Martin Luther’s *Here I Stand*:

Last of the Medievals / First of the Moderns

Week 6 – Lecture 1

13 October 2004

“We’re all Lutheran in Minnesota; even the Catholics are Lutherans.”

--- Garrison Keillor, *A Prairie Home Companion*

Seeing *The Best Intentions* in Palo Alto v. in Minneapolis...

**Martin Luther: 1483-1546 [NB: nine years old in 1492]**

**Key Anxiety: Can I trust God to fulfill his promises?**

- **Last of Medievals:**
  - theology of alienation
  - crisis of mediation
  - nominalist: pessimism over knowledge and arbitrariness / absolute power (irrationality) of God

- **First of Moderns:**
  - solution: the individual subject as the source of stability
  - atomistic, not organic worldview
  - NOT: community; not belonging; not actions / merit / what I do --- not “God has taught thus” or “The Holy Spirit has revealed thus”
  - RATHER: Scripture alone / Faith alone
  - *Here I stand: I read, I interpret, I believe*
1. Theology of Alienation

First: What is a “Theology of Alienation”? Christianity: founded on belief that God became incarnate in human person Jesus

One belief but different implications:
- i.e., different theologies of what “incarnation” means
- “Theology of Alienation” <dialnet theology>:
  - cf. Calvin: human corruption is so great that gap between human beings and God can be bridged only by God’s unilateral movement toward us [“grace”]. Our actions [merits] cannot bridge.

“Theology of Reconciliation” <e.g., Great Chain of Being>:
- Humanity and God in one continuous chain.
- God’s “grace” works through human nature which is sinful but not thoroughly so.

Examples of “Theology of Alienation”:
- Letters of St. Paul [apocalyptic: end is near]
- St. Augustine [4th-5th cc.]
- Nominalists: Scotus / William of Occam

Note Influence on Luther:
1) Augustinian monk [1505]
2) Nominalism – Ockham
3) Converted by reading St. Paul’s letter to the Romans

Luther: a “theology of alienation” between God and the World.
- “I am like ripe shit, and the world is a gigantic asshole. We probably will let go of each other soon.”

Luther: God v. World – antagonistic; not “organic” or “humanist”; rather: dialegetic [dualistic]
- “I am like ripe shit, and the world is a gigantic asshole. We probably will let go of each other soon.”
- Douglas: bodily fluids – blood, spit, semen, mucous, feces … symbolize margins on social body
- Luther: does not feel himself part of the world
2. Mediation

ALIENATION:
A Crisis of Mediation = Crisis of Reason
The Remoteness of God from the World
and the seeming arbitrariness of his will

3. Nominalism

14th century: essentialism vs. “NOMINALISM”

L. nomen = “name”

There is no essential connection between a thing and the name (model/meaning) we give it.

IN OTHER WORDS: names --- and meanings --- are arbitrary and contingent agreements.

Shakespeare:
“A rose by any other name would still smell sweet as a rose.”

REVIEW:

Luther: Heidelberg Disputation Theses (1518):

#3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.

#4. Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.

APPEARANCES DECEIVE
The names we give to things aren’t what they “really are.”

REVIEW:

Nominalism = end of rational religion (i.e., “creation makes sense”)

- Scotus: “God could have willed the inverse of the 10 commandments”: “Thou shalt steal!”
- Ockham: “If God had willed the absolute opposite of the 10 commandments [“Thou shalt commit adultery”] they would have been binding absolutely.
- God’s will is not reasonable --- it is arbitrary and yet absolutely binding.
#14. “Free Will” after the fall [of Adam and Eve] has the potentiality toward good as an unrealizable capacity only; towards evil, however, always a realizable one.

#18. It is certain that a man must completely despair of himself in order to become fit to obtain the grace of Christ.

(cf. Calvin!)

ALIENATION: HUMAN MERIT / DIVINE GRACE

NB: Opposite of Italian Renaissance solution

Luther Thesis #21: “The ‘theologian of glory’ calls the bad good and the good bad. The ‘theologian of the cross’ says what a thing is.”

(Italians: “theologians of glory”: emphasize the positive.

Luther: sees himself as a “theologian of the cross”)

NB: nominalist anxiety! saying what a thing is = giving right name

From Luther, On Christian Liberty

Is not such a soul most obedient to God in all things by this faith? What commandment is there that such obedience has not completely fulfilled? What more complete fulfilment is there than obedience in all things? This obedience, however, is not rendered by works, but by faith alone. On the other hand, what greater contempt of God is there than not believing his promise? For what if this but to make God a liar or to doubt that he is truthful—that is, to ascribe truthfulness to one’s self but lying and vanity to God? Does not a man who does this deny God and set himself up as an idol in his heart? Then of what good are works done in such

Why this anxiety…?
Northern “Renaissance”:
Different Cultural Mood than Italian Renaissance

Shift in cultural mood:
**WHATEVER**
- Despair over arbitrary world / human action: “What’s the use of doing anything at all?”
- Macabre / grotesque
- Images:
  - disease
  - pain
  - skeletons
  - judgment
  - sado-masochistic torture

*Piéta*, 1400s
German

*Totentanz*: Berlin, 1490

*Totentanz*  
Danse Macabre  
The Dance of Death  

BERLINER TOTENTANZ 1

http://www.totentanz.de/totentanz.htm
Ingmar Bergman (Sweden): 
*The Seventh Seal* [1957]
Set in time of Black Plague
“Seventh Seal”: from the *Apocalypse*

- “When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.”
  – *Apocalypse* 8:1-2

Procession of Flagellants during Black Death
Bergman uses music: *Dies Irae, Dies Illa*

Hieronymous Bosch
A world of monsters, chaos, sadism, punishment for sin
Bosch: Surreal!!!

Matthias Grünewald, ca. 1500

_Crucifixion_

*Painted to hang in chapel of hospital for victims of “rye” syndrome*

Luther Heidelberg Thesis #21:

“The ‘theologian of glory’ calls the bad good and the good bad.

The ‘theologian of the cross’ says what a thing is.”
Last Judgment
Jan van Eyck, 1420-25
Shift in cultural mood:

**WHATEVER**

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“A Christian should and could be happy, but then the devil shits on him.”

**1515: “Tower Room Experience”**

- KEY ANXIETY: Can we trust God’s word that he will save us???
- Luther reads Romans: “Man is justified by faith alone.”
  - i.e., Not good works!
  - cf. Calvinist hymn: cannot wash away the leprosy!
- FAITH ALONE [SOLA FIDE]
- IN GOD’S WORD ALONE [SOLA SCRIPTURA]
- NEW WAY TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF SALVATION.
  - i.e: NOT MEDIATION!

Martin Luther, *On Christian Liberty*

Since, therefore, this faith can rule only in the inner man, as Rom. 10: [10] says, “For man believes with his heart and so is justified,” and since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and that these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with this inner man. On the other hand, only ungodliness and unbelief of heart, and no outer work, make him guilty and a damnable servant of sin. Wherefore it ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus, who suffered and

NB: “inner” v. “outer” man — “anxieties over passing for righteous”

cf. hymn: leprosy is “deep within”

**1517: “Ninety-Five Theses”**

*The Folly of Indulgences*
"The Birth of the Pope and his Roman Curia"

From Luther: 
Against the Roman Papacy: 
An Institution of the Devil 
[1545]
Emphasis on excrement: What would Mary Douglas say???

An ordered system disintegrating . . .?

NOTE INVERSION OF VALUATION: Luther takes anxiety and spins it as something positive:

God’s will is — and must be — absolutely arbitrary and remote — or else it would not be absolutely free

Human will is — and ought to be — disregarded of

Otherwise: God’s will would not be all-powerful; would depend in some way upon us; somehow be subject to the world.

Our trust in its ABSOLUTE POWER saves us.

From Luther, *On Christian Liberty*

honor him whom we trust. Could we ascribe to a man anything greater than truthfulness and righteousness and perfect goodness? On the other hand, there is no way in which we can show greater contempt for a man than to regard him as false and wicked and to be suspicious of him, as we do when we do not trust him. So when the soul firmly trusts God’s promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted. When this is done, the soul consents to his will. Then it hallow his name and allows itself to be treated according to God’s good pleasure for, clinging to God’s promises, it does not doubt that he who is true, just, and wise will do, dispose, and provide all things well.
Verse 1:
A mighty fortress is our God,  
A trusty Shield and Weapon;  
That has us now overtaken.  
The old evil Foe  
Seriously means us woe;  
Deep guile and great might  
Are his dread arms in fight;  
On Earth is not his equal.

Verse 2:
With might of ours can naught be done  
On our own we'd soon be losing.  
There fights for us a righteous Man  
The man of God's own choosing.  
Do you ask who that might be?  
Christ Jesus, it is he!  
Lord Sabaoth his name,  
there is no other God.  
He holds the [battle-field forever.]

Verse 3:
Though devils all the world  
should fill,  
All eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill,  
They shall not overpower us.  
This world's prince may still  
Scowl fierce as he will,  
He can harm us none,  
He's judged; the deed is done;  
One little word can fell him.

Verse 4:
The Word they [the devils] still  
still shall let remain  
Nor any thanks have for it.  
He's by our side upon the plain  
With His good gifts and Spirit.  
And take they our life,  
Goods, fame, child and [our] wife, ***  
Let these all be gone,  
They yet have nothing won;  
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

*** Allusion to Book of Job

If God is more remote,  
how can we connect to God?

- **Conservative answer:**
  - give more money to mediating institutions --- masses, indulgences, bequests
  - Italian Christian Humanism
  - Hybrid: both conservative and yet innovative: reworking of Great Chain of Being

If God is more remote,  
how can we connect to God?

New revolutionary answers:

- Bypass the visible church and turn to invisible “Church of the Elect”
- Mysticism: direct contact with God
- Private meditation on scripture
Medieval: Mediation
Modern: by-pass mediation – immediate access (reading)