

## LUTHER'S REVOLT—THE PERSON & THE INDIVIDUAL

Protestantism operates in the spirit of its founder, Martin Luther: Protestantism's influence in the world reflects Luther's influence. What was Luther's character? What was the nature of his revolt? Jacques Maritain provides us here with a sketch of both<sup>1</sup>. He goes on to demonstrate one of the profound consequences of his influence—the exalting of individuality at the expense of the person.

Visitors to this website may be bemused at certain views expressed in recent articles: for example, the claim in *The Pinching of Protestantism*, "Protestantism is an evil thing: it has—it has always had—evil effects"; or that in *Atheism's Great Cosmogenic Myth*, "Protestantism is not, contrary to belief, a religion, but a turning away from God under a guise of religion". Maritain demonstrates here the effects, in the moral order, of Protestantism's influence. This parallels the descent in the philosophical order from a true doctrine of causality to a bland materialism documented in the earlier articles.

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What first impresses us in Luther's character is egocentrism: something much subtler, much deeper, and much more serious, than egoism; a metaphysical egoism. Luther's self becomes practically the centre of gravity of everything, especially in the spiritual order... The Reformation unbridled the human self in the spiritual and religious order, as the Renaissance... unbridled the human self in the order of natural and sensible activities.

After Luther decided to refuse obedience to the Pope and break with the communion of the Church, his self is henceforth supreme, despite his interior agonies which increased until the end. Every 'external' rule, every 'heteronomy', as Kant said, becomes then an intolerable insult to his 'Christian liberty'.

"I do not admit," he writes in June 1522, "that my doctrine can be judged by anyone, even by the angels. He who does not receive my doctrine cannot be saved." "Luther's self," wrote Moehler, "was in his opinion the centre round which all humanity should gravitate; he made himself the universal man in whom all should find their model. Let us make no bones about it, he put himself in the place of Jesus Christ."

As we have already noticed, Luther's doctrine is itself only a universalisation of his self, a projection of his self into the world of eternal truths. From this point of view what distinguishes the father of Protestantism from the other great heresiarchs is that they started first from a doctrinal error, from a false doctrinal view; whatever their psychological origins may have been, the cause of their heresies is a deviation of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Luther*, in Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers*, Charles Scribner, New York, 1950. My copy is a republication by Greenwood Press, Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1970. The material quoted is from pp. 14 to 25 of this edition. The original has extensive footnotes and source notes which have not been reproduced in this extract. All emphases are in the original.

intelligence, and their own fortunes only count insofar as they conditioned that deviation. It is quite different with Luther. What counts is his life, his history. Doctrine comes as an extra. Lutheranism is not a system worked out by Luther; it is the overflow of Luther's individuality...

If you are looking for the translation of this egocentrism into dogma, you will find it in some of the most noticeable characteristics of the Lutheran theology. What is the Lutheran dogma of the certainty of salvation but the transference to the human individual and his subjective state of that absolute assurance in the divine promises which was formerly the privilege of the Church and her mission. Because God was her centre, the Catholic soul needed to know nothing with perfect certainty except the mysteries of the faith, and that God is love and is merciful... But without perfect certainty of her state of grace the heretical soul could not exist without breaking for agony, because she has become the centre and seeks her salvation in the justice with which she covers herself, not in the abyss of the mercies of Another, who made her.

Why does the doctrine of salvation absorb all the Lutheran theology, if it be not because the human self has become in actual fact the chief preoccupation of that theology? For Luther, one question towers above all the rest: to escape the judicial wrath of the Almighty in spite of the invincible concupiscence which poisons our nature. The truth is that if it is essentially important that we should save ourselves, it is less to escape the devil than to see the face of God, and less to save our own being from the fire than from love of Him whom we love more than ourselves... Lutheran theology is for the creature; that is why it aims above all at the practical end to be attained. Luther, who drives charity away and keeps servile fear... makes the science of divine things revolve round human corruption.

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And thus in the person of Luther and in his doctrine, we are present—and that on the level of the spirit and religious life—at the Advent of the Self... Luther's case shows us precisely one of the problems against which modern man beats in vain. It is the problem of *individualism* and *personality*...

See with what religious pomp the modern world has proclaimed the sacred rights of the individual, and what a price it has paid for that proclamation. Yet was there ever a time when the individual was more completely ruled by the great anonymous powers of the State, of Money, of Opinion? What then is the mystery?

There is no mystery in it. It is simply that the modern world confounds two things which ancient wisdom had distinguished. It confounds *individuality* and *personality*.

What does [Catholic] philosophy tell us? It tells us that the person is 'a complete individual substance, intellectual in nature and master of its actions', *sui juris*, *autonomous*, in the authentic sense of the word. And so the word *person* is reserved for substances which possess that divine thing, the spirit, and are in consequence, each by itself, a world above the whole bodily order, a spiritual and moral world which strictly speaking, is not a *part* of this universe, and whose secret is hidden even from the natural perception of the angels. The word *person* is reserved for substances which, choosing their end, are capable of themselves deciding on the means, and of introducing series of new events into the universe by their liberty; for substances which can say after their kind, *fiat*, and it is so. And what makes their dignity, what makes their personality, is just exactly the subsistence of the spiritual and immortal

soul and its supreme independence in regard to all fleeting imagery and all the machinery of sensible phenomena. And St Thomas teaches that the word person signifies the noblest and highest thing in all nature: "Persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura."<sup>2</sup>

The word *individual*, on the contrary, is common to man and beast, to plant, microbe, and atom. And, whilst personality rests on the subsistence of the human soul (a subsistence independent of the body and communicated to the body which is sustained in being by the very subsistence of the soul), Thomist philosophy tells us that individuality as such is based on the peculiar needs of matter, *the principle of individuation* because it is the principle of division, because it requires to occupy a position and have a quantity, by which that which is *here* will differ from what is *there*. So that insofar as we are individuals we are only a fragment of matter, a part of this universe, distinct, no doubt, but a part, a point of that immense network of forces and influences, physical and cosmic, vegetative and animal, ethnic, atavistic, hereditary, economic and historic, to whose laws we are subject. As individuals, we are subject to the stars. As persons, we rule them.

What is modern individualism? A misunderstanding, a blunder; the exaltation of individuality camouflaged as personality, and the corresponding degradation of true personality.

In the social order, the modern city sacrifices the *person* to the *individual*; it gives universal suffrage, equal rights, liberty of opinion, to the *individual*, and delivers the *person*, isolated, naked, with no social framework to support and protect it, to all the devouring powers which threaten the soul's life, to the pitiless actions and reactions of conflicting interests and appetites, to the infinite demands of matter to manufacture and use.

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On the contrary, according to the principles of St Thomas, it is because he is first an individual of a species that man, having need of the help of his fellows to perfect his specific activity, is consequently an *individual* of the city, a member of society. And on this count he is subordinated to the good of his city as to the good of the whole, the common good which as such is more *divine* and therefore better deserving the love of each than his very own life. But if it is a question of the destiny which belongs to a man as a *person*, the relation is inverse, and it is the human city which is subordinate to his destiny... the city exists for him, to wit, for the advancement of the moral and spiritual life and the heaping up of divine goods; for that is the very end of personality; and it is only by virtue of this that the city has its common good. Thus Christianity maintains and reinforces the moral framework and the hierarchies of the city, it has not denounced slavery as of itself contrary to the natural law. But it calls slave and master alike to the same supernatural destiny and the same communion of saints. It makes every soul in a state of grace the dwelling of the living God; it teaches us that unjust laws are no laws, and that the Prince's command must be disobeyed when it is contrary to God's command. It bases law and juridical relations not on the free will of individuals, but on justice towards persons...

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In the spiritual order the distinction between individuality and personality is no less necessary. Fr Garrigou-Lagrange has shown its bearing admirably:

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<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 29, a. 3. Cf. Cajetan's Commentary

“Man will be fully a person, a *per se subsistens* and a *per se operans*, only insofar as the life of reason and liberty dominates that of the senses and passions in him; otherwise he will remain like the animal, a simple individual, the slave of events and circumstances, always led by something else, incapable of guiding himself; he will be only a part, without being able to aspire to be a whole...

“To develop one’s individuality is to live the egoistical life of the passions, to make oneself the centre of everything, and end finally by being the slave of a thousand passing goods which bring us a wretched momentary joy.

“Personality, on the contrary, increases as the soul rises above the sensible world and by intelligence and will binds itself more closely to what makes the life of the spirit.

“The philosophers have caught sight of it, but the saints especially have understood, that the full development of our poor personality consists in losing it in some way in that of God, who alone possesses personality in the perfect sense of the word, for He alone is absolutely independent in His being and action.”<sup>3</sup>

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[D]id the saints set out to “develop their personality”? They found it without seeking, because they did not seek it but God alone. They understood that their person, just insofar as it was a person, insofar as it was free, was complete dependence on God, and that the inner control over our acts, which we cannot resign before man or angel, they must deliver into the hands of God, by whose Spirit they must be moved in order to be His sons...

Such is the secret of our life as men which the poor modern world does not know: we gain our soul only if we lose it; a total death is needed before we can find ourselves. And when we are utterly stripped, lost, torn out of ourselves, then all is ours who are Christ’s, and Christ himself and God himself is our good.

Luther’s history, like that of Jean-Jacques [Rousseau], is a wonderful illustration of this doctrine. He did not free human personality, he led it astray. What he did was free the material individuality... the animal man. Cannot we see it in his own life? As he gets older, his energy becomes less and less a soul’s energy, and more and more the energy of a temperament. Driven by great desires and vehement longings which fed on instinct and feeling, not on intelligence; possessed by the passions, loosing the tempest around him, breaking every obstacle and all ‘external’ discipline; but having within him a heart full of contradictions and discordant cries; seeing life, before Nietzsche, as essentially *tragic*, Luther is the very type of modern individualism...

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<sup>3</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Le Sens commun*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Nouvelle Librairie Nationale), pp. 332-3.