

450 years ago, in the early hours of February 18, the charismatic reformer and fearless combatant who had changed the face of Europe and of Christianity died in his home town of Eisleben while on a peace mission. The feuding Counts of Mansfeldt had asked him to mediate. Accompanied by his three sons, Luther, old at 62 and ailing, made the trip in mid-winter against the advice of friends and family. His body was returned to Wittenberg and buried there on February 22.

It is impossible to overestimate his impact. The common priesthood of man, "everybody his own priest", this truly revolutionary notion at the core of his teaching, was immediately recognized for its (unintended) political, democratic implications. To him, all the faithful were one community, there was no room for separate casts. His zeal as a preacher of the "true faith", and his denunciation of those who would not accept it, earned him the reputation of intolerance, even anti-Semitism. The latter would surprise him, for he considered himself a prophet, though anointed against his will, like those of the Old Testament who also admonished, cajoled and condemned the "wayward children of Israel"

Erasmus of Rotterdam, an early supporter, had from the outset deplored Luther's "righteous obstinacy" and his lack of "modesty and evangelical gentleness." Speaking at Luther's bier, Philip Melanchthon sought to soften his mentor's image: that he was kind and friendly at heart, and that the harsh treatment he accorded his foes was merely testimony to the seriousness with which he pursued his mission.

Yet he was the first to bring down an ideological curtain across Europe, causing centuries of venomous dispute and warfare, including the Thirty Years War (1618-48), the most devastating ever fought on German soil. He could not know that, but it is not at all certain that it would have made a difference if he had. He was unshakable in his conviction that the second coming of Christ was imminent and that the only important task remaining was to find and maintain the True Faith in order to escape eternal damnation. A hundred years later the pragmatic English Puritans, also convinced that the millennium was at hand, sought to prepare for it by returning mind, body and the land to their original, pristine conditions: hence their emphasis on education, medicine and agriculture.

Luther was a religious reformer first and foremost who rejected any secular role his contemporaries would have him play. And therein lies perhaps his most unfortunate legacy. Limited by his earnest but narrow view of what was needed he refused to acknowledge that the unparalleled corruption of all institutions, church and state, called for a revolution that would reorganize the relationship between government and the governed. When the Peasants' War broke out in 1525 he exhorted the German nobles to "kill the mob". To him this was rebellion, the very act that turned Lucifer, first among the angels, into the devil, changing forever the momentum of creation. Any subsequent rebel was a follower of Satan and himself a devil. Luther unconditionally endorsed St. Paul's doctrine that all secular government is divinely instituted and entitled to unconditional obedience in all matters but faith.

In the Anglo-Saxon world this is filtered through such liberating events as the Magna Carta, the execution of Charles I, to say nothing of the American Revolution. In Germany Luther's views dominated, even stifled, the political debate of the issue. It was not until the revolutionary events of 1989 which brought down the Wall, that the (East) German Protestant Churches, as an institution, sided with a rebellious populace in protest against an intolerable government. It is idle to speculate how Luther would have responded. In the early 16th century he was the man of the hour but a child of his time and a prisoner of his circumstances, a monk who sought to correct only the evil he deemed worthy of his attention.

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