

## Introduction

About a third of the earth's seven billion people can be identified as Christian. About half of these 2.2 billion Christians are Roman Catholic, and a little more than a third, about 37 percent of them, are Protestant.<sup>1</sup> The Protestants divide into hundreds of denominations, and although the majority of these have emerged only in the last 200 years, the oldest trace their origins to national and territorial churches of sixteenth-century Europe.<sup>2</sup> Roman Catholics and Protestants thus make up the two largest segments of a pie chart representing the world's largest religion today.

The distinction between Catholic and Protestant arose 500 years ago in the controversy over Martin Luther. A monk and a professor in Saxony, a divided territory in the center-east of German-speaking lands,<sup>3</sup> Luther

<sup>1</sup> About 12 percent are members of the Eastern Orthodox churches that trace their histories to Russia and the Middle East. *The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010*, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, December 2012), [www.pewforum.org/files/2012/12/globalReligion-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/12/globalReligion-full.pdf), accessed 29 December 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions to this rule are the Moravian Brethren, who trace their origins to a rebellion against the papacy and the Holy Roman Emperor in Bohemia in the 1420s inspired by the teachings of Jan Hus (d. 1415); the Hutterites, who trace their origins to the religious commune begun by Jakob Hutter (d. 1536); and the Mennonites, who trace their beginnings to the teachings of Menno Simons (d. 1561). None of these churches ever became a national or territorial church, a church officially endorsed by a king, prince, or city.

<sup>3</sup> Two cousins, princes and competitors, ruled a divided territory. The territory was divided by Friedrich II (d. 1464) between two sons, Ernst (d. 1486) and Albrecht (d. 1500). The two Saxonies are therefore known as Ernestine Saxony and Albertine Saxony. At the beginning of the Reformation, Ernestine Saxony was ruled by sons of Ernst and Albrecht. Friedrich "the Wise" ruled Ernestine Saxony, and Albertine Saxony was ruled by Georg "the Bearded." Friedrich, like his father Ernst, had his main residence in the city of

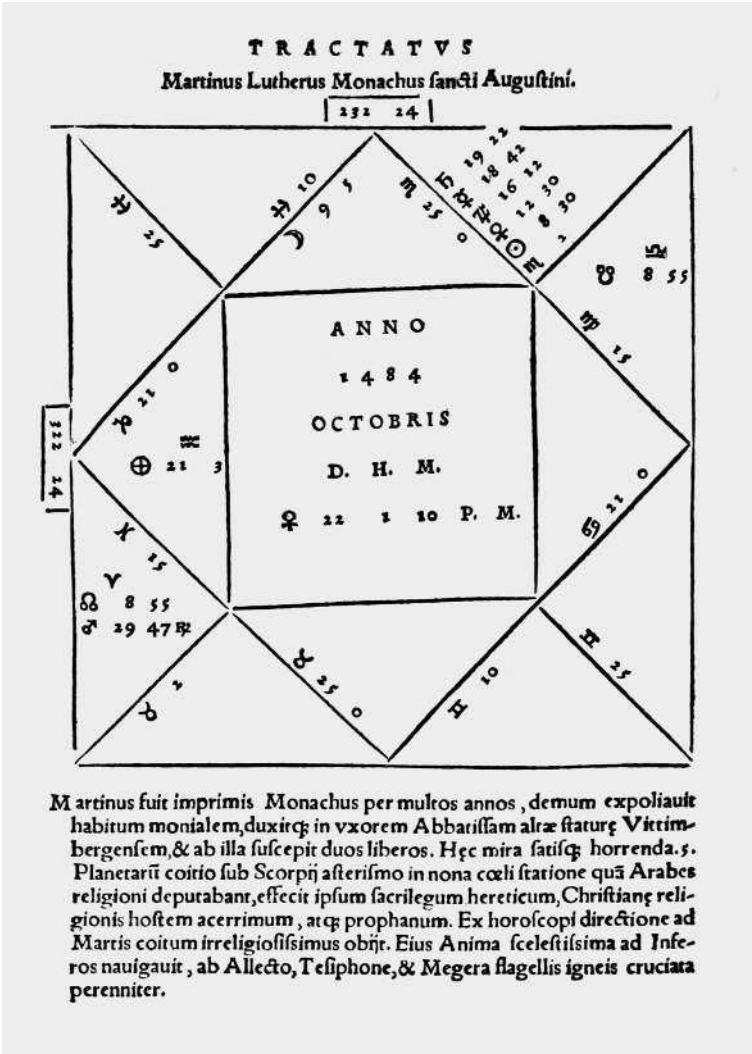


FIGURE 1. Luca Guarico, *Tractatus Astrologicus* (Venice: Navo, 1552), f. 69v, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich (shelf mark 4 Liturg. 252#Beibd.1). Photo: Courtesy Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

Martin Luther's horoscope, according to Luca Gaurico, one of the most influential astrologers of the sixteenth century, in his most famous book, the *Tractatus astrologicus* (1552). The caption says, "Martin Luther was, first of all, a monk for many years, until he finished with the monastic robe and took a Wittenberg abbess of high standing as a wife and had two children by her. [Now referring to upper right-hand triangle] This marvelous and sufficiently dreadful conjunction of five planets under the astral region of Scorpio [ $\eta$ ] in the triangle, below symbols for Saturn, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and the Sun] in the ninth heaven, which the Arab astrologers reserved for religion, causes that heretical sacrilege, that most irritating and profane enemy of Christian religion. From the direction of the horoscope toward the conjunction of Mars, the most irreligious man dies. His most wicked soul sails into the earth's depths, tormented forever by Allecta, Tisiphone, and Megaera [avenging furies of Greek mythology] with fiery whips."

*A Question of Impact*

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was condemned for heresy by the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor in 1520 and 1521. Less than a decade later, in 1529, his supporters were called Protestants for the first time. And so the great divide of western Christendom began.

A QUESTION OF IMPACT

Did Martin Luther change the world? The sheer dimensions of western Christianity, with this historical division over Luther, suggest he did. Historians in Germany, where Luther lived, and many other scholars elsewhere have frequently spoken of the “global-historical significance of Luther” (*Luthers weltgeschichtliche Bedeutung*), to quote the title of an essay by Hermann Heimpel, director of the prestigious Max Planck Institute for History in Göttingen from 1957 to 1971.<sup>4</sup> The controversy over Luther divided and profoundly affected world Christianity, but historians have, in fact, claimed it did much more. Luther, they say, contributed to a whole gamut of modern developments, not only secularization, science, philosophies that reject metaphysics, and liberal theologies adapted to such developments, but also fundamentalist reactions against modern science, and even the emergence of Pentecostal movements in America, Latin America, and Africa today. Many have claimed Luther. But how could such dissimilar things be attributed to the influence of one man?

We should be able to answer this question. Luther is arguably the most knowable historical figure of any kind who lived before the year 1700, a remarkable distinction for an epoch that routinely lionized its spiritual heroes and institutionalized memories of them.<sup>5</sup> The famous

Wittenberg. Georg, like his father Albrecht, had his main residence in Leipzig. The competition between them and their successors is only the most famous aspect of the political complexity of our story.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Heimpel, “Luthers weltgeschichtliche Bedeutung,” first published in 1946 and reprinted in H. Heimpel, *Der Mensch und seine Gegenwart. Sieben historische Essays* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1954), 136–141. Hans Medick, Peer Schmidt, “Einleitung,” Medick and Schmidt eds., *Luther zwischen den Kulturen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2004), 1–30, here 14.

<sup>5</sup> On this score, he could be compared to the founders of Catholic religious orders. Peter Burke, “How to Be a Counter-Reformation Saint,” *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings*, ed. David M. Luebke (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 129–142. See also Ulrike Strasser, “The First Form and Grace: Ignatius of Loyola and the Reformation of Masculinity,” *Masculinity in the Reformation Era*, ed. Scott H. Hendrix, Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2008), 45–70; Jodi Bilinkoff, “First

Weimar edition of Luther's works, which reflects the highest standards of textual reconstruction and editing, comprises some 127 volumes and is available to scholars in a searchable electronic version.<sup>6</sup> This collection includes a massive and nearly complete edition of letters, sermons, commentaries, polemical writings, treatises, and conversations.<sup>7</sup> For each document, the edition includes careful scholarly introductions and notes on printings and the historical circumstances of composition. Aided by this extraordinary tool, scholars have for over a century burrowed into the depths of both Luther's thought and its early reception, creating a specialized field of historical and theological study, with its own history, trends, and themes, its own "culture." Since 1956, the quinquennial International Luther Congress has been the clearing house for new scholarship on Luther from around the world. Every year, Luther is discussed and debated by scholars from every continent at dozens of academic conferences. This field is bountiful and contentious. A German academic society, the Luther Gesellschaft, produces an annual journal, the *Luther Jahrbuch*, which includes an annual, specialized bibliography that in 2012 alone numbered 729 books and articles (the bibliography for 2004 listed 1,740 books and articles, the all-time high at the time of this writing).<sup>8</sup> The 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, celebrated in 1983, provoked a frenzy of publishing. Since 2007, another frenzy has been building up over a "Luther Decade" to the 500th anniversary of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in 2017. In a reunited Germany, where the disturbing memory of Nazi atrocities and the use of Luther in anti-Semitic propaganda in both the "Second" and "Third Reichs" linger, the occasion combined research and education, cultural tourism, and soulful introspection over legacies and commercial reappropriations.<sup>9</sup>

Friar, Problematic Founder: John of the Cross in His Earliest Biographies," *Reforming Reformation*, ed. Thomas F. Mayer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 103–118.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luthers Werke im WWW, <http://luther.chadwyck.co.uk/>, accessed 16 August 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Luther's "Table Talk" contains off-the-cuff remarks taken down by students at his table in his home.

<sup>8</sup> [www.luther-gesellschaft.de/jahrbuch/lutherbibliographie.html](http://www.luther-gesellschaft.de/jahrbuch/lutherbibliographie.html), accessed 17 August 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Consider Hartmut Lehmann's trenchant critique of the national, Protestant focus promoted by the organizers of the Luther Decade, pointing out that in Germany today only a third of the population is nominally Protestant (only five percent of whom participate in religious activities), another third is Roman Catholic, and the remaining third adheres to no church, while ten percent of the adults in Germany and one quarter of the children and youth belong to immigrant families with no connection to the Reformation's cultural legacy. Lehmann argues for an international, ecumenical focus that cultivates international partners in North America, Latin America, India, and Ethiopia. Hartmut Lehmann, "Vom Helden zur Null?" [From Hero to Nothing?], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

Today, interest in Luther and his world extends to the minute. In the academic symposium held at the Martin Luther University in Halle-Wittenberg at the beginning of the Luther Decade in 2007, German scholars gathered to summarize and compare archeological and other historical evidence of daily life in Mansfeld, where Luther was a child and his parents lived, and in Wittenberg, where Luther spent the longest period of his adulthood. Their findings were published in a gorgeously illustrated book that includes careful discussions of, among other things, the housewares, ceramic tiles, buckles, buttons, medicine, bird-catching, and groceries (including fish) to which Luther was or could have been exposed.<sup>10</sup> The potential for fetishism is muted only by the intellectual acumen of this exquisite volume.

There are excellent, up-to-date biographies, study tools, and general historical surveys to guide the student of Luther.<sup>11</sup> Martin Brecht's three-volume *Martin Luther*, first published thirty years ago, remains the most accurate and complete presentation of Martin Luther's life available in the English language.<sup>12</sup> A new encyclopedia includes over one hundred articles by experts in all aspects of Luther's background, life, theology, and influence.<sup>13</sup> A new collection of essays by theologians stresses Luther's contribution to serious reflection on psychological anxiety, conflict,

26 October 2014. [www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/die-gegenwart/reformationsjubilaeum-2017-vom-helden-zur-null-13230882.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex\\_2](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/die-gegenwart/reformationsjubilaeum-2017-vom-helden-zur-null-13230882.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2), accessed 28 August 2015. Thomas Kaufmann concedes Luther's enmity to Judaism in his late writing, *Of the Jews and their Lies* (1543), stressing Luther's use of traditional Christian anti-Jewish topoi. But he points to nineteenth-century historians and theologians who facilitated its appropriation by Germans who have been unsettled by industrialization, and defends Luther as "the central figure of the sixteenth century," "whether one likes him or not." "Neither as nutcase, hero, or nothing, Luther has something to say to us. We must rub against the historical Luther, who was always shocking and will so remain." Thomas Kaufmann, "Lutherdekade: Luther und den Antisemiten," *Frankfurter Allgemeinezeitung* 9 January 2015. [www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/die-gegenwart/lutherdekade-luther-unter-den-antisemiten-13344053.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex\\_2](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/die-gegenwart/lutherdekade-luther-unter-den-antisemiten-13344053.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2), accessed 30 August 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *Luthers Lebenswelten*, ed. Harald Meller, Stefan Rhein, Hans-Georg Stephan (Halle: Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Two especially good brief surveys of Reformation history are James Tracy's *Europe's Reformations, 1450–1650* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006) and Peter Marshall's *The Reformation: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 2009). A new handbook includes up-to-date introductions by leading experts on all aspects of the Reformation: *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (New York: Oxford, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek Nelson, Paul Hinlicky (New York: Oxford, 2017).

judicial violence, religious community, sexuality, social justice, feminism, and anti-Semitism.<sup>14</sup> From Germany, a rapidly growing body of new work has appeared. A *Luther Handbuch* (Luther Handbook), with contributions by some of the most important German scholars working on the Reformation, introduces readers to current themes.<sup>15</sup> Among more recent work, the American church historian Robert Kolb offers a new and engaging survey of Luther's thought, and Scott Hendrix has written a thoroughly researched, intimate, and appreciative biography.<sup>16</sup> Lyndal Roper has written a finely textured, intimate biography, too, pointing out sources of the authoritarian personality behind Luther's anti-Semitism and anti-Catholic vituperation.<sup>17</sup> Heinz Schilling's 600-page *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval* offers a comprehensive and detailed perspective that emphasizes Luther's place in the emergence of the early modern territorial state.<sup>18</sup> Volker Leppin stresses Luther's transformation of medieval themes in the first decade of his career as a reformer. Bernd Hamm examines Luther's relationship to late medieval theology and piety, identifying multiple stages in the development of Luther's doctrines and experiences of faith, justification, human freedom, and mysticism.<sup>19</sup> Harm Klueting's *Luther und die Neuzeit* (Luther and Modernity) is informed by detailed knowledge of the medieval background to Luther's principal ideas. It challenges clichés about medieval Catholicism, and describes Luther as a transitional figure in whom evidence for continuity and discontinuity with the medieval past must both be recognized and evaluated.<sup>20</sup> In fact, for the last half century scholars in and out of Germany and beyond have increasingly seen Martin Luther's biography as a palimpsest of competing cultural trends that obscure and complicate the idea of a definitive cultural break: continuity *and* discontinuity, innovation and reaction, *rivoluzione e involuzione* (revolution and reversion) in Claudio Pozzoli's phrase.<sup>21</sup> Since

<sup>14</sup> *Encounters with Luther: New Directions for Critical Studies*, ed. Kirs I. Stjerna, Brooks Schramm (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), esp. xvii–xxi.

<sup>15</sup> *Luther Handbuch*, ed. Albrecht Beutel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (New York: Oxford, 2009). Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther* (New Haven: Yale, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther. Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs. Eine Biographie* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2012), trans. Rona Johnson Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Harm Klueting, *Luther und die Neuzeit* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale, 2006). Claudio Pozzoli, *Vita di Martin Lutero* (Milan: Rusconi, 1983). This form of argument is

few historians have dodged this trend, the difficulty of our question, did Luther change the world, becomes clear.

To attribute cultural change to an individual person, in this case to a monk and professor, could be something like trying to trace the cause of a tornado in Texas to the flap of a butterfly's wing in Brazil.<sup>22</sup> A random change in the finer structure of a system, once it has attained sufficient size, can induce change in the coarser structure, observed the mathematician Edward Lorenz. But, Lorenz explained, this can only be established with high probability by considering a sufficient quantity of relevant data. Society, like nature, is also conditioned by randomness.<sup>23</sup> The accumulation of sufficient relevant data has always been a challenge to historians of pre-modern Europe. Even in the exceptionally well-studied case of Martin Luther, we have limited and inconsistent access to the past, and this includes areas where all historians agree that a body of information has important bearing on the history of lived religion, and it includes areas where the dataset is strong, such as first-person accounts of conversion or a large corpus of an author's writing, or the records of court cases involving religious beliefs, behaviors, and practices in particular towns or regions. At issue is a problem of perspective. Individual actors, to adapt a concept from agent-based modeling in computational science, affect real-world outcomes (in this case, historical outcomes), but only within an environment of a total number of agents; and the agents in a system interact both in clusters and as a whole, forming, in our case, the emergent phenomenon of a society.<sup>24</sup> To isolate an individual

often associated with the German theologian and philosopher Ernst Troeltsch (d. 1923), most famously in his *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (1912). For decentering Luther in Reformation research in English, C. Scott Dixon, *Contesting the Reformation* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1–33.

<sup>22</sup> As in the essay quoted in the epigraph to this chapter.

<sup>23</sup> Ananta Kumar Giri, *Knowledge and Human Liberation: Towards Planetary Realizations* (New York: Anthem, 2014), 132–134. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 76–100.

<sup>24</sup> The idea of the role of autonomous agents in history is, in its crudest form, often called, and ridiculed as, “the great man” theory of history. Of course, the idea of the great historical agent has fallen, together with all the other philosophical and scientific positivisms of the 1960s and 1970s; succumbing, by the 1990s in most fields of the humanities, to an extreme social constructivism, often called “post-modernism,” “post-structuralism,” or “critical theory.” Post-structuralists frequently contrast their deconstructive methods and strongly relativist views of society and culture with natural science, or complain against the failure of the sciences to see themselves as a subset of competing discourses in society, “calling for abandoning classical normal science epistemology and its assumptions of homogenous agent behavior, linear determinism, and equilibrium.” But in fact social constructivism and its stress on social relativity is entirely consistent with the work

actor, such as Luther, and search for the moment of his transformation, his “Reformation breakthrough,” as scholars once commonly did, tells us nothing about the impact of the controversy over time. By the same token, there is no isolated invention, such as the printing press, no single innovative idea, such as the “priesthood of all believers,” and no particular event, such as the 1521 interrogation of Luther at the imperial Diet<sup>25</sup> of Worms, that makes complete sense of the Luther affair.<sup>26</sup> The history we are pursuing is more intricate, vibrant, and unstable than the genius, character, or deeds of an uncommon man could ever explain.

This book therefore strives for an impersonal approach to the legacy of a person. It is an attempt to find patterns that provide answers to questions such as these. What were the most consequential features of the controversy over Luther in the sixteenth century, first and foremost in Luther’s Germany,<sup>27</sup> but also wherever opinions about Luther came

of complexity scientists across the board, which relies heavily on mathematical theories of John von Neumann and John Horton Conway. Since few scholars in the humanities use computational methods, they overlook the compatibility of trends in both domains. The compatibility is pointed out by Leslie Henrickson, Bill McKelvey, “Foundations of a ‘New’ Social Science: Institutional Legitimacy from Philosophy, Complexity Science, Post-Modernism, and Agent-Based Modeling,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 99(2002):7288–7295. The social constructivism that most informs my outlook on religion is the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. Niklas Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion*, trans. David A. Brenner, Adrian Hermann (Palo Alto: Stanford, 2013). Rudolf Schlögl, *Anwesende und Abwesende. Grundriss für eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte der Frühneuzeit* (Constance: University Press, 2014). Norbert Haag, “Zum Verhältnis von Religion und Politik im konfessionellen Zeitalter – system- und diskurstheoretische Überlegungen am Beispiel der Lutherischen Erneuerung in Württemberg und Hessen,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 88(1997):166–198. The importance of contingency for a historicist outlook is emphasized by Otto Gerhard Oexle, “‘Historismus’. Überlegungen zur Geschichte des Phänomens und des Begriffs,” *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus: Studien zu Problemgeschichten der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 41–72.

<sup>25</sup> *Dieta* in Latin, *Tagung* in German, refers to a meeting on an appointed day or days. In English, the term is used to describe called meetings of governing authorities and property-holders at the regional or transregional level in the Holy Roman Empire, that is, meetings of urban leagues, of the estates of a principality, or of the estates of the entire empire.

<sup>26</sup> By contrast, Thomas Kaufmann, the Göttingen Reformation historian, in a 2013 opinion piece, while conceding the complexity of the Reformation, argues that Luther’s concept of the priesthood of all believers in the 1520 treatise *To the Nobility of the German Nation* constitutes “a Copernican turning-point” in European history. Thomas Kaufmann, “Luthers kopernikanische Wende,” *Frankfurter Allgemeinezeitung*, 27 October 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Luther’s Germany is best described as the language zone of five principal groups of dialects dividing a countryside that filled the space between Scandinavian (Danish), Romance (French and Italian), and Slavic and Magyar (Polish, Czech, Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian,

to matter?<sup>28</sup> What exactly did the controversy contribute to Christianity, which is the world's largest religion today? How did Luther's rebellion against the papacy, and against a significant part of established religious custom, in a fairly remote place, ripple and amplify into other larger, more comprehensive rebellions that could one day put down an old Europe or yield to a new world? What is the connection between the Reformation and the competition of religious belief and unbelief in modern "western" societies or to the cultural pluralism of today's heavily networked global community?

#### SENSE AND AMBIGUITY

There are no fixed answers to these questions. Perspectives on Martin Luther change across places and times, both in a narrow biographical framework and in a broad trans-historical one. The issue is, why and how should the controversy over Luther matter to us? To many scholars, it goes without saying that in early modern Europe the universe was imagined and experienced very differently than now. What we might call supernatural forces were perfectly natural to Luther's contemporaries. The importance of this point for historical research has been repeated by historians of antiquity and the Middle Ages for generations. It belongs to a relatively new trend in *Reformation* historiography, which has, until thirty years ago, more often described Renaissance and Reformation as modernizing and secularizing movements, tending inexorably toward a Europe separated into heavily bureaucratized nation states in which church authority and popular religiosity have sharply declined while scientific reasoning grew. This perspective often pressed the supernatural far into the background of the historian's field of view, an effect against which the historians Lucien Febvre (d. 1956), Robert Scribner (d. 1998), Klaus Reinhardt, Heinz Schilling, and more recently Brad Gregory have variously complained.<sup>29</sup> At the root of their criticisms is a problem of

Hungarian) regions, from the North Sea in the east to Prussia in the west, and then southward along two crooked borders to the Alps.

<sup>28</sup> Werner König, *Atlas zur deutschen Sprache* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978), 76.

<sup>29</sup> Lucien Febvre, "The Origins of the French Reformation: A Question Badly Put," first published in 1929, trans. K. Folca in Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 44–107. Robert Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London: Hambledon, 1988). Brad Gregory, "No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion," *History and Theory*, 47 (2008), 495–519. Brad

distortion, a modern worldview obscuring aspects of human experience that may have been commonplace, indeed central, to Europeans before modernity. This criticism is broadly similar to recent post-colonial complaints about modern western norms in the study of philosophy or colonialism: western secularity may distort our perception of human experience in non-western societies.<sup>30</sup> But over the last twenty years the situation has changed, and thanks in large part to scholars such as those just mentioned, early-modern religion has become a major preoccupation of historians, both in its popular and official dimensions. The challenge of Reformation scholarship right now is not only to recognize how different the present has become from a pre-modern past, not only to trace the origins of a distinctly secularized and industrialized Europe, but also to determine how similar a pre-colonial West could at moments be to a post-colonial world; how, in other words, the history of the West points to the entanglement and commensurability of civilizations and cultures today, not just the distinctiveness of Europe and the differences between civilizations. To do this, a student of the past must entertain a broad view of what counted and counts as real, what counted and counts as a cause of material and psychological effect, to specific people and groups then, now, and at all points in between.

Consider a factoid from Martin Luther's life, a datum that you might think should stand fixed near the beginning of any biography – the date of his birth. He was born late in the night of 10 November, said Margarita, his mother, according to Luther's friend Philip Melanchthon.<sup>31</sup> This was the vigil of St. Martin of Tours, which would explain the choice of his name. But Margarita could not remember the year. The year was 1483, said Luther's brother Jacob, again, according to the friend Melanchthon's report.<sup>32</sup> And today, 10 November 1483 is commonly accepted as the day of Luther's birth.

But others were not so sure, including Martin Luther himself, who in 1540, if not earlier in the 1530s, thought he was born in 1484, “for

Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Ananta Kumar Giri, *Knowledge and Human Liberation: Towards Planetary Realizations* (New York: Anthem, 2013). Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3–23.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Melanchthon, preface to the second volume of Martin Luther's works published at Wittenberg in 1546. CR 6:156. For a detailed survey of Melanchthon's view of astrology and the responses of others to it, Beate Kobler, *Die Entstehung des negativen Melanchthonbildes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 410–427, 433–445.

<sup>32</sup> CR 6:156.

certain,” he is quoted as saying, keeping silent about the day.<sup>33</sup> Philip Melanchthon and Luca Gaurico, the renowned Italian scholar and astrologer of Pope Paul III, who visited Melanchthon in Wittenberg in 1532 and with whom he exchanged cordial letters for years to come, thought that Luther’s birth occurred not on the Feast of St. Martin but on 22 October 1484, at the ninth or tenth hour.<sup>34</sup> At this sensitive point in the religious controversy, 1532, the question of Luther’s astrological prognosis could seem unsure to an avid astrologer (genius, depraved, success, failure?), perhaps even to a friend like Melanchthon. But just after Luther’s death, Melanchthon changed his mind. He turned to the earlier year, 1483, and the later day, the night of November 10, and a later time, the eleventh hour.<sup>35</sup> Luther’s younger colleague at Wittenberg, Paul Eber, who taught that we should study astrology as a branch of physics, agreed: it was the eleventh hour in the night of 10 November 1483, he thought.<sup>36</sup> Still, in spite of Eber and Melanchthon’s protestations, the exact day of birth continued to be contested, perhaps because the alternative date, 22 October 1484, was later included in Gaurico’s famous, useful, and influential *Tractatus astrologicus*, a book of horoscopes for famous places, rulers, intellectuals, fatalities, and deformed bodies, published in 1552.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> WATr 5:76. Cf. WATr 2:376. Reinhart Staats believes this particular claim by Luther may have originated in the early 1530s, and he notes that the claim is attributed to Luther no less than five times by his contemporaries. Reinhart Staats, “Luthers Geburtsjahr 1484 und das Geburtsjahr der evangelischen Kirche,” *Bibliothek und Wissenschaft* 18 (1984), 61–84, here 67–71. Cf. also Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (First published in German 1982, in English 1989, and most recently New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 83.

<sup>34</sup> Melanchthon, with Johannes Schöner and Erasmus Reinhold, said the ninth hour. Gaurico said the tenth hour. Claudia Brosseder, *Im Bann der Sterne: Caspar Peucer, Philipp Melanchthon und andere Wittenberger Astrologen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), 13 n. 11. Thomas B. Deutscher, “Luca Gaurico,” *Contemporaries of Erasmus*, 3 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 2:80–81. Anthony Grafton, *Cardano’s Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991), 55, 75–77, and passim. For Gaurico’s charts, Monica Azzolini, “Refining the Astrologer’s Art: Astrological Diagrams in Bodleian ms Canon. Misc. 24 and Cardano’s *Libelli Quinque* (1547),” *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 42(2011), 1–26. For Melanchthon’s ongoing relationship with Gaurico, Kobler, *Die Entstehung*, 431–432 n. 128.

<sup>35</sup> Staats, “Luthers Geburtsjahr,” 74. Cf. Brosseder, *Im Bann der Sterne*, 13 n. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Eber, *Calendarium historicum conscriptum* (Wittenberg: Georg Rhau, 1559), 380. Brosseder, *Im Bann der Sterne*, 146. It is not exactly clear whether Eber, or Melanchthon citing Luther’s mother before him, meant the eleventh hour post meridian (11 pm on 10 November) or the eleventh hour of darkness (which would be the early morning of 11 November).

<sup>37</sup> Lucas Gauricus, *Tractatus astrologicus* (Venice: B. Casano, 1552), f. 69v.

Twenty years after his meeting with Melanchthon, Gaurico told his readers that the stars helped form Luther into a religious calamity, destining the monk for torment in hell.<sup>38</sup>

That settled it. Luther's sympathizers naturally gravitated toward the night of 10/11 November 1483, against the tendentious speculation of an Italian Catholic. But Gaurico's *Tractatus* was exactly the sort of book that *any* student of the liberal arts might read and admire – Catholic, Protestant, skeptic, orthodox. So, a century later, even in a thoroughly Protestantized country, the Englishman John Gadbury confidently observed that on the particular night of 10/11 November 1483 Saturn and Mercury converged into a conjunction in the constellation Scorpio, creating a magnificent planetary forcefield, which boded very well for Martin Luther: he *must* have been born on that day. The date was “an eminent argument of the activity of his Fancie, and of his great Parts and Learning; and five Planets in the Ninth [house], noted his Eminency in Religion, and (they being in Sextile to the Ascendent) his great Abilities to perform what he did therein.” In turn, said the Anglican Protestant, Gaurico's planetary conjunction, the five planets ganging up on Luther's constitution, was mere speculation. To be sure, critics debunked horoscopes in Gadbury's day, such as the famous mathematician, skeptic, and Catholic priest Pierre Gassendi. But was this enough to overcome the convenience of a horoscope that confirmed an anti-papal *orthodoxy*, or a horoscope that confirmed Lutheran insanity?<sup>39</sup> Not for a long time. Gadbury's argument for Luther's November birthday was confidently repeated even 200 years later, in the early nineteenth century, as proof of the scientific validity of astrology.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, astrology had its detractors, and Melanchthon had his critics,<sup>41</sup> but who else had reason to use the exact day of a person's birth but the respector of cosmic powers? A mid-century hobbyist chronicler, the Ulm shoemaker Sebastian Fischer, did. A young contemporary of Martin Luther, he recorded birthdays for himself, his parents, his siblings, his

<sup>38</sup> Figure 1, at the beginning of this Introduction.

<sup>39</sup> John Gadbury, *Collectio geniturarum: or a Collection of Nativities in CL Genitures* (London: James Cottrel, 1662), 84. For earlier English objections to Gaurico's horoscope on Luther (Harvey, Richard Bruarne), Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos*, 104–105.

<sup>40</sup> Ebenezer Sibly, *A New and Complete Illustration of the Celestial Science of Astrology*, 13th edn. (London: W. Lewis, 1826), 888–889.

<sup>41</sup> Kobler, *Die Entstehung*, 433–434 for critics of Melanchthon's horoscopes (including Luther).

wives, nephews, nieces, and children, and the circumstances of deaths.<sup>42</sup> Fischer is testimony to the rapid growth of autobiographical awareness in the generation after Luther's. But Luther, apparently, did not indulge that kind of personal chronography. Why would he? A birthday had nothing to do with one's legal identity, as it does today. A conflict about his dates, in the end, is the more revealing thing. It is, in short, far more important to understand the tangle of debate around the day in and after Luther's time than to determine exactly when Martin Luther was born. This conviction, that circumstances and effects, not individual people or events, are the proper object of historical investigation, has guided the writing of this book.

## MY PURPOSE

The book before you is therefore a kind of anti-biography, an account shaped, in part, by "matters too extreme or fantastic or impudent to belong in a dignified narrative of someone's life."<sup>43</sup> Its central preoccupation is not Luther as monk, priest, intellectual, or revolutionary, but rather the controversy about him. I describe the main features of "the matter of Martin Luther," *die Religionssache* or the *Luthersache*, as Catholic controversialists called it in the sixteenth century, in its original environment, and I pose an argument ultimately about the contributions of the *conflict* over Luther to the place of religion in European and post-colonial societies today.

There is much that I will not discuss in this book; for example, these canonical topics in the sub-discipline of Luther scholarship: Luther's *Anfechtungen*, the inner turmoil he famously endured as a monk; his intense relationship with Johannes Staupitz, his confessor and superior in the Augustinian Order; his relationships with his wife, children, or closest friends; his sexuality, diet, illnesses, or distemper; his hallucinatory exchanges with the devil; or the development and interconnection of his central religious ideas.<sup>44</sup> Among many other things, these are to the

<sup>42</sup> *Sebastian Fischers Chronik besonders von Ulmischen Sachen*, ed. Karl Gustav Veesenmeyer (Ulm: Gebrüder Nübling, 1896), 7.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Albright, "Lyrical Antibiography," *Victorian Connections*, ed. J.J. McGann (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 200–210, here 201–202.

<sup>44</sup> These central religious ideas include: the distinction between law and gospel, the distinction between human reason and divine revelation or the realms of nature and grace, the authority of scripture, his complex theory of the relationship between religious and temporal authority, the idea of justification by faith alone, and his view of the sacraments.

experts, and to me, interesting and important subjects, and they are thoroughly debated by many other writers.<sup>45</sup> They are not my present subject.

Instead, I offer a brief introduction to the sixteenth-century debate over Luther in its most important social, political, and intellectual contexts. And I claim that a historical phenomenon called Martin Luther was, indeed, as many have said, important for the history of the world, but in a particular way. Martin Luther was a controversy. The Reformation was a controversy about him.

<sup>45</sup> For a sympathetic introduction to any of these themes the English reader may wish to consult the three volumes of Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*; Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*; Bernd Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*.