

Time to Resurrect Martin Luther

By Anand Peter

The Church, the world over, faces major issues that remain unresolved, subjects now debated widely across visual and print media. In a socio-political climate not always congenial to Christian values, some are quick to malign and blame the whole community for the apparent failures of a few. The prevailing narrative, in many countries, paints a picture of large-scale conversion achieved through aggressive proselytising. While this impression owes much to "fake news" narratives, and is far from the truth on the ground, it nonetheless causes serious friction in many parts of the world, not least in India. The fact remains that, although Christianity came to India as early as the first century, the Christian population there has stagnated at under three per cent of the populace. Adding fuel to the fire are the presumed misadventures of ordained priests, spanning the whole spectrum of moral, ethical, financial, and spiritual promiscuity. Louder voices are heard, too, questioning the practice by which Catholics confess their sins to a priest, in a spirit of true repentance, and "receive" forgiveness [sic]. Critics allege that confessional statements are used, chiefly against female believers, to blackmail them into submission, and to place them under various forms of obligation.

Confession, or reconciliation, or penance, is counted as one of the seven Sacraments in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition, while the Protestant Church, by and large, recognises only two: Baptism and the Eucharist. A Sacrament is, at the very least, an outward sign of an inward Grace. God has clearly bestowed Grace through various acts, but the Church experienced them long before it precisely defined, or numbered, them — although Baptism and the Eucharist were always on that list, however it was expressed.

The collective body of Jewish religious law, comprising both Biblical law and the later Talmudic and Rabbinic law, together with custom and tradition, is known as the Halakha. The Pharisees believed that God, besides the Ten Commandments, had also given Moses the knowledge of what those laws meant, and how they were to be applied; this oral tradition was codified and written down some three centuries later, in what became known as the Talmud. In effect, the Mosaic Law was expanded into an all-encompassing way of life, extending even to governance, strict in letter and next to impossible in practice. This did not, let us remember, receive the approval of Jesus Christ. I suspect that this same tendency was carried over into Christianity, giving rise to a proliferation of Sacraments, most of which Jesus Christ never instituted.

If we accept that human beings are, by nature, sinners, it follows that the ordination of a person as priest does not make him, or her, holy and pure, or set that person above other human beings, save perhaps a little below Jesus Himself. The concept of the Logos has no bearing here. I find myself in sympathy with the statements of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses on this point. His first two theses read: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance"; and, "This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy." He makes three main points throughout the Theses, given here in his own words, condensed:

First, that the revenues of all Christendom are being drawn into an insatiable basilica — or, read another way, into the insatiable greed of priests and laity alike. Rather than build such monuments, Luther argued, we should first raise up living temples, not local churches — or, again, honest bishops, clergy, and laity — and build St Peter's last of all, since it is not, in fact, necessary to us.

Second, that papal indulgences do not remove guilt. Luther warned against those who claimed that indulgences could effect reconciliation with God: the truly contrite, he wrote, already possess full remission of guilt and penalty, without any indulgence at all. The Pope — or, we might equally say, the priest — can remove only those penalties he himself has imposed on earth, for Christ never said, "Whatsoever I have bound in heaven you may loose on earth." Luther went further still, denying that the Pope had any jurisdiction over Purgatory at all: if he did, why, in the name of love, would he not simply abolish Purgatory, and let everyone out?

Third, that indulgences positively harm the very people who receive them, since they impede Salvation, divert charity, and induce a false sense of security. Christians should be taught, Luther wrote, that a man who gives to the poor does better than one who purchases a pardon; the one who spends his money on indulgences, rather than relieving the needy, receives not the indulgence of the Pope but the indignation of God. Indulgences are most pernicious of all because they breed complacency, and so imperil Salvation. It is only when a man believes himself utterly lost that the light breaks in, and peace comes through faith in the word of Christ. Whoever lacks this is lost, though he be absolved a million times over by the Pope, or by the priest.

The time has come for the Church to undergo another season of revival, and to take seriously, once again, the Ninety-Five Theses of Martin Luther. If they were relevant then, they remain relevant now.

Amen.