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Martin Luther & the Law of Unintended Consequences: Reflections on the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

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Two days from now on October 31, the celebration on most people's minds will be Halloween. Don't get me wrong: I'm all for trick-or-treating! But I would like to invite us to spend a few moments reflecting on another event happening this Tuesday: the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. On October 31, 1517, a thirty-four year-old monk nailed a large parchment with Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Typically, a list of propositions for debate would find a limited audience within the ivory tower of academia. But in this case, **Luther's ideas spread quickly, sparking a controversy that grew out of Luther's control** (Roper xvii - xviii).

You all have your monk robes ready to dress up as Martin Luther for Halloween, right?! In all seriousness, Luther could indeed be a scary guy, unafraid to boldly criticize his opponents. Have you seen the **Luther Insulter** webpage, which generates random insults from his writings? Here's some examples of what you'll get if you click on the "Insult me again" button:

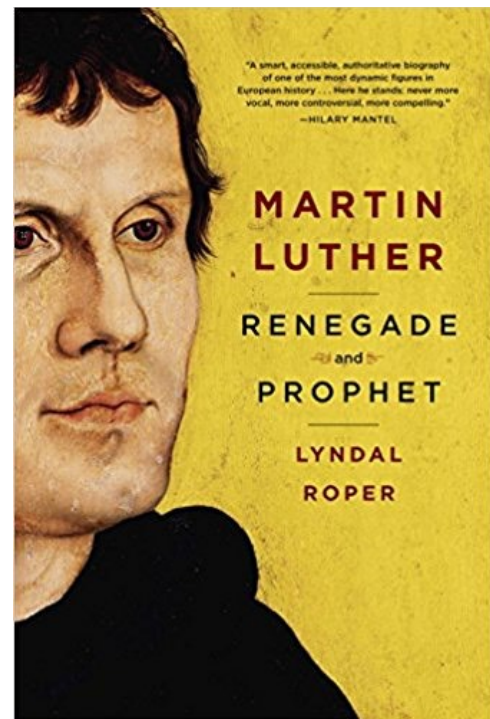
- You are like swine who indiscriminately devour everything. (p. 363 of *Luther's Works*, Vol. 40)
- "You have a priesthood of Satan." (p. 34 of *Luther's Works*, Vol. 40)
- You forgot to purge yourself with hellebore while you were preparing to fabricate this lie. (p. 290 of *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31)
- We despise your whorish impudence. (p. 205 of *Luther's Works*, Vol. 32).

Seriously, Luther died a few centuries too early because his insults would have been amazing on Twitter ([Hendrix xvii](#)).

But even without social media on his side, Luther's ideas went viral. His success in spreading his ideas is even more impressive since, five hundred years ago, **Wittenberg was a backwater town** of “muddy houses, unclean lanes, every path, step and street full of mud....” Luther's nailing of Ninety-five Theses into the church door makes for a dramatic story, but it was a different but equally paradigm-shifting innovation from 77 years earlier that made it possible for Luther to be more than just a voice crying in the wilderness.

In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg developed a printing process using moveable type. So while Church authorities were dragging their feet in response to Luther, copies of his Ninety-five Theses were spreading like wildfire. As the renowned Oxford University historian Lyndal Roper details in her excellent new biography [Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet](#) (Random House, 2017), “There was a huge readership for them, lay as well as clerical. In just two months they were known all over Germany, and soon beyond it” (Roper xviii).

Similarly, as historian Brad Gregory summarizes in his helpful overview [Rebel in the Ranks: Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the Conflicts That Continue to Shape Our World](#) (HarperOne, 2017), Luther was a significant catalyst for change, but what is often unappreciated is that the actual changes he caused were in many ways “inadvertent, improbable, and unintentional.” And “he never had control” of the Reformation he unleashed (Gregory 85). **Luther was an obscure, unknown figure who *intended* to make a courageous stand for reforming the Roman Catholic Church—but his impact was far beyond and far different from anything he wanted.** He ended up “sundering the unity of the Catholic Church forever, and can even be credited with starting the process of secularization in the West,” a result that



would have horrified him if he could have glimpsed the state of religion five hundred years later (Roper xviii).

The gap between Luther's intent and his impact has been compared to "a man in the darkness climbing a winding staircase in the steeple of an ancient cathedral. **In the blackness he reaches out to steady himself and his hand lays hold of a rope. He is startled to hear the clanging of a bell.**" The reverberations of that bell awakened people and initiated movements Luther opposed—and that bell still continues to echo today, including through our own tradition of Unitarian Universalism, whose roots are in the Radical wing of the Reformation .

So what was Luther upset about in the first place? One of the main triggers of his ire was the "indulgence scandal." According to medieval Roman Catholic theology, one could buy an indulgence to reduce divine punishment for sins. It was said that, "**As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs**" (Roper xxi). Luther did not believe the church had the authority to buy and sell salvation; rather, he held that salvation is granted by *God's grace*—irrespective of human action.

That may seem like an obscure theological debate today, but **it really mattered then, both economically (indulgences were a huge income stream for the Church) and psycho-spiritually: it would be difficult to overemphasize the amount of "religious despair and overwhelming sinfulness that Luther felt as a monk"** (62). Luther's religious conviction, which arose through studying a line from Paul's Letter to the Romans in the Bible—that salvation comes by God's grace, *not* human merit—was profoundly liberating for him. And from this perspective, the selling of indulgences appeared wrongheaded, abusive, and offensive.

To briefly consider the larger context of those times, it's not shocking for Luther to come to this insight. He was an *Augustinian* monk, from an order named after the 4th century saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who had himself, a thousand years before Luther was born, strongly emphasized *God's grace* over human merit. A turning point for Luther was deeply and repeatedly meditating on Romans 1:17, which says, "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"

Now, don't go tell Luther, but if you turn to the very next chapter in Romans 2:13, you'll find, "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the **doers of the**

law who will be justified” (Eisenbaum 29, 50). That sounds a lot like what Luther would have called “works righteousness.” (But if you tell him, he’ll just get upset and insult you!)

Now, from our vantage point five hundred years later, we get to ask odd questions, like whether old debates that many people were killed over still matter. So I was fascinated to discover that the Pew Research Center did a survey a few months ago to investigate the state of this argument today. On the question of whether humans are saved by “grace alone” or by “human merit,” it turns out that: **“About half of U.S. Protestants (52%) say both good deeds and faith in God are needed to get into heaven.”** That is, of course, a fine thing for Protestants to believe; the trick is, however, that this is “an historically *Catholic* position” and precisely the critical point of faith which Luther fought so hard to oppose. He believed strongly in *sola fide*, salvation by “faith alone.”

That Pew survey also showed that, among U.S. Protestants, **“52% say Christians should look for guidance from church teachings and traditions as well as from the Bible, the position held by the Catholic Church.”** Again, most Christians today believe that there’s nothing wrong with looking to multiple sources of authority. But it is ironic that so many Protestants embrace religious authority, considering that Luther struggled so mightily on behalf of the sole authority of scripture (*sola scriptura*—“scripture alone”).

As for us Unitarian Universalists, we tend to shift the paradigm altogether from theology to *ethics*. As the sayings go, **“We believe in deeds not creeds”—and “We don’t have to believe alike to love alike.”** And here in the early twenty-first century, as heirs to the insights of modern science, we tend to neither share Luther’s conclusions nor even feel the burden of asking the questions that felt so vital to him and his fellow reformers five hundred years ago. Nevertheless, we can at least in some senses respect that he had the courage of his convictions.

In 1521, four years after he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door in Wittenberg, Luther was called to stand before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500 - 1558). And before the emperor’s throne—with a cardinal shouting at him, “Recant! Acknowledge your error, this is what the Pope wants!”—Luther would not be cowed (Roper 104-105). He said, **“As long as these Scripture passages stand, I cannot do otherwise, for I know that one must obey**

God rather than men.... I do not want to be compelled to affirm something contrary to my conscience” (Roper 103):

For a commoner to stand up to the emperor and the most powerful princes in the empire, and to resist the might of the Church, was as extraordinary as it was unforgettable. A defining event, it probably did more to win people over to the Reformation, and shape their hopes and expectations, than did his theology....

(xxiv)

Most famously, his stance was distilled into the famous line attributed to him: “Here I stand, I can do no other” (240).

Today, even if intolerance to religious pluralism remains alive and well in parts of our country, it is still relatively easy here in the U.S. to “build your own theology.” But the consequences for independent religious inquiry—and choices—were much more dire in Luther’s day. The emperor decided that, “It hardly seemed likely that one monk could be right and centuries of learned theologians could be wrong,” so **he declared Luther an outlaw, forbade anyone to house him or eat with him, and banned the sale, reading, possession, or printing of his works”** (175, 182).

Since Luther risked so much to reform perceived corruptions, it is a cautionary tale for all of us to realize how much the longterm results of his actions were impacted by The Law of Unintended Consequences. Sometimes your actions produce the *precise result* you anticipate; sometimes one very different, or even, an opposite result Other times the outcome can be significantly *better* or *worse* than you expect. The truth is that five hundred years later, **“Martin Luther would be horrified by most of the long-term outcomes of the Reformation”** (Gregory 1)

Luther’s *intent* was to make the church, “society, and culture more thoroughly Christian, not less” (Gregory 214). And he meant his particular understanding of Christianity, which he honestly thought was the one, true, correct understanding. He hoped that claiming the freedom to interpret scripture and tradition according to the best of his ability—over against the teachings of the Church authorities—would lead to everyone agreeing with him. He did not foresee **the actual result: a proliferation of other individuals claiming the same freedom as he—and**

arriving at different conclusions.

On that point, Luther is often deeply mischaracterized as an advocate for every individual having freedom of conscience:

Luther was not “modern”.... What he meant by “freedom” and by “conscience” were not what we mean by these words now.... It meant our capacity to know *with God*, a knowledge he believed to be objective truth. (Roper 411)

Because he thought he had the one true interpretation, he was willing to risk everything many times over—including being martyred—to convince others to join that position which he viewed as most righteous. But **instead of everyone jumping on his bandwagon, he opened a “Pandora’s box of competing biblical interpretations” and “rival versions of Protestantism”** (Gregory 215).

The word Protestant was coined in 1529, and buried within it is the word “protest” (Gregory 88). **Unitarian Universalism is one of the results you get when you keep pushing the boundaries of protest—away from the control of “tradition,” “community,” and “hierarchy” and toward both reason and individual experience.** And I would be remiss if I didn’t spend at least a few minutes describing what our early Unitarian forebears were up to during this time.

I’ll limit myself to only one exemplar today: **Michael Servetus** (1511 - 1553)—then revisit a second, Francis Dávid (c. 1520 - 1588), in January, when we will celebrate the 450th Anniversary of an **historic act of religious tolerance from history’s only Unitarian king.** Both Servetus and Dávid were born within a few years of Luther nailing his Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg church door.

As Luther had done, Servetus read the Bible for himself. But in contrast to what Luther thought would happen—that everyone would become convinced of the same conclusions Luther reached—**what stood out most to Servetus was that the word “Trinity” was not even in the Bible.** He was shocked to learn that Trinitarianism—a major source of what was keeping Christians *divided from* Jews and Muslims—could be viewed as a non-essential, post-biblical doctrine.

However, in the same way that Luther naively thought that people would agree with his interpretation, Servetus thought that people would celebrate learning that belief in the Trinity might be viewed as optional. **In 1533, he published a book with the not-very-subtle title of *On the Errors of the Trinity*.** His intent was to tear down a wall needlessly separating the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Tragically, his views led him to be burned at the stake by John Calvin for the heresies of anti-Trinitarianism and anti-paedobaptism (Bainton 140).

As many of you know, that word heresy comes from the Greek word for “choice.” A heretic is nothing more than one who *chooses for themselves* what to believe instead of accepting what others tell them. Ironically, many of the Reformers, including Luther and Calvin, did *not* emphasize the doctrine of the Trinity. Nevertheless, **they were unwilling to grant the same freedom to the proto-Unitarians that they themselves sought from Rome** (Howe 2). That same unwillingness to grant the freedom of innovation to others than you want for yourself also led to Francis Dávid’s imprisonment and martyrdom, but I’ll say more about him in January.

For now, five hundred years after that fateful day of October 31, 1517, when one individual dared resist the religious powers that be, “We find ourselves in our present situation of hyperpluralism because individualism and liberalism have succeeded so well.” And **here is the truly perverse result from Luther’s perspective: his seeking of an “individual freedom of religion” is precisely what helped created the possibility for an individual to choose secularism or atheism, that is, “freedom from religion.”**

In Luther’s Day, Christendom dominated the Western world. Today, despite lingering effects of what is sometimes called “Christian Supremacy,” an individual can for the most part: believe whatever you want and live however you wish within the laws of the state, and so can everyone else. That’s both a great blessing and a big problem. So **here we are: so very free and so very far away from Martin Luther and what he started in a small town in Germany five hundred years ago.** (Gregory 269) Today we UUs, heirs to the Radical wing of the Reformation, embrace in our 4th Principle, the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” In that spirit, I invite you to turn to Hymn #113. As we sing, I invite you to notice the way that its lyrics point us to the ways in which we

continue to live into many of the same questions that motivated the earliest Protestant Reformers five hundred years ago:

- Where do we find *religious community*?
- What do we consider *scripture*?
- What do we mean by “*sacred*” and “*divine*”?
- What is *holy* to us?
- And what are our dreams of *beloved community*?

We may not always agree on the answers, but together, we can live the questions