Book Review
Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World
By Eric Metaxas
Penguin Books, 2017, 480 pages

October 31, 2017, marked the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which historians date from the posting of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* on the church door at Wittenberg. Recent historians, however, question whether this famous incident actually took place. The date and incident were recalled by Philip Melanchthon several decades later, but he was not actually present in Wittenberg at the time and was only relating hearsay. It is more likely, writes Eric Metaxas, that Luther posted his famous theses two weeks later and that the date, October 31, 1517, is only significant because it was on that day that Luther posted a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz alerting him to the abuse of selling indulgences in Saxony that was then taking place under his name. Metaxas' biography of Luther is filled with this type of myth-busting information and analysis.

There have been a number of excellent biographies of Luther written over the years. Many today – including me – grew up reading Roland Bainton's classic, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950), an eloquent volume that has appealed to both scholarly and popular audiences. Biographies in the past few decades have tended to be directed more to scholars than laypersons. Metaxas himself cites Martin Brecht's *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation* (1981)as "unsurpassable." Others might lean more towards Heiko A. Oberman's *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (1992) or Lyndal Roper's recent *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (2016). These latter books carefully weigh the historical evidence and remain in conversation with other scholars in the field in ways that historians of the Reformation appreciate. For those, however, who want to read a popular but reliable and up-to-date introduction to Luther, Eric Metaxas' new biography may be just the thing.

In addition to the *faux* story of the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, the introduction to Metaxas' biography notes six other famous myths about Luther that have no basis in fact, and other Luther fables are exposed in the course of Luther's story as Metaxas tells it. Metaxas also doesn't shrink from being dismissive of scholarly works on Luther such as Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1958), a widely read but generally misleading psychoanalysis of Luther that concluded that Luther's assaults on the papacy were due to a redirected oedipal complex.
This is not Metaxas' first foray into biography. He first came to my attention with *William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (2007), and he gained universal renown for *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*(2011). Like his biography of Luther, these *New York Times* bestsellers were well-researched, fast paced, and written in a popular style.

Though Metaxas is fair-minded throughout, he does not pull his punches. In describing the practice of Catholicism in the city of Rome when Luther visited it in 1510, he writes, "If ever one needed a picture of 'dead religion' and 'dead works,' here it was in all of its most legalistic ghastliness." As for the pre-Reformation popes, Metaxas has no kind words. "The elegant evil of the Medici popes," he opines, "sometimes makes Machiavelli himself come across like a gap-toothed rube." The Roman Catholic Church, to be blunt, was engaged in a massive fraud: the sale of indulgences. Clearly the Augean stables needed cleansing, and in Metaxas' view, the reverent but blunt-speaking Luther was just the Christian Hercules for the job. Borrowing an image from the *Wizard of Oz*, Metaxas describes the leaders of the Catholic Church as "a group of small and fearful men pulling ecclesiastical and legalistic levers from behind red and gold curtains," while Luther is the little black dog that succeeds in pulling the curtains back to "reveal the imperious and worldly chicanery at the black heart of it all."

The Luther that Metaxas presents is far from being a Protestant plaster saint. Though profoundly religious, he was not otherworldly. He loved his wife and children, and his theology affirmed the goodness of the physical universe as God created it. Though he often presented himself as a peasant, this was a ruse. He was from a well-to-do family that gave him the best education available at the time. He could be earthy, irascible, and – late in life – anti-Semitic. His name, curiously, was not originally Luther, but rather Luder or Ludher, which today, Metaxas suggests, might be translated as "hussy" or "bitch" – hardly a suitable name for a religious figure. Luther understandably changed his name at some point, possibly as he was becoming famous and feared that it would be an easy target for his often vociferous and uninhibited opponents. When close to death, he retained his humility as well as his sense of humor, saying, "If I get back home to Wittenberg, I'll lie down in a coffin and give the maggots a fat doctor to eat."

Metaxas' Luther is a genuine hero, a Christian scholar of tremendous insight, honesty, and courage. While Luther scholars have closely examined the great reformer's place in the history of Christian theology, Metaxas is less concerned with Luther's theological contributions than with his influence on Western culture in general. For Metaxas, Luther is "the man who created the future." In using the new medium of pamphlets, Luther not only became the voice of the people but helped to create the very idea of the *vox populi*. By insisting on freedom of conscience for all individuals, he helped to pave the way to today's religious pluralism. As a religious prophet who spoke truth to power, he helped to open the door to modern notions of religious dissent, human rights, and democracy. Because he based Christian truth on the Bible rather than the bald assertions of an authoritarian institutional church, Luther made it possible for people of conscience to challenge both church and state when they veered from the teachings of the gospel.

Luther did not anticipate all the great reforms that have occurred in the five centuries since the Protestant Reformation, nor did he even dimly foresee them. Yet, Metaxas reasons, his insights and example surely helped to make such reforms possible: from freedom of the press as advocated in John Milton's timeless *Areopagiticia* (1644) to democratic government created in the upheaval of the American Revolution (1775-83); and onward to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that saw the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of child labor, legislation to benefit the poor, and so much more. Luther's long shadow can be seen even in the messy democratic world we inhabit today, for it is the world that he helped to bring into being.

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