

Like Lighting: An Investigation into Bainton and Marius's Account of Luther through Biography

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Like Lighting:
An Investigation into Bainton and Marius's Account of Luther through Biography

Autumn Loucks
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Thesis: Synthesizing and critically analyzing Roland Bainton and Richard Marius' biographical approach to Luther, I will argue that Martin Luther's theological development of *Justification of Faith* was partially triggered as a method that absolved Luther of his religious fears.

However, to come to this conclusion is not difficult when the evidence is weighed, what does need to be done is to create a separation between two narratives presiding over Luther, one that is born from apologetics, and the other from a critical skepticism. To clarify, in both, there exist wisdom. From apologetics, such as Roland Bainton, while keeping the sanctity of the religion present, a critical defense made from scholarship is useful for preventing growing waves of criticism to topple over the subject. Apologetics often, while not denying the severity of the damage done in the wake of the subject, in this case the Reformation, they do try to take in account of the history, politics, and development of the social conscious of the time to make their case. For those who ascribe to a more skeptical edge, such as Richard Marius, accountability is a topic that must be addressed. Regardless of the contribution the Reformation is said to have, the consequences were drastic and must be looked upon critically.

While these two have merits, they also have their faults, mainly coinciding with their motives. All biographers have a motive for what they write. For Roland Bainton, a historian during the early twenty-first century on the Protestant Reformation, he wished to lift the name of Luther. Although he authored thirty-two books, '*Here I Stand*' is by far his most successful and well-known biography, so much so that it has even been used as a standard textbook. It is for this reason that I will be using '*Here I Stand*' for this paper. The book was published in 1950, a time when anti-Protestant rhetoric was beginning to rise. America had been founded on much

anti-Catholic sentiment however, by the fifties, a new rise of anti-protestant counter rhetoric had developed. Luther himself was thought of fondly by American Protestants however his teachings and life was mainly in the hands of scholars or to be used for anti-Catholic rhetoric. Despite the sentimental attitudes of many American Protestants, Luther himself was not held to be in popular concern. Well written in a story type narrative, Roland Bainton's, *'Here I Stand'* grew to great popularity for it's easy to read and academic look on Luther. Where it fails is in it's observation of Luther's attacks on the Jews. Richard Marius criticized Bainton for "in his efforts to make the best of Luther [Bainton] declared that Luther's view of the Jews 'was entirely religious and by no means racial'"¹. That is, that Bainton worked to downgraded the hatred spun by Luther by characterizing his works such as *The Jews and Their Lies* as nonracial anti-semitism. While my paper's topic does not extend to the topic of Luther's views on Jews, it must be mentioned now to clarify the type of apologetics used by Bainton. For most of my paper however, I wish to illustrate how Bainton's sympathies are expressed.

Richard Marius takes a different approach to Luther, rather than preserving the sanctity of such a famous cherished man, Marius states that Luther was a man "whose complications and contradictions were numerous and baffling"² and that "Luther represents catastrophe in the history of Western civilization"³ also going as far to say that because of Luther's existence, "Europe was strewn with the slaughtered corpses of people who would have lived normal lives if Luther had never lived at all"⁴ needless to say that Marius' views have been controversial however his writings on Luther were a great success nonetheless. Which could suggest the need

¹ Richard Marius, *"Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death"*

² Marius, preface PXII

³ Marius, preface PXI

⁴ Marius P485.

or desire for such a work. Marius wished to look at Luther without covering over his faults, something he felt was common, as well as hold Luther accountable, something he felt was uncommon. However, Marius tends to cross into simply being vicious in his accounts of Luther. His choice to end his biography of Luther's life decades before his death⁵ does not allow the more personable and human side of Luther that is apparent in his last years to be revealed. At times, Marius offers too much commentary and too little charity when interpreting Luther.

Ultimately, what I am trying to get across is that both contain a functioning method of scholarship however, they both are self-serving even as they both work in defense of something. Either defending the subject or defending who has been harmed due to the subject by keeping the subject accountable. Although, for Marius, accountability does not seem to be the only agenda. They work inversely against each other. But what if they didn't? What if the key aspects of their criticism were combined to create a method that not only separated the myth from the man, but still reserved a respectful tone? In other words, one that removed the sanctity but still treated the subject as something to be handled in consideration, not condemnation. That is what I would like to suggest. A look into Martin Luther, not as the victor of the reformation who set the people free from the Catholic church, nor as the bringer of ultimate woe and death to Europe for centuries to come. Rather, my paper will take the middle road to suggest that Martin Luther was a man, before anything, who was both brilliant in theology and unstable in emotionality.

⁵ Marius, preface P XII

Using the New Approach

For the scope of my paper, I will not be scavenging through every part of Luther's life, rather I will be referring to the time span between Luther entering the monastery through his tower scene, mainly, as I do not find the grand relevance of his early childhood in his later achievements. While there is much to say about this part of Luther's life, only a Freudian psychoanalysis would find anything of greater importance. Also, while on the subject of approaches, I will try to avoid using an approach that is too modern, something Richard Marius tries to avoid but uses nonetheless when he diagnoses Luther with a fear solely of death. While understanding the character during the context of his time is vital, I will try not to encapsulate Luther solely by his time period. I do this as this method often is equipped as a shield from modern judgements about a character's conduct during his life. While context is important, when used as a shield and sanctity as a sword, this approach gives justification for the character's actions, rather than explanation. For this paper, I will be searching for an explanation for Luther's development of *Justification By Faith* theology and I will be arguing that his unstable emotional state is one cause. I will therefore be stripping the narrative of the sanctity that is usually ascribed to the *Tower Experience* when Luther is inspired by his new readings of Paul.

Rather than Luther coming to some holy inspired epiphany that rang true to the Christ of the gospel, I argue that Luther's interpretation, while still grand, was to some level self serving in the way that it soothed his specific spiritual woes. This is not to detract from his "discovery" but rather approach it from the perspective that in some cases we find what we search for. Whereas Luther is accounted as a brilliant, holy man-which he certainly was- his interpretation was not discovered from this brilliance but rather from his own need to satisfy his insecurities.

Entry In The Monastery

Luther's entrance into the monastery could be taken as the beginning point of Luther's true career. I would argue that Luther's joining is an indication of the internal struggles that ultimately came to be revealed in his "discovery" of the gospel truth. Bainton's illustration of Luther's entrance into the monastery is expressed through vivid storytelling. Distinctly different from Marius's simply factual retellings. What makes Bainton's version of events so powerful is how his storytelling abilities frame Luther already as a being with sanctly qualities, even when fearing for his life. The dramatized telling of Luther almost being struck by lightning is one that is highly effective in its ability to evoke certain moods surrounding Luther's entry. What makes Bainton's piece interesting is that compared to Marius, he does significantly less arguing. While he makes claims and supports them, he mainly uses his method of storytelling to expand on the events of Luther's life as an effort to capture the essence of the mood during the particular scene. This is evident in his description of Luther's entry into the monastery. His is the excerpt on the left with Marius's telling of the same scene on the right.

The immediate occasion of his resolve to enter the cloister was the unexpected encounter with death on that sultry July day in 1505... As he returned home from school after a visit to his parents, sudden lightning struck to the earth. In that single flash he saw the denouement of the drama of existence. There was God the all-terrible, Christ the inexorable, and all the leering fiends springing from their lurking places in pond and wood that with sardonic cachinnations they might seize his shock of curly hair and bolt him into hell. It was no wonder that he cried out to his father's saint,

It [the story of Luther entering the monastery] is found in his table talk of July 16, 1539, thirty-four years after the event. He remarked casually that fourteen days earlier had been the anniversary of the day he had been caught in a storm near Stotternheim, a village near Erfurt. In his terror before lightning, he cried out, "Help, St. Anne, I will become a monk"⁷

patroness of miners, “St. Anne help me! I will become a monk.”⁶

I placed these excerpts to illustrate the simple difference in writing styles. The styles showcased here are used throughout the entire lengths of their biographies. While Bainton’s account obviously is more dramatized, it does serve an important purpose for which I believe should be preserved. Firstly, it is engaging to the audience and with his motivations to enlarge the common popularity of the man-or myth- Luther, his method is effective. He joined in the construction of Luther as a folk hero. But secondly, it also provides a certain context for the narrative. In Bainton’s characterization of the lightning as revealing the all-terrible and frightening Lord to Luther, he does in fact capture the fear that incited Luther to call out to St. Anne in the first place. With Luther’s intense “Terror of The Holy” as Bainton phrased it⁸, this dramatization does in fact work to illustrate the underlying tones that are relevant to understanding Luther’s state of mind.

That is why I view this method of Bainton’s as not only effective but vital, however, I do see it as partially problematic in its easy ability to take any event and craft it as a part in a play. Seeing as plays and dramas or even cinema are constructed into acts that follow certain preconceived orders, to dramatize Luther in such a fashion would be problematic as it takes the life of Luther and can manipulate it in such a way that suits the author’s specific need. It is significantly easier to craft Luther as the folk hero who in this scene is in fear of the power of the Lord that came striking down before him and goes on in that fear to call out to a saint and

⁷ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, Cambridge. University Press. 1999. P 43.

⁶ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, New York. Abingdon Press. 1950. P 34.

⁸ Bainton, P. 39.

pledged his loyalty to the church. In comparison, Marius' description is quite straightforward. I am not convinced that Bainton goes as far as I have suggested, but it must be noted considering most of Bainton's biography is done in such a way.

Amid scholarly debate for why Luther ultimately held his pledge, I am more inclined to believe that Luther did join for the sake of "saving his soul"⁹ as both Bainton and Marius suggest, however I am also inclined to believe the fear from that incident had more significant role in his choice than it is usually given. To begin, a pledge to a saint was a serious matter that would not be taken lightly if ignored. To ignore a pledge or *vow* to a saint or to the Lord, a greater offense, was to renounce that holy being. However, in cases of vows made under distress, such as Luther's, they could not be enforced. Despite Luther's pass to not join the monastery, he did so which has been suggested to point to Luther already having considered the option. This point does have some legitimacy as Luther would have a motive to join, albeit, not a strong one.

The monastery life had a stark difference compared the lives of most everyone else. The life of Martin Luther up until that point, was attending school to be a lawyer¹⁰. Something that would have an income that he would be able to live off of and support his family, which was expected at this period of time. Which is also why Luther's family, his father especially, would have been devastated with him joining the monastery. With the monastery life however, no such income would exist. Monks took vows of poverty and would beg for their meals.

As for the Augustinian order, to which Luther would belong, there existed a variety of rules such as the monks were to live in silence with no talking, laughing, or singing unless they were gathered in the choir. Their heads must always be bowed when walking and they were

⁹ Marius, P 27.

¹⁰ Gerhard Brendler, *Martin Luther*, Claude R. Foster, Jr. trans. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 1991. P 33.

monitored always¹¹. Despite the strict nature of the monasteries, to Luther, it could have been a relief to the “malaise of existence”¹². The path to the monastery was one where a monk would align his focus to that of higher things. The monasteries existed separated from the rest of society. This lifestyle developed as a way of aiding the monks to live pious and orderly lives.¹³ The monks were essentially separated from the rest of the world as the monasteries were built intentionally *to* be separate. Marius wrote, “It always seemed natural to Martin Luther’s biographers that he should have entered the monastery”¹⁴. If Luther had wished to escape his stable career as a lawyer, his familial obligations, and live in such a way pious way, this would be a natural solution. However, Luther was excelling in all his courses, was on his way to be a lawyer, something that would be seen in high esteem, and gave no indication that he had prior thinking of joining the monastery. His spirit was always shaky but this does not lend itself to a strong reason for his joining the monastery. His shaky spirit lead him to join for salvation, not for escape. Bainton and Marius are both in agreement for this, however to Marius, this decision is not a glimmer of evidence for how spectacular Luther would become. In this, Luther’s decision to join the monastery is in fact natural.

Notably here, in both ‘*Luther*’ and ‘*Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*’, Marius effectively reduces all forms of reverence that otherwise would be employed by Bainton and the like. While I would argue that this reduction is important, it is only to be utilized to a point. Ultimately, Marius reduces the reverence towards Christianity too greatly. When I say that Marius reduces the reverence, I say this on the basis of how often Marius, *fairly*, points to

¹¹ Brendler P. 35.

¹² Bainton, P. 25.

¹³ Richard Marius, *Luther*. New York. J.B. Lippincott Company. 1974. P. 24.

¹⁴ Marius, P 24.

similarities between Christian doctrine and practices to other religions of antiquity such as the “cultic Communion of bread and wine”¹⁵, which lessens the inherent uniqueness of the religion. This usually isn’t problematic as it gives us more of an objective perspective but when combine with the tendency for Marius to then directly critique Christianity and Monotheism specifically, it then can work to compromise the audience’s ability to interpret the main actor, in this case Luther. When analyzing a historical character, that character acts in and interacts with his own context. For Luther that involves his religion, to reduce any significance, importance, or over all holiness of the religion complicates the audience’s ability to understand the motivations, concerns, and overall importance that the religion held for the character. While it must be stated as well, Marius’ audience is different from Bainton’s. While Bainton has appeal to scholars, it mainly works as piece for common consumption. Marius’ flock would be most likely, strictly academic. While these academics don’t need too much help articulating informations, without consideration for the cultural context, the character is inherently irrational. This ultimately works to Marius’ benefit as he *does* view Luther as vehement, unstable, and wildly angry. While all biographers enter in with their own agenda, if truth is compromised, then so is the biography.

Returning to the main point, Marius is still right in his claim that Luther entered the monastery to “seek the salvation of his soul, just as similar men had done in previous centuries”¹⁶ While Marius is harsh, there is value in his critiques. Marius’ views on Luther differentiate from others as he is quite critical of Luther, even referring to him as lacking “kindliness” and having an “impassioned wrath and hatred”. This of course would be the a representation of Luther that does not exclude the worst of him, from his famed years until his aged state when he spoke

¹⁵ Marius, P 27.

¹⁶ Marius, P. 27.

hatefully of the Jews and peasants. Marius' claim is legitimate on two accounts. To begin, as stated previously, Luther's pledge to join the monastery could not be legally or religiously pursued, which indicates that he did not join from force. Something else must have compelled him to do so. For Marius, Luther simply was compelled to join from fear of death. The vow to St. Anne was made in fear of immediate death and his decision to continue though was made when he survived¹⁷. In the *Table Talks, On Monastic Life*, Luther claims, "Surrounded by the terror and the agony of death, I felt constrained to keep my vow". Marius is right in his belief that death was the motivator behind Luther's rash decision. While there is past indications that Luther had fears of death, I must detract from Marius' view that Luther's fear is solely *of* death. To have better understandings of Luther's general state of mind, we should be delved into whether this fear of death is also by extension a fear of hell and damnation.

Luther's God: Friend or Foe?

Before examining the information, first it must be stated. Luther excelled as a monk by his own account, later becoming a priest. A priest works as an agent for mediation between Christ and humans. Theologically speaking, priests being human themselves, are no more perfect than other persons. A priest is made from the outside, not inside.¹⁸ Grace also is bestowed upon the individual from Christ and the community. Because the authority and power that bestowed the priesthood is given by Christ himself, priest will always remain a priest even if excommunicated. Through a human vessel, the priest is a priest even if weak, fragile, corrupt, etc

¹⁷ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: A Christian between God and Death*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1999. P. 44-45.

¹⁸ Brendler, P. 37.

and Luther was a fearful priest himself.¹⁹ Him becoming a priest, in other words, a holy man, simply would not have saved him from the trouble brewing in his psyche.

On May 2, 1507, Luther was preparing to deliver the *Primiz*, his first mass. His father had arrived as well which will be commented on later. At the Augustinian Monastic Church's altar, Luther was terrified. Later in life Luther commented on his first mass saying:

“Later when I stood there during the mass and began the canon, I was so frightened that I would have fled if I hadn't been admonished by the prior. For when I read the words, ‘Thee, therefore, most merciful Father,’ etc., and thought I had to speak to God without a Mediator, I felt like fleeing from the world like Judas. Who can bear the majesty of God without Christ as Mediator?”²⁰

There is an implicit premise hidden in among the facts. From what has been stated, Luther's priesthood did not and would not have relieved Luther's emotional baggage (which will be showcased soon) and that Luther felt an overwhelming sense of fear and inferiority in the face of God. To understand what could even cause Luther to experience this intense fear during his *Primiz*, I have to explain the concept of Transubstantiation. This concept is that during communion, the bread and wine are not symbolically the blood and body of Christ but the literal manifestations of Christ. While Luther was performing during mass, Luther would have literally been holding Christ-God- in his hands, this is enough to bring any pious person into terror especially under the weight of God's glory.

Marius figuratively handles this well by illustrating to our modernity how intense of a situation Luther was in by using a metaphor. This is somewhat reminiscent of Bainton's storytelling only in the way Marius figuratively crafts a scenario where the emotional and psychological context involved can be charted. Simply, Marius related the bread to a ticking time

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Table Talks*, abridged vol. 54. ed. Henry F. French. Minneapolis. Fortress Press. 2017. P. 141.

bomb. By comparing the bread to a live bomb, Marius illustrates the ultimate and deadly precise power of God to Luther. Of Bainton and Marius, both use methods involve the ability to interpret information and creatively express it in a way that eloquently gives psychological insight of Luther's identification of God. Although Bainton does this to a much greater degree. But who exactly is God to Luther? Before going further to answer the question of whether Luther was afraid of damnation-that is, God's wrath-Luther's God must be put under the microscope.

As mentioned previously, Luther was a monk of the Augustinian order. As a part of Augustinian thought, humans could not bring themselves to deserve grace. Naturally immoral, humans could not be trusted to God's precepts fully. Luther in his life displayed a sort of pessimistic anthropology with himself as the most helpless. Humanity in it of itself was a species that is not only depraved but unable to free itself from its depravity. Even from following the law, humans are so inadequate that they cannot earn their grace. Grace, however, is not something to be earned and it is only something God can bestow. However, for Luther, so distraught with his own inadequacies, he questioned whether God will bestow grace upon him. Later in life Luther wrote, "It's very difficult for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. That human heart can't grasp this"²¹ Luther himself struggled to accept God's grace. This is obvious when looking into Luther's life. During his monastery days, he spent much of his time in confession. Much more than the other monks, Luther would excess in fasting and confessions. So much so that Luther even commented later in life that he almost "fasted to death"²²

From Bainton's look, in Luther's striving he had hoped to compensate for his sinfulness

²³ Looking beyond this, if Luther's fear was simply an earthly death and not what would

²¹ Martin Luther, *Table Talks*. P. 19.

²² Luther, P 339.

²³ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, New York. Abingdon Press. 1950. P.44-46.

inevitably come next then what is the ultimate point of his constant confession and harsh self-regulation? Luther himself was infused with fear. But what was he afraid of? Luther's own intense austere behavior indicates the intensity of his fear was of God's wrath not simply death.

Whereas Richard Marius argues that Luther's fear was simply of death itself, it would seem that if Luther feared death, it was because through the passage of death, Luther would be held in God's fist. At this period in Luther's life at least, death had the real threat of bringing destruction not only of the body but was the beginning of eternal torment for the damned. His fears are only justified in that Luther had convinced himself that God held him in contempt²⁴. This self-doubt could stem from many different faucets from profound self-judgement to questioning his priesthood as he was formerly a lawyer, something that Luther later in life suggested is profoundly different from a theologian.²⁵ Either way, this was an all too real fear to Luther.

Marius wrote, "Death is a gateway to paradise. Real believers do not fear it...If we have *real* faith, we should not have terror before death; that we have this terror means that our faith is not complete" in reference to the many Christians who believed in the resurrection yet still feared death. Now it must be stated, that whereas Bainton, like many biographers who are experts in the Reformation and Martin Luther, is coming to the table with a Protestant belief, Marius however is not. Marius' approach is of a Humanist perspective. This does not compromise Marius' ability to articulate information, rather it gives his piece an interesting, uncommon edge to it. Humanism, as the name suggest, places value on human agency and

²⁴ Luther, P.15.

²⁵ Luther, P.69.

downplays the divine. Humanist often place empirical data, critical thinking²⁶, and science over established religion and what is deemed as superstitious.

Marius' commentary above, is an interesting one. Written to illustrate contradiction in Christian belief, he applies this to Luther. By this claim, Luther's fear of death reveals that Luther lacks faith. That Luther at this period in his life, was just the same as those who believe in Christ and his victory over the grave yet still feared the grave. This conclusion is too simple. Because for Luther, the grave was also an invitation to what would come next. This is indicated by his own words, "Christians could easily suffer death if they didn't know that God's wrath is connected with it. This circumstance makes death a bitter thing for us" Luther later commented. The Heathens however, "don't see God's wrath but think death is the end of man,"²⁷ It was because he had faith in God that he was afraid.

Luther's fear of God's wrath is ultimately on display during his Primiz. Although later in life Luther ultimately rejected the concept of transubstantiation²⁸, in the moment during his first mass with Christ in his hand, he was terrified and wished to flee because of who he understood God to be. Not just all powerful, but all superior, and all wrathful. In his hands held the power to condemn him permanently. He was was afraid of death because he had faith. Although Marius usually does a sufficient job of giving historical context for how characters think, it is in this example that his understanding of Luther was too disconnected to his cultural context, too modern. While Marius warns of modern interpretations such as Freudian analysis, which is occasionally used to explain Luther's stress during Primiz (as his earthly father was present), his argument that Luther only feared death denies the fullness of Luther and his understanding of

²⁶ Not to suggest that belief in the divine suggest a *lack* of critical thinking.

²⁷ Luther, P. 190.

²⁸ Luther, P.12.

God. Is this a simple oversight or does it stem from our modern inability to fear hell as much as it was in the 1500s? Of Marius and Bainton, Marius far more than Bainton underscores the fear in Luther. Relating back to the monastic life, Marius' depiction makes much more sense now. Whereas before it seemed to be a simple objective look of the details, and in comparison making Bainton's look over exaggerated, but actually this 'objective look' may not be so sincere, or at least agenda-less. Because Marius does not believe in Luther being afraid of eternal damnation, he has no reason to add (or even interpret) the drastic subtext that Bainton does. So naturally that could have been left out. But if I am charitable, then it could equally be said that Marius did not include the subtext because he simply did not see it.

1510 Trip To Rome

Luther's experience in Rome is the event that kicked off his disillusionment with the Roman Church. Besides from the emotional, there was an intellectual conflict within Luther's theology and belief. One of the main developers of his shift was that he began to see the Catholic Church's doctrines as problematic. As he developed his doctrines of Justification Through Faith, Luther wondered if he, a simple priest, could actually be right while the church was wrong. While this thinking reveals an inward fallacious appeal to tradition, Luther's struggles with the church would be one of the main driving forces in making his concerns public.

One of the main formative events that ignited Luther's disillusionment with the Roman Church and had already begun two year earlier, however, it was not until Luther physically arrived and experienced Rome did full disillusionment set in. Prior to Luther's arrival, in 1509, Luther's attention was spent on the works of the patron of his order, St. Augustine. St.

Augustine's theology had optimistic implications for humans as he believed that humans could behave morally enough to enter into heaven. However, through his lifetime, St. Augustine had begun to see the decline of the Roman Empire with sieges by the Goths and with the Vandals moving in on Africa²⁹, where Augustine was a bishop. It was in 410, St. Augustine wrote his work, *City of God*. In this, St. Augustine sets forth his theology of the separation of the temporal, *City of Earth*, from the eternal, *City of God*. This piece comes in a time of ruin for the empire. St. Augustine's optimistic view of the human ability to behave morally declined through his life. By the end of his life, St. Augustine viewed that by original sin, humans were incapable of meeting the requirements of grace.

As Luther was a Augustinian monk, this seemed to have had a profound effect on Luther's own budding theology. As suggested earlier, Luther's view of humanity was dim which naturally translated to his own self-view. Rome however, was the holy city of God so Luther would naturally have viewed his opportunity to visit as a chance to cleanse his sickly spiritual palette. After all, Rome at the time, represented the spiritual center of the world.³⁰ However, Luther was astonished and dismayed at what he saw. For Luther, travelling to the spiritual center of the world, a trip that would have taken three months, this trip not only served as a mission but also as a personal way to account for his own ongoing restlessness over his feelings of inferiority. Marius accounts for Luther's diving into the the relic culture of the Roman Empire much deeper than Bainton does. While Bainton accounts for Luther's thought that he would be able to regain communion with the God Luther felt so distant from,³¹ Marius spends more time

²⁹ Gergard Brendler, *Martin Luther*. Trans. Claude R, Foster Jr., New York. Oxford University Press. 1991. P. 47.

³⁰ Brendler, p. 48.

³¹ Richard Marius, *Luther*, New York. J.B. Lippincott Company. 1974. P. 35.

criticizing the relic culture as a sham. Aside from the in depth criticisms that Marius offers, he has the tendency to offer *too* much commentary. Bainton on the other hand can be accused of offering too little, but this seems to be caused by the difference in his audience. Whereas Marius is appealing to scholars, particularly of the Humanist variety, Bainton is appealing to average American protestants. However, this is not a jab at Bainton as his credentials are respectable and his work itself clearly is written by an academic.

Returning to the topic of relics, at the time relics were a common way of gaining a place in the Church's good standing, and by extension, God's. Not only did relics offer benefits such as early release from purgatory, but they also contained the implicit connection between the visible and the invisible³². This implicit connection is mentioned by Marius and I include it as it does provide the necessary context that could undoubtedly play partially into Luther's drive to interact with the relics. With this, the relics served as a reassuring visible proof that the stories of old and the invisible God rang true and with them being tied to the church, it provided even more ammunition that the Church was the holy center of the world despite the criticism the church had been receiving regarding its financial practices. Luther would have been aware of these lobs tossed at the church considering the plight of the Germans towards Rome however, that would not have necessarily have caused him to question the church before entering Rome. After all, whether the accusations against Rome were true, for Martin Luther, a devout monk and a man desiring what Rome could bring him, it could not be so without having witnessed the supposed atrocities. With the relics to boot, Luther could have easily been given a swift healing by the city of Rome but that is not what happened.

³² Marius, P. 34.

Luther had seen many things in Rome. While there, he spent much time with relics. Unfortunately, he was not very satisfied with his venturing. As the story goes, Luther climbed the steps of Pilate's Stairs while saying the *Pater Noster*, the Lord's Prayer in Latin, as he climbed each step. Upon reaching the top, Luther contrary to legend, says "Who knows whether it is so?"³³

This seems to be the answer to the question of whether the whole of the relic culture was a true way to come closer to God. It had been said that by climbing the stairs in a particular fashion, on the knees and kissing each step, that a person's sins would be forgiven. But looking from his shoulder down the stairs that Jesus had supposedly ascended, Luther could not tell whether the relics or the Roman Church were reliable. It is a fair assessment as the relic system, while noble in theory, even early in history became a business so to speak. Doubt was something that plagued Luther. From his studies of St. Augustine and from the already open disdain for the Catholic Church, Luther would have already been well aware of the criticism surrounding the holy city but that could not stop him from imagining the sheer holiness of Rome.

For Luther, the seeds of doubt, which he claims are natural to man³⁴, had already begun to sprout in his mind. It was not just the relics, the relics were a small aspect of what he saw in Rome. Rome was not only a physical destination that could be found on a map, it was a fantasy, an imaginary vision. It was a representation of all the good and godliness centered in one place, the place where Jesus himself gave Peter the keys to the kingdom.³⁵ This image was so powerful that no word or warning could have allowed Martin Luther to see the corruption in the holy city.

³³ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, New York. Abingdon Press. 1950. P. 50-51.

³⁴ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1999. P. 83.

³⁵ Matthew, 16:19 (NIV)

From public urination to clergy entering into brothels, Martin Luther was “most shocked by the irreligion of Rome”³⁶ Luther most notably says:

“I wouldn’t take one thousand florins for not having seen Rome because I wouldn’t have been able to believe such a thing. A Christian was taken to be nothing but a fool...There is no disgrace in Italy except to be poor. Murder and theft are still punished a little for they must do this. Otherwise there is no sin too great for them.”³⁷

Not only disillusionment but scorn for the Church grew as well. Something to be kept in mind is that Luther’s commentary about Rome can not be sequestered from the fact that Rome is an Italian city. Luther was one, especially in later life, to express scorn or indignation towards certain peoples- the Jews for one. In his commentaries such as the *TableTalks*, Luther does not shy away from expressing his opinions of the Italians. Although Luther does claim Italian clothes are hospitals are of good quality³⁸, he also expresses that they are unbelieving³⁹, jealous, lascivious and wanton dancers⁴⁰, and that their uncleannesses are satanic⁴¹. They are simply too corrupt. It seems that Luther attached his view of the city with his views of the people as well.

This is not too hard to understand as his opinions of the city were directly related to how he saw the Italian priest and civilians behave. However Marius, much more than Bainton, steps up to confronting this. Bainton brushes over this with only a brief mention of Luther’s dislike of Italians. This is not too unbelievable as Bainton also covers over Luther’s view on the Jews. But Bainton (and other apologetics) do mention these situations, mainly because they have to. A part of their work is to make a rebuttal. The mere fact that apologetic works exist illustrate that

³⁶ Marius, *Between God and Death*, P. 82.

³⁷ Luther, *Table Talk*, vol. 54. ed. And trans. Theodore G. Tappert. Philadelphia. Fortress Press. 1967. P. 427.

³⁸ *TableTalks*, P 297-298

³⁹ *TableTalks*, P 140.

⁴⁰ *TableTalks*, P 207.

⁴¹ *TableTalks*, P 278.

criticism of the topic is already in circulation. Critiques like the pieces from Marius⁴². Because Bainton's audience is partially the general public and his goal is apologetic, it makes perfect sense why he does not work too hard to express Luther's dislike of the Italians, and later the Jews. But it is important to mention if we want a whole portrait of Luther. But also, it is important if we want to understand a man, not a myth.

To Luther at the time however, the Holy Catholic Church was not just a place of wide amassment of the holy, it *was* the city of God on Earth. The pope held the powers to bind and loosen whatever on earth and have it bound or loosened in heaven.⁴³ The popes, descended from the apostle Luke, were to be infallible yet the unsavory history of past popes were now true accounts of abuse. The Italian priest were supposed to be holy men and yet hurried through their masses and were overall incompetent and ignorant according to Luther.⁴⁴ Despite these, Luther's disillusionment did not take away his belief in the Church's ability to extol grace. The question was whether the means in which grace was achieved was legitimate.

The 1510 journey to Rome had a great impact on Martin Luther. The illusion of Rome that Luther had seen was done away with and all that remained was a grim reality of the holiest city in the world. Rome had not changed with his visit, but Martin Luther had.

As far as biographical approaches, Marius' approach is good in two places, although it falters in one. Mainly it is that critical edge that is so valuable. Marius' need to spotlight (even briefly) Luther's view of the Italians, which I used showed in Luther's own words, does a marvelous job. In biographical works of famed figures, to get a full understanding of the

⁴² For Clarification, Bainton's *Here I Stand* was written a few decades before Marius' writings were published. Bainton's apologetic work is not a response to Marius specifically, although Marius does make commentary about Bainton.

⁴³ Matthew, 16:19 (NIV)

⁴⁴ Bainton, P. 49-50.

character, then any sort of prejudices or ill thoughts of certain peoples should be shown. It is important, especially in the case of the Jews, that such an accredited person who has such sway in political history, can be connected to anything that may have come of their views. However, controversially, I would say that considering the outcome of Luther's words against the Italians, he possibly spent more time than necessary highlighting this. In a different note, while Marius' speaks too much commentary on relic culture, there was a gem. His insight on the visible vs invisible divide was spot on.

The Second Lightning Bolt

Around the table with his followers, Luther recalled the moment when he was struck by the gospel:

“The words ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness of God’ struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified”⁴⁵

From what has been gained from looking through Martin Luther's life, it can be stated that Luther's doubts must have translated into his newly developed theologies or at least the shakiness in his soul worked as fertile soil for his new interpretations of the gospel. Either way, two factors were at work: Luther's distress and his beginning disillusionment with the Catholic Church. One thing should be made clear here, Martin Luther did not necessarily go *against* the church when he developed theologies that later *would* break away and lead to the development of an entire new branch of Christianity. Besides anything redeemable about Luther, something

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Table Talk*, abridged vol. 54. ed. Henry F. French. Minneapolis. Fortress Press. 2017. P. 193..

Bainton does illustrate better than Marius, is the internal struggle that the man Luther experienced. Luther's bout with Rome did raise a bitter view of the Italian city and the pope but that did not shake his loyalty to the church. Luther never considered his ideas too outside the realms of his faith, actually, he believed they coincide well with Catholicism. It is for that reason that after returning from Rome, and returning to his mental psyche, which never had vanished, he had dug deeper into "every resource of contemporary Catholicism for assuaging the anguish of a spirit alienated from God"⁴⁶ Simply put, the Rome visit did not help him the way he thought it would. Naturally this could be added damage to him. However, maybe not. What was different here was that, while Luther was returning to many things, he was not returning to Erfurt. He had been transferred to Wittenberg where Luther would flourish both in his career and in his theology.

No theologian can deny the role Jon von Staupitz would play in Luther's life. No biography that I have read has done this either, however some do cast suspicion on him. Marius for example, even hints that Staupitz did so for political reasons. Marius tends to be *too* suspicious of Luther and those around him. Suspicion is good, but so is charity. If we spend too much time scrutinizing the pieces, we don't see the full puzzle. To connect some pieces to make the picture, it is clear from Luther's own words that the trip to Rome was an utter failure. Luther and his accompanying monks were never allowed access to those in higher authority because Rome was preoccupied with greater matters than that of monks⁴⁷. The general dispute that lead Luther to going to Rome was in regard to whether the Augustinian monasteries should continue their strict discipline or lean towards a more relaxed condition in which the monks also would

⁴⁶ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, New York. Abingdon Press. P. 54.

⁴⁷ Gergard Brendler, *Martin Luther*, trans. Claude R. Foster, Jr. New York. Oxford University Press. 1991. P51.

enjoy more independence. The Erfurt monastery was supportive of continuing the strict discipline that had been set in place. Because of this, the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt and some other locations wished to remove themselves from under Augustinian vicar-general Johann von Staupitz's supervision, for he supported the opposition. After returning unanswered, many monks returned to questioning the issue and continued their support for the strict discipline. Luther on the other hand, had begun to support Staupitz and this is likely what led to Luther's transfer from Erfurt to Wittenberg where Staupitz was a professor. Luther's support for Staupitz did benefit his career as Staupitz urged the election of Luther to the position of associate administrator of the Wittenburg Monastery.⁴⁸

Although it may seem suspicious, Staupitz did not only benefit Luther's career but his theologies also were shaped by his interactions with the man. Luther himself credited Staupitz with his emotional and theological development, it is clear from Luther that Staupitz was a guiding figure. Not specifically the 'father figure' that Marius argues for in *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, while interestingly enough in his first book about Luther, simply titled, *Luther*, Marius outright denies any Freudian approach to the father role. While in *Christian Between* he does not, actually he rides the theory partially and mentions Staupitz as a possible father figure⁴⁹. Professionally, Luther was also entrusted to Staupitz's position of professor of Bible when Staupitz felt that his administrative duties took precedence over his duties as a professor. Clearly there was mutual affection and respect between the two but Luther gives no indication that he thought of Staupitz mentorship as a fatherly role.

⁴⁸ Brendler, P.51

⁴⁹ Marius, P 53-54.

After receiving his doctorate, Luther had another compound dilemma, although this one was significantly less distressing. Simply, with a doctorate, Luther now needed to do more than *know* the theology and recount it, he must become “more than a sponge which merely exudes in its initial form what had been absorbed”⁵⁰ Mainly, from this point on, Luther would have to insert himself into what he taught, he must “plumb his own depths and give of his own personality instead of merely relying on memory and logic”⁵¹ While this was an opportunity for Luther, what was to come was not the product of an attempt to be something unique. In this position, Luther did not teach systematic or doctrinal theology, rather biblical interpretations⁵². As Luther read the bible and prepared his lectures, a transformation happened, a second thunderbolt who’s strike would be felt around the world in the years to come- for better according to Bainton, for worse according to Marius.

Up until Luther creates his ninety-five these, from 1511 through 1517, Luther was developing his own understandings of the gospel. It was also during the beginning of this time that Luther had overindulged in the (brief) temporary relief of confession, something to which he would commit generally daily for as long as six hours for a single occasion.⁵³ His comfort in the sacrament of penance comes from the solace that the Church provides in mediation. It was already mentioned, however it needs further spotlighting that Luther’s grief lies in himself. His rightfully irritated confessor told him, “Man, God is not angry with you, you are angry with God. Don’t you know that God commands you to hope?”⁵⁴ The theologies that Luther had begun to

⁵⁰ Brendler, P. 52.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull. Fortress Press. Minneapolis. 1989. XI.

⁵³ Bainton, P. 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

develop are that very hope that God commands. The concerns of Martin Luther that would reappear in his theologies is that of human nature.

As discussed before, man is the unreliable, unworthy, and inherently flawed, the incubators of sin. From his own excessive experience of confession, Luther is well aware of man's habit of being unable to recognize his sin as well as forgetting what had been recognized⁵⁵. This is the chain in the link that disconnects for Luther, as for the penitential system to function, the sins must be confessed to be forgiven. As humans have the unique ability to be not only able to be blindly unaware of all their sins as well but they also forget sins which prevents them from confessing and therefore from full participation in penance. These conditions make the fruits of the Church's penitential system simply unattainable.

Staupitz offered another point of view to Luther, without rejecting the penitential system, he suggest rather than striving, man should surrender himself to the being and love of God⁵⁶. While Luther tried this method, it was no solution. The reason why tied back to God's identity as wrathful and all-powerful. Too great, as despite the desire of the weak to, "probe and understand the incomprehensible majesty of the unfathomable light" it inevitably, "overpowers us and shatters [us]". Luther initially rejected Staupitz's guidance, finding fault with his claim that "There is just one thing needful, to love God".⁵⁷ How can Luther love God when he is not entirely certain that God is even just? In this regard Marius's comment about lacking faith may be interpreted as correct here, but rest assured, it in't. From Marius' use of *faith* almost seems synonymous with *belief* in God. Which would again be a modern approach. I would argue that even as Luther claims to hate God later on, and his questioning of God all point not simply that

⁵⁵ Bainton, P. 56.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Bainton, 58.

he just believed in God as most did, but that he had profound faith in God but not in himself. Simply, his anger came from his own inferiority. Even as he had the strictest regulation of himself, something that he could have even prided himself in despite all his suffering⁵⁸, he still did not stack up. His confessor was right in his assertion that Luther was angry towards God. It was not just a simple flame that was simmering, Luther's inner rage toward God for the years of torment that he had experienced was only out burned by the fires of hell itself. Luther said later,

“Is it not against all natural reason that God out of his mere whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them, as if he delighted in sins and in such torments of the wretched for eternity, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness? This appears iniquitous, cruel, and intolerable in God, by which very many have been offended in all ages. And who would not be? I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!”

When Luther began his position as Chair of Bible, Luther naturally would be working more closely with the bible. Luther himself was already well-versed in it from his experience in the monastery, for which he was required to read an entire chapter a day, but also in his work as a priest. The only difference is that now he would have to keep in mind that he would be teaching. A special strictness would follow Luther, one in which he brought to everything that he had attempted.

During Luther's lectures of Psalms, Luther often thought of the Psalms as being intimately related to Christ. This is logical on account that during the Medieval period of Christian orthodoxy held that the Bible was one continuous work of God.⁵⁹ And to Luther, the entirety of the Old Testament and the psalms themselves would therefore work to reveal the

⁵⁸ Marius, *The Christian Between God and Death*, P 53

⁵⁹ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God And Death*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1999. P89-90.

redeemer so it would be no stretch of the imagination that the Psalms of joyfulness as well as the Psalms of lamentation all boasted the message of Christ. Under this framework, the Bible itself was that of the revealed Lord which came to fruition in the New Testament⁶⁰. With this, accompanied by the medieval standard of interpreting the scripture under certain senses, one being the allegorical/"spiritual", which allows the interpreter to step away from the literal and often historical context to provide reinterpretation or reveal the true meaning, which in this case was Christ.⁶¹ From this, the Old Testament and Psalms takes on a Christocentric nature. As Luther continued to read the gospel, one thing became abundantly clear, if the Old Testament and Psalms predicted Christ coming, then they also predicted Christ's crucifixion, from which Christ would bear the sins of all iniquity. This is seen in Jesus's call to the Almighty upon the cross, "My God, My God, why hath thou forsaken me?" which is from the twenty-second Psalm which reappears in Matthew 27:46 as well as Mark 15:34.

What can be gathered from this is that, according to Roland Bainton, Luther would have not only been able to identify with the grief of Jesus in this particular scene, of being rejected by God, but it would have thrust him to the conclusion that Jesus, God himself incarnate, must have come for the purpose of redeeming the world. After all, whereas Luther was weak, impure, impious, Christ is not⁶². So for Christ to experience that suffering, it must be because he took upon himself the sin of the world at the climax of the Bible. In his solidarity and identification with mankind, Christ participated in our alienation and took it upon his shoulders, bearing the yoke of man.

⁶⁰ Brendler, P. 62-63.

⁶¹ Marius, P. 91.

⁶² Bainton, P. 62.

With this new understanding of Christ, Luther's old image was compromised. If Christ would stand beside his people, join in solidarity with these people when, acting as the shameful species they are, betrayed and crucified him then what could be said about Christ? This is not the face of an intensely wrathful or unpredictable God. This God seems to be a merciful master, bearing up the yoke of a failed kind. But is God just? Even if God does not extol out wrath as previously believed, then is God too lax? It would have been just for Christ to have just as easily not taken the sins of man and yet he did. The concept of wrath was not dissolved in Luther, yet where does it belong now? It was when reading Paul's works that justice and righteousness were found. A lot has been said about Luther's *Tower Experience*, as it is often referred to as. There is no certainty among scholars when this occurred, and there is some debate on where Luther was specifically when he was inspired. What is certain is that this event brought the gasoline to the candles burning inside Luther. Luther found his answer:

“If God is righteous, [I thought], he must punish. But when by God's grace I pondered, in the tower and heated room of this building, over the words, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’ [Rom. 1:17] and ‘the righteousness of God’ [Rom. 3:21], I soon came to the conclusion that if we as righteous men ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of God should contribute to the salvation of all who believe, then salvation won't be our merit but God's mercy. My spirit was thereby cheered”⁶³

It was the second lightning bolt that had struck Martin Luther. From the readings of the apostle Paul, not only Luther's understanding of God changed but ultimately, Luther's ability to distinguish between the law and the gospel developed. What is most important here, and the main point of my paper, is how Luther's “discovery” was something that was added by his desire to reconnect with God. “Discovery” might actually be a good phrasing for this as Luther was

⁶³ *Table Talks*. P. 194.

intensely searching for relief to his anguished soul. To clarify again, my assessment is not to detract from the brilliance of Luther's theology. Luther went on to argue for his theology with strict reason and a vast understanding of the Bible. Regardless of how his conclusion came to be, it stands on its own. What I argue is that Luther's dive into the monastery, Rome and the relics, confession and austerities, all were guiding factors to leading Luther to what he discovered. These events and thinking processes cannot be ignored. To suggest that Luther's ultimate conclusion that God is not the all-wrathful and spiteful master who damns his men for their inherent sinful inability to adhere to the law, rather that God is a merciful master who gives his gift of grace freely and that the law works to illustrate the care of God for his creation yet is not the factor that leads to salvation, is unrelated to how Luther punished and chided himself severely for his self-perceived high-caliber sinfulness in the eyes of God, would be to ignore the ever present evidence. When Luther said that "his spirit was cheered" it was because he had seen a path that relieved him of the bonds of suffering and hatred. In his discovery, his fear became irrational to himself because Christ was always a loving, familiar and mild-mannered all along but when Christ is not comprehended through faith, the conscience is brought to death. Christ is especially kind to those in tormented spirit⁶⁴.

While I acknowledge that I used Marius' more than Bainton for this paper, both provided interesting approaches for my consideration. Simply, Bainton for all his optimism, provided a more charitable view of Luther as he considered the fear of God's wrath as being relevant to Luther's thinking. While Marius doesn't do this, something that I find puzzling, Marius does continue his critical edge and takes the opportunity to suggest an alternate image of Luther that

⁶⁴ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Table Talks*. Ed. David L. Scheidt. New York. The World Publishing Company. P 28.

does consider his most negative qualities. He can do this as he has no loyalty to Luther.

However, he does have loyalties to other worldviews and that cannot be ignored when evaluating bias. I do appreciate how Bainton consistently provides context for Luther. However, I had to strip away some of the sacred subtext being added to the story. While I myself am Lutheran, in approaching Luther, I believe it would be better to ignore my impulses to establish him as a righteous man from the beginning. It would blind me to his faults and motivations however to wipe away all of it is not only impossible but not advisable, otherwise I would be doing the same act but in the reverse. Both Bainton and Marius' works are well known for a reason. They are both well learned and their writings are of good quality. I benefited most from reading both in the same period. With such different tones and agendas, it is beneficial to gather them both in.

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