CNI

LUTHER 500 - The shout that awakened nations

Martin Luther, the Reformation – and the birth of the modern world, Simon Heffer writes in The Economist

There is still the odd parish church in England with a notice on its south door that begins: "There are those who will tell you that at the time of the Reformation the Church of England ceased to be Catholic and became Protestant. Do not believe them." It is a bemusing argument, hinting at the divisions within Anglicanism that stemmed from Henry VIII's decision to establish a state church in 1534 and reject the authority of the pope in Rome.

Many Anglican clergy long for the Western Church to be reunited, but important practical and doctrinal differences obstruct this – not least the celibacy of clergy and the ordination of women as priests. Henry VIII's decision had little to do with religion, though a theological

earthquake in continental Europe had made it possible. Not the least of the secular consequences of that earthquake was that the king of England could, in order to marry his mistress, set up his own Christian Church, and in doing so change the course of English, and British, history. It is not least why we have a queen of German descent, and why for centuries Britain and Ireland had such bad relations.

By 1534 the course of European history had already been changed; large tracts of the world would in the ensuing centuries have their destinies changed as a result. On 31 October it will be 500 years since Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk from Saxony, sent his bishop, Albrecht of Mainz, his *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*. And Luther may, as the mythology states, have nailed the document – also known as the 95 Theses – to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, where he was a theologian at the university.

In England it occasioned the most significant moment in history between the Battle of Hastings and the Great War: significant because of all that flowed from it, not in a theological sense, but in its secular effect. In Europe it caused an upheaval not seen since the establishment of the Holy Roman empire in 800,

and it was the beginning of the end of that empire. The history of the West changed in that moment. Despite the efforts of the Spanish and Portuguese to establish Catholic empires around the world, the most extensive empire of all would be the Protestant, British one. Its creation was directly attributable to the religious, economic and cultural consequences of the Reformation, and it would be imported into North America, Africa and Australasia.

Luther, who was 33 when he picked this argument with his Church, had become a monk after a bolt of lightning hit the ground near him and thus spared him. Later, he was ordained as a priest. He was a gifted and disputatious academic theologian. The cause of his affront was that the then pope, Leo X – a Medici from Florence – had granted the sale of indulgences to raise money to complete St Peter's at Rome, and had sent Johann Tetzel, his commissioner for indulgences, to Germany to raise funds in this way. Purchase of an indulgence supposedly guaranteed less time in purgatory. Luther was outraged: he had developed a system of belief in which simple faith, not the execution of good works or donations of money to various forms of charity, was the way to salvation. In this way, he was also indirectly the father of the welfare state.

Luther's 86th thesis asked why, given the pope's wealth, he did not use his own money to pay for St Peter's rather than that of "poor believers". Bishop Albrecht did not respond to his complaint, but sent the document to Rome. Early in 1518, using the relatively new medium of the printing press, the 95 Theses, in the universal language of Latin, were distributed around Germany and, with remarkable speed, much of Europe, too. Thomas Carlyle, for whom Luther was one of history's heroes, called this expression of outrage a "shout", and wrote: "The Pope should not have provoked that 'shout'! It was the shout of the awakening of nations."

Carlyle got to the root of the significance of the Reformation, and why it shapes our world so profoundly. There had been challenges to the Christian religious orthodoxy before – remember King John's, not to mention other outbursts of insolence around Catholic Europe – but Luther's came at a time to trigger the perfect storm. The Reformation provoked a challenge to spiritual authority for which not merely the masses, but many of their rulers, felt ready; the invention of the printing press also allowed their view to be broadcast with an ease hitherto impossible. In the same manner as Henry VIII and his successors would establish a principle of absolute sovereignty – eventually, parliamentary

sovereignty – in England and then in Great Britain, other polities in northern Europe gradually ended the influence of the pope and the Catholic Church in their affairs.

The Church hierarchy tried to talk Luther out of his views, but failed. In April 1521 he was summoned to the Diet of Worms, providing the moment Carlyle described as “the greatest scene in Modern European History; the point, indeed, from which the whole subsequent history of civilisation takes its rise”. This was where secular authority under Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor, tried to persuade Luther to recant. He refused: the mythology has it that this was when he pronounced: “Here I stand. I can do no other.” He was outlawed and excommunicated: but Frederick the Wise, the sympathetic elector of Saxony, shielded him in his castle at Wartburg and, once the heat was off, Luther set about organising his own Church on his own principles.

The secular effects of this attack on authority were soon apparent. A peasants’ revolt in parts of Germany in 1525, which for strategic reasons Luther declined to support, showed the mood, and helped explain why in the northern German lands, in the Low Countries and elsewhere in Europe, people flocked to the new brand of

Christianity. Lutheranism was the anti-establishment populism of its day and a means whereby, in an age before democracy, the unfranchised could make their voices heard.

Luther's ideas inspired, and were developed by, John Calvin, a Frenchman who expounded his own theology from Geneva, where he had gone into exile. If we owe Luther (among other things) the intellectual right to question and reject authority, especially when it can be proved wrong or corrupt, we owe Calvin the Protestant work ethic, as well as the flourishing of capitalism and enterprise that stems from it. The left should be well aware of this point, as it was the basis of R H Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, published in 1926; the right should know it through the political economist Max Weber. Calvin saw work as a duty that the individual owed God and fellow citizens out of gratitude for redemption through Jesus Christ: no one had the right not to work if able to do so. Those who shared his belief that the industrious would prosper in the afterlife developed a culture that not only created capitalism, but encouraged the buccaneers, pioneers and adventurers who would seek to build empires.

Thus, as Carlyle said, the Reformation marked the moment when society stopped caring about

the moral and spiritual health of people and started to worry about their economic and practical condition. Other historians have put it more bluntly: it was the moment when the Middle Ages ended and the modern world began. It brought with it ideas and attitudes such as social mobility, an inevitable by-product of a society where work and enterprise are promoted. Luther was in some senses highly enlightened, and his enlightenment spread: he set an example of freedom of thought, opening up new inquiries into science and philosophy. This establishment of the right to individual conscience leads to the contention that our modern idea of liberty stems from the Reformation.

Some who pursued liberty of thought and conscience in rigidly Catholic societies, such as Galileo a century later, still struggled; yet by the time Galileo was put under house arrest for claiming that the sun was the centre of the solar system many were belatedly accepting Copernicus's theory of heliocentricity, advanced around the time of the 95 Theses. The Reformation signalled the moment when the Church lost control of science, though even Protestants retained a prejudice, born of fear, against radical inquiry. It was the 19th century before geology became an accepted subject of

study at English universities, for fear it would contradict what the Bible said about the chronology of the Creation.

Luther's sense of enlightenment also led him to oppose the subjugation of women, believing they should be able to divorce an unsatisfactory husband. Excommunicated, he himself married a former nun, unilaterally ending the notion that a clergyman had to be celibate. He was also deeply opposed to slavery, an abomination whose international abolition was eventually driven by British and American Quakers. However, there was one marked respect in which his doctrine was anything but enlightened, and its poisonous legacy would resonate down the centuries.

Luther had argued initially for Christians to treat Jews kindly, in the hope of converting them; but by the 1530s he had abandoned any idea of mass conversion and saw persecution as the only alternative. He became unequivocally anti-Semitic and called explicitly for Jews to be removed from all German territories, their houses and synagogues burned, and their chattels and religious texts confiscated; they were also to be denied safe passage as they travelled. Jews fled to eastern Europe to avoid the privations Lutherans forced on them, congregating

particularly in Catholic Poland, and in Habsburg lands to the south and east.

Luther now condemned those Christians who helped the Jews; indeed, one Lutheran pastor in the Alsatian town of Hochfelden ordered his congregation to go out and murder them. A substantial Jewish community lived in Hochfelden until 1940, when the Nazis began to deport them. Then in December 1941, six weeks before the Wannsee Conference, seven confederations of Protestant churches in Germany announced their support for the Nazi policy of forcing Jews to wear the Star of David. From time to time the Nazis used Luther to justify their persecution.

Nor would this be the only form of Protestant racism. In South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church was explicit in its endorsement of apartheid, and Hendrik Verwoerd, its architect, was educated by Lutherans. But racism was not inextricable from the Reformation: in 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which took its main inspiration from Calvin rather than Luther, expelled the Dutch Reformed Church and declared apartheid a sin.

Luther soon had followers among secular rulers other than Frederick the Wise, who in 1531

formed a defensive alliance called the Schmalkaldic League. In 1555 it forced Charles V to conclude the Peace of Augsburg, allowing Lutheran rulers to exist within the Holy Roman empire: this sundered Protestant Germany from Catholic Germany, a divide that persisted until the declaration of the Second Reich in 1871. It then took until the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648 and the Peace of Westphalia to allow Calvinist rule, too, within the empire. In that war, 40 per cent of the population of what is now Germany was killed, partly through plague. Eight million people died altogether, in a series of wars that began over the determination of Emperor Ferdinand II to renege on the Treaty of Augsburg and impose Catholicism throughout the empire. In time, however, the war became a conflict between the leading powers – notably the French and the Habsburgs – squabbling over territory and influence, with Catholic France finding it desirable for reasons of security to support the Protestants, and with powers as far-flung as Spain and Sweden joining in.

The other consequences of Luther's Reformation were less horrific. His translation of the Bible into the German vernacular helped standardise that language and had a profound effect on German literacy and culture: it founded a literary tradition that would flower after the Thirty Years War with

the Baroque period, and then produce Kant, Goethe and Schiller. Luther was also a prolific hymn-writer. A German musical tradition that passed down from Bach and influenced composers around Europe was greatly stimulated by the Church he founded. The growth of literacy further fed debate and discourse. Luther's translation of the Bible was emulated in England, Scotland and other Protestant countries, and had a similarly galvanising effect on culture in those lands. It was not just that, greatly helped by printing, translation made religion more accessible and comprehensible to the masses: greater literacy propelled freedom of speech and thought. The Reformation provoked the greatest explosion of information, knowledge and ideas until the arrival of the internet.

Despite his strictures against ideas promulgated by the Jews, Luther advocated inquiry as a means of stimulating freedom of thought. Even though he saw it as a tool of the devil, he also wanted the Quran to be freely available so that it could be subject to scrutiny. Ironically, this spirit of inquiry and debate did not always exist in Luther's own denomination. The Pilgrim Fathers went to America, founding the nation as we know it and providing perhaps one of the greatest consequences of the Reformation, only

because of the mutual intolerance of factions within Protestantism. The emigration on the *Mayflower* can be traced back to the departure from the East Midlands of early Nonconformists, who fled to Holland in 1606-07 to escape rising persecution in the Church of England. Perhaps predictably, when they arrived in New Plymouth they radiated loathing of other religions, notably Catholicism, setting in place an institutional prejudice in America. It took the United States until 1960, and the election of John F Kennedy, to choose a Catholic president.

In continental Europe, the political, constitutional and economic effects of the Reformation have been profound. In Britain, it is why Queen Elizabeth II sits on the throne and not Franz, Duke of Bavaria, the premier descendant of Charles I of England, who would otherwise be King Francis II. Charles I's failure to accept the religious consequences of the Reformation helped cause the English Civil War. The refusal of his son James II to do so brought about the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and the Act of Settlement, preventing the Catholic children of James and their descendants from inheriting the throne and offering it to the distantly related House of Hanover. Thanks to this, the monarch was taken out of British politics, with the office of prime minister developing after 1721 to

manage affairs on behalf of George I and the role of the sovereign being steadily eroded over the next two centuries into what we now call a constitutional monarchy.

The hostility with France from the late 17th century until 1815 was fed by English outrage at the revocation in 1685 by Louis XIV of the Edict of Nantes, by which Protestants had had their rights protected in France. An estimated 50,000 of the most accomplished people in France – - Calvinist Huguenots – migrated across the Channel, forming one of the biggest waves of immigration in English history of one group relative to the existing population. For generations they and their descendants made a valuable contribution to British life, setting up enclaves of weavers in Canterbury and Spitalfields and lacemakers in Worcestershire, and also settling in Ireland, where they became prominent both in business and in local government.

The transfer of power from religious to secular authority in central Europe after the Peace of Westphalia paved the way for a continent dominated in the late 19th century by Germany, with all that would entail. It was a grotesque perversion of history that Adolf Hitler, a lapsed Catholic, should reunite those who were

culturally German into a heathen form of the Holy Roman empire on the *Anschluss* with Austria of 1938.

France passed a *loi de laïcité* in 1905 formally separating the state from the power of the Roman Catholic Church; but in that country's affairs what is still called the *haute société protestante* has an influence far exceeding the proportion of Protestants in society, whether in politics, officialdom or business. Protestants had been allowed back into France after 1789 and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and they applied their Calvinist work ethic to French business. Peugeot and Hermès were founded and run by Protestants. So, too, were some of the biggest French firms, such as the Schlumberger industrial group, whose origins were in Alsace. Protestants are disproportionately represented in finance and utility companies. The relatively great wealth of northern (Protestant) Europe compared to the Catholic south is still a matter of tension in the European Union.

A secular society such as ours naturally regards politics as driving the course of history, but at this 500th anniversary it is right to recall what has driven the course of politics. Martin Luther did not only change the world: the

consequences of this quarrelsome but brave monk's actions continue to affect the world to this day. If you seek his monument, look around you.

Simon Heffer is a columnist for the Daily and Sunday Telegraphs