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Martin Luther and the peasants' revolt

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THESIS

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MARTIN LUTHER AND THE PEASANTS' REVOLT

The Study of
A Wave in the Advancing Tide
of
Democracy.

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Foreword

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The student of the Middle Ages, particularly the time of the Peasants' Revolt (1525), is likely to come from his study with a considerable number of questions in his mind. That was a time of intense rivalry, open bitterness, and rank partizanship. Seemingly much of the same spirit and practice has descended upon the shoulders of those who have since acted as historians of that period, and much, if not all, of what has been written bears the mark of bias and is open to the charge of partizanship. The facts, with a right estimate as to their value, and the correct inference to be drawn, - these are difficult to determine.

One needs to remember also, that the very character of the period with its state of wide spread unrest, its religious, social and political uncertainties, was reflected in the lives and actions of the individual men of the time. They thought, spoke and acted, usually with much vigor, and (as men usually do) from mixed motives. If we sieze upon certain of their conceptions and deeds it would be to condemn them unmeridfully in the judgment of today, but upon closer and fuller study there come to light the complex reasons and explanations which raise the question: Should they, products of their age and living by its standards, be subjected too searchingly to the more rigid tests of the modern conscience?

A further difficulty lies in the practically impossible necessity of knowing all the facts and events of the history of the period before it is safe to make deductions, or to offer dogmatic assertions concerning causes and effects. It would be easy to ascribe all the good achievements of the 16th Century to the Reformation, and all evil results to the opponents of reform in church and state, or to do as some of the "enemy's side" prefer, - reverse the tables and condemn the Protestant cause throughout as the greatest retarding influence on Church and secular progress which history offers. Either process would be questionable and unsound. To illustrate how many and varied were the forces at work, and the necessity of an adequate knowledge before drawing conclusions, take the matter of increased wages and passing villeinage in the years between Wyclif and Queen Elizabeth's death. Wages during that

period doubled for agricultural laborers and, according to J.R.Green, "villeinage died out so rapidly that it became a rare and antiquated thing." On first thought one would probably say that this was the direct result of the new religious conceptions which had been formulated by the Reformation. But on further inquiry another force is seen to have been working to produce this result, and might have attained it whether there had ever been a Reformation or not. This was the simple fact that the "Black Death" had taken toll of probably one-half of the agricultural districts, and labor was just doubly as scarce as formerly. The labor market, then, was in a depleted state, and the usual result followed, an advance and betterment of the wages and living conditions of the laborer. "It would be as unscientific to ascribe the amelioration in the condition of the laboring classes entirely to the propaganda of Wyclif and the Lollards as it would be to deny altogether the part which the new religious ideas played in creating what Thorold Rogers called 'the Golden Age' of the English peasant in the 15th Century." *

Bearing these difficulties in mind, we shall endeavor to set forth the chief causes and phenomena of that part of the period of the Reformation in which the peasants and their revolt held chief sway. After that we shall consider the relation of this social revolution to Luther and the teachings for which he was responsible.

*"Christ and Civilization" (London, 1910), p. 338.

Chapter I.

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CONTRIBUTING CAUSES.

It is no easy task to unravel the threads of mediaeval society with the purpose of disclosing those elements which were making for its decay. That it was marked for decay was clear to the discerning eye. A new life was growing up which was to first crush and then supplant many of the features of the old society. "Every established institution - political, social and religious - was shaken, and showed the rents and fissures caused by time and by the growth of a new life underneath it."* It must be recognized concerning the separate factors of this disintegration of the old system that that they were not actually unrelated, but rather were interwoven and commingled in such a way as to make any differentiation between them now an arbitrary procedure.

When, therefore, we say that the first cause in this social disintegration was the changing and increasingly harder lot of the peasantry, it may be that we have said all there is to say, for the subsequent contributory causes which we shall name are all more or less factors in this general condition of the peasants. There are those who do not allow that the position of the peasants was that of economic need but this does not seem to be borne out by the facts. True, not long before this period, - indeed right up to the beginning of the 16th century, the peasants had been enjoying a degree of prosperity which is surprising to one whose idea of "peasant" has always suggested poverty and oppression. But the evidence seems clear that up to this time they had far from suffered need. Wimpfeling says: "The peasants in our district and in many parts of Germany have become, through their riches, stiff-necked and ease loving. I know peasants who at the weddings of their sons or daughters, or at the baptism of their children, make so much display that a house and field might be bought therewith, and a small vineyard to boot. Through their riches they are oftentimes spendthrift in food and in vestments, and they drink wines of price." It is elsewhere written that they "wore better garments and drank better wine than their lords" and in 1497 laws were passed with the purpose of restricting the quality and price of the

*Bax, "The Peasant's War", p. 1.

clothing a peasant and his family should be allowed to wear.

These conditions were rapidly reversed; however, and in 1550 one writer describes the contrast: "In the memory of my father...the peasant did eat much better than now. Meat and food in plenty was there every day and at fairs and other junketings the tables did well-nigh break with what they bore. Then drank they wine as it were water, then did a man fill his belly and carry away withal as much as he could; then was wealth and plenty. Otherwise is it now. A costly and a bad time hath arisen since many a year, and the food and drink of the best peasant is much worse than of yore that of the day-laborer and the serving man". What had brought about this change would be a long story, and we can only touch upon it. A growing love of luxury was one of the root causes, resulting in the seeking by the rich to gain more money through grinding the faces of the peasants. Dues, taxes, fines, services, rents and all sorts of exactions fell in doubled severity on the lower classes, each class of the old feudal system passing the burden to the one below it, until the extreme lower stratum was reached, - where there was no one to whom it could be passed on. Robber warfare and feuds were an additional cross on the back of the unprotected farmer and peasant, who often had to suffer the loss of life as well as of property. With the approach of luxurious tastes had come an unprecedented rise in prices while wages rose "either not at all or at most from half a groschen to a groschen", while "the price of rye rose from six or seven groschen a bushel to about five and twenty groschen, that of a sheep from four to eighteen groschen and all other articles of necessary consumption in a like proportion".* The striking feature of this situation was that at this period the rise in prices was on the necessaries of life, while luxuries became much lower in proportion. Land values were falling also and the nobles sought to restore this depreciation by the increase of the land rents and services which they received from the peasants, thus aggravating a situation which was rapidly becoming intolerable. Matters were made much worse by a series of disastrous crops and this added to the sufferings of the peasants.

Other factors not directly included in the peasants' life but touching upon it may be mentioned here, but without enlarging upon each of them. "The growing use of

*Bax, "Social side of the Reformation in Germany", p. 203.

fire-arms in war; the rapid multiplication of printed books; the spread of the new learning after the taking of Constantinople in 1453, and the subsequent diffusion of Greek teachers throughout Europe; the surely and steadily increasing communication with the new world, and the consequent increase of the precious metals; and last but not least, Vasco de Gama's discovery of the new trade route from the East by way of the Cape-- all these were indications of the fact that the death knell of the old order of things had been struck.* Of these the fall of Constantinople and the new trade route to the East are notable, since because of the first all Oriental traffic by the Black Sea was finally stifled; and by means of the second the modern merchant navy had its inception. The German towns suffered more and more heavily from this deflection of their trade, and the decline of their prosperity "contributed directly to the coming upheaval".

It should be noted before this section is left that, in connection with all this, there had grown up great trading companies and associations upon which there rested a great measure of blame for the prevailing high prices and excessive usury now thrust upon the people. Even Luther took occasion to write vehemently against them, declaring that for their avarice, greed and general rascality the secular authorities would be justified in "stripping such wretches of all they had and driving them out of the country". And, says Baur, "these cormorants, who sucked the life blood out of the working classes, would not own that they were at fault but laid the whole blame on the clergy:

The priests and monks you say must bear
The blame of this; but I declare
The merchants are the culprits here,
Combining to make all things dear,
Ye pious men!

The one has bought up all the wine;
The other says, 'All pepper's mine';
A third has 'cornered' all the lard:
Yet on the priests alone you're hard,
Ye free men!

No conscience have they for their guide,
Weight, measures, coins are falsified.
With wicked cut all round they've cheated,

*Bax, "German Society", p.3.

And all their wares adulterated.
Ye free men !

Whatever the poor man may need
He's at the mercy of their greed,
Must buy all goods at their own price.
To root them from the earth were wise,
Ye pious men !"

A further contributing cause of the coming upheaval was the complete reversal of the legal standing of the peasant in the courts. This was due to the "revolutionary" introduction of Roman law by the governing classes. It is because of the results which followed this that the Peasants' Revolt has been called by some writers a "reactionary" rather than a progressive step. By the abandonment of the old Germanic law the peasant lost his standing; he saw his former rights (especially those to be described as "communal") slipping away from him. The Roman law put into the hands of the princes, prelates, nobles and the "upper" classes in general, the weapon they had long desired, by which they were enabled to remove the restrictions of the older law in the acquisition of personal and individual property. The democracy of the older system, i.e. the Germanic, such as it was, was now superseded by a system which has been described, justly or unjustly, as "on most of its sides brutally and crassly individualistic". Under this law it was the peasant who suffered, and the baron who prospered. Emperor Maximilian said that by this law "the poor man either got no justice at all against the rich, or it was so sharp and fine pointed that it availed him nothing". A policy now sprang up which was to systematically reduce every man to serfdom who had any duty of service whatsoever resting upon him. Even the Abbots were party to this, denying the sacraments to those who refused to acknowledge their servitude, and even forging and falsifying documents to gain their point. By this process the princes legally "became everything, in the land and the people naught. The people shall only obey, pay tax and do service" (Wimpfelling).

This mention of the Abbots brings us to the next contributing cause in the gathering storm, - namely, that of ecclesiastical oppression and debauchery. We have just noted the fact, ^{that} forgery of documents (in order to

double or treble taxes and dues) was a common practice, and the clergy excelled the princes in such work. The spiritual princes of the Empire were in no respect much different nor any better, we are told, than the lords temporal. Contact with Rome and with Byzantine civilization brought a style of living into their ranks before it reached the others which led to "every kind of debauchery" in the ecclesiastical courts. The enormous taxes which they laid upon the people, the annates, and the cost of frequent journeys to Rome with their attendant display and extravagantly lavish outlay, - all these added fuel to the flame of the peasants' grievances. Someday that fuel would burst into terrific conflagration. The wealth of Germany seemed to flow ceaselessly toward Rome, and a gradual but rising tide of resentment, - formulated into words by the mouth of Luther, - was soon to be expressed in acts of outrage and violence by the revengeful peasants.

We have space for but one other cause which figured in this growing movement and stir in the peasant classes, and that was the ferment of democracy which was beginning to work. Previous to this time the peasants had seen better days, and had felt a taste of a certain sort of "equality" with those above them. They had "caught a glimpse of better things. They were no longer content to render even the old services as a matter of course." "All things not in harmony with divine and human law were to be rejected even though they were sanctioned and sanctified by immemorial tradition. To return to the conditions of primitive Christianity, to establish a new order based upon social justice and fashioned after the will of God - that was the central demand of the peasants."* "A wave of democratic agitation was sweeping over Europe; a fierce struggle between reason and authority was working its way to the surface in the sphere of politics as well as of belief. For in that age all revolutions were naturally religious in character and origin, while all reformation led of necessity to social revolution".** In support of the last statement the writer of this paper has noted the fact that in "The Twelve Articles" (of which more will be said later) there are fifty one direct references and appeals made to the Bible in support of the demands therein set forth. It is true that this was the common practice, even "fad", of the time, but that hard-

*Hulme, "The Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Revolution", p. 246.

**Workman, in "Christ and Civilization", p. 324.

Chapter II.

PRELIMINARY ENCOUNTERS.

The Peasants' Revolt was not a storm which had no warning rumblings and mutterings of thunder. Here and there, not only on the continent but also in England, there had been premonitions of the outbreak. Some were more violent than others but all were significant. We shall understand the Revolution all the better for a brief resume' of certain of these advance stirrings of the people, confining ourselves to the Continent.

In 1476 in the village of Niklashausen, Franconia, there lived a drummer and cow-herd, Hans Boheim. Suddenly this man began to proclaim himself the prophet of a new day, preaching to his neighbors of the country along the Tauber that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and that the Virgin Mary had commissioned him to preach to the common man. This he proceeded to do, after burning his musical instruments before the door of the village church. Boheim's fame spread rapidly, and he continued his message of repentance for sin, combined with the proclamation of a new order in which the yoke of bondage (as exemplified in ecclesiastical and temporal authorities) was to be abolished. Taxes, tithes and dues also were to be ended. The people flocked to Niklashausen by the thousands. Every man, according to Boheim, whether he was bishop, baron or laborer, was to be a worker; one man being as good as another. Rank and distinction were to melt away and become a thing of the past; no longer would there be prince or prelate, emperor or pope. The man was soon regarded by the adoring throngs as a saint, and soon the "brothers" and "sisters" who had left ploughs and fields, homes and duties without so much as "by your leave", numbered about forty thousand. But when the preaching began to sound the martial note and men were summoned to come to the preacher leaving all behind them but arms and ammunition, the authorities, hitherto only exasperated, now became alarmed. Extreme measures resulted in Boheim's secret arrest and he subsequently met his death at the burning stake. His movement was a failure, but his cry had found an echo in the peasant heart which was destined not to die for many a year.

The first really organized peasant movement came, we are told, in 1493 among the feudatories of the Bishop of Strassburg. A secret organization with a symbol, - that of a peasant's shoe or "Bundschuh", - and a motto, - "Only what is just before God", was formed on the hill of Hungerberg. The professed purposes of the band were freedom for the common laborer, certain church reforms, a year of jubilee, and the abolition of spiritual courts. They had a mapped-out program of action, and all seemed hopeful until, despite their terrible threats against any who should break the oaths of secrecy, the movement was betrayed. All suspects were treated without mercy by the nobility, and many were tortured, quartered alive or hung. However, the movement itself was not extinguished.

Nine years later (1502) another "Bundschuh", more in the nature of a conspiracy than of open revolt, took place. This was in the region about Speyer and the Neckar. Some seven thousand men and four hundred women were enrolled in the movement, which purposed the complete annihilation of the existing feudal and ecclesiastical governments. They affirmed: "We have joined ourselves together to be free.....for we would be as the Swiss. We will root out and abolish all authorities and lordships from the land...and all who do not honor and acknowledge us shall be killed...We will storm the clergy in their foundations and abbeys. We will overpower them, and hunt out and kill all priests and monks together". All members of the association were forbidden to go to confession, but one did, - and hence followed ruin, for the priest revealed the secret to the authorities and the iron hand of the nobility, temporal and ecclesiastical, was immediately applied. Confiscation of property, families exiled, quartering alive after being tied to the tail of a horse and dragged through the streets, - these were some of the methods of persecution. Quiet followed, but not inactivity; the peasant waited, but also planned.

One of the ring-leaders of the Bundschuh had escaped and hidden himself in parts unknown. This was Joss Fritz, a soldier and leader of much prowess, personality, eloquence, patience and tact. He laid his plans carefully and cannily. He returned about 1512 to Lehen near Freiburg, and settled into the community life, and

managed to establish a great confidence in himself. By quietly talking, persuading and convincing the peasants around him of the necessity for something to be done to remedy the injustices heaped upon them, the foundations for a new B \ddot{u} ndschuh were thoroughly and carefully laid. Even the Beggars' Guild was utilized as a spy system; and upon their discoveries elaborate plans were laid, whereby many cities could be taken with ease. In fact, the movement seemed so assured of success that some began to grow careless, and also overzealous at the last moment in winning converts to the cause. One such man, set upon by the peasants, was nearly killed for failing to acquiesce in their plans to take the city of Freiburg, and was only saved from his antagonists by the arrival of strangers on the scene from whom the peasants fled. Naturally, the confession-all got the story by nightfall, the priest notified the authorities, heads of neighboring villages and towns were put on their guard, and in the unfortunate absence of Joss Fritz from the scene, the leaders of the movement were attacked by the armed citizens of Freiburg. The alarmed peasants were disorganized and scattered. Few, however, were killed, due to the loyal secrecy of those who were taken. Joss Fritz himself disappeared, and he is no longer seen in the pages of history.

There were other uprisings but all more or less on the same order. They met the same fate as those just described. In 1514 was the "Poor Conrad" and in 1517 the Baden revolt. In 1514 also, Hungary was in the throes of a terrible revolution. In connection with this latter the picture offered of the spirit and temper of the day, inflamed as it was by hatred and warfare, is most revolting. George Doza, the leader of this revolt, and eight other captured victims were "led into the open space before their prison. An iron throne was erected there and made red hot, and Doza, loaded with chains, was forcibly placed upon it. A red hot iron crown was laid upon his head, and a red hot iron sceptre thrust into his hand. His companions were then offered their lives on condition that they forthwith tore off and devoured the flesh of their leader. Three, who refused with indignation, were at once hewn to pieces. Six did as they were bidden. 'Dogs!' cried Doza. This was the only sound that escaped him. Torn with red hot pincers, he died."* Sixty thousand perished as a result of this war.

*Bax, "German Society", p482.

Strange to say, the upper classes were only weakly banded together for the purpose of resisting these sporadic uprisings. This was largely due to the feudalistic, decentralized type of government in Germany at this period. There was one organization, however, in the north country, and this was called the Swabian League. It issued a proclamation to this effect, that "Since in the land of Swabia, and all over the Empire, among the vassals and poor people disturbances and insurrections are taking place, with setting up of the standard of the Bundschuh and other designs against the authority of their natural lords and rulers, with a view to the destruction of the nobles and all honourable persons, the noble and knightly orders have therefore agreed, whatsoever shall happen, to support each other against every such attempt on the part of the common man". By this organization there were banded together prelates, princes, lesser nobility and towns for purposes of self-defense and self-interest. As in the past, so in the future, they were going to show the power of a united front in favor of privilege and authority, even in the name of religion.

Chapter III.

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CRYSTALIZATION OF IDEALS AND DEMANDS

Before we proceed to describe the actual course of the revolution, it would be well to see what sort of ideals were crystalizing all the while in the minds of the peasants. As the movement gathered significance with the passing years certain demands were forming in their minds waiting for some occasion to bring them out clearly and objectively. This was now about to come. First, there should be noted here a little book which has been called the "earliest of the German revolutionary pamphlets" (having appeared in 1437) entitled "The Reformation of Emperor Sigismund". The meaning of the title is not clear, and we do not have the name of the author, but the book became widely known in a few years and wielded a very great influence. Someone has said that eventually it became the "trumpet of the Peasants' War". At any rate, it probably served as a guide when later there was need of a compact statement of principles by the social revolutionists. The book condemned serfdom as a sin and contrary to Scripture. Those who opposed freedom for the peasants should be destroyed, for the peasantry was the oldest, most respectable and most essential of all the classes. It demanded for them freedom from tithes, tolls, rents, all punishments, civil and ecclesiastical, and the unrestricted right to waters, meadows and woods. Thunderbolts were hurled at the new economical system based on capitalistic schemes of commerce and trade. There was to be a "wages and high cost of living commission" as we would call it today, composed of representatives of the common people, or more specifically, of the handicrafts. There were other elements less definite but just as illuminating for the spirit and thought of the day. "Verily the humble should be exalted and the mighty put down from their seats. The last age of the world was dawning. All evil was to be rooted out and happiness was to become the common lot. The book is expressive, too, of the exceedingly varied elements of the discontent that everywhere was rife, and of the idealization of the peasantry and the proletariat and the religious ennoblement of agriculture and the handicrafts that characterize the literature of the fifteenth

century."* It is interesting to note that this book was published forty-six years before Luther was born, and the fact should be considered by those who place upon Luther's shoulders all the blame for the horrors of the Peasants' Revolt.

This little book did not represent any particular organized body of peasants. Statements, manifestoes, summaries of grievances, etc., were issued, however, from time to time, which did do so. Of these, the first to seriously attract attention were the Sixteen Articles issued as a basis for "negotiation" between the Count of Lupfen (in 1524 at Stühlingen) and Hans Müller, who, with his peasant band, had revolted. The united peasants of the Black Forest and of Southern Swabia intended to use these in arbitration proceedings, but the Count was pretending to negotiate merely to gain time to raise military forces sufficient to crush the outbreak. These demands, however, show us the trend of the peasants' grievances, and in substance were as follows:

1. Fishing to be declared free. Abolishment of obligation to hunt or fish for the overlord.
2. Abolish bells on dogs' necks.
3. Should be free to carry weapons.
4. Right to punish peasants to be taken from huntsmen and forest rangers.
5. Should no longer carry dung for their lord.
6. Mowing, reaping, hewing wood, etc., for the castle not to be required.
7. Freedom from certain tolls and taxes.
8. None to be imprisoned who could give bail.
9. All taxes, dues, etc., not judicially established, to be done away.
10. Tithes of growing corn to be lifted.
11. No more punishment for marriage without the lord's permission.
12. Property of suicides no longer to revert to the lord.
13. Where relatives of the deceased still live, the lord not to inherit.
14. All bailiff rights to be abolished.
15. To have liberty to serve wine to whomsoever he pleased.
16. One accused by the lord or his bailiff to be given liberty unless proved guilty.

It will be observed that the religious element is

*Hulme, "The Renaissance, etc", p. 245.

entirely lacking in these demands, unless "justice" be counted as a religious factor. These articles seem perfectly fair and quite moderate to us. They were designed merely to stop the robbery of pasture and of the right to fish and hunt for one's self; to stop the practice of demanding service from the peasant even though his own hay, harvest or vintage must spoil and be lost; the oppression of overtaxation; the injustice of being forbidden to drive off or hurt wild animals, even though they were damaging the crops; the necessity of seeing one's poultry yard rifled at pleasure by the lord's hunting dogs; and similar practices all unjust and enslaving.

The peasants had different ways and forms of presenting these and other demands; sometimes in a greater number, sometimes in less. In March 1525 they were simplified and "summed up in the famous 'Twelve Articles' which became the Protestant Charter of the uprising, although the classic form was continually modified in various districts".* These are worthy of quoting in full but they must also be condensed in these pages. The peasants asked:

1. The right to choose their own pastors, who were to preach a plain Gospel "without any addition of man".
2. Admitting the rightfulness of the corn-tithe (with certain limits) they demanded exemption from the small tithe (of animals, etc.).
3. Relief from villeinage on ground of Christ's redemption and sacrificial purchase.
4. The right to fish and hunt for wild game.
5. A communal share in the forests for their household needs.
6. Restoration of services to the former feudal basis.
7. Wages to be paid for more than the contracted service.
8. Proper reduction of rent where it was higher than the land value would admit.
9. Legal reform; restoration to the old law; illegal punishment to be abolished.
10. Communal lands to be restored.
11. Absolute abolishment of the iniquitous death-due.
12. That if any of these articles can be proved to be contrary to God's Word, they are null

*Lindsay, "Luther and the German Reformation", p.179.

AND void.

Such were the twelve demands, by far the most popular statement of the peasants' cause which appeared. There were others, and sometimes these superseded the Twelve Articles in certain districts, e.g. Elsass-Lothringen, where they had twelve short but pointed demands of their own. In these and in certain other statements, for example that of the "Evangelical Divine Reformation", there is less emphasis on the agrarian reform than on political. This is particularly true where the townsmen join the revolt. There is one other notable difference: of the language in the latter scheme of reconstruction it may be said that "it is studiously moderate, but the Biblical and pietistic phraseology of the 'Twelve Articles' is almost entirely wanting".* An example of extreme religious and utopian reform was seen in the teaching and theories of the radical, Thomas M^unzer, in Thuringia.

Summing up these various elements, we see that the ideals and demands of the movement were: (1) the political and social, as well as economic aspirations of the peasantry, based on religious sanction; (2) the political plans of the townsmen for "equality before the law, reformed administration and national and imperial unity"; and (3), in the radicalism of M^unzer, the idea of a "religious utopia on the traditional lines of mediaeval communism".

*Bax, "The Peasants' War", p. 81.

Chapter IV.

OUTBREAK AND PROGRESS OF THE REVOLT
(1524-1525)

In its initial stages the actual movement called the Peasants' Revolt was not striking nor overwhelming. The violence of thought and deed which characterized its later stages was not seen in the earlier ones, but the progress of affairs was rapid and startling. The great uprising began among the peasants of Count Lupfen of Stühlingen, and tradition says it was the order for the peasants to gather strawberries and snail-shells for the Countess on a holiday, which precipitated the long-repressed purpose to revolt. The leader was Hans Müller, and around him there were gathered some 1200 tenants of the district. The statement that he proceeded to organize "Evangelical brotherhoods" at once, as he marched through the country, seems not to be borne out by the facts, but he did accomplish much in organizing and adding to his own peasant band. There was no open conflict as yet between the authorities and the peasants, for the former, unprepared to give battle, were ready to either negotiate or wait until recruits could be gathered wherewith to crush the rebellion. In fact they did both. Winter was coming, and when the peasants settled in camp to await the spring, the authorities opened negotiations (the sixteen articles mentioned above), and at the same time the military forces of the Swabian League were augmented and equipped for the coming struggle.

About this time the peasants under the hated and tyrannical Abbot of Kempton in upper Swabia, began to lay demands before him, but did not receive the slightest consideration. Peasants from Baltringen, the Black Forest and Lake Constance now met (February 1525) in the city of Memmingen, organized the Evangelical Brotherhood, and adopted the justly famous "Twelve Articles". These Articles have been dealt with elsewhere, and we only add here the statement that it is generally agreed that "It is truly wonderful that the peasants in the white heat of rebellion could have produced a statement of their grievances, so restrain-

ed in tone and so temperate in demanding only what was plainly justifiable....Of all the plans of reform produced during that revolutionary period, this one is by far the most reasonable and conservative.* In spite of that fact, however, the proposals were received with the utmost contempt by the lords, who, in truth, were only consenting to negotiate with the peasants in order to gain time for recruiting their armies. They had no intention of yielding one jot to the demands placed upon them.

The Twelve Articles did their work nevertheless. They did not unify the peasants into an organized army, - if they had another result might have come down in history, - but they did serve as a rallying cry for men in all provinces to shake off the shackles of oppression and join the revolt. The uprising gained momentum every day. By the first months of 1525 nearly every part of Germany was shaken to the depths by the outbursts of revolution. Only a handful of provinces were exempt. Impoverished knights (whose own previous insurrection had failed), the dissatisfied proletariat of the towns, even criminals and self-seeking adventurers also joined forces with the peasants. These, according to some students, were the main factors in leading the peasants astray in to excessive and wanton violence and cruelty later on.

Even while negotiations were pending concerning the Twelve Articles, the nobles struck their first blow. George Truchsess, leader of the Swabian League force of eight thousand footmen and three thousand horsemen, attacked and captured Leipheim, executed the pastor, Jacob Wehe, and destroyed large numbers of the peasants. Similar action was taken on the bands from the Lake region, and Truchsess was able by negotiation to get some others to disband. On the whole the peasant movement did not abate because of these reversals. Their bands began to roam the country, burning and destroying and plundering monasteries and castles alike. Everywhere they demanded allegiance to the Twelve Articles, and many out of sheer fear subscribed to them. This happened with Count Hohenlohe, when his castle was captured by a body of two thousand peasants. It was the leader of this same band, Jäcklein Rohrbach, who perpetrated the "horrors of Weinsberg", near Heilbronn,

*Schapiro, "Social Reform and the Reformation", p. 136.

when, in retaliation for the unwarranted massacring of a group of peasants, he caused the revolting death of Count von Helfenstein and his nobles in the presence of the Countess and her little son. The details of the event were harrowing, and a cry of protest and horror arose throughout Germany, and one result was a division among the peasants themselves into two general classes, - conservative and extremist. However justified the vengeance Eberbach meted out may have been, perhaps as equally justified was the vengeance which fell back upon one of his leaders, administered by the hand of Truchsess. In this case the victim was fastened to an apple tree by a short chain, after which wood was piled in a circle around him and set on fire. "It was night; and amid the groans of wounded and dying peasants on the battle-field around them, and the drunken revelry of the camp, was heard the laughter of these nobles as they watched their victim springing shrieking from point to point of the fiery circle within which he was slowly roasted to death. Such was the revenge of nobles upon peasants."* Verily the "honors" seem equally divided between the aspirants for fame in cruelty! Eventually, however, the nobles will both win and keep that prize.

The revolt continued to spread, not in an organized or unified way, but simultaneously and without coordination. The cities experienced their portion of the struggle, and in many instances were divided in sympathy between the two sides. In Franconia under Florian Geyer, in Thuringia under the visionary, fanatic and sensational Münzer, wild and bloody deeds were committed. Then the tide began to turn, and the end began to come in sight. The successes of the peasants had seemed to paralyze the nobles with fear, but now they began to rally to Truchsess' standard and to really bring forward the men and supplies needed to strike a crushing blow. An active campaign started. On March 15, 1525 a massed army of peasants in Thuringia were put to utter rout and more than five thousand were slain. Münzer escaped but was captured and executed. The turning point in the revolt had arrived, and the forces of the League continued to successfully crush one army of the peasants after another. Würtemberg fell, then Heilbronn, and after the defeat of Geyer's "Black Troop" came the downfall of Würzburg. Rebellion was stamped out of Rothenburg, Memmingen and Elsass, and

*Seebohm, "The Era of the Protestant Revolution", p. 140.

finally throughout upper Swabia as well. But it was a costly victory. There was apparently no limit to the cruelty practiced. Those who criticize the peasants do well, but what of the princes, one alone of whom on a certain occasion "put out the eyes of fifty-nine townsfolk and forbade the rest under severe penalties to offer them medical or other assistance"?* After this manner was the rebellion crushed, after taking the terrible toll of not less than one hundred thousand lives of peasant folk.

The causes for the failure of the revolt have been variously estimated. Of these the following may be mentioned. First, there was a lack of unity, organization and training upon the part of the peasants. Then, too, they were armed with only the rudest of weapons, whereas they faced cannon and mail-clad forces, - strange combination of medieval and modern! Further, the strong, centralized Swabian League, which, by superior strategy and coordination of forces, was bound to win in the end. Other reasons of a different kind could be brought forth, e.g. that the movement was an incongruous mingling of reactionary tendencies with revolutionary ideas, premature for the age.** "Many of these ideas have been since successfully put into practice, but in 1525 the classes which formulated them had not acquired the faculties necessary for the proper exercise of political power; and the movement was an abortion." This may be true, and yet not warrant the conclusion here made. For, what people ever came up to the possession of liberty and freedom whose training in slavery had prepared them for the exercise of government? Obviously, none. Training for government does not lie in slavery, but governors may be made out of slaves by their actual participation in governing. Is not the best way to prepare a man for sound political sagacity to put in his hand the right, the power and the responsibility of learning to govern himself? How else can one "acquire the faculties necessary for..... political power" than to be allowed expression for those inherent capacities, which, in greater or lesser degree, are in all men for controlling himself? It seems to me the first reason given for the collapse of the Peasants' Revolt is the more nearly correct: they had no common directing agency, no one campaign leader, and the united, efficient fighting forces of the Swabian League easily swept all before them.

*Cambridge Modern History, vol.2, p. 191.

**See Pollard, in Cambr. Modern Hist., Vol.2, p.192

Chapter V.

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MARTIN LUTHER AND THE SOCIAL REVOLT

When we come to study the relation of Luther to the Peasants' Revolt, we have at once a most interesting and a most complicated problem before us. This man was now the dominating personality of the day, overshadowing even the great Erasmus, with whom he had some points in common and many of disagreement. It was impossible for Luther not to be drawn into the issues of the social revolution; the tenseness and urgency of the situation demanded that much from every man, and Luther certainly not less than other men. More than that, Luther's nature was too easily inflamed and excited for him to remain silent or neutral with such issues confronting him. The existing order of government was threatened; all established institutions seemed about to fall and the success of the Reformation was beyond question involved with the future fortunes of Germany. Anarchy seemed imminent; an ignorant mass of people were trying to assume control of the national life; wherein, then, lay the guarantees of those conditions which would further the struggle for spiritual freedom from Rome? Such were some of the phases of the questions which Luther had to meet and to which he must make response.

He has been variously praised, condemned, condoned or justified for his attitude toward the revolt, all according to the viewpoint of the historian. Janssen, the Catholic, bitterly denounces him as being partly responsible for the movement, and then leaving it in the lurch when he saw advantage for himself and his cause elsewhere.* The Socialist, Bax, criticizes him "as a tool of the princes and a traitor to the peasants' cause". Other and more favorable authors defend his course, finding ample justification for the stand he took toward revolution as opposed to reformation. Many who hold to the wisdom of his course, nevertheless deplore some of the features of it, especially the language and spirit which he displayed.

It is but fair to Luther that we ask before taking up this question another, namely, - just what was his chief concern, his supreme interest during all these

*Janssen, "History of the German People", vol. 7, pp. 372-418, 519-526, 571-576.

days of storm and stress? The answer seems clear enough: he was chiefly devoted to religious, not political nor social questions. Such, at least, was his desire, though he was to fail in keeping himself clear from these other matters, as can readily be understood when we see how religious interests ramify all of life. Luther's profoundest problem was the relation which exists between God and man, and how man should be justified in God's sight. But as to the social relations, right or otherwise, which existed between man and his fellows, - these were of comparatively little or no moment to him. This is not necessarily to condemn Luther, for with the greatness of genius he pursued one dominating idea, and to that all else must be subordinate. Luther held that if a man was right in his relation to God, that was enough - his other relationships would settle into proper place automatically. With such a view he might behold with calmness the disruption and overthrow of spiritual and ecclesiastical thrones, but the idea that one could upset the existing order of civil government was a thoroughly distasteful thought to him, and absolutely unjustifiable in his mind. Luther's life interests are quite well summed up in the statement that the real watchword of the Reformation was "Save the individual and by saving the individual you will save the state".

On looking into the matter we see that, whether he willed it or not, the forces which Luther had let loose were destined to shatter not only ecclesiastical and spiritual shackles, but to undermine the entrenchments of civil and economic oppression as well. "His democratic message of the brotherhood of man and the excellence of the humblest Christian worked in many ways undreamed of by himself."* "The spirit of his age was essentially a religious one, and the religious character of the Reformation served as a unifying principle for the hitherto spasmodic and political revolts which ^{had} been springing up all over the country. In other words, the Reformation was, first of all, the logical inspiration of just the sort of movement which we behold in the peasants' struggle for economic and political freedom: history attests that spiritual liberation is followed by stirrings toward physical and economic levels of justice. Secondly, the Reformation was not only the logical contributor to the gathering storm, but it came with exceeding timeliness. It is probably safe to

*Smith, "Life and Letters of Martin Luther", p.157.

say that without the Reformation and Luther's part in it, this peasants' revolt would never have attained such large proportions, but would have died a premature death, as did the others before it. "His attacks upon many features of the existing order, his criticisms of the growing luxury of the wealthier classes, his denunciations of the rapacity and greed of great commercial magnates and of the tyranny and corruption of rulers both civil and ecclesiastical, all tended to inflame the populace and spread impatience and discontent. His gospel of Christian liberty also had its effect. For the spiritual freedom he taught, multitudes substituted freedom from political oppression, from social injustice, and from economic burdens. Then, too, the extraordinary response he had met with, the confusion all Germany had been thrown into by the Reformation, and the widespread weakening of respect for traditional authority resulting therefrom, made this seem a peculiarly favorable time for the peasants to press their claims."*

This, in a general way, was the relation of the Lutheran Reformation to the Peasants' Revolt. When we study Luther's social theory and teachings, we are faced with a man whose intellectual and spiritual grasp was too great for the restraints of conservatism to hold him down in the realms of the spirit, but whose conservatism was victorious in the realms of civic and political consciousness. His insight for justice and truth was hampered by his ingrained belief in the divine character of secular government. The latter might be wrong, oppressive and burdensome, but still it was divinely ordained and not to be opposed by rebellion. If the rebellion did come, those who rebelled were to be blamed, yet God might use their sinful conduct as a chastisement for those who had misused their divinely appointed powers of government. In his pamphlet "On Secular Authority" he said: "Kings are made for their people, they ought to seek only the good for their subjects". But they have failed, so "They are of the world, and the world is the enemy of God....From the beginning of history a prudent prince has been a very rare thing, an upright and an honest prince still rarer. They are generally the greatest fools or the greatest scoundrels in the world". Shortly before the Revolt he wrote: "The laboring man,

*McGiffert, "Martin Luther", p. 250.

tried beyond all endurance, overwhelmed with intolerable burdens, will not and cannot any longer tamely submit; and he has doubtless good reasons for striking with the flail and the club as Hans Pitchfork threatens to do. I am delighted so far to see the tyrants trembling". Thus spoke the man of clear gaze and simple justice, but this same man was unable to do two things: first, he was unable to forecast the reception which such words would receive from the inflamed peasants, and second, he was unable to follow his own words to their logical conclusion. After the great storm had subsided, with great loss and bloodshed for the peasants, Luther made this statement in a letter which reveals his constitutional conservatism: "Even if the princes abuse their power, yet they have it of God, and under their rule the Kingdom of God at least has a chance to exist" (1).

It is not surprising, then, that a difference of opinion was held by the peasants themselves concerning Luther. He had said enough against the princes and overlords and the commercial and luxurious tendencies of the day to win a large following among the peasants, who were ready to read these economic interpretations into all his utterances, religious as well as secular. Some, however, like Münzer and similar fanatics, were decidedly and bitterly hostile to him. The rest who believed in him were sufficiently strong to have the Twelve Articles submitted to him as the basis for arbitration proceedings between themselves and the princes. "His was a name to conjure with and they made the most of it. They appealed to his gospel and quoted his writings in support of their programs. They called themselves his followers, and declared it their purpose to put his principles into practice. And whatever was true of the leaders, by the great mass of the peasants themselves it was doubtless honestly believed that Luther was with them, and that they could count on his sympathy and support."*

If this was the attitude of the peasants toward Luther, what was Luther's real attitude toward them? If the movement for which he was sponsor had provided the peasants with their centralizing factor, had furnished them with the terminology and the example of revolt against authority, had inspired them with a new self respect as individuals and as Christians, had

*McGiffert, "Martin Luther", p. 252.

indeed so loosened the strongholds of visible government as to already promise its speedy collapse, - surely, then, Luther would be the friend and supporter of their own movement! So one might think, but only until he remembers Luther's conviction that all constituted authority had its basis in divine sanction. Then he will not be so surprised to find that, while Luther at the first was neutral, warning and admonishing both sides in the controversy, he became openly hostile to the peasants when they showed signs of a determination to gain by force what they failed to receive through arbitration. Indeed he made it quite plain in his first pamphlet concerning the Twelve Articles that, while he sympathized (then, at least) with their demands, they must not seek their purposes by the sword, for such will perish by the sword. Further, "if the government is bad and intolerable" he says, "that is no excuse for rioting and insurrection, for to punish evil belongs not to everyone, but to the civil authority which bears the sword." Also, he proves by Scripture (1) that the abolition of serfdom is unjustified. This from the Luther who had said "A wholesale destruction of all cloisters and religious institutions would be the best kind of reformation.....It would be better that all churches and cloisters all over the world were rooted out and burnt to ashes" !* The words he now utters against the peasants are almost unbelievable. Feeling a sympathy for their sufferings, when the princes put the rebellion down with terribly cruel measures, nevertheless he says, "Peasants are no better than straw. They will not hear the word and they are without sense; therefore they must be compelled to hear the crack of the whip and the whiz of bullets, and it is only what they deserve. We must pray for them that they may become obedient; but if they do not, pity is of no avail here; we must let the cannon balls whistle among them, or they will only make things a thousand times worse." "Let no one have pity on the stiff-necked, obstinate, misguided peasants, who would listen to no one, but let whoever can stab, strangle and kill them, like mad-dogs; and this must be done for the sake of those who have been ruined and misled by these rebel peasants, so that peace and security may be reestablished." Many years later, we are told, he wrote: "It was I, Martin Luther, who slew all the peasants in the insurrection, for I commanded them to be slaughtered; all their blood

*See Janssen, "History of the German People", vol. 4, p. 211.

is on my head. But I throw the responsibility on our Lord God, who instructed me to give this order".*

The mind recoils from such words as these, and one feels instinctively that they can in no way be justified. It is hard to conceive of a Christian having the right to allow such feelings and words in his mind or in his speech. No one can blame the Catholic or hostile historian for making great capital out of these and (unfortunately) many other statements, and undoubtedly the Protestant historian has had a hard time of it to mitigate the severity of criticism which it seems that Luther deserves for his attitude in this crisis. So, is it not better to abandon the idea of justification and stick to explanation? We may understand why Luther spoke and wrote in such a way, and admit at the same time that he did wrong, especially in his vehemence and choice of language. Perhaps the "explanation" will somewhat "justify", but it cannot be offered for that purpose. We set forth now a few considerations which may throw light upon the situation.

(1) We must judge Luther, not against the background of our day, but of his. If we did not do so, we would have to vote him an immoral man, for many of the things which Luther said at his guest-table would not today be repeated by one decent man to another. Likewise, the great Apostle Paul would not stand the test, for his standards of reasons for marriage are much lower than we would accept today. Luther, then, in language, spirit and viewpoint was a medieval man, and this side of him comes out the most clearly when he believes the great issues of life, which have illuminated him and his world, are threatened by mob violence.

(2) Remember, too, his inherent conservatism, coupled with his conception of civil government as being of God. If one questions Luther's conservatism, let him contrast his spirit with that of the restless, dissatisfied, nervously critical Erasmus. Whereas the latter moved quickly and readily to the front as a critic of the church (though never in the end showing the courage of his convictions as did Luther), Luther, we are told, "did not seek the fight; he waited in his place till the battle sought him out and then he dared not refuse the challenge....Already Luther spoke as one who could not help it."** When he did move he

*See Janssen, vol. 4, pp. 310f, 314f.

**Emerton, "Erasmus", pp. 283, 289.

gathered momentum steadily, but with all his later violence, one cannot accuse him of being erratic or unstable. Anchored as he was to this conception of government, Luther could not be driven by any ulterior consideration to champion the cause of any group just because they too were revolutionists, though of another sort.

(3) This conception of government figures largely in relation to his sincere conviction that the religious reformation was of far greater importance than the economic. He felt, as we have already pointed out, that if the first was successful, that would be sufficient, and whatever else followed must conform to that. To him, religious liberty was all; spiritual freedom in Christ was the supreme interest, and all that one must hope for in this world. In his tract "On the Freedom of the Christian Man" he says; "Behold! this is the righteous, spiritual, Christian idea of freedom; that which frees the heart from sins, laws and edicts; that which overtops all other kinds of freedom, as heaven does the earth. May God give us the power to behold it and understand it!"* It would seem as if the old monastic ideals of contempt for the physical comforts of life and the exaltation of poverty, still linger in the mind of Luther, judging from his attitude toward economic slavery. Believing then, in the established authorities, and that the spiritual revolt was of vaster importance than the economic, we begin to see why Luther sided with those forces, which, so he thought, were the only ones able to guarantee the safety of his religious ideals. Why must we condemn Luther for this? He could have done this sincerely, from conviction, and not for selfish and time-serving reasons as his enemies declare. He honestly believed that the peasants' success meant the failure of righteousness and the triumph of evil. "It is the devil's dear wish", he said, "to bring about a political rebellion in order to hinder and disgrace the religious revolt."**

(4) Luther's attitude may be explained by one of the very principles of the Reformation itself, namely, that "man's salvation is independent of his environment". Schapiro calls this a "fundamental Christian idea, Protestant as well as Catholic".*** Social theorists today might challenge the statement, but certainly in that day it was "fundamental" and for centuries afterward, even until now. It is, perhaps,

*Werke, (Weimar) VII, p. 38. **Ditto, VIII, p. 683.

***Schapiro, "Social Reform, etc", p. 88.

a corollary of the principle just discussed, - that the nature of Christian freedom is spiritual. Luther held the idea that to be concerned over the condition of this world, that is, in a material or physical sense, was by no means the proper business of the Christian. Jesus came to give men spiritual life and hope, not the earthly blessings and goods of this world. In fact, the harder one's lot is here, the greater the likelihood that his life will please God, inasmuch as character is strengthened by overcoming obstacles. The weight, then, of Luther's philosophy of Christianity was all thrown in the scale against the social revolt of the peasants.

(5) The final consideration which we shall offer is by no means the least important, - rather the opposite. So far as the writer knows, the theory he now presents has not been applied to Luther as an explanation of his relation to the rebellious peasants. It is based on the psychology of revolution, and was suggested in the first place by psychological phenomena observed in connection with events occurring in recent years. Luther's conduct and language concerning the peasants is not nearly so startling when we call to mind many of the things which men have said and done here in America since the Great War began. Since 1914 few men have thought or acted in a normal way; the tensivity and strain of the atmosphere of war exacted its toll from men, robbing them of self-control, moderation and toleration in varying degrees. The mad dog of war left few unbiten as he raged through the world. The fevers have not yet wholly subsided, or if they have, the inevitable reaction which has set in constitutes as dangerous and critical a time as before the war's close. The patient is never so irritable and hard to please as when convalescing, still weak and nervous from the wasting effects of disease. Only recently the writer heard a man (a professing Christian and official of the Church) say of certain individuals (whose presence was deemed undesirable and dangerous by the United States government and whom therefore were deported) about as follows: "There is just one thing that ought to be done to those 'Reds'! They ought to be put on board a ship loaded with dynamite and then the ship used as a target for the Navy! Only the rats aren't worth the powder to blow them up!" One can well believe that such words are not representative of the feelings of Christian men generally, and yet far too

many similar sentiments have found lodgment in the minds of the war-weary and psychologically abnormal members of modern society.

Let us remember then, that the psychological atmosphere of Luther's day was a deadly one to breathe into one's system. Conflict and controversy were on all sides; every layer of society had its grudge against the others. Even scholars and great men seemed unable to rise above suspicions and jealousies of one another, often of the pettiest sort. The eye of the Church was upon every outstanding thinker, ready to search and try him, and if necessary condemn him, should he overstep the lines laid down. The country was steeped in centuries of war and bloodshed, human life was cheap and lavishly squandered. The Peasants' Revolt exceeded everything so far, in universality, determination and success. The governing classes were at first utterly "paralyzed by fear and inaction". For a time it seemed that every vestige of visible authority was destined to be broken down. We are told that Prince Frederick gave up all hope. "He wrote his brother John that if it was God's will that the common man should rule he would not resist it. John, too, was without hope: 'There are thirty five thousand men in the field against us', he wrote, 'we are but lost princes'."*

Gustave Le Bon, a modern French psychologist, in his book on "The Psychology of Revolution", has a chapter on "Individual variations of character in times of revolution", in which he says: "Every individual possesses, besides his habitual mentality, which when the environment does not alter is almost constant, various possibilities of character which may be evoked by passing events". People have, he says, "an equilibrium which is fairly permanent when the social environment does not vary. As soon as this environment is considerably modified, as in time of insurrection, this equilibrium is broken, and the dissociated elements (i.e. of personality) constitute, by a fresh aggregation, a new personality, which is manifested by ideas, feelings and actions very different from those formerly observed in the same individual. Thus it is that during the Terror we see honest bourgeois and peaceful magistrates who were noted for their kindness turned into bloodthirsty fanatics.... For this reason the actors in great religious and political crises often seem of a different

*Smith, "Martin Luther", p. 160.

essence from ourselves; yet they do not differ from us; the repetition of the same events would bring back the same men". In the same chapter he points out certain affective elements of character "which are commonly repressed, but to which the destruction of social restraints gives a free vent". These are "hatred, fear, ambition, jealousy or envy, vanity and enthusiasm".*

Who that has watched the progress of thought and action during the great European war and in these present days, but can see therein the confirmation of this theory? It is most interesting to note that Le Bon himself furnishes an example of this very thing; the words just quoted from him were published in 1913, and in 1916, during the war, he published a book called "The Psychology of the Great War", in the last pages of which he allows himself to say, "Are we to relinquish the conquests of civilization and see an unending repetition of these horrible hecatombs, which mow down the youth of a nation, ruin entire provinces, and destroy the most unsullied masterpieces of the past? Is brutal force destined to become the only ruler of nations, as it was at the beginning of the world? Must mankind submit to a pitiless barbarism, which condemns the weak to hopeless slavery?....The future depends, beyond all else, upon the continuance of our will. Conquer or die, but never yield!" must be the watchword of the nations which Germany would enslave!"** It would be an interesting study to determine if it were possible, just how far this abnormality of human minds in war-time is responsible for the modern spirit of intolerance and mutual suspicion. Would the attitude of the world outside of Russia and Germany be the same toward those countries as it is; would theirs be the same toward us, if all the devastating fevers of war were banished from our veins? We wonder. Would our estimate of new political systems and revolutionary movements, such as Bolshevism, etc, be what it now is? Who knows? But somehow we do feel that it is a striking fact that men talk today concerning these things just about as Luther did when he lifted his voice against the insurrectionists of his own day. On every hand we hear the same hysterical vehemence in the tones and voices of men, when they speak of the new and imperfectly understood movements toward reform in modern society. Granted that their opposition is justified, granted, too, that Luther's stand against the Peasants' Revolt was for the best, we can account

*Le Bon, "The Psychology of Revolution", p. 75ff.

**Le Bon, "The Psychology of the Great War", pp.469f, 471.

for the intolerance and ugly animosities of word and deed, which both he and many moderns have revealed, only on one of two grounds: 1) either they arise from the inherent, constitutional bias and prejudice of minds consciously closed to the truth, or, 2) they are the outbursts of men who are normally sane and open-minded, but now laboring under the handicap of an abnormal, disturbing, nerve-testing hour, in the midst of which they yield to sentiments and opinions normally foreign to their nature.

Some may object to this view or explanation on the ground that it is materialistic, finding, as it does, certain causal relations growing out of the physical and mental environment in which men find themselves. To open up the field of controversy on this subject would be vain; we have no desire to "decide" in this paper between the rival claims of environment as against hereditary and personal elements affecting the decisions and characters of men. Probably we would have to admit a leaning toward the inward and personal sources of conduct as being superior to and more important than the external and environmental. Whether we would be right or wrong need not affect the theory we are presenting here. For each one of us must at least admit that it is impossible to wholly dissociate a man from the physical and mental accompaniments of his inward progress or regress. On the other hand, we admit the possibility of his rising superior to these enveloping influences. It is only the rare man, however, who has the capacity for that self-psycho-analysis, which will enable him to detect himself falling under the influences of social and psychical forces, strong enough to lead him to be untrue to his highest and loftiest ideals. At any rate, it is safe to say that Luther was not able to do so. He was a man to whom had come great overwhelming convictions of truth, and his nature was such that he was compelled thereby to enter the conflict which the proclamation of that truth entailed. He did not seek the battle; even the Ninety-five Theses were less of a challenge to combat than a "challenge to discussion." Luther put himself forward as a learner, who was prepared to change his view whenever a better one should appear.* It is true that as time passed and matters grew more serious that Luther became increasingly emphatic, even violent, in his language, and, in the latter years of his prominence and success, highly intol-

*Emerton, "Erasmus", p. 289.

erant of others, but still there are those who hold that "the boldness of Luther was not that of a man defiant by nature, who enjoys the game of give and take, but rather that of a man who puts off the moment of his attack until he can do so no longer, and then lets himself go, driven from behind, as it were, by a will greater than his own and against which he is powerless".* Like Paul he "was not disobedient" unto what he believed to be his "heavenly visions". If sometimes his opinions and utterances suggest more of earthly dominions than of heavenly, Luther was scarcely the man to detect the fact, or to be concerned much about it. Entrusted with the leadership of a great religious movement, he cared only to see that movement triumph for the good of the world and the enhancement of the Kingdom. If he lived, preached, wrote, declaimed, even stormed his way to victory according to the laws of psychology and religion which governed that period of religious and economic revolution, who are we that we should altogether censure or revile him? Rather, we should ask ourselves if we have lived as the people of a more enlightened era should have lived, deriving from the mistakes of even such great men as Martin Luther a more tolerant, equipoised and sympathetic attitude toward all men than it was possible for him to realize.

(6) In summing up this question, then, of justifying or explaining Luther's attitude toward the Revolt, we see that, while we cannot justify him from a strict Christian standpoint, we must nevertheless remember certain things: the background of the medieval age in which he lived; his native conservatism and conception of civil authority; his estimate of the value of religious as contrasted to economic protest; his Christian philosophy, which called upon men to transcend rather than to transform their environment; and finally, the psychological atmosphere of the time, with its tendency to inflame the abnormalities of his normal self. Bearing these in mind, the attacks of the critics lose much of their force and weight. Few of us but what have been laying ourselves open to the same attacks in these modern days. It has become a case of "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone".

*Emerton, "Erasmus", p. 282.

Chapter VI.

IMMEDIATE RESULTS OF THE REVOLT.

Our review of the Revolt would not be complete without at least a brief consideration of the results which followed it. Great was the misery and suffering everywhere. According to Janssen, "more than one thousand cloisters and castles had been reduced to cinders; hundreds of villages had been burnt down; fields lay uncultivated; farming utensils, cattle and all movable goods had been carried off; the widows and orphans of more than one hundred thousand slaughtered peasants were in a state of profoundest misery".* By some the number of the slain has been placed at a much higher figure. The burdens now placed upon the peasants were almost too great to be imagined. All who did not sue for mercy and give themselves up for punishment, but fled the country, became common prey. "Whosoever also, 'the mandate of the Swabian League goes on, 'shall kill any one of these fugitives shall not be punished for the deed, nor treated as if he had committed a crime'".**

The peasants themselves, largely because of Luther's conduct, "were alienated from Protestantism and relapsed, some back into Roman Catholicism but the majority into unbelief. The cause of social reform was handicapped, and it took centuries before it recovered from the blow which Luther dealt it".*** Professor Pollard says that "to the end of the 18th Century the German peasantry remained the most wretched in Europe. Serfdom lingered there longer than in any other civilized country save Russia, and the mass of the people were effectively shut out from the sphere of political action. The beginnings of democracy were crushed in the cities; the knights and then the peasants were beaten down. And only the territorial power of the princes profited. The misery of the mass of her people must be reckoned as one of the causes of the national weakness and intellectual sterility which marked Germany during the latter part of the 16th Century".****

Not only were there disastrous results for the peasants, but the Reformation itself and ultimately the Lutheran Church suffered also. A movement which had

*Janssen, "Hist. of the German People", Vol.4, p.347.

**Ibid. p. 352.

***Andrews, in "Christ and Civilization", p. 344.

****Cambridge Modern History, Vol.2, p. 191.

once been national in character, with Luther as its hero, now took on the proportions of sectarianism. Lutheranism became a sect with Luther as its leader, and greater and greater dependence was laid upon the support of the powerful princes. It was admitted that "the decrees of the Lutheran Church were mere platonic conclusions without the support of the princes, and Luther suddenly abandoned his views on the freedom of conscience and the independence of the Church".* Professor Andrews makes this comment, which is at least suggestive: "The anti-Christian character of modern socialism in Germany is one of the fruits of Luther's policy".**

As for Luther himself,-- he paid the price for his attitude toward the peasants. Much of the light and joy of his life vanished. His personal popularity declined, thousands repudiated and left him alone. His outlook became narrower and more exclusive. Bitterness found lodgment in his soul; he never overcame the distrust of the "common man" which now settled upon him. "We may be thankful he was able to disentangle his cause from the perilous alliance with radicalism and revolution and to carry it forward despite friends and foes; but the disentanglement cost both him and Protestantism dear, and we may well deplore the situation which made it necessary."***

*Cambridge Modern History, Vol. 2, p.194.

**Andrews, in "Christ and Civilization", p.344.

***McGiffert, "Martin Luther", p. 261.

CONCLUSION

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What shall be our estimate of the Peasants' Revolt in relation to the whole of history? Was it reactionary or progressive? Doubtless there were reactionary elements, attempts to put new wine into old bottles by satisfying the new spirit with older and simpler forms of society, but in the main, we surely have here a forward movement. The various rebellions of the peasants were not unrelated, isolated events, but part of a great, universal feeling of unrest which was sweeping England and France as well as northern Europe. It is true that the Revolt was not an immediate success, "but we may be sure it was destined to conquer someday, because we cannot fail to recognize in it one of the waves of the advancing tide of modern civilization". The Protestant Revolution "was a great revolutionary wave, the onward swell of which, beginning with the refusal of reform at the Diet of Worms, produced the Peasants' War and the sack of Rome, swept on through the Revolt of the Netherlands, the Thirty Years War, the Puritan Revolution in England under Oliver Cromwell, the formation of the great independent American Republic, until it came to a head and broke in all the terrors of the French Revolution".* Has the end come yet? Who shall say that the Great War just finished, the attendant upheavals of peoples and classes of society, are not the later booms of this mighty tide against the stern coasts of entrenched privilege and exalted selfishness? Seas rage and lash long after the storm has passed; what seem to be the unreasoned frothings of an angry sea of humanity, may have their causes remote from the sight of the casual observer, but for all that, they are none the less real.

*Seebohm, "The Era of the Protestant Revolution", pp. 65, 230.