

Martin Luther, Home-Boy, Looks Outward*

By Susan C. Karant-Nunn

In the Reformation era, Europe was confronting the world beyond its boundaries. Particularly among those colleagues who have studied at institutions where the year 1500 remains the great dividing line between an old-fashioned past and an emerging modern world, awareness may be less of the extent to which medieval traders, military men, clerics, and intellectuals were already reaching across the boundaries we assign to Europe within the Eurasian continent. This process begins not later than 1100. In the fifteenth century, to be sure, the intensification and diversification of exchange is visible. We know that this did, in time, alter European culture, especially in the great trading cities through which artifacts and ideas were prone to flow. But other trends were setting in that had only a slender connection to the outside world, and the Lutheran Reformation was one of these. Luther's world was circumscribed to an extent that, say, that of the mercantile Dutch followers of John Calvin could not be.

Martin Luther knew that he was Thuringian. His homeland was Mansfeld – the County of Mansfeld – and he was a little pleased when he found that he was going to die there. He also knew that he adopted the Saxon German of the elector's chancery for his formal writing and speaking, larded, to be sure, with the expression of his own ordinary people.¹ He preached to these; he translated the Bible for their benefit even though, in the main, they themselves could not read and write. He could have told us, then, that he was a home-boy. He might have thought it strange for twenty-first-century scholars to struggle through all his works in order to place his geographic mentality. His identity was clear. He did not reflect on it.

Secondarily, Luther was German. He was bound by mother-tongue and general life-style to all fellow citizens of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, even though he had to listen closely and enunciate carefully when he traveled to more distant territories or entertained their clerics as guests. Even with these, he often relied on Latin to communicate.

* Abbreviations: *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 73 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-2009), hereafter WA. Volumes from the *Tischreden* are marked as TR and from the *Briefwechsel* as BR. Volumes from the *Schriften* carry no extra designation.

1. WA TR 1, no. 1040, 524-525; WA TR 2, no. 2758, 639.

The spiritual affliction that kept his thoughts at home was the same that disturbed him as a young Augustinian friar: the desire for God to love and save him. Even in his mature career as a celebrity theologian, his visitations by the devil, his *Anfechtungen* as he termed them in less graphic conversations, were sufficiently frequent as to confine his thoughts to himself and the environment that immediately bore down on him. He had in mind the state of his heart, his God, his friends and enemies, his wife Katharina, his children, his students, the congregations of people who listened to his sermons either in the city church, the castle church, or elsewhere, and his precarious health. These were enough to preoccupy him. Perhaps these primary concerns help us to understand why he did not equally focus upon the political consequences of his words. His naïve impetuosity irritated his rulers. And it may provide a clue as to why he did not often look outward into the New World, Asia, and Africa. For the time being, these were remote; first things came first. Still, he thought that the Bible, and especially the Gospels, ought to be translated into every human tongue. On a distant horizon, he foresaw an age in which even his own followers would go forth, preach, convert, and baptize in the name of Christ.² Commenting on Psalm 19 in 1530, he looked ahead to the era of missions: “This Psalm is about the necessity of making the Gospel known throughout the world. [...] The Gospel will be preached in all languages, and not in one alone.”³ In this very category, there was a great deal to do at home, where, he lamented, the populace was barely Christian.

Three activities in particular drew Luther to reflect on life outside Germany. The first of these was his trip to Rome in 1510-1511 as the companion of a senior member of the Augustinian Eremites.⁴ It took Luther years to digest that experience; and after the beginning of the Reformation, he regarded it differently than he had as a devout Catholic who was seeking to liberate his grandfather Heinrich Luder from purgatory.⁵ In those earlier years, he was single-minded; he shared none of the German imperial free cities’ admiration of Venice and made no effort to divert his path in its direction.⁶ He came away with no assur-

2. Matthew 28: 19-20.

3. WA 31.1, “Psalmenauslegungen 1529-32,” Psalm 19, 339, 340.

4. Or consider the redating suggested by Hans Schneider, “Martin Luthers Reise nach Rom – neu datiert und neu gedeutet,” in Werner Lehfeldt, ed., *Studien zur Wissenschafts- und zur Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 1-157, esp. 6.

5. Herbert Voßberg, *Im heiligen Rom: Luthers Reiseeindrücke 1510-1511* (Berlin [West]: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1966), 8.

6. See Luther’s description of Venice, WA TR 3, no. 3145c, 192.

ance of having achieved his spiritual goal, but between 1531 and 1542, when various young men were studiously recording their mentor's words at the dinner table, he spontaneously passed judgment on the life-style and morals of the Italians, and not just the clergy.⁷ Art historians have assiduously reconstructed what Martin Luther must have seen while spending three months on that peninsula – yet the man himself had other interests.⁸ He had made the rounds of the seven major churches, but his motivation was spiritual rather than esthetic.⁹ Later on, as a host, Luther recalled the gross sexual immorality of which he saw signs and about which he had heard.¹⁰ Everything was for sale. His comments on Popes Julius II, Leo X, and Clement VII were highly uncomplimentary. He found the Italians to be self-indulgent – although they drank less than Germans! – and to regard the Germans and all peoples to the north of the Alps with arrogance. Luther was hardly alone in voicing this complaint. “Italy lives without God's Word.” The clerics laugh at us, he said, “because we believe everything in Scripture.”¹¹ He did praise one (dead) Italian, Lorenzo Valla, nevertheless.¹²

Whether Luther admired these *Welsch* (foreigners) or not, the experience of walking from Erfurt to Rome and back gave him a breadth of experience that he could have acquired in no other way. He had crossed the Alps; he had stayed at Augustinian houses and inns along the month-long expedition in either direction; he noticed the dialects in southern Germany; he experienced the changes in landscape and crops; he observed alterations in prevalent house styles; he did visit the Pantheon and marveled that it had no windows except the oculus at the pinnacle of the cupola¹³; he concluded that, the Pantheon and a few other structures aside, the ancient world was very little in evidence. For all his contempt for the *Welsch*, he had now encountered at least the Italian variety on its own turf. He did not have to rely solely on imagination. And most consequentially, he had witnessed the Catholic Church at its core. Without intending to do so, he had made the second-most valuable pilgrimage that a late medieval Christian could accomplish.

7. WA TR 3, no. 3164a, 205; and WA TR 3, no. 3478, 345-349, for example.

8. For example, Theodor Elze, *Luthers Reise nach Rom* (Berlin: Alexander Duncker, 1899), which contains major errors; Richard Baumann, *Auf Luthers Wegen in Rom* (Rottweil, Neckar: Verlag Aktuelle Texte, 1969); Voßberg, *Im heiligen Rom* (see note 5). There is a larger older literature on this subject.

9. WA TR 3, no. 3428, 313, for his recollections of the abuse of the Mass in Rome.

10. For example, WA TR 3, no. 3201a-b, 218-219.

11. WA TR 2, no. 1327, 48-50.

12. WA TR 1, no. 259, 109; WA TR 2, no. 1470, 107.

13. WA TR 1, no. 507, 232.

The northern man marveled at the separation of respectable Italian women from public life, and indeed their invisibility. On the rare occasions when they were permitted to leave their homes, usually to attend church as on Saint Gregory's Day, they were veiled.¹⁴ Luther found this a great contrast with his life at home, and, notably, he did not wish the North to emulate this pattern.

Luther's second impetus to reflect upon what we today refer to as "the other" was the encroachment of the Ottoman Turks on southeastern Europe. How little the Reformer may have realized that the approach of these alien warriors allowed the electors of Saxony and himself a certain latitude in their relations with the Holy Roman Emperor! Frederick the Wise and his brother John the Constant knew this full well and gambled on the desperation of His Imperial Majesty, who, before leaving Worms in 1521, declared his personal preference for banning the upstart "monk" as a heretic until he was captured and summarily executed. For the elector, the outcome of the Battle of Mohács was a partial blessing. We can regard it as postponing the date on which the Ernestine branch of the Wettin family would forfeit the electorship to its rival, its Albertine cousins. Luther lost no love on this particular category of the *Welsch*, and he appears to be oblivious to the psychological ways in which the Ottomans assisted his cause. These were diabolical to his mind, literally instruments of Satan. They were a sign of the impending End of Time. Like their abominable master, however, they were subject to the will of God. They could only accomplish what the omnipotent God allocated to them in His eternal plan. Luther was curious about their way of life and about their Prophet Mohammed, but whatever introductory amounts of information he was able to glean, he found condemnable. Their Scripture, the Koran, was filled with lies.¹⁵ They worshipped a false God, kept multiple wives in harems, and were merciless in slaughtering men, women, and children in their progression northward and then westward. No doubt, he prayed with other Christians that God should strike them down, as He seemed to do in 1529 at the gates of Vienna. Luther was spared the heavy Turkish Tax that the electors of Saxony imposed twice in these years on most of the rest of their subjects. Illustrated books and broadsheets on the Turks appeared from German presses and found their audiences, and it is likely

14. WA TR 2, no. 1329, 50-51.

15. WA TR 5, no. 5428.

that Luther read at least some of them.¹⁶ He was alert to conversational summaries of their content. He never went as far as John Calvin in haranguing the sinners before him as Turks (or Jews or Judases) themselves, although he did think them comparable. He reached into his arsenal of invective one day: “The pope is worse than the Turk.”¹⁷

Luther’s direct acquaintance with the Koran began in 1542 with a poor Latin translation of the Muslim Scripture. A better one by Theodore Bibliander was to appear in Basel in that year but was suppressed by the city council. Luther, Melancthon, and others appealed to the council, arguing that this book would make clear its author’s “lies, fables, and abominations.”¹⁸ Other public figures joined in. The council relented in 1543. Luther provided a foreword in which he stressed the value of acquaintance with non-Christian faiths in underscoring the sole validity of Christianity.¹⁹

The third activity that engaged Luther in imagining a world beyond that with which he was familiar was translating the Bible. Luther had not even seen a Latin Bible until he became a friar in Erfurt. He devoured it and remembered much. He was canny in recognizing that language exists within a cultural framework. When seeking the best rendering of either Greek or Hebrew words, he needed to envision the people who used them within their environment in order to decipher their meaning. He had acquired expertise in Greek as part of a humanistically influenced arts curriculum at the University of Erfurt. We may assume that his own mastery of classical Greek derived much amplification when he took it upon himself to understand what the Gospels and key letters of Saint Paul, such as Romans and Galatians, actually meant. His spiritual quest was a towering incentive to language improvement. In the Wartburg, Luther translated the whole New Testament into German in eleven weeks. He benefited mightily from Erasmus’s scholarship.

He immediately turned to the second book, the Old Testament. He had to gather a committee of experts, including the Hebraist Mattheus Aurogallus, to ferret out the intentions of Moses and the other patriarchs and the prophets,

16. Most detailed is Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); see also Charlotte Colding Smith, *Images of Islam, 1453-1600* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), the entire first third, but esp. ch. 3, “Biblical Images of the Turk,” 69-98.

17. WA TR 2, no. 1588, 143; WA TR 3, no. 3183, 214.

18. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 3, *Die Erhaltung der Kirche 1532-1546* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1987), 349.

19. Francisco, *Luther and Islam* (see note 16), 212-217.

who could be poetic.²⁰ He had some trouble in lecturing on the Song of Songs. A woman's breasts, he thought, were intended as symbols of consolation. But, he concluded, "Allegory or similitude is difficult."²¹

Luther's commentaries and sermons on Old Testament books are filled with speculation and imaginative in-fill. Many foreign places, such as Jerusalem, Mount Ararat, and Damascus remained in existence as Luther sat at his desk. But he had to wrestle with the location of the Garden of Eden as he prepared his early sermons and then his later lectures on the Book of Genesis. The Tigris-Euphrates River delta was in his geographic repertoire. But where did the accursed Cain wander? What was meant by "east of Eden"? When Abraham and Lot divided their flocks and went their separate ways, where in fact did they now locate themselves? When Lot and his daughters escaped from Sodom, where precisely did they go? His analyses of these books are also rich in the Reformer's empathy. That resource, too, had its limits, and even the patriarchs occasionally elicited his moral outrage. They were sinful men. Why did they find it necessary to practice polygamy? To commit incest? Why did David seduce Bathsheba and arrange to have her husband murdered? Yet, these were part of Christ's lineage, and as such, he was sure, God had in mind to save them.

In reconstructing the life of Christ based on the Gospels, Luther had to evoke life in the early Roman Empire almost as extensively as in the earlier period. The Levant of 25 A.D. was just as alien to him as that of many centuries earlier. The scholar had informed himself of the basic programs of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and he knew who each of Christ's interrogators / tormentors (Annas, Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate) was and in what capacity he served. In telling other Bible stories, too, Luther was practiced in transmitting a comprehensible version of a foreign culture to his simple listeners. The Wittenberger's writings were never simply theological abstractions; Luther invariably engaged with realistic explanations and revealed himself to his audiences. His audiences themselves are in need of further research.

Luther's mastery of Scripture and his gift for drawing congregations into his preaching by no means make this divine an expert on those parts of the extra-European world that roused his attention. He was not a practiced geographer, much less an ethnographer. He was a home-boy who, even as he perceived differences among peoples, still viewed human activity through the lens of his

20. WA TR 3, no. 3271a-b, 243-244, on translating.

21. WA 31.2, "Vorlesung über das Hohelied 1530-1531," 684.

German-ness and his allegiance to the ideals of the New Testament. Indeed, he colored the somewhat alien features of Old Testament society with the crayon of the Christocentric New: The patriarchs, he repeated, were instructed by the Holy Spirit and through its mysterious ministrations were Christians in advance of the Incarnation; they believed in justification by faith.²² Luther called them preachers as well.

A further indication of Luther's awareness of human difference lies in his expansive concept of *adiaphora*, indifferent matters. Even if his followers in the beset and rigorous later sixteenth century would struggle to bring all churches subject to their authority to uniformity in ceremonial practice, the Reformer himself repeated that local circumstances ought to meet with flexibility in such matters as the language used in ritual, hymns sung, order of worship, texts read, and decoration of the sanctuary. The soul of divine services lay in building a fire in people's hearts and availing them of the comfort (*Trost*) that God extended to all His children. Luther's own practical mentality could accommodate certain variations. He would not, however, accommodate the least deviation from his personal interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, Scripture was not to *be* interpreted. It contained the sum total of God's Truth for people as long as the world should last, which flawed mortals should never attempt to manipulate in accordance with their reason. The purity of this Word of God was sealed in the consciences of the elect. This conscience informed them when they violated its provisions.

Luther was both sustained and energized by his familiar German environment. Never again did he undertake a physical adventure like the trip to Rome, or a mental excursion at the level that the translation of the Bible entailed. He fantasized once about traveling to Bavaria and Swabia.²³ But in reality, travel to Mansfeld and the *Veste* (*Festung*) Coburg, through safe territory, provided sufficient excitement, along with the extreme physical discomfort of riding in the equivalent of a buckboard. As much as he was gratified to be a celebrity, he was content that admirers wrote to him or sought him out at home. There he could be well or ill in peace, with Katharina and servants to minister to his needs. He could fall into a pacifying routine of writing and preaching. He could

22. WA 24, "In Genesisin Declamationes. 1527. Über das erste Buch Mose. Predigten. 1527," 30-31, see 291, about Abram: "So gewinnet er gar ein andern neuen wahn und verstand uber [*sic*] die natur, Das heisset nu allein durch den glauben rechtfertig werden."

23. WA TR 3, no. 3473, 341.

hold forth at the table and witness the admiration that the endeavors of one or more scribes testified to. He could be utterly candid in characterizing popes, cardinals, Duke George, any dead princes including Saxon electors, Erasmus, Karlstadt, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and endless others, without fearing the political fallout of public pronouncement. He could joke with his wife. He could comment lovingly on his infants' piercing cries and bodily excretions and entertain the five-year-old Magdalena's challenge as to whether he did not believe in Christ, the angels, and a joyful heaven.²⁴ He could savor his wife's beer and gifts of wine and know that his personal tastes helped to shape the daily menu. He could play with the dog. He could engage in serious theological discussion with his peers. He could play and sing with these and other friends after the meal. Domestic life was a fine antidote to the temptations of the devil, which often beset him at night.

If Martin Luther's concentration on other cultures somewhat weakened after he abandoned the Augustinian Eremites and rejoined secular society, after the Turks were beaten back from the gates of Vienna in 1529, and after he saw his complete German Bible to press in 1534, he was nonetheless still concerned with matters beyond the city walls. His brief participation in parish visitation along with the ongoing reports of Melanchthon and other colleagues farther away, informed him of the parlous condition of rural clergymen's knowledge of his most basic precepts, not to mention the abysmal ignorance of the laity. The most fundamental rectification remained to be carried out at home. In the Empire at large, the fear remained that Landgrave Philipp of Hesse, something of a loose cannon ("a restless man"), would transfer his preference from Luther's Real Presence to Zwinglian Sacramentarianism.²⁵ Above all, Luther feared that Elector Johann, or, after Johann's death in 1532, his son Elector Johann Friedrich might be drawn into war against the Catholic partisans of Charles V. Luther threatened to depart from Wittenberg if his own prince initiated that.²⁶

Luther's macrocosm consisted in his latter years mainly of Germany. Part of his microcosm were the "caterpillars, flies, fleas, and bedbugs" that he detected

24. The last exchange, WA TR 1, no. 660, 311.

25. WA BR 5, no. 1424, 79: "ein unruhiger man."

26. WA BR 4, no. 1258, 447-450. This was an ongoing issue, one in which Melanchthon took an active part and wrote separately to the elector, e.g. *Philippi Melanthonis [sic] Opera quae supersunt omnia* I, ed. by Carl Gottlieb Bretschneider (Halle: C.A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1834), no. 532, 979-980.

around him.²⁷ He was at home, too, among the tiniest, most afflicting of God's northern German creatures.

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27. *Luther's Works, American edition*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), vol. 1 (1958): *Lectures on Genesis*, 170-171.