CrossMark

*Review Essay**

A Luther for 2017

Ralph Keen
University of Illinois at Chicago

The history of the Reformation begins, and often ends, with Martin Luther. The history of Luther's biography is a chronicle of the perspectives from which Luther has been approached. Throughout the twentieth century, with few exceptions, his greatness was accepted as being beyond question, with each interpreter offering a new explanation for the Reformer's heroic place in European religious history. Scott Hendrix has been contributing to Luther studies since *Luther and the Papacy* (1981); his *Short Introduction* (2010) and an earlier biography (2009) are marked by lucidity and accuracy. His careful work on the little-known Urbanus Rhegius (1489–1541) and other Reformers has brought these significant participants in the expansion of religious reform out of the shadows of historical oblivion. For care with material and clarity of exposition, Hendrix is well positioned to write the American Luther biography of this anniversary year.

The biographer of Luther faces a challenge reserved for those taking on the lives of iconic figures: the problem of differentiation. The details of Luther's life and the magnitude of his legacy are too well known to allow space for discoveries that would substantially change the dominant narrative. There have been more changes in the reading audience for biographies of religious leaders: assumptions regarding a secular culture in the twenty-first century, questions over the relevance of events of a half millennium ago, and diminished general familiarity with the issues at stake at the dawn of modernity all occupy the mind of a scholar attempting a new Life of Luther. Biographies celebrating the quincentennial of Luther's birth (1983) tended to assume levels of historical and theological literacy that cannot

* Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) 368 pp, $22.00 pb. Page references appear in parentheses in the text.

HTR 110:4 (2017) 627–634

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781601700030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

be assumed in today's educated lay reader. Hendrix presents Luther in a manner accessible to contemporary readers by anticipating these concerns and providing the explanatory context that a broader readership might need. In the process, he crafts a Luther for the twenty-first century reader, a Luther who serves as a lens into an era imperfectly understood by most.

Contextualizing Young Luther

Luther's life, as Hendrix states (xiii), is divided by the year 1521, when he became a Reformer: that is, the leader of a movement that would grow by its own momentum. Accordingly, the book is made up of two parts: "Pathways to Reform," describing Luther's progress to 1521; and "Pursuit of a Vision," the narrative of the Reformer's work and influence. We are presented with Luther's origins in rich detail (Hendrix is aware that we have more documentation for Luther than for most of his contemporaries). Hendrix introduces readers to the family background, already a well-known part of Luther's story, and to the townspeople and schoolmasters, as well as a few of the parish clergy, who formed the extended community of the young Luther. We have descriptions of the landscape Luther traveled: a touch that brings him literally to ground level. The Luther who populates these chapters is an ordinary young man, the beneficiary of superior schooling and the vehicle of his parents' ambitions, altogether not very different from his contemporaries who were able, via parentage or patronage, to enter the ranks of the learned in church and school.

The close attention that Hendrix pays to Luther's university education is especially welcome, in large part because Luther's struggles over a vocational decision took place in the course of his training for the legal career his parents wanted for him. Hendrix describes Erfurt as a center of humanistic and theological work, where Aristotle was read seriously and Greek and Hebrew had recently entered the curriculum. The humanist circle at Erfurt included individuals who would later become significant in Luther's work: Georg Spalatin, Johann Lang, and Justus Jonas were contemporaries of Luther's at Erfurt. In these pages, we have a detailed description of life in the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Luther's ordination, and his relocation to Wittenberg, where the young professor labored over Aristotle and Peter Lombard in his effort to do everything correctly.

Recognizing that those to whom Luther is little more than a name and the eponym of a denomination require a certain amount of orientation to the subject, Hendrix is careful to identify the names and places that intersect Luther's life. Thus, this biography is equipped with maps and a comprehensive prosopography. Other accommodations to an American readership not fully at home in European church history include explanations of distances between cities in miles and kilometers and comparisons of populations in Germany with those of American cities (e.g., 9).

Conscious of earlier attempts to explain Luther by means of psychoanalytic theory, Hendrix depicts young Martin as a normal child of his time, the product of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781601700030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

a family entering (almost entering, we might say) an early bourgeoisie. We have in this narrative a Luther who lives among others, friends and foes and students and ordinary villagers, part of a community, or a dovetailing matrix of communities, populated by persons like himself: earnest, anxious, troubled, and hopeful. Hendrix is adept at capturing life in Wittenberg in the early sixteenth century. Wittenberg was a new university, contending with growing pains and questions about reputation as an upstart far from the established humanist centers of Europe. Thus the strength of the university rested on a small number of bold individuals: Lang, Staupitz, and Karlstadt were critical, if fractious, figures in an educational reform that quickly transformed the new academy from being an extension of Erfurt to becoming a center of attention and a magnet for students from across Europe.

The political order of Luther's time was a culture that has left mere traces in secular modernity. Hendrix guides his readers through the often-intricate system in which princes of the land and princes of the church, usually acting in concert and frequently related, guided the people in their civic and religious lives. Had Luther's patron Frederick not been such an avid collector of relics, Luther's rebuke of indulgences might not have taken the form that it did. Without Frederick's protection and the adoption of evangelical reform by other territorial rulers, the course of church history would have followed a different path. The reader senses the momentousness of Luther's encounters and correspondence with these rulers without Hendrix's arguing for their importance.

While hereditary monarchs may be a species with which secular American readers are unfamiliar, the Roman church and the papacy are very much in the public eye. Hendrix describes the Roman church of Luther's time in such a way that it serves as the ecclesiastical backdrop for the new reform movement; and he does this without exaggerating the corruption of the late-medieval church or depicting its hierarchy as villains. At the same time, he does not shy away from explaining how Luther could draw on late-medieval characterizations of the church to describe the pope as the Antichrist (88). No one can understand Luther's work and thought without a grasp of the economic and diplomatic operations of the papacy, a realm in which confessional historiography occasionally endorses the polemical assessments of earlier generalizations. Much to his credit, Hendrix avoids this danger by remaining focused on the documentary evidence and providing what the reader needs to know about the Roman Church in order to understand Luther's opposition to it.

The Later Luther

The second part, longer by a half than the first, chronicles Luther's life after his decisive break and taking on "a fresh identity and a new purpose" (114). Hendrix sees the experience at the Wartburg Castle, and not the Diet of Worms, as the turning-point of Luther's work: the condemnation was a signal to Luther that he was henceforth to live in a new relationship to Christ (115). Among Luther's first

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781601700030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

tasks was liturgical reform, work in which he knew he and his colleagues would fall short of perfection but must nevertheless be prepared to "sin boldly" (122)—one of several instances in which familiar slogans are set in their proper contexts. These early years of reform saw major shifts in the alignment of Luther's allies and adversaries, some of them no doubt the result of Luther's new sense of purpose.

The expansion of reform during these decades is presented as much from the ground up as from the top down: the revised liturgy was accompanied by spiritual guides in the vernacular, new definitions for institutions like marriage that the people had imagined unchangeable, and devotional works that the laity had performed for merit. Luther addressed the economic life of the community with the idea of the common chest, and he addressed its educational needs by advocating for new schools under civil authority. In Hendrix's telling, the practices and institutions associated with the Reformation did not just happen: they emerged from conversations and confrontations with others. And Luther did not compose texts simply as the ideas came to him: they were prompted by specific events, many of them described here for the first time in a volume of this sort.

At the center of Luther's work was concern for the spiritual and moral edification of the people. In order to focus on pastoral elements of Luther's work such as church visitations and the catechetical process, Hendrix draws his reader's attention to the slow and difficult work of replacing the old order with the new, one that is more attentive to the needs of the people. The human side of Luther's work is evident in Luther's handling of many cases calling for moral and pastoral judgment, like instances of adultery, nuns leaving their convents, and the bigamy of Philip of Hesse. Hendrix's telling of these episodes is grounded in thorough work with the epistolary record and other documents frequently ignored.

Notwithstanding his activity as the center of an extended network of persons of every station, Luther stood alone as a figure of controversy. It is here that Luther's religious positions are described in some detail, since these were the targets of opposition from within and without the evangelical camp.

While the question of Luther's continued relevance may be debated, there can be no doubt that he remains the subject of wide interest, and this interest is predominantly focused on the controversies that surrounded him. Luther was a fierce combatant with adversaries on all sides, and a thorough and honest biographer will offer an account of unsuccessful disputes as well as triumphs over opponents. In contrast to biographers who have accentuated Luther's victories, Hendrix offers a chronicle of the embroilments in which Luther was continually engaged—sometimes defensively (Worms), sometimes agonistically (his repudiation of the militant peasants). Karlstadt looms largest in the earlier discussions, but Albert of Mainz, Zwingli, and various Anabaptists also make appearances. Disputes over baptism, the Eucharist, and revisions of liturgy are all described even-handedly if sometimes perfunctorily, together inevitably producing an image of Luther as a man besieged. The impression is an accurate one, and one in which the heroic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781601700030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

figure of well-known episodes comes to resemble other controversial theologians and religious leaders, similarly embattled during their lifetimes but over time vindicated in their struggles.

The most delicate topic for any biographer of Luther concerns the Reformer's attitude to Jews and Judaism. Depending on which earlier biography one reads, Luther was either filled with hate, typical of his age, or in declining health and mental faculties. That is, Luther's attitude to Judaism represented either the authentic Luther or a false one, each position posing challenges to the fair-minded biographer. By remaining focused on the personal as opposed to the heroic view of Luther, Hendrix is able to describe views in which Luther is at his least appealing. He describes Luther as the heir of a Christian anti-Judaism that originated in the Apostolic period, operating with an understanding of the two covenants that made it impossible for him to acknowledge the validity of a law-based religious culture alongside the covenant of grace.

Hendrix explains that Luther's anti-Jewish sentiments, especially the 1543 screed that earned him a place in the history of anti-Semitism, were the product of exchanges with others, some of them converts from Judaism who became antagonistic toward it, for whom tolerance of Jewish communities in a Christian society was a highly troublesome prospect. Luther emerges not so much as the product of his era as someone participating in a fierce polemical debate over whether the Jews could or would convert to Christianity—and whether they were worth the Evangelicals' effort. Given Luther's capacity for vituperation, from which none of his adversaries was spared, the anti-Jewish rhetoric is of a piece with his statements about Turks, Sabbatarians, and (especially toward the end of his life) the papacy. Aware of the tendency to draw a straight line from 1543 to 1943, Hendrix states that "Luther's recommendations can hardly be called mercy of any stripe, but neither were they roundups leading to wholesale murder like the Holocaust" (276).

Luther in His Own Words

Scott H. Hendrix has been an active researcher into the work of Luther and other Reformers, whom he has avoided treating as mere extensions of Luther at Wittenberg. Thus, he is able to depict Luther as a leader of a wide-ranging network of clergy and theologians (and civil rulers) intent on addressing the flaws in Christian teaching and practice, and his account offers a glimpse into everyday life in a variety of settings: church, university, court, and his own and his friends' households.

Hendrix sets Luther within the quotidian life of the towns and schools in which he lived and worked, providing details from the lives of ordinary characters Luther knew and describing aspects of the landscape through which Luther moved. In these pages, we have a life-sized Luther in place of the larger-than-life Luther of Great Man narratives. The Reformer is thus made accessible to readers skeptical of treatments in which a single individual is presented as the personification of the age. Aspects of Hendrix's narrative depict Luther at his most human during

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781601700030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

episodes in which he is most often seen in a heroic frame. His vowing to "put a hole in that drum" (58) as he embarks on his attack against Tetzel, for example, adds a colloquial touch to a pivotal moment in church history. And Tetzel's equally colloquial response, "throw that heretic Luther into the fire" (65), signals the beginning of the opposition from the Roman Church.

The biographer of Luther must determine the relation of thought to action in the narrative, for without attention to his religious ideas, Luther's claim to historical importance is incompletely understood. However, describing the characteristics of Luther's thought beyond the familiar foundations of justification by faith and the three "solas" requires a measure of explanatory legerdemain. The risk of veering into technicalities of interest only to specialists in the history of theology easily tempts a biographer to avoid the theological dimension altogether or to limit oneself to those well-known foundations already too familiar. Hendrix successfully weaves the theological aspect into the biographical narrative by stopping at critical moments, such as 1530, to explain the significance of the Diet of Augsburg—in this instance giving due credit to Melanchthon for his role in the proceedings. While the reader might not learn the full shape and nuances of the Reformer's thought, there is enough description of argument in these episodes to provide a sense of what was at stake and what the major positions in opposition were. As a result, one here has more the story of controversies about religious ideas than an analysis of those ideas, a compromise of sorts between theological exposition and flesh-and-blood biography.

In Chapter 11, Hendrix is lucid and succinct in his depiction of the dispute between Erasmus and Luther on the will. He describes this as a turning-point in the relationship between evangelical doctrine and the humanism out of which it emerged, a rupture in a unity that had made Luther's initial work possible. While stating that the subject at issue "was theologically important for both men, but the controversy had little impact on their lives or on the reformation" (171), Hendrix deftly describes a difference in the two anthropological positions in such a way as to clarify a critical departure from the Scholastic theology according to which the will was free in order to merit salvation.

Luther was a biblical interpreter, a fact that many minimize in the interest of keeping the focus on his work as a Reformer. Hendrix appreciates the role of scripture in Luther's theology and explains the exegetical task underlying the reform program. The question of Luther's relation to humanism is carefully addressed with attention to Luther's proximate influences, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Erasmus (whose work, apart from the debate on the will, receives only moderate scrutiny). Without burdening the reader with detailed descriptions of the biblical humanism that prepared the foundation for Luther's work, Hendrix makes clear both the extent to which the Bible guided the early Luther and the way the Church Fathers, Augustine in particular, served as models in the recovery of a scriptural message. The concentration on Luther's life and actions has meant less attention to his work with the Bible than one may find in other biographical treatments; but

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781601700030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

it is a commonplace that the best introduction to Luther's scriptural interpretation is the commentaries and sermons of Luther himself.

A Luther for 2017

Celebrations of the quincentennial of the dawn of the Reformation have put the focus on Luther more than on other Reformers, as is to be expected. Questions about why (and whether) the Reformation matters have focused attention on a culture well-nigh unrecognizable in its remoteness from the global and secular twenty-first century. Regardless of the terms used and the theories of the origins of the various Reformation movements, no account of early Protestant rhetoric is complete without attention to the work of theologians beyond Wittenberg.

If there is a dominant biographical narrative for Luther, it has followed the Great Man approach to history. The story of the former monk who overturned the monopoly of medieval Catholicism and ushered in the modern age has run its course, having served both political and confessional agendas. Merely from the evident force of his personality, Luther lends himself to being portrayed as larger than life, and his influence is neither enhanced nor diminished by how later generations assess him. He can, however, be captured in the more realistic colors of one strong yet flawed, determined yet troubled. Most importantly, he can be set within a place and time populated by others, helpers and detractors, ordinary individuals active at an extraordinary time. Hendrix refers to "a myth of Luther the hero who single-handedly started the reformation. Nothing could be further from the truth" (33).

More than most recent Luther biographies, Hendrix's narrative uses the life of the Reformer as a way to present a little-known era. On the first page, we are told that the dating of letters followed the calendar of saints' days. In depicting the contrasts between Luther's world and that of secular and technological modernity, Hendrix participates in the historiographical movement that critiques the assumption of progress from an enchanted world to the current materialistic one. There is little nostalgia for aspects of this world, however: Hendrix exposes the scientific ignorance of Luther's time and the insularity of a culture only slowly learning about newly-discovered regions.

Appealing vignettes of members of Luther's circle reveal aspects of Luther's personality and the daily lives of his colleagues. That Luther asked his own family to stand in for Melanchthon's at the latter's marriage to Katherine Krapp (96) adds a touch of charm to the story of the two theologians' relationship. A singular strength of the narrative is the use of small details to fill out the stories of specific episodes in Luther's life, such as the fact that the person who took care of Luther at the Wartburg Castle was one of the two who had come upon Luther in the forest on his way there (110). And after his compact accounts of the 1519 Leipzig Disputation, Hendrix mentions that Luther wrote to Tetzel, then close to death, assuring him that he should not feel solely responsible for the controversy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781601700030X Published online by Cambridge University Press

over indulgences (82). These are small touches that reveal a Luther seldom seen outside the correspondence and the Table Talk.

Scott Hendrix gives us an intelligible Luther in more than one sense. This is Luther's life presented in accessible terms and without condescension, with the social and biographical context that modern general readers may need to situate Luther in his world. Hendrix's biography is best read as a historical commentary to Luther's writings. He adroitly provides the names and places and issues at hand in the early decades of evangelical reform.

How could one write a biography of Luther and add anything new? The question of differentiation mentioned at the outset haunts all biographers of Luther, especially in a year that has seen a remarkable proliferation of such biographies. Hendrix's treatment stands apart from the others (each of which has its own distinguishing particularities) in the care with which he captures Luther at eye level, as a product of his age in a struggle for a new religious vision. The "visionary reformer" of the subtitle is not the lofty visionary of heroic narratives but a believer and priest and scholar with a new vision for the Church.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S001781601700030X Published online by Cambridge University Press