



The Worldly Luther: Wholistic Living

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I. BIOGRAPHICAL SNAPSHOTS

Luther was very much a man of his time; he shared the hopes, fears, and joys of many young people of his day. His parents provided him with a good education, and he learned to cope well with the stress of his vocation as priest-professor, his fame, and his various diseases in an age not yet blessed with such conveniences as electricity, mechanical horsepower, and aspirin.

As a teenage student in Eisenach, Luther was one of the traditional “crumb collectors” (*Parthenkengst*, literally a stallion for whom something is laid out) who went from door to door and sang for bread and alms, as was customary. In a sermon on the advantages of education, Luther proudly declared, “I was once a crumb collector, and I have come far by means of the writer’s pen.”¹

During the winter of 1510/11, Luther travelled to Rome with another friar; they accomplished the 850-mile journey mostly on foot, hitching a ride here and there. Their mission was to prevent the merger of conventional with reformed Augustinian convents in Germany. His short stay in Rome introduced Luther to the puzzling world of Renaissance bureaucracy and its moral decay, especially prevalent in the Holy City. “In Rome I encountered the most unlearned men. Dear God, what could the cardinals be expected to know, when they were so overloaded with business and political affairs?”²

Drawn into a confrontation with Rome shortly after the publication of the Ninety-five Theses in 1517, Luther asked for the protection of his prince, Elector Frederick of Saxony; he was well aware that God can employ powerful princes to support the cause of the gospel. In August, 1518, Luther told the Saxon Court Chaplain George Spalatin, “You should use your influence with the Most Illustrious Sovereign...so that our Sovereign and His Imperial Majesty obtain for

¹Martin Luther, “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School,” *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimarer Ausgabe; Weimar: H. Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 30/2.576; *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 46.250-51; hereafter cited as *WA* and *LW*, respectively.

²Table Talk between March 28 and May 27, 1537, No. 3582A, *WA Tischreden*, 3.432; hereafter cited as *WA.TR*; *LW* 54.237.

me from the pope the return of my case [to Germany], so that it is tried before German judges.”³ Elector Frederick asked for and received safe-conduct for Luther, and sent a team of lawyers along with him to the hearing in Augsburg, which made Luther feel better prepared to meet Cardinal Cajetan. The cardinal did not execute the papal orders to arrest Luther and bring him to

Rome, which increased Luther's certainty that he could handle the "Roman flatterers." If they should oppose him, he said after the meeting, he would "act like a distinguished jurist and theologian, playing war with them as Joshua did against the people of Ai" (Josh 8:3-29).⁴

When he was condemned by both papal bull and imperial edict, Luther hid at the Wartburg for almost a year in the guise of "Knight George" with appropriate beard and dress. "I would have preferred to suffer death at the hands of the tyrants," he told his artist friend Lucas Cranach, "but I must not disregard the counsel of good men."⁵ He nevertheless made secret visits to Wittenberg, defying the orders of Prince Frederick to stay put; stops along the way for food and drink made the journeys more exciting.

In 1525 Luther married the twenty-six-year-old apostate nun Katharina von Bora, whom he called "Katie." He was forty-two and embroiled in controversy. Why get married? Because, he said, such a worldly affair pleased God. But it did not please many of his friends and his foes; his faculty colleague and legal advisor, Jerome Schurff, declared, "If this monk marries, the whole world and the devil will laugh, so that everything he has accomplished will come to nought."⁶ When Luther heard of the remark, he advanced the wedding date and let it be known that he had used the written condemnations of his marriage as toilet paper.⁷ The private wedding ceremony, arranged according to custom, took place on June 13, 1525; the public ceremony on June 27 was the social event of the year. Elector Frederick gave the Luthers the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg as a home, together with a hundred guilders and a monthly salary to the bridegroom of two hundred guilders.

By 1542 Katie ran a large household consisting of four children (two others had died), servants, boarding students, a constant stream of houseguests, five cows, nine calves, four goats, thirteen pigs, several horses, a fish pond full of carp (Luther's favorite dish), and a small farm in the country which the Luthers used as a summer retreat.

Some of Luther's advice regarding sex and marriage was decidedly controversial. In 1531, the English theologian Robert Barnes solicited his opinions regarding King Henry VIII's planned divorce, and Luther declared, "Before I would approve of divorce I would rather permit the king to marry still another woman and to have, according to the examples of the patriarchs and kings [of

³Letter of August 8, 1518, *WA Briefe*, 1.188; hereafter cited as *WA.BR*; LW 48.71.

⁴M. Luther, "Proceedings at Augsburg," *WA* 2.18; *LW* 31.278.

⁵Letter of April 28, 1521. *WA.BR* 2.305; *LW* 48.201.

⁶Quoted in Heinrich Boehmer, "Luthers Ehe," *Lutherjahrbuch* 7 (1925) 65.

⁷The Swiss poet Simon Lemnius had produced a Latin play depicting Luther and his friends as whoring monks. The vice-chancellor of Leipzig University, John Hasenberg, attacked Katie in a letter, promising her eternal punishment. Luther responded with a version of Aesop's fable on the lion and the ass in 1528. *WA* 26.545-54.

Israel], two women or queens at the same time."⁸ Luther also maintained that no spouse should be forced to remain continent; he advised that an impotent husband should permit his wife to obtain sexual satisfaction with another partner, and that a husband has the right to seek such satisfaction elsewhere if his wife refuses to oblige him.⁹

The Catholic Luther scholar Peter Manns sees the worldly Luther fully embodied at his sixty-second birthday dinner on November 10, 1545.¹⁰ The Saxon court had sent good wine to celebrate the occasion, and Katie prepared a fabulous meal, using her own recipes for Luther's

favorite pike soup and baked carp. Two generations of “reformers” attended: Luther’s Wittenberg friends and comrades, among them Philip Melancthon and John Bugenhagen who sat with Luther at the head of the table; young Caspar Cruciger, preacher at the Castle Church and professor of Biblical Studies at Wittenberg University, who came with George Major, the newest member of the Wittenberg theological faculty. As always there was much animated conversation, until Luther himself raised his heavy body from the chair and delivered one of his last table talks: he first complimented Katie tenderly, adding that he found her worries about him difficult to bear; he talked about his forthcoming trip to Eisleben, where he was to mediate a feud between the counts of Mansfeld; and he referred bluntly to his own death, which he felt was imminent. “When I get back, I’ll lie down in my coffin and offer a final meal to the maggots,” he declared. “I am tired of the world, and so I shall leave it like an old guest leaves the inn we all have in common.”

Luther’s use of rather earthy language increased with age. In 1543, furious at the Jews who refused to become Christians, he raged against them in a vituperative treatise in which he called for their banishment. “If God were to give me no other Messiah than such as the Jews wish and hope for, I would much, much rather be a sow than a human being.”¹¹ In the same year, Luther was heard to say at table to Katie, “I am like ripe stool, and the world is like a gigantic anus, and so we’re about to let go of each other.”¹²

Luther had his own personal barber, loved to eat and drink, and liked to impress visiting dignitaries with his fox-fur coat and fine clothes.¹³ He was indeed a worldly churchman and theologian.

II. NATURE, MUSIC, HISTORY

Though not a systematic theologian, Luther developed a basic stance which portrayed all of Christian life as a two-faced Gemini existence. There is life “in the face of God (*coram Deo*),” and there is life “in the face of other people (*coram hominibus*).” When I face God I am righteous through my faith in Christ, who

⁸Letter to Robert Barnes, September 3, 1531. *WA.BR* 6.179; *LW* 50.33.

⁹M. Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity,” *WA* 6.558; *LW* 36.104.

¹⁰Peter Manns, *Martin Luther. An Illustrated Biography* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 218.

¹¹M. Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” *WA* 53.542; *LW* 47.292.

¹²Table Talk, Winter 1542/43, No. 5537, *WA. TR* 5.222; *LW* 54.448.

¹³See the dramatic description of Luther’s breakfast with the papal emissary Vergerio in Wittenberg in 1535 in Harry G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1980) ch. 1.

atoned for my unrighteousness; when I face other human beings and indeed trust them instead of God, I am sinful, for then I follow the lure of the serpent which tempts me to be “like God” (Gen 3:5). My identity depends on what I am facing and how I appear to whomever I am faced by, for to be “seen (*gesehen*)” means to have a “face (*Gesicht*),” an identity.¹⁴ Christians find their identity through complete trust in God.

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with

God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith.¹⁵

Such faith is governed by the conviction that God identified Himself with the world by becoming the man Jesus. Luther, in accordance with his findings from Scripture and tradition, contended that one must clearly distinguish between the incomprehensible majesty of God the Creator, and the suffering humanity of God the Redeemer.

The hidden will of God can't be searched out by man.... We will have enough to learn about the humanity of Christ, in whom the Father revealed Himself. But we are fools who neglect the revealed Word and the will of the Father in Christ, and instead investigate mysteries which ought only to be worshiped. As a result, many break their necks.¹⁶

In this sense, Christ is the center of the world, "the point of the center of a circle, with all eyes inside the circle focused on him."¹⁷ Whatever the world may do, whatever conflicts may exist within and outside the human soul, Christ alone is the mediator in the cosmic conflict between God and the world. Christ alone "justifies" before God, makes things right. "To seek God outside Jesus is the devil."¹⁸

Anchored in the conviction that God in Christ turned the world around, Luther could find pleasure in viewing creation as one "mask of God."¹⁹ A masked God may be frightening, but Christians know that behind every divine mask there is the gracious God; this insight aroused in Luther a doxological sense of life, and his table talks are filled with love for "birds, dogs, and babies."²⁰ He observed and appreciated the common details of nature.

Our Lord has made the best gifts the most common. The preeminent gift to all living things is the eye. Small birds have very bright eyes, like little stars,

¹⁴See the hermeneutical exposition of this point of view in Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) ch. 12, esp. 193-98.

¹⁵M. Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," *WA Deutsche Bibel*, 7.11; *LW* 35.370-71.

¹⁶Table Talk between June 11 and 19, 1540, No. 5070, *WA. TR* 4.641; *LW* 54.385.

¹⁷M. Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of John," *WA* 47.66; *LW* 22.339.

¹⁸M. Luther, "Lectures on Psalms," *WA* 40/3.337.

¹⁹M. Luther, "Lectures on Galatians," *WA* 40/1.174; *LW* 26.95. Luther often spoke of "masquerade" (*Mummenschanz*) and "face mask" (*larva*).

²⁰Roland H. Bainton, "Luther on Birds, Dogs and Babies," *Luther Today* (Martin Luther Lectures 1; Decorah: Luther College, 1957) 3-12.

and can see a fly a room-length away. But we don't acknowledge such everyday gifts. We are stupid clods. In the future life we'll see them, however; there we ourselves will make birds with pretty, shining eyes.²¹

To Luther, the birth of a baby or the hatching of a chick are events which defy philosophical explanations of "first" and "secondary" causes:

These are all miracles. God is in the creature He creates and in which He works. But we pay no heed, and meanwhile we look for secondary causes. We'll never learn the article about creation rightly in this way.²²

Though never thoroughly convinced that the earth was round and orbited around the sun, Luther did appreciate the emergence of the new natural sciences: "We are at the dawn of a new era, for we are beginning to recover the knowledge of the eternal world that we lost through the fall of Adam.... We now observe creatures properly."²³

Luther thought that music responds most effectively to what God has done: "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise."²⁴ Luther found music liberating, especially as expressed in the human voice: "How can the air projected by a light movement of the tongue and an even lighter movement of the throat produce such an infinite variety and articulation of voice and words?" he marveled.²⁵ He insisted that proper worship of God always includes music, especially congregational singing, and this is illustrated in the Lutheran Sunday liturgies he developed. Luther was so enthralled with the relationship between the Word of God and music that he composed a poem entitled "Dame Musica" in which music declares, "God in me more pleasure finds/ than all the joys of earthly minds."²⁶ Commenting on the Psalms, Luther observed that the spoken word issues from and goes to the head, but the sung word issues from and goes to the heart.

Note that there is a difference between singing and speaking, as there is between chanting or saying a psalm and only knowing it and teaching it with understanding. But by adding the voice it becomes a song, and the voice is the feeling. Therefore, as the word is understanding so the voice is feeling.²⁷

He urged educators to add music to a curriculum stressing the study of languages and history. "The ancient Greeks trained their children in these disciplines, and they grew up to be people of wondrous ability, subsequently fit for every thing."²⁸ By calling for the proper combination of education and edification, Luther joined Reformation to Renaissance concerns, thus paving the way

²¹Table Talk between December 11 and January 2, 1532/33, No. 2849b, *WA*. TR 3.27; *LW* 54.175.

²²Table Talk between September 2 and 17, 1540, No. 5227, *WA*. TR 5.17; *LW* 54.400.

²³Table Talk, 1530-35, No. 1160, *WA*. TR 1.573.

²⁴"Martin Luther to the Devotees of Music. Preface to George Rhau's Delightful Symphonies," *WA* 50.371; *LW* 53.323.

²⁵*Ibid.*, *WA* 50.370; *LW* 53.322.

²⁶M. Luther, "A Preface to All Good Hymnals," *WA* 35.483; *LW* 53.320.

²⁷M. Luther, "First Lectures on Psalms," *WA* 4.140; *LW* 11.294.

²⁸M. Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They May Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," *WA* 15.46; *LW* 45.369-70.

for an appreciation of wholistic living and influencing later philosophers like Wilhelm Leibnitz and musicians like Johann Sebastian Bach.²⁹

Luther did not hesitate to affirm that God was in charge of everything which happens, even though such a view makes God seem capricious as well as omnipotent. To Luther, to be

omnipotent is God's business, and His will "is itself the rule of all things." He told Erasmus, in 1525, "For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as cause or reason, it could no longer be the will of God."³⁰ So, as Luther viewed things, the world is God's playground. Nations rise and fall, natural disasters come and go, and the course of history appears to have no meaning. Yet to the believer God is not capricious; he merely hides under the "contrariness" (*sub contrario*) of events. On the one hand, God as Creator is powerful; on the other hand, as Christ the Redeemer he is weak and suffers. It all depends on whether one sees with the eyes of faith or with eyes blind to faith. Luther contended that history makes sense only if viewed as the history of God's people, as biblical history. Scripture contains the record of the meaning of history. Luther therefore respected the work of historians:

Histories are nothing else than a demonstration, recollection, and sign of divine action and judgment, of how He upholds, rules, obstructs, prospers, punishes, and honors the world, especially men, each according to his just deserts, evil or good....The historians, therefore, are the most useful people and the best teachers, so that one can never honor, praise, and thank them enough.³¹

Yet historians do their job best when their histories are anchored in the presupposition that the God of the Bible controls all events. Pagan histories—be they written by Virgil, by Homer, or by Livy—"lack the magnificence, the glory, and the crown of the Word and promise of God."³²

Luther asserted that God used "miracle men" (*Wundermänner*) like David and others to keep in check the "smart alecks" who always think they can do things better than anyone else.³³ The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) was to him a basic clue to the discernment of how God deals with political power in history:

We see in all the histories and in experience that He puts down one kingdom and exalts another, lifts up one principality and casts down another, increases one people and destroys another; as He did with Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, though they thought they would sit in their seats forever. Nor does He destroy reason, wisdom, and right; for if the world is to go on, these things must remain. But he does destroy pride and the proud.³⁴

Thus history, according to Luther, is the battlefield between the forces of good and evil, between God and Satan, between the true and the false church. One must study history because this is where God discloses his ways. Ultimately, in-

²⁹Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1948) ch. 6.

³⁰M. Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," *WA* 18.712; *LW* 33.181.

³¹M. Luther, "Preface to Galeatius Capella's History," *WA* 50.384; *LW* 34.275-76.

³²M. Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *WA* 43.672; *LW* 5.353.

³³M. Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 101," *WA* 51.208.

³⁴M. Luther, "The Magnificat," *WA* 7.590; *LW* 21.344.

volvement with the world—especially with history—shows us how differently things turn out

than one expected.

All of our experience with history should teach us, when we look back, how badly human wisdom is betrayed when it relies on itself. For hardly anything happens the way it is planned. But everything turns out differently, and the opposite happens from what one thought should happen.³⁵

The study of history, more than anything else, humbles the human mind and prepares people to rely on God rather than on themselves.

III. HOLY SECULARITY

Luther was not “worldly” in a hedonistic sense, as both his friends and his foes have occasionally portrayed him. He has been described by them as an apostate monk who, once liberated from asceticism, plunged into the world of the flesh, enjoyed food, drink, and sex, and became the victim of forces already apparent in his childhood and adolescence.³⁶ Rather, Luther was worldly in the sense in which he understood God to be worldly: God “emptied” himself in his Son Jesus to save His fallen creatures (Phil 2:7); just so should Christians serve a needy world. Unlike John Calvin and other “Puritan” reformers, Luther had no notion of transforming the world into a model Christian commonwealth. Instead, he contended that Christians are saved by faith in Christ and can only witness to him by serving their neighbor: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, help the poor, and witness to the good news that Christ is to come again.

Luther had learned from the Bible, especially from the Old Testament, that God—especially in the person of Jesus Christ—involves himself with people where they are. This is the revealed God who is nevertheless also hidden; the function of Christian theology is to testify to the revealed rather than the hidden God. That is why to Luther all true theology is “practical,” that is, it does not speculate but rather concentrates on a life-long enterprise to “learn Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).³⁷ In Jesus Christ the world catches a glimpse of what it means to be whole—to have relationships no longer corrupted by sin, evil, and death. Christ points to a world where everything is right with God, and until he comes again Christians must bear witness to this wholesome life, even though it is still in the future. Involvement with and in the world, therefore, was to Luther a mandate to witness to that other world which is to come. He contended that the church, as the people of God and the body of Christ, must therefore be a militant, struggling church always in, but not of, the world. Like Christ himself, the church must suffer tribulation in the world by standing guard against the

³⁵M. Luther, “Sermon on the Third Sunday after Trinity on I Peter 5:5-11. Cruciger’s Summer Postil,” *WA* 33.23.

³⁶This point of view has been part of the “Luther legend.” See, for example, Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958). For a critical discussion of the issue, see *Psychohistory and Religion: The Case of Martin Luther*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). I have analyzed the issue of “Religion and Psyche” in Luther and Luther research in *Martin Luther—God’s Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (forthcoming from Fortress, Philadelphia in the fall of 1983) ch. 8.

³⁷M. Luther, “Lectures on Romans,” *WA* 56.371; *LW* 25.361.

sin, death, and evil which threaten Christians. “The more the church is oppressed and hemmed

in, the more it rises up.”³⁸

Human beings have been created by God to serve each other in specific “stations” or “orders” of life, according to Luther:

We are saved through Christ alone; but we become holy through this faith and through these divine foundations and orders. Even the godless may have much about them that is holy, without being saved thereby. For God wishes us to perform such works to His praise and glory. And all who are saved in the faith of Christ surely do these works and maintain these orders.³⁹

But Luther did not argue for specifically “Christian” activities in addition to vocations and callings. Rather, Christians must be faithful in and through their various callings:

You have as many preachers as you have transactions, goods, tools, and other equipment in your house and home. All this is continually crying out to you, “Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you.”⁴⁰

According to Luther, Christian life in the world consists of daily work arranged in a variety of callings in the spirit of Christian love. Both work and love link people to each other in such away that they can deal with each other’s needs in marriage, family, government, trade, or any of the other arrangements of life ordered by God. Like Paul, he insisted that the existing order not be disturbed and that everyone should remain in his or her station (1 Cor 7:20). For example, he advised that if a marriage runs into difficulties, the two partners should not seek a divorce because “God’s forgiveness of their sins will be much greater if only they remain in their station and do not leave it.”⁴¹ Here Luther has been justly criticized for tempting Christians to bless the status quo rather than seeking change to witness better.

Luther advocated a holy secularity which places Christians squarely into the world, the place of their ministry. It is here that they must discern the conflict between God and Satan which is as old as the world and which began when the serpent tempted Adam and Eve to violate God’s First Commandment (“You shall have no other gods”) with the attractive injunction, “Be like God” (Gen 3:5). To confuse the divine with the human was, to Luther, the devil’s best trick, for confusion is “diabolic” (from the Greek *diabollein*, to deceive). Wholistic living means to live out of a faith which knows of God’s unconditional love for his creatures. Christ embodies that wholistic life which has overcome the distance between God and his creatures, and, by faith in him, Christians already experience some of the freedom and joy which are to come when this world has come to an end.

Once this has been established, namely that God alone justifies us solely by His grace through Christ, we are willing not only to bear the pope aloft on

³⁸M. Luther, “Lectures on Isaiah,” *WA* 31/2.448; *LW* 17.241.

³⁹M. Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper,” *WA* 26.505; *LW* 37.365.

⁴⁰M. Luther, “Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount,” *WA* 32.494; *LW* 21.237.

⁴¹M. Luther, “Wedding Sermon on Hebr. 13:4,” *WA* 34/1.71.

our hands but also kiss His feet....In short, we can stand the loss of possessions, our name, our life, and everything else; but we will not let ourselves be deprived of the Gospel, our faith, and Jesus Christ. And that is that.⁴²

Luther contended that this Christocentric view of life gives Christians the freedom to become boldly involved with the world, no matter what the conflict or the suffering may be.

Thus a Christian man who lives in this confidence towards God knows all things, can do all things, ventures everything that needs to be done, and does everything gladly and willingly.⁴³

This faith allowed Luther to enjoy life without succumbing to its siren song of hedonism; he could laugh and cry, always comforted by God's unconditional promise of love through Christ. Luther could live wholistically because he got a glimpse of how wholistic God was in Christ. Having found such a God, he could both sin boldly and rejoice boldly.

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for He is victorious over sin, death, and the world.⁴⁴

⁴²M. Luther, "Lectures on Galatians," *WA* 4011.181; *LW* 26.99.

⁴³M. Luther, "Treatise on Good Works," *WA* 6.207; *LW* 44.27.

⁴⁴Letter to Philip Melanchthon, August 1, 1521, *WA.BR* 2.372; *LW* 48.281-82.