

4-1-1964

Historical Interpretation and Luther's Role in the Peasant Revolt

Heinz F. Mackensen

Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mackensen, Heinz F. (1964) "Historical Interpretation and Luther's Role in the Peasant Revolt," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 35, Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol35/iss1/20>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Historical Interpretation and Luther's Role
in the Peasant Revolt

HEINZ F. MACKENSEN

Motivation in Paul's Life

M. H. GRUMM

The Lutheran Council in the United States
of America

MARTIN H. FRANZMANN and ALFRED O.
FUERBRINGER

Homiletics

Theological Observer

Book Review

VOL. XXXV

April 1964

No. 4

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Volume XXXV

April 1964

Number 4

Published by

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Edited by

**THE FACULTY OF CONCORDIA SEMINARY
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI**

**CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI**

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY is published monthly by Concordia Publishing House, 3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, Mo. 63118, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. \$3.50 per annum, anywhere in the world, payable in advance. Second-class postage paid at St. Louis, Mo.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Vol. XXXV

April 1964

No. 4

Historical Interpretation and Luther's Role in the Peasant Revolt	197
HEINZ F. MACKENSEN	
Motivation in Paul's Epistles	210
M. H. GRUMM	
The Lutheran Council in the United States of America	219
MARTIN H. FRANZMANN AND ALFRED O. FUERBRINGER	
Homiletics	228
Theological Observer	242
Book Review	247

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

VICTOR BARTLING, PAUL M. BRETSCHER

ALFRED O. FUERBRINGER, GEORGE W. HOYER, HERBERT T. MAYER

ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN, WALTER R. ROEHR

LEWIS W. SPITZ, GILBERT A. THIELE

*Address all communications to the Editorial Committee in care of
Walter R. Roehrs, 801 De Mun Ave., St. Louis 5, Mo.*

CONCORDIA

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Historical Interpretation and Luther's Role in the Peasant Revolt

By HEINZ F. MACKENSEN

EDITORIAL NOTE: The author is associate professor of history, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck, New Jersey. He was a fellow of the Foundation for Reformation Research at St. Louis, Mo., in the summer of 1963. This article reproduces a lecture which he delivered at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., July 9, 1963.

The events of the Peasants' Revolt and Luther's attitude towards it are well known. After the peasant troubles had begun to spread more widely Luther wrote his *Advice for Peace on the Basis of the Twelve Articles of the Peasantry in Swabia*.¹ In this pamphlet he took both princes and peasants to task and urged a peaceful settlement after considering the demands of the peasants on the basis of their twelve articles. When, during 1525, events became more violent, began to come closer to Saxony, and began to take on some of the characteristics of a social revolution, Luther wrote his pamphlet *Against the Murdering Robber Bands of Peasants*.² Luther condemned the peasants in the strongest possible terms, as rebels against God and their rightful lords, and called for their energetic and ruthless suppression. He used extremely harsh and even brutal language. Later, after the suppression of the peasants and the execution of their chief ideological leader, Thomas Münzer,

¹ "Ermahnung zum Frieden auf die zwölf Artikel der Bauernschaft in Schwaben," Weimarer Ausgabe [hereafter abbreviated WA] 18, 279 ff.

² "Wider die räuberischen und mörderischen Rotten der Bauern," WA 18, 344 ff.

Luther interpreted these events as the righteous judgment of God.³

Luther's attitude has generally been condemned by the great majority of scholars of all schools of thought. Particularly his pamphlet condemning the peasants is cited as revealing an attitude of harshness and brutality which is hard to accept from a man who has staked his life on reviving and preaching the pure Gospel of God's love for man. Moreover, all of Luther's own grandparents had been peasants. Luther himself seems to have felt some of this in his later years. He took the whole responsibility for his attitude and his pamphlet on himself and said: "The blood of all the peasants is on my neck." But he maintained to the end of his life that he would do it again if need be.

Luther believed that the course of history is changed by "great heroes," *Wundermänner*.⁴ The causation of historical change is personal, heroic action by unusual men. Great emperors and conquerors, such as Alexander, Augustus, or Hannibal; philosophers, prophets, and apostles in their different ways, forced change upon ordinary men, who would otherwise remain static in their daily routine. God drives on these unusual heroes and uses them to break the cake of custom which inevitably governs the lives of the broad masses.

³ "Eine schreckliche Geschichte und ein Gericht Gottes über Thomas Münzer," WA 18, 362 ff.

⁴ Luther's Explanation of the 101st Psalm, WA 51, 200 ff.

If these heroes recognize God's guidance, they are saved. If they do not, or forget it, their pride will destroy them.

If, for the sake of discussion, Luther's theory of historical causation is accepted, it is necessary to point out something else about his heroes. It is the fate of such world-shaking personalities that mankind's judgments of them in their own times, and for generations to come, vary from one extreme to another.

So has it also been with the historical interpretations of Luther. During the first three centuries after the Reformer's death everything in his life and work was interpreted for or against him. There were few or no efforts at objective evaluation and judgment. Every incident, small or great, was utilized polemically or apologetically. Luther's role during the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 has not been the least among the incidents of his life to arouse controversy. In fact, it still continues today as one of the chief points on which Luther is attacked or defended.

During the past century the influence of the objective, scientific school of Leopold von Ranke, the passage of time itself, and most recently the ecumenical movement have brought about, among both Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars, a great increase in efforts at a fair and also completely honest historical interpretation of Luther and his work. The Peasants' Revolt, and Luther's role in it, remains, however, a subject on which the sharpest disagreements exist. Not along the traditional Roman Catholic-Protestant lines, but along new lines, Luther's role in the Peasants' Revolt has become the focus for a controversy which is as bitter and as deeply involved for or against ideological causes

as any during the worst periods of confessional acerbity.

It seems hardly necessary nowadays to emphasize the importance of paying the most earnest attention to whatever is said and done behind the Iron Curtain. Less than a century has passed since the death of Karl Marx, and today his doctrines supply the guidelines for the reorganization and transformation of social and economic life in almost half the world. Here is a new, powerful, expansive religion which is still in its first century of development. Even Islam did not spread that fast. It took Christianity three centuries to dominate culturally, socially, and intellectually the area of its own first appearance.

Today, in Wittenberg, in Eisenach, in Erfurt, a new faith is seeking to impose its interpretation on the past. What do the Communists say about Luther and the Reformation, specifically in connection with the Peasants' Revolt?

The basic, starting text for all Communist exegesis of the Peasants' Revolt is taken from Karl Marx himself: "Obscured by theology, the Peasants' Revolt is nevertheless the most revolutionary event in German history." In Marxist terminology that means the most important event.

In 1947 M. M. Smirin first published his *The Peoples' Reformation of Thomas Muentzer and the Great Peasant War*.⁵ A German translation appeared in East Berlin in 1956.⁶ Smirin's work has become the standard, authoritative Communist work on the subject. In the introduction to his work Smirin surveyed the whole

⁵ Originally published in Russian.

⁶ M. M. Smirin, *Die Volksreformation des Thomas M nzer und der grosse Bauernkrieg* (Berlin: Dietz, 1956).

development of historiography on the Peasants' Revolt as reflected in the work of significant writers on the subject. Consideration of what he says in this introduction will naturally lead to an understanding of his point of view.

The first significant historian to come under Smirin's lens is Leopold von Ranke.⁷ Ranke, according to Smirin, saw the Peasants' Revolt only as an incident in the struggle for political reform of the Empire. He was enthusiastic for the plan of the archbishop of Mainz, Berthold von Henneberg, for centralizing the empire but also increasing the power of the more important territorial princes. In essence this was also the plan of Prussia during the 19th century. Smirin dismisses Ranke as a servant of the aristocratic and authoritarian Prussian state. He was a conservative who regretted that the power of the German princely territorial states of the 16th century had not been strong or quick enough to crush the revolt in its beginnings. In the new Prussian state of the 19th century no such weakness existed.

The next writer on the Peasants' Revolt to interest Smirin was Wilhelm Zimmermann and his work on the subject, which had appeared in 1841.⁸ Zimmermann was a left-wing, bourgeois democrat, a forty-eightier. His central concern was with the failure of the peasants in 1525 to unite Germany, a concern which was of basic importance to the liberal, democratic constitution makers of 1848. The trouble with Zimmermann, according to Smirin, was that he had not understood the class nature

of the struggle of the peasants against feudalism. Smirin, nevertheless, praises him for using all the sources and for being fair to the peasants and to Münzer.

The first truly scientific work, according to Smirin, on the Peasants' Revolt has also remained the best. This work still towers far above everything else that has ever been written on the history of the Peasants' Revolt, Smirin claims.⁹ It is the relatively small work written in 1851 by Friedrich Engels, the collaborator and friend of Marx. Despite the fact that Engels admitted that he had drawn all of his material on the Peasants' Revolt and Thomas Münzer from Zimmermann's work, Smirin insists that it is Engels' taking into account of the basic principles underlying the revolt—the nature of the new social and economic developments and of the class struggle reflected in the revolt—which gives Engels' work its unique and paramount importance.

Lamprecht and Gothein are basically rejected by Smirin as 19th-century liberals who worked with inadequate categories.¹⁰ They did not sufficiently understand the class origins of the struggle of the peasants against their lords. They attributed too much of the causation for the revolt to the degeneration of the peasants into a wild and lawless state.

Wilhelm Stolze, *Privatdozent* at the University of Königsberg, is torn to shreds by Smirin, because in his works, written before and after World War I, he had sought to maintain the thesis that the peasants had been influenced primarily by religious rather than by social and eco-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸ Wilhelm Zimmermann, *Allgemeine Geschichte des grossen Bauernkriegs* (Stuttgart, 1841—1843).

⁹ Smirin, *Die Volksreformation*, p. 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-46.

nomic considerations.¹¹ In his work of 1926, written after World War I, Stolze had changed his attitude somewhat from that of his earlier work, which had appeared in 1906.¹² In 1926 Stolze admitted some social motivation in the actions of the peasants, but he still insisted that basically the spirit of the Lutheran religious reformation had prevailed among them. This spirit always caused radical movements in Germany to become more moderate and ultimately to accept a reactionary regime. Smirin can hardly find words adequate to express his scorn of such a religious, clerical interpretation.¹³

The work of Stolze was carried further by Günther Franz in 1933, Smirin claims.¹⁴ Whereas Stolze had not taken the basic sources into account, the "fascist" Franz had sought, according to Smirin, to give the impression that he had used all of the sources and had considered all of the secondary literature as well.¹⁵ But Franz had introduced yet another falsification into the interpretation of the Peasants' Revolt. He made, according to Smirin, a false and misleading distinction between *altes Recht*, to which the peasants appealed in support of their demands, and *göttliches, neues Recht*, which was cited by a small, idealistic band of peasant leaders and knights. Restoration of their old rights, based on the customs and usages of the earlier Middle Ages, was demanded by the great majority of the

peasants, who could not see beyond their own selfish class interests. The better, more creative peasants, as Smirin explains Franz, denied their class egotism in order to serve the interests of the nation as a whole. The small band of idealistic peasants justified their program on the basis of "the new, godly right." They had wanted to create a national state in which every class and every individual submerged his own welfare in the common weal. But they had been a minority and had not found a creative leader who could have mobilized them for this task. Münzer and the other peasant leaders had been *Schwärmer*. Florian Geyer, the revolutionary knight, might have supplied the necessary leadership, but he did not succeed in inspiring the peasants to consider anything beyond their own class interests. Smirin's final comment is:

In this manner the fascist Guenther Franz drums it into the peasants that it had only been in their own final interest if they let themselves be made into blind tools of reactionary government.¹⁶

Only on the basis of Marxist-Leninist categories and methodology has it now become possible to present a truly correct, because scientific, contribution of the Peasants' Revolt. So says Smirin.¹⁷ In the last few years the historians of the German Democratic Republic (the East German Soviet satellite state) have written histories in which the Peasants' Revolt is interpreted correctly.¹⁸

Kamnitzer's work on the Peasant Revolt is considered by Smirin and highly

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 49—55.

¹² Wilhelm Stolze, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, 1906. Wilhelm Stolze, *Bauernkrieg und Reformation* (Leipzig: Eger & Sievers, 1926).

¹³ Smirin, *Die Volksreformation*, p. 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 55—62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

praised.¹⁹ Kamnitzer, *inter alia*, had finally corrected Lamprecht's mistaken idea that the peasants had revolted because they had become *verwildert* as a result of their poor living conditions. Instead it was the increasing complexities of the system of feudal dues and obligations to which they were exposed that had motivated the revolt.²⁰

More to the point is Smirin's explication of a monograph by the East German historian Alfred Meusel on Thomas Münzer.²¹ Meusel had shown that the Reformation must be divided into two parts—*die Fürstenreformation Luthers* and *die Volksreformation Münzers*. Münzer was the true hero of the people.²² In his teaching the real wishes of the people for reform were expressed. Until his death Münzer fought heroically and unselfishly for the interests of the toiling masses. But he had to fail because his goals were far too progressive for his own times. With this hero Meusel contrasts Luther, who had first raised the banner of the people's Reformation. However, when he saw the revolutionary scope of the peasants' demands, Luther had left them and became instead the ideologue of the princes' Reformation.²³ Smirin criticizes Meusel because he did not bring out that even during his earlier period—especially around 1521/1522, when he seemed to be the leader of a real people's Reformation—Luther had actually been the spokesman of

the bourgeoisie. Luther even then had formed his ideas on the basis of his bourgeois background and motivation. The Peasant Revolt had brought out his basic position more clearly in line with his own class origin and ideology.²⁴

These published Soviet and East German interpretations were amplified recently at a conference in Moscow with five Soviet historians at the Lomonosov University. For a person who had dealt only with Communist interpretations in cold print, it was quite a revelation to deal with the interpreters personally. They did not have horns but were capable, mature masters of the historian's craft, but always in a Marxist framework. They contrasted favorably with the doctrinaire, young fanatics who had, just before this conference, held forth at the Moscow Institute of History, which is a training ground for instructors and professors at Moscow University. The encounter with the more seasoned and genial historians of the university faculty revealed once again the limitations of a purely documentary or bookish approach to subjects, including the historical.

In order to point the discussion into basic directions, the Soviet conferees were presented with a fundamental philosophical question on the nature of historical causation. This question was illustrated by a specific example which would elicit their interpretation of Luther. They were asked: What is the role of the human personality in historical causation? Specifically, how do you evaluate the importance of Luther's personality and ideology in the course of the Reformation? These questions were asked with the fact in mind that Marx

¹⁹ Heinz Kamnitzer, *Zur Vorgeschichte des Deutschen Bauernkrieges* (Berlin, 1953).

²⁰ Smirin, *Die Volksreformation*, p. 64.

²¹ Alfred Meusel, *Thomas Münzer und seine Zeit* (Berlin, 1953).

²² Smirin, *Die Volksreformation*, p. 65.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

himself had stated that no other philosophy of history than his own would require a lower estimate of the effects of human personality on historical causation.

A discussion of about three hours followed. The Soviet conferees presented a collective interpretation which is presented herewith in summarized and condensed form.²⁵

On the general question they replied that the role of the human personality and its ideologies in historic causation is not unimportant. They then asked themselves a question and gave their own answer. On what basis can the contribution of any personality in history be evaluated? To the extent that any particular historical personality had worked with and not against the new, progressive social forces seeking expression at the time, to that extent his contribution must be considered positive. To the extent that he had represented the reaction of the previous social stage of development against the newly emerging stage in his time, his contribution must be considered negative and destructive in character. All intellectual, cultural, and ideological changes are actually the results of basic economic and social changes. These are occurring constantly. Therefore those historical personalities could be considered most progressive, and for that reason ultimately most effective, whose activities had been in greatest accord with the dialectic movement of history as it reflected any particular stage of social development. Whether or not they had actually understood the basic economic and social changes in which they were involved was, in dealing with historical personages before Marx,

²⁵ Based on notes taken by the author at the time.

an academic question. Particularly in dealing with historical personalities before Marx one could not expect much insight into the dialectic movement of history.

A powerful, creative personality would at any time in history exercise a certain influence. This thought should not lead one into the error of overemphasizing the influence of the human personality in history and of carrying on a *kult lichnosti*, "a cult of the personality." No personality had any mysterious or mystical creative powers of its own. It always reacted to the basic economic and social situation in which it found itself, and the quality and nature of its reaction determined the value of any particular historical personality. Its value must be judged, and could only be judged properly, according to the objective, rational categories supplied by scientific Marxism-Leninism. To what extent the social effects of any personality have been progressive or regressive must always be the basic question.²⁶

²⁶ The following selections from letters by Engels illustrate these points. They are cited in Communist discussion in much the same manner as Christian theologians cite the epistles of St. Paul.

Engels to Mehring, July 14, 1893: "Ideology results from a process which is indeed carried out consciously by the so-called thinker, but it is based upon a mistaken consciousness. The real motivations, which inspire him, remain unrecognized by him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process. . . ." Marx/Engels/Lenin/Stalin, *Zur deutschen Geschichte* (Berlin, 1955), I, 622.

Engels to Starkenberg, January 25, 1894: "The political, juridical, literary, artistic, and other developments rest upon the economic. But they all react upon each other and upon the economic basis. It is not that the economic situation is the only active cause and all the rest passive reaction. But it is an interchange on the basis of economic necessity, which in the long run finally always prevails. . . ." Ibid.

They next proceeded to answer the subordinate question. Luther was descended from peasants but his father had become a petty capitalist. As a result, Luther experienced the conflict between the values of the dying, medieval rural economy and the new growing capitalist, bourgeois town economy in his own family. He experienced this conflict, and could only experience it, in terms which he understood. These, in the Middle Ages, were inevitably religious and theological in character. The medieval Roman Catholic church was the dominant social and the largest financial institution of the Middle Ages. It was the largest landowner in an agrarian economy. Inevitably it dominated, or tried to dominate, all intellectual, cultural, and even political life. Luther solved his difficulty by finding theological answers for his religious problems which, in effect, destroyed the authority and power of the medieval, feudal church and replaced it with a theological and religious system much more in harmony with the needs of the rising new bourgeoisie which was passing through the early individualistic stage of capitalist social and economic development.

These factors were clearly reflected in Luther's attitude and actions during the Peasant Revolt. Luther wanted only a destruction of the social and political power of the church. He did not, on the other hand, want to limit the power of the princes, who had supported him for their own reasons. The bourgeoisie, which Luther represented, was not yet ready to dispense with the feudality. That would be attempted in England unsuccessfully in the 17th century, and in France successfully in the 18th century. But, at this time, both feudal lords and bourgeoisie agreed

in wishing to dispense with the medieval church, and to take over its land and dominant social role instead. As a result of Luther's teaching the secular princes were able to strengthen their states by confiscating the territories of the church. The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, were enabled to move ahead towards a social and governmental system which served their new, emerging needs more effectively. When the most determined and revolutionary of the peasants, led by Thomas Münzer, tried to carry the program still further in the direction of an agrarian socialism, which would have benefited them, they were opposed by both feudality and bourgeoisie, whose spokesman Luther became.

Münzer and his peasants had to fail, however, because they were seeking to bring about a transformation of society for which the Germany of the 16th century was not ripe economically or socially.

* * *

The rather rigid interpretation of the Communist historians in print and their somewhat more flexible interpretation in person must be seen and appreciated against a still wider background. Although not as dogmatically or systematically applied as by the Communists, the general Marxist interpretation of history in its various forms has today, to a greater or lesser degree, influenced the work of very large numbers of historians in the non-Communist world. As a natural result the social and economic aspects of every event and of every personality in history are sought out and emphasized. To the rationalism of the Enlightenment and to the increasing secularization of human life has been added an ever greater emphasis on the material aspects of every historical develop-

ment and a corresponding decline of appreciation for the intellectual, emotional, or spiritual forces involved. Marxism sees all intellectual and cultural forms as merely superstructures built on the prevalent economic and social conditions. These superstructures have no real motivation of their own. The ultimate motivation is always materialistic and economic. The flooding of the world by mass-produced goods and services fits in well with this growing dominance of materialistic interpretations of history. The text is: Man does live by bread alone. Man shall live by bread alone.

George W. Forell, in his careful study, *Faith Active in Love*,²⁷ is far from reading into Luther a profounder social consciousness than he actually had. His work sets forth Luther's social ethics with real understanding. The theological categories which shaped his thinking, and the actual nature and content of his teaching on the believing Christian, active through faith, are presented clearly and accurately.

There are, however, two aspects of Luther's thought brought out in this work which need to be amplified. Forell correctly emphasizes Luther's eschatological concern and how this affected his attitude towards social questions. Since Luther viewed everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, an eternity which would soon make its irruption into this imperfect world, social questions remained of subordinate and peripheral significance in Luther's thought. Typically, Forell states:

The social-ethical 'quietive' which limits in Luther's thought the social-ethical 'mo-

tive' of faith active in love, is his expectation of the speedily approaching end of the world.²⁸

Something must be stressed which Forell merely mentions. This is Luther's pessimism about human nature. Not only latter-day eschatology, but a strong dose of early Christian skepticism about the possibilities of human nature, prevails in Luther's attitude to man as a social being. Concern about the self-centeredness of natural man's disposition and motivations underlies all of Luther's teaching about society and *Obrigkeit*. This fact needs emphasis. It is an evaluation of human nature which we, living in a society which believes in constant progress based on man's fundamental goodness and on his increasing command of nature through rational analysis and scientific means, can appreciate only with difficulty. Yet without such appreciation no real understanding of Luther's teaching on the nature of society and of man in society is possible.

The other aspect of Forell's interpretation of Luther's social ethics which must be amplified comes out in the fourth of his five concluding insights:

Through the Christian individual, be he peasant or prince, the inexhaustible resources of the Gospel become available to the social order.²⁹

Here the emphasis is shifted to the advantages, for natural human society, of having Christian individuals within it. When the inexhaustible resources of the Gospel become available for the social order, they become available to man in the mass. Luther was extremely concerned with *Herr*

²⁷ George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Omnes and all his works. It is the individual who despairs of himself and his own works, who repents, who trusts in God for salvation, and who is saved. Any effort to utilize the resources of the individual, repentant, and saved Christian in a utilitarian way for improvement of the social order, of man in the mass, would involve an inner contradiction. The purpose of the life and work of the believing Christian, of the new Adam in this world, is to show forth the fruit of faith by serving his neighbor. All such good works serve as coals on the heads of unbelieving and, for that reason, still self-centered men. Service to the social order may be an unconscious byproduct of such a new life, but it is not its originating principle or vivifying motivation.

As soon as the new life in Christ is viewed as a means for service and betterment of the social order, its true purpose is obscured. It becomes again a life lived for self, since human society is simply an extension of the individual. Such calculated efforts to use the renewed life of the Christian to uplift social ethics have too often ended historically in self-righteousness in the individual and in repressive action through censorship — witch and heresy hunting and similar activities by corporate social bodies, whether ecclesiastical, governmental, or private. Among unsentimentally honest men, whether believers or unbelievers, such efforts are generally labeled "do gooder" activities and recognized as intrinsically shams. Luther was too honest a student of human nature and of the Bible to make this mistake.

* * *

What then were the ideas and values which motivated Luther's attitude towards

social questions, specifically as he expressed it in connection with the Peasants' Revolt? Every answer to this question which does not fairly take into account Luther's individual, personal religious development in its own terms will remain inadequate.

In a way, the different phases of Luther's religious development, which underlie his attitude towards the peasants, roughly reproduce the various stages through which the Christian faith has passed in history. At any rate, such a rough analogy may be useful in bringing out certain links and facets more clearly.

Baptism and the naïveté of childhood parallel the primitive simplicity and directness of the Christianity of the New Testament. Luther's concern with demons and spirits, which he acquired in his childhood, is strongly present in the New Testament. What we miss in this childhood equivalent of apostolic and postapostolic Christianity is the close presence and inspiration of Christ Himself. Here our analogy, like every analogy, clearly breaks down. Christ is far away as a stern judge. The eschatological note, so strong in the New Testament and the apostolic church, is, however, strongly present in the spiritual environment of Luther's childhood.

In his young adult life as a law student, Luther quite well reflects the life of the Christian layman during the Middle Ages. He is concerned with preparing for a career in the world. Family and personal goals are uppermost. Religion is there as well, but it is a part of life and does not permeate and form the whole of it. Deep down is the fear that such a partially devoted life "in the world" will not be enough to satisfy the stern judge on *dies irae, dies illa*. He felt guilty that he did

not do more for his own salvation in view of his own unworthiness and since the saints had done so much for theirs.

Such influences had played upon the Christian layman ever since Constantine. Belief in Christ no longer led to persecution, to daily antagonism and tension with the world around one, as it had done before Constantine. Instead, carefully practised and observed Christian religion, as prescribed by the church, led for the layman to a guaranteed escape from hell and ultimate entrance to heaven by way of purgatory. A few laymen had been saints and had entered heaven at once, but for the great majority the pains of purgatorial fires would have to make up for the self-centered nature of life "in the world." Ever since Constantine the diligent observance of religion had also been of assistance to laymen in their social relationships and their practical professional and business affairs. The confession of the creed might lead no longer to the lions of the arena, but it was a help in meeting the lions of society. Tension between the world and the spirit was lacking.

Luther as a monk reflects the other aspect of post-Constantinian, medieval Christianity. A continuing sense of guilt at such an inadequate life in the world and the risk of hell as a result drove Luther, as it had driven so many before him, to seek salvation in "a religious life." Here was expressed the concern of the medieval Christian that life as a layman was just not good enough. The real tensions of pre-Constantinian Christianity with a hostile world were absent. The monk or "religious" sought to recreate them by artificial means. He sought to live largely in the City of God, while still a citizen of the

City of Man. Poverty, chastity, obedience, unique and different dress, personal asceticism and mortification—all were means designed to reproduce that tension between the world and the spirit which is so dominant a note of the New Testament and of apostolic Christianity until Constantine.

Yet, in Luther's case, it led to no greater spiritual peace than before. On the contrary, the occasions and actions of this enhanced "religious life" led to enhanced spiritual difficulties and personal torment. At this point our device of the correspondence of the stages of Luther's personal religious development with the stages of development of Christianity through the ages ceases to be analogous and becomes factual. Luther experienced justification by faith alone along Pauline and Augustinian lines. The Reformation began when he threw this doctrine, somewhat in the manner of a theological atomic bomb, into the religious life of his time. Let him who sees social and economic factors as basic to this development point them out without sophistry and distortion. We maintain that this was the work of that Spirit which works among men principally in and through their personalities. Such movements in the spiritual life of mankind have a vitality and autonomy of their own which no economic, social, or psychological analyses by themselves alone will ever be able to fathom.

Through his recovery and presentation of justification by faith Luther became one of those *Wundermänner Gottes*, who basically alter the direction of men's thought and emotions for generations to come. Luther recovered and reemphasized that the relationship between the Savior, who offers His merits for men's

salvation, and the sinner, who trusts in those merits to save him, is a wholly personal and individual one. Nevertheless man is a social creature and cannot live alone without becoming a god or a beast. Then there is the brotherhood of the faithful, the communion of saints. How could these necessary tensions between the official and the personal, between the corporate and the individual, be maintained in the church without harming the relationship between man and God? For the church Luther met this need by his distinction between the visible and the invisible aspects of the church. On its visible side the church is official, organized. It engages in the practical outward tasks of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. But in another aspect the church is visible only to God, who alone knows those who believe in Him for their salvation and are really beginning to live and work accordingly. Thus in the church the official, the organized aspect is given its necessary recognition and role, while the personal experience of the individual sinner with the God who judges and saves him remains untouched by the inevitable friction of any human society, including that of the church in its outwardly visible, officially organized aspect.

In dealing with the state, with *weltlich Ding*, with man in secular society rather than in the brotherhood of faith, Luther gave full scope to his profound pessimism about the natural self-centeredness of man when unaffected by the work of the Spirit. At the same time he faced the problem of the Christian placed in this "naughty world" and experiencing daily the tensions of the Spirit with that world. The Christian is not to flee from it into a "religious

life." On the basis of his personal experience and the doctrine of justification by faith Luther rejected the medieval concept of the inherent greater holiness of certain callings. The priest, monk, or nun as such is no more pleasing to God than any peasant, burgher, or noble. There are no holy persons as there are no holy places, relics, buildings. One's calling in the world is to be the way to serve one's neighbors, and thus show forth the fruit of faith. The sinner who trusts in God is through his faith free of any outward factor or threat. He has a freedom in his inward spiritual existence which no mere outward freedom can equal. But in his relationship with his fellowmen he becomes everyone's servant. He becomes active because faith always produces fruit. He becomes zealous for his neighbor's rights but does not consider his own. He seeks to correct injustices and evils affecting others but suffers his own in silence in imitation of Christ.

Yet there will always be few who, at any moment, really act in this way. *Die Christen wohnen ferne von einander*. There will never be enough men transformed by the Gospel in any society so that the nature of that society or its need for a government which will punish the evildoers and maintain order will be either changed or eliminated. In view of natural man's self-centeredness God instituted government. Reason, law, and sentiment are great supports of government. In the last analysis, however, in view of what this world is really like, all governments *must* rest on force. *Vis, ultima ratio regum*. Only force or the threat of force is able to maintain the outward order which rea-

son dictates as the minimum condition for some sort of acceptably functioning society. Soldiers, policemen, even hangmen, are types which human society will never be able to do without. *Billigkeit* (equity) is about the most one can expect from the state. Often it does not even give that. Selfish, unprincipled rulers are frequent phenomena. A good prince is indeed a rarity. One should pray for the bad rulers and accept them as the scourges applied by God to the self-centeredness of natural man living in society. They do not bear the sword in vain.

The worst thing men can do, from the social point of view, is to rebel against the social system. Such an attitude is the collective social counterpart of the type of personal despair which causes the suicide of the individual. The suicide despairs of the nature of his own existence and therefore ends it instead of finding reasons beyond himself for continuing to live. The revolutionary masses rebel against the fundamental conditions upon which all human societies will always exist and, in their despair, seek to destroy what they have and to build something better. They will always be disappointed. They cannot build anything better since they themselves are really no better than those who had power before them. Luther commented:

To change social order and to improve social order are two things as far apart as heaven and earth. You can change it easily. To improve it is difficult and dangerous. Why? Because this is not possible through our will or ability. The wild crowd does not care very much whether things will be better but only that they shall be different. If things then get worse, they want still further changes.

Thus they exchange flies for bumble bees, and finally bumble bees for hornets.³⁰

The peasants were guilty of this. But they were guilty of something still worse. Not only did they make the fundamental error of believing that they could change by force the basic nature of the conditions for the existence of human society. They went a step further and claimed that use of force and efforts at social revolution on their part were in agreement with and authorized by the Gospel.

It was this claim, even more than their effort to change the social order by revolt, that aroused Luther. The word "Christian," which they had used in their articles to justify their demands, Luther says in his pamphlet, he is going to rip away from them. They have no right to it and are using it to justify their own ambitions. On the cover of his pamphlet Luther placed the picture of a revolutionary peasant. Big and brawny, the peasant stands, leaning with one hand on a blood-stained sword, while holding under his arm stolen chickens and other plunder. With the other arm he holds aloft a banner on which is inscribed in large letters, "Love your neighbor."

This peasant can serve as a symbol for the continuing confusion of the two realms in men's minds. For Luther this confusion

³⁰ "Ob kriegsleute auch ynn seligem stande seyn kunden," WA 19, 639: "Oberkeit endern und Oberkeit bessern sind zwey ding, so weit von einander als hymel und erden. Endern mag leichtlich geschehen. Bessern ist mislich und ferlich. Warum? Es steht nicht ynn unsern willen und hand. Der tolle Poefel aber fragt nicht viel, wie es besser werde, sondern das nur anders werde. Wenns denn erger wird, so wil er aber ein anders haben. So krigt er denn humeln fuer fliegen und zu letzt hornissen fuer humeln."

is one of the devil's chief tools in disrupting the work of the Spirit.³¹ Luther felt obliged, when he saw this mingling of the two cities by the peasants, in what was for

him a most flagrant form, to oppose it with the full intensity of which his powerful, emotional personality was capable.

Teaneck, N. J.

³¹ Gunnar Hillerdal, *Geborsam gegen Gott und Menschen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), pp. 31 f.:

Zu den ärgsten Künsten des Teufels gehört die Vermengung von weltlichem und geistlichem Regiment. Gott hat beide Regimenter von einander geschieden. Nach seinem Befehl sollen in ihnen verschiedene Mittel zur Durchsetzung seiner Herrschaft angewandt werden, nämlich im Bereich des geistlichen Regimentes das Wort des Evangeliums, im Bereich des weltlichen Regimentes dagegen das Schwert. Der Teufel jedoch will, dass die Fürsten sich in die Angelegenheiten

der Kirche einmischen, indem sie ihre weltliche Gewalt dazu benutzen, Glaubensgesetze aufzustellen und die Ordnung der geistlichen Dinge zu bestimmen. Und umgekehrt ist er bestrebt, die Gläubigen zu veranlassen, die Grenzen des geistlichen Regimentes zu überschreiten. Sie sollen dort, wo Gebet und Busse vonnöten wären, der Gewaltanwendung vertrauen. Luther verwies hier auf das Beispiel der Schwärmer, die mit Gewalt die überlieferten falschen Kirchenordnungen abschaffen wollten, und auf die aufständischen Bauern, die im Namen des Evangeliums zu den Waffen griffen, um ihre sozialen Forderungen durchzusetzen.