

LUTHER: A LIFE, by John M Todd. *Hamish Hamilton*, 1982, pp xix + 396.

"I attempted a previous picture in *Martin Luther, a Biographical Study*, written primarily for specialists in history and theology. . . . The present study is an attempt to present the man more fully . . . in particular from his letters" (p xix).

In this aim Mr Todd has been strikingly successful. He gives us, to begin with, a map of Central Europe in 1546 which really does include almost every place mentioned in the text (a feature rare in this kind of book). Unencumbered by footnotes, the succeeding narrative is colourful, dramatic, sustaining the "plot" and integrating the characters both historically and theologially. The many who know merely the main events of Luther's life will follow their expert guide behind the scenes with growing appreciation and even excitement. In particular, the years following Worms and the Wartburg, which tend to be a blank in the popular mind, bring this book to a fitting climax of triumphs and disillusionments, the "theology of the Cross" in living history and experience.

Nothing is more remarkable than the sympathy shown at every point by a modern R C layman for the arch-Reformer. I have not found a single major doctrinal issue in which Luther is condemned, and even the appendix on Indulgences (reproduced from Mr Todd's earlier book) leaves little for traditional Catholic apologists to feed on. I instance the excellent pages on Grace (37ff), penance/penitence (76), Luther and Nominalism (54f), the "grossly exaggerated theologism" of the Pope as 'Christ's Vicar on Earth' (153), the Eucharist (298, 331, 348) and the Blessed Virgin (333). There are sharp criticisms of contemporary priests in Luther's day – looking and acting "rather like the very priests of the old Jewish Law or even of paganism" (xviii) – and of the contemporary Mass, in theory and practice (36ff). Yet however badly 16th Century Catholicism comes off, Mr Todd is loyal to that underlying Catholic faith and practice, as he sees it, which many have claimed came to the surface in Vatican II and in which Luther

(like Newman) at last came into his own.

In a book which shows such generous penetrating and comprehensive appreciation of Luther – statesman, churchman, theologian, scholar, above all Luther the man of God – I have been stimulated to several minor and one major criticism. "Melancthon" should have been corrected to "Melanchthon" throughout, instead of being imputed a "copying error" (136 n). To say that Luther "probably did not nail the Theses on the door of the castle church" (108 n) is to give too much credit to Iserloh and too little to his critics, like Gordon Rupp (J.T.S. April 1968, 360ff). "Quote" (in spite of the vile modern habit) is not a noun (58). "Gell", in spite of the still viler modern habit, is not a verb (81). There are printing errors on p 160 (sub fin. – "the Duke need"), 161 (sub fin. "seam"? for "stream"), 314 (Augsberg), 358 (the quotation should end at "Judas bag"). The word "communitarian" (73 sub fin.) I do not understand.

But what worries me most is the recurrent category of "Myth". The Index shows how dominant it is throughout. We are initiated by a paragraph on p xvii and left at the end (372f) with a tribute to Luther's life-work in putting the 'Myth' into a new gear. Now just what is gained by this term? The author may merely be trying to show that he is aware of a present theological debate. But quite notoriously our "Myth"-theologians fail to preserve firmly the distinction between the vulgar use of "myth" (something untrue) and the technical use as a tool for Scriptural interpretation. This carelessness (or confusion) runs riot through Mr Todd's book, and would have brought on him the wrath not only of Martin Luther but of the Catholic authorities of every century. He should replace it, according to context, by such expressions as "the Gospel", "the *Kerygma*", "the objective pattern of Christian truth" – best of all, with Luther himself, by *solus Christus*.

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