

is so different from the Reformation in the cities, and from Calvin's Reformation: biblical counsel is not to be confused with bourgeois morality. Not making this distinction means unmaking Luther's Reformation.

Chaos and Peace

December 10, 1539, was the day Luther advised the landgrave to take a secret additional wife. This was the "black day" in the history of the German Reformation, or at least that is what can still be read in a widely used Protestant handbook of Church history that has otherwise undergone numerous revisions and corrections over the past seventy-five years.⁴⁹ "Dies ater" it says in its classical erudition, for middle-class sensibilities have been offended.

In comparison, Luther's writings against the Jews, which in turn cannot be isolated from his writings against the papists and peasants, evidently seemed far less offensive. But Luther assailed all three groups with deadly ferocity, urging the authorities to take decisive action. As early as the summer of 1520 his reply to the claims of the papacy as revealingly formulated by Silvester Prierias could hardly have been plainer: "If we punish thieves with the gallows, robbers with the sword, heretics with fire, why do we not defend ourselves all the more with all weapons against these perpetrators of destruction, these cardinals, these popes, this whole filth heap of the Roman Sodom, who are unceasingly destroying the Church of God, and wash our hands in their blood."⁵⁰

The attacks he leveled against the rebelling peasants in May 1525 were equally virulent.⁵¹ His *Ermahnung zum Frieden* (*Admonition to Peace*) was a two-pronged assault denouncing alike the injustices of the princes and landed nobility and the inadmissible mixing of Gospel and violence by the peasants. Filled with the impressions of a ten-day journey through convulsed Thuringia, Luther hastily added an appendix to the *Admonition: Against the Robbing and Murderous Hordes of Peasants*. Here we can find the sentence that was to style him "toady of princes": "Such strange times are these that a prince can be more deserving of Heaven by shedding blood than others by praying."⁵² Luther's language veritably trembles with rage and indignation:

So dear lords, free here, save here, help here. Have mercy on the poor, stab, slay, strangle here whoever can; if you die doing it, good for you: a more blessed . . . death you can never receive.⁵³

When the old Luther called for measures against the Jews twenty years later, he included cruelly exact instructions. In his pamphlet *Of the Jews and Their Lies*, he suggested how these "children of the Devil" should be treated.⁵⁴

Firstly, that their synagogues or schools should be burned down and what will not burn should be razed and covered with earth, that no man will ever see a stone or cinder of it again. . . . *Next*, that their houses should be broken and destroyed in the same way. For they do the same things there as in their schools. For that they can be put under a roof or stable, like the gypsies. . . . *Thirdly*, that all their prayer books and Talmudists, in which such idolatrous lies, curses, and blasphemies are taught, should be taken from them. *Fourthly*, that their rabbis should be forbidden, at the risk of life and limb, to teach from now on. Because they have lost their office for good reason. . . . *Fifthly*, that escort and road should be completely prohibited to the Jews. For they have no reason to be in the country, being neither landlords, nor officials, nor peddlers or the like. . . . *Sixthly*, that they should be prohibited from usury and that all their cash and fortunes in silver and gold should be taken from them and put in safekeeping. . . . *Seventhly*, that young, strong Jewish men and women should be given flail, axe, hoe, spade, distaff, spindle, and be left to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. . . . For, as all can see, God's wrath over them is so great that gentle mercy will only make them worse and worse, and harshness little better. So away with them at all costs.⁵⁵

The very first sentence of this program, which can safely be termed a pogrom, is left out in modern translations:

We must exercise harsh mercy with fear and trembling, in the hope that we could save some from the flames and embers. We must not avenge ourselves. They are under God's wrath—a thousand times worse than we could wish it upon them.⁵⁶

What he actually does wish upon them is, however, bad enough.

It is not only Luther the *old* man, worn out by work, overtaxed by worries, at the end of his strength, who has spoken here. Nor is it all merely verbal acerbity characteristic of the times. The Reformer had made similar appeals for resistance to the "exploiting Romanists" in 1520 and the "plundering peasants" in 1525. Three times the limits of his view of the Devil, which brought liberation and progress in so many respects, were demonstrated. As

a result of his constant awareness of the Devil's might, Luther had learned to apply the distinction between law and the Gospel and discovered the boundary between passive belief in God and active participation in shaping the world.⁵⁷ Against the background of a world pervaded by the Devil, Luther had discovered the joy of life. And ultimately the moral pressure of the Devil had led him to do battle against that fatal human disease, the oppressive "superego" of conscience. But where the battle against Satan's forces leads to collective judgments in the face of a rapidly approaching doomsday, the voice of the prophet becomes a shrilly fanatical battle cry. That, too, is Luther.

How can one and the same man insist on the Gospel of love as opposed to public morals and decency in the case of bigamy and at the same time arm the authorities with the sword, charging them, as guardians of the law, to employ even pogrom and massacre as a means of restoring order?

The natural condition of the world is chaos and upheaval. It is never left to itself, but is always the battleground between God and the Devil. Like a father sustaining and supporting his family, the temporal authorities protect the welfare of all men. It is a Christian duty to make a contribution in both family and society to the survival of the world in the struggle against chaos.⁵⁸



A peasant army at the gates of a monastery

There is a fatal connection between fighting the Devil in papists, peasants, and Jews and the subsequent use of the cry for reformation to rally "God's troops" against "God's enemies."

Darkness at Noon: Luther and the Jews

The Third Reich and in its wake the whole Western world capitalized upon Luther, the fierce Jew-baiter. Any attempt to deal with the Reformer runs up against this obstacle. No description of Luther's campaign against the Jews, however objective and erudite it may be, escapes the horror: we live in the post-Holocaust era. Under the spell of nightmarish terror, it is difficult to peer through the shadows of history, making clear judgments, passing a just sentence, as we grope our way along the path between aggressive accusation and apologetic explanation. Guilt-ridden voices abound, but our era requires far more than verbal repudiation: it calls for detailed information and an unvarnished view of the past. It needs collective anamnesis in the painful encounter with an epoch in which the modern world emerged. For this is not a matter of a German past which, once overcome, will free civilization from future fear of the Darkness at Noon.

Luther's late writings on the Jews are crucial to this agonizing but necessary task of remembering. The time to begin is August 1536, when Elector John Frederick of Saxony, Luther's magnanimous patron and staunch defender of the Reformation, decreed that the Jews were to be driven out of his electorate.⁵⁹ The elector was employing a means that had long been religiously sanctioned in Christendom and was thus no bolt from the blue to the Jews. Homelessness had become their fate in medieval Europe. But there was no getting used to it. Whenever they were expelled, they suffered renewed, severe hardship.

The elector had to be persuaded to rescind his measures or at least to mitigate them and grant Jewish merchants the right to pass through the electorate. The man most suited for the task was Josel von Rosheim, acknowledged far beyond his Alsatian home as the spokesman of the Jews, "governor of all Jewishness in the empire."⁶⁰ But who was to procure him access to the court of Electoral Saxony? There seemed to be a man at hand, a certain Martin Luther of Wittenberg, who in 1523, as a friend of the Jews, so it seemed, had bravely exposed himself to his opponents' suspicions. After all, who at that time could stand to hear that as Luther put it, "Jesus Christ was