

AKSUM

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LUTHER AND THE EASTERN CHURCES

By

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The celebrations in 1983, of the fifth centenary of the birth of Martin Luther were world wide and attracted the attention of the learned world. There were many conferences and essays written and volumes published. Not least interesting was the participation of the authorities in Eastern Germany, the heartland of the Lutheran Reformation, and the Communist government subsidised and sponsored a great part of the official celebrations in that land. Naturally, these events brought to attention the wider question of the origins of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, that great explosion within the Western church. Luther himself was at the centre of the great church conflict which began with his protest against the late mediaeval penitential system as it had resulted in the selling of indulgences, and this in turn involved him in a challenge to the authority of the Bishop of Rome. A great deal of this was about matters which had been by-passed by the Eastern Churches and concerned issues about which they had their own proportion of faith. Thus the Eastern churches had not been directly involved in the great struggle between St. Augustine and the Pelagians and had been free from the long repercussions of that conflict, which in the later Middle Ages had been complicated by a doctrine of merit. But above all, the Eastern churches had never acknowledged that the primacy of Rome was something which existed 'de divino jure' and they denied the extreme canonist doctrines of the 'papal plenitude of power'.

And though within the Conciliar movement and supported by such figures as Gerson, and his champions, the University of Paris, there were those who combatted the idea of extreme, papal authority, so that even Sir Thomas More as a young man thought that the papal power existed by human law only, the prevailing attitude in Germany to the authority of the Roman church was such that the first reactions of the church to Luther's protest was simply to inhibit him, and to demand obedience without question, and without any attempt to argue his case.

It was perhaps a fateful afternoon in Luther's life when on a journey in a wagon with some colle-

agues, his lawyer friend, Augustin Schürpf warned him that this business of protesting against Indulgences might yet bring him into serious trouble, if it brought him openly to question the authority of the Pope and of his "plenitude of power". And this is how events did move, first in his confrontations with the authorities in Germany and then more sciously his interview with the Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg in the summer of 1518. From this time onwards he began an intensive study of the canon law and of the history of the early church and to take up more and more forthright and obstinate opposition to the Roman claims.

This became apparent in the great debate in which he became involved at the Castle of the Pleissenberg in Leipzig in the summer of 1519. The Catholic theologian, humanist, biblicist, John Eck of the University of Ingolstadt was anxious to keep in with the humanists as well as with the theologians, and for a time tried to keep out of any personal confrontation with Luther himself. But he wrote some informal papers against Luther which Luther read, and to which he replied. But it was Luther's senior colleague Andrew Karlstadt who now intervened and made inevitable a public debate which was bound to attract publicity, and for Luther himself a rather dangerous situation. Karlstadt published on his own an enormous series of Theses against Eck, and the original debate was planned between Eck and Karlstadt. But Eck really had Luther in mind, and eventually Luther became included in the invitation to the confrontation. The debate between Eck and Karlstadt was to be on the themes of Grace and Free Will, subjects which were sharply divisive enough, though Eck was not rigid and unbending about his exposition of them. But by the time the debate took place Eck and Luther had already and in print taken up entirely conflicting attitudes towards the power of the Pope.

Luther, in the 22nd conclusion of his explanations of the 95 Theses of 1517, had declared that 'the Roman church in the time of Gregory the Great did not stand above the Greek Church'. To this Eck now firmly opposed an opposite view:

'Romanam Ecclesiam non fuisse superiorem aliis Ecclesiis ante tempora Sylvestri negamus. Sed eum, qui sedem beatissimi Petri habuit et idem, successorem Petri et Vicarium Christi generalem semper agnovimus'.

In this statement he had tried to push Luther into a more extreme statement than his actual utterance.

One feature of the Luther fifth centenary is that in it, after a century, the great Weimar edition of Luther's works has reached its completion and in Vol. 59, published in 1983 there is an excellent up to date edition of the disputation between Eck and Luther at Leipzig in 1519 which enables us to follow the debates blow by blow as they were recorded by the four Notaries who took them down.

1. Weimarer Ausgabe (W.A) 1883

1. 'Disputatio inter Joannem Eccium et Martinum Lutherum.' 1519. ed FT Bos. WA 59.427-606. 1983. The debate between Eck and Luther was always forceful and often angry, and frequently interrupted by Luther's protests as Eck cleverly tried to manoeuvre Luther into more and more extreme statements, and above all in the admission of views which could plausibly link him with former heretics, and above all with that of John Huss and of John Wyclif who had been condemned at the Council of Constance in 1415.

Fairly early in the debate, Eck turned to attack the record of the Eastern Churches and affirmed:

'Graecos longo tempore non solum fuisse schismaticos, sed haereticissimos, ut tot errorum cumulus et pervicax obstinatio testator, ut de spiritu sancto, de confessione, de trium evangelistarum falsitate et innumeris aliis quamvis saepe fictam fecerint ecclesiae Romanae obedientiam uti et in concilio Florentino Eugenii quarti temporibus factum est'¹

To this Luther replied by paying tribute to the theology of the Eastern churches:

'Graecos haereticissimos ausus est appellare satis modeste, cum in universa ecclesia nulla pars dedit plures excellentiores scriptores, quam Graeca'².

Eck now tried to qualify his extreme statement:

'fateor eos olim fuisse christianissimos et doctissimos, cum Romanam ecclesiam primam appelabant sedem. Sed superbia elati et invidia

infecti ab obedientia Romanae sedis se subtrahentes in pessimos inciderunt errores et simul fidem cum imperio perdidierunt'³.

Against this, too Luther vehemently protested, aspersions cast against 'tot milia martyrum et sanctorum per annos MCCCC in Graeca ecclesia habitos, extra ecclesiam eicere et nunc deman etiam regnantes in coelo velle deturnare'⁴.

And Luther saw another denial of the papal supremacy in the fact that the ancient Eastern sees did not seek confirmation of their occupants from Rome:

'Graeca ecclesia usque ad nostra tempora numquam accepit episcopos confirmatos ex Roma. Ideo si fuisset just divinum per tantum tempus omnes episcopi Alexandriae, Constantinopoli, aliquot sanctissimi ut Gregorius Nazianzenus et ceteri quamplurimi essent damnati, heretici, et Bohemici qua blasphemia nihil potest detestabilis dici'⁵.

Next day, Luther had been driven to defend an article of John Huss which declared 'it was not necessary for salvation to believe the Roman church superior to others' and he added:-

'Scio quod salvati sunt Basilius magnus, Gregorius Nazianzenus, Epiphanius, Cyprius et innumerabiles alii episcopi Graeci et tamen hunc articulum non tenuerant'⁶.

Now Eck felt himself drawn to justify his criticism of the Eastern Churches and their doctors.

'Graecos laudatissimos et sanctos martyres semper laudavi'⁷ and he accused. Luther of mixing together the Greek saints with heretics and schismatics. 'Nam sanctos patres Graecos canonizatos non damno'⁸.

But Luther would have none of this. 'When he confesses the Greek saints to be not damned but only schismatics, this is irrelevant. Nor do I ever speak of the schismatic Greeks 'sed de sanctis, praesertim Niceni concilii, sicut nec credo ipsum sentire de schismaticis latinis quando de Romano ecclesia loquitur'⁹.

This counter-attack drove Eck to name the Greek schismatics.

1. WA 59.453.514.
2. *ibid.* p. 456.747.

3. *ibid.* 458.810.
4. *ibid.* 462.917.
5. *ibid.* 462.930.
6. *ibid.* 466.1055.
7. *ibid.* 468.1112.
8. *ibid.* 473.1275.
9. *ibid.* 480.1488.

'Nonne schismaticus fuit Macedonius, Nestorius, Eutices, Achatius, Joannes Constantinopolitanus¹.

To this Luther made the simple but effective reply that if these schismatics were to be regarded as Greek fathers then of 'Possem et ego sic latinam ecclesiam describere per Pelagianos, Manichaeos, Jovinianos, Vigilantianos et similia monstra'².

These references to the Eastern churches were a very subsidiary part of the debate, but they were certainly part of Luther's argument— 'et erant tunc temporis in Graecia Epiphanius celeberrime laudatus a Hieronymo, Gregorius Nazianzenus, Basilius christianissimi viri: non tamen sub Romano pontifice unquam fuerunt'³.

It might be thought that Luther was simply using the Eastern churches as an instrument with which to belabour the extreme papalist views. But it is plain that he had great esteem for the great Greek fathers, and throughout his life continued to quote and to praise Chrysostom especially, though he generally had criticism of the Fathers when he compared their authority with that of Holy Scripture, or when he disagreed with some points of scriptural exegesis.

The real theme of 'Luther and the Eastern Churches' would be much more subtle and to pursue it would demand a really intricate knowledge of the motifs, both of Orthodox and of Lutheran thought. But Luther himself, though in many ways a typical product of the Latin and Western church was a thinker of originality, and a man of deep prayer, who wrestled throughout his life with the mysteries of Holy Scripture. So, although it is true that he made much of the teachings of St Paul, there is a deeply Johannine strand in his teaching, his preaching and devotion which brings him nearer to the Eastern divines. His doctrine of the Word, complex as it is, is founded on ancient expositions of the Logos, and his view of the uncreated and created word and of the

whole creation as proceeding from the Word is in some striking ways reminiscent of Orthodox thought. And though he subordinated their authority to Scripture, it has been often shown how fundamental for him was the teaching of the Councils of Nicea and of Chalcedon for his doctrines of the Person of Christ and of the Holy Trinity.

In some ways his spirituality, devout, simple, practical Biblical might seem to leave no room for those mystical doctrines, and for the whole idea of 'Theoria' which lies deep in the Eastern tradition, but as a moralist and as a man of prayer he naturally comes close to some of the themes classically expounded by the Greek Fathers. When we turn from the shell of dogmatic theory, which is encased always in Western terms, we find Luther profoundly and fundamentally concerned with the relationship of men with God in Christ and with the gift of his grace, so that there are insights in Luther which we do not find again as profoundly in the literature of the West, until we come to Dostoevsky, himself so deeply rooted in the Orthodox tradition. It cannot be said that Luther was a great creator of liturgies, but the importance of liturgical worship for him, and above all of the eucharist cannot be gainsaid. And then, there is his devotion to singing and to music, which was so remarkable, evidenced by the fine hymns he wrote. I remember going with a church delegation to a Russian monastery at Pskov, and after our common meal the abbot said to us— 'And now shall we pray together? Or perhaps better still, shall we pray and *sing* together?' There are areas of the soul and of the Christian community where, when we escape the barriers imposed by space and time and ecclesiastical custom, Christians of widely and deeply separated communions find themselves speaking in common language, and expressing a common devotion. Perhaps the last word has not yet been written on 'Luther and the Eastern churches' and the recent celebrations invite their reconsideration of this problem.

1. *ibid.* 482.1557.

2. *ibid.* 493.1848.

3. *ibid.* 496.1941.