

EPILOGUE

David Bagchi (University of Hull)

The quatercentenary of the Reformation in 1917, it need hardly be said, fell at an inauspicious moment in world history. Even if it had not, the idea that Roman Catholic and Lutheran scholars might have used the occasion to gather together from around the world to discuss the ecumenical legacy of Martin Luther would have been unthinkable. It is an encouraging sign of the times that the commemoration of the Reformation's quinqucentenary in 2017 *without* such a gathering is equally unthinkable. But historical reflection can challenge as well as comfort us, and it is certainly uncomfortable to acknowledge that, at the time of the last major Lutherfest, the quinqucentenary of his birth in 1983, the ecumenical dimension was much more to the fore than it is now. Looking back, it can now be seen as the Indian summer of the ecumenical movement. Cardinal Willebrands, whose historic address to the Fifth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation at Evian in 1970 included his declaring Luther a *doctor communis*, was at that time still President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In 1983 there was still a sense of ecumenical impetus, aided (perhaps ironically in retrospect) by the visits of Pope John Paul II to countries with large Protestant populations. That sense of impetus has dissipated considerably since, despite some excellent initiatives such as the agreed statement *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017. Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlaganstalt and Paderborn: Banifatius, 2013). That Indian summer (which, coincidentally, used to be known as 'St Martin's summer' in England) has given way to what is described in James Corkery's essay, quoting Gerard Mannion's phrase, as 'an ecumenical winter'.

In a way this is surprising, because the intervening years have seen two developments rich in ecumenical promise. The first was the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, a signal achievement despite its uneven reception. The second was Mannermaa's and his school's understanding of Luther's doctrine of salvation as involving inner transformation (*theosis*) as well as a righteousness that remains extrinsic. This interpretation was forged in the context of Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue in Finland but is largely applicable to Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue as well. Like the JDDJ, the Finnish contribution, of which the doyen is now Risto Saarinen, has been both acclaimed and rejected by voices in both traditions. Little wonder that in 2001, with the ecumenical winter well advanced, a book appeared that declared fundamental rapprochement between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism impossible. Daphne Hampson, in *Christian Contradictions. The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought*, argued that the two systems are differently structured and mutually incomprehensible. Ecumenically-minded Catholics had, in her opinion, succeeded in claiming Luther as a legitimate theological resource only through benign misunderstanding, selecting what appealed to them and rejecting what did not and could not fit.

Hampson undoubtedly put her finger on an important difference; but whether the difference is as ineluctable as she states is moot. She herself identified Kierkegaard as one who can be seen as holding in tension the two contradictory insights, namely that God is both the ontological ground of our being and an 'other' with whom we can have a relationship. And she found no shortage of discussion-partners who claimed that their own confession was able to resolve the dichotomy. This could just be a case of wishful thinking, of course. I come across many fellow-Anglicans, for example, who insist on telling me that our Communion is a 'bridge' church between Catholicism and Protestantism. Those other churches do not seem to have received the memo. If anything, Anglicanism is more like the pretty chapel on that

bridge at Avignon which does not reach the other side. In practice, I suspect that most Anglicans, if pushed (always a dangerous manoeuvre for those standing on a bridge) would choose one side or the other of the ontological-relational divide.

It is however as a historian that I find Hampson's pessimism about the ecumenical enterprise most unconvincing. Generations of religious or other tribalism can of course create mutually uncomprehending and incomprehensible communities. Competing narratives of victimhood, as Peter Marshall reminds us, can be potent factors in this process. But unless Luther and his followers were lifeforms beamed down from outer space into sixteenth-century Europe, their worldviews could not have been wholly alien to their contemporaries, at least in the early years. Heinz Schilling rightly points out that the Protestant and Catholic Reformations grew out of the same medieval root ball, which is why we see such devout opposites as the ex-friar Martin Luther and the ex-Emperor Charles V wrestling with similar questions. If pushed on Hampson's question, both men might have chosen the same side.

It could be a useful exercise for a twenty-first century historical theologian, armed not only with the accumulated knowledge of decades but also with a more sophisticated theoretical toolkit, to revisit that old chestnut of the Luther Renaissance and ask again, 'At what point did the developing Luther cease to be a Catholic theologian? At what point did he become a Reformation theologian?'. Of course, it would be a *chindogu* question. (For the uninitiated, *chindogu* is apparently a Japanese word, normally applied to dodgy inventions, meaning 'almost but not completely useless'.) The question is almost completely pointless because it assumes that what is 'Catholic' and what is 'reformatory' can be known in advance, that we can somehow submit Luther's early writings to theological DNA tests to reveal the exact proportions of each. It also assumes that theology was the only factor involved in Luther's development. But, once the dangers of historical positivism and

monocausality are allowed for, I believe that the question does have a residual value. This is because, at various moments in Luther's story, he can be seen, and was seen at the time, as taking a decisive step away from the tradition, while at the same time echoing or applying the critique of people who remained more or less firmly within the Catholic fold. This applies to his break with his mentor Staupitz and his Augustinianism; to his Erfurt teachers Trutvetter and von Usingen and their critique of scholastic theology; to Cajetan and his critique of indulgences; and, perhaps most problematically of all, to Erasmus. Each of these moments could profitably be revisited to see what it was that separated Luther from other, ultimately more conservative, critics. What was the added value, the '*extra*' *Lutheranium*, so to speak? In proposing this I am not suggesting a return to a focus on Luther's development at the expense of a more theological approach which looks at the broad structures of his thought (as exemplified by Otto Pesch and, with a different result, by Hampson herself). Rather, this is a plea to adopt a binocular approach, continuing the very fruitful focus on his structures of thought while not losing sight of the vital questions of historical context and historical development. That, it seems to me, is the essential historical framework required for any investigation of the theme 'Martin Luther and Catholic theology'.

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It is too early to say whether the essays in this volume represent the rustle of an ecumenical spring. But some recurring themes emerge strongly from them, some of which will be of particular relevance for 2017, while others will have a much longer shelf-life.

When Cardinal Willebrands conferred the title of a 'common doctor' (*doctor communis*) upon Martin Luther, there would have been many at Evian who (after the sharp intake of breath at hearing a traditional title of Thomas Aquinas applied to the Wittenberg reformer) would have understood it unidirectionally, as meaning that Roman Catholics had

much to learn from him. That might also be how some will interpret the title of this volume. But, as both Pieter de Witte and Gesa Thiessen pointed out in their essays, the ecumenical study of Luther provides us with the opportunity for mutual learning and a genuine appropriation of new insights, not merely a formal recognition of the validity of our respective positions. Catholics and Lutherans can learn from each other, and those of us who stand outside the process can learn from both. Christine Helmer drove this point home with verve in her concluding paper: Protestants themselves, including Lutherans, still have much to learn from Luther, once his ideas have been sifted out from those of his interpreters through the centuries. Of course, there are some things we would rather not, or do not need, to learn from Luther: the antisemitism of his later writings springs immediately to mind. However, as Charlotte Methuen reminded us in her study of his attitudes towards the roles of women in family, church, and society, it is essential that we make an effort to understand his thought in context.

Historians nowadays are expected to empathize with the subjects of their study, which is however not the same as absorbing their worldviews uncritically. A huge test of historical empathy is posed by the acres of printed religious polemic which any student of the Reformation period has to wade through sooner or later. It is intemperate, vituperative, and sometimes very funny; but it always leaves a bad taste in the mouth. In an adaptation of Godwin's Law of online discussions and the chances of some poor correspondent being likened to Hitler, I would like to propose Bagchi's Law: 'as an exchange of early-modern religious pamphlets develops, the probability of a comparison involving Judas Iscariot, Arius, or Satan (or all three) approaches 1'. But, to echo a question raised by Peter Marshall, how far should we shake our heads at such opinions and pass on, and how much should we ask how and why those opinions arose, what principles were they based on, and what we can learn from them? This approach will at least help us avoid the perennial danger of ecumenical

dialogue which Peter De May reported in relation to the reactions to *Lumen Gentium*:

‘differences should not be overcome by minimizing them’.

Finally, we may note another way in which this ‘common doctor’ can teach us. In his classic biography of Luther, Heiko Oberman presented us with a figure who was a profoundly medieval and not a modern man, thereby challenging almost every Protestant portrayal of the reformer since at least the Enlightenment. Charlotte Methuen, Risto Saarinen, and Christine Helmer have reminded us in this volume that Protestants are still too ready to attribute progressive ideas to Luther, whether in his attitudes to women and marriage, in his approach to scriptural hermeneutics, or in his understanding of the universal priesthood, and not to give due credit to the tradition, which Luther is often only repeating. One of Luther’s qualifications as a *doctor communis* is the fact that he is a teacher in the common tradition. We all still have much to learn from him.