

After SP

The Age of Reform 1250-1550

AN INTELLECTUAL AND
RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF
LATE MEDIEVAL AND
REFORMATION EUROPE

STEVEN OZMENT

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Designed by Sally Harris
and set in VIP Baskerville type.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Ozment, Steven E.
The age of reform (1250-1550).

Includes index.

1. Church history—Middle Ages, 600-1500.
2. Reformation. 3. Theology, Doctrinal—History—
Middle Ages, 600-1500. 4. Theology, Doctrinal—
History—16th century. 5. Civilization, Medieval.

BR270.09 274 79-24162

ISBN: 0-300-02760-5 pbk.

20 19 18 17 16 15 14

NEW HAVEN AND LONDON
YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CHAPTER 6

The Mental World of Martin Luther

Young Man Luther

THE religious demands placed on Luther the monk were not unlike those known by earnest laity; both shared a common experience of unresolved religious oppression. Many laity derived no more consolation from the sacrament of confession than Luther from monastic exercises. This shared religious experience formed the basic bond between Luther and the multitude who became Protestant. When Luther articulated his complaints against the medieval church and religion in the famous Reformation pamphlets of 1520, ordinary people knew immediately what he was talking about, because his complaints were also theirs. The "Grievances of the Holy Roman Empire and Especially the Entire German Nation," presented by the German estates to the emperor at the Diet of Worms in March 1521 on the eve of Luther's appearance and representing both aristocratic and ordinary burgher resentment, echoed Luther on point after point as they brought forth complaints of a fiscal, legal, and religious nature against the pope, German high prelates, and the church and clergy in general. Because these grievances derived from a common religious culture, their resolution was also to be primarily religious in nature; it resulted from a new theology that transformed the concept, practice, and institutions of traditional religious life.

One of the most provocative books ever written in the field of Reformation studies, Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1958), attempted to relate Luther's theology and the Reformation's popular success to the experiences of a common oppressive childhood, not to dissatisfactions stemming from a shared oppressive religious culture. Luther's theological and religious problems are seen to have been more parentally than culturally induced, the product of a universal spiritual odyssey of youth rather than of a time-bound religious culture. For Erikson, the Reformation was an unsuccessful attempt to resolve by cultural revolution the universal problems of

childhood and adolescence. Hence, it is the transhistorical young man Luther, not Luther the sixteenth-century theologian, who fascinates.

Historians have not taken kindly to Erikson's book, partly because his conclusions do not meet the canons of historical demonstration and partly because historians remain skeptical of the methods of "psychohistory." Such criticism by historians is as predictable as psychologists' preference for the experiences of childhood as explanations for adult behavior. In dealing with the past, historians and psychologists find themselves vocationally at odds with one another. (The historian is trained to explain the past in its own terms rather than in those of present experience.) He tries to appreciate Luther's actions in light of the historical culture of Luther's time, a time in which the historian too is immersed through his study of primary sources. He sees Luther's actions as based on religious motives that are largely self-explanatory, given good historical knowledge of the period.¹ Historians worry about committing what Lucien Febvre described as "psychological anachronism," the attribution to an earlier age of the emotional make-up of a later one.²

The modern psychologist, on the other hand, is convinced that the evidence he derives from his clinical experience says something universal about the nature of man, regardless of the particular historical period or culture in which he is found. Because his findings are seen to be empirical and scientific, they are considered capable of elucidating human behavior wherever and whenever it occurs. To the psychologist, man is a far more constant and predictable creature than he is to the historian. If such faith in the explanatory power of his craft causes the psychologist to seem all too confident to the historian, it also has the advantage for the psychologist to make him impervious to the historian's criticism.

Psychologists can, of course, recognize the role of historical cultures in shaping the actions of individuals and groups, even though they are not

1. Attention has been called to the importance of studying the cultural derivation of Luther's religious problems by George A. Lindbeck, "Erikson's *Young Man Luther*: A Historical and Theological Reappraisal," *Soundings* (1973), 210-27; and Lewis W. Spitz, "Psychohistory and History: The Case of *Young Man Luther*," in Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Psychohistory and Religion: The Case of Young Man Luther* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 81-83. Johnson appends a helpful bibliography of reviews of *Young Man Luther*. See also the bibliographical summary of Jean Delumeau, *Amorosa et affirmativa de la repame* (Paris, 1967), pp. 280-300.

2. "History and Psychology," in Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History and Other Essays*, ed. Peter Burke (New York, 1965), p. 9. A more up-to-date catalogue of the historian's objections to psychohistory, by one actually sympathetic to social-scientific techniques in historical study, is Lawrence Stone, "The Massacre of the Innocents," *New York Review of Books* 21, no. 16 (14 November 1974), pp. 25-31. An attempt to rebut Stone in defense especially of Erikson's relevance to historical study is Frank L. Halla, "Childhood, Culture, and Society in Psychoanalysis and History," *The Historian* 39 (1977): 423-28.

trained to know thoroughly any culture but their own. And historians can certainly appreciate the way the experiences of childhood and adolescence influence adult behavior, even though their craft does not involve them in the clinical study of youth. The crucial issue for the historian must remain, however, whether the results of such psychological research, when applied to a particular historical epoch, actually illumine this epoch in its particularity or simply reduce the culture in question to supposedly transhistorical truths about humankind. The sociologist Robert Bellah has rightly challenged historians critical of Erikson: "The only real critique of Erikson on Luther that will stand up is . . . a portrait of the cultural development of Luther which is more compelling than the one which [Erikson] has given us."³

Young Man Luther is the most important test case to date for the application of modern clinical psychology to past history. Erikson describes his work as a study of a delayed identity crisis in a "young great man." By "identity crisis" Erikson means the major trauma of adolescence, a crisis occurring at that point in a young person's life when he must either fall prey to his confusion over who he is or overcome it by squaring his own self-judgment and expectation with those of authorities and superiors, especially his parents. In Erikson's words, the identity crisis occurs in that period of the life cycle "when each youth must forge for himself some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the offensive remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood."⁴ The crisis is considered to be the fifth in a series of eight that Erikson sees beginning in earliest childhood, continuing through adolescence and adulthood, and subjecting the individual repeatedly to opposed feelings and attitudes.⁵

Erikson is guided in his work on Luther by his own clinical studies of gifted young people. Believing childhood experiences to be the key to human behavior, he searches the "spiritual and intellectual milieu" of the young Luther for evidence of real or possible emotional reactions to his parents and the world in which he grew up. Unfortunately, there are not a lot of undisputed facts about Luther's youth with which the psychohistorian can begin to work. We know that Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben in Saxony; that he grew up in Mansfeld, attended school at Magdeburg (1497) and Eisenach (1498), and matriculated at the University of

3. Comment on George A. Lindbeck's "Young Man Luther: A Historical and Theological Reappraisal," in *Encounter With Erikson: Historical Interpretation and Religious Biography*, ed. Donald Capps et al. (Missoula, Montana, 1977), pp. 29-30.

4. *Young Man Luther* (New York, 1962), p. 14.

5. See *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1963), part 3, ch. 7, esp. pp. 261-62.

Erfurt in May 1501, where he received his bachelor's degree in September 1502 and his master's in January 1505. He was at this time twenty-two years of age and destined to the study of law in compliance with his parents' wishes. However, he abruptly changed these plans after being terrified by a thunderstorm in early July 1505, while returning to Erfurt after a visit with his parents. Fulfilling a vow made during the storm to St. Anne, the patron saint of travelers in distress, Luther entered the Augustinian monastery upon his arrival in Erfurt on July 17. He said his first mass in May 1507, taught Aristotelian philosophy at Wittenberg in 1508, and journeyed to Rome on the business of his order in November 1510. After his return to Erfurt in April 1511, he was permanently transferred to Wittenberg, where he became a doctor of theology in October 1512 at twenty-eight. Between 1513 and 1515 he gave his first lectures, a glossing of the Psalms. Many scholars believe that it was during these years that he experienced clearly for the first time the meaning of justification by faith.⁶ Two years later (1517), at age thirty-four, he posted his theses against indulgences and launched his career as a reformer.

With almost no direct evidence for the reconstruction of Luther's early childhood, Erikson argues that "a clinician's training permits and in fact forces him to recognize major trends even where the facts are not all available."⁷ Aided by this sense of mission and Luther's recollections of his childhood experiences, Erikson constructs an interesting if ultimately unverifiable portrait of Luther's childhood.

Luther recalls having received three beatings as a child: one from his father, which made both very anxious until they were reconciled; the actual drawing of blood by his mother after he had stolen a nut; and fifteen whacks in school for speaking German rather than Latin. Although Luther gives the impression that the parental beatings were exceptions to the way his parents normally treated him, and the caning in school was nothing unusual for the fifteenth century, Erikson draws the conclusion that Luther grew up a brutalized child, lacking a sense of basic trust from his parents.⁸

6. Other scholars place the conversion experience as late as 1518. See the discussion in *Die Jahre des reformatorischen Erkennens des Luther*, ed. Bernhard Lohse (Darmstadt, 1967); Ernst Bizer, *Fiducia Audita: Eine Untersuchung über die Bedeutung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther* (Neukirchen, 1961), pp. 20-31, 51; Heinrich Bornkamm, "Zur Frage des Fides Dei beim jungen Luther," *ARL* 52 (1961), *ARL* 53 (1962); Roland H. Bainton provides a helpful chronology of Luther's life in *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, 1950), pp. 12-14.

7. *Young Man Luther*, p. 50.
8. Ibid., pp. 61-65, 68, 79. See the discussion of these reports by Spitz in Johnson, *Psychobiography and Religion*, pp. 70-71, 75, and by Roland H. Bainton, "Psychiatry and History: An Examination of Erikson's Young Man Luther," *Religion in Life* 40 (1971): 458-61, reprinted in Johnson, *Psychobiography and Religion*, pp. 19-56.

9. *Young Man Luther*, p. 65.

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Drawing on studies of second-generation emigrants to America who moved out of rural poverty and into a degree of affluence in industry, Erikson surmises that Luther's father, a second-generation peasant who rose to power and wealth in the mining industry, must have been exceedingly demanding, arbitrary, and paternalistic. Life in such an environment is seen to have weighed Luther down with an "overweening superego" so that he felt all his life "like some sort of criminal" who had continually to be justifying himself.¹⁰ Erikson also sees in Luther's love-hate relationship with his parents the origins of his later preoccupation with the righteousness of God and his attack on the cult of the Virgin.¹¹

This is all certainly very suggestive. Was Luther's father guided by love or malice when he punished his son and demanded more of him than he could do? Is God guided by love or malice when, in seemingly arbitrary fashion, he damns some and saves others? One can see how a problem with parental wrath in childhood might directly influence the formation of a theology like Luther's that is preoccupied with the righteousness of God.

Erikson's portrait of Luther's father, however, is demonstrably fabricated, and the weight of reliable historical evidence strongly indicates that Luther's childhood was unhappy neither at home nor in school.¹² Nor was preoccupation with the righteousness of God unprecedented in medieval theology.¹³ Luther's overpowering sense of unworthiness, which Erikson skillfully detects, seems clearly to have been culturally rather than parentally derived. In all probability it was popular religious practice, centered on the sacrament of penance and known to Luther from his childhood, and the traditional theology taught at Erfurt, both the dominant Ockhamism and the persisting Thomism, that magnified for him, as it did for so many others, the tension between divine mercy and divine wrath and the individual's responsibility to placate the latter and ensure the former by doing his best with the aid of grace.

Erikson deals at length with the crisis that brought Luther into the monastery. He finds the thunderstorm experience, during which Luther promised St. Anne he would enter the monastery if he came to safety, very revealing of the personal stress Luther was under at this time. Erikson

10. Ibid., pp. 68, 77.

11. Ibid., pp. 58, 67-61.

12. See Spitz in Johnson, *Psychobiography and Religion*, pp. 79, 76-77. Johnson makes a case for viewing Erikson's description of Luther's father as Erikson's own "ideological construct" rather than a portrait resultant from a careful application of psychology to the past (*Psychobiography and Religion*, pp. 136-37).

13. See Harry J. McCortley, *Luther: Right or Wrong, An Argumental Theological Study of Luther's Major Work: The Bondage of the Will* (New York, 1969); English translation of *Luther's Leber vom untreuen Willen* (Munich, 1967).

suspects that he had argued with his father during his visit home, probably because he had expressed reservations about studying law and a desire to enter a religious vocation. He sees the young Luther as torn between distaste for a career he himself had not chosen and fear of disappointing his parents, whose ambitions for him were not his own. The vow in the thunderstorm gave him the courage to resist his father, who could not countermand the wishes of God, and the monastery provided a much needed "inoratorium," time for him to reflect on what he himself wanted his life to be.¹⁴

These speculations on Luther's motives and mental state could be perfectly true and Luther's entrance into the monastery still be satisfactorily explained in terms of his religious culture. If anything about the young Luther is as clear as his fear of disappointing his parents may have been real, it is his temperamental attraction to religion and theological genius. As Erikson also knows, Luther was almost as "natural" a *homo religiosus* and theologian as he was a son.

Rather than resolving Luther's anxiety, the monastery only aggravated it. Erikson finds two events that occurred during his stay in the monastery particularly revealing. The first is an alleged seizure Luther suffered while singing in choir a short time after he had entered the monastery; the second, the celebration of his first mass in the presence of his father. According to a report, Luther became extremely emotional in choir one day after hearing the story from the gospel of Mark about Jesus's exorcising a dumb spirit from a boy (Mark 9:17) and he began to shout out, "I am not, I am not," apparently meaning, "I [Luther] am not this boy possessed by a dumb spirit." Erikson speculates that Luther was here defending his decision to enter the monastery against his father's strong disapproval and his own subconscious feeling that he was not cut out for the religious life. He compares Luther's well-known scrupulosity as a monk with that of modern teenagers and young adults who, having repudiated a rule imposed on them by others, become fanatically devoted to something they themselves have chosen.¹⁵

Luther's behavior at the celebration of his first mass in the presence of his parents also suggests to Erikson the intensification of an identity crisis. Once again the young Luther was confronted by paternal disapproval and his own dawning doubts about the decision he had made. His father publicly criticized him during a banquet following the mass. In the days prior to the performance of the mass, Luther tells of waking in the night in cold

14. *Young Man Luther*, pp. 90-97.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-48.

sweats, something that recurred throughout his monastic career. Erikson even finds evidence suggesting that Luther became so tense that he experienced spontaneous ejaculations.¹⁶

Historians largely discount the story of the fit in the choir because it originated with Johannes Cochlaeus (1497-1552), a contemporary Catholic polemicist, who related the story in support of his own charge that Luther was demon-possessed; the chances of the story's being fabricated are at least as good as those of its being true. But even without this particular episode, a solid case can be made that Luther was extremely anxious and behaved neurotically in the monastery. What remains at issue between the historian and the psychologist is the more likely cause—brooding over paternal disapproval and vocational self-doubt, as Erikson maintains, or, as I would argue, subjection to medieval religious culture in its purest form, the monastic regimen. In a letter to his father, written as a preface to an attack on monastic vows in 1521, Luther apologized for having taken vows without his father's knowledge and consent and admitted to having been "forcibly struck" at the time by his father's criticism of his decision. But what he most regretted about his action in retrospect was that his vows turned out to be a true seduction. By Luther's own confession it was the monastic life, not his parents, which proved to be the tyrant.¹⁷ Luther and his followers constantly depicted the cloistered life as a kind of training in mental illness, driving boys and girls mad by its "unnatural" demands of poverty, chastity, and obedience; in so arguing, they claimed the authority not only of Holy Scripture, but also of their own experience under vows.¹⁸

The final key event in the life of Erikson's Luther is his conversion experience in the tower room of the Augustinian cloister, when Luther saw clearly for the first time the meaning of justification by faith. Luther described the event in a preface to the 1545 edition of his Latin works:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly . . . I was angry with God. . . . Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul [in Romans 1:17]. . . . At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteous-

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-60.

17. *WZ 8*, pp. 573-76 = *LIV 48*, pp. 330-36.

18. See below, ch. 12.

ness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself.¹⁹

Erikson, who dates this event between 1513 and 1515, finds it significant that Luther was in his early thirties, an important age for people with a delayed identity crisis. Even more significant for Erikson is Luther's confiding at table that the Holy Spirit gave him this new understanding in the tower room "auff diser cloaca," literally, "in the men's room."²⁰ Believing *cloaca* refers to an actual facility, Erikson, as several before him, connects Luther's religious breakthrough with his lifelong suffering from constipation and urine retention. He believes the religious insight was accompanied by a great physical release, a loosing of long-repressed emotions and physical processes.²¹ Erikson sees the experience prepared for by Luther's close contact with Johannes von Staupitz, a grandfatherly senior confidant, who lessened Luther's fears about his unworthiness and helped him relax. Quite perceptively, Erikson describes the relationship with Staupitz as giving Luther a much needed feeling of "benevolent parental presence."²²

On the meaning of *cloaca*, however, the historians have done their homework better than the psychologists. In the late Middle Ages, the descriptions of oneself as being *in cloaca*, *in stercore*, or *in latrina* were common religious rhetoric, actually derived from the Bible and connoting a state of utter humility and dependence of God.²³ When Luther described his Reformation insight as occurring "in cloaca," he was saying no more than that he received his understanding of the righteousness of God after a long period of humble meditation in the tower room—actually the library—of the monastery. Once again an understanding of the religious culture of the period proves more illuminating than conjectures based on modern clinical psychology. And could we not also say that any feelings of benevolent parental presence communicated to Luther by Staupitz would be as helpful an aid against an oppressive religious culture as against a supposed oppressive childhood?

There is not a more positive and admiring evaluation of the young

19. *LW* 54, pp. 336–337.

20. *WAT* 3, no. 3232 a, b, c (9 June–12 July 1532), p. 228.

21. *Young Man Luther*, pp. 204–205.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

23. Heiko A. Oberman, "Wir sein Petter. Hoc est Verum. Bund und Gnade in der Theologie des Mittelalters und der Reformation," *ZKG* 78 (1967): 232–52. Cf. also Spitz in Johnson, *Psychohistory and Religion*, pp. 78–82.

Luther than that of Erikson. Although he believes the old Luther became a manic-depressive who "inadvertently helped increase and refine authoritarianism," he praises the young Luther as one who "tried to free individual conscience from totalitarian dogma" and "give man credal wholeness."²⁴ I believe this latter conclusion, to which I would also strongly subscribe, is far better understood and more plausibly explained by a grasp of the religious culture and theology of the Middle Ages than by the importation of the findings of clinical psychology into the sixteenth century. So to believe is not to prefer abstractions to reality. Luther's suffering was no less real because a religious culture rather than an oppressive childhood induced it. Nor was its resolution any less real because it proved ultimately to be theological in nature. In the culture of the premodern world, what is religious and theological cannot be distinguished from what is emotional and psychological in terms of the less and the more real. It is an age when reality wears a tonsure. For this reason we must take young theologian Luther as seriously as young man Luther.

Luther and Scholasticism

WE are so accustomed to think of the young Luther as a melancholy monk preoccupied with his own salvation that we sometimes lose sight of the fact that he was the age's most brilliant theologian. He led the revolution against Rome and traditional religion not as a visionary spiritual reformer, but as a skilled doctor of theology. At the base of all the religious changes brought about by the Reformation lay the new theology of justification by faith. If recollections of the ordeals of young man Luther give insight into his life and work, even more suggestive are reports of the thoughts and feelings of young theologian Luther.

Consider one such report. According to Anton Lauterbach, Luther, in a cheerful mood, was conversing one evening with Nicholas von Amsdorf about "the [theological] works of the prior age when the most talented men were preoccupied with vain studies." Luther reminisced:

Those sophistical pursuits are completely behind us now. The men of our age would look upon them as barbarous. [Duns] Scotus, Bonaventura, Gabriel [Biel], and Thomas [Aquinas], having lived when the papacy was flourishing, were the most idle of men. With so much time on their hands, they naturally gave free rein to their fantasy. Gabriel wrote a book on the canon of the Mass. In my youth I considered it the

24. *Young Man Luther*, pp. 231, 252.