Luther as skeptic

by Mark U. Edwards in the November 17, 1999 issue

Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death, by Richard Marius

Most of Martin Luther's biographers end their books in the 1520s, some 20 years before Luther's death. This allows them to leave Luther as a revolutionary (and theological) hero, rather than as an establishment curmudgeon. And it enables them to avoid dealing with the older Luther's repugnant attacks on Catholics, Jews, Turks and fellow Protestants.

Richard Marius follows this tradition by ending with the 1525 quarrel between Luther and Erasmus over the freedom of the will. But Marius finds even the young Luther repugnant. Rather than idealizing the youthful revolutionary, Marius sees in his rebellion the seed of subsequent religious wars. He even ventures the ahistorical surmise that modern European history would have been "more serene" and less disfigured by hatred and massacre had Luther either been dissuaded from entering the monastery or died a martyr at Worms.

The polemical exchange that pitted the irenic skeptic, Erasmus (with whom Marius clearly sympathizes), against the belligerent dogmatist, Luther, provides Marius the perfect opportunity to sum up his case:

- Luther's fear of death and his doubt that there is a God who can or will raise the dead explain his psyche and theology and account for the "Reformation breakthrough";
- these fears and doubts drove Luther paradoxically to claim absolute certainty and to excoriate those with whom he disagreed;
- finally, Luther's insistence on *sola scriptura* unleashed religious anarchy, since others, much to his dismay, read scripture differently than he did.

As Marius lays out the crucial lectures, sermons, treatises and confrontations of these early years, he aggressively sells his thesis, drawing the reader's attention again and again to Luther's obsession with death-not hell, purgatory or even judgment, but annihilating death-and the younger Luther's equation of this fear with

unbelief. Following the lead of Ernst Bizer and Oswald Bayer and dating the "Reformation breakthrough" to late 1519, Marius brilliantly argues that a new understanding of the gospel promise freed Luther to accept his inner fear and doubt. But this precarious liberation generated its own tension and required repeated renewal. "A promise by its nature looks to the future, something not yet complete," Marius explains.

> In this life, God does not lift the Christian out of human nature, and God does not reveal himself beyond any shadow of doubt. Weak human nature will not let us believe in the promises of God with a confidence that purges from the soul the anguish of fear and unbelief, the Anfechtungen. . . . Therefore, in Luther's discovery of justification the Christian was liberated from the self-imposed requirement to present a perfect mental attitude to God, to confuse belief with knowledge, faith with the direct intuition of an observed world. Whereas in the earlier Luther the fear of death was the ultimate form of unbelief, the Luther who discovered justification by faith understood that no matter how great our faith, it cannot be strong enough to stave off terror before death.

In subsequent years, the unresolvable tension in Luther's soul between present doubt and future hope goaded him into frantic advocacy, disparagement of doubt-inducing reason, and vitriolic polemic. "Christ for Luther was like a campfire projecting a circle of light against the vast dark of earthly life," Marius states. "Whenever the darkness threatened to encroach upon that illuminated ground, Luther flung more of his volatile ink onto the fire, causing it to flame up again in his own heart, and keeping the darkness at bay."

Is this a recognizable portrait of Luther? Yes, although overdrawn. It is not necessary to turn Luther into a closet Renaissance skeptic to appreciate Marius's insight that doubt and fear of death played a larger role in Luther's psyche and theology than scholars have appreciated.

Why, then, does Marius risk overstatement, and why does he indulge in expressions of distaste and condescension? He offers a clue: "But it may be that those who have experienced modern fundamentalism, with its paradoxical psychology and its confusion of assertion, rationalization, mystical love, and abject fear, can best understand Luther's mind and heart, and his quest for God. Typical fundamentalists

assert a roaring confidence in their faith-and run colleges and seminaries where not a breath of dissent is allowed lest their faith be swept away. Luther's mentality was not far distant from that." Nor, I suspect, was Marius's own upbringing.Perhaps Marius, too, is attempting to exorcise his ghosts by writing.

Marius's novel and shrewd insights earn his biography an honored place alongside such other idiosyncratic but brilliant portraits of Luther as Eric Erikson's and Heiko Oberman's. And Marius's Luther reads better than theirs-better, in fact, than almost all other Luther biographies.