



The Impact of Martin Luther's Reformation on German National Consciousness

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Abstract. At the beginning of the 16th century, many countries in Europe began to establish centralized power and gradually formed independent sovereign states. They tried to escape the control of the Holy See, effectively limiting the flow of wealth from their countries to Rome. The exception was Germany, which was still in the feudalism of "Holy Roman Empire". The "Holy Roman Empire" was not a unified political entity, but was made up of several vassal states. Therefore, it was difficult for Germany to form a strong force against the Holy See, and it had to be subjected to the corrupt Catholic Church. It was at that time that Martin Luther protested against the Holy See and began to advocate the Reformation. This paper takes Luther's religious reform as the research object, demonstrates its theoretical basis and concrete measures, and explains the reasons why the vassals, the nobles and the peasants of Germany supported the religious reform, aiming to reveal the role of Luther's religious reform in promoting the German national consciousness.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Reformation, Germany, National Consciousness

1 Introduction

In 1517, Martin Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church to oppose the sale of "indulgences" by the Holy See to the German faithful, which was often regarded as the beginning of the German Reformation. The "indulgences" was established by the Church as a form of atonement for the sins of the faithful, which would relieve the suffering of the soul in purgatory after death. During the Crusades, the Pope promised the Crusaders remission of sins in order to strengthen their faith and gave each of them an indulgence. Later, in order to increase its revenue, the Holy See extended this form to the general faithful. Anyone who paid money to the Holy See was cleared of sins and forgiven of all punishment. The theologians also created a doctrine of the "sacred treasury of good works", which provided the theoretical basis for the Church's sale of indulgences. In Luther's view, the "Indulgences" had no sufficient theological basis, but was the exploitation and oppression of the German people by the Holy See. As a professor of theology, Luther was obliged to criticize it and to defend the interests of the German congregation. As a result, a massive reform movement was launched in Germany.

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2 The Theoretical Basis of the Reformation

In *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther began with a doctrinal expose of the unreasonableness of the indulgences. Luther pointed out that the repentance of the faithful expected by Jesus Christ cannot remain only on the surface, but should be transformed into restraint and discipline of oneself. The punishment of God is always accompanied by the self-examination of the faithful and will continue until the time of entry into the heaven, so that no one can foresee whether their repentance will be sincere enough, much less whether their sins will be forgiven. The Pope himself does not have any power to absolve sins, but can only proclaim or witness God's forgiveness, and the Church's statute of atonement is valid only for the living and cannot be applied to the dying. A dying person who lacks integrity and love is bound to feel fear and trepidation, which in itself constitutes the penalty of purgatory, and it's not within the authority of the Pope and the Church.^[1] (pp.273-274) Therefore, it is an absurdity for the sellers of the indulgences to claim that the papal indulgence can absolve a person from all punishment. Those who think that they can be saved by holding the indulgence are sinful, while those who sincerely repent can be saved even without the indulgence, which is the grace of God given to Christians. Truly devout Christians are willing to be punished for their sins, while the indulgence feeds the fluke mentality of people and makes believers mistakenly believe that they can use money to replace their confessions. In the long run, the believers will lose their fear of God because of the indulgences, it is the greatest drawback of the indulgences.^[2] (pp.15-23)

In *On the Freedom of Christians*, Luther focused on the doctrine of "justification by faith", which was the core concept of his Reformation movement. According to Luther, a truly righteous and free Christian relies not on external "ministry" but on internal "faith". As the Gospel of John says, "I am the resurrection, and the life, he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (11:25-26). The Romans says, "the just shall live by faith" (1:17), and again, "for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness" (10:10). As a qualified Christian, one should abandon the idea of being justified by relying on ministry, and keep growing in faith and confidence, and grow in God's glory by experiencing God through faith. Luther pointed out three powers of "faith". First, people can be "justified, sanctified, made true, attained to peace, made free, and filled with blessings, and made fully children of God" by faith in God's Word. Second, faith puts one's mind fully under the will of God, this is the highest worship and the best obedience to God, and one no longer doubts that "the God who is honest, righteous and full of wisdom will make all things right". Third, Christ is full of "glory, life and salvation", while the human heart is "saturated with sin, death and damnation", and faith is between the two, connecting the human heart with Christ, and bringing grace and salvation to human.^[3] (pp.222-226) Luther's doctrine of "justification by faith" posed a great challenge to Catholic theology. According to this theory, every Christian has the same faith, the same Gospel, and the same sacraments, they should have the same power to approach God through the Bible and to test the truth of their faith. Therefore, the Pope's monopoly on the power of interpretation of the Bible is unreasonable. That

is to say, when the pope acts contrary to the Bible, the entire faithful have the right and the duty to call a church council to rebuke and restrain him.

3 The Concrete Measures of the Reformation

With regard to the concrete measures of the Reformation, Luther began to work on the establishment of Protestant churches. He proposed that the Elector of Saxony should appoint overseers to replace the papal envoys, who would visit the churches to check on the progress of the Reformation and to administer it as a whole. In terms of organization, the old Catholic dioceses were replaced by the new dioceses overseen by supervisory committees, composed of judges and priests of repute in the fiefdom, and the practice of abstinence was abolished. The seven Catholic sacraments were replaced by the Baptism and the Eucharist, and Latin was replaced by German as the language of the religious rite. In addition to Saxony, the other German states that supported Protestantism also reformed their churches in accordance with Luther's ideas. This vast reformation project, all led by the lords of the states, laid the foundation for the subsequent control of the church by secular power. In 1530, Luther commissioned his close friend Melancthon to draw up the *Augsburg Confession of Faith* and present it to the Reichstag, which clearly set out the basic doctrines of Lutheranism and reiterated his opposition to the Catholic Church and its abuses. This marked the birth of Protestantism, and also meant that the German nation began to enter the modern history of Europe in its unique form.^[4] (p.311)

At the same time, Luther began to work on a translation of the Bible into German. One of the central ideas of Luther's Reformation was to oppose the papal monopoly on the interpretation of the Bible. No one could act as God's spokesman, only the Bible itself could serve as the basis of faith. However, most of the Bibles in circulation at the time were in Latin, which could only be read by a small number of clerics and intellectuals, and this catered to and contributed to the Catholic Church's monopoly on Biblical interpretation. Therefore, it was especially important to provide the German faithful with a German version of the Bible. Instead of referring to the Latin Bible, which was commonly used by the Catholic Church, Luther's translation of the Old Testament of the Bible was based on Hebrew manuscripts and the New Testament of the Bible was based on the Greek version that was proofread by humanists. It can be seen that Luther attached great importance to the authenticity of the text and the accuracy of the translation. Luther lived at a time when the German language was in transition from "Middle Highland German" to "Modern Highland German", and this transition between the old and the new caused great confusion in the language. Therefore, in the process of translation, Luther continued to polish and improve the language, which greatly contributed to the unification and standardization of the German language. Luther also had an important translation principle, which was to make it readable by every ordinary German speaker. Therefore, he deeply experienced the language habits of the elderly and the children, and extensively absorbed folk words and proverbs, which were incorporated into his translation. Because of the wide range of German used in Luther's translation of the Bible, it also gradually be-

came a link between the various regions and classes in Germany. In the long period of division in Germany, Luther's career of Bible translation made an extremely significant contribution to the strengthening of national consciousness and the development of national culture.^[5] (pp.187-188)

4 The Support of the Prince-electors

Luther's protest against indulgences and his reform of the religious system represented the voice of the German nation. Before that, the Pope had collected so much money for his own use in Germany under various names, that Germany was called the "Pope's cow". At that time, Britain and France had already established their nation-state rule, and their kings had explicitly forbidden the sale of indulgences in the region. In the Holy Roman Empire, where there were many states, the vassals took different attitudes toward the indulgences for their different interests, which led to Germany once again becoming the object of Papal oppression. In Brandenburg, the sale of the indulgences was supported by the secular vassals. Albrecht of the Hohenzollern family, in order to be elected Archbishop of Mainz, permitted and promoted the sale of indulgences in his jurisdiction to bribe the Pope. In Saxony, where Luther lived, the Elector Friedrich boycotted the indulgences severely, but the common faithful, out of superstition and customary respect for the Pope, did not question the validity of the indulgences, and they still traveled to nearby cities to make their purchases. It is said that a man once showed Luther the indulgences he had purchased and claimed that he would no longer need to perform penance and prayer, which became a direct incentive for Luther to speak out against the pope.

In the beginning, Luther did not want to break with the Roman Church completely, but only wanted to promote reform within the Church. However, his reform ideas and criticism of the Pope had a great impact in the German region and received wide support from all classes, including peasants, citizens, nobles, and some powerful vassals. As things escalated, Luther's ideas seriously threatened the authority of the Holy See, and the Pope tried every means to force Luther's hand, but to no avail. This was due in large part to the patronage of the Saxony Elector, who first tried to reconcile the Pope with Luther and later protected Luther's trips to Augsburg and Leipzig for the debate, and the Pope's promise to give him the Order of the Golden Rose did not make him give up his support for Luther. The reason why Luther was so highly regarded by the Elector and the nobility was that the Reformation movement catered to their desire for a strong state, and they hoped to use it to get rid of the control of the Roman Church and establish a new ecclesiastical order in Germany. Although this movement did not break through the limitations of the feudal system, it fully reflected the awakening of German national consciousness.^[6] (pp.94-96)

5 The Reaction of the German Public

With the development of the Reformation, social unrest began to break out in the name of the Reformation in Germany with the aim of overthrowing the existing sys-

tem. The first was the "knight insurrection" led by Hutten and Sickingen. In the hierarchy of the Holy Roman Empire, the knights were at the bottom of the aristocracy, and they strongly resented the division of the Empire and their own situation. Through the implementation of the religious reform, they wanted to oppose the dictatorship of the Pope and the vassals, and establish a centralized state with the Emperor as the core and the knight class as the pillar. They had been Luther's supporters and were willing to come to his aid when he was being suppressed by the Pope and the Emperor. But Luther did not want to be associated with them, for in Luther's view, the preservation of the Christian faith and the Gospel could not rely on violent means. So they eventually parted ways with Luther, choosing to use violence to gain their own interests. However, as they did not have the support of the peasants and the citizens, the "knight insurrection" ended in failure.

This was followed by the "peasant revolt" led by Munzer. There is no doubt that the peasants and the common people were at the bottom of the social ladder, and they have long suffered from the exploitation and oppression of the rulers. When the Reformation came, they actively supported Luther and wanted to take the opportunity to overthrow the feudal system. They proposed that no rulers can be recognized except the Emperor and the Pope, and demanded to remove the the division of the Empire and the establish a unified monarchy headed by the Emperor.^[4] (p.327) The leader Munzer argued that the reason is as important as the faith, which is present in the body of man and is the light of the mind given by God. Therefore the Bible should not be seen as the only source of faith. He also advocated the establishment of a free and equal paradise on earth through violent revolution. Both in thought and action, this proposition of Munzer was already far removed from Luther's position. Luther was initially sympathetic to the situation of the peasants, but believed that they should not make excessive demands. As the peasant revolt grew rapidly, Luther turned to a fierce critique of it. Due to the lack of strict organization and unified action, the "peasant revolt" also ended in failure, but it dealt a blow to the Catholic feudal forces to a certain extent, and promoted the development of the Reformation.

6 The Final Result of the Reformation

In 1521, the Pope officially excommunicated Luther and his followers, and sent a special envoy to Germany to urge and assist the Emperor to sanction Luther. Despite the discouragement of his friends, Luther attended the Imperial Council of Worms summoned by the Emperor, where he spoke eloquently in defense of his Reformation position. As a result, the Emperor issued the *Edict of Worms*, which condemned Luther as a heretic and made him wanted and hunted throughout the Holy Roman Empire. After the *Edict of Worms*, the vassal states gradually divided into two camps. One chose to obey the Pope and Emperor, imposed sanctions on Luther and his followers, and prohibited the spread of the Reformation ideas in their territories. The other faction chose to support the Reformation and jointly oppose the *Edict of Worms*. There was constant conflict between the two factions, and the war between the Catholic League and the Protestant League broke out in 1546. Finally, after long and diffi-

cult negotiations for the overall peace of the Holy Roman Empire, the two sides signed the *Treaty of Augsburg Religion* in 1555, establishing the principle of "religion follows the state". First, the Empire would no longer use violence against Protestant vassals or force them to convert who adhered to the *Augsburg Confession of Faith*. Second, Protestant and Catholic freedom of worship was recognized, and both parties enjoyed equal rights within the Empire. Third, the vassals had the right to determine the religious beliefs of themselves and their subjects within their territories, and to allow all classes of people to move in or out for religious reasons. Fourth, states and classes can no longer wage war on the grounds of religious belief.

7 Conclusions

Based on the above, we can draw a conclusion on the historical significance of Martin Luther's Reformation. The Reformation was in line with the inevitable trend of the development of Christianity in the late Middle Ages and played a great role in promoting the ideological liberation and religious tolerance in Europe. Luther's theory of "justification by faith" was the core idea of the German Reformation, which led people to internal religious piety, but led to the division of the European Church. This also set the scene for the "Thirty Years' War", which later brought great suffering to the Holy Roman Empire. However, the birth of Protestantism brought the European history to a new stage, and it also marked that the German spirit flow into the river of European civilization in its own unique form. At the same time, we have to point out that the Reformation did not completely break through the limitations of the feudal system, so it could not fully meet the real demands of the citizens and the peasants, but it did greatly improve the situation of the people in all classes. In addition, Luther translated the Bible into German during the Reformation, which greatly promoted the development of German ideology and culture. The German language used by Luther in his translation of the Bible gradually became a link between the various regions and classes in Germany. So it's reasonable to say that Martin Luther's religious reform made a great contribution to the formation of German national consciousness.

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