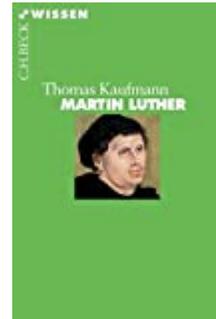




**Thomas Kaufmann.** *Martin Luther.* München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2006. EUR 7.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-406-50888-2.



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**Published on** H-German (June, 2008)

## **Martin Luther: Man between God and Earthly Life**

It has become obligatory to begin a review of any new biography of Martin Luther with the question of whether we really need another. In the case of Thomas Kaufmann's new biography, however, the answer to this question is at least in part affirmative because his work is designed to fill a particular niche.

In this situation, the niche goes a long way toward defining the parameters of the book and is nearly as important as authorial license. The series in which this slim biography appears, "C. H. Wissen," presents brief, introductory monographs devoted to significant issues in the fields of history, politics, music, art, religion and philosophy, psychology and medicine, natural science and technology, and language and literature—as well as biographies of important individuals in each of these disciplines. The mandate of the series, which is aimed at the German-speaking public, is to put complex scholarly material into a compact form for the general reader at a price of less than ten euros. If the authors chosen to write the monographs and biographies related to early modern European history are any indication of the series' overall quality, one can be assured of its excellence.

In light of these parameters, Kaufmann's biography does not disappoint. It concisely synthesizes the newest scholarship on Luther and presents it in an original, readable way. Although few references are made to secondary sources (the book does not include footnotes but rather parenthetical references), Kaufmann does include copious quotations from Luther's works, and the ones he chooses address his points with impressive precision. As we might expect, the focus is very narrowly on Luther and his immediate context. When Kaufmann does place Luther in a larger context, it is usually against the backdrop of western Christian thinkers in general, rather than that of late medieval Europe. The consequences of this understandable decision will be addressed below, but we must also keep in mind that the target audience of this book undoubtedly commands a greater background knowledge than its North American counterparts. Thus, Kaufmann can present a more sophisticated portrait of Luther than might otherwise be the case. Finally, it bears mentioning that Kaufmann's treatment of Luther is entirely sympathetic, despite his curious tendency to refer to him as a heretic (*Ketzer*) without quotation marks.

But the book goes beyond a merely serviceable attempt to fill a particular niche. Kaufmann offers a distinctive approach to understanding Luther and why he was and remains such a unique figure, in particular when compared with other Christian thinkers. Had Kaufmann included a subtitle in the manner of recent English-language Luther biographies, he might well have called his book *Martin Luther: Man between God and Earthly Life* for, as we learn, these are the poles of Luther's thought. His ability to see constantly one in the light of the other is what makes Luther so unique. In his introduction, Kaufmann begins to articulate this key to understanding Luther. Under the rubric of "One person 'in two natures'" (*Eine Person "in zwei Naturen"*) Kaufmann claims that Luther's ability to "stand in the presence of his God and within the confines of the world simultaneously" (p. 8) or put another way, to live out entirely his relationship with God, but in an absolutely public way that fully embraced earthly life, makes him exceptional. Luther embodies theology and biography, belief and experience, contemplation and action in a way that few other contemporary theologians ever managed. These complementary pairs are not only the key to understanding Luther, the individual, but to understanding his success as well.

Chapter 1, "In Search of Luther," explores Luther's self-understanding, and provides brief descriptions of how his contemporaries, both supporters and detractors, saw him. Kaufmann takes as his point of departure one of the central tensions in Luther's thought: "From the perspective of God, Luther knew himself to be righteous and free; but from his own perspective, he was a prisoner to sin and an unworthy servant" (p. 17). Like St. Paul (who occasionally provides a point of comparison for Kaufmann), Luther's conception of his own value was based on his knowledge of unearned grace, not on a sense of inherent self-worth. Thus Luther's self-conception fits nicely into Kaufmann's theme, for it was comprised of a combination of divine and human perspectives. Having achieved this understanding, Luther assumed the task of its proclamation, well aware that at various times in the history, God had used individual witnesses to the truth to safeguard his church. The astonishingly rapid spread of his message further convinced Luther of its veracity, and brought him to the realization that God was controlling the situation. His supporters quickly concluded that God had chosen him for a special task, dubbing him a "man" or "servant" of God, or even "the prophet Elijah," while his opponents saw the cult of Luther's person as proof of his status as a heretic.

Chapter 2, "A Life in the Confines of God's Reformation," expands on the theme of Luther's existence between God and earthly life. Taking a chronological approach, it traces the Reformer's life from childhood through his excommunication and hearing at Worms, ending with a short addendum regarding Luther's endeavors as head of a "heretical church" after 1521. The focus is on the development of Luther's thought at each stage of his life, always conceived of as resulting from the dialectic between his understanding of God and his experiences in the world. Kaufmann includes a brief discussion of why Luther's message initially convinced so many people. His answer is that during Luther's early career, he wrote a variety of works in the vernacular that were not polemical but addressed "the elemental questions of the Christian faith ... in a compelling way that was aimed at living a Christian life in day-to-day existence" (p. 42). Thus, one of the most important reasons for Luther's success was his ability to bridge the gap between God and earthly life.

Kaufmann expands on this theme in chapter 3, "Theological Existence," which, as the title suggests, is not merely an abstracted description of Luther's key doctrinal positions, but a discussion of his views embedded in the various contexts of his world. Kaufmann's layout of this, the longest chapter, follows a pattern of concentric circles that proceed from the center point of Luther's life, the word of God, outward to include the Bible (as distinct from the word of God), the pulpit and the professor's lectern, the political and civil order of the world, the community of Christians within the world, and Luther's foes. In each case, Kaufmann explores how Luther's understanding of that particular topic was shaped by his knowledge of the Bible and earthly life.

To understand Kaufmann's point it is worthwhile to provide a few examples. In his approach to the scriptures, Luther insisted that constant study and contemplation were necessary, but that true insight only becomes authentic when combined with human experience, for experience alone makes the theologian. With regard to Luther's brilliance as a Bible translator, Kaufmann claims that it lay in his desire to comprehend God, in the person of Christ, but also in his ability to bring the divinity to the common man. His success as a preacher was in large part due to his intensive scriptural study as a university professor, but also to his gift in presenting his knowledge to audiences in ways meaningful to their own lives. For Luther, the social ordering of the world was biblically rooted; thus his attachment to temporal authority was not opportunistic, but the result of his theology. Even

scientific discoveries and technological advances were placed in a dialectical relationship with the Bible: Copernicus was wrong because the ancient leader of the Hebrews, Joshua, had commanded the sun to stand still, not the earth; but inventions such as the printing press and improved mining techniques advantageous to the word of God and Christian society were divine gifts, because God is, in fact, the ruler of all history. Luther's belief that religion and daily life are essentially contiguous spheres is most clearly demonstrated, however, in the patterns of his social interactions. Kaufmann describes the omnipresent throngs in the Luther household, Luther's marriage in 1525 at what was perhaps the most critical moment of the Reformation, and his role as a happy father. Life and religion are always intimately bound together. Even Luther's foes were not merely individuals or groups who saw things differently, or foreign armies in search of new conquests, but enemies of Christ and the Christian religion: the pope was the Antichrist, the Turks represented the apocalyptic last Kingdom referred to in Daniel 7, and the Jews were God's example to the world of a failed relationship to the divine. Thus, Luther saw the world through the prism of his understanding of God, while his religious views were deeply influenced by his experiences in the world. Moreover, he himself understood this to such an extent that he was ambivalent about producing a complete edition of his own works. Luther saw their importance more as a historical record than as a dogmatic statement.

Kaufman ends with an epilogue that addresses Luther's legacy. After briefly touching on the Catholic response to the Reformation, the post-Reformation tightening of the alliance between church and state, and Luther's faith as the source of his extreme confidence, he returns to his point, Luther's ability to combine the religious with the quotidian. In his introduction, Kaufmann describes Luther as a man who could "stand in the presence of his God and within the confines of the world simultaneously" (p. 8). Luther's most important legacy, then, was to leave behind a religion that reflected this exceptional ability. Kaufmann ends his book with the observation: "If it is true that to have a religion means 'to have something upon which the heart can completely rely' ... then Luther opened up a religion for Christianity and for the world" (p. 122).

Kaufmann's point, that Luther's uniqueness lies in the fact that he was not an ivory tower theologian, but

someone with his feet firmly planted in God's word and in the experiences and realities of life, is indeed worth noting. Unquestionably, this distinctive aspect of Luther's character goes a long way in accounting for his towering popularity and his lasting impact. And while this observation is not new, Kaufmann traces it through Luther's life and thought in an impressive and comprehensive way. However, at times Kaufmann omits aspects of the larger picture to fit the evidence into his thesis. For example, Luther's early popularity was not merely a product of his ability to express Christian truths in a way Germans found applicable to their lives but perhaps even more importantly, it was due to his skill in picking up on the various strains of popular dissatisfaction and discontent with the late medieval church. Moreover, Luther's marriage in 1525 was not based solely on a desire to establish a Christian household, to live his Christianity, but was itself a public act of defiance against what Luther saw as the burdensome and unbiblical regulations of the late medieval church.

This occasional tendency to circumscribe the wider context leads to a second critique of the book. The nature of the series in which Kaufmann publishes places him in a bit of a dilemma: if we assume that the general reader desires to know especially what makes Luther different from all the other religious thinkers, then Kaufmann is forced to remove the Reformer from his historical context in order to compare him with other Christian thinkers. The disadvantage of presenting Luther in this long historical perspective is that it diminishes the complex realities of his life, thus eschewing much of the grit and grime, the violence and drama of the late middle ages that the better recent Luther biographies worked so hard to recreate. For example, the whole point of Heiko Oberman's biography, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (1982), was to assert that Luther was a medieval man, and to place him firmly in his late medieval context. Kaufmann's argument that Luther's uniqueness and success lay in his ability to bridge the gap between God and earthly life goes some way in relocating him in that earthly existence or, in other words, in his historical context. But in the end, the emphasis is on Luther as an exceptional Christian thinker and actor, rather than as a product of a specific place and time. Within such a series as this, it is understandable that Kaufmann would take a sympathetic approach to Luther and that he would measure his subject against the entire panoply of western Christian thinkers; but such a decision comes at a price.

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**Citation:** Robert Christman. Review of Kaufmann, Thomas, *Martin Luther*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14606>

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