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Emperor Charles V and the Lutheran Reformation: an Attempt at Revision

In historiography, the predominant portrayal of Charles V is that of a ruler hostile to the Reformation. Various authors, notably those unfavourably inclined towards the Habsburgs, show him as a defender of the Catholic orthodoxy and an opponent of any heresy. He is alleged to have lacked tolerance and endorsed the papacy, as well as to have used military force to combat Lutheranism. In this context, authors draw attention to the Battle of Mühlberg (1547), where the imperial army under Charles V's command crushed the Protestant forces, leaving the battlefield strewn with the bodies of 8,000 killed and wounded.

In this paper, I seek to revise the false and overly demonised image of the Emperor, one that is particularly frequently encountered in authors of evangelical provenance. In my opinion, the notion of a militant Emperor-Catholic which the figure of Charles V has come to evoke effectively diverts one's attention away from the ideological substrate on which his vision of Christianity evolved: Charles's religiousness and his association with the teachings of Erasmus of Rotterdam. If this context is disregarded, one cannot hope to understand the approach of the Emperor to Martin Luther and Lutheranism. Consequently, Charles's idea of Christianity should be outlined in order to demonstrate how it translated into relations with Luther and his movement. The chief proposition I am going to argue is as follows: influenced by

Erasmus' thought, Charles V remained open to Christian humanism, understood Lutherans and sought conciliation with them; however, his attitude was neither appreciated nor acknowledged by the Protestant princes of the Reich, to whom Luther was an instrument allowing to make a bid for greater power and independence, nor was his appeal to the papacy, which rejected everything that was new as a threat to the fossilised dogmas. It is in this light that I will subsequently evaluate the impact that Charles V and Luther had on the Western civilisation.

Religiousness of Charles V

Religiousness of a person is in most cases the upshot of parental influence and the pressure of the immediate environment (teachers, friends, etc.). From one's earliest years, those are the people who shape religious attitudes and beliefs therefore, apparently, religiousness tends to be "handed over" and "adopted". However, the approach overlooks the more primeval and profound roots of one's religiousness which do play a role in Charles's case, as he was orphaned at an early age: his father died when Charles was six, while the mother allegedly lost her sanity soon after her husband's death. Furthermore, Philip the Fair, Charles's father, was truly a man of the Renaissance who took full advantage of the joys of life. On the other hand, his mother, Joanna of Castile, was a very religious person, but due to her mental illness she spent most of her life in isolation, therefore her influence on her son's religious upbringing was negligible. Much greater influence should be attributed to his tutors, especially Adrian of Utrecht, future Pope Hadrian VI, who taught him the love of God and respect for religion. The latter embodied the genuine "philosophy of Christ," which is exactly what Erasmus espoused. Without doubt, the spiritual formation of young Charles should be credited to Adrian.

Nonetheless, Charles's religious attitudes cannot be accounted for by the impact of the environment, which might suggest that they had in some way been "inculcated". As far as Charles is concerned one has to speak of a source of religiousness, a source in the sense of spring from which the water issues and flows. Thus, wishing to describe such sources of religiousness one looks to those elements of human psychological make-up which contribute to the

development of religious behaviours.¹ Though it is clear that attempting to establish the psychological background for religious beliefs will at times verge on speculation, such an approach is justified by Charles's genuine religiousness, which was neither superficial as in his father, Philip the Fair, nor fanatical as in his son, Philip II. Chroniclers from the period unanimously underline that Charles V was a profound and honest believer. The fact is corroborated by numerous sources (documents, letters, diaries) originating from the Emperor himself. Their analysis leaves no doubt that it was the deep faith in God which revealed to Charles the meaning of life, gave him a sense of security and unity with the others. It was thanks to faith that Charles perceived – in himself and in the world around him – a truly existing order and the values of love, dignity, justice, and peace, all of which were his lodestars.² The religious mindset was furthermore fostered by Charles's melancholic inclination and the penchant for solitude.

It is likely that in Charles's case the genetic background came into play, whereby his genes were the foundation of his belief. Charles's hereditary endowment should not be ignored: apart from the aforementioned mother Joanna, one should mention Isabel of Castile, the grandmother, known perhaps better as Isabel the Catholic. In the opinion of many, due to her piety Isabel deserves to be canonised (the beatification is in progress, yet there are numerous opponents, especially among the Jewish community).

In any case, the crucial element is that for Charles V the religious idea was inherently bound with the observance of tradition and adherence to the law. Consequently, he would perceive the power he exercised as a mission, participation in the divine work. From his profound faith in God Charles derived the determination to defend the creed of his forebears and the unity of the Catholic Church.³ Still, it has to be underlined that as a man of honour he was never guided in his actions by hatred or scorn for his adversaries, including Luther. Here is a symptomatic example: when at the Battle of Mühlberg one of the prince-electors tried to persuade the Emperor to destroy Luther's

¹ Cf. J. Makselon, *Psychologia dla teologów*, Cracow 1990, p. 263.

² On the hypothesis that religiousness derives from the need to satisfy the sense of meaning of life see M. Argyle, *Seven Psychological Roots of Religion*, in: *Psychology and Religion*, L. Brown, ed., London 1973, pp. 5-30.

³ Viktor Frankl believes the sense of mission to be the primary force enabling individuals to overcome subjective and objective obstacles. Idem, *Wirtschaftskrise und Seelenleben vom Standpunkt des Jugendberäters*, "Sozialärztliche Rundschau" 1933, p. 45.

grave in Wittenberg and have his remains scattered, Charles V responded: "Let him rest in peace, for he had already found his judge. My war is with the living, not the dead."⁴ What is more, not infrequently the steps the Emperor would take had more in common with what the reformers did than what the Curia commanded. Such an attitude resulted from the fact that Charles V invariably saw and thought of his domains and lands from the standpoint of Christianity of which he was the leader. Importantly enough, his vision of Christianity was at variance with the official vision, propagated and enforced by the Holy See. It was a vision which adopted the Erasmian optic; in my opinion the latter had a considerable influence on the Emperor's approach to the issue of Lutheran heresy and, in a broader perspective, the development of the Protestant movement.

Charles V and Erasmus of Rotterdam

Charles met Erasmus in early 1516 in Mechelen, during the journey to the court of his aunt, Margaret, when the philosopher had been appointed counsellor to the young Prince.⁵ The vision of the human and the world that the Dutch humanist entertained was a Christian one, yet it was thoroughly novel. Erasmus departed from the notions affirmed in that respect by the mediaeval Church, advocating instead an inner religiousness and a bold reform of the Church. Liturgy with all its props, the ceremonies, the holidays, the indulgences as well as the hierarchical structure of the Church with its dogmas had become secondary, superfluous. As he wrote, "To be Christian does not mean merely to be cleansed with the water of baptism, to be anointed, to be partaking in the mass; a Christian is one who in the deepest depths of the heart cherishes the thought of Christ, who demonstrates his faith unto Him through noble deeds."⁶

Erasmus' severe criticism of the clergy and corrupt ecclesiastical structure caused him to be put on par with Luther. Luther himself counted on the

⁴ J. M. González Cremona, *Carlos V, señor de dos mundos*, Barcelona 1989, p. 213.

⁵ J. Huizinga, *Erazm z Rotterdamu*, M. Kurecka, transl., Warsaw 1964, p. 130.

⁶ Erazm z Rotterdamu, *Pisma moralne*, M. Cytowska, selection and transl., Warsaw 1970, p. 163.

former's support, which is by no means strange. After all, in terms of ideology the correspondences between the two were quite substantial. Both Erasmus and Luther strove for a restitution of Christianity, to a form in which evangelical ideals could be genuinely practiced. Still, Luther aimed even further, intending to establish a separatist ecclesiastical community, of which Erasmus did not approve, as he wanted no schism in Christianity. Remaining with Catholicism, he only desired to be a preacher of evangelical wisdom. He believed that the best in Christianity is a life worthy of Christ therefore – as Johan Huizinga put it – he embarked on the task of “opening up of the pure sources of Christianity, [on] the exposition of the truth of the Gospel in all the simple comprehensibility in which he saw it.”⁷ The Dutchman firmly believed in the intrinsic goodness and value of human nature, as well as saw salvation in grace, thanks to which one could put their trust fully in God's love. Those were the two fundamentals by virtue of which the Erasmian vision of Christianity acquired a humanistic dimension.

That Christian humanism was reflected in the selection of books that Erasmus recommended Charles peruse. Alongside the Bible (the Old Testament), particularly the Book of Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs, as well as the Gospels, it included writings by classical authors, such as Plutarch, Seneca, Aristotle, Cicero, or Plato. This shows that the heritage of the antiquity did not represent an issue for Erasmus. His disciples and followers also appreciated the achievement of the pre-Christian world, whereas this was not true of the adherents of the Reformation; Luther himself was not an enthusiast of philosophy, while 16th century Antitrinitarians – a revolutionary faction within the Reformation movement – went as far as accusing the Platonian thought of having contributed to the distortions of Christianity. Erasmus, too, was somewhat reluctant of philosophy, especially that variety which instead of exploring the roots of Christianity busied itself with curiosities and syllogisms. Erasmus understood both philosophy and Christianity chiefly as a particular mode of living which tallied with what he defined as the “philosophy of Christ.” With the Gospels in mind, he spoke of his philosophy thus: “Its wisdom may be drawn from those few books, like from crystal clear springs that they are. How much easier it is to be attained than the wisdom of Aristotle from many an obscure volume, and how much

⁷ J. Huizinga, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

fruitful it proves! (...) This philosophy is for anyone to grasp. Christ wishes his mysteries to be propagated as widely as possible (...) this kind of philosophy consists in a conviction rather than in syllogisms, it is a life rather than a position, an attainment of the spiritual rather than of learning, a transformation rather than reasoning.”⁸ The core idea of the Erasmian educational mission was observing the principles stipulated in the Gospels and upholding peace. Erasmus wished them to be the fundamentals of actions of the Christian rulers who, thanks to his teachings, would manage to become Christian philosophers.⁹

Although Erasmus maintained contacts with many of the contemporary European monarchs, there is no doubt that it was Charles in whom he saw a sovereign capable of bringing healing to Christianity and giving world the peace it so much needed. It is a fact that Erasmus’ teachings had a tremendous influence on the young Emperor, who never renounced them. Until the end of his life he was surrounded by the Spanish adherents of the Dutch humanist, while as he lay dying in Yuste, the person attending at his deathbed was Father Bartolomé de Carranza, the last representative of Spanish Erasmianism, who had arrived from Flanders. This is not accident that under Charles V’s rule in Spain (where he reigned as Charles I), the teachings of Erasmus enjoyed their peak popularity, with the most eminent figures of Spanish Erasmianism active at the court: brothers Alfonso and Juan de Valdés, as well as Antonio de Guevara.¹⁰ Let us add that unlike in other European states, Spain had overcome the problem of religious rifts already under the Catholic Kings, thanks to the reforms of Cardinal Cisneros, becoming a paragon of Catholic unity.¹¹ On top of that, Spain opened up to America as it embarked on the mission of evangelisation.

The teachings of Erasmus and the Spanish Church were the foremost sources from which Charles V derived his notions of Christianity. That very

⁸ Erazm z Rotterdamu, op. cit., pp. 154-155.

⁹ M. Cytowska, *Od tłumacza*, in: Erazm z Rotterdamu, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

¹⁰ On Erasmus’ associations with Spain see M. Bataillon, *Erasmus y España. Estudios sobre la historia espiritual del siglo XVI*, Madrid 1998; J. L. Abellán, *El erasmismo español*, Madrid 2005.

¹¹ See M. Bataillon, op. cit., pp. 1-71 (*Cisneros y la Prereforma española*). The view that the reform launched by Cisneros safeguarded Spain from Protestantism is questioned in the more recent historiography. For instance, Werner Thomas, a Belgian historian, observes that in terms of actual effect it brought little result, as it failed to make Spaniards into believers. Idem, *La represión del protestantismo en España 1517-1648*, Leuven 2001, p. 18.

vision of Christianity constituted an alternative to Lutheranism, whose emergence in 1517 coincided with Charles' ascension to throne of Spain, and the assumption of the imperial throne two years later. Erasmianism, which propounded the return to the evangelical spirit, encouraged one to discover the fundamentals of Christianity, while the renewed Spanish Church showed that problems similar to those which arose in the Reich could be resolved without the incurring the danger of schism in the Western Church.

Charles V and Lutheranism

When assessing Charles V's policy with regard to the Reformation, one should underline the striving for compromise with the Lutherans whom the Emperor understood, and with the Church, on which he called to endeavour restoration. The fact that Lutheranism evolved from a religious issue into a political one was due to Luther himself, the German princes and the papacy. It should be remembered that Luther was much in favour of an authoritarian state while his ecclesiastical programme was "one giant rebellion against the Gregorian Reforms of the 11-13th century."¹² Luther was more anti-papal than anti-Catholic; his theology was in fact a continuation of the mediaeval Catholic theology. As Ernest Troeltsch, Protestant theologian and philosopher observed: "The most vital thing is that Protestantism – in particular its beginnings, the Lutheran reform of the Church, approached from the standpoint of ecclesiastical and dogmatic history – is nothing else than a transformation of Catholicism, an extension of conceptions of the Catholics, who were offered new answers."¹³ What is more, Luther was instrumentally used by the German princes who exploited his authority and his movement to their advantage, seeking independence from the Emperor and the Church at Rome.¹⁴ It was their undertakings which turned the religious cause into a national one.

Lutheranism in the Reich cannot be considered whilst disregarding the relations between Charles V as Emperor and the German princes, especially

¹² A. Wielomski, *Mysł polityczna reformacji i kontrreformacji*, vol. 1, *Rewolucja protestancka*, Radzymin 2013, p. 149.

¹³ E. Troeltsch, *El protestantismo y el mundo moderno*, México 1951, p. 46.

¹⁴ Cf. A. Wielomski, op. cit., pp. 133-134.

where their political loyalty was concerned. It is emphasised in German Protestant historiography that in the 1520s the entire Germany was going to embrace the new faith, therefore Charles V was seen as an outside intruder who, together with the Pope, played a major part in the rift which ensued in the Reich. Even today, some historians blame none other than Charles V for the division of Germany into the Protestant North and the Catholic South. This unfair assessment owes to a religious standpoint, and yet the Schmalkaldic war in which the Emperor won victory at Mühlberg cannot be interpreted as a crusade against the Protestants. It is generally doubtful whether the wars waged by Charles V against the German princes can be termed religious. One can hardly resist the impression that for the latter religion was a smokescreen for the actual reasons and motivations which were strictly political. One should concur with Helmut Koenigsberger who concludes that on Charles V's part those were "purely legal and political actions aimed against those who violated the public law of the Holy Empire."¹⁵ That the Emperor was legitimate in doing so is corroborated by the fact that his actions were supported by a number of Protestant princes of the Reich, e. g. Prince Maurice of Saxony. It should be underlined that as regards the Lutheran issue, the Emperor could not count on the help of the Catholics, particularly the radical ones, who demanded that the heretics be dealt with by means of military force. In fact, the Emperor was alone in his conciliatory approach to resolving the religious problems in Germany.

Undeniably, it was under Charles V that the Western Church became divided, but is he the actor to bear the blame for it? It is often falsely alleged that he devoted too little time to the matters in Germany. The Reformation presented a major problem for the Emperor, one he definitely did not ignore: after all, the religious unity of Christianity and the political integrity of the Empire were at stake. In my opinion, the circumspection which Charles V demonstrated with respect to the Lutheran heresy deserves praise rather than criticism. This kind of attitude would be lacking in his son, Philip II, who would bloodily suppress the Protestant uprising in the Netherlands.¹⁶

¹⁵ H. G. Koenigsberger, *Marte y Venus: guerra y relaciones internacionales de la Casa de Austria*, "Revista Pedralbes" núm. 19, 1999, p. 46.

¹⁶ Such a "liberal" image of Charles V, juxtaposed with the persecutory figure of Philip II, is rejected by Joseph Pérez, who sees no difference in the approaches of the father and the son to the Protestant heresy in the Netherlands (*idem*, *Carlos V y la problemática de la reforma europea*,

Paradoxically enough, it was because Charles V decided not to crush the Reformation at the very outset that it flourished and contributed to the process of modernisation of Europe.

Without doubt, the division of the Western Christianity owes the most to the Holy See, especially its tardiness to summon a council, for which the Emperor urgently solicited successive popes. The degree of tension and the extent of dissonance between Charles V and the popes as regarded Protestants shows that popes were afraid of the Emperor who, for his part, felt responsible for the unity of Christianity. Even Joseph Pérez, an author less than favourable towards Charles V, stresses that “the emperor never received papal support for his plan of ecclesiastical reform.”¹⁷ In my opinion, the causes behind the divergence were more profound, a fact usually overlooked by the critics of the Emperor. They were due to a different understanding of what Christianity was. Charles, whose formation relied on Erasmus’ teachings, construed Christianity in moral categories as opposed to dogmatic ones. Being a person of profound faith, he recognised the need for reform of Christianity and the Church itself, therefore he sought conciliation with Lutherans. The approach, however, found no understanding within the papacy. The popes wished for no council. Clement VII was afraid that a council would strengthen the position of the Emperor in Italy; Paul III had initially been in favour of summoning one, but the plans were thwarted by Francis I of France. Eventually, when the Pope had finally convened the council, it was already too late, because the erstwhile Protestant movement had become an autonomous Church. If the council had resolved the dispute with Luther on time, as the Emperor urged, an agreement could have been

in: *XIV Coloquio de historia canario-americana. Actas de congreso*, Las Palmas 2000, pp. 1980-1989). Actually, the French historian equates civil judiciary introduced by Charles V with the Church inquisition as far as heresy is concerned, and calls imperial decrees “cruel” (ibidem, p. 1985). He argues that in the Netherlands the Emperor had intended to install inquisition following the Spanish pattern but ultimately changed his mind. In fact, the legislation directed against heresy in the Netherlands dates to a much earlier time than Spanish rule, going back to the Middle Ages. Furthermore, in alleging Charles V’s lack of tolerance, Pérez fails to take into account that in the 16th century no country, be it the Netherlands, France, England, or Spain, was capable (in material, ideological, social, and political terms) of making the policy of tolerance a reality. Cf. L. Martínez Peñas, *La legislación de Carlos V contra la herejía en los Países Bajos*, “Revista de la Inquisición (Intolerancia y Derechos Humanos)” vol. 16, 2012, pp. 27-61.

¹⁷ J. Pérez, *Historia de España*, Barcelona 2011, p. 163.

reached and the emergence of further currents in the Reformation hindered. At this point, it may be worthwhile to cite Pope Francis who, on September 26, 2016 – shortly before his departure to Lund in Sweden for the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Lutheranism – stated in an interview for the Jesuit newspaper “La Civiltà Cattolica”: “Luther was a reformer at a difficult juncture, and he put the word of God into human hands, yet history shows that the Church was not a model to follow: there was corruption there, worldliness, attachment to wealth and power.”¹⁸

I would like to draw on Charles V as well, as he is quoted by Richard Friedenthal in the latter’s biography of Luther. These are the words spoken in Yuste, shortly before his death, when hotbeds of Lutheran heresy had appeared in Spain. Surrounded by monks, Charles is alleged to have admitted as follows: “I erred, I did not destroy Luther at the time, I was under no obligation to keep the word given. (...) I did not destroy him and thus the error grew to monstrous dimensions. I could have prevented it.”¹⁹ The German historian uses that confession to defend the claim that supposedly Charles V attempted to solve the religious issue in Germany solely by means of force. Comparing Luther with Charles, Friedenthal underlines that while the former “trusted in the Word,” the “Emperor, a man of power, trusted in force. Force was his only means of legitimacy.” Then he adds: “Charles was a tragic figure in that he had to live through and experience the collapse and disintegration of his uttermost argument, in fact the only one he had: that of force.”²⁰ One can hardly concur with such an inequitable evaluation of Charles V’s approach towards Luther and Lutheranism. The Emperor, as the leader of the Christian world, could not remain indifferent to Luther’s challenge. After all, having been crowned as the German King,²¹ he pledged: “I swear before the Lord and his angels that I shall keep the Church of God in justice and peace until the end.”²² And so, from the very outset, he strove for a peaceful resolution of the religious issue.

¹⁸ *Entrevista del Papa Francisco con La Civiltà Cattolica antes del viaje a Suecia*, <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/texto-entrevista-del-papa-francisco-con-la-civilta-cattolica-antes-del-viaje-a-suecia-84744> (accessed October 8, 2017).

¹⁹ R. Friedenthal, *Marcin Luter*, Cz. Tarnogórski, transl., Warsaw 1991, p. 291.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 291-292.

²¹ Charles V was crowned as German King in October 1520, in Aachen.

²² P. de Sandoval, *Historia de la vida y hechos del emperador Carlos V*, vol. 1, C. Seco Serrano, ed., Madrid 1920, p. 456.

However, the ill will of the German princes, the provocations of the French King who financed and goaded them on, as well as the intrigues of the Holy See were enough to produce a cause for war (*casus belli*) which proved a difficult and painful event for Charles,²³ even though it ended in the victory at Mühlberg. For one thing, the long period of negotiations, which demonstrated his genuine determination, came to an end; secondly, it was a Pyrrhic victory, being advantageous neither to the Catholics nor the Protestants. Against expectations of the radical Catholics, the Emperor did not decide to crush the Protestant side totally, which undermines the claim that warfare was purportedly his preferred mode of action. As for the aforesaid confession made on his deathbed, it was uttered in specific circumstances, by an embittered man who was aware of the failure of his ideals and designs. Charles still remembered the principles stated by the Peace of Augsburg (1555), which represented his major defeat as it ultimately recognised the schism in Western Christianity. It may be added at this point that shortly prior to the Diet of Augsburg, Charles V wrote from Brussels a letter to his brother Ferdinand, in which he informed the latter that he wished to surrender his rule as Emperor due to ill health, age, and religious scruples. In reality, he wanted the electors to approve his abdication at the Diet, which would have meant that his name would not appear in the final document. However, Ferdinand refused and concluded the peace on Emperor's behalf.²⁴ This is an important detail, which is seldom if ever mentioned in the handbooks. It confirms that Charles V did not want to endorse the religious peace in the Reich with his personal authority. Lastly, the bitter response to the appearance of the Lutheran heresy in Spain should be associated with the trauma which affected its people. Until that moment, they had lived with a sense of pride stemming from the awareness of belonging to

²³ In his *Memoirs* (written in third person), Charles V highlights the arrogance and political self-interest among the German princes: "Since His Imperial Majesty was cognizant of and perceived the tremendous impudence and obstinacy of the protestants, he doubted that good will would guide them to do anything that may be desirable [for the Church], therefore, the good ways and means to pacify Germany being of no avail, one had to resort to the devices of force, just as the times and circumstances that came to pass dictated." Idem, *Memorias*, in: *Corpus documental de Carlos V*, vol. 4, M. Fernández Álvarez, ed., Salamanca 1983, p. 527.

²⁴ F. Edelmayer, *Carlos V y Fernando I. La quiebra de la monarquía universal*, in: *Carlos V y la quiebra del humanismo político en Europa (1530-1558)*, vol. 1, J. Martínez Millán, ed., Madrid 2001, p. 160.

Christianity unblemished by heresy or internal religious strife.²⁵ At any rate, the words quoted by Friedenthal cannot by any means be taken as indicative of the entirety of the Emperor's policy towards Lutherans. Such a far-fetched interpretation is nothing short of abuse and manipulation.

Charles V, Luther, and the Shape of the Western Civilisation

Finally, I would like to take a look at Charles V and Luther, two outstanding figures of the first half of the 16th century, with the hindsight of five centuries, as I intend to appraise their contribution to the Western civilisation. As for Charles V, one cannot fail to mention his efforts to uphold the tradition and defend the Christian community. In doing so, Charles V embodied the classical notion of politics as a pursuit of the common good. Seen from that standpoint, politics is unequivocally positive ethically, and as such it found its fullest expression in Charles' concept of Christian unity. In its spiritual essence, it was an Erasmian idea, a fact which the critics of Charles V pass over in silence, preferring to portray him as a mediaeval, anachronistic monarch. Due to his association with Erasmus – whose teachings were also considered heresy by the Catholic Church²⁶ – Charles V is a debatable figure for Protestants and Catholics alike. Meanwhile, the universal import of his notions and endeavours has survived until today and remains still valid, particularly in view of the severe identity crisis that the Western civilisation appears to be undergoing. This is well evident in the fact that numerous European historians and politicians see Charles V as a precursor of the unfinished idea of united Europe²⁷; this is indeed quite significant today, when Europe is haunted by the spectres of nationalisms which could bring about the disintegration of unity it cost such an effort to build.

It is Luther, the Emperor's adversary, that may be deemed the father of nationalism who became the founding figure of the German nation. Before

²⁵ Cf. J. I. Tellechea Idígoras, *La reacción española ante el luteranismo (1520-1559)*, "Diálogo Ecueménico" vol. 6, no. 23-24, 1971, p. 334.

²⁶ In 1559, the writings of Erasmus were included in the index of banned books.

²⁷ I discuss this issue in *Cesarz Karol V. Kłęska polityki, triumfidei*, Oświęcim 2017, pp. 195-209.

him, Germany had been an Empire linked with Rome, but not yet a nation. Luther, who translated the Bible into German in 1534, severed the ties binding Germany to Rome and transformed it into a nation. Heinrich Heine, German poet of Jewish descent, described Luther as “not only the greatest, but also the most German”²⁸ individual in the history of Germany. Also, Thomas Mann, the great German writer, saw Luther to be the embodiment of what was German in the purest of forms: separatist, anti-Roman, and anti-European.²⁹ His hatred of Rome made him into a “German Messiah,”³⁰ spiritual leader of the nation. It was Lutheranism which brought forth the paradigm of confessionalisation and the German “path apart” (*deutsche Sonderweg*).³¹ This shows that Luther’s schism, which evinced early German nationalism, was in fact a manifestation of a political issue. One should agree with Angela Pellicciari, Italian historian of the Church, who observes that Luther was no reformer but a “great revolutionary of the modern era,”³² yet he was not fit for a spiritual leader of a social rebellion. Characteristically enough, he looked down with contempt on the peasant uprising which took its inspiration from the Gospels, finding it to be a caricature of his own achievement. What is more, he urged the princes to deal with the rebels ruthlessly, calling them peasant vermin. As a supporter of serfdom and ardent defender of the oligarchs, he was a religious guarantor of late feudalism, thanks to whom Germany’s poverty and backwardness were perpetuated. As Thomas Mann

²⁸ H. Heine, *Z dziejów religii i filozofii w Niemczech*, T. Zatorski, transl., Cracow 1997, p. 41.

²⁹ T. Mann, *Moje czasy. Eseje*, W. Kunicki, transl., Poznań 2002, p. 394.

³⁰ A. Pellicciari, *Martin Lutero: il lato oscuro di un rivoluzionario*, Siena 2016, p. 5.

³¹ H. Schilling, *Konfesjonalizacja. Kościół i państwo w Europie doby przednowoczesnej*, J. Kałużny, transl., Poznań 2010.

³² A. Pellicciari, op. cit. p. 42. Hans Küng, Swiss theologian and Roman Catholic priest, takes a different position. In his opinion, “neither was Luther a political revolutionary, nor the Reformation an early bourgeois revolution, as Marxist historiography so persistently claims. Whether one likes it or not, one cannot compare Luther to the great revolutionaries in world history, from Spartacus, through English Puritans and French Jacobins to Marx, Lenin and Mao, who from the very outset aimed for a sudden and violent upheaval of the social order, its values and protagonists (...) Luther did not seek to be anyone else than a reformer of the Church, who strove for a return to the original forms of Christianity.” Idem, *El cristianismo: esencia e historia*, Madrid 1997, p. 550. Even assuming that Luther did not aspire to be a revolutionary, he must have been aware of the social consequences of the movement he originated. Besides, he did not refrain from referring to politics in his disquisitions, clearly siding with the authority. It suffices to mention his well-known theory of power as a *scourge of God* to punish the sinful, a theory he formulated – significantly enough – during the Peasant War.

wrote, Luther “was a hero of freedom, yet after the German fashion, having no idea what freedom was. I do not mean the freedom of a Christian, but political liberty, freedom of the citizen; to that he was not only indifferent but in his heart of hearts detested its stirrings and claims.”³³

On the other hand, the concept of modern freedom, which became the driving force behind the development of capitalism, derives precisely from Luther, as Max Weber underlines in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-1905). In reality, Luther’s ideas contributed to secularisation and relativism, and thus to the dissolution of the bonds which ensured integrity to communities. In a sense, when Lutheranism introduced a direct relationship between the individual and God, that individual person was deprived of the community. Paradoxically enough, contemporary discourse concerned with the sources of modernisation in Europe usually mentions Luther rather than Erasmus. The crisis which the Western civilisation experiences clearly demonstrates that the capitalist model rooted in Luther’s ideas has not wholly stood the test. The modern concept of freedom derived from Luther is a freedom encumbered by inherent slavery. Let us note that according to Luther the human does not possess free will³⁴ and merely does what they have been enjoined to do by God or Satan. Luther would compare the human to a “beast of burden,” ridden by either God or Satan. Which of either they shall serve is not up to them to decide. Luther wanted human love of God to be founded on fear, and the life of the faithful to be a penance.³⁵ In such a relationship to God, the human is a slave while the former becomes a monster, the source of enslavement. Luther was a pessimist and his vision of the world presumed the human to be intrinsically evil, flawed by sin, and in Satan’s power. Not believing in the human, Luther condemned them to life in the pillory of punishment and penance, which would end upon entering the Kingdom of Heaven. It is likely that the sinful human condition reflected Luther’s personal experience. He is known to have been a person of cruel disposition³⁶ and supposedly

³³ T. Mann, op. cit., p. 395.

³⁴ M. Luter, *O niewolnej woli. De servo Arbitrio*, W. Niemczyk, transl., Warsaw 1979.

³⁵ M. Luter, *95 Tez*, <http://dabar.de/old.dabar/Tezy.pdf> (accessed October 11, 2017).

³⁶ Luther is alleged to have killed a man in his youth (probably a fellow student during a duel), while his sojourn in a monastery served to evade being held responsible for it. It is also claimed that he committed suicide, hanging himself in the bedroom. See L. Villa, *Marcin Luter morderca i samobójca. Wydanie poszerzone o dokumenty Papieża Leona X zawierające potępienie błędów*

suffered from manic depression.³⁷ This is no accident that in his lecture on sin, Luther points to desire (*affectus*) as its source, which lends it an existential as opposed to moral aspect.³⁸ In the light of the above, Hans Küng seems correct in observing that “the Lutheran Reformation did not pave the way (as it is often maintained in the history of the Church by Protestant authors) for modernity, freedom of religion, and the French revolution (...) but, in actual fact, to absolutism and despotism of the princes.”³⁹

Also, Luther may be deemed the father of modern anti-Semitism,⁴⁰ which he voiced in particular in *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), a pamphlet published towards the end of his life. Luther hated Jews, whom he considered a plague guilty of all evil in the world. As he wrote: “(...) we must burn down their synagogues and schools, and dispose of all the filth that fire cannot consume, so that no man may see the stone or ashes that remain. This should be done for the glory of our Lord and Christianity.” Then he adds: “I shall request of our leaders who have authority over Jewish subject that they show no mercy for those cursed people.”⁴¹ It is therefore no wonder that Angela Pellicciari sees Luther as a precursor of the *Arbeit Macht Frei*, the sentence with which Jews were “welcomed” in the Nazi concentration camps or that Karl Jaspers, brilliant German philosopher, observes that Luther’s thought anticipated the Nazi agenda. As French philosopher Pierre Mesnard put it: “In Luther’s mind the secularisation of the Church lays the groundwork for the messianism of the German race and nations:

oraz ekskomunikę Marcina Lutra i jego zwolenników, Kęty 2016. It may be added that Luigi Villa, long-standing publisher of the Catholic periodical “Chiesa Viva,” relies on the findings of a Protestant researcher, Dietrich Emme, which the latter communicated in *Marcin Luter. Młodość i czasy studenckie 1483–1505*, H. Ulrich, transl., Kęty 2011. Other researchers underline that Luther’s dominant traits included vainglory, arrogance, passion, extremism, anguish, propensity for melancholy, inner tension, and lascivious temperament. See R. García Villoslada, *Raíces históricas del luteranismo*, Madrid 1976, p. 207.

³⁷ A. Devesa del Prado, *Lutero 1483-1546*, Madrid 1998, p. 23.

³⁸ M. Luther, *Quaestio de viribus et voluntate hominis sine gratia disputata*, in: idem, *Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, *Der Mensch vor Gott*, W. Härle, J. Schelling, G. Wartenberg, M. Beyer, eds., Leipzig 2006, pp. 1-17.

³⁹ H. Küng, *El cristianismo*, op. cit., p. 149.

⁴⁰ On Luther’s anti-Semitism see T. Kaufmann, *Luther’s Jews. A Journey into Anti-Semitism*, Oxford 2017.

⁴¹ M. Luther, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* [1543], Aschaffenburg 2016. Here, I take advantage of the Spanish edition: *Sobre los judíos y sus mentiras*, E. Bernard, transl., December 2000, <http://www.herenciacristiana.com/luther/luther.html> (accessed October 11, 2017).

Christianitas morphs into the empire.”⁴² It is a fact that in the 1930s Germany the Protestant regions were more in favour of Hitler than the Catholic ones. It is also indisputable that Luther’s legacy fostered nationalisation of Christianity, or more precisely its Germanisation, as evidenced by the 19th century philosophical critique of Christian religion, from Hegel to Nietzsche. It does display a palpable Protestant trait: all its representatives were Protestants with a theological background.⁴³ Luther’s thought also had its impact on how Martin Heidegger – the foremost German philosopher of the 20th century, who became involved in National Socialism – construed philosophy and theology. In his seminal *Being and Time*, Heidegger underscores Luther’s influence of Christian theology.⁴⁴ Rooted in the Lutheran heritage, the German spirit of Christianity came to adopt creative and unconstrained formation of individual personality as its essence, unlike the Greco-Judaic tradition in which it consisted in knowledge. That spirit led Nietzsche to an utter critique of Christianity. Since his earliest years, the author of *Zarathustra* experienced the oppression of the Protestant mores and the overwhelming influence of the Church on everyday life in Germany. To Nietzsche, church – be it Evangelical or Catholic – was an instrument to control the masses, and accused it of having strayed away from the practices of Christianity as it had been at the beginning, and having sanctioned its own position in the state. As he emphasised, by accepting the life that Jesus fought against and condemned, the Church managed to enshrine the meaning of Christianity in the belief unto things unworthy of true faith, such as the ceremony of prayer, adoration of the saints etc., as well as brought the notions of sin, forgiveness, punishment, or due reward to the fore, whereas in the earliest Christianity these were hardly significant or even unthinkable.⁴⁵

It is quite the contrary with Erasmus, whose thought is the epitome of the genuine spirit of the Gospels. According to the Dutch humanist, the human beings are endowed with free will and through their deeds and actions may shape themselves and their surroundings, thus approaching the

⁴² P. Mesnard, *L'essor de la philosophie politique au XVIe siècle*, Paris 1952, p. 201.

⁴³ K. Löwith, *Od Hegla do Nietzschego. Rewolucyjny przełom w myśli XIX wieku*, P. Gromadzki, transl., Warsaw 2001, p. 395.

⁴⁴ M. Heidegger, *Bycie i czas*, B. Baran, transl., Warsaw 1994, p. 15.

⁴⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Notatki z lat 1887–1889*, P. Pieniążek, transl., in: F. Nietzsche, *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. 13, Łódź 2012, pp. 109, 114.

divine. Unlike Luther, Erasmus does believe in the human beings and their self-knowledge. He finds that thanks to reason and mind the human is capable of autonomous judgements and therefore can oppose the tyranny of custom and the authority of the majority. Thus Erasmus elevates the freedom of the Christians who seek to emulate Christ. Without doubt, this vision of the human beings and their relationship with God is more optimistic. It was in the name of freedom construed in this manner that Emperor Charles V, Erasmus' disciple, made efforts to defend the unity of the Western Church in which the spirit of Christian humanism would prevail.

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