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Luther and German Humanism

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Historians of sixteenth-century Germany, especially those writing in the English language, owe a considerable debt to the work of Lewis W. Spitz. In his *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963) Spitz gave us what is still an unsurpassed survey of the lives, works, and characters of the German Renaissance humanists of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. His work combines sensitivity towards the goals and tastes of the northern Renaissance, with an appreciation of the spiritual issues raised by Martin Luther's religious message. It balances on that delicate fulcrum of the relationship between Renaissance and Reformation. This topic has fascinated scholars from Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century through the idealist philosophers of nineteenth-century Germany to the critical history of our own age, and shows no sign of losing its allure.

The present volume collects together eleven of Spitz's essays, all previously published, which range in date from 1959 to 1990. The first presents, by way of introduction, an English version of Spitz's articles on 'Humanism' and 'Humanism Research' which have already appeared in German in the *Theologische Realenzyklopaedie*. Four further essays grouped under the heading 'German Humanism' embrace the impact of Renaissance values on German scholarship as a whole. The remaining six address Martin Luther

specifically, and focus on the contribution which Renaissance values made to Luther's Reformation. This formal arrangement in some ways belies the relationship between the various chapters. In the first section, on German Humanism itself, parts of chapters II and V, and most of IV, discuss the humanists who lived in the Reformation era. Conversely, parts of the second section, ostensibly devoted to Luther and the Reformation, discuss the earlier pre-Reformation humanists, especially in chapter VII. The themes of Spitz's interests form a seamless web which is not easily cut up into discrete sections. Because several of the essays in this volume have been written as contributions to various multi-authored survey volumes, there is a good deal of straightforward repetition in the book. Themes, arguments, pieces of evidence, even quotations, allusions, and jokes are repeated across chapters. Such overlap and repetition is an unavoidable consequence of gathering together pieces which were first written for other, particular contexts, as the *Variorum* series requires. It in no way reflects upon the author, though it does diminish the impact of the book slightly. On the other hand, the two final chapters, 'Luther's importance for anthropological realism', and 'Man on this isthmus', range far more widely than the remainder, and ought perhaps to have been graced with a separate section heading. In these essays Lewis Spitz examines Renaissance and early modern 'anthropology'. By this he means contemporary attitudes to the human predicament - the grandeur and misery of being human - in the light of later philosophical traditions. These speculative pieces attest a breadth of vision, and wealth of erudition, which is only glimpsed in the earlier chapters, and well repay the careful reading needed to understand them.

The sharing of so many motifs between the majority of the book's chapters confers one distinct benefit on the book, and on the reviewer. There is a unity of themes and approaches to Spitz's treatment of his problem which invites one to consider his argument as a whole. Spitz has formed his approach to his basic question in conscious contrast to the great traditions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German philosophical history (IV.105, VIII, 70). He is particularly aware of the assessments of the relationship between Renaissance and Reformation found in the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923). Dilthey, writing from an idealist and nationalist viewpoint, interpreted the Reformation as the peculiarly German, religious expression of the movement towards individual spiritual freedom found elsewhere in the shape of the Renaissance. Troeltsch, whose life's work was to free the religious consciousness from 'dogma' and the quest for supernatural validation of the claims of faith, found the individualism of the reformers too narrow, too dogmatic, too tied down to the supernatural authority of the text of Scripture, to count as a part of the process of freeing the human spirit. The true implications of the Renaissance were, for Troeltsch, only realized and amplified in the Enlightenment.(1) Spitz is far too subtle and too close to the evidence to give undue weight to either of these over-simplified theses: he reacts against both. Nevertheless, the idealistic treatment of 'Renaissance' and 'Reformation' as portmanteau expressions stands repeatedly in the background to his discussions.

One can fairly summarize Spitz's overall argument as follows. He defines 'humanism' in slightly broader terms than the fashionable ones associated with Paul Oskar Kristeller, who located humanism within the tradition of the late medieval Italian *ars dictaminis*, with its quest for formal latinate rhetoric and an elegant letter-writing style. Spitz prefers to describe humanism as a broad intellectual movement rooted in love for the classical antique, and in high esteem for philology, rhetoric, poetry, ethics, and history (VII.93, and again, VIII.70-1). Against some German idealists, Spitz sees no reason to deny or play down the extent to which contacts between Italy and Germany, especially in the first half of the fifteenth century, determined the German reception of Italian humanism (1. 16,11.4-7, 26-9, V.202-3). He believes that German humanism reached its peak, as an independent intellectual tradition, in the first two decades of the sixteenth century (11.36-51, IV.106, V.207-9), at which point it was broadening out into diverse and curious religious speculations (III, passim). When the Reformation came about - and Spitz is properly careful to stress that Luther's message arose from an individual spiritual insight, which cannot be neatly summarized in terms of its 'sources' (e.g. VII.113-14) - it soon 'derailed' humanism. The energies hitherto devoted to the humanist programme were transferred to more specifically theological ends (IV.109, V.209). Nevertheless, humanism and the Reformation remained intertwined. The intellectual attainments of the Renaissance humanists 'made the Reformation possible', by supplying linguistic skills, techniques of textual criticism, and the critique of scholastic theology and institutional corruption in the Church (11.51, V, 213ff, IX, 383-4). Moreover, since

many of the younger reformers had been primarily Renaissance humanists in their youth (IV, passim), they ensured the continuity of humanist values and methods by incorporating them into reformed schooling. Languages, rhetoric, poetry, and history all found their place in the Lutheran higher educational curriculum. By the end of the sixteenth century, study of these subjects had advanced to a level of knowledge well beyond those attained by the propagandists of the 'heroic' period of 1510-20 (11.57ff, V.215-19, VII,106-8, IX.384-93).

At this point, intellectually speaking, a serious problem rears its head, of which Spitz is only too well aware. It has long been customary to regard the Reformation, and even more so Luther's role in it, as representing an 'anti-Renaissance' or an 'anti-humanism'.(2) The Reformation appears as the antithesis of the Renaissance, in two related and connected areas: the ability of human nature to know the divine through reason, and the ability of human nature to obey the divine law through the moral will. In each case the humanists are depicted as optimists, and the reformers as pessimists. For the latter, only the cloak of Christ's righteousness, draped over the sinful soul, could protect it from the terrors of divine justice against sin. Before the unsearchable majesty of God, attempts by unaided human reason to comprehend the depths of Providence appeared presumptuous: light came only through the Gospel received in the Word of Scripture, and reason was a 'harlot' (Luther's choice of word) when it tried to reach beyond revelation. Lewis Spitz is extremely sensitive to this antinomy and refers to it on many occasions. He points out that the Renaissance writers saw Christ as a moral example to imitate, whereas the reformers saw him as a testimony of God's will towards humanity (V.215, VII.114-15, IX.384). This problem gives his studies on religious anthropology (above all in Chapter XI) their relevance within the book. Spitz seeks to square the circle by claiming Luther, as far as possible, as a disciple of the humanists. He points out that Luther praised the powers of human reason, quite extravagantly, in certain particular texts, but only in so far as those powers related to earthly, secular knowledge (VI.92-4, VII.101, X.136-9). This claim is perfectly sound (although based on rather few texts); Calvin said something quite similar.(3) The difference between Renaissance and Reformation lies not so much on how highly natural reason is valued, as on the relative importance attached to divine and human knowledge; for the reformers, the former was so much more important than earthly knowledge, that mere worldly wisdom bulked less large. Spitz's approach gives less satisfaction, however, when reformers are compared one with another. When Luther spoke of the 'harlot reason', he opposed not only human efforts to fulfill the divine law, but also human efforts to 'rationalize' the divine message. When Zwingli argued that it was unreasonable to suppose that performance of a human rite (say, consecrating the Eucharist) could bring about supernatural changes in the elements, Luther accused him (amongst other things) of 'arrogantly' abusing reason. This difference in approach provides one of many reasons why Zwingli and his followers are usually regarded as more 'humanist' than Luther. The powers of natural reason were a battleground *within* the Reformation itself. It is not that Spitz is unaware of this point; he simply does not say very much about it.

Chapter XI, 'Man on this isthmus', goes even further in flattening out the distinction between higher and lower estimates of the powers of human nature. With a breathtaking range of erudition, Spitz first traces a tradition of high estimates of human powers, through classical antiquity, Nemesius of Emesa, Lactantius, the early Italian humanists, and Luther (XI.26-39); then he identifies a parallel tradition of pessimism about human powers, through the melancholic tendencies of Boethius, Innocent III, Petrarch, Salutati, Ficino and Pico (XI.39-47). The pessimists had their hopeful moments; the optimists had their bleak moments. It is not altogether clear what this proves, beyond the point (about which idealist historians perhaps did need a reminder) that high or low values of human worth almost never exist in their pure forms in a mind of any subtlety at all.

One senses that, for Spitz, Luther did indeed embody the Germanic religious spirit of the Renaissance, as Dilthey might have claimed. Yet it is not absolutely clear how strongly Spitz himself feels about this point. Evidence for Luther's engagement with humanism is surveyed in two adjacent chapters. In the third section of Chapter VII, Spitz reviews Luther's attitude to the classics and the Renaissance on the basis of the 'Table Talk' of 1530-46: he remarks upon his continued citation of classical authors, and notes his approval of Cicero, rhetoric, classical drama, music, and history. He cites Gordon Rupp's discovery that Luther actually used more classical allusions in his treatise against Erasmus in 1525 than the latter had used in his own

diatribe (VII.101-14). In Chapter VIII, first published some eleven years after Chapter VII, Spitz reviews much of the same evidence, but comes to slightly more measured conclusions. Luther's classical citations may not have been first-hand; his classical erudition was by no means untypical of a scholar of his age, nor did he seem to read any new classics in later life. He interpreted doubtful scriptural texts according to dogmatic criteria, not the pure humanist principle of comparing text with text. He believed in mass education, but lacked the humanists' prodigious confidence in its improving effects (V111.77-88).

Luther holds the key to the debate. The problem is that in Lewis Spitz's work only two aspects of that many-faceted and elusive mind really come sharply into focus: his Renaissance-inspired scholarship, and his biblically inspired theology of justification. Spitz responds to some of the other issues in the shaping of Luther's mind here and there through this collection, above all in Chapter VII. Since the pioneering work of Heiko A. Oberman and his students has taught us to take late medieval scholasticism seriously, Luther has been shown to draw on his training in scholastic methods of reasoning, especially the 'via moderna' of late medieval nominalism, long after he had aggressively denounced that school's approach to the justification of sinful souls.(4) Luther called William of Ockham his 'master' even quite late in life.(5) Spitz has little time for this paradoxical insistence that Luther may have depended on the thought-patterns of a school of theology which he rejected twice, first as a humanist when reforming the Wittenberg curriculum, and again, more profoundly, as a reformer (e.g. VII, 113). Yet the paradox, that Luther could denounce the 'sophists' and yet invoke them against opponents' faulty logic, is not of historians' making, but Luther's. If Spitz is hostile to the idea of enduring nominalist influence on Luther, he has no time at all for Oberman's other major thesis, that Luther's religious psyche was shaped by an intense sense of the power and work of the devil. In recent years Heiko Oberman has alleged that Luther did not intend what we call a 'reformation' at all. He saw his role as that of preaching the Gospel in the face of the ever greater rage of Satan against him and the Gospel; when Satan's rage was at its worst, he expected Christ to appear as the true 'reformer'.(6) In this light, the work of 'reforming' the Church appeared merely provisional. Spitz is tersely dismissive of this claim in the preface: 'Luther was not a cultural freak-out caught between God and Satan expecting momentary eschatological doom, but a university professor and family man ... looking to the future of mankind' (preface, p. viii). It is perfectly legitimate to question whether apocalyptic, near-Manichaean fear of the devil was always and equally present in Luther's thought.(7) However, it is also clear that by comparison with other reformers, Luther was more apocalyptic, more concerned with the presence of the devil, than was usual for his contemporaries. Oecolampadius complained, for example, of the repeated references to the devil in *That these words, 'This is my body' ... still stand firm against the fanatics*. Luther was not only different from the Swiss humanists; he was also very different from Melanchthon. It is questionable whether Spitz has really done justice to this aspect of the man, even in the way suggested by the most judicious of recent Luther biographers, Martin Brecht.(8)

Professor Spitz is slightly more generous to the suggestion that an 'Augustinian revival' in late medieval theology helped to condition Luther's mind alongside the influences of humanism. Unfortunately, Spitz's discussion Of the 'via Gregorii', the tradition of the fourteenth-century Augustinian Gregory of Rimini and his alleged influence at the university of Wittenberg, which was perfectly reasonable in 1974 when Chapter VII was first published, has since been seriously questioned by the researches of D. C. Steinmetz. Steinmetz has shown that the idea of an 'Augustinian school' needs very careful qualification.(9) On the other hand, it does not really matter that Spitz has not reconsidered late medieval Augustinianism in this context, since he is not concerned with Augustinian theology for itself, but for its relationship to humanism. He claims that many Augustinian religious were also humanist writers; that followers of the writings of Augustine tended to adopt a 'platonized and somewhat mystical theology' which made them prone to oppose Aristotelianism. In other words, the 'Augustinians' can be drawn into the humanist camp; therefore, 'humanist Augustinians' can be added to the list of forerunners who prepared the ground for Luther (V11.93-101). One senses that a certain sleight-of-hand is being used here, consciously or not. Of course there was a strand in Augustine's thought which was consciously and abundantly Neo-Platonist. Recent researches in his *Confessions* have revealed numerous unacknowledged quotations and allusions to the writings of the pagan Neo-Platonist Plotinus.(10) Yet Augustine could be many things to many people, according to whether one focused on his doctrine of soul and spirit (Platonist), his doctrine of justification (anti-Pelagian) or his doctrine of the

Church (anti-Donatist and anti-Manichaean). It was the second of these doctrines, not the first, which was alleged to have shaped the younger Luther. Given that D. C. Steinmetz has warned us all about running together many of the different senses of the word 'Augustinian', Spitz's argument in Chapter VII should perhaps be read with some caution.

A more fundamental question arises over the assimilation of Luther into the humanist tradition both before and after the Reformation crisis. Renaissance humanism, as Spitz shows in Chapter III, did not spawn a coherent body of religious teachings. One should go further: it was not only un-dogmatic, but anti-dogmatic. The religious humanists consciously opposed the attempt to nail down the content of faith in terms of dogma. In contrast, as Dilthey himself put it, Luther's faith 'is not the exit of dogma ... on the contrary, it has this dogma in all respects as its necessary presupposition. It stands and falls with the dogma."(11) It was because of this essentially un-humanist preoccupation with dogmatic formulations that Lutheranism, like Calvinism, eventually outgrew the humanistic, rhetorical garb which it wore in its youth, and had to adopt a technical jargon akin to the old scholasticism. It was partly for this reason that Ernst Troeltsch, whose first major scholarly work focused on Reason and revelation in Melanchthon and Johann Gerhard, so emphasized the medieval, supernaturalist, dogmatic quality of Reformation thought.'(12)

So why is it that Spitz, who shows such sensitivity to so many of the favoured themes of the Renaissance humanists, slides over their opposition to debate over religious dogma? Evidently this antithesis has the power to make the progress from humanist to reformer less smooth, less natural, than it could appear to be. Another quirk in Spitz's writing needs to be remarked upon here. He treats Erasmus of Rotterdam, the leader of anti-dogmatic religious writers in the Renaissance, whom one might expect to figure quite largely in the subject, cursorily and often dismissively. I have great personal sympathy for the view that Erasmus has been excessively and uncritically praised by some of his biographers, who sometimes seem rather to seek to justify his stance in terms of modern-day Catholicism, than to locate his beliefs historically in the sixteenth-century context.'(13) Yet when Spitz refers to the debate between Erasmus and Luther in 1525-6 as 'overrated' (1.20), or tidies discussion of him into a corner with German (or sometimes English) humanists, it is hard to see that this represents a fair estimate either of his stature or his influence. Spitz points out that in contrast to Mutian, Celtis, and Reuchlin, the chief German Neo-Platonist religious philosophers, Erasmus did not develop a 'theologia platonica' in his *Enchiridion* (III.130). This is no doubt true: but surely the point is that Erasmus, by appropriating some of the slogans of the Neo-Platonists, e.g. calling on intelligent believers to proceed from 'things visible' (relics, good works) to 'things invisible' (contemplation of the virtues of great Christians), produced a sort of Platonized ethical theology which was potentially much more accessible and influential to a wide readership than the secretive musings of Mutian or the arcana of Reuchlin.

A deeper historical question lies under the surface of the material covered in this book. The earlier religious humanists, as Spitz himself has shown so well, could wander off into remote ethereal zones of religio-philosophical speculation, and mock the crass piety of the vulgar, safe in the knowledge (as they thought) that the great machinery of the Church and its rites was never likely to be challenged. The next generation of humanists found by the early 1520s that this very system *had* been challenged, and to devastating effect. The disturbing and destructive speculations of a Mutian could not provide a safe haven for young scholars whose means of grace had suddenly been shattered: so they turned to the dogmas of the Reformation, and brought their intellectual baggage with them. In this unstable world it took a rare and resolute belief in the priority of ethics over doctrine in the Christian life - such a belief as Erasmus held - to resist the drift onwards into Lutheranism or backwards into sacerdotalism. Spitz's insights into the continuity of humanist values are vital and valuable. Yet if one is to take the measure of the religious turmoil of the early sixteenth century, the conflict between Renaissance and Reformation values and priorities may need to be acknowledged, more than he appears willing to do.

Notes

1. See the essays by Dilthey and Troeltsch translated in L. W. Spitz, ed., *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*

, 2nd edn., (Lexington, Mass., 1972), 1143).Back to (1)

2. This is the precise phrase used in Jean Delumeau, *Naissance et affirmation de la réforme* (Paris, 1973), 74).Back to (2)
3. Spitz's analysis of Luther's use of the term 'reason' draws on Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*: *A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford, 1962). Compare the discussion of man's natural gifts in Calvin, Institutes, II. ii. 12-24).Back to (3)
4. See esp. Heiko A. Oberman, 'Headwaters of the Reformation' in Oberman, ed., *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era*: *papers for the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research* (Leiden, 1974), 54-69 and refs).Back to (4)
5. O. Scheel, *Dokumente zu Luthers Entwicklung* (bis 1519), 2nd edn., (Tubingen, 1929), 86-7, 94,110, 144,162,175).Back to (5)
6. See Oberman's essay, 'Martin Luther: Forerunner of the Reformation', in H. A. Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications*, trans. A. C. Gow (Edinburgh, 1994), 27-38. On the devil see ibid., 56-70).Back to (6)
7. See my review article, 'Heroic Ideas and Hero-Worship', in *The Historical Journal* 40 No. 1 (1997), 217-226 and esp. 221-2).Back to (7)
8. On Oecolampadius's remarks, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and defining the Reformation*, trans. J. M. Schaaf (Minneapolis, 1990), 319 and refs).Back to (8)
9. D. C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham, NC, 1980), 23-34).Back to (9)
10. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1991), esp. 111ff).Back to (10)
11. Dilthey, 'The Interpretation and Analysis of Man, in Spitz, *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations* [as note 1], 18).Back to (11)
12. See e.g. *Wilhelm Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch: two historical theologians* (New York, 1968), 58-65). Back to (12)
13. See my review articles discussing e.g. R. J. Schoeck's two-volume biography of Erasmus in *The Historical Journal* 36 No. 4 (1993) 957-64 (vol 1) and *European History Quarterly* 26 (1996) 125-40 (vol 11).Back to (13)

Due to outstanding work commitments the author has not yet been able to respond to this review. The response will be posted in due course.

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