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**Nailed it**

# How Martin Luther has shaped Germany for half a millennium

**The 500th anniversary of the 95 theses finds a country as moralistic as ever**

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SET foot in Germany this year and you are likely to encounter the jowly, dour portrait of Martin Luther. With more than 1,000 events in 100 locations, the whole nation is celebrating the 500th anniversary of the monk issuing his 95 theses and (perhaps apocryphally) pinning them to the church door at Wittenberg. He set in motion a split in Christianity that would forever change not just Germany, but the world.



At home, Luther's significance is no longer primarily theological. After generations of secularisation, not to mention decades of official atheism in the formerly communist east (which includes Wittenberg), Germans are not particularly religious. But the Reformation was not just about God. It shaped the German language, mentality and way of life. For centuries the country was riven by bloody confessional strife; today Protestants and Catholics are each about 30% of the population. But after German unification in the 19th century, Lutheranism won the culture wars. "Much of what used to be typically Protestant we today perceive as typically German," says Christine Eichel, author of "Deutschland, Lutherland", a book about Luther's influence.

Start with aesthetics. For Luther this was, like everything else, a serious matter. He believed that Christians were guaranteed salvation through Jesus but had a duty to live in such a way as to deserve it. Ostentation was thus a disgraceful distraction from the asceticism required to examine one's own conscience. The traces of this severity live on in Germany's early 20th-century Bauhaus architecture, and even in the furniture styles at IKEA (from Lutheran Sweden). They can be seen in

the modest dress, office decor and eating habits of Angela Merkel, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, and of Joachim Gauck, Germany's president and a former pastor himself. Both may partake of the glitz of the French presidency while visiting Paris, but it would never pass in Berlin.

Luther shared his distaste for visual ornament with other Protestant reformers. But he differed in the role he saw for music. The Swiss Protestants John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli viewed music as sensual temptation and frowned on it. But to Luther music was a divinely inspired weapon against the devil. He wanted believers to sing together—in German, in church and at home, and with instruments accompanying them. Today Germany has 130 publicly financed orchestras, more than any other country. And concerts are still attended like sermons, sombrely and seriously.

Luther's inheritance can also be seen in the fact that Germany, the world's 17th-most populous country, has the second-largest book market after America's. After he translated the Bible into German, Luther wanted everyone, male or female, rich or poor, to read it. At first Protestants became more literate than Catholics; ultimately all Germans became bookish.

Finally, a familiar thesis links Luther to German attitudes towards money. In this view Catholics, used to confessing and being absolved after each round of sins, tend to run up debts (*Schulden*, from the same root as *Schuld*, or "guilt"), whereas Protestants see saving as a moral imperative. This argument, valid or not, has a familiar ring in southern Europe's mainly Catholic and Orthodox countries, which have spent the euro crisis enduring lectures on austerity from Wolfgang Schäuble, Germany's devoutly Lutheran finance minister.

Yet on money, too, Luther differed from other reformers. When Max Weber wrote of the Protestant work ethic in 1904, he had in mind Calvinism and its relatives, such as American Puritanism. Calvin viewed an individual's ability to get rich as a sign that God had predestined him to be saved. To Luther, Christians were already saved, so wealth was suspect. Instead of amassing it, Christians should work for their community, not themselves. Work (*Beruf*) thus became a calling (*Berufung*). Not profit but redistribution was the goal. According to Gerhard Wegner, a professor of theology, this "Lutheran socialism" finds secular expression in the welfare states of Scandinavia and Germany.

Luther's "subcutaneous" legacy keeps popping up in surprising places, says Mrs Eichel. Germans, and especially Lutherans, buy more life insurance but fewer shares than others (Luther didn't believe in making money without working for it). And everywhere they insist on conscientious observance of principle and order. They religiously separate their rubbish by the colour of glass and are world champions at recycling (65% of all waste), easily beating the second-place South Koreans.

## Holier than thou

Luther also shares blame for some negative qualities ascribed to Germans. He was deeply anti-Semitic, a prejudice his countrymen have shed at great cost (he blamed evil plagues on Jews for the illness that eventually killed him). Germans' legendary obedience to authority is attributed to Luther's insistence on separating spiritual and worldly authorities (which princes in his day found useful in suppressing a peasants' revolt). And although personally fond of boisterous jokes, he was among the founding figures of Germany's rather humourless and preachy tradition of public discourse. Germans today are the first to bemoan their national habit of delivering finger-wagging lectures.

Such rigid moralism can make Germans hard to deal with, especially in Brussels, where the EU's problems demand a willingness to let misdemeanours slide. But there are worse traits than excessive morality. Besides, 500 years on, Lutheran Germany is being transformed by globalisation. Germany today has not only devout ascetics but everything from consumerist hipsters to Om-chanting yogis. A growing Muslim population is pushing the country towards a new kind of religious pluralism. Mrs Eichel herself finds German churches "too serious"; she attends one headed by an African-American gospel preacher. If the downside of Germans' Lutheran heritage is a difficulty in lightening up or accepting alternative lifestyles, they seem to be getting over it.

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