



Martin  
**LUTHER**  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Federated with  
**Wilfrid Laurier**  
**University**

## Shifting Paradigms Martin Luther's Enduring Global Impact

When Doing the Right Thing  
Doesn't Make You Right!  
Martin Luther's (Very) Public Ethics



David Pfrimmer  
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# Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?



The Augustinian Monastery  
became Luther & Katie's Home  
Lutherhaus Museum

Actor Bernhard Naumann  
Plays Martin Luther with  
Katie Luther Actor



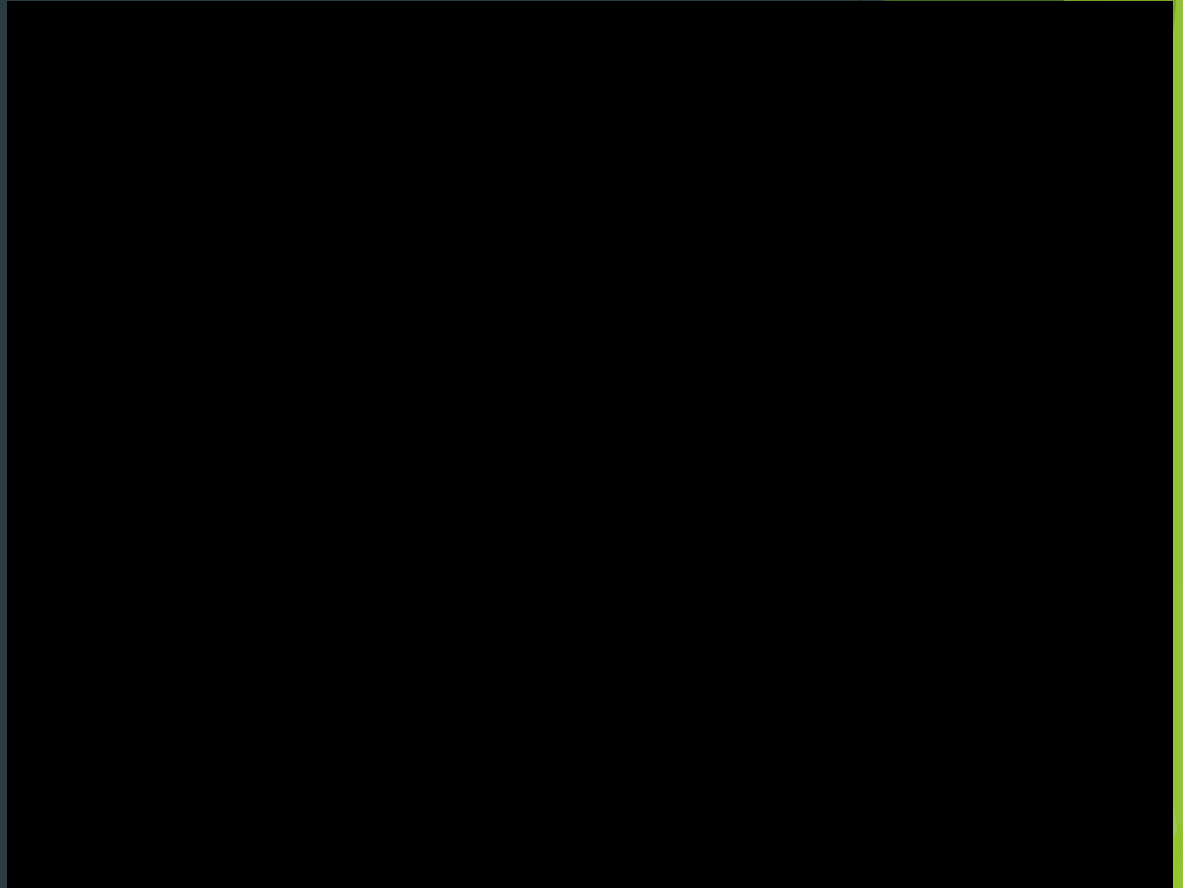
German Churches Host Dinner  
at Luther & Katie's Home for  
Participants to LWF Stuttgart  
Assembly 2010



# Martin Luther an Enigma and a Theological Ethics of Paradox

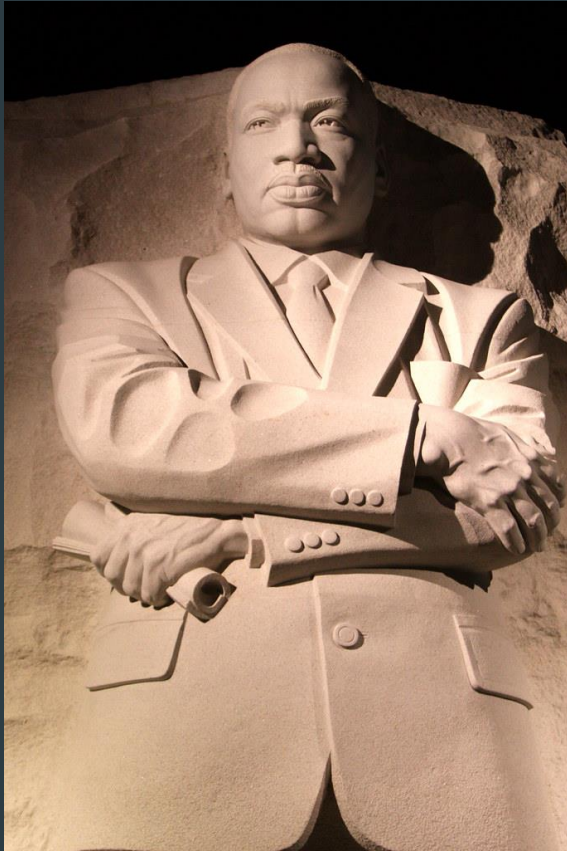


“So large is Luther that every age has been able to find in him a religious hero to its own liking...” **Time Magazine**  
March 1967



With Permission Rick Steve's Travel Europe

# Luther Still Matters Today



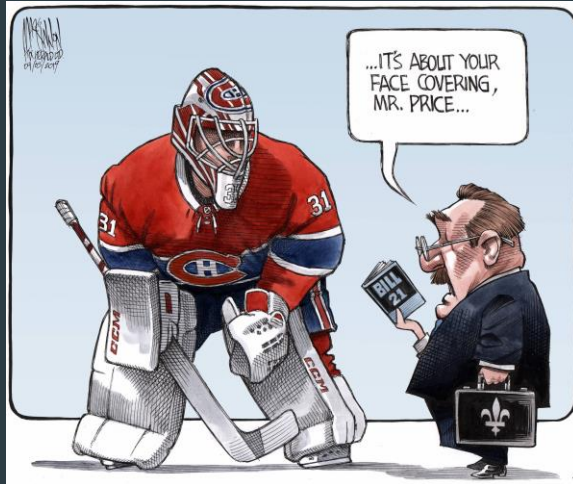
Martin Luther King Jr.  
Memorial - Washington DC

In 1934 Michael King Sr. visited Germany to attend the Baptist World Alliance meeting. He witnessed in his words, the “the racial animosity toward Jews and coloured people.” He also visited the sites where Luther’s Protestant Reformation began. Michael King was “so impressed by the story of Martin Luther’s Reformation, he decided to change his name and the name of his then 5-year-old son, Michael Jr.” to Martin Luther King.

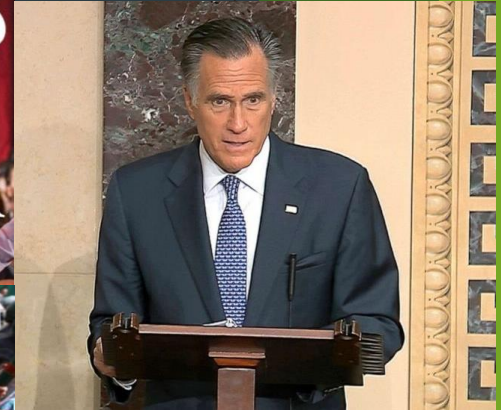




# What Does Martin Luther have to do with ....



Bill 21 From *iPolitics*  
- Bruce MacKinnon



Mitt Romney Invokes his  
faith to explain his vote

the SNC Lavelin affair, the Uighurs,  
Quebec's Bill 21 and Mitt Romney ?

Luther Focuses on the *Individual* and *Freedom of Conscience*



# Luther and Clear (Justified) Private Conscience

Luther Defends his Writings on the Basis of Conscience at the Imperial Diet (Assembly) in Worms (1521)



Luther at the Diet of Worms, by [Anton von Werner](#), 1877

"Here I stand,  
I can do no  
other" There is  
no recorded  
indication Luther  
actually said  
this.

Luther's *Justification by Grace Alone* asserts a clear inner private moral conscience as the basis for outer public good works



# Luther's Contribution to Public Ethics

*Not that Luther Would Necessarily Agree!*

Ethics is about the *Good Life*.

## The Argument

Luther's View of the Good Life (ethics);

- God Grants a Cleared (Justified) Private Conscience for Individuals;
- Individuals Freed for a Vocation as a Public Person;
- That Lovingly Works for the Good of their *Neighbours and the Common Good*;
- That Results in Shared Stories that offer a Meaningful Worldview for the Good Life



*“The paradox is that God must destroy in us, all illusions of righteousness before he can make us righteous”*

*Roland Bainton on Luther's Ethics*

# The Individual and Their Cleared (Justified) Conscience

Martin Luther's Ethics of Gratitude





# The Individual and a Cleared Conscience

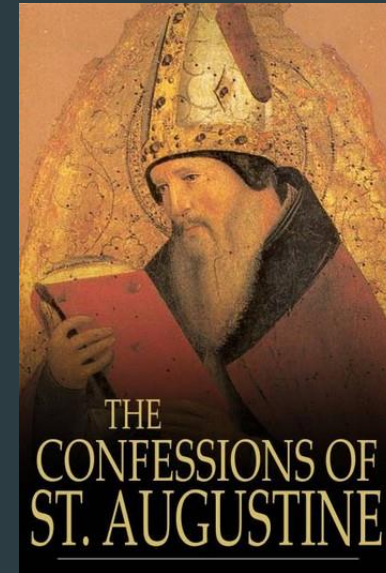
The Indulgence Controversy a Symptom of the “salvation anxiety” of the Penitential Piety 16<sup>th</sup> Century.



Woodcut of Tetzel's Indulgence Campaign. The Fugger Accountant entering the receipts



Life's Goal to Return to God



“Thou hast made us for thyself,  
O Lord, and our heart is restless  
until it finds its rest in thee.”

Augustine

# The Individual and Human Dignity

Freedom of religion/conscience becomes central to Enlightenment and modern thinking about human rights. Churches have been strong (albeit imperfect) defenders of human rights.



Article 2a in “the fundamental freedoms section of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* includes “freedom of conscience and religion.”

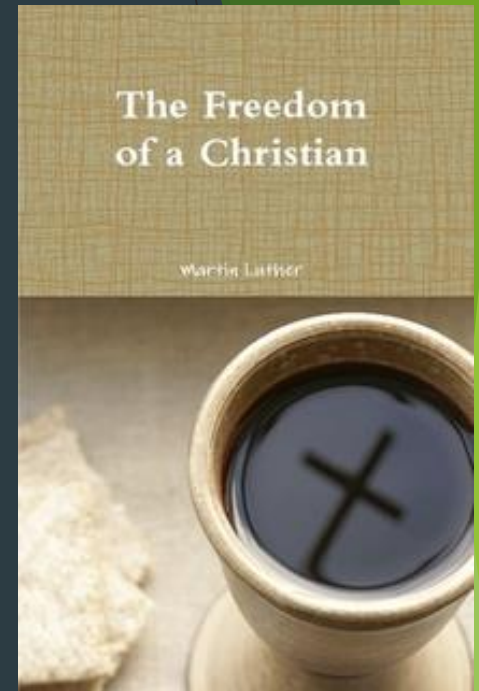


Otto Frederick Nolde, Dean at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia helped write the Preamble to the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* and Article 18 on Religious Freedom

# Martin Luther's *Christian Realism*

Luther Confronted the Human Dilemma - *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* (Paul Writing to Early Church in Rome 7: 14-15)

- Sin is the great equalizer (*incurvatus in se*).
- Luther distinguishes between the **inner private person** (*persona privata* or *coram Deo*) who is justified (made good) and **the outer public person** (*persona publica* or *coram hominibus*) called to neighbour-love (to do good).
- The public person is crucial to convening and sustaining publics.



"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none" in their inner life. "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" in their outward life. (Luther & Porter, 1974, 25)



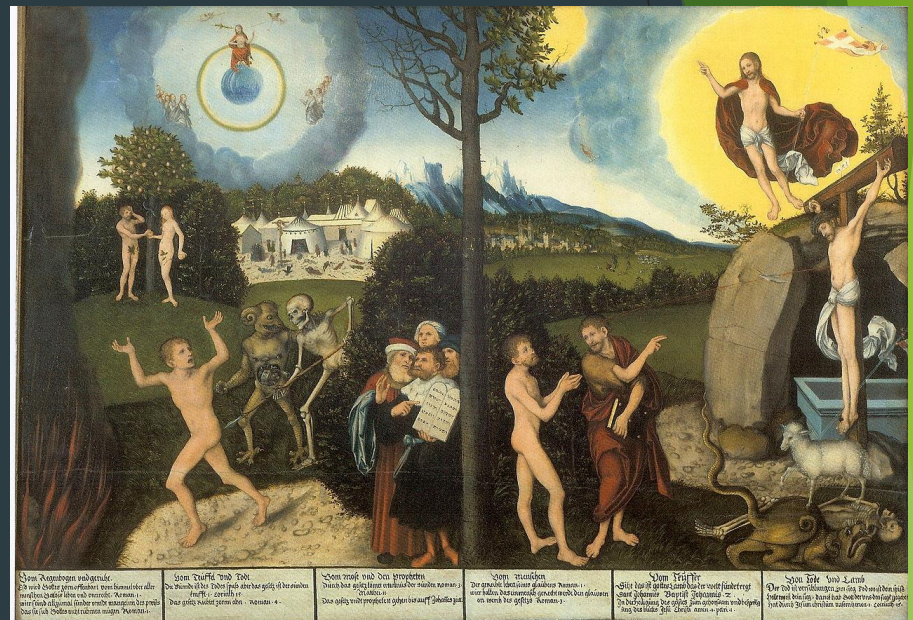


# Living by the Ten Commandments?

## The Ethical *Ying and Yang* of Luther's Law and Gospel

### Luther's Two Uses of The Law Plus a Third

- The **Political/Civil Use** of the Law for maintaining law and order
- The **Forensic/Evangelical Use** of the Law for convicting the conscience
- The **Transformative Use** of the Law *guides the* Christian's Public Life of Service in the World



Law and Gospel - Lucas Cranach, the Elder.  
Law illustrated on left, Gospel on the right





# The Transformative or Positive Use of the Law to Guide Public Life

- Luther's *priesthood of all believers* disrupted a hierarchical clerical order for a more egalitarian vision in theory.
- Luther ended the monastic system with almsgiving and charity. Wittenbergs' *Order of the Communal Purse* and *The Leisnig Order* on the Community Chest provided for the poor
- Phillip Melanchthon “founder of Protestant schooling.” As Oberdorfer points out “...Melanchthon was honoured with the name ‘Praeceptor Germaniae,’ “Germany’s Teacher”, because of his ingenious work of restructuring schools and universities according to the principles of Reformation.



# The Vocation of the Public Person

Martin Luther's Ethics of Gratitude



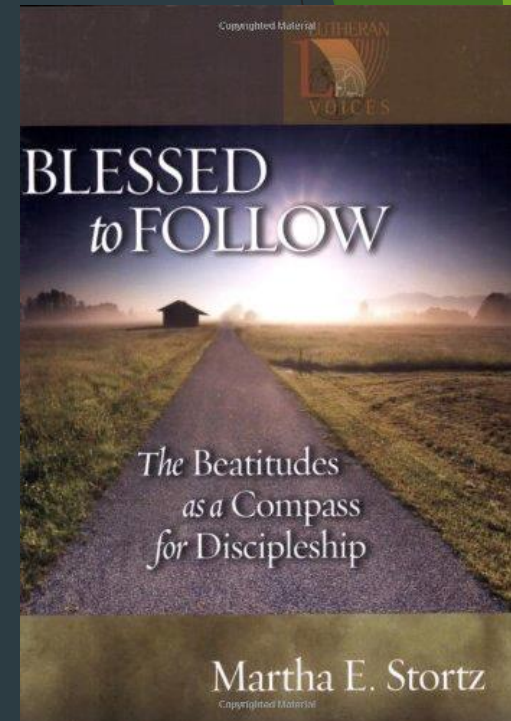
# Neighbour-love becomes the imperative for being a public person

(Cynthia Moe-Lobeda)

Neighbor-love involves more than just our individual actions. While Luther "emphasized the dignity, freedom, and responsibility of the individual" it was a **"communal individualism"**

(Klaus Nürnberger, 2005, 129)

Humans cooperate with God (**cooperator Dei**) in the care of others and of Creation. (Vitor Westhelle, 2009, 297)



“Luther saw in the beatitudes a structure of command and promise” for all believers.

(Martha Stortz , 10)



# “Little Christs” loving our Neighbour

The public person is liberated to lead a life of gratitude in **loving public service** to their neighbour and community.

- The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich defined Christian love this way, “... love is the moving power of life... Love is the drive toward the unity of what is separated.”
- Judaism speaks of *Tikkun olam*, those acts of loving kindness performed to repair and make the world better.
- The divinely rooted love - *storge* (empathy), *philia* (friendship), *eros* (romantic) and *agape* (unconditional-God) - puts people, communities, and creation back together.



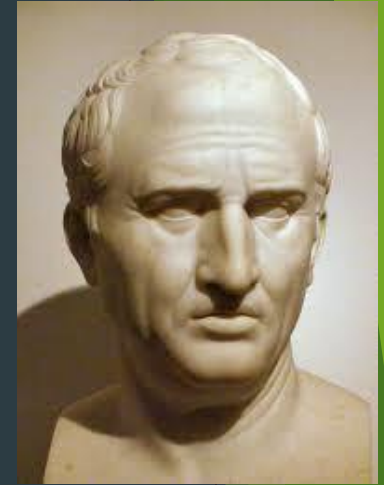
The Loving Thing is to Put People and Our World Back Together Again. Or at Least Try!



# What have We Learned from Luther?

## *An Ethics of Gratitude* (Radical Grace)

- God's Justification makes people good *from the inside out* (Luther's view) rather than *from the outside in* (Rome's view);
- **Christian Realism Understands Our Human Dilemma and the Dignity of Individual;**
- The Conscience of Flawed Individuals is Justified Daily by Remembering God's Baptismal Promise - a "re-set button";
- **Allows Freedom for Response-able Life of Gratitude and Public Service to Neighbour and Community**
- Life is not our journey back to God (Augustine). Life is our journey with God into the world (Luther).



*Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others*  
Cicero



# Convening Publics with an Imperative for A Good Life for Neighbours (and Creation!)

Martin Luther's Ethics of Gratitude



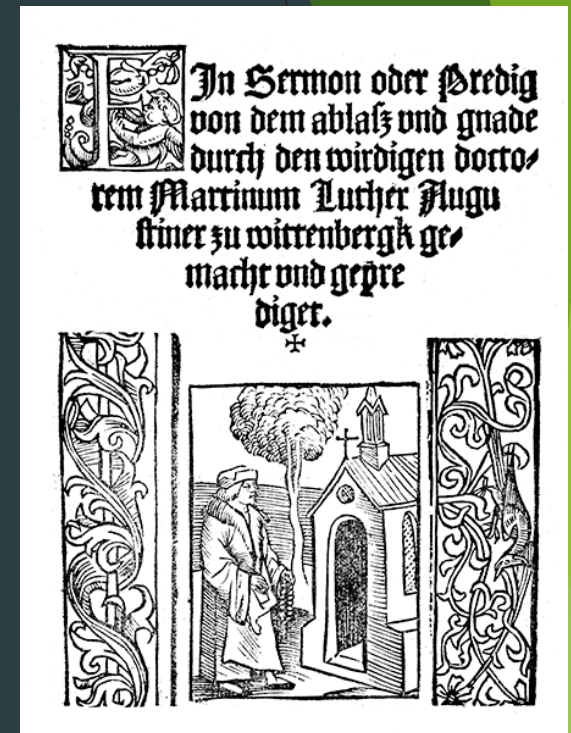
# Luther's Public Imperative

The liberated private person becomes the “hands and feet” of God.

Luther decided to reply to Tetzel, not in Latin but in German. *The Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* (1518) was "an instant publishing sensation" (Pettegree, 2015, 81)

Luther went *public*!

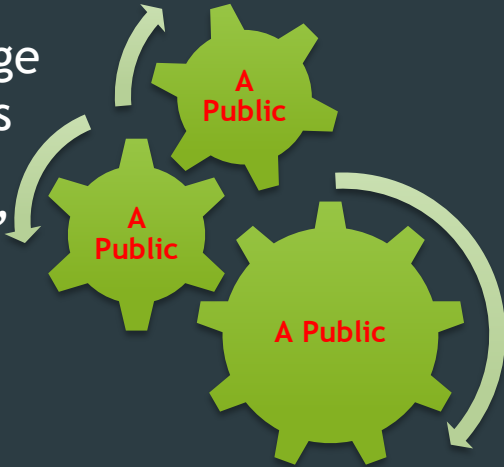
Luther's had many publics; e.g. the German public, his academic public, his publishing public, and his political public.



Title Page woodcut from  
Luther's *Sermon on  
Indulgences and Grace*  
(The Annotated Luther, Vol. 1 The Roots of  
Reform by Tim J Wengert (2015))

# What is a Public and Public Ethics?

Publics Engage  
Other Publics  
to Develop a  
'Body Politic'



A “public” is a voluntary association of individuals who gather around an idea, purpose or action and who in the process of gathering are changed while at the same time are changing their context. (D. Pfrimmer)

## Public Ethics ....

- *Convenes “public(s),” a “company of strangers” (P. Palmer)*
- *To engage a community-based process of moral deliberation*
- *To address compelling personal and social ethical dilemma(s)*
- *Enlisting our ultimate convictions and deepest values as global citizens*
- *To address or resolve an issue or life question(s) of misery and meaning in our world. (D. Pfrimmer)*





# A German National Public

Luther rocketed from obscurity to being “a celebrity, a national hero ... and icon of resistance” to oppression by the Roman Church

Luther's Bible gave rise to a literate German public... creating a language and a tool to learn reading and writing.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe visiting the room said, “Only through Luther did we become a people, one nation, did we find a common language.”



Wartburg Castle and the room where Luther translated the New Testament into German in 11 weeks in 1521-22

# Luther's Printers become a Public of Publishers

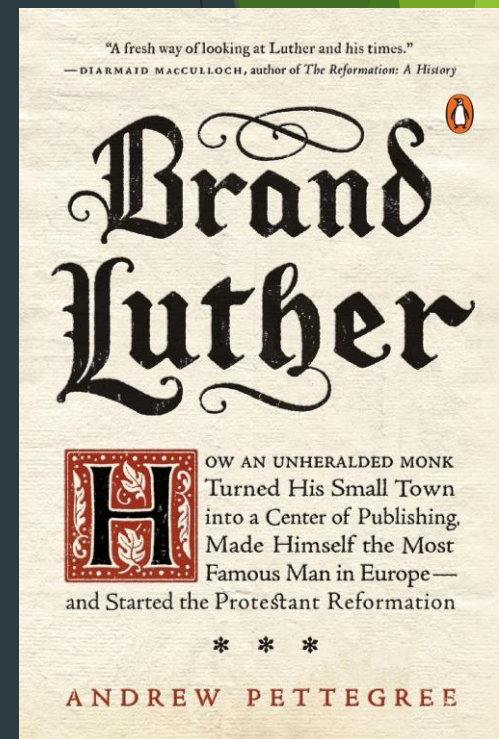
“How Luther went viral”

*Five centuries before Facebook and the Arab spring, social media helped bring about the Reformation”* (The Economist December 17, 2011)

Pettegree points to the paradox, "...printing was crucial to the creation of Martin Luther, but Luther was also a determining, shaping force in the German printing industry."

There were approximately 6- 7 million pamphlets printed during the first decade of the Reformation. One-quarter were Luther's

After Luther there was huge public demand for news and information. Eventually the idea of the newspaper was born



# Regional Rulers - Luther's Political Public

Political Support Came from Regional Ruler  
“wannabes,” Princelings who had no real power  
to resist Rome

The Princelings needed a theological  
justification. Luther writes *To the Christian  
Nobility of the German Nation.* (1520) and  
*Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should  
Be Obeyed* (1523)

Luther's “Two Kingdom Theology” - Kingdom of  
World and Kingdom of Grace. Luther is the first  
“European Christian to advocate for the  
separation of church and state.” (Karen  
Armstrong) He created public space.



Luther's Protector and  
Patron Elector Frederick  
in a portrait by Lucas  
Cranach the Elder

# Two Kinds of Righteousness for Two Kingdoms

Christian Righteousness (Coram Deo)	Civil Righteousness (Coram Mundo)
Gospel	Law
Private Individual Conscience	Seeking Right Relationships in Public
Being Right with God	Doing the Right Thing in the World
Dependent on God's Radical Grace	Dependent on Human Character
Christians	Any or No Faith

*Civil Righteousness* allows any rational creature to engage in moral actions as law-abiding citizens and makes public ethics and action possible between the Christians and others.





# Luther' Ethics and the *Unethical* Luther?

Luther was a “man of extremes” who didn't favour “middle ground,” and was prone to violent, vulgar and offensive language (Martin Marty).

Luther's Excessive Extremes include;

- Luther called the papacy the “anti-Christ” regularly;
- Wrote vile and despicable anti-Jewish tracts such as *Against the Jews and Their Lies* which were later used by the Nazis and still by extreme right wing groups today;
- Luther was complicit in the persecution of the Anabaptists which resulted in 3000 being executed and thousands more imprisoned, tortured and exiled. (Harry Loewen)
- In the Peasants Revolt of (1524-6) Luther wrote *Against the Murderous and Plundering Bands Among the Peasants* calling “upon all nobles to stab, beat, and strangle the peasants.” They slaughtered them.



# Luther - A Problematic Enigma

## The Problem;

- Luther was steeped in an authoritarian culture. Authority was a important. What about authoritarianism?
- Luther was a man driven by *a hunger for certainty* and Luther was absolutely certain he was right about justification. What about other sources of *certainty* and *certainty* itself?
- Luther just didn't just disagree. He *demonized* any opponents that questioned *Justification by Grace Alone*. He thought they were agents of the devil out to undermine the Gospel. Polarization is not new.

The Lesson; Self-Awareness-Self Interrogation-Self-Criticism

“Never believe your own propaganda!” (D. Pfrimmer)



Luther and the Kaiser  
Lutherhaus Museum, Wittenberg



The German Oaks  
A Mighty Fortress is Our God - We  
Germans Fear - God Nothing Else in  
the World

# Composing Our Communal Stories for a Meaningful Worldview of the Good Life

Martin Luther's Ethics of Gratitude



# WHEN OUR WORLDVIEW FALTERS?

Medieval Theological  
Worldview Failed

Modern Rational  
Worldview Failing

Post-Modern Relational  
Worldview To Be Determined

“Faith is biographical, defining who we are. Ethics is auto-biographical, composing our story of who we are becoming.” (D. Pfrimmer)

Public Ethics creates a *Weltanschauung* – a worldview or meaningful social ethic.

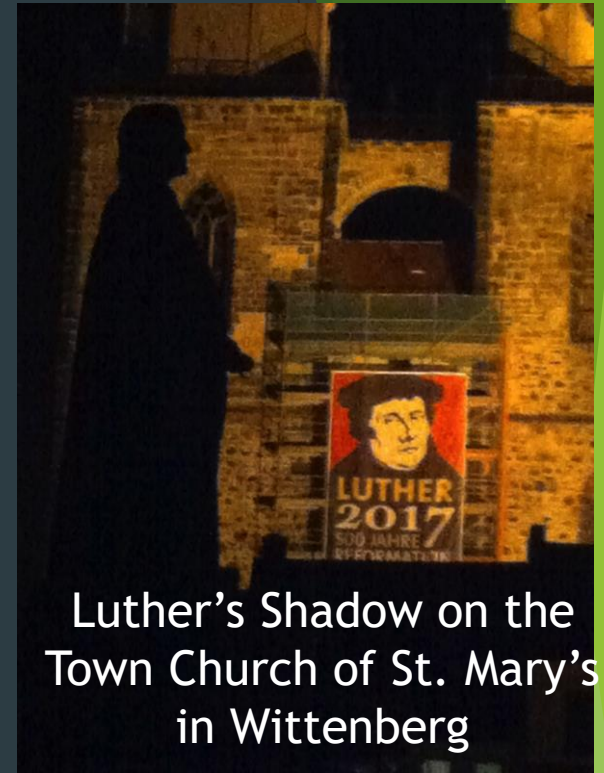
Charles Taylor speaks of a “social imaginary” about how life works and how life ought to work



# A Failing Late Medieval Worldview

The Medieval Worldview was failing, *salvation anxiety* was a symptom.

- Unconvincing Assurance of Salvation
- Religious Institutions that did not address people's life questions
- Dynamic changing economy (Colonialism & Mercantilism)
- Growing Militarism and piracy in Mediterranean
- Emerging Renaissance (i.e. Humanist) values
- Political Uncertainty



Luther's Shadow on the  
Town Church of St. Mary's  
in Wittenberg

The **Protestant Reformation** was theological  
.... de-theocratizing a pious and orthodox Catholic society





# The Great Transformation to *Modernity*

Luther's Reformation was about restoring a "better past." Paradoxically, Luther unleashed public forces of a *Great Transformation 1500-2000* (Karen Armstrong) for a life enhancing future.

In fact there were many "Reformations" across Europe. The "failure of confessional Europe was twofold: they **failed politically and militarily**, just as they failed to **create moral communities** free of religious dissent."

(Brad Gregory-University of Notre Dame)



Campus Activism Against Bill 21's Attempt at Secularization (Laïcité) - The McGill Tribune

**Modernity's** emerging worldview offered two solutions;

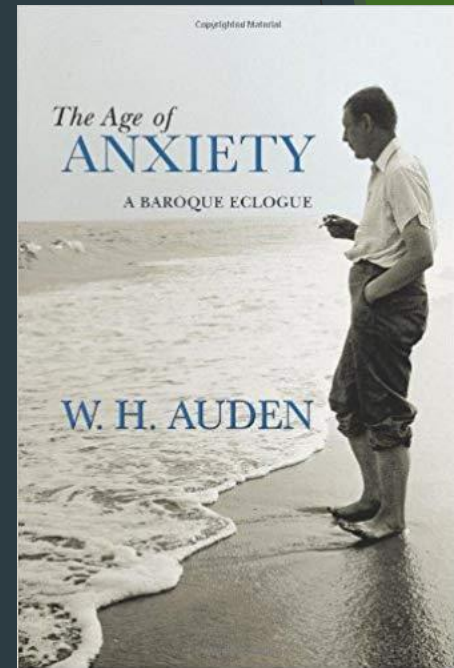
- **Separation of Church and State** - *Peace of Westphalia* (1648) and emergence of nation states;
- **Secularization** - modernity is rational, seeks progress/prosperity, and quarantines religion safely in the individual private sphere.



# The Great Unraveling of *Modernity*

“(T)he same institutional arrangements that solved the central problem posed by the failure of confessional Europe created the conditions for the **failure of Western modernity itself**, which is now well underway in different respects.” (Brad C. Gregory)

“Something’s up. And deep down, where the body meets the soul, we are fearful. We fear, down so deep, it hasn’t even risen to the point of articulation, that with all our comforts and amusements, with all our toys and bells and whistles ... we wonder if what we really have is a first-class stateroom on the Titanic. Everything is wonderful, but the world is ending and we sense it.” Peggy Noonan, *The Time of Our Lives: Collected Writings* (2015)



**Published in 1948**



# The Spirit and Ethic of a Post-Modern Age?

“Cultural Anxiety” may be the zeitgeist of **Post-Modernity** marked by;

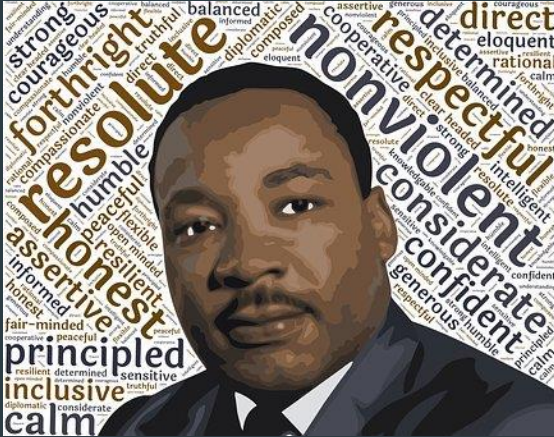
- Lack of Right Relationships with Others and Creation
- **Disestablishment of a Christendom-Values-Consensus**
- Unravelling Economic globalization & the *end of capitalism* (Wolfgang Streeck)
- **Illiberal Democracy and rising Authoritarianism**
- Militarized globalization & terrorist non-state actors
- **Entertainment values of individualism, consumerism and celebrity**

If the **Reformation** was about **theology**  
And **Modernity** was about scientific **rationality**,  
Might **Post-Modernity** be about **ethical relationships**?



Wittenberg Market Square and  
Town Church of St. Mary's

# What Luther's Public Ethics Offer Us Today?



*The old law about an 'eye for an eye' leaves everybody blind. The time is always right to do the right thing."*

# Martin Luther King Jr.

- People are dignified and flawed "communal individuals," private people with a public purpose. Human Rights and Social Responsibility matter.
- Publics matter and public spaces are important for shaping the common good. We need to guard against those who would dominate and exploit the public commons.
- An ethics of gratitude may be more effective than an ethic of merit or entitlement
- *Just as scripture alone came with problems Reason alone may not be enough today*
- Live with it! Ambiguity rather than certainty may be more instructive. Trying to be right may be the enemy of doing the right thing



[luther.wlu.ca](http://luther.wlu.ca)

