

From Martin Luther to Arthur Balfour

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Many Christians celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation on October 31. In 1517 the Augustinian monk Martin Luther (1483-1546) posted his [95 theses in opposition to the abuses of the Catholic Church](#) on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, which ultimately led to the split between the Catholic and Protestant churches.

Luther objected initially to what he saw as the commercialization of religion. His target was papal indulgences, an important way of raising money for the pope through forgiveness of sins. (I must say I think many of us Jews have kept that tradition alive in the way we dole out money to pseudo-kabbalists, miracle-working rabbis, and those who claim to pray for others. And indeed pay for others to be religious for us. All in the belief that we will get special treatment On High. Human nature hasn't changed much.) Luther was offended by the role money played in the church.

Luther did want to make the church more open, popular, and accessible. He wanted everyone to have access to the biblical texts and translated the New Testament into German. Other Reformers, like the Swiss Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), were ready to reinterpret much of the Gospels and Christian ritual, whereas Luther was a literalist and a fundamentalist.

The truth is that Protestant ideas began to appear long before Luther. John Wycliffe in England (1330 -1384) was a popular reformist hero in his day. He challenged the central authority of the pope. He translated the Bible into English and insisted on its study and accessibility to the masses.

Jan Hus (1369–1415) was an even more impressive. He too challenged papal authority, criticized the corruption of the Church, and stressed the importance of the Old Testament. Because his followers rejected the worship of saints and the adoration of relics, contemporary Roman Catholics accused them of being a Judaizing sect and called them Zionists! Huss was declared a heretic and burnt to death. I guess when we Jews get upset at what the Church did to us, we should remember that it tended to treat its own dissidents just as badly. As well as freethinkers, pagans, scientists, Muslims, anyone who couldn't be brought to see reason and join up. It was said that Hus was in partnership with the Jews. Which is ironic given the fact that he himself attacked the Jews for their implacable opposition to Christianity.

What gave Luther the edge over the earlier reformers was his use of the printing press. He was the first best-selling author by volume, by far. But there were other political factors in the rise of protest movements, of which Lutheranism was just one, that led to what we call Protestantism in general. Politics and power. Rulers like Henry VIII of England played politics with religion. He attacked Luther as an evil heretic in a book he wrote in 1521 for which the pope gave him the title of Defender of the Faith (that English monarchs use to this day)! But when Henry split with Rome in 1532 because he

didn't get his way over divorcing Katharine of Aragon, he set up his own Protestant church.

Luther was excommunicated. But he escaped burning at the stake, because within the German states there were rivalries and competitors who undermined each other. Besides, the Emperor Charles V, who hated Luther, had bigger problems when the Ottoman Suleiman invaded and got as far as Vienna.

In other words, it was a confluence of political, social, and religious factors that turned Luther into such an important figure. Which is probably why he failed to support the rebellions of peasants protesting against their rulers despite his pleas for the common man.

We Jews remember him for his virulent antisemitism. He hoped initially that the Jews would all convert to his cause because of his emphasis on the Old Testament. But when they did not accept him, he wrote the abusive tract [*On the Jews and their Lies*](#) (1543), in which he said such humane things as, "Their synagogues or schools should be set fire to...in honor of our Lord and of Christendom. The houses of Jews should be razed and destroyed, their prayerbooks and the Talmud burnt, their money and treasures of silver and gold confiscated. They should receive no mercy or kindness, given no legal protection, and drafted into forced labor or expelled. Christians who did not slay them are at fault." It is true that you can find such ideas in the Bible regarding Canaanites. But that was, after all, three thousand years ago and more and was declared inoperable by our rabbis two thousand years ago.

Not surprisingly, Luther became favorite bedtime reading for Adolph Hitler and the Nazis. Luther's book against the Jews was widely disseminated and quoted in public rallies. His portrait publicly displayed alongside his invective. The popularity of his views has certainly influenced the antisemitism that remains endemic in much of Western society.

But the accepted narrative is that his laudable emphasis on education for boys and girls, and his emphasis on being good towards other human beings (so long as they agree with you) acts as a cover for his racism and intolerance. He is applauded as a symbol of freedom of expression, free speech, and the right to challenge authority. None of which he stood by in practice. Refusing, for example, to accept Zwingli's alternative theologies or other Protestants who protested in ways different to his. Even so, he is often touted as a precursor of the Enlightenment.

The fact is that the Enlightenment in Europe owes more to pagan Romans than to Christians. The sacking of Constantinople in 1453 led to the dissemination and spread of ancient Greek and Roman ideas. There is a book by Stephen Greenblatt called [*The Swerve*](#). In it he charts the career of Poggio Bracciolini and his work in unearthing ancient manuscripts lying neglected in isolated monasteries the century before Luther. Amongst his great discovery was *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius, who lived in the century before Christianity began to emerge.

It is a brilliant poem in praise of Epicurus. Everything, said Lucretius, is made of invisible particles. All particles are in motion in an infinite void.

The universe has no creator. Everything comes into being as a result of a swerve (in atoms). The swerve is the source of free will. Nature ceaselessly experiments. Humans are not unique. The soul dies. There is no afterlife. Death is nothing. Organized religions are superstitious. Invariably cruel. There are no angels or demons. The aim in life is to enhance pleasure and reduce pain. Delusion is the greatest obstacle.

In fact, it shares a great deal with Ecclesiastes and indeed Ecclesiasticus. It pricks bubbles and undermines false theories. It became incredibly popular amongst scholars and thinkers as Bracciolini had copies made and distributed (before Gutenberg). But its influence was enormous. In terms of inspiring the Enlightenment, it was far more positive than Luther. The amazing thing is that it was not put on the Index of Forbidden Books by the Church.

The pro-Luther lobby was on display in the Wall Street Journal on Friday when Joseph Loconte argued in [an opinion piece](#) that "Luther delivered a spiritual bill of rights." So long as you are not Jewish, I guess. A bit like claiming the KKK advances the fight against racism.

If anything, the ideals attributed to Luther owe more to giants of scientific enquiry and freedom of thought such as Jan Hus and Giordano Bruno, who were burnt for their honesty. Or scientists like Copernicus and Galileo, who were persecuted by the Church and yet were free of hatred or vituperation. Now those were genuine humanists whom I would rather celebrate.

Ironically, this past weekend has also been the 100-year anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. The Protestant emphasis on the Old Testament as well as the New was a major factor in generating sympathy for the Jews. It changed the perception from seeing them as the Catholics did, as spawn of the Devil to be eradicated, to an exiled noble tradition longing to return home. Even before Zionism was a political movement, whether it was Oliver Cromwell or the great novelist George Eliot, Protestantism developed a strain of philosemitism that was behind Arthur Balfour's letter to Lord Rothschild supporting a Jewish homeland in 1917. How ironic that today Israel garners more support for Israel from Catholics and Southern Baptists than it does from the Lutheran Church.

I was fascinated to see how many members of the English petty aristocracy (as well as some on the Israeli left) have been so vociferous in attacking the Balfour Declaration and imperialism over the self-inflicted fate of the Palestinians. After all, it was not Balfour but the San Remo Conference of 1920 that granted the British mandate over Palestine and formalized the rights of Jews to a homeland. It also created the Arab states of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and later Jordan. All states that had never existed before, forcing disparate, opposing tribes and ideologies together in artificial entities. If people want to blame Israel on imperialism, they should disband all those other products of imperialism too. Perhaps reinstating the Ottoman Empire (without Erdogan) is the solution. The venom of the Israel-haters came out in full view over the Balfour anniversary. Which proves that Luther's poison is still very much alive today.