

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and Martin Luther (1483-1546): A Comparative Study

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THOUGH CONTINENTS APART, there are a few common features between Martin Luther and Guru Nanak. My study shows a string of contradictions between these two contemporaries.

Martin Luther, a contemporary of Guru Nanak, was born on 10 November, 1483 in Eiselben, Germany. He was a Christian theologian and Augustinian monk whose teachings inspired the Protestant Reformation and deeply influenced the doctrines of Protestant and subsequent Christian traditions. Luther's call to the church to return to the teachings of the Bible resulted in the formation of new traditions within the Christianity and Counter-Reformation in the Roman Church. He brought many revolutionary changes in the Roman Catholic Church and became a leader of the Protestant movement in Europe.

Early Life: He was harshly treated at home and school which forced him to run away to a monastery and become a monk. In 1497, he entered a school at Magdeburg and in 1501, the University of Erfurt from where he received the degree of Bachelor of Philosophy in 1502. Three years later, in 1505, he received a Master's degree at Erfurt, scoring second position in his class. Luther's sudden and unexpected entrance into the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt occurred 17 July, 1505. The motives that prompted him to do this are conflicting and the subject of considerable debate. He himself alleges that the brutality of his home and school life drove him into the monastery. In a letter to his father, he writes, "When I was terror-stricken and overwhelmed by the fear of impending death, I made an involuntary and forced vow." The popular belief is that once Martin Luther while returning from his Mansfield home to school was overtaken by a terrible storm, with an alarming lightning flash and thunderbolt. Terrified and overwhelmed he cries out: "Help St. Anne! I shall become a monk". Luther kept his bargain, dropped out of law school and entered the monastery at Erfurt.

Luther was ordained to the priesthood in 1507. There is no reason to doubt that Luther's monastic career was exemplary; his heart at rest, his mind undisturbed, his soul at peace. He devoted himself to fasts, flagellations, long hours in prayer and pilgrimages, and constant confession. He was happy in the monastery.

During 1508-09, he was sent to the University of Wittenberg to teach theology. Luther earned his Bachelor's degree in Biblical studies in 1508 and the Doctor of Theology on 19 October, 1512 at Wittenberg.

Evangelical Discovery: The demands of study for an academic degree and preparation for delivering lectures, drove Martin Luther to study the scriptures in depth. He tried to understand the basic principles of the early Church and meaning of terms like penance and righteousness with their new connotation. This study convinced him that the Church had lost sight of several central truths. To Luther, the most important was the doctrine that brought him peace with God. Luther now believed and taught that salvation is a gift of God's

grace, received by faith and trust in God's promise to forgive sins for the sake of Christ's death on the cross. His mission to Rome in 1511 was a turning point of his life which imparted an inspirational character to the leading doctrine of the Reformation. On Halloween of 1517, Luther changed the course of human history when he nailed his 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, accusing the Roman Catholic Church of heresy upon heresy. Many people cite this act as the primary starting point of the Protestant Reformation. Luther's action was in great part a response to the selling of indulgences by Johann Tetzel, a Dominican priest. Luther's charges also directly challenged the position of the clergy in regard to individual salvation. Before long, Luther's 95 Theses of Contention had been copied and published all over Europe.

Luther, the reformer, had become Luther the revolutionary; the religious agitation had become political rebellion. Luther's theological attitude at this time was as follows: The Bible is the only source of faith; it contains the plenary inspiration of God. Human nature has been totally corrupted by *original sin*, and man, accordingly, is deprived of free will. Whatsoever he does be it good or bad, is not his own work, but God's. Faith alone can work justification, and man is saved by confidently believing that God will pardon him. The hierarchy and priesthood are not divinely instituted or necessary, and ceremonial or external worship is not essential or useful. Ecclesiastical vestments, pilgrimages, mortifications, monastic vows, prayers for the dead, intercession of saints, avail the soul nothing. All sacraments, with the exception of baptism and Holy Eucharist, are rejected, but their absence may be supplied by faith. The priesthood is universal, every Christian may assume it. There is no need for specially trained and ordained men to dispense the mysteries of God. There is no visible Church established by God whereby men may work out their salvation.

Luther's Trial and Exile: Luther's protestant views were condemned as heretical by Pope Leo III in the Bull of excommunication, "Exsurge Domine" in 1520. Luther was summoned to either renounce or reaffirm them at the Diet of Worms on 17 April 1521. Luther respectfully but boldly stated, "*Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I cannot and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.*" The Emperor Charles V issued his Edict of Worms on May 26, 1521, declaring Martin Luther an outlaw. Luther was ordered to return but forbidden to preach or publish while on the way. It placed Luther under the ban of the empire and ordered the destruction of his writings.

Luther appealed to the emperor (Charles V) in his pamphlets, to destroy the power of the Pope, to confiscate all ecclesiastical property for his own use, to abolish holy feasts, fasts and holidays, to do away with Masses for the dead, etc. The Bull of excommunication affected him little. It only drove him to further virulent attacks on the Roman Catholic Church. The Bull itself became the object of shocking indignities in Germany. The university students at Wittenberg, led by Melancthon and Luther himself, consigned it to the flames. Germany was living on a politico-religious volcano. Luther by his inflammatory denunciation of Pope and clergy let loose a veritable hurricane of fierce, uncontrollable racial and religious hatred, which was to spend itself in the bloodshed of the Peasant's War and the orgies of the sack of Rome. He had powerful friends among the princes of Germany, one of whom was his own prince, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony. The prince arranged for Luther to be kidnapped by masked horsemen on return from Diet of Worms and carried to the castle of Wartburg, where he was kept in hiding for a year in the garb of a knight.

Luther published many pamphlets attacking Pope, Papal Bull and sacramental system. His chief distinction while at the Wartburg castle was his translation of the New Testament into commonly spoken dialect of the German people. It was first published in 1522 and a complete version of the Bible appeared in 1534. Fourteen editions were published during his lifetime. The number of books attributed to Luther is quite impressive but the German Bible is his master-piece. "Opinion on Monastic Orders" is considered another important work of Luther, the book that helped to depopulate the sanctuary and monastery in Germany. It made the bold proclamation of new code of ethics: It made the gratification of sexual propensities as natural and inexorable, a physiological necessity of our being. It was a trumpet call to priest, monk, and nun to break their vows of chastity and enter matrimony. It demanded an instant abrogation of the laws of celibacy.

A Strange Character: Luther had one prominent trait of character: It was an overweening confidence and unbending will, buttressed by an inflexible dogmatism. He recognized no superior, tolerated no rival, and brooked no contradiction. His role during the Peasant's War speaks volumes about his character. Luther calls upon the princes to slaughter the offending peasants like mad dogs, to stab, strangle and slay as best one can, and holds out as a reward the promise of heaven. More than 1000 monasteries were leveled to the ground, hundreds of villages were laid in ashes, and one lakh people killed. While Germany was drenched in blood, its people paralyzed with horror, the cry of the widow and wail of the orphan rent the air, Luther then in his 42nd year was spending his honeymoon with Catherine von Bora, a Bernardine nun of 26 years, who had abandoned her convent. It was a most detestable act on his part.

Jewish Hatred: Luther initially preached tolerance towards the Jewish people but after his overtures to Jews failed to convince them to adopt Christianity; he began preaching that Jews were set in evil, anti-Christian ways, and needed to be expelled from German politics. He wrote a treatise, "On the Jews and Their Lies" quoting the words of Jesus calling Jews "a brood of vipers and children of the devil."

Martin Luther died on 18 February, 1546 at Eisleben. He was buried on 22nd Feb. in the Wartberg castle church. Fortunately, he escaped martyrdom and died of natural causes.

Common Features: Both Guru Nanak and Martin Luther got harsh treatment at the hands of their fathers, even as their mothers showered love and kindness. Guru Nanak entered the village school but was not a conventional student, and left without completing his elementary schooling. Martin Luther was a highly qualified scholar having earned his Master's in Philosophy from university of Erfurt and a doctorate in Theology from University of Wittenberg. He was a professor of theology throughout his life.

Guru Nanak was blessed with a spiritual experience of audience with God during his Bein Nadi episode and started preaching His divine mission as ordained by God Himself. His message had universal appeal for all human beings without the distinction of caste, creed or sex. Guru remark was highly critical of the religious preachers, both Hindu and Muslim, who delivered sermons to others but failed to practice in their own lives what they preached to others. He condemned the hypocrisy of the clergy.

Luther studied the Christian scriptures in depth and found discrepancy in the written message and its adoption by the Church. The priestly class exploited the poor people and played a second fiddle to the ruling class. The situation was almost identical to the scenario in India during the supremacy of Brahmanical priests. Both Guru Nanak and Martin Luther

reject the superiority of priestly class in religious affairs. Salvation is not a prerogative of priests but it is within reach of the common people.

Another common feature between Guru Nanak and Martin Luther is their theological attitude towards religion. All forms of external worship and rituals were rejected by both. Guru Nanak advocated truthful living as the core concept of his spiritual ethics. He believed in grace of God and declared that salvation is not earned by human effort; it is bestowed by the grace of God. Martin Luther rejected the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church and preached his new code of ethics based on the Bible and old Church. He accepted the institution of marriage for monks and nuns and pleaded for abrogation of the laws and vows of celibacy.

A Study in Contradictions:

- (a) Guru Nanak adopted a mystic approach to religion while Martin Luther had an intellectual approach only. The element of mysticism, so essential for a religion, was missing in the writings of Martin Luther.
- (b) Guru Nanak was a prophet in his own right, ordained by God to preach his mission, a kind of true spirituality in the world. It is a mischief on the part of the Brahmanical scholars to call Guru Nanak, a reformer of Hindu faith in India. Martin Luther led the Protestant Reformation in Europe and can be labeled as a mere reformer of the Christian faith.
- (c) Guru Nanak laid the foundation of a new religion in India with its distinct social system and holy book. It got a revolutionary character in the hands of Guru Gobind Singh. Martin Luther revolutionized the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church without modifying the Bible or pristine form of Christianity.
- (d) Guru Nanak always stood with the poor and fought for the exploited people of India while Martin Luther stood with the princes and rich aristocracy who butchered the poor during the Peasant's War in Germany. Rather, he became instrumental for this carnage.
- (e) Guru Nanak represented humility of character in all his dealings even with the adversaries while Martin Luther was haughty, intolerant, dogmatic and venomous in his uttering against the Pope and the Jews.
- (f) Guru Nanak was the pinnacle of glory of the Bhakti culture in India while Martin Luther was a by-product of a revolt of the State against the Church in Europe.

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