

Martin Luther

DiPs at *The Blue Mugge* pub Mon 31st October 7.45pm > 9.15pm

It's 500 years to the day when Luther nailed 'proposed points for a university discussion to a church door in Wittenburg', leading to the '**Reformation**'. These notes (with my bold emphases) are based on the *London Review of Books* (LRB) essay by Diarmaid MacCulloch (Professor of the history of the church at Oxford) reviewing three new books on Luther to mark the half millennium anniversary.

1. Following the nailing of his announcement: "The pin ball machine of history then sent the consequences flying round the continent, and we are still observing the ricochets. Within ten years of this apparently trivial action (discussion notes!) people were calling the unintended consequences, 'The Reformation'. Modern inhabitants of the UK will be familiar with the **Law of Unintended Consequences**".
2. "By the time the Reformation had become a familiar term, a second word had become embedded in the consciousness of Europeans: '**Protestant**'.... Many would contrast 'Protestant' with another Latin/Greek hybrid, '**Catholic**', meaning '**universal**'.... Protestants in their own eyes were the true Catholics. The pope's followers were at best 'Roman Catholics'... Reformed Protestantism is often called '**Calvinism**' after the French Reformer, John Calvin."
3. "Behind the Reformation lay the overriding concern of medieval Europe: salvation from eternal death and torment after the physical end of our brief lives on earth... This is a stark ...version of Christian faith, and Western Christians brooded on how to negotiate its starkness. They borrowed an idea.. from before the time of Augustine: God might permit a period of purging after earthly death, which would eventually equip the individual for heaven. '**Purgatory**' was a comforting notion: it was a place from which there was only one exit, towards heaven."
4. To this notion of purgatory, Western thinkers coupled one of the basic features of Christianity: its feast of love, instituted by Jesus himself in bread and wine... in Christian worship... '**Eucharist**' ...this liturgical drama gained a Latin tag name, **Missa** ('sent') or '**Mass**'.... The Western Church pushed on further than this association between the association of Mass and purgatory... only a few years before Luther was born, the theology of merit had stretched to saying that one could pay hard cash for ...'purgatory remission'... Such grants were sold as '**indulgences**'.... They financed good causes like building hospitals, bridges or churches.
5. "Good causes were irrelevant to Luther, steeped as he had become in reading Augustine in fine new scholarly printed editions, and it was the misuse of indulgences he condemned on 31st October in announcing the seminar... Appalled at such blindness in the pope and his hierarchy, Luther began considering their wider claims against his reading of Christian truth in the Bible, and found a web of falsehoods based on the clergy's misuse of its status. It was not that the clergy were failing to fulfil their job description by laziness or inefficiency: the job description was wrong. Obedience became impossible. The wider world then took sides."
6. "...at the end of it all... out of the clashes and miseries of the Reformation came lasting results which millions see as achievements. A five-hundred year old family of Lutheran churches flourishes world-wide and nowadays even the pope doesn't think Luther was an heretic... Pettegree (whose book 'Brand Luther' is reviewed) a specialist in the history of printing, observes how surprising it was that a middle-aged lecturer who had never published a book should suddenly discover a genius for popular writing. Luther's combination of direct vernacular style and aesthetic sense created a product which ...hit a newly emerging market: a lay reading public."
7. "**Polemical writing was as transformative in its effects on Western behaviour as our own experience of Facebook and the rest.**" (My emphasis). "At the heart of Pettegree's story is Luther's fruitful alliance with some of Europe's most accomplished printer-publishers... One huge incidental asset was the residence in Wittenburg of Lucas Cranach... Luther put their friendship to profitable use. Rather unusually for an artist of genius, Cranach had a gift for **entrepreneurship**, and he was fascinated by the possibilities of illustration in printed books. Luther and Cranach between them worked out a brilliant formula for spreading Luther's message: short pamphlets in vigorous German, but also and crucially, fronted by what looked like de luxe title pages."
8. Finally, "was Martin Luther a monk or a friar? ... difference between the words '**monk**' and '**friar**'. Monks predate friars and their name comes from the Greek for 'single' or '**solitary**'... the movement which produced the 'friars' made sure they would never be tempted to withdraw by the simple structural device of forbidding their communities to hold property." Luther was a Friar.

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