

BERÜHMTE DEUTSCHEN / FAMOUS GERMANS

MARTIN LUTHER

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Martin Luther: A man of paradox

WASHINGTON — Ask 20 thoughtful persons to list the 20 historical figures most important as makers of the modern world and you may get a hundred names. But a few names would be on every list: Einstein, Freud. And the man born half a millennium ago, Nov. 10, 1483.

Arguably, the modern world began when Martin Luther, appearing at an inquiry into his thought, reportedly said: "*Hier steh' ich, ich kann nicht anders.*" "I can do no other." It seems an odd cry of freedom. It foreshadowed societies based on recognition of "unalienable" rights.

Luther's words announced the ascendance of private judgment — of conscience. But he was speaking the language — "*ich kann nicht*" — of restriction, compulsion. The life of this driven man demonstrated that the modern notion of freedom — freedom from external restraints imposed by others — can mean submission to a hard master, one's conscience. Alternatively, it can mean the soft tyranny of conformity to opinion. That, however, is an option that never occurred to Luther. He was perhaps the most potent opinion-shaper since Christ.

Luther was a conservative and a revolutionary. He supported forceful, sometimes brutal, defense of the social status quo while actually subverting with his ideas the established order in every particular. An Italian contemporary, Machiavelli, was secularizing politics, orienting it toward man's passions rather than God's laws. Luther was peeling politics off religion, in a quest for religion's essence.

Of course Luther's theology had political consequences. You, reader, are living in a country that is, in no small measure, a consequence.

His dispute with Rome was cast, unavoidably, in categories of political thought: "authority" within the church, the church's "power" in society, the "right" of the faithful to "participate" in certain arrangements. He thought the state legitimately could be, and probably must be, powerful and sometimes ruthless. By his reckoning, the state is of less dignity than it was when church and

One of the giants

state were thoroughly melded. The state, he thought, is responsible only for order, and is barely relevant to the serious business of life, salvation.

It is said that someone seeking a purpose in life should see a bishop, not a politician — but that today's bishops talk like politicians. Someone seeking to extract political agendas from Christianity gets little help from Luther.

Christianity's assessment of man, at once high and severe, is about right for political philosophy: Man can be magnificent, but is magnificent rarely, and never spontaneously — without help from nurturing institutions. Luther had a haunting sense of the utter fallenness of mankind, and of mankind's total dependence on God's grace for even the slightest amelioration of the consequences of sin. This insulated him from the political temptation to believe in the perfectability of man through the improvement of social arrangements. In the endless argument about which dominates, nature or nurture, Luther knew: nature.

His quest for purity in religious experience — an anticipation of the modern quest for "authenticity" — led him to scant the institutional help necessary to mankind's quest for religious satisfaction and social fulfillment. But the radical individualism implicit in his thought was tempered by his celebration of the family as society's molecular unit.

The former monk started a family at age 41. Although never without a piercing sense of sinfulness, this most human of outsized heroes overflowed with enjoyment — of beer and sex and music. (His chorales and hymns earn him a significant place in the history of music.)

Luther's career was made possible by another German's career, Johann Gutenberg's. Luther's was the first great life bound up with mass communication — printing with movable type. He was the most prolific serious writer in history. One edition of his works exceeds 100 volumes. More than 2,500 of his letters survive.

Charles V, Luther's antagonist, said the German language was suited only for speaking to horses. Luther made it speak to God. His translation of the Bible into German virtually invented the German language. It also showed how the tangible (a new technology, printing) can shape the intangible (the idea of an institutional church). When laymen could read scripture, priests were challenged in their role as mediators between laymen and God.

Luther's doctrine of salvation by faith alone rather than by good works expressed his belief that salvation derives from God's gift of unmerited grace. This doctrine challenged the role of priests as deliverers of grace through sacraments.

He was no democrat, but with seven words — "each and all of us are priests" — he asserted an idea of equality that evolved into an underpinning of popular sovereignty. So this republic, 207 years old, should honor a Founding Father born 500 years ago.