

Stefano Leoni

Disquieting Analogies

Saul's Conversion and Martin Luder's Reformation Turn (a Twin Historical Mystery)*

Two great religious innovators, glorified by their Churches - among others, maybe - from hundreds and even thousands of years: yet, they still keep secrets, and the most disquieting of them let us trace an unexpected parallelism between them. Actually, some issues which Paul of Tarsus and Martin Luther always evade, or carefully conceal, might underlie the "conversion" of both of them: a) a great theological discovery; b) the purpose of a radical religious break; c) the name change; d) a proud challenge to God.

What Paul never says, can be reconstructed by reading between the lines of Luke's Acts of the Apostles: he is the first to sense, during the stoning of Stephen, that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and also senses that this discovery gives him the opportunity to force Judaism up to the establishment of a new universal religion. He then changes his name from Saul to Paul (from the Latin "little", "cheap") in order to present himself as the last to whom the risen Christ has appeared, "as to one abnormally born", the least of the Apostles, the worst sinner, that nonetheless has received a direct revelation of Jesus Christ which justifies a fiercely asserted independence of his own authority from the Apostles. After that he starts to preach the risen Christ far from Jerusalem, then he approaches the apostolic community itself until he is eventually able to impose the resurrection as the earmark of what might put itself as a "new" religion - Christianity - even to the Judaic authorities. According to Luke, Paul had been called only through Ananias, and only to proclaim Christ as the Messiah, as Stephen had done in Jerusalem to the Hellenistic Jews and soon would be done in Antioch to the Gentiles too; but the announcement of the resurrection, involving a final break with Judaism, is due to Paul's pride and his challenge to God.

What Luther never reveals - as he doesn't publish his fundamental juvenile works, perhaps even destroys his own most compromising texts, and anyway will never speak about too many subjects -, we have learnt in the following centuries, yet only partially. In fact, he discovers that the traditional metaphysics, on which the Catholic Church based its theology, has led it astray, and he senses that his "new" metaphysics, ultimately hidden under the magnificent lifelong theological work built upon it, demands Christianity to find fulfillment in a church different from the Latin one. Accordingly, he changes his name from Luder - which means "carrion" and "scoundrel", so even worse than "stinker" or "vermin" - to Luther, so as not to weaken the public role he knows he is just going to play, and he attacks the papacy on a minor theological issue, yet with a strategic "political" meaning. Thus he wins at once the condemnation of Rome and the support of the German princes and people, which will be at the basis of his new "German" Church; and just in Luther's claim to have developed the true Christian theology, and to have established the final Christian Church, lay his pride and his challenge to God.

Paul's and Luther's secrets are disquieting, and the analogies between them even more. But the most disquieting point of all might be that, for both of them, the challenge to God will end in a triumph. In the Acts' third account of Paul's conversion, he himself tells that the risen Christ had, rather, directly appointed him "To serve and testify the things in which you have seen me", a hint at Paul's "revelation" implicitly stating the alleged mission to announce it; and, actually, even king Agrippa acknowledges Paul as the prophet of resurrection and of a new religion - which after 2000 years is still vital and widespread throughout the world. On the other hand, Luther's own account of his juvenile "reformation turn" stresses that, rather, God himself would have fully approved his theology, and implicitly the new philosophy on which it based and the religious break it demanded; and this is written just a few months before Luther's death, when his church - still vital and widespread as well - is by now firmly established.

Yes, there may be an "other" glorifying them: actually, Paul's and Luther's conversion to God seems to have overturned, in the history of man, in God's conversion to Saul of Tarsus and Martin Luder.

* With partial (and disquieting) reference to: Stefano Leoni, "Re-surrezione. Dialogo fra lo scrittore e il primo lettore", Rome 2016, unprinted, free downloadable© PDF at <www.stefanoleoni.org> (about Paul); id., "Der Augustinkomplex. Luthers zwei reformatorische Bekehrungen", in "Reformatorische Theologie und Autoritäten. Studien zur Genese des Schriftprinzips beim jungen Luther" ed. Volker Leppin, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015, pp. 185-294 (about Luther).