

Robert Scribner in: Times Literary Supplement, 28/5/1982

RAINER WOHLFEIL: Einführung in die Geschichte der deutschen Reformation
230pp. Munich: Beck. DM26. 3 406 08675 6

JOHN M. TODD: Luther: A Life
396pp. Hamish Hamilton. £18. U 241 10703 2

For most of this century, Luther has set the standard against which all other aspects of the German Reformation have been measured. Understanding the Reformation meant understanding Luther and his impact; the best introduction to the subject was believed to be a good biography of the man. During the past decade, however, some remarkable changes have been taking place in Reformation historiography, excellently summed up in Rainer Wohlfeil's survey of recent research. Intended largely as a student introduction, this book is also a major contribution to the current debate about social historical approaches to the Reformation, and it shows how inadequate a Luther-centred view has become.

Wohlfeil sketches briefly the main phases of development of the German Reformation, and provides an overview of the major schools of historiography since the sixteenth century. He then turns to an extended discussion of the concepts used to understand the Reformation, pointing out that many of our common assumptions about it are impositions of later ages, rather than sixteenth-century perceptions of events. The notions of "Protestant" and "Protestantism" in our modern usage were creations of the seventeenth century, as was "the Reformation" itself. The concept of the "age of the Reformation", describing an interrelated complex of political and ecclesiastical events, dates only from the nineteenth century, and was the creation of Ranke.

Doctrine is not neglected. Wohlfeil gives a lucid account of the many different kinds of doctrine being preached during the first half of the sixteenth century, indicating that it was by no means certain that Luther's would come to be the norm. The reason for this is found in two themes which receive the greater part of Wohlfeil's attention and now stand at the centre of recent historiography of the German Reformation: the wide-ranging public debate precipitated by the "Luther affair", which created in Germany for the first time something resembling modern "public opinion"; and the movements which arose in the wake of this debate demanding changes not only in religious practices but in many other areas of life as well. These began in the German towns, but spilled over into the countryside, and ranged from public assemblies, protest meetings and minor demonstrations to riots, urban rebellions and the complex confrontation known as the German Peasants' War. Historians have yet to assess the full measure of these movements, but it is clear that they combined religious with social and economic hopes and fears, and released an extraordinary ferment in German society. Historians from the German Democratic Republic consider the entire phenomenon to have amounted to an "early bourgeois

revolution", although Wohlfeil, in a careful analysis of their approach, denies the applicability of the label.

The inspiration for all these associations was the desire, encouraged by the example of Luther himself, to apply Christian principles consistently to the conduct of daily life. For this reason alone, theology and theological tendencies cannot be ignored in any analysis. But the Reformation movements were often more responsive to Zwinglianism or Anabaptism than to Lutheranism, which became too cautious and submissive to authority when faced with serious socio-economic and ecclesiastical issues, especially after the Peasants' War. Wohlfeil rightly identifies Anabaptism and ecclesiastical radicalism as a major theme in modern Reformation historiography, although he seriously underestimates the originality of both tendencies in seeing them as a "reaction" to Lutheranism, rather than independent movements in their own right. Another similar phenomenon, hitherto largely ignored by historians, is iconoclasm and Wohlfeil likewise picks out this theme, and the wider question of the Reformation and art, as an important field for discussion in the years ahead.

Most important, however, is his contention that the Reformation can only be properly understood "in social historical perspective". Here he echoes the views of several other historians who maintained that the Reformation involved not just changes in individual belief, but forms of group behaviour. He argues that social, political and religious matters were inextricably interlinked, and that Reformation movements were more decisively shaped by non-religious influences than has so far been conceded by church historians. There is only one major omission here, Wohlfeil's failure to discuss the recent work of Peter Blickle, who argues that it was the importance attached to the Gospel as a legitimation of social protest and of the principle of Christian liberty interpreted in a social context, which precipitated a near-revolution in 1524-26. But Wohlfeil has produced an excellent introduction to what deserves to be labelled the "new Reformation history".

To attempt any new biography of Luther in the light of this is a hazardous undertaking, demanding that Luther be seen neither as hero nor as saint. John M. Todd's life succeeds admirably in establishing the human limits of the man while yet appreciating his undoubted achievements. Todd is fascinated by Luther's psychology, but without falling into the crude Freudianism of Erikson's *Young Man Luther*. We see Luther as a depressive personality (Todd comes close to saying manic depressive), irascible, given to sexual lusts, to outbursts of extraordinary coarseness and obsessed with his chronic constipation. Todd does not refrain from criticizing him for being often arrogant and bigoted, but this enables us to assess Luther's true measure as a man of boundless energy and passion for people and ideas, and with a profound commitment to what he held to be genuine religious experience. This very positive side of Luther made him a scholar and theologian of genius, and a teacher, pastor, husband and father of gentle understanding and kindly humour.

Todd does not escape all the dangers of the traditional biography. He concentrates a little too much on the "heroic years" of 1517-22 and on the "confessional" events up to 1530 which formed the Lutheran church. It would have been useful, however, to have heard more about Luther's pastoral work in the years 1528-46, when he was engaged in the singularly frustrating work of building up this new church. We could also have been told more about Luther's continual expectations of the Last Days, and the waxing and waning of his apocalyptic mood, closely related to his growing pessimism about the possibility of forming within his own generation genuinely pious Christian believers. Sometimes Todd overdramatizes his achievements - for example, writing of Luther's 1520 reform programme as "shocking in the extent of change it demanded". Yet it was only a few points more radical (its theological implications aside) than other reform plans abroad at the time. In fact, the most shocking of Luther's suggestions is very rarely mentioned: that a woman with an impotent husband is justified not only in taking a lover, but also in going off to live with him elsewhere in a common-law marriage.

Sometimes Todd uses modern terminology which sits uneasily on descriptions of sixteenth-century events: the pre-Reformation church characterized as a "totalitarian polity", the terms "left", "right", "centre" used to describe the spectrum of reform around Luther. Indeed, given that Luther provoked one of the major upheavals in the history of the Christian Church, it seems quite inappropriate to speak of him as standing "in the centre". Occasionally Todd translates badly: for example, using the term "living wildly" for *wilde Ehe* (common-law marriage).

There are a few minor errors of fact, the most important of which is to speak of the "massive violence" committed by the peasant rebels of 1524-25 under the influence of "extremist leaders". Such leaders rarely set the tone of the Peasants' War, and the amount of violence was very small by the standards of the time, certainly far less than that visited on the rebels in revenge. It should be said here that Todd's treatment of Luther's role in the Peasants' War is an excellent example of fair-minded historical judgment.

Although Todd pays more attention to political and ecclesiastical matters than to social or economic, he is not unaware of recent trends in Reformation scholarship. This may escape the general reader in the absence of footnotes or any substantial bibliography, but it is clear to the specialist eye in numerous references throughout his text. His frequent use of careful qualifications, measured judgments and judicious asides shows that he is well read in all the fields discussed by Wohlfeil and has carefully incorporated their findings into his overall picture. This unassuming use of recent scholarship throughout enables him to avoid the danger of producing another stock biography and to provide a more subtle and reflective set of standards against which to measure Luther.

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