolation, no Luther research as yet appeared.

2. In the early decades of the twentieth century American Luther research was still very dependent upon European and predominantly German scholarship, through books and due to the influence of immigrant and refugee scholars in this country. As the century progressed, however, American scholars have showed a growing independence and originality of thought. In its early phases twentieth century Japanese scholarship, too, was heavily dependent upon translations of German and English works, due in part to the number of Japanese scholars who have studied at German universities and American seminaries. But post-war Japanese scholars, too, have been doing new editions of Luther in Japanese translation and have been contributing original work not only on Luther’s life and theology, but also on the larger social and political context and even on his impact on subsequent history.

3. Whereas American Reformation research has broadened out to cover nearly every phase of sixteenth century history, thus reducing Luther and the religious side of the Reformation to less exclusive import, Japanese scholars have still stressed Luther’s life and theology. But the latest trend seems to run parallel to what has happened in America with the tendency to do more sixteenth century
studies than specifically Luther or religious reformation topics.

4. American and Japanese scholars alike share the advantage of distance from Europe. They tend to see the Reformation as a Pan-European movement and so manage to avoid European national parochialism. Japanese scholars, for example, are very much interested in the Luther-Zwingli connection.

5. Moreover, Japanese like American scholars for the most part do their own work and are accountable for what they publish under their own name. They have not adopted the patron or institute chief system of the Europeans which allows the head man to publish the research of the underlings under the name of the big man, sometimes with little or no acknowledgement.

6. Like American scholars, Japanese Luther scholars have been free of ideological constructs such as Marxism and the "battles of the German schools" which in Europe have led to preposterous one-sidedness and exaggerated claims for unilateral explanations.

7. Some American scholars have carried their realistic assessment of the greater reformer so far as to emphasize the psychotic side of his personality, though he has held up well under close and even hostile scrutiny. Japanese scholars have shown little interest in this shadow side of the all too human reformer and have been spared the American neurotic preoccupation with Freud, psycho-history and psycho-biography.

In the year 1602 an Elizabethan publicist composed a poem entitled "An Answere to a Romish Rime," which reads:

Till Luther's time you say that we
Heard not of Christ: but you shall see
That we, not you, have heard of him
As only pardoner of our sinne
Thrise happy Luther, and the rest,
(Except some faults which we detest.)

8. American and Japanese scholars must, finally, all agree with Lord Acton, who wrote: "Better one great man than a dozen immaculate historians."

2. Personal Correspondence, Clare College, Cambridge University, March 23, 1983, cited by permission.
7. For the key section on Erikson and Roland Bainton’s response, see


12. On printing, for example, the work of scholars such as Elisabeth Eisenstein and Richard Cole is well known, but most recently Norman G.
Wente of Northwestern Theological Seminary has completed a thesis at the University of Minnesota entitled "Luther's Debt to Gutenberg."


15. Vol. 1: Masami Ishii, tr. and ed., Luther’s Prayers (Tokyo, 1976) and Vol. 2: Chitose Kishi, ed., Luther’s Sermons (Tokyo, 1977). This series is also published by Seibunsha, Tokyo.


19. R. H. Bainton, Ware Kokoni Tatsu, tr. Kazunami Aoyama and Chitose Kishi (Tokyo, 1954); F. lau, Rotah Ron, tr. Shigeru Watanabe (Tokyo, 1966); C. W. Gheorghiu, Wakağı Rutah to Sono Jidai, tr. Shiro Hamazaki (Tokyo, 1972); R. Friedenthal, Maruchin Rutah no Shogai, tr. Takashi Kasari, Y. Tokuzen and others (Tokyo, 1972). We might note that...


22. Ishiwara Ken Hakushi Kentei Ronbunshu: Shukyokaikaku Kenkyu (Tokyo, 1968). For various appraisals of Dr. Ishiwara’s contributions to the study of theology and church history in Japan, see Theological


27. R. Stupperich, Meranhiton, tr. Taira Kuratsuka (Tokyo, 1971).


30. Yoshikazu Tokuzen has edited on behalf of The Japan Society of Luther Research a new commemorative volume, Luther Past and Present. Collected Essays in the Anniversary Year of the 500th Birthday of Dr. Martin Luther. (Tokyo: Seibunsha, 1983). It includes his essay on “Die Lutherforschung in Japan seit 1976.”