Which Luther? A God-obsessed seeker: A God-obsessed seeker

by Martin E. Marty in the February 10, 2004 issue

I have lived with Martin Luther for 76 years, since I was christened with the reformer's name. My father was a Lutheran teacher and organist. Lutheran chorales have provided the *cantus firmus* for my life. But in only in the past few years, as I worked on a short biography of Luther, did the reformer become a constant companion.

When I told people what I was working on, they invariably expressed curiosity but also strong opinions, often drawing on modern stereotypes of Luther. Their reactions were useful, since they taught me some of the ways Luther is viewed these days. I had to decide which of the different accounts of Luther I was going to focus on, and which Luther I would have as my primary companion.

Many people know of Luther as a violently anti-Jewish (especially anti-rabbi) writer. I didn't want to let this Luther in my study, but I couldn't keep him out. He rants loudly, especially in his later years when he was an equal-opportunity denouncer of Jews, papists, Turks, Anabaptists and even Wittenbergers. He was slightly worse on this score than most humanists of his day. His anti-Judaism was not racial; he welcomed Jewish converts to Christianity. It was religious, which may be worse. Luther thought the world was ending soon, and Jews were rejecting the gospel. As much as I might not have wanted to hear him, I had to let this Luther speak.

A second well-known Luther also got his foot in the door, though I wanted to hold him back. This is the Luther who was more fearful of anarchy than of authoritarianism, despite his own rejection of authoritarianism. Luther saw anarchy in the uprising of peasants, who had thought Luther would take their side in the Peasants' War. He called on princes to smite and stab the peasants. The princes didn't need much encouragement. Later he asked for restraint and penitence from the murderous princes—but that was too little and too late. In his *Table Talk* he showed massive insensitivity when crediting his preaching as being the instrument

that put the peasants down. Up to 100,000 lost their lives. When East Germany marked Luther's 500th birthday in 1983, officials played up Luther as a man of the people. In this case, hardly.

A third modern complaint about Luther is that he was a misogynist. It's true that he was not a modern feminist. But then there weren't many modern feminists until a half-century ago. Luther is an important partner to our conversations on sexuality and gender. He rejected clerical celibacy as the only model for the religious life, he married a former nun and enjoyed an affectionate marriage, and he stood in awe of his wife Katherine's abilities. He included girls in both Christian and practical education. These are signs of a Luther who, while a man of his times, moved beyond their boundaries.

Another common view of Luther is influenced by Erik Erikson's best-selling 1958 psychobiography *Young Man Luther*. Erikson portrays the reformer as shaped by his abusive father and his own gastrointestinal troubles, and he ascribes Luther's "discovery" of the gospel to a session *in cloaca*—in the toilet room. Scholars who know more about the language than I claim that Luther's abbreviation "*in cl*" more likely refers to nothing more than the cloister. Erikson remains worth reading, but his post-Freudian account of Luther was long ago demolished by historians who found his reading of sources to be biased. As the reputation of psychobiography has declined, so has the reputation of Erikson's book. I waved this semifictional Luther along toward the clinic or bathroom and allowed the real one to stay. Still, any reader of Luther can't help doing some psychological probing given Luther's references to depression.

I have always told students that when they pronounce judgment on historical figures, they should do so in the light of possibilities in that person's circumstances. Otherwise the judgment is based on nothing more than their having been born later than the person they are studying.

So who is "my" Luther? I decided there is no point in conversing with and writing about Luther unless one deals with his profound religious experience. He makes most sense to me as a wrestler with God—indeed, as a God- obsessed seeker of certainty and assurance in a time of social trauma and of personal anxiety, beginning with his own. However you choose to explain his life, it makes sense chiefly as one rooted in and focused by an obsession with God: God present and God absent, God too near and God too far, the God of wrath and the God of love, God

weak and God almighty, God real and God as illusion, God hidden and God revealed.

Luther was often paralyzed by what he called *Anfechtungen*, an untranslatable word that I would define this way: the spiritual assaults that keep people from finding certainty in a loving God—attacks of doubt and near-despair sent not from the devil but, quite possibly, from God himself.

The God-centered Luther might be a hard sell these days, when people are more comfortable speaking of “spirituality” than of God. But the more I read of the Luther who sought assurance (he abhorred spiritual “security”) and looked around at the victims of a world marked by insecurity, the more this theme made sense. And I think it is a theme that makes sense to non-Christians and nonreligous people too, who struggle with their own despair, and their own passionate search for meaning and security in an insecure world.

“My” Luther was like Luther’s Jacob, who is portrayed in Genesis as wrestling with God. (The word for Jacob’s wresting partner, *ish*, could mean man, or God, or the evil part of Jacob himself.) Late in his life Luther preached and wrote on Jacob, and offered this advice: “So you should reflect: ‘I am not alone in being tempted concerning the wrath of God, predestination, and unbelief.” All the saints experienced that. Luther pointed out a line in the Jacob story I had never noticed: “In this passage it is expressly stated, ‘You have prevailed with God,’ not only ‘you have striven with God’ but ‘you have also conquered.’” This is a God who “has surrendered and is bound to and by the divine promise.”

From that shocking conviction of faith, Luther was able to go forth teaching, preaching, raising a family, running from authorities, sulking in protective custody in two castles, translating the Bible, writing hymns, eating and drinking with students and colleagues, maladministering the new congregations of evangelicals, struggling for freedom, devising pragmatic polities for the churches, becoming a public and political figure, defying pope and emperor and developing a Christ-centered theology. All the while, he was never an isolated individual but a catholic Christian, devoted to the sacraments, surrounded and supported by other Christians. On the day before he died in apparent peace, he called himself a “beggar” before God.

In my Luther the familiar theological topics make an appearance: justification by grace through faith (which is linked with one of his favorite images, that of a “joyful exchange” of identities with Christ); the forgiveness of sins; the authority of the

Word; the human as “sinner and at the same time justified.” But all these formulations derive from a God-preoccupied rhetorician.

The Luther I lived with always took chances. He seemed to raise the temperature in the room. Often I wished that my companion had a bit more of Erasmus in him. He could have been more civil, less sure of himself, less explosive in his vocabulary of denunciation. He could have been more conciliatory as he dealt with others in the church catholic, more moderate when compromise might have helped hold things together.

But had he been mild and concessive, he would not have been able to speak of his inner wrestling in a way that helped others. He would not have manifested such courage in his struggles for freedom and in his readiness to see the foundations of Christendom crack for the sake of human freedom before God.

Luther had influence in politics, education, economics and the arts. But if one fails to see that his impact was rooted in his fundamental dealings with God, then one misses the whole point.