Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus


In an article in the Journal of Modern History (September, 1985) reviewing recent publications on Luther, Jean Wirth has written “In this end of the twentieth century, when ecumenism is the order of the day among Christians in industrialized countries . . . what is most important to Luther scholars is to deny the revolutionary nature of the Reformation and to connect Luther to the old church by his sense of obedience, his fear of disorder, and his abiding faith” (p.484). According to Wirth, some writers have been so determined to make Luther acceptable to all parties as a true son of the universal church that they have gone so far as to attribute some of the reformer’s more reprehensible deeds (the pamphlets against peasants and Jews) and verbal excesses (the style of his attacks on the Papacy) to either the “mentality” of the times or to Luther’s personal belief in the devil. Wirth correctly sees in this practice an attempt by historians and biographers not only to evade discussion of some of the touchier aspects of Luther’s behaviour but also to relieve themselves of the burden of having to analyze such difficult points as the reformer’s thought systems. The effect of such tactics is to shift responsibility away from Luther himself for some of his own most passionately expressed ideas. As laudatory as the current ecumenical movement might be for its efforts to achieve Christian unity, it clearly raises some serious questions when its influence is felt in historical and theological writing in such a way as to distort the historical picture of Luther the man and the Reformation movement or to produce a strained or implausible picture of Lutheran theology in its historical development. For this reason, one fairly recent publication dealing with Luther’s thought, Johann Heinz, Justification and Merit: Luther vs. Catholicism should be welcomed as a much-needed corrective to the efforts of ecumenists to make Luther’s thought seem no more than a novel approach to traditional church doctrines.

Heinz believes the fundamental issue dividing the Lutheran from the Catholic church – at the time of the Reformation and today as well – to be the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone and its opposition to the Catholic doctrine of merit. While Luther’s doctrine upholds the sole agency of God and denies any human cooperation in the process of salvation, Catholic dogma requires human cooperation in both the preparation for justification and the event of justification itself. The intermixing of divine grace and human free will produces merit in the believer, and through this merit the believer earns increase in grace and, thus, eternal
life. But, despite the differences between these two doctrines, Heinz notes, Lutheran and Catholic ecumenicists have recently been moving closer to a compromise position on the question of justification. It is to this central question that Heinz devotes his book: is such a compromise on the relationship of justification and merit possible, and can such a common position end the ages-old church schism?

In the first half of his study Heinz deals with the historical development of the doctrine of merit within the Catholic church, and Luther's criticism of the doctrine. He points out that Luther considered the doctrine of justification to be the principle teaching of Christianity and the foundation of the New Testament, and thus he considered his own doctrine of *sola fide* to be the basis for his break with the church. The church, on the other hand, had traditionally not placed the doctrine of justification at the center of its theology, and this permitted considerable ambiguity to persist in church doctrine with regard to the roles and relative values of faith, sacraments and good works in the salvation process. Heinz's historical sketch of the development of the doctrine of merit further shows, he believes, that the Christian doctrine of merit and reward began only with the church father Tertullian in the third century. In this view the teachings of Jesus were a protest against a doctrine of merit that had developed in late Judaic teaching, and by insisting on salvation by faith alone Luther returned to the original Christian teaching as he found it expressed by Paul. The doctrine of merit was correctly identified by Luther as a product of Medieval Scholastic theology. Heinz adds that even though some Catholic theologians continue to find a doctrine of merit in Paul, many have come to accept Luther's interpretation of Paul's stand on justification as essentially correct.

In the second half of his book Heinz deals with the problem of justification and merit in modern Catholic theology. On this question he finds the Catholic camp divided since Vatican II. While many theologians still condemn Luther's ideas as wholly or partly heretical, a number of ecumenical writers have come to see in Luther's doctrine of justification "a thoroughly Catholic variant of the justification event," if Luther's ideas are "properly understood" (p.280). Indeed, writers like Joseph Lortz have said that Luther's teaching on justification is "so Catholic that it no longer justifies an ecclesiastical separation" (p.284).

Heinz next investigates how far such a statement can be supported by examining the teachings on justification and merit found in modern Catholic Biblical exegesis and dogmatics, and comparing the result to the doctrine of justification by faith alone staunchly upheld by Lutherans. Heinz finds that, even in those Catholic authors who consciously try to modify the doctrine of merit in a Lutheran direction, the basic idea of salvation as a reward given to man, who somehow autonomously merits it, remains essentially intact. Heinz thus disagrees with the advocates of the "Catholic Luther," saying that, on the fundamental point of justification, the differences between Luther and Catholicism are still very real. Thus, while Catholic ecumenical thought has made great strides toward a "fairer" understanding of Luther, any claims of a union or consensus on the doctrine of justification are just "pious wishful thinking" at present.

Finally, Heinz believes a union of the two churches based on a compromise on justification to be unlikely in the future as well. The issue of God's sole agency vs. human free will produces a disagreement over the basic relationship between God
and man in salvation that is so profound as to make compromise nearly impossible. While compromise is a necessary and healthy part of politics and social affairs, in matters dealing with eternal truths essential differences often do not permit compromise solutions. Such affairs, Heinz seems to indicate in concluding, are not placed in the hands of men for negotiation.

Justification and Merit is a solid and well-documented book with a compelling argument. While the style still suffers from some redundancy and a tendency to degenerate into listings of opinions of different theologians, such faults are to be expected in what is essentially an unreconstructed dissertation put to press. These objections, and Heinz's clear Lutheran bias, aside, this book should be welcomed as a sober treatment of an important part of the theological foundation of modern Catholic ecumenicism.

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In King Lear, according to Joseph Wittreich, "tragedy and comedy are subduced within a history that masks a prophecy and mutters of an apocalypse" (p.87). Like the many other broad, confidently asserted generalizations that appear in Image of that Horror, this one presents the reader with a good deal to assimilate all at once. Yet it deserves digestion, for it encapsulates the burden of this challenging, learned, and brilliantly speculative book. Wittreich's aim is to re-orient our perceptions of Lear so that we see it not in the context of certain conventional generic expectations but rather in the light of an idea of history. In Shakespeare's time, as Wittreich amply demonstrates, that idea would be teleological in nature ("these times" speaking darkly of Latter Days) and saturated with an awareness of a promised End. Hence the emphasis in this book falls on the socio-political dimension of the play rather than on the personal, on the collective destiny of its characters rather than on the psychological development of one individual, on the division of the kingdom rather than on the rash disowning of Cordelia.

Wittreich's pursuit of these concerns depends little on the specific local structures of King Lear, such as scene development, character interplay, language, and tone. He warns us from the outset not to expect a close reading of the play, and most of his quotations from it are glancing and often detached from their immediate contexts. But if Wittreich scants attention to local contexts within Lear, it is mainly so that he may flood his reading of the play with a sense of the larger contexts that surround it, "its occasion and sources" (p. ix), its meaning to an audience of its time, its problematic place in a Christian culture. From such perspectives, details that come from the peripheries of the play's concerns, as conventionally regarded, or that lie immediately outside it leap to the foreground. Thus we hear much about such things as the Fool's "parodic" prophecy of Merlin, the liturgy of St. Stephen's day when Shakespeare's version was first performed, the importance of perceiving James as the principal intended audience, the Lear story as presented in the chronicles and the old Leir play, and, especially, the relevance of the Book of Revelation.