The Enlightenment

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The Protest That Made Our World

Martin Luther's idea still lives in us all, writes **Barney Zwartz**.

WHEN Martin Luther stepped up to the doors of Wittenberg Castle Church with hammer, nails and paper 500 years ago on Tuesday, 31 October 1517, he had no idea of the momentous events he was about to unleash: the Reformation, the birth of the Protestant churches, truly vicious European wars, the Enlightenment, even modern democracy.

From one simple idea, what historian Alister McGrath has called "Christianity's dangerous idea", flowed far-reaching changes that influence us today in education, communication, work, science, capitalism, democracy, philosophy and secularism.

That revolutionary idea was that the Bible can be understood by anyone, and therefore that Christians must be able to interpret it for themselves rather than just accept the teaching of the Church. And it introduced the central idea of modern liberal democracies, the priority of the individual.

The movement it unleashed, Protestantism, has waxed and waned over the past five centuries in ways we can determine with hindsight but which, McGrath says, have always been impossible to predict. It was less like a seed, developing on orderly lines, and more like a virus, capable of rapid mutation and adaptation but beyond control. It also helped reshape the Roman Catholic Church, through its reaction to the Reformation and later, particularly in the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, aligning with some Reformation ideas.

Today, as mainstream churches decline in the West, a new and especially vibrant form of Protestantism is flourishing, especially among the marginalised of Asia, Africa and South America.

Many churches this year are remembering the Reformation but not celebrating it because they do not believe the division and disunity it brought merit rejoicing.

I utterly disagree: the cost has been high, but the benefits far greater. Without the Reformation the world would be greatly diminished.

When Luther nailed his 95 Theses (or arguments) to the church doors in 1517, the pious German monk was using an accepted contemporary form of opening a debate. (Some scholars doubt the account, but we can't check the church doors: they were burned by French troops in 1760.)

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The theses spread rapidly across Europe: Luther was furious about the corrupt practice of selling indulgences,

promissory notes reducing the time people spent in purgatory after they died, “purging” their sins in agony before entering heaven.

He argued that, if the Pope had the power for people to bypass purgatory, which, incidentally, is not in the Bible but a later church innovation, he should bestow that freely on everyone, rather than using it to raise money to build St Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

How did a minor argument about a sub-branch of theology by an obscure monk at an insignificant university end up in a conflagration that consumed much of Europe?

According to historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, Luther’s protest was quickly turned into rebellion because “powerful churchmen gave heavy-handed response”. He wanted to highlight God’s grace; to his opponents it was an issue of authority: Luther must submit.

Invited to recant before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet (assembly) of Worms, Luther refused unless he could be persuaded from Scripture or plain reason. He uttered his most famous statement (though it was more likely a summary by his first biographer): “Here I stand, I can do no other.”

Luther showed great courage in going to Worms, given the fate of Jan Hus of Bohemia a century earlier. Hus, an early reformer, went to Rome on a safe conduct, only to be burned at the stake on the grounds that “error has no rights”.

Even so, it was wise for Luther to disappear, which his ruler, Friedrich the Wise, arranged on the way home by abducting him and housing him in Wartburg Castle. Here, Luther translated the New Testament into German, in the process providing the first unified German language.

Of course, Luther was watering fertile soil. Catholic reform movements, deeply enmeshed in the pre-Reformation church, helped lay the ground. And distractions for the Pope and Emperor gave the movement time to develop.

Charles V narrowly held off the Ottoman armies at the Siege of Vienna in 1529, two years after 20,000 of his troops had carried out a weeks-long sack of Rome. Luther observed: “Christ reigns in such a way that the Emperor who persecutes Luther for the Pope is forced to destroy the Pope for Luther.”

As Luther developed his theology, he expounded the “five solas” (Latin for “alone”): grace alone, the Scriptures alone, faith alone, Christ alone, and glory to God alone, recovering what Protestants saw as clear biblical teachings that had been encrusted over centuries by the institutional church.

The Reformation quickly fragmented: McGrath says it was “a movement of movements” that shared aspirations but disagreed on how they should be articulated, let alone obtained, though Protestants were gradually unified by Catholic persecution.

Luther’s progress was reversed when farmers used his reasoning to seek reforms in the Peasants’ War of 1524, brutally repressed by German princes. Luther took fright, and started wooing princes and leaders for reform from the top.

In Switzerland, where the cantons were already republican, the process was more populist. In Geneva, John Calvin promoted a more democratic government, without bishops, which spilled into the political order, including checks and balances which helped inspire the separation of powers in the United States.

In England, Henry VIII had marital and economic reasons for rejecting the Pope, while the Scottish Reformation was later but more thorough.

Everywhere, religious motivations were mixed with political, social and personal ambitions.

Theologian Michael Jensen calls the Reformation the first Brexit, a move away from Spanish and Italian control of Europe.

All these appalling complexities were magnified in the 30 Years' War, from 1618 to 1648, one of history's deadliest and most destructive wars, gradually dragging in such powers as France and Sweden.

Large mercenary armies swaggered through Germany perpetrating atrocities, and some 8 million people died. For example, the Protestant town of Magdeburg had 25,000 people in 1618. In 1635 only 400 homes were left standing, and by 1644 it was reduced to fewer than 2500 people.

One of the most important fruits of this time of terror was the 18th century Age of Reason or Enlightenment. It began with the obvious recognition that all sides, exhausted, had to coexist, which required finding common ground. This could not be the contested claims of divine revelation or the church, so philosophy, reason and secular interests came to the fore. Interestingly, some of the great Reformed centres became Enlightenment centres, as the Geneva of Calvin and the Edinburgh of John Knox gave way to Rousseau and David Hume.

But the Enlightenment could not have happened without "Christianity's dangerous idea", its emphasis on the individual and its approach to reason. Where the Roman Catholic Church taught that salvation came through the Church and its sacraments, for the Reformers the individual could relate immediately with God through faith, unmediated by priests, and his or her own conscience was primary.

Luther's translation of the Bible mirrored English translations by Wycliffe and Tyndale (the latter martyred for his pains), which had similarly seismic results. Autocratic rulers quickly realised a vernacular Bible was dynamite, Jensen says. The Geneva Bible, translated by English and Scottish exiles from Queen Mary's persecution, became very popular in England. Translated by Calvinists, it had inflammatory anti-monarchical notes, while the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was also a great leveller.

Tyndale went on to write *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, setting out that obedience to God outranks duty to the king. The divine right of kings had long been a central issue, decisively if summarily resolved with the beheading of Charles I 120 years later.

Education was an obvious and immediate beneficiary of the Reformation. Vernacular Bibles created an imperative for Christians to read Scripture, but first most needed to learn to read. Literacy levels soared among ordinary people, especially women. The Reformers set up schools, including for girls, along with colleges, universities and seminaries. They wanted to avoid the ignorance of the English monk who, asked if he had read the New Testament, replied: "No, and nor will I read any other work by that damned heretic Luther." Where most people had never owned a book, now wills showed them bequeathing Geneva Bibles.

The Reformers also used music as a teaching tool. Previously confined to choirs, singing was taken up by congregations so successfully that the Catholic Counter-Reformation Council of Trent followed Luther and Calvin in sponsoring a hymnbook.

Printing was another important servant of the Reformation, without which it could not have survived. Tracts and pamphlets were the 16th-century equivalent of blogs and Facebook, and they spread the message rapidly in a way that the authorities could not control. It took Catholic leaders a while to recognise how effective this relatively new technology was, but they then took advantage of its propaganda opportunities as well.

A momentous change in people's self-understanding came with the rebuttal of the ancient idea that only monks or priests were holy. Recovering the biblical notion of the priesthood of all believers meant that all work was to the

glory of God. Vocation was no longer about leaving the world to perform heroics of prayer in the monastery, but serving God in the world — Luther speaks of changing nappies to the glory of God.

This new understanding, along with a decision to permit the long-banned practice of usury (lending money at interest), led to the development of capitalism and the rapid economic advance of Protestant centres.

McGrath gives the example of Flanders, torn apart in the 16th century by Protestant revolt and Catholic reconquest. "For the best part of 200 years thereafter, the Protestant zone was bustling and prosperous, and the Catholic area depressed and unproductive." Even in robustly Catholic nations, the entrepreneurs were mostly Calvinists.

Science could advance because Protestants detached the divine from the natural order. God spoke to mankind through two books, the Bible and Nature, and the Reformation allowed investigation of both. Scientists could pursue their examinations of the natural world independently of theological concerns, encouraging the scientific method.

However, this loss of the sense of the sacred came at a cost, according to philosopher Charles Taylor: secularisation, in the sense of the elimination of God from the natural world. American commentator Ed Simon says Luther's insistence on the interior disposition of the individual soul and its unmediated relation to God inadvertently weakened the connection between meaning and the world.

"A new form of Protestantism is flourishing."

Quoting philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, Simon argues that this, in turn, "accidentally prepared the way for the active nihilism associated with the death of God".

But a new form of Protestantism is flourishing, providing a strong response to the perceived aridity of some secularist attitudes and the decline of mainstream denominations: that of the Pentecostals or Charismatics, who now outnumber all other Protestants combined and are by far the largest non-Catholic group. They total some 500 million people, ahead of Orthodox Christians at up to 300 million.

Their history goes back only a century or so to a revival at Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906, but Pentecostalists' emphasis on an immediate encounter with God through the Holy Spirit and on personal renewal — something that can be narrated and proclaimed rather than doctrines to be analysed — has been powerful. Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul has 700,000 members, while in Nigeria the Redeemed Christian Church of God has 4000 parishes.

In South America Pentecostal numbers are starting to challenge Catholicism. McGrath says Pentecostalism has seen off both Marxism and liberation theology by showing Christian faith is liberating and transforming: "How could God's existence be doubted when God is such a powerful reality in people's lives? And how could God's relevance be doubted when God inspires people to care for the poor, heal the sick and work for the dispossessed? Pentecostalism is displacing Marxism as the solace and inspiration of the urban poor."

Luther's legacy is still unfolding. Ed Simon says he is "either to thank for liberal modernity or to blame for the doctrinaire, literalist form much of Christianity now takes". What can't be denied is that he and his fellow-thinkers are still shaping the world.

From the *Sunday Age* (Melbourne), 29 October 2017: 22 & 23.
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Editor's Note Finally, after 500 years, the significance and importance of the Protestant Reformation is being recognized. For 1000 years the Roman Catholic Church repressed the secularism of the Greek and Roman

civilizations and prevented the advancement of science and democracy. The Protestant Reformation weakened the authority of Catholicism and allowed northern Europe to enter the Enlightenment and enable separation of Church and State to occur. Western societies gradually became more secular and less religious and this trend will hopefully continue. What is needed now, of course, is for moderate Muslims to bring about a reform of Islam.

Hume's Deathbed: No Recanting for David

*By Dennis Rasmussen**

As the Scottish philosopher David Hume lay on his deathbed in the summer of 1776, his passing became a highly anticipated event. Few people in 18th-century Britain were as forthright in their lack of religious faith as Hume was, and his skepticism had earned him a lifetime of abuse and reproach from the pious, including a concerted effort to excommunicate him from the Church of Scotland. Now everyone wanted to know how the notorious infidel would face his end. Would he show remorse or perhaps even recant his skepticism? Would he die in a state of distress, having none of the usual consolations afforded by belief in an afterlife? In the event, Hume died as he had lived, with remarkable good humour and without religion.

The most famous depiction of Hume's dying days, at least in our time, comes from James Boswell, who managed to contrive a visit with him on Sunday, 7 July 1776. As his account of their conversation makes plain, the purpose of Boswell's visit was less to pay his respects to a dying man, or even to gratify a sense of morbid curiosity, than to try to fortify his own religious convictions by confirming that even Hume could not remain a sincere non-believer to the end. In this, he failed utterly.

'Being too late for church,' Boswell made his way to Hume's house, where he was surprised to find him 'placid and even cheerful … talking of different matters with a tranquility of mind and a clearness of head which few men possess at any time.' Ever tactful, Boswell immediately brought up the subject of the afterlife, asking if there might not be a future state. Hume replied that 'it was possible that a piece of coal put upon the fire would not burn; and he added that it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist for ever'. Boswell persisted, asking if he was not made uneasy by the thought of annihilation, to which Hume responded that he was no more perturbed by the idea of ceasing to exist than by the idea that he had not existed before he was born. What was more, Hume 'said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad, and … that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious.'

This interview might show Hume at his brashest, but in the 18th century it remained mostly confined to Boswell's private notebooks. The most prominent and controversial public account of Hume's final days came instead from an even more famous pen: that of Adam Smith, Hume's closest friend. Smith composed a eulogy for Hume soon after the latter's death in the form of a public letter to their mutual publisher, William Strahan. This letter was effectively the 'authorised version' of the story of Hume's death, as it appeared (with Hume's advance permission) as a companion piece to his short, posthumously published autobiography, *My Own Life* (1776).

Smith's letter contains none of the open impiety that pervades Boswell's interview, but it does chronicle – even flaunt – the equanimity of Hume's last days, depicting the philosopher telling jokes, playing cards, and conversing cheerfully with his friends. It also emphasises the excellence of Hume's character; indeed, Smith concluded the letter by declaring that his unbelieving friend approached 'as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit'.

Though relatively little-known today, in the 18th century Smith's letter caused an uproar. He later proclaimed that it 'brought upon me 10 times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain' – meaning, of course, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Throughout his life, Smith had generally gone to great lengths to avoid revealing much about his religious beliefs – or lack thereof – and to steer clear of confrontations with the devout, but his claim that an avowed skeptic such as Hume was a model of wisdom and virtue 'gave very great offence' and 'shocked every sober Christian' (as a contemporary commented).

Boswell himself deemed Smith's letter a piece of 'daring effrontery' and an example of the 'poisonous productions with which this age is infested'. Accordingly, he beseeched Samuel Johnson to 'step forth' to 'knock Hume's and Smith's heads together, and make vain and ostentatious infidelity exceedingly ridiculous. Would it not,' he pleaded, 'be worth your while to crush such noxious weeds in the moral garden?'

Nor did the controversy subside quickly. Nearly a century later, one prolific author of religious tomes, John Lowrie, was still sufficiently incensed by Smith's letter to proclaim that he knew 'no more lamentable evidence of the weakness and folly of irreligion and infidelity' in 'all the range of English literature'.

In the 18th century, the idea that it was possible for a skeptic to die well, without undue hopes or fears, clearly haunted many people, including Boswell, who tried to call on Hume twice more after their 7 July conversation in order to press him further, but was turned away. Today, of course, non-believers are still regarded with suspicion and even hatred in some circles, but many die every day with little notice or comment about their lack of faith. It takes a particularly audacious and outspoken form of non-belief – more akin to the Hume of Boswell's private interview than to the Hume of Smith's public letter – to arouse much in the way of shock or resentment, of the kind that attended the death of Christopher Hitchens some years ago. (Indeed, there were a number of comparisons drawn between Hitchens and Hume at the time.) The fact that in the 18th century Smith endured vigorous and lasting abuse for merely *reporting* his friend's calm and courageous end offers a stark reminder of just how far we have come in this regard.

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