

MARTIN LUTHER AND THE BULL *EXSURGE DOMINE*

There is agreement among most Reformation scholars that the Bull *Exsurge Domine* of June 15, 1520, which threatened Martin Luther with excommunication, constitutes a strange document and an evasive assessment of Luther's theological concerns.¹ The reasons for this agreement are several.² Some of Luther's most incisive theological pronouncements—such as his tract on the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, of 1520, or that on the *Bondage of the Will*, of 1525—were unknown to the authors of the Bull, who had to rely on his tracts from the years 1518 and 1519. These clearly did not convey the full range of his theological concern. Moreover, the Bull allowed differing interpretations of certain passages: at one point it seemingly condemned all of Luther's writings, at another only those containing any of the condemned forty-one errors.³ An additional weakness of the document was that it refrained from identifying the specific censures for the forty-one propositions. The quotations from Luther simply received the label "respective haereticos aut scandalosos aut falsos aut piarum aurium offensos vel simplicium mentium seductivos et veritati catholicae obviantes."⁴ This vagueness was especially significant in light of the absence of any explicit verdict as to which sentences were outrightly "heretical."

The following marginalia seek to address themselves to one aspect of the Bull that still seems to require adequate documentation, the exactness of the forty-one quotations from Luther, though it would be of equal interest to undertake, on the basis of the dogmatic decisions of the early and medieval Church, a specific classification of these propositions. The task of verifying the quotations from Luther was undertaken several years ago by H. Roos, whose industrious work was subsequently incorporated into the thirty-second edition of H. Denzinger's classic *Enchiridion symbolorum*.⁵ The following observations

¹ See, e.g., the comments of R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York, 1950) p. 112; H. Boehmer, *Der junge Luther* (Stuttgart, 1951) p. 288; J. M. Todd, *Martin Luther* (Westminster, Md., 1964) p. 166.

² The Bull is printed in *Bullarium Romanum* 5, 748–57.

³ Compare here *Bullarium Romanum* 5, 753, "in libellis . . . in quibus dicti errores seu eorum aliquis continentur," with p. 755, "Inhibemus praeterea . . . ne scripta, etiam praefatos errores non continentia, ab eodem Martino . . . legere."

⁴ *Bullarium Romanum* 5, 752. See also *ibid.*: "respective quam sint pestiferi, quam perniciosi, quam scandalosi, quam piarum et simplicium mentium seductivi, quam denique sint contra omnem caritatem . . . aut articulos non esse catholicos, nec tamquam tales esse dogmatizandos, sed contra Ecclesiae catholicae doctrinam sive traditionem."

⁵ "Die Quellen der Bulle 'Exsurge Domine,'" in J. Auer and H. Volk (eds.), *Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Munich, 1957) pp. 909–26.

are greatly indebted to Roos's effort. They will show, all the same, that Roos used the term "sources" all too broadly and without the necessary theological precision.

A detailed examination of the sources of the forty-one propositions reveals the following:

Proposition 25, which pertains to the primacy of the Roman pontiff, cannot be located in any of Luther's writings prior to 1520. One may conjecture that its insertion was due to the influence of Johann Eck, who may have recalled (or thought he recalled) an oral statement from Luther.⁶

Proposition 4 ("Imperfecta caritas morituri fert secum necessario magnum timorem, qui se solo satis est facere poenam purgatorii, et impedit introitum regni") took two of the 95 Theses (Thesis 14, "Imperfecta . . . magnum timorem," and Thesis 15, "Hic timor et horror satis est se solo . . . facere poenam purgatorii"), and added, as a final clause, a passage from the *Resolutions* which read "horror ipse mortis . . . etiam se solo impedit introitum regni."⁷ It would seem that the "new" sentence does not precisely agree with Luther's own formulations. If we overlook the fact that the "sentence," as quoted, does not appear in Luther, we still note that the phrase altered the subject of Luther's final clause.

Proposition 5 confined itself to a quotation of the opinion of others.⁸

Proposition 16 expressed the hope that a future general council might decide favorably concerning Communion under both kinds and observed that the Hussites were schismatics and not heretics.⁹

The important phrase of proposition 18, "Indulgentiae sunt piaes fraudes fidelium," taken from the Leipzig disputation, would seem to

⁶ Denzinger-Schönmetzer (32nd ed., 1963) 1475: "Romanus Pontifex, Petri successor, non est Christi vicarius super omnes totius mundi ecclesias ab ipso Christo in beato Petro institutus."

⁷ WA 1, 572; cf. DS 1454.

⁸ DS 1455: "Tres esse partes paenitentiae . . . non est fundatum in sacra Scriptura . . ." The quotation is from WA 1, 243, *Sermon von Ablass und Gnade*: "dass etlich new lerer, als Magister sententiarum, S. Thomas . . . geben der puss drey teyll . . . und wiewoll disser unter scheid noch yrer meinung schwerlich adder gar uichts gegruendet erfundenn uirt ynn der heyligen schrift."

⁹ The quotation is from *Sermon vom Sakrament des Leichnams Christi* (WA 2, 742) and *Verklärung etlicher Artikel* (WA 6, 80). Still, it must be noted that in WA 2, 742 Luther explicitly affirmed the crucial aspect of Communion under two kinds, "nit darumb, das eyne gestalt nit gnug sey," and in WA 6, 80 Luther based his verdict concerning the schismatic rather than heretical character of the Hussites on "meyner wider sacher rede," asserting "so sag ich und schliess auss yren eygen Worten . . ." Cf. DS 1466.

require further explication as to whether the reference is to practice or theology. Moreover, Luther indicated that he was citing a popular saying (the saying appears in quotation marks in the text) the point of which was to underscore the existing disagreements over indulgences.¹⁰

Proposition 20 condensed a lengthy statement from the *Resolutions* ("Atque his mecum utinam terra et plenitudo eius gerneret ac fleret super seductionem populi Christiani, qui passim indulgentias non aliter intelligunt quam salutare et ad fructum spiritus utiles"¹¹) into the simple assertion "Seducuntur credentes indulgentias esse salutare et ad fructum spiritus utiles."¹² This assertion does not express Luther's sentiment and overlooks the fact that the concrete setting of Tetzels proclamation rather than the undefined doctrine of indulgences precipitated the 95 Theses. Luther's relative clause surely should be translated "who ordinarily know nothing about indulgences except . . ." Thus the connection "seducuntur" and "esse salutare . . . utiles" is unwarranted.

Proposition 41, which rejected Luther's notion that the authorities "non male facerent, si omnes saccos mendicitatis delerent," was evidently understood as an attack upon the mendicant orders, but was in Luther a social concern that had to do with begging as such.¹³

Proposition 33 ("Haereticos comburi est contra voluntatem Spiritus") forged one sentence out of two disjointed ones in Luther. Again, the quotation overlooked that Luther expressly referred to St. Jerome as guide for his own view.¹⁴

In proposition 30 Luther was incorrectly quoted. The Bull stated "Aliqui articuli Iohannis Hus condemnati in Concilio Constantiensi sunt christianissimi, verissimi et evangelici," whereas Luther had only written "inter articulos Iohannis Huss vel Bohemorum multos esse plane Christianissimos et Evangelicos."¹⁵ Omitting the unimportant grammatical differences, the substantive change in the wording of the Bull is, of course, the insertion of "condemnati in Concilio Constantiensi," which gives vastly different meaning to Luther's sentence.

The same kind of change occurred also in proposition 38 (on purgatory), which changed Luther's expressions "probatum esse videtur" and "probatum videtur" into "non sunt" and "probatum est."¹⁶ The uncertainty on the part of Luther thus was changed into a firm pro-

¹⁰ WA 2, 349; 353; 356: "cum interim semper fuerint, quibus et displicuerint, qui et contraxerint, saltem privatim, indulgentiis, ut testatur vulgatissimum proverbium . . ." Cf. DS 1468.

¹¹ WA 1, 587. ¹² DS 1470. ¹³ DS 1491.

¹⁴ WA 1, 624: "Quod si S. Hieronymus non decipit me, puto de bellis haereticorum praefiguratum." Cf. DS 1483.

¹⁵ WA 2, 279; DS 1480. ¹⁶ WA 1, 234; DS 1488.

nouncement. A similar omission of "videri" is found in propositions 21 and 22, which changed Luther's statement "septuplex hominum genus mihi videtur excoemptum, quod non egeat indulgentiis," into "sex generibus hominum indulgentiae nec sunt necessariae nec utiles."¹⁷

Proposition 37 changed Luther's "quod in universa scriptura non habeatur memoria purgatorii" into "purgatorium non potest probari ex sacra Scriptura."¹⁸ Again, one must take note of a divergence in meaning, if Luther's sense is taken to be that the word "purgatory" does not occur in Scripture.¹⁹

Several of the remaining propositions were propounded by contemporaries without evoking official ecclesiastical censure. In proposition 34, for example, we have the condemnation of Luther's view that the Turks are God's judgment and to fight against them is to resist this judgment. Not only was this a peripheral theological point, as the context of Luther's passage shows²⁰ (Luther discusses divine judgments and not wars against the Turk), but the notion of divine judgment can also be found, for example, in Geiler von Geilersberg.²¹

Proposition 28, finally, can be taken as an illustration of a statement that can hardly be considered heretical: "Si Papa cum magna parte Ecclesiae sic vel sic sentiret, nec etiam erraret; adhuc non est peccatum aut haeresis, contrarium sentire, praesertim in re non necessaria ad salutem, donec fuerit per Concilium universale alterum reprobatum, alterum approbatum."²²

In sum, no less than twelve of the forty-one propositions did not accurately quote Luther or cannot be taken to express his sentiment. While this leaves the majority of the propositions still intact, this fact does introduce a note of uncertainty.

Any consideration of the Bull *Exsurge Domine* raises varied and far-reaching questions that go beyond the modest scope of what was attempted here: Are the 41 condemned propositions a fair summary of Luther's teaching? If so, was his thought truly incompatible with the norms of the Catholic Church?²³

¹⁷ WA 1, 552: "et impatientibus indulgentiae proprie concedi videntur"; DS 1471: "et proprie conceduntur duris solummodo et impatientibus." Cf. also DS 1472.

¹⁸ WA 2, 324; DS 1487.

¹⁹ Such a use of *memoria* as "mention" is possible; see *Novum glossarium mediae latinitatis*, p. 358.

²⁰ WA 1, 535.

²¹ See J. Douglass-Dempsey, *Justification in Late Medieval Preaching* (Leyden, 1966) pp. 62 ff., 93 ff.

²² WA 1, 583. Luther's point was to underscore the freedom to discuss questions as yet dogmatically undefined. His illustration was the question of the Immaculate Conception.

²³ That the situation is more complex than has been traditionally assumed was shown

We have already cited the scholarly consensus which answers this question negatively, if for no other reason than that the theologically weightier pronouncements on the part of Luther came only after 1520. There is an additional consideration of importance. Undoubtedly, the psychological impact of *Exsurge Domine* was extensive, for the Bull seemed to support the contention that Luther had not been taken seriously and had not received a fair hearing. While this contention was expressed even prior to the promulgation of the Bull, it afterwards intensified and, what is more, influenced the course of the theological controversy. The Bull did its share to sharpen the debate, not because of what it actually said, but because of its seemingly careless assessment of Luther.

Thus the admonition of the papal commission charged with the assessment of Luther's orthodoxy, "quod ponerentur articuli sub verbis propriis quibus illos posuerat Martinus, ne reliqueretur ei locus subterfugii dicendo: non dixi eo modo," was not heeded.²⁴

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by Hans Küng's study on *Justification* (New York, 1964) with its argument that the teaching of the Council of Trent and Karl Barth can be harmonized. One can well suggest that Catholic historical scholarship is presently engaged in a comprehensive effort to reassess the entire sixteenth century. Such efforts move in two directions, the reassessment of the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation (notably, of course, the response of the Council of Trent) and the examination of the theological intent and position of the Reformers. For the former see E. Schillebeeckx, "Das tridentinische Rechtfertigungsdekret in neuer Sicht," *Concilium* 1 (1965) 453 f., with his conclusion that the Tridentine statements are "minimalistisch"; for the latter see the monumental (1010 pages) work of O. H. Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz, 1967) with its summary conclusion, p. 950: "Was den behandelten Fragenkreis betrifft, ist zwischen Luther und Thomas ein gegenseitiges Anathema weder nötig noch verantwortbar. Unter dem Vorbehalt, dass Thomas in allen dargestellten Fragen die Lehre der Kirche wiedergibt und hier richtig interpretiert wurde, muss geurteilt werden, dass Luthers Lehre von der Rechtfertigung des Sünders zwar den Boden der Theologie seiner Zeit und Vorzeit verlässt, dabei aber kein solches Neuland betritt, das dem katholischen Theologen zu betreten verwehrt wäre."

²⁴ P. Kalkoff, "Zu Luthers römischem Prozess," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 15 (1904) 106 f.