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How Luther's *Preface* Reflects "Refined" Use of Seventeenth Century Propaganda
to Advance Reformation Ideology Beyond Pamphlets

The concept of propaganda frequently is equated as a twentieth century phenomenon, a modern communications practice employed to propagate messages and shape opinions before and during wartime, as a way to drive revolution, and at the onset of periods of great social upheaval.

Multiple instances of propaganda can be documented during the two World Wars, the Bolshevik Revolution, the anti-establishment counterculture of the 1960s in America and certainly numerous other examples over the past century. Yet, occurrences of propaganda – in its essence the dissemination of information or opinions to support a cause or belief, sometimes regardless of its accuracy or authentication – has roots dating back to fifth century Greece, where Athenians employed “powerful engines of propaganda to mold attitudes and opinions.”¹

Lacking the printed means to spread messages to the masses, the ancient Greeks expressed ideas to challenge the oppressive governance of ruling despots through presentations of drama, athletic contests, religious gatherings and assemblies.

Advance some 2,000 years, and one of the major advancements in Western civilization provided a vehicle for messages of all kinds to reach a much wider audience. By the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, the invention of the printing press (generally accepted to be in around 1450) in the then Holy Roman Empire allowed the reproduction of many types of works that could then

be shared within a wide audience during those decades often fraught with and frequently defined by religious, social, intellectual and political cataclysm. This paper will provide insight into how the printed communications helped spread often crude, vicious and graphic propaganda messages that contributed to the splintering of Western Christianity and provide an example of a more refined and subtle application of a clearly opinionated and well-crafted longer-form communication that can be perceived as a masterful work of Reformation propaganda by Martin Luther, the architect of the movement. A goal of this work is to provide an argument that Reformation propaganda “evolved” from somewhat staccato, unsophisticated messages aimed at the illiterate commoner to more refined communications geared to a more educated, literate and influential audience.

As the Reformation took shape, Protestant loyalists embraced the printed word to champion a broad range of issues – from anti-papacy beliefs and the value of adhering to social principles to the need for individual salvation and the value of scripture. To combat and oppose these purported truths, the Catholic response challenged the validity of Lutherism and focused on dogma related to “the saints, morality, and Scriptural stories.”² Clearly, there were correlations between the two opposing movements, with the foundation of the schism centered around Christian beliefs, the Bible and interpretations of its teachings.

Luther’s dominant role in using the printed word to write and share anti-Catholic messaging during the Reformation is explained and quantified in this passage from the book, “Printing, Propaganda and Martin Luther” by Mark U. Edwards, Jr.

Not only did the Reformation see the first large-scale “media campaign,” it also saw a campaign that was overwhelmingly dominated by one person, Martin Luther. More

works by Luther were printed and reprinted than by any other publicist. In fact, the presses of the German-speaking lands produced substantially more vernacular works by Luther in the crucial early years (1518-1525) than the seventeen other major Evangelical publicists combined. During Luther's lifetime these presses produced nearly five times as many German works by Luther as by all the Catholic controversialists put together.³

One can argue that Luther did not actually meet the requirements of a “publicist,” a communications role that evolved in more modern times with the advent and growth of newspapers and later broadcast mediums; the key role of a publicist is to build awareness for a person, a cause, a product or an organization through generating positive exposure from articles and interviews shared through the news media. Of course, in the sixteenth century Luther lacked a news media network structure, and the messages presented clearly were of a propagandic nature. Yet, the strategies behind the tactics that were used – craft definitive messages, target the communications to a specific audience, build awareness for and acceptance of the message – follow accepted practices refined in the early twentieth century and continue to be used by modern communicators.

With printing still in its relative infancy, early print propaganda actions were restricted. In around 1520, Luther and other purveyors of Reformation literature in what is now Germany initially favored small and inexpensive booklets or pamphlets as the medium for sharing their beliefs, as these non-bound documents were easy to produce, transport and distribute. Edwards points out the pamphlets, often published in a “quarto format” of folded sheets of paper sometimes adorned with a simple-but-compelling graphic, were disseminated stealthily in taverns and on street corners by what could be described as sixteenth century “news boys.” The compact format let the pamphlet hawkers conceal the work “in a pack or under clothing when the

authorities made an appearance. They were ideal for circulating a subservice message right under the noses of the opponents of reform.”⁴

The contents of these pamphlets centered on proclaiming the key message of Lutheran Reformation: That the Bible is the Word of God and humans can only reach salvation by their faith and not their deeds. To Luther and other Reformists, the printed word offered the vehicle to share those views with fellow believers. However, this question had to be accounted for: What percentage of the population could in essence absorb the message by reading it? In actuality, the literacy rates were quite low, as this passage from the “Oxford Research Encyclopedia” points out:

Against this correlation must be set the very low literacy rate in the Holy Roman Empire in the early 16th century, which on some estimates ranged between only 5 and 10 percent of the entire population. Even taking into account the fact that historical literacy rates are notoriously difficult to estimate, the impact of printing on the majority must have been negligible. This fact has led historians to develop more nuanced ways of understanding the early-modern communication process than simply imagining a reader sitting in front of a text.⁵

Given the widespread illiteracy of the era, some propagandists wrote and printed “hybrid” publications that included images, content that could be read as a sermon and even lyrics to religious songs, which often were written and sung to the melody of an existing popular musical verse. (It should be noted that the practice of “borrowing” a well-known melody was a sound strategic maneuver because it helped drive home the Reformist message through a relatable musical composition, thereby providing a level of acceptance and authenticity.) Regularly portrayed as the Anti-Christ, the pope often was the subject of these musical compositions. To sully the pope in the minds of Reformation faithful, pamphlets included songs like *Nun treiben wir den Babst hinaus*, which translated means “Now We Drive Out the Pope” and may even

have been written by Luther.⁶ The first two stanzas **pull** no proverbial punches regarding Luther's jaundiced view (if he indeed, did compose the piece, yet one can ascertain he supported the message) of the pontiff:

Now we drive out the pope
 From Christ's church and God's house.
 Therin he has reigned in a deadly fashion
 And has seduced uncountably many souls.

Now move along, you damned son,
 you Whore of Babylon.
 You are the abomination and the Antichrist
 Full of lies, death and cunning.

Clearly, the language – outwardly offensive and graphic – and the message – remove the pope who has reigned as a tyrant-pimp and physical being contrary to Protestant beliefs – encapsulate Reformist propaganda, **leaving** little to the imagination of even an illiterate peasant of the era. The other way to defile the pope was by incorporating his image in woodcut illustrations that adorned some pamphlets. Artist Lucas Cranach the Elder, a friend of Luther's and a believer in the Protestant cause, created pamphlet artwork that left little to the imagination; one example, "Passional Christi und Antichristi" of 1521, presents clashing images of Christ and the Anti-Christ or pope. In one image, Christ is shown driving out the money-changers in the temple in Jerusalem, while in the corresponding image "the Antichrist sits in God's temple and displays himself as God. In exchange for money, the pope sells dispensations, indulgences and bishopric and other church offices, dissolves marriages, makes and breaks law, blesses and damns, and so

forth.”⁷ As with the brusque nature of the aforementioned song lyrics, the scenes depicted in the Cranach woodcuts unquestionably are one-sided, unquestionably are targeted propaganda-driven messages even an illiterate sixteenth-century Protestant could comprehend. It is apparent that Luther firmly grasped the value of the new print medium: His participation in the propaganda pamphlet practice from the years 1516 to 1546 accounted for 20 percent of the total output and is estimated to have totaled 3.1 million copies.⁸

However, Luther – and assuredly other scholars within the Reformation movement – transitioned beyond the crude and graphic messages noted in songs like *Nun treiben wir* and the Cranach woodcut illustrations to forward the propaganda messaging. In the year before his death in 1546, Martin Luther wrote a short chronicle that addressed how he spent his time on earth, how he conducted his life over the previous 62 years, and how he declared or made himself righteous before God. The document was the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings*, a collection of works that included Biblical preferences and reforming treatises. The author mandated the *Preface* to be the first work presented in the collection – despite the fact that it was composed much later than the other writings. The often rambling *Preface*, replete with regular ingratiating second-person salutations to the reader and passages proclaiming self-pity, provides a chronological and historical account of Luther’s so-called “reformation breakthrough.”⁹

So, why did Luther stipulate that the *Preface* open the collection? One could argue that it was, indeed, an introductory written piece based on its title and subject matter. But, one also should consider the intrinsic persuasive rationale from Luther’s perspective: This literary salvo against the pope and Catholicism will be the debut document in the collection because by being first, it will set a precedent of sorts, ingratiate the reader and (hopefully) have the most impact.

But there's another perspective to be gained by reading Luther's *Preface*. Through a close examination of some early passages, one can deduct that Luther's choice of language and literary voice, the way the narrative is presented, and the structure and tone of the work could be considered as another example of Reformation propaganda every bit as compelling -- and perhaps even more effective -- than the millions of pamphlets containing messages, songs and woodcuts produced in the previous two decades. With the *Preface*, the targeted audience is unmistakably literate, unquestionably more refined and educated, and perhaps holding a higher social and economic stature, thereby being in a position to move the Protestant message and beliefs forward.

From a literal point of view, the *Preface* chronicles a lifelong physical and spiritual "road trip" of sorts, chronicling the young Luther's journey in 1518 to Augsburg to address the sale of indulgences by Rome to his steadfast concluding resolution where he bids "Farewell in the Lord, reader, and pray for the growth of the Word against Satan."¹⁰ But within the document, the reader is swayed by the author's at times cunning and persuasive attempt to captivate and coerce support for an engagement in the Protestant dogma -- primarily by denigrating the pope and Catholic beliefs without much in the way of supporting facts. As translated by Dillenberger, the opening line of the *Preface* presents an uplifting welcome: "Martin Luther wishes the sincere reader salvation!"¹¹ Luther goes on to point out that he opposed having his religious and scholarly writings published, referring to his works as "crude and disordered chaos." Here, from the onset, Luther qualifies and panders to his audience through use of a flattering adjective and hopes for deliverance from sin and its consequences; and, by dismissing his body of writing, he presents himself as a martyr, a fall-guy, a sixteenth century sad sack.

The opening salutation is followed one paragraph later by Luther wallowing in self-deprecation, wishing, “that all my books were buried in perpetual oblivion, so that there might be room for better ones.” He follows this declaration up with a sudden change of perspective, stating, “men wholly ignorant of the causes and the time of events would nevertheless most certainly publish them,” so the reluctant Luther “permitted them to be published.” Luther continues with another appeal to “the sincere reader” to do, indeed, read his published thoughts “with great commiseration” and goes on to note that he once was a supporter of the pope – “drunk, yes, submerged in the pope’s dogmas” – and that at the time he would murder those who challenged the beliefs of Rome.¹²

These captivating statements usher in a passage where Luther explains to – again-- the “sincere reader” that his initial religious and moral beliefs were the result of inexperience: “At first, I was all alone and certainly very inept and unskilled in conducting such great affairs. For I got into these turmoils by accident and not by will or intention. I call upon God himself as a witness.” Reading further, Luther recounts his attempts to persuade fellow Christians to ignore “the clamors of the indulgence hawkers” and letters sent to high-ranking clergy imploring “them to stop the shameless blasphemy of the quaestors.” Then, Luther contradicts himself – confusing the reader – by stating he “developed the idea that indulgences should indeed not be condemned, but that good works of love should be preferred to them.” This declaration is then immediately followed by yet another contradictory claim that the indulgences were “demolishing heaven and consuming the earth with fire,” and that due to Luther’s actions against the remissions of temporal punishment and beliefs, “the whole papacy rose up against (him) alone.”¹³

In essence, the analysis above can be summarized this way: Luther positions himself as an incompetent theologian, one duped by the pope and Catholic Church. Yet, with repeated reverence to the “sincere reader,” he chronicles how he rises to the occasion and charges forward triumphantly to bash the pope and the practice of indulgences and usher in the Reformation movement. For the purpose of the arguments presented here, Luther’s quandary over his published collections and self-deprecating commentary skillfully and somewhat eloquently communicate the value proposition of the Protestant message without offering any counter balance regarding Catholicism, the faith he once accepted.

The balance of the *Preface* features other examples of literary legerdemain – references to the German people being “tired of suffering the pillagings, traffickings, and endless impostures of Roman rascals”¹⁴ for example – as Luther continues his historical and spiritual journey. A close reading certainly could identify other passages that one could single out as propaganda in nature.

But, this thought from a work cited earlier summarizes the contention just presented and offers a challenge of sorts, given developments in the twenty-first century and given today’s always-evolving digital communications mediums and dynamic, increasingly hostile political arena: “Another is the notion of the ‘two-stage communications process,’ by which propagandists or advertisers direct their message principally to influential, literate, opinion-formers who cascade the new ideas down. Clearly much work remains to be done in understanding how Luther’s propaganda and public opinion interacted. The fact that our present generations are living through a series of equally transformative and disruptive communications revolutions will no doubt inspire new questions as well as new insight.”¹⁵

Martin Luther unquestionably altered the course of history when he affixed his *95 Theses* to a church door in 1517, then methodically published a wide range of documents designed to orchestrate and inspire the Protestant revolution. This paper presented information and analysis on how unfiltered printed works, from surreptitiously distributed pamphlets to a more polished treatise of sorts, embraced the process of propaganda to deliver the Reformation message. As noted by the most recent citation here, Luther should be recognized as a master of the communications process perhaps as much as the man who challenged the Catholic Church and won.

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