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**Turning the “Reformation Turn”.
Bad Thoughts about Luther's Self-Testimony of 1545***

“Bad thoughts are sinful, but they hit the mark”, said an important Italian politician, a catholic one but so powerful and malignant that he was called Beelzebub. The famous self-testimony about the so-called “Reformation Turn”, which Luther wrote in the Preface to his latin writings (1545), by its authority, dating and place should clear solemnly the most important passage in Luther's theological development. Now, such story is surprisingly summary and simplified about inner biography, theological content, chronology and sources; that's why it gave rise to many different interpretations by scholars who - taking it for good - for the whole XX century tried to unravel its knots. But they failed: every year from 1512 to 1519 was proposed, many pages were indicated as direct or indirect marks of the turn, the turn itself was explained as an immediate event or a long process; and about its theological contents, we can choose between a quite generic “Wiederentdeckung des Evangeliums” (Gospel re-discovery), the theologia crucis, the Worttheologie (theology of the Word), some extrinsecism, without any shared agreement among them and with Luther's text. That's likely why the matter, yet crucial for the *initia Lutheri* and for the history of the Reformation itself, lies today set aside.

We'll therefore try to take this story not for good but for bad, and to consider it not only as summary and simplified but simplistic, evasive and even intentionally tendentious and misleading: according to our bad thought, Luther feels having something to hide. Actually, it's surely true that the young Luther's thought shows a radical turn at a precise time, which led him directly to break with the papacy and, just as “Reformation Turn”, will remain central in the evangelical theology; but Luther's reconstruction in 1545 is definitely doubtful: the story about spiritual anxiety and temptations is hardly convincing, the “discovery” of the *iustitia Dei* in Rom. 1,17, the way Luther explains it, is nothing new, and the presumed, following reading of Augustin's *De spiritu et littera*, where Luther claims to have simply found the confirmation of his intuition, is really a historical fake. A totally different reconstruction of such turn would have been fully documentable: but surprisingly in the huge Luther's *opera omnia* there's a total documental void just in the year in which we could place the turn; and above all, just in his latin works' edition some basic ones are lacking, as Luther preferred let them fall into oblivion, from where they re-emerged accidentally only some centuries later.

Let's set something clear: until the end of his first lecture of the Psalms in spring 1515, and before the beginning of the Commentary on Romans in summer 1515, Luther:

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- 1) knows very well and widely quotes several Augustin's writings, yet not that respectfully (and even deeply criticizes since 1512 his trinitarian theology!), and does never quote Augustin's anti-pelagian writings;
- 2) never speaks about the original sin, nor focuses on the relationship between grace and free will nor on their possible co-operation, and even less on predestination;
- 3) in his polemic against late Scholastics' misuse of Aristotle and confusion between philosophy and theology, which occurs in Luther's thought since the very beginning, he never aims at their doctrine of grace and free will; on the contrary, Luther occasionally agrees with them on that issue.

Well, but from the very beginning of the Commentary on Romans, there is a sudden, radical turn on all of these issues:

- 1) Luther begins quoting many anti-pelagian writings of Augustin (above all the "De spiritu et littera", "De peccatorum meritis et remissione", "Contra Iulianum pelagianum") on every page, definitely lets Augustin lead him in Paul's interpretation, and becomes anyway very respectful to Augustin even when he slightly deviates from the Doctor of Grace's way;
- 2) the huge power of evil on men, the corruption of the human nature, the original sin itself, the violent refusal of the free will and of any human cooperation with the grace of God, together with the focusing on predestination, are seen as the main themes of the epistle and become anyway the keys of Luther Paul's interpretation and of Luther's theology itself, even in the near following years;
- 3) he emphasizes his critique to Gabriel Biel, Scotus and the late Scholasticism, but this time the focus of Luther's opposition is their understanding of the free will, of human natural capacities even after the sin, of possibility of a preparation to receive the grace of God; and above all, he charges now them definitely and exclusively with Pelagianism.

Exactly this purely Augustinian understanding of the main theological problems belongs to Luther until the end of the commentary, in the following academic writings up to the time of the break with Catholicism; and in 1525 yet, answering to Erasmus "De libero arbitrio diatribè sive collatio" with the "De servo arbitrio" - which Luther ever considered as his own masterpiece -, he says thanks to Erasmus: he had namely understood that the central issue of his critique to Catholicism and the main theme of the Reformation were not the Pope, indulgences or similar, but definitely the one concerning sin, grace of God and free or slave will.

Finally, this is the only veritable turn strong, documentable and leading directly to break with Rome, in young Luther's thinking; and we are able to state its datation: i.e. spring 1515 (which Luther in his self-testimony doesn't tell), its theological content as "Reformation turn": i.e. the radically anti-pelagian understanding of grace, human will and sin (about which Luther is definitely generic and evasive), and the chronological priority between the turn and Luther's reading - or (re-)discovery - of Augustin's anti-pelagian writings: i.e. their

exact time coincidence, about which Luther definitely lies. On the contrary, this reading itself is supposed to be most likely the very cause of this turn, maybe even of Luther's choice to switch his lecture - before ending - from the Psalms to Romans, and is anyway the main stream in Luther's thought until the Reformation.

All of that is definitely clear if comparing Luther's commentaries to Psalms and Romans, so different and following so close one another; and it's really surprising that Luther's scholars didn't yet bring out and even less exploit these matters of fact at all. And even more open to suspicion is that, for it to be clear, you have to compare two writings which Luther never published, neither near after having written them, nor even in the first official Summa of his theological teaching, namely the edition of his Latin writings in 1545: and this is really a bad thought, supposing that Luther, just as he tells us a fake story about his way to Reformation, at the same time hides us the documents which could tell us the true - and much different - story!

Well, the questions here are what Luther hides - and we tried to summarize our answer - and why. This latter question is genuinely theological - therefore Luther fears it could unsettle the foundations of the young evangelical church - and it refers only to the faith and the related theological options; here the issue of sin surely arises, but this question remains definitely outside of our study. On the other side, the former question is a historical and philological, i.e. a scientific one, and shall be analyzed and solved merely from this point of view; here, no matter about good or bad thoughts and even less about sins, but solely about "hitting the mark".