Introduction

Christian thought in the West has known one major disruption, that represented by the Reformation. The thought of Martin Luther may well be described as a shift in paradigm compared with that which preceded it. As is often the case with paradigm shifts, those who continued to belong to the previous paradigm (in this case Catholicism) have failed to appreciate what is at stake. The new system tends to be interpreted in terms of the old. Thus what is novel about it comes to be lost, or is simply not understood for what it is. Terms or concepts are taken from the new system and equated with what those terms or concepts meant within the previous system. The shift which has taken place, such that the new system revolves around a different axis and embodies different presuppositions, fails to be comprehended. Viewed through an inappropriate lens, the new system appears not to be systematic at all. What of course is needed is to jump wholesale from the old paradigm into the new, gaining a different orientation. Only then can comparisons between the two systems be made. But comparisons are also difficult, because the two paradigms are strictly non-comparable.

Catholic and Lutheran thought are differently structured. By way of shorthand, I shall designate Catholic thought as 'linear', whereas Lutheran thought by contrast revolves around a 'dialectic'. In using the term 'structure of thought', clearly I mean the way in which different doctrines are arranged in relation to one another, though the doctrines and concepts may themselves also differ. An interesting question is the relationship between diverse structures of thought and the philosophical underpinning which is present (though rarely articulated). The structures of thought of Lutheran faith on the one hand and Catholic doctrine on the other are I believe more enduring and more fundamental than the respective philosophical outlooks in which each has been embedded. Thus

much Catholicism, unsurprisingly, since Catholicism grew within the ancient pagan world, is neo-Platonist and, subsequent to the Middle Ages, Aristotelian in its presuppositions. Yet it is possible to conceive of a Catholicism which had largely left behind any explicit utilisation of these philosophies. More surprisingly perhaps, it was possible for Lutherans in the sixteenth century, in their endeavour to explain what they would say to Catholics, to express themselves using Aristotelian terminology. It is not then possible to think that the gap between Lutheran and Catholic faith is simply a philosophical divide, however significant this may be. It consists rather in a different structuring of Christian faith.

Catholics will sometimes proclaim there to be 'no such thing as Catholicism'. If by this the intention is to call attention to the fact that Catholicism has been extraordinarily diverse, then that is certainly the case. But all Catholicism is, as far as I can see, linear or 'Augustinian': that is simply taken as axiomatic. Salvation is something other than creation, and the human undergoes change as (through God's grace, to express this in traditional manner) he or she is transformed. The situation is akin to that of the Chinaman who proclaimed all Westerners to look alike. To the outsider it is apparent what all members of a race hold in common. Catholics who say there is 'no such thing as Catholicism' have presumably not considered the Lutheran structuring of Christianity. Were they to do so, it would become apparent what Catholics in common take for granted.

By contrast with Catholic thought, the essence of Lutheranism is that it is structured by a dialectic. There are two ways in which a human being can live: the one is to be designated 'faith', the other 'sin'. Nor is it – unlike the linear structure of Catholicism – that the human can move from the one situation to the other while keeping the self intact, as though 'nature' were to be transformed by 'grace'. On the one hand there is the stance of faith, in which a human looks wholly to God, basing himself 'outside' himself in God. On the other, there is sin, in which the human, wrapped up in himself, attempts in and of himself to be good enough for God. The stance of faith represents both salvation and creation, since salvation is the recovery of the relationship to God intended by the creator. The movement from sin to faith is a revolution and takes place through repentance and the recognition that the attempt to come to oneself apart from God was futile. Life is not to be conceived as a *via* for our

inward change and the Christian looks not to something about the way he is but, rather, simply to God in whom he trusts.

I should say that what fascinates me about this topic (for we shall soon become embroiled in the intricacies of Lutheran and Catholic thought as historical traditions) is not Lutheranism and Catholicism *per se*. What has interested me is the more abstract and theoretical issue as to how one should conceptualise the human relationship to God. Thus the book could be written in terms of two paradigms which are possible, given the presupposition of monotheistic Christian thought. Is it possible to think both of these together? That is to say – in terms of the two structures which we shall consider – how might one bring together Lutheran 'faith' and Catholic 'love'? What makes this issue so pertinent is that the two possibilities have in fact been embodied in the West in two divergent historical traditions. This may have given the way in which the question has been formulated particular quirks which are accidents of history. But it also serves to show, through the different spiritualities or understandings of faith, what a fundamental question this is. Catholics and Lutherans have rejoiced in different things. They stumble over different aspects of the 'other' faith. They ask divergent questions of each other. The two are not symmetrically opposed.

In this book I commence with an attempt, within the space of one chapter, to describe the structure of Luther's thought. Given the depth and breadth of misunderstanding which over centuries there has been, this is a tall order, but one in which I hope I can succeed! If there are Catholics who, reading this, understand for the first time what it is that confronts them in Lutheranism, then this book will have served its purpose even should they read no further. It is important that readers approach this chapter without presuppositions if they themselves come from a 'catholic' (that could be an 'Anglo-Catholic') background. It is as though a kaleidoscope has been shaken as compared with Catholicism, resulting in a different pattern. It is not moreover just a surface pattern which is different, but what I have described as a different structuring of faith, formulated to meet different concerns and founded on different presuppositions. One can of course think a structure of thought to be of the greatest fascination even if, ultimately, one comes out against it. This has been my own story as I have wrestled with Lutheran faith, though I continue to think it both powerful and profoundly integrated. Each thought or doctrine

is logically placed in relation to the dialectic around which Lutheran faith is structured.

I am taking it for granted that the structure of Catholic thought will be much more familiar to many of my readers. It is also to a greater extent self-evident. (It is the point of Lutheran faith that something other is the case than what one would expect.) Therefore I shall not in chapter 2 repeat what I attempt for Lutheran thought in chapter 1 (besides which there is no one thinker whom one can take for Catholicism in the way that one can take Luther's thought for Lutheran faith). What I shall rather do is consider the sixteenth-century Catholic response to the outbreak of the Reformation. In particular I shall consider the Council of Trent and its decree on 'justification'. Catholics may in part have failed to understand Luther, but the decree makes very evident what they by contrast would say and where they disagreed. Trent is also important as being a defining moment within Catholic history, both drawing on diverse strands within the Catholic past and remaining authoritative to this day. It set the path for modern Catholicism, marking out the boundaries as to what was acceptable. I shall also therefore consider that other movement within early sixteenth-century (in particular Italian) Catholicism which, thinking itself closer to the Reformation position, advocated a 'double justice'. It is important to understand what was ruled out at Trent. Towards the end of the chapter 1 shall make some more general remarks, setting Trent within a wider Catholic context. It will be possible (having now described both structures) to make some illuminative contrasts.

Given that it is a basic contention of the present work that Catholics have failed to grasp the basic structure of Lutheran thought, this needs to be documented and explored. In chapter 3 I shall turn to this matter, attempting to demonstrate the widespread, indeed near universal, nature of this phenomenon. The same misunderstandings are to be found in divergent Catholic traditions, among those who are hostile and equally, it would seem, among more recent writers who aim to be eirenic. (That this is the case itself of course sheds an interesting light on the extent to which Catholic presuppositions are taken for granted among those who hold them.) In the early part of the chapter 1 shall take at random a plethora of writers, pointing to their misconceptions. As the chapter progresses, however, I shall focus on a number of recent major theologians in the German-language tradition. I shall consider, as a way of

organising the material, the misreading of the Lutheran epithet that we are *simul iustus et peccator.* Catholic response to this is a good litmus test. Catholic authors read it in an Augustinian sense, as though it meant that we are part justified, in part still a sinner (or insist that it must be read in this manner). For Lutherans by contrast the phrase signifies that we are accepted by God irrespective of any interior state. (But that, as we shall see, it would be almost impossible for Catholics to say.)

Having ranged over Christian history (though concentrating in particular on the sixteenth century) I turn in chapter 4 to what is in effect a case history or vignette. I consider the misreading by those of a Catholic disposition (Anglo-Catholic or Catholic) of the Swedish Lutheran Anders Nygren's well-known book *Agape and Eros.* The choice is a good one. As a representative of what is known as Scandinavian 'motif' research, Nygren is precisely interested in structures of thought and in particular the difference between Catholicism and Lutheranism. (Unlike Nygren I do not wish to advocate one rather than the other, though he would claim his work to be purely historical.) The extent to which Nygren could be misread is stunning; but then this illustrates our point that unless one knows the Lutheran structure of thought one reads through the wrong pair of glasses. Interesting also is Karl Barth's very different response, as a Reformed theologian, to Nygren. That there is something in common between the Catholic response and Barth's response (while in other respects Barth takes the Lutheran side in what is a common Protestant position) allows us to begin to articulate what might be problematic about the Lutheran structure as such. Furthermore, given Barth's position, it is interesting to ask whether he himself in his thinking brings together the strengths of both the Catholic and the Lutheran positions which we have considered. I think that in the end he does not succeed in this, but the failure provides a backdrop to what I consider a much more successful synthesis in the thought of Kierkegaard, which I discuss in the final chapter.

Were I not to consider the modern ecumenical movement, I am clear that it would be said to me 'But have not all these ancient difficulties of which you speak been resolved in recent years?' I therefore interrupt my flow of thought to devote chapter 5 to a consideration of the Lutheran/Catholic debates on 'justification' (the heart of the matter) which have taken place during the last

quarter of the twentieth century. I consider the American conversations, those of a rather different nature which took place in the Federal Republic of Germany, and finally the international attempt to formulate a 'Joint Declaration on Justification' which, after a notable setback, resulted in the signing of an 'Official Common Statement' on Reformation Day, 31 October 1999. What I hope I shall show through this chapter is that the differences are far from resolved. That does not of course mean that no ecumenical statement is possible (clearly it is, as it was also in the sixteenth century at Regensburg). But whether there is a point in such declarations when one is concerned with two such different structures is a different issue. It will therefore be pertinent to our present considerations to consider dissenting Lutherans who, both in the States and in Germany, have found themselves profoundly unhappy with what is being negotiated on their behalf.

In chapter 6 I return to the position reached at the end of chapter 4. Having considered Nygren, I shall now turn to Bultmann as a twentieth-century Lutheran who exemplifies the Lutheran structure of faith. Bultmann is I believe brilliant; the most persuasive advocate of Christianity in the modern world. Bultmann follows through the structure of Lutheran thought into the realm of epistemology, thus making Christianity independent of (or able to live with) the implications of the Enlightenment for Christian thought. He is also a very creative Lutheran theologian who shows, in his own way, how relevant Lutheran insights might be today. That I ultimately disagree with Bultmann, indeed find him to exemplify in marked form the problems which I found to be present in Nygren's thought (and behind both of them in Luther and the Lutheran structure as a whole) has therefore been very important for my own development. In some ways the position which I have come to hold is closer to Catholicism, but it is a Catholicism shorn of Christian revelation! That one could even make such a remark raises interesting questions about the nature of Catholicism. Lutherans indeed have long been asking about the importance of Christianity understood as revelation to Catholics. I therefore in this chapter carry on a three-way debate between Catholicism, Lutheranism, and my own now post-Christian position.

At this point it has become clear what might be the strengths and the problems associated with each of the divergent traditions which I have considered. In either case both strengths and problems may be

considered intrinsic to the structure itself as well as, in the case of Catholicism, a result of its Aristotelian substructure. It therefore becomes pertinent to ask whether the strengths of each position could be brought together in one coherent whole. Here I concentrate on the nub of the problem: the question as to how the self should be conceived in relationship to God. I turn to the thought of the nineteenth-century Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was a Lutheran by upbringing and disposition. Nevertheless he weaves into his Lutheran positions strands of thought which have more commonly been associated with Catholicism. Kierkegaard would speak of a love of God and therefore also of a self which comes to itself in relationship to God. He is moreover a post-Enlightenment man, with a post-Hegelian rather than an 'Aristotelian' understanding of the self – allowing various problematic aspects of the Catholic position to fall away. Kierkegaard makes a notable advance upon a classical Lutheran position and one which has not been followed by the twentieth-century Lutherans whom we have considered. His understanding of the self as it is structured in relationship to God therefore forms the climax to this present work.

It may well have surprised readers who do not know my previous writing to learn that I am not a Christian (though I am – at least according to my own definition – certainly a theist). Equally it may surprise readers who are apprised of that body of work that I choose to write a book in mainline Christian theology, in which of course I was trained and which for many years I taught. This book and my previous post-Christian, feminist, publication are not unconnected. It was in part in wrestling with the issues which I discuss in this book that I moved outside and beyond Christianity. (It was simply too difficult to explain to readers of the feminist work that there was no way in which, within Christianity, I could see the self both as grounded in God and as able to inter-relate with God.) The questions which I discuss in this book were at one time of acute personal moment for me. But it is not that I have resolved them. Rather have I moved to a position where they have become inapplicable, in that I have come to think of 'God' in very different terms. This I cannot discuss here and readers should turn to my *After Christianity*.[1] Meanwhile I hope that my standing outside Christianity has not prevented me from entering, with clarity and not without

[1] London: SCM Press, 1996 and Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997.

compassion, into debates about those profound theological issues over which Christians have struggled for so long. At the end of the book, in an epilogue, I allow myself to stand outside the present work and to consider how some of the issues I discuss look from my present perspective.

CHAPTER I

Luther's Revolution

What I want to do in this chapter is to convey the structure of Lutheran thought. One could of course do this in the abstract, as an 'ideal' system of thought, drawing on numerous Lutheran theologians by way of illustration. I have decided however that this would unnecessarily complicate the chapter and that it is preferable simply to turn to Luther as the progenitor of a tradition, leaving the discussion of later Lutheran theologians considered in their own right to subsequent chapters. I shall however draw on a whole variety of Lutheran commentators on Luther, thereby conveying something of a wider tradition, indeed of different schools of Lutheran thought and divergent emphases. Catholics, as we shall see, have too often treated Luther as though he were a 'one-off', his thought the result of some personal problem or disposition. On the contrary, Luther was the founder of a vibrant tradition, one way of structuring Christian belief. I shall make one exception to this policy of confining myself to Luther and those who commentate directly on Luther. I shall at points make reference to the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I do this both because I do not consider Bonhoeffer elsewhere (and he seems important) and also because no one more markedly than he took up and translated Lutheran insights, expressing them in other form. I believe that reading Bonhoeffer gives one insights into Luther and not simply vice versa.

I shall structure this chapter in the following manner. In the first part I shall consider Luther's understanding of the 'self' (if one can use such a term for a sixteenth-century man) and the human relation to God, returning once and again to the theme of 'extrinsic' righteousness. I believe this to be quite fundamental to grasping Luther and crucial to the contrast with Catholicism. In the remainder of the chapter I shall turn to a wider exposition of Luther's thought, showing it to revolve, as I have already mentioned, around

a dialectic which is repeated in one or another guise. The chapter is, thus, something other than a general introduction to Luther's thought and is rather orientated to the task at hand.[1] I must apologise to readers who are already familiar with Luther. It seems necessary to start at the beginning.

It was in September 1520 that an Augustinian friar, Martin Luther, sent a remarkable essay in Latin and in German, together with a conciliatory letter, to Pope Leo X. Luther was threatened with the bull 'Exsurge Domine', which entailed excommunication, the burning of his books, and the requirement of recantation within sixty days. The essay was entitled 'On the Freedom of a Christian'. Luther was a learned man, a university professor and biblical exegete, trained in the original biblical languages and making use of texts which had not been available to scholars for a thousand years until his time. The essay represents the conclusions which, as we shall see, he had arrived at through courses of lectures delivered during the previous eight years. His position in this essay is exactly commensurate with that of his great Galatians lectures (perhaps the high point of his career as a theologian) given in the first half of the 1530s.[2]

The essay concerns – significantly, for this is fundamental to Luther – 'Christian Freedom'. It argues that the Christian is free from all works; and that this man, freed from worrying about his acceptance by God, is available to become a servant (or slave) in the service of his neighbour. Hence it revolves around the paradox: 'A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.' (Cf. Romans 13.8.) At the climax of the essay Luther encapsulates his theology in a nutshell. 'We conclude, therefore,' he writes, 'that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour' (another way of expressing this same paradox). He adds: 'Otherwise he is not a Christian.' This then for Luther is the hallmark of what it means to be a Christian. The Christian is one who lives *not in himself*, but in

[1] For good general introductions to all aspects of Luther's thought in English see Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (London: Collins Fontana, 1972; first published 1964) and Philip Watson, *Let God be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (London: Epworth Press, 1947).

[2] In saying this I do not mean to imply that there was no development in Luther's thought. There was – notably in the matter of the sacraments following the controversies with the left wing of the Reformation in the late 1520s. But the basic structure remains remarkably constant subsequent to the breakthrough to a full Reformation position in 1520.