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The Age of the Individual: 500 Years Ago Today
Session 1: Origins of Individualism**

Luther: The Age of the Individual, 500 Years Today

**Christine Helmer
Boston College and Northwestern University
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It is Oct. 31, 2017, exactly five hundred years to the day on which Luther's hammer pounded on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. The *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power of Indulgences* was made public for disputation. The sound of the hammer reverberated down the centuries. Luther's theses have come to stand for courage in the face of oppression, freedom from religious and political bondage, the speaking of truth to power, and the dawn of modernity.

The provocation that took place in the university town of Wittenberg on the Elbe is usually taken together with another event that transpired in the German town of Worms, further west and on the Rhine. Four years later, on April 18, 1521, Luther stood defiantly in front of German nobles, church cardinals, and the emperor, Charles V, known as the universal monarch because his power extended over the largest land mass that any monarch on earth had ever seen: the Holy Roman Empire of German Nations, the Netherlands, Austria and other lands in Central Europe, Spain and Portugal with all the lands in Asia and the Americas on which the Spanish flag had been raised. Luther was confronted with the ultimatum to recant his writings. The spiritual sword had already condemned his soul to eternal damnation. The anticipated verdict in Worms was execution by the political sword. Luther (allegedly) spoke the plain words: "Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God. Amen."

What exactly are we celebrating today? The conference title assigned to us is "Luther: The Age of the Individual, 500 years ago today." Because the Center for Capitalism here at Columbia University is sponsoring today's conversation, we might also need to touch on the topic of capitalism. I thank Professor Phelps and the organizers of today's event for the generous opportunity to work together in thinking about how the Protestant reformation shaped the modern world in distinctive ways, or as I will show, how we can recover Luther's understanding

of the self in a particular theological sense, namely in the Catholic sense of the self as necessarily preceded by and enlivened in the community.

Because the word “individual” is important for our conference deliberations, I would like to begin by clarifying it in philosophical terms. In philosophy, “individual” does not mean the same thing as another related term, “subject.” Both are modern philosophical terms that connote the way reality exists and appears to us as discrete entities that are non-substitutable and non-reducible to each other. An individual is a discrete entity that has reality. In fact in the philosophical world in which Luther was educated, that of late medieval nominalism, individual substances and qualities (and some relations in view of theology) were understood as the only kinds of reality that has existence. Individuals, however, are not restricted solely to humans. They can be particular stones, bicycles, or pets, in other words, discrete really existing things. The term “subject,” however, is applied exclusively to individuals with consciousness. Human beings have a privileged status among individuals with varying degrees of consciousness because they have self-consciousness. While fish or cows can have some kind of consciousness, humans are conscious of a self that has apprehensions of others, hence self-consciousness. A personal (human) subject is thus an individual that has a distinct center of consciousness that grounds its own apprehensions, as in Hegel’s theory of reflective consciousness, or someone who is aware that personal existence is grounded in another, as in Schleiermacher’s theory of immediate consciousness. Modern theories of the human individual presuppose this notion of subjectivity.

When we celebrate Luther’s contributions to the “age of the individual,” what assumptions are we making about Luther’s connection to modernity? Luther as the individual hero of his own story makes for a great plot that sells movies and books. But the historical Luther, or the one we assume to be Luther the Protestant Reformer—the one alleged to have

stood tall before Catholic authorities and universal monarch—is not really the monk of the later middle ages who until 1517 went by the name of Martin Luder. The late medieval theologian, Augustinian friar, and ordained Catholic priest I am referring to is someone quite different from the one we see on pedestals around Germany today.

The image of the solitary Luther was created by the German sculptor Johann Gottfried Schadow in the 1820s. By the 1880s, this sculpture was dominant in marketplaces in Germany, usually not far from a statue of another famous German by the name of Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian general who consolidated diverse German territories under the Prussian flag under the expansionist politics of Wilhelmine monarchy.¹ In fact, Luther and Bismarck are often portrayed together during this era, as a familiar postcard from around 1900 shows. Luther on the postcard, like the statue, has taken on the facial features of a leader. His mien is stern, his eyes focused, the lines of his face etching the seriousness of the weighty world-historical role he has been assigned. His feet are firmly planted on the ground, his large academic robe billowing in the wind, covering a body that has eaten meals befitting a strong male leader. Two hands hold onto the one authority—from God—that legitimates his bold stance: the Bible. The translation of the Bible, specifically as the Protestant canon, from its original Hebrew and koine Greek, was Luther's achievement. With the Bible Luther gave to the Germans their language—inflected with a Saxon political tone, a rich vocabulary, German syntax, and emotional palette that shaped German piety and linguistic culture for hundreds of years. Luther had united Germany around the Bible as the cultural symbol of modern Protestantism. At a time when Germany intellectuals sought to identify their country as a modern nation, like France and Germany, when Germany strove to become a political powerhouse in Europe and beyond, German thinkers rallied around

¹ See Catriona MacLeod, *Fugitive Objects: Sculpture and Literature in the German Nineteenth Century* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2013).

their cultural contribution to the modern world. That contribution took the form of Martin Luther.

The Luther created as individual leader standing defiant with the symbol of his cultural authority was the Luther celebrated in 1883 and 1917. These dates mark the two four-hundred year centenaries that are crucial to the creation of the “modern Protestant Luther.” Between these two dates, the first in 1883 celebrating Luther’s birthday, the second being the four-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant reformation, Luther was being curated as cultural unifier of Germany. Lutheran theologians—who occupied 10% of all university posts at the time—saw their opportunity. They began studying Luther—not as a systematic theologian whose ideas were to be organized into a system of deductive thought—but as a religious virtuoso, a solitary individual who had himself experienced events that would become definitive of modernity. Luther’s reformation breakthrough catapulted him from medieval subservience to modern freedom, from celibate monastic to married man, from Catholicism to Protestantism. A new narrative of the modern Luther began to take shape.

Luther’s biography became the central preoccupation of academic theologians. The church historian at the University of Berlin, Karl Holl (1866-1926), initiated what is known as the Luther Renaissance. The historians of this movement were intent on identifying the precise date Luther’s reformation breakthrough. To study the chronology, they used tools of historical research, for which German academics were known, together with new research methods emerging at the time at the University of Berlin, such as economics, sociology, and anthropology. The date of 1517 was determined as critical to Luther’s reformation discovery, the text of Luther’s *Lectures on Romans* from 1515-1516 provided the evidence, and the image of Luther as solitary Protestant individual with the word of God in his hand, began to be celebrated

in a land in which 35% of the population was Roman Catholic.² The “age of the individual” that we assume is connected to Luther and the sixteenth-century Protestant reformation is a creation of modern culture, politics, and theology.

This assumption is made explicit on a Norton Critical Edition 2009 reprint of Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, on which Luther appears on the front cover. We know from the book’s content that Weber assigns to Luther merely a transitional status from medieval feudal society to early modern capitalism. It is Calvin, not Luther who should be on the cover. The power of Luther’s image as herald of modernity is this edition’s selling point.

Who was Luther, really? Can the Luther who lived at the end of the middle ages, in the early sixteenth century, offer us some resources to think critically about the individual that today lives in the cruel and inhumane “iron cage” of Weber’s prophecy at the end of his *Protestant Ethic*? It is important for our reflections on Luther’s legacy today to reconsider Luther in terms that offer a critical perspective on and corrective to the modern individual. For this particular Luther, we need to recover the Catholic Luther, or the Luther whose reformation efforts were directed to the late medieval church.

The Catholic Luther was not a rebel or revolutionary. Rather, he was a reformer of the church who appeared in a long historical line of medieval reformers and reformations. The title of his 1520 treatise *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* is an explicit reference to the corrupt Avignon papacy (1309-1376) and the rise of medieval conciliarism that sought to reform it. Luther knew his church history. He knew that the monastic reforms, undertaken even by his own Augustinian order, were important for the ongoing ministry of the church. Luther was

² Helmut Walser Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1870-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

deeply conscious of his connection to a spiritual mentor, Jan Hus, who had been burned at the stake after sentencing by the Council of Constance in 1415 for supporting conciliarism and eucharistic communion in both kinds (bread and wine). Luther appropriated the political theology of his intellectual mentor, William of Ockham, for his own efforts to garner political support for theological reforms. When Luther responded to the issuing of indulgences by the Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz in 1517, he was merely claiming his right as a doctor of theology, a *doctor ecclesiae*, to dispute a problematic development that confused economic exchange with a proper use and right understanding of indulgences. The theological task of reforming the church—of distinguishing between economic exploitation and an “economy of grace”—is not the same thing as a dramatic reformation breakthrough.

Luther standing with his Bible has become the image of a theological doctrine central to his reformation experience. Ever since Karl Holl’s study of Luther from 1917, the doctrine of justification has been integral to Luther’s biography—the individual in a dramatic encounter with God. Yet we must be careful to restrict justification to individualistic traits that have been emphasized through the early twentieth century centenaries. It is true that when Luther preaches on Christ’s forgiveness of the human sinner, he sometimes impersonates Christ in intimate first to second person speech. “I forgive you”; in Latin, “ego te absolvo.” He was a psychologically sensitive priest, compassionately aware of the human need for a personal dimension to religious experience. Luther’s roots in late medieval mysticism and spiritual formation had taught him that a meaningful religiosity require a personal dimension. A personal bridal analogy thus is central to part one of Luther’s famous treatise from 1520, *The Freedom of a Christian*. In this image, Christ is present to the bride, without clerical mediation, taking on her sins and giving her his righteousness.

Yet Luther also knew that the individual exists only in community. The personal dimension in his theology cannot be taken as a Protestant rejection of the church in communicating forgiveness. Rather for Luther, the church is social institution in which the individual experiences justification. The church communicates Christ's forgiveness through its liturgy and sacraments. When the person is freed by Christ from sin, she is freed from selfish interests to wholeheartedly serve the neighbor. Luther understood that justification was reciprocally related to the creation of community. Christ has a double act, so to speak: in creating new life for the sinner, Christ creates the community of saints. *The Freedom of a Christian* has two parts, just like Romans 11 continues on to Romans 12. Weber knew this about Luther; he knew that neighbor-serving vocation was the necessary consequence of justification. The task of living out one's vocation in the world is the way in which the justified sinner participates in and contributes to the community, a community that communicates Christ in the first place.

Today I propose that we use the term "commemorate" regarding our attitude to the Protestant reformation. I propose that we think about the early sixteenth century in continuity with a medieval tradition of reformations as well as a broad and robust movement of many reformations taking place all over Europe, in Spain and England, in Strasbourg, Geneva, and Zurich. The reformations were intended to benefit the health of the church. Luther's account of a personal experience of justification went together with his insistence on church reforms to facilitate communicating grace to sinners. Justification does not occur at the expense of the community but together with it. The self freed by grace lives to benefit the community. By considering the late medieval Catholic Luther in our conversations about the reformation, I think we can take a new look at Luther's contribution, namely in that what it means to be human does

not rest with the individual but requires community. Becoming human occurs in community. It is this reformation idea that is important today.