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INTRODUCTION

THE ANNIVERSARY OF Luther in 2017 was not just an event of local Wittenberg history or even primarily of the Lutheran church. Because Luther has so long been linked with German-ness itself, the event was a secular commemoration as well, an occasion to ask about what being German means today. Even though the country was formally reunited in 1990, the difference between the former East and the former West is still unmistakable. The East remains noticeably poorer, and thirty years on, its idealism is different too, with an abiding commitment to equality and communitarian values, and an ingrained suspicion of the power of the state. If the anniversary were meant to do anything politically, it was intended to bring East and West together. Yet those formed in the education system of the East approached Luther very differently. They wanted to know about the economic side of the indulgences trade, and the wealth and status of those who supported him, topics which were not really considered during the centenary celebrations. They asked different questions too; scholars from the former East who worked in monument conservation, for instance, undertook the archaeology on Luther's house and transformed our view of the family's wealth. But far from uniting East and West, it felt as though the questions and outlook of the former East was often silenced during the anniversary year in favour of a more anodyne commemoration of the reformer as the translator of the Bible and inventor of the German language.

Celebrating Luther has often been politically fraught, and linked to questions of German identity. The first centenary of the 95 Theses was celebrated on the eve of the Thirty Years' War, the catastrophic conflict that unleashed a generation-long religious and political military

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struggle and left much of Germany devastated. In 1917, the posting of the 95 Theses was commemorated in the midst of war and on the brink of revolution and defeat. Now, in a reunited Germany, with the commemoration happening on the territory that had once been that of the former East Germany, celebrating Luther was also an attempt to escape defining Germany's history solely in terms of Nazism and the holocaust—to find, that is, a 'usable past'.

How Luther was commemorated was therefore a question of national significance.¹ This difficult hero, with his stodgy determination, his love of beer and pork, his relentless hatreds, his penchant for misogynist quips, and his four-square masculinist stance, has always been a divisive figure. Embracing him would not be easy. It could only be done with self-mockery, and could succeed only if religious divisions proved to be distant enough for denominational identity to be surpassed by a more indulgent attitude towards the colourful characters of the sixteenth century. But the fact that the Göttingen professor of church history Thomas Kaufmann published a book on Luther's Jews that acknowledged Luther's anti-Semitism once and for all, and which did not excuse it as a product of his times, meant that this issue in particular became a subject of national debate, the first time it had been confronted head on since the Second World War.²

Luther, it seemed, always raises issues of cultural and national identity that reach far beyond his theological legacy. A colossus of the stature of Bismarck, every age seems to appropriate him as its own—erasing him as a historical figure. People either love him or hate him, and even today, he elicits strong emotional reactions. How this anniversary unfolded, and what rituals of remembrance took place, revealed a lot about German culture and politics: here, surely, cultural history had much to say. It could help us examine Luther's cursed character, his lumpy masculinity, the depth of his appeal, and it could explain the pervasive legacy he has left in German culture, musical, linguistic, material, and visual.

As the commemorative year wore on, I pondered how the biography I had written of Luther had itself become part of the memorial cult, and I often felt uncomfortable. Partly because of my own experience when I spoke from the pulpit in Luther's church, I realized that I had not done enough to interrogate Luther's anti-Semitism

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or to ask how far it extended into Lutheran theology. And I sensed that I needed to confront the less comfortable sides of his legacy. Most of all, I needed to look more critically at one of the aspects I loved most about Luther: his rambunctious masculine posturing. Here studies of masculinity didn't really seem to offer the tools I needed. Years before, I had felt impatient with historians who divided masculinity into 'good', responsible house-father masculinity and rough, disruptive male behaviour. Surely you could not have one without the other; the upstanding patriarchs of today were yesterday's tearaways. Indeed, because state power so evidently relied in the end upon force in the early-modern period, authorities needed their young men to have mastered the use of weapons (towns were defended by citizen militias); and while law-makers might inveigh against drinking to excess, male bonding rituals—then as now—usually involve collective consumption of alcohol.³ I felt irritated with histories that adopted the authorities' moralising tones towards the young rowdies of the past, and impatient with those who claimed to be shocked by Luther's crudeness, or who air-brushed out his aggressive polemics against those he disagreed with. This, to me, was part of Luther's anarchic attractiveness, his refusal to be a plaster saint. And yet, the commemoration year led me to re-consider my tendency to integrate Luther's obstreperous qualities into a relatively positive assessment of his personality, and to draw out more the dangers of his habitual aggression.

Thinking about masculinity—one of the major growth areas of gender history over the last thirty years—can help us think differently about Luther. You could, for example, write a history of the Reformation through Luther's facial hair: the tonsured, shaven monk gave way to the shaggy, bearded, mustachioed Luther once he was in hiding in the Wartburg, disguised as a nobleman. The mature Luther adopted a clean-shaven look but the stubble on his jutting jaw is usually visible. The Cranach workshop was at pains to show Luther as a virile, potent man, a figure very different from a diffident monk. Indeed, it could be argued that the Reformation marked a genuine moment of transformation in the history of masculinity, as it rejected the ideal of celibacy, mocked the pope as effeminate, and abolished monks and priests as different models of manhood. Protestant pastors were meant to be patriarchs like the city fathers and stately bureaucrats

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o.2. The Luther Shrine triptych. Veit Thiem, 1572. Collection of the St Peter und Paul (Herderkirche), Weimar. © Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

who employed them. Instead of a multiplicity of different kinds of masculinity, Lutherans valued only one.

Cultural history of this kind has its seductions, but our story must be more complex, because masculinity is never uniform and individuals craft their sexual identities, albeit in dialogue with social forms. After all, from early on, Luther was paired in portraits with the much less potent-looking Melancthon. Unlike Luther, the younger man wore a wispy beard; and as Melancthon never was a monk, he did not have to repudiate celibate masculinity; but both men knew Melancthon was the better scholar. The reformer's masculine strutting was of a piece with his bullying antagonism to the Jews. In his final years he ordered German rulers, including his own elector, to take measures against the Jews and he castigated the Brandenburg electors for being too tolerant, using the same polemical, prophetic mode he had developed early on to enable him to speak the truth (as he saw it) to power.

Luther revelled in his masculinity and liked to see himself as the hero of the Reformation. It was part of the way he established his dominance over his younger followers. It had playful aspects—one of Luther's greatest gifts was his sense of humour—but it also had much less pleasant sides. So, in 1530, when Melancthon had to conduct

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the negotiations over the recognition of the Confession of Augsburg, Luther twitted him for his lack of masculine bravery and for weeping too much, cutting remarks that seemed to reveal less about sixteenth century masculinity than they did about Luther's penchant for bullying.⁴ Or when, as the *Table Talk* (the notes Luther's students took on his dinner conversations) reveals, Luther mocked his wife Katharina von Bora for her failure to understand what 'rhetoric' was or pronounced that cleverness was the garment that suited women least, Luther's jolliness was also a way of shutting women up.⁵ Luther's masculinist polemical mode, in fact, may have been part of the way he cemented his own position and made it less possible for others to speak. It also contributed to making compromise—with the Catholics or with the Sacramentarians—impossible. In this sense, the history of masculinity has much to offer, because this kind of rough-hewn, bullying manhood may mesmerise even those it grinds down. Why were Luther's followers, including women, willing to fall into line, at least for much of the time? And what did Luther's manly displays enable him to do, crossing the lines of what was acceptable, getting away with rudeness, and directing aggression at his greatest enemy, the pope? Luther's masculinity, it seemed, had its noxious streak.

Luther thought in binaries, and repeatedly split people into friends and foes. His ability to turn the world into an epic moral struggle—to see the Devil at work everywhere, to simplify, and to give names to things—was one of his greatest strengths, but also the source of his greatest weaknesses. This pattern is evident in his theological works as well: his ability to put a 'name' on something was key to his devastating polemic, but it was also one of his greatest gifts as a theologian. Looking for repetitive behaviour across all areas of Luther's activity helps us to understand his theology differently: the Luther who devised brilliant nicknames for his friends, calling the Wittenberg pastor Johannes Bugenhagen 'Dr Pommer' (he came from Pomerania and so spoke Low German, and his sermons were too long) and his enemy Johannes Cochlaeus 'the snail' (he was always several steps behind Luther), also had the knack of summarising complex theology in a word.⁶ Naming is after all about the relationship of language to reality, a fundamental issue for Luther philosophically as well as theologically. These essays are an attempt to do theological history in a different

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way. Instead of treating ideas as independent agents, with their own lineages, this book tries to understand them in relation to the person who produced them, and not to distinguish them from their unconscious and semi-conscious usages. It looks for patterns and habits of mind as much as for explicit statements.

Binaries structured much of Lutheran rhetoric and a good deal of the Reformation's propaganda too. Central to this was its apposition of the pope and Christ, and the movement developed an unrelenting anti-papalism in which Luther was the hero who revealed the Papacy for what it truly was: the Antichrist. Even as Luther died, he repeated the anti-papal prophecy which is also a curse: 'Living I was your plague, O Pope, dead I will be your death'. This bitter aphorism was surprisingly pervasive in Lutheran memorial culture from the sixteenth century on. Nowadays the offensive words have frequently been erased, but even when they are not, it can be easy to overlook their presence in some of the most familiar images of the Reformation. For example, Luther's binary thinking was mirrored in the image-making which the Cranach workshop invented for the new movement, with clear vertical divisions into good and evil and anti-papal caricatures which at times bordered on being images of hatred. The movement's obsession with the pope is revealed in the insults his opponents flung at him, both radicals and Catholics. Müntzer dubbed him the Wittenberg Pope, accusing him of 'play[ing] the hypocrite with the princes' and 'set[ting] himself up in place of the pope'.⁷ He is 'Pope of the Elbe', complained another former supporter.⁸

And yet the Cranach workshop did far more than manufacture images of hate. It also created novel Reformation iconographies, in particular, Law and Gospel, which—though they use binary forms—do more than contrast opposites. Both Law and Gospel are needed, for the Christian needs the Law to recognize their sin. The image-form the workshop devised required the viewer to meditate on different sections of the image, to incorporate it into their own devotion, and to follow words and sign so as to 'get' the key theological ideas.

There was more, too, to Luther than just the bullying patriarch. Dreams are not normally part of the field of investigation for ecclesiastical historians. But one cannot fail to be haunted by reading Luther's account in a letter to his confessor, Staupitz, of a dream he

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had when he was feeling abandoned by him, in which he wrote that he felt like a child ‘weaned from its mother’. Weaning is a foundational human physical experience, for the mother as for the child, and yet we rarely talk about it.⁹ When a child is weaned, he or she gradually separates from the mother and the interdependence of their two digestive systems, which begins at conception, finally comes to an end. For mother and child alike, it means the loss of a deep source of physical connection and pleasure. Both have to find comfort without that oral link, and the child must learn to comfort himself or herself.

Yet while this is a universal human experience, what is revealing is how Luther chose to invoke it, and what this might tell us about a specific historical time. As Luther wrote in the letter, the words were taken from Psalm 131, a psalm which Luther later translated, using words that conveyed more of the child’s experience of *being* weaned, and that left the agency of the child in the process unclear. And yet in translations by others, the child is content, having reached its own separation from its mother. Mistakes and imprecisions are usually revealing, often more so than we readily realize, as Freud pointed out long ago: Luther ‘remembered’ the psalm as conveying a feeling of abandonment and not the child’s arrival at its own contentment. This profound ambiguity in how Luther recalled what was a very important biblical quotation for him helps us to understand the depth of his attachment to Staupitz. It also suggests that he was groping his way towards independence as he set off on his own theological path, revealing some of the pain and abandonment that parting from the Catholic church entailed.

A conventional psychoanalytic interpretation might attempt to divine Luther’s relationship with his mother through this dream, but that might be a reductive path, narrowing a complex character to problems in weaning and development, about which we know nothing in Luther’s case. So also, a psychoanalytic analysis which derived Luther’s theology from his relationship with his parents would be unsatisfying—though his complicated relationship to his father, against whom he rebelled by becoming an Augustinian friar, gave him unusual insight into the paternal aspect of the Christian’s relation to God, and how that can lead to struggle with God. Psychoanalytic ideas are not much use to historians if they lead them to pathologise an

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individual. They serve then merely to cheapen complex inner lives and they do not help us understand their thought over time, organically revealed in all their habits, patterns of mind, conscious and unconscious inclinations, and in their actual relationships with others. As we start to tease these out, we can see how dreams—which raise issues about the nature of divine inspiration and prophecy as opposed to the letter of scripture—were connected to central dilemmas of Luther’s Reformation. By approaching questions at a tangent, by looking at issues that are on the periphery of our scholarly vision, new and unexpected connections often emerge. So, for example, one of the central theological divisions of the Reformation was linked to the status of dreams. The revolutionary firebrand Thomas Müntzer was scathing about Luther’s support of the rich and powerful, and derived his own authority in part from dreams and visions. For his part, Luther was always sceptical about them, preferring to rely on scripture alone—but of course, scripture too features prophetic dreams and visions. Luther could never entirely disavow dreams, and his apparent scepticism masked a fascination with them.

Dreams communicated hopes and fears for people in Luther’s circle, allowing them to talk indirectly about them by arguing over possible interpretations of their dreams. They wondered, for example, if the eagle, who became a cat in one of Melancthon’s dreams, stood for the emperor. He was the focus of much of their anxieties at this time as they waited to present their confession of faith to him at the Imperial Diet of 1530 at Augsburg, the document that founded their new church. They worried about this while being unable to talk to Luther, who could come no further than the castle of Coburg. Psychoanalytic ideas could therefore help illuminate not just the psychological dilemmas of individuals, but might disclose the richness of relationships between groups of people—and it was these collective dynamics which were crucial to the Reformation’s implementation. They were not just harmonious relationships of co-operation, but often of rivalry for Luther’s attention, and they could on occasion include attacks on each other’s manhood, as in every movement with a charismatic leader. To look at these undersides of the nascent church is not, of course, to belittle what the Wittenbergers accomplished together; it reminds us how important that Wittenberg collective was to the movement’s

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self-perception: one of the abiding iconographies of the Reformation, not just within Lutheranism, but copied even within iconophobic Calvinism, was that of the reformers sitting together around a table.

Images were central to Lutheranism and museum exhibitions featured prominently in the celebrations of 2017. Perhaps the most inspiring was ‘Luther und die Avantgarde’, held in the nineteenth-century former jail in Wittenberg, with each artist given a prison cell as a canvas on which to develop their ideas about Luther. Containing a ramshackle series of installations, videos, mixed media artworks, and sculptures, the crumbling building was as much a part of the show as the exhibits, for it juxtaposed the architectural legacies of state institutions with Western cutting-edge art (having been a prison in the Third Reich and in the DDR, the building had lately become a depot for storing official records). Not all of it worked. Some artists seemed to think that Luther was an iconoclast who wanted to destroy all religious images—he was no such thing—while others thought he stood for the freedom of the individual. But some of the displays conveyed aspects of Luther that scholarship had been unable to deal with. In particular I was struck by Erwin Wurm’s orange fist that greeted the visitor on arrival at the exhibition, which conveyed that masculine aggression so much part of Luther’s style (see figure 1.19).¹⁰ Another was a dizzying prison of clear plastic tubes in a cage-like structure by the Chinese artist Song Dong, filled with sweets and placed on top of a mirror that filled the floor space—it somehow managed to recreate the self-referential quality of Luther’s thought, conveying how such a liberating theology could yet turn inwards on itself, repeating its key concepts to infinity.¹¹ Above all, the sheer creativity and inventiveness of this exhibition showed that Lutheranism is far from being confined to museums, and can inspire extraordinary art.¹²

As it did from its inception. There is no other Protestant sect which could have hosted such an amazing number of exhibitions, because none fostered such a rich material and visual legacy. Most other protestant sects shared iconoclastic instincts, mistrusting sumptuous altar-pieces that might seduce the senses, and favouring white-washed walls or simple words from scripture. Not so Luther: from the outset, he remained closer to the Catholicism he had left, and though Lutherans remodelled their churches to include didactic art, with paintings of

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Christ blessing the children that underlined the importance of infant baptism, or of Law and Gospel, they decorated their places of worship with appealing and fashionable mannerist designs. They also furnished their churches with images of the reformer himself. The artist Lucas Cranach was one of Luther's oldest friends and earliest supporters, and as the *Lutherjahr* demonstrated, he did more than any other artist to shape the remarkable churches of Saxony and Thuringia, to make Luther's face well known, and to stamp the 'look' of early modern Lutheran print.¹³ Lutheranism was as much a visual and material culture as it was a musical one. And if we think that we can 'know' Luther as an individual, that is largely because we are so familiar with the Luther the Cranach workshop made, the man with the deep-set, far-seeing eyes, the confident four-square stance, and the wayward curl, poking out irreverently from underneath the doctor's hat. If this book can occasionally seem critical of Luther, or point to less comfortable features of Lutheranism's legacy, I hope that this will be taken in the spirit of Lutheranism I so admire: its profound anti-authoritarianism, its political engagement, and its insistence on argument, discussion, and critical appraisal of its own history.

o.3. Portrait of Martin Luther. Cranach the Elder, 1528. Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg.



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