

Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet

By Lyndal Roper

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Martin Luther: the brave Reformation hero. Or, Martin Luther: the proud and bitter ex-monk? Or even, Martin Luther: the loving husband and pastor; or Luther: the tyrannical leader? Legend or human? What about, all the above? Lyndal Roper has made a magnificent work on showing every aspect of Luther's humanity, and all his faces. This biographical masterpiece intends to give us more than dates and events.

From the problematic life of a mining economy-based society in Mansfeld where the Luder family grew, to the thorough account of the great Reformation hero's death; the genius of Roper's work resides on details. Even by way of introduction, she manages to give an account of almost every important date and event on Luther's life; thus, showing that her work won't be based on those by themselves, but on everything which surrounded them, and what she will derive about Martin Luther's inner life from them. Roper does state clearly her intention with this work: "*This book charts the emotional transformations wrought by the religious changes Luther set in motion...I want to understand Luther himself!* (Roper 2016, xxvi–xxvii)". Thus, this book could be considered more as pertaining to the literary genre known as *psychohistory*, than to a regular biography.

Luther was a great example of a man of his time. But, what does this mean exactly? It means that for us to know Luther, we need to know something about the world in which he lived. For this reason, one of the great features of this book is the cultural and social context provided with every chapter of Luther's life. The comprehensive way Roper shares with us the contours of the life lived in XVI century's Saxon lands, and Europe, opens the door for us to understand many of Luther's reactions and emotions to various events in a revealing way. This allow us to feel as being part of the crowd laughing at the initiation rituals in Wittenberg where 'wine baptisms' were practiced (74–75); ignoring the monk's challenge when he posted his theses at the door of the Wittenberg church (82); astonished by his famous phrase in the Diet of Worms and even

more by the Spaniards present therein shouting: “*Burn him!*” (172); and even raising our beer to the toast with which he celebrated his deal with Karlstadt after giving him a coin at the Black Bear Inn (232–33), a rather peculiar way of solving matters.

However, all this context serves only to the purpose of bringing forth the ‘inner Luther’. And for this, Roper makes use also of an impressive number of letters written to and from Luther at each stage of his life as the key to unlock for us: Luther: the man. A man afraid of a thunderstorm to the point that he begs and vows Saint Anne for his life. A man who’s sense of unworthiness and guilt make him chastise himself over, and over again at the monastery, and who’s superiors couldn’t understand the large hours of confession without result. A man so deep into depression, that comes up with his own term for these spiritual trials: *Anfechtungen*. But also, a man who rejoices like a little kid when he discovers grace for the first time, and finally finds assurance. The life of Luther is one marked by contrast both in his personality and emotions. At one time, we can see Luther excited and inspired by all of the supporters his ‘new theology’ has brought after the Heidelberg Disputation (95); and at the next, hurt and angry when he realizes that his debate at Leipzig feels more as a brother’s treason (112), whom he once believed to be on his side (96), than an academic task.

Roper presents Luther as a man of flesh and blood, and that implied both illness and sin. While it might be somewhat fun at times to read the readiness with which Luther can write about his defecation habits, even to the point that he relates what seems to be an account of an rectal prolapse in a letter to Justus Jonas (319), not everything in this book is something to laugh about. Indeed, even when Luther might be regarded as *the* heroic figure of the Reformation, he himself didn’t claim to be a saint, and Roper makes that sharp to us. Perhaps, too sharp for those who have never come across the dark side of Luther.

Reading that he acknowledged the fact that “*he suffered from the sins of anger and pride*” (177) is one thing; and yet, another thing is to perceive the pride it takes to be willing to change his mind over the elevation of the sacrament only until Karlstadt (first proponent of this doctrine but also Luther’s enemy by the time) died in 1541 (345). It is shameful to watch him despise his

closer colleague, Melancthon, accusing him of having “*extremely evil and completely vacuous worries...playing the martyr... and lacking manly courage*” (323) when he needed him the most. It is sad to see how much he was willing to concede for keeping the support of Philip of Hesse, even to the point of permitting, and advising bigamy in his case, as long as he kept it secret; and yet how little he would move from his theological position at the Marburg Colloquy with respect of the physical presence of Christ’s body in the Lord’s Supper, even unto heartbreaking Zwingli into tears and splitting, thus, the Reformation movement. And it is genuinely frightening to read his later hatred to the Jews and the suggestions of a cultural eradication (381) (with all which that implied) even when it had a theological basis rather than a racial one.

Roper’s interest in human psychology, emotions and thought, and the fact that she is no reformed theologian makes her account of Luther’s life more accurate in regard of the person of Luther; as she states from the very beginning, she “*do[es] not wish to idolize Luther nor to denigrate him*” (xxx). But this also takes its toll. In addition to the fact that there is not much theological nuance to Luther’s thought, among those same lines, she acknowledges herself as deeply “shaped” by the feminist movement. And, even when this doesn’t come up that often in her book (something we need to be grateful for), when it does, it is crystal-clear. From underhanded comments about how Luther admired the Turks because of how they “*kept their women on a tight leash*” (375) up to arguing that “*he downgraded the position of Mary so that Christianity no longer contained a female divine figure*” (384), she begins with the presupposition that Luther was a misogyny character (xxvii). Therefore, she seems to read into Luther some thoughts that doesn’t appear to cope with history. In the first place, because of the environment in which Luther grew, which was dominated by males, we cannot qualify as misogyny every single thought on woman than differs from today’s ‘female liberation’. And in the second place, because Luther was a loving husband, and even admired by some well-respected women such as Argula von Grumbach (407), which wouldn’t make much sense if he was regarded as a man who hated women on his time. In fact, it seems to be the very opposite.

Along with all of this, and even when Roper accuses Luther to have an “*obsession with sex, sodomy, and extravagance...*” (375-376), we need to remember that Luther was mainly using a common mean of communicating ideas in a day and age where the literacy rate was less than

5%, namely: caricaturizing. His opponents did the same sort of things. Even she admits that Luther show some modesty when asking Cranach to cover the Pope's genitalia in a picture (377; ill.66) because it would be offensive to the female gender. On the other hand, it is her who has written a whole book about *Sexuality in Early Europe*. Indeed, I would propose that it is her who finds sexuality an interesting topic, judging for how early in her work she begins to speak about it, and even how long she dedicates to Staupitz's sexual allegories (58-59), which, while curious, the level of detail in this case doesn't seem to add much to the overall work.

Nevertheless, the Luther that Roper faces us with is human; and that makes this work of great value. The real Luther is one to which we can relate more easily. Bitter at times and full of pride, this same Luther was the one who changed the world. If his thought and theology were evolving factors of his life, Luther was also consistent in some areas. This was the man who loved his wife and children from the very first moment, and until the end. This was the man who was passionate about expounding the Word of God. This was the pastor who not only helped others to pray, but he himself prayed so much, that he died praying. This was indeed the man that was so in love to Christ and His free gospel, that was willing to stand firm against Kings and Popes to defend it. Historically rich, and accurate, Lyndal Roper's *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* is a *must* to anyone who want to know and study Martin Luther seriously, beyond the Reformation legend.