The Fabricated Luther

Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths

Third Edition

UWE SIEMON-NETTO

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In Memoriam

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Contents

Foreword

UWE SIEMON-NETTO'S BOOK combines a number of themes in an original and ingenious way—the place of clichés in modern culture generally, the particular cliché according to which Luther is to be seen as the spiritual ancestor of Hitler, the manner in which this cliché violates the historical facts about Luther's understanding of the relation of Christianity and the world, the practical consequences of this cliché during World War II and after, and, finally and in the most ringing manner, the continuing relevance of Luther, correctly understood, for our own time. This is quite a table of contents, and it is a measure of Siemon-Netto's abilities that he carries off this project with both scholarly competence and verve. Obviously, different parts of this argument will be more interesting for different groups of readers. I can only make some general observations here.

It is debatable whether, as Siemon-Netto believes, clichés are more pervasive in modern times than in earlier periods of history. They can certainly be diffused more rapidly and effectively as a result of modern media. Once a cliché is firmly established in the minds of a particular group of people, it attains the quality of taken-for-granted truth and is very difficult to dislodge even by clear empirical counterevidence. Human beings do not like to be confronted with what the psychologists call cognitive dissonance ("I have made up my mind; don't confuse me with the facts"). What is more, thinking in general and rethinking in particular are fairly painful processes, and most people prefer to avoid this pain. The plausibility of a cliché does not depend on the amount or the quality of the evidence for

it, but on the way it meets the social and psychic needs of a particular situation. This is not necessarily a bad thing. All of us believe in propositions for which the evidence is dubious or, in any case, not available to us, and some of us hold beliefs that are contradicted by all sorts of "confusing facts." We cannot be careful scientists in our everyday lives. What is more, a good many beliefs based on factual error can have quite benign effects. A child in Lower Poldovia, a country recently blessed with a democratic government, may learn in school that King Bogumil, founder of the nation, was a fervent humanitarian who practiced respect of human rights, justice for minorities, and sensitivity to the environment. The empirical evidence, as known to the historians, may be that Bogumil was a homicidal maniac, terror of peasants, and polluter of rivers. Yet the cliché that transformed Bogumil the Terrible into Bogumil the Good may, on balance, be considered a morally tolerable error.

The "Luther cliché," as analyzed by Siemon-Netto, was clearly not benign. If Siemon-Netto's argument holds up (and I think that it does), this cliché had very deleterious consequences during World War II, preventing important decision-makers among the Allies from taking seriously those elements in the German resistance that were inspired by Lutheran ideas: If all Lutherans were really Nazis underneath, then these people could not be trusted. I have no expert knowledge of this episode in the history of World War II and thus cannot make any useful observations on it. But I do know something about the ideological uses of the same cliché in the postwar era, and some observations on that may be appropriate.

The cliché, as Siemon-Netto shows, is not just an assertion of a direct lineage between Luther and Hitler as two "bad Germans." The cliché also contains the proposition that the reason for this lineage is Luther's doctrine of the two realms. This doctrine supposedly relegates the world of social and political realities to some sort of amoral cynicism. This supposition, of course, completely distorts the Lutheran doctrine both as promulgated by Luther and as developed in later Lutheran thought. This is not my concern here. Rather, I want to ask: Who benefits ideologically from this distortion? I think I know the answer: It benefits those who understand Christianity in terms of an agenda of political utopianism. In recent times this has been an agenda of the Left.

According to the cliché, Lutheranism separates politics from the constraints of Christian morality and, therefore, opens the way for every sort of evil, culminating in the evil of the Third Reich. The doctrine of the two realms must be repudiated. God's grace is active in this world, and especially in the political world, and Christians must be active in, as it were, helping God's grace along. Put differently, the Christian task in the world is to work toward a Christian society—that is, a society that will embody the imperatives of Christian morality. In its Left version, this society will be a socialist one, and we all have heard the proposition that the task of Christians of our time is "to build socialism." But there is no compelling reason why the utopian agenda must be on the Left. It could also be proposed as the task of "building true Poldovianism" (and in the course of this "ethnic cleansing" the nation of all non- or not-quite-true Poldovians) or as "building white America" (with whatever homicidal implications that agenda might involve). Needless to say, utopianism of any political coloration has never been averse to homicide—the more grandiose the utopian vision, usually the more grandiose the scope of the homicide.

The ideological function of the "Luther cliché," as defined by Siemon-Netto, could be nicely observed in the former German Democratic Republic. An embarrassingly large number of Protestant clergy and laypeople were prepared to collaborate with the Communist regime out of a sense of guilt over the role of the churches in the Third Reich (just *how* embarrassingly large the number of collaborators was is only now becoming evident as the files of the security organizations are made public). Now, let it be stipulated that this role was not one of unblemished heroism (though, of course, there were genuine heroes). But the notion that the passive response of many in the churches was the result of Lutheran doctrine has little going for it. For one, the role of Roman Catholic clergy and laypeople during the same period was not at all more heroic or resistance-prone, despite the obvious absence there of the doctrine of the two realms. In the retrospective of DDR Protestants, though, the alleged Lutheran cynicism in the face of the Nazi evils was now to be repudiated in the name of a new (if you will, post-Lutheran) dedication to social justice—which in turn was understood to be participation in the task of "socialist construction." In other words, the repudiation

of Lutheranism served to legitimate the participation of Christians in the utopian project of Marxism in general and of the Marxist regime in Germany in particular. The phrase *Kirche im Sozialismus* ("church in socialist society"), which some simply understood as a realistic assessment of the churches' situation in Soviet-dominated Europe, was understood by many others as a political agenda with high moral legitimacy: Not that the church had to find ways of surviving under socialism, rather that the church should make itself part of the socialist project. It was precisely in this positive, utopian sense that this phrase found wide resonance in wide ecumenical circles outside the DDR and is the reason why for many years Protestant churchmen from the DDR were the darlings on the World Council of Churches circuit. This understanding of the Christian mission in our time was also, of course, linked to the triumphant ascendancy of various "liberation theologies" in both Protestant and Roman Catholic communities.

It is precisely this sort of utopianism that the Lutheran doctrine of the two realms was intended to forestall. And, as Siemon-Netto shows, it is not Martin Luther but Thomas Münzer who is the ancestor of twentieth-century utopianisms, the Nazi one included. And it is precisely for this reason that the sober realism of Lutheranism continues to be highly needed today. It remains to be seen whether the dismal collapse of socialism in most of the countries where it held sway only a few years ago will put an end to the Left version of modern secularized Anabaptism. As suggested above, beliefs are not usually either adopted or abandoned on the basis of empirical evidence, and the myth of socialism meets very powerful individual as well as collective needs. But even if that myth should have really died in the cataclysmic three years following the east-European revolutions of 1989, other utopian myths are already standing in line. Some are on the Right, such as various nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms (including the Christian right in the United States). Most continue to be on the Left, if not in the old socialist sense, in the sense of being hostile to democratic capitalism and to the bourgeois culture to which it is linked. Thus we have feminist utopias, environmentalist utopias (closely allied with what some have called "health fascism"), multiculturalist utopias. And every one of them has attached to it regiments of Christian theologians,

clergy, and lay activists who proclaim the urgent Christian imperative of enlisting under this particular banner. To slightly paraphrase Malcolm Muggeridge, there is no cause mad enough not to enlist the services of demented clergymen strumming their guitars. To legitimate such activities, needless to say, the doctrine of the two realms must be emphatically rejected.

Can a Lutheran morality, even if unintentionally, lead to an amoral cynicism? Perhaps. But, I think, an objective reading of history suggests that much greater harm has been done by utopians than by cynics, certainly in this century. It further seems to me, as it does to Siemon-Netto, that a Lutheran mission in our time would be to preach the doctrine of the two realms at every street corner where utopians gather and thereby to diminish the chances of the homicidal horrors that these types produce with great regularity. It would be nice to be able to record that this is indeed what the Lutheran churches have been doing. Alas, they have not. Not in Germany, not in the United States, not ecumenically. Even in the churches in the territory of the old German Democratic Republic, where one would think that some basic lessons should have been learned, there are powerful residues of the utopian delusions that made the *Kirche im Sozialismus* mischief. Lutherans by and large seem as vulnerable as other Christians to the great utopian temptation. One might perhaps consider this as empirical support for yet another Lutheran doctrine—that of original sin.

Peter L. Berger

Preface to the Third Edition

IT IS NOW half a millennium since Martin Luther ushered in the modern era with the Reformation. This happened in the middle of Germany. Luther made it clear to Christians that they were redeemed by grace alone through their faith in Jesus' saving act on the cross, but that they should now roll up their sleeves to get involved in this finite, sinful world. The quintessentially Lutheran idea that the Christian is called to serve one's neighbor in love in all secular activities[1]—whether as head of state or opposition leader, as mother, elementary school student, teacher, soldier, or voter—could not be more relevant to our confused and dangerous times. Luther thus delivered a spiritual liberation blow, one of the fruits of which was democracy. One would like to think that especially the Germans should now remember him happily and gratefully.

But what did we read on the eve of the Reformation anniversary, for example, in a major German newspaper? "Luther was not an Enlightenment thinker."[2] The writer of this twaddle obviously overlooked the fact that the reformer (1483–1546) had been dead for 238 years before Immanuel Kant's seminal work *What Is Enlightenment?* went to press in 1784. We read further: "Luther preached an eliminatory anti-Semitism." Here the same commentator overlooked the fact that anti-Semitism is a form of racism. Racism, however, was a prejudice unknown at the time of the Reformation and did not begin

1 *In vocatione* but not *per vocationem*, which would suggest works-righteousness.

2 Alan Posener, "Neuneinhalb Thesen gegen Martin Luther," *Welt am Sonntag*, April 3, 2014.

until the Age of Enlightenment. It is true that Luther made reprehensible anti-Jewish statements in his old age on religious grounds, which already embarrassed his contemporaries and in particular provoked the vehement opposition of Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), a Franconian titan of the Lutheran Reformation. Luther's invective, this black mark on the history of my denomination, I will of course discuss in this book. But a forerunner of the Holocaust, that is, the liquidation of an entire race, this Luther was not.

The writer went on: "Luther establishes Protestantism's allegiance to authority." Ah, here we arrive at the cliché that has taken root in many supposedly learned minds since the beginning of the Second World War: The *Fürstenknecht* Luther, the lackey of princes, Hitler's spiritual ancestor, had turned the Germans into obstructionist duck mice and thus paved the way for a genocide almost four hundred years after his death.

This charge, which implicitly makes all Germans since the sixteenth century Hitler's accomplices, is what I am primarily concerned with in this book, which is based on my doctoral thesis. I submitted it to the renowned Boston University in 1992. In the United States, dissertations are always evaluated by three scholars: the doctoral supervisor and two other reviewers. In my case, two members of this trio had to flee Vienna in their younger years because of their Jewish ancestry, and the third was of Swedish provenance. I mention this only to prevent malicious insinuations: if each of these gentlemen gave this paper a grade of "A," it was certainly not because they wanted to help a sympathizer or apologist of National Socialism obtain the highest academic degree.

I received my doctorate at Boston University in the dual discipline of theology and sociology of religion. From the perspective of these two academic fields—and supported by historical research—I now take a close look here at the "Luther stereotype," as the original title of my doctoral dissertation was. Gentle readers, please do not be deterred by this reference. At the time of writing, I have been working as a journalist for sixty-five years, trying to present even complicated facts in a generally understandable way, that is, without academic jargon but also without banalities.

Uwe Siemon-Netto
January 2023

Preface to the Second Edition

THREE PERSONAL REASONS have led to this study on cliché thinking, on Martin Luther, and on Carl Goerdeler, a study in need of an update twelve years after its first publication. My reasons are:

1. I am a journalist

I have been a journalist for fifty years at the time of this revision of *The Fabricated Luther*. In this business, clichés are our stock-in-trade. A journalist cannot avoid stereotypes. He receives them, originates them, and, alas, also spreads them. And if he is conscientious, he will constantly strive to find out what is behind a cliché; in other words, he will try to *relativize* and thus undo the cliché.

2. I am a Lutheran

I was brought up on the works of Johann Sebastian Bach—Lutheran theology put to music. I was introduced to these riches early in life by my mother, Ruth Siemon-Netto, an oratorio singer, who began taking me regularly to the weekly motet and cantata services in Leipzig's *Thomaskirche*—Bach's church—when I was 4 years old. This provided an invaluable education from which I have benefited all my life, especially in times of extreme hardship. (Bearing this in mind, I feel deep pity for today's youth, including Lutheran divinity students, whose upbringing at home and at school has deprived them of any sense of this treasure. This flippant abandonment of a magnificent legacy is all the more incomprehensible

as it occurs at a time of great prosperity when it would behoove us to nurture this inheritance; but that is a story for another day.)

Tough Lutheran instructor: Clara Netto, the author's grandmother.

The most important person in my childhood, though, was my staunchly Lutheran grandmother, Clara Netto, to whom I owe my values. She taught me Christianity; she taught me to stand up for my beliefs and to be wary of false prophets. In World War II, she simply boycotted her neighborhood church, which was afflicted by the *Zeitgeist* and consequently did not cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the creation of faith. Appalled by the pro-Nazi "German Christian" heresy preached there, she conducted her religious life in a way that will sound familiar to contemporary Christians who are offended by the way their denominations are selling out to the current *Zeitgeist*: She withdrew into her bedroom, lit a candle, read her Bible, and said her prayers. She prayed for an end to the spiritual darkness that had befallen our country.

It was during those frightful years that Clara Netto taught me by her own example what it meant to be a brave Christian—particularly one of Lutheran persuasion. After my parents and I had lost our home in an air raid on Leipzig in 1943, we lived in her apartment. Late every evening, when the sirens sounded the first alarm, she donned her best dress because, as she said, she could well meet her Lord in a matter of hours and wished to be properly attired for that occasion. We lived at a major streetcar crossing, which meant that as the Allied bombings began, passengers, conductors, and drivers of four tramlines would pour into the basements of nearby buildings, including ours, where we stored potatoes and coal and where bunk beds were set up for tenants and visitors.

Among the strangers there were often members of one particular species ordinary Germans heartily disliked. They were Nazi Party functionaries in brown uniforms bedecked with gold tinsel, which is why we called them *Goldfasane*, or gold pheasants. They had two characteristics: They tended to be fat and pudgy, an unusual

sight in wartime Germany, and given the macho pretensions of their ideology, they were amazingly pusillanimous. Blockbuster bombs would detonate around us, flattening neighboring apartment blocks so thoroughly that it was often impossible to identify the tenants' bodies. (My grandmother's sister died that way; we buried her right hand bearing her wedding ring.) While this was happening up and down our street, and fire, smoke, and clouds of dust entered our basement through cracks in the walls, we prayed quietly. Only the *Goldfasane* would howl, sigh, and shiver, and they perspired most unattractively.

This irritated Grandmother Netto, who held me tightly in her left arm, softly singing Lutheran hymns into my ear, hymns that would remain in my head for the rest of my life, even as I covered battles as a foreign correspondent in Vietnam decades later. She lowered her lorgnettes and stared sternly at the gutless Nazi officials. "*Aber, aber, meine Herren* [But, gentlemen]," she said, then immediately correcting herself, "*Ach nein*, gentlemen you are not. Whatever you are, pull yourselves together. You are setting a bad example for my grandson and the other children here. You wanted this war; we didn't. Now face its consequences bravely."

The following morning, Gestapo officers in long leather coats showed up at our front door, accusing my grandmother of sedition. "Come, pray with me," she would say. Of course they did not pray, being atheists or pagans. "Well, then, go ahead, arrest me. Arrest a German officer's widow for admonishing German men in uniform to show valor." At that, the Gestapo men left.

I am not claiming here that my grandmother was a paragon of republican principles. She was not. Born in 1888—the year Germany had three emperors (William I, Frederick, and William II)—Clara Netto was a monarchist to the core, though a monarchist fashioned by the gentle 800-year rule of Saxony's cultured, enlightened, and lighthearted royal family. Being a monarchist of that kind included a mindset that abhorred the depravity of the Nazi rabble and its inhumanity. And it included a virtue Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *Zivilcourage*, or civil courage, whose dearth in Nazi-ruled Germany he lamented.[1] Bonhoeffer would have been elated observing my feisty

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 5.

grandmother during those bombings in Leipzig and the days that followed. She showed *Zivilcourage*. To her, this was the Lutheran way.

I will not deny that in my childhood I also observed so-called Lutherans act in the opposite manner. I was briefly evacuated to the countryside, where I lived in the parsonage of a "German Christian" pastor. He put out the swastika on April 20 to celebrate Hitler's birthday, which scandalized my grandmother and my parents. But I realized that this pastor was not representative of the Lutherans in his village; in fact, he was loathed by his parishioners, especially his organist, who was also the principal of the local school. I was with this man in the organ loft every Sunday, turning pages. During the sermons, he never failed to whisper into my ear what a specious character he thought the minister was, a traitor to his Lord, an idolater worshiping a false god. This was dangerous stuff to teach a child. Had I denounced the organist, he could have been guillotined. Yet his faith commanded him to take this risk for my benefit; he considered it his Christian duty to teach children to distinguish between the righteous and the unrighteous. On Sundays this minister's church was empty, unless a pulpit exchange brought his colleague from a neighboring parish. According to the organist, this neighboring pastor was a "proper, old-fashioned Lutheran," one who proclaimed the Gospel of Christ, not the false gospel according to Adolf Hitler. Thus everybody came to hear him.

"Here I stand": Luther before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms.

I understand that these anecdotal reminiscences might not carry the weight of empirical evidence, scholarly speaking. But with childhood memories such as these, I was all the more astounded to

find out later in life that Martin Luther was being accused of being Hitler's spiritual ancestor. The "Here I Stand" Luther, whom my upright grandmother loved to quote, was supposed to have taught us Germans quietism? This just did not square with my own experiences. And when I studied Lutheran theology late in life, I was cheered that my research proved my grandmother right and William L. Shirer wrong. (Shirer popularized the Luther cliché in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.)

3. I am a Leipziger

A few days after I was born, our most popular mayor in recent history, Carl Goerdeler, resigned after the Nazis had blown up the Mendelssohn monument outside the *Gewandhaus*, our concert hall. I remember Goerdeler was mentioned in hushed voices around the dinner table. And I remember the immense sadness in our family when, after the July 20, 1944, coup attempt against Hitler, Goerdeler was arrested and sentenced to death. Everyone agreed that, had the coup succeeded, Goerdeler would have made a wonderful chancellor of a post-Nazi government.

In early 1988, as I was finishing my master's thesis applying Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross to the plight of Vietnam veterans, Dr. Marianne Meyer-Krahmer visited me in my campus apartment at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC). Meyer-Krahmer, the retired head mistress of a large high school for girls in Heidelberg, was Goerdeler's daughter. She told me of her futile efforts to have German and other historians evaluate fairly her father's sacrifice. The fact that he was a conservative simply did not tally with the *Zeitgeist*, which happened to be left-wing at the time.

As Goerdeler's daughter and I spoke, I began to realize that it was Goerdeler's internalized Lutheranism that had motivated him to fight Hitler the way he did—for example, rejecting assassination as an option in favor of attempting to have Hitler arrested and tried before a court of law. In all of Goerdeler's thoughts and actions, he displayed typically Lutheran attitudes—from the dauntless way in which he warned the world of the evil of National Socialism, to his willingness to combat that evil at great risk to his life, to his insistence on an orderly form of resistance.

Thus the subject for a doctoral dissertation was born. I thank Dr. Meyer-Krahmer for many enriching hours of interviews and for giving me access to her family files. I am most grateful to my *Doktorvater*, Professor Peter L. Berger, for patiently guiding my research of cliché thinking as a sociological phenomenon. I am equally grateful to Professor Carter Lindberg for his invaluable advice as I was trying to counter the Luther cliché from a theological perspective. And I am indebted to Professor Uri Ra'anan for his inestimable counsel on the historical aspects of my writing. However, none of these gentlemen is responsible for the views I have expressed in this study.

I also owe thanks to Professor Paul Rorem who, as my instructor in church history at LSTC, first triggered my interest in Lutheran resistance theories; to Professor Oliver K. Olson, formerly of Marquette University, who directed my attention to the *Gnesio*-Lutheran contributions to these theories; and to Professors Klemens von Klemperer of Smith College and Peter Hofmann of McGill University for their counsel on the history of the German resistance in World War II.

I am indebted to Professor H. Joachim Maître of the College of Communications, Boston University, for making me aware of Thomas Mann's part in the genesis of the Luther cliché.

I am most grateful to the Earhart Foundation for awarding me a grant to fund my doctoral studies.

I thank the scores of pastors and members of the Lutheran laity whom I interviewed during my research into the Lutheran roots of the East German revolution centered in Leipzig, my hometown. That revolution provided me with potent material to argue against the Luther cliché.

I thank my friend Sidney Bertner, whose generosity facilitated my research. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my friends Dudley and Eliane Freeman for giving me access to their extensive library. It proved invaluable for my research on the German resistance.

Most of all, I thank my wife, Gillian, for her patience with her middle-aged husband, who interrupted his career as a journalist and disrupted her life to study theology and sociology of religion. She was the first to read every new chapter, and she proved to be a superb critic.

New York, October 1994
Gurat, France, July 2006

Abbreviations

AE	*Luther's Works: American Edition*. Volumes 1–30: Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76. Volumes 31–55: Edited by Helmut Lehmann. Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/ Fortress, 1957–86. Volumes 56–82: Edited by Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–.
AC	Augsburg Confession
GDR/DDR	German Democratic Republic
EKD	Evangelical Church in Germany
LSTC	Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago
OSS	Office of Strategic Services (United States)
SA	*Sturmabteilung* (Nazi storm troopers)
SS	*Schutzstaffel* (Nazi elite guard)
WA	*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. 73 volumes in 85. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–.
WA Br	*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Briefwechsel*. 18 volumes. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–.
WA TR	*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Tischreden*. 6 volumes. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–21.

Chapter One

A Cliché Twice Defeated

NEARLY EIGHT DECADES ago, scores of Germans were rounded up and tortured to death, hanged, guillotined, or executed by firing squads for their attempt to overthrow the National Socialist tyranny. Almost all of them were Christians; some were Roman Catholic, and some were Lutheran. The most famous among the latter group were Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian, and Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, the former mayor of Leipzig. Goerdeler would have become Germany's chancellor had the July 20, 1944, coup attempt against Adolf Hitler succeeded.

This study will show that they acted in accordance with Martin Luther's teachings on how and when to resist secular authority. Yet since the end of World War II, eminent scholars and scribes have promoted the cliché that Luther was somehow to blame for Hitler's rise to power and for the Germans' subservience to this evil ruler.

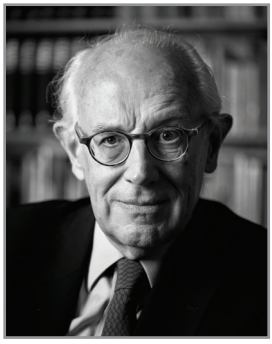
Let us jump ahead in history for one moment: "Germany will never be reunified—at least not in our lifetime." For decades this is what Communist leaders stated as a fact and Western politicians whispered so they would not offend their West German allies. Most "independent experts" were less bashful. To the well-informed, the impossibility of Germany's reunification was a "given." But in the autumn of 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. And a year later, Germany was one country again, joined together peacefully and

democratically. In hindsight, what seemed a verity turned out to be yet another cliché.

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. This was indirectly the result of Lutheran resistance thinking.

Both stereotypes—Luther's alleged authorship of National Socialism and the presumed impossibility of Germany's reunification—are related, as we shall see. This gives us cause for reflection on the role of clichés in modern times. The word *cliché* is the French vocable for a stereotype printing plate. Its function is to reproduce the likeness of a given object over and over again. A cliché does not give an altogether truthful picture of that object. For one thing, a cliché is never more than two-dimensional; for another, it is not alive—once cast, it will never change. And even the best cliché is never more than a rough approximation of the real thing.

Used as a metaphor for a particular way of thinking, clichés distinguish themselves by "their capacity to bypass reflection and thus unconsciously to work on the mind, while excluding potential relativizations," according to Anton Zijderveld.[1] Zijderveld sees a strong affinity between clichés and modernity. I shall take this notion a step further. I will show that cliché thinking is a sibling of the *Zeitgeist*, which also excludes potential relativizations.



Anton Zijderveld, cliché researcher.

1 Anton C. Zijderveld, *On Clichés* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 5–6.

The cliché about the alleged impossibility of a German reunification conspired with the *Zeitgeist* and excluded potential relativizations such as

1. that the Communist system would ultimately collapse;
2. that this collapse could conceivably occur in a largely nonviolent manner;
3. that reasonable leaders such as Gorbachev and Yeltsin could appear on the Soviet scene;
4. that a peaceful and powerful opposition would emerge inside East Germany.

Finally, being twinned to the *Zeitgeist*, which by its very definition is finite and therefore anthropocentric, our cliché excludes the theological option that God might interfere directly with history.

In fairness to our cliché, it must be said that all these potential relativizations had seemed rather remote for the last forty years. But what of more pedestrian stereotypes, clichés about other nations, for example? "Having been fully socialized in a particular society," Zijderveld writes, "the clichés of this society will lie in store in man's consciousness, ever ready to be triggered and used."[2] This surely applies to clichés such as the following: The English are eccentric and scurrilous; the French arrogant or full of *joie de vivre*; the Germans efficient, *gemütlich*, or cruel, and at any rate obedient to authority. Those endowed with a somewhat larger stock of clichés might elaborate that the Germans' submissiveness to any type of ruler, tyrants included, is all Luther's fault; he was Hitler's spiritual ancestor.

Men of renown have enunciated this astonishing lineage running from the sixteenth-century Saxon founder of Protestantism via King Frederick II of Prussia—a former Calvinist turned Deist—to a twentieth-century Roman Catholic Austrian who became the internationally acknowledged symbol of evil. U.S. historian Robert Michael argued that there was a "strong parallel" between Luther's ideas and the anti-Semitism of most German Lutherans throughout the Holocaust. According to Michael, Luther mythologized the Jews as evil, just as the Nazis did.[3] Another U.S. historian, Lucy

2 Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 36.

3 Robert Michael, "Luther, Luther Scholars, and the Jews," *Encounter* 46:4 (Autumn 1985): 339–56.

Dawidowicz, suggested that the "line of anti-Semitic descent" from Luther to Hitler was "easy to draw." Dawidowicz asserted that, like Hitler four centuries later, Luther was obsessed by the "demonologized universe" inhabited by Jews.[4] However, Dawidowicz at least qualified this by saying that *to Hitler*, this was the "real Luther," as opposed to an entirely different Luther we will discuss later. Alan Dershowitz, not a historian but a renowned legal scholar, pulled no such punches:

> Toward the end of his life—and at the height of his influence—Luther articulated a specific program against the Jews, which served as bible of anti-Jewish actions over the next four centuries, culminating in the Holocaust. In many ways, Luther can be viewed as the spiritual predecessor of Adolf Hitler. Indeed, virtually all the themes that eventually found their way into Hitler's genocidal writings, rantings, and actions are adumbrated in Martin Luther's infamous essay "Concerning the Jews and Their Lies . . ." It is shocking that Luther's ignoble name is still honored rather than forever cursed by mainstream Protestant churches.[5]

Dershowitz stands in a long tradition. Thomas Mann linked Luther to Hitler, as did Lord Vansittart, who was once the highest civil servant in the British Foreign Office. Archbishop Temple and the Very Reverend William R. Inge of the Church of England shared this opinion, as did William L. Shirer, the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, a bestseller. And all owe their insights, directly or indirectly, to Ernst Troeltsch, a liberal German theologian considered a tragic figure by many of his colleagues—a man who could not square the church's doctrine with science and consequently lost his Christian faith, though not his belief in God.

One of Shirer's observations has since gained almost worldwide acceptance: He explained the timidity of most German Protestants in the early Nazi years with the assertion that they were imbued with Luther's "ferocious [belief] in absolute political authority."[6] This is, of course, a crass cliché that entirely ignores Luther's advocacy of, in Franz Lau's words, "an almost foolhardy opposition against all

4 Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Bantam, 1986), 23.

5 Alan Dershowitz, *Chutzpah* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 106–7.

6 William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 236.

governmental injustice."[7] It ignores that Luther provided his followers with precise definitions of the circumstances under which tyrants may be removed by force of arms.

At the time of the National Socialists' rise to power, Shirer was an American radio correspondent in Germany. As I prepared the first edition of this volume, Shirer (d. 1993) was living in retirement in New England. For the purpose of this study, I asked him how he had arrived at this conclusion. He replied, "It came from general reading."[8] This book will demonstrate that if one does one's homework—that is, if one reads those books which Luther himself authored and is not content with doing "general reading"—one will see that Shirer's conclusions are a construct that has no foundation in historic reality. To say it differently, I hope to demonstrate that Shirer's conclusions are the result of cliché thinking, not the result of work with primary sources.

But this leads us to questions that must be pondered in a study of the phenomenon of cliché thinking: Does modernity allow for differentiated views? Can a media society function without clichés? Would Shirer's work have been a global success had he written, "Well, yes, there were Germans who misunderstood Luther and therefore did not resist the Nazis and who became Nazis themselves; and there were other Germans whose internalized Lutheranism guided them in the opposite direction and made them choose the path of resistance and martyrdom"?

Shirer knew many of the latter variety of Germans. He knew Carl Goerdeler, who will be the focus of a long chapter in this volume. Did Shirer not see that it was Goerdeler, rather than Hitler's fellow travelers, who acted in a truly Lutheran fashion? Or was Shirer insufficiently informed about Luther *and* about Hitler? Or did he not want to know? Like Shirer, I am a veteran foreign correspondent familiar with the pressures and constraints of our trade, and that makes it impossible for me to slam him. Too great is the temptation to reach into your stock of clichés if your job compels you to explain strange societies to readers and listeners who are unfamiliar with such subjects.

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7 Franz Lau, *Luthers Lehre von den beiden Reichen* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1952), 88–89.

8 William L. Shirer in a letter to Uwe Siemon-Netto, dated February 21, 1989.

The same types of questions apply to our second stereotype: "Germany will never be reunified—at least not in our lifetime." Was it at all possible for journalists to relativize something that *seemed* obvious to everyone? Was there any precedent on which one could base the assumption that things may change literally overnight? Yet on October 9, 1989, this cliché was soundly defeated—along with the other stereotype, which held that Luther had so effectively warped the minds of his followers in Germany (though not the minds of the people in more uniformly Lutheran countries such as Norway or Denmark!) that they would forever be incapable of resisting governmental evil. It was in Leipzig, Goerdeler's city, almost two generations after his death on the gallows, that one of Luther's most famous dicta was proven right: "At no place has Christ's Gospel ever been stronger than where it is the least liked. For when their hour came the tyrants went under, and the Word remains on the agenda."[9]

On that October day of what went down in history as the year of Germany's peaceful revolution, after the traditional "prayers for peace" in Leipzig's churches, 70,000 demonstrators marched around the medieval city center. Later, Pastor Friedrich Schorlemmer, a leading dissident and seminary professor in Wittenberg, was to write: "Those who marched in Leipzig had a good notion of what might happen. So they took each other by their hands and got started, the fear of a Chinese solution in their bellies and the security apparatus before their eyes. Only later did it became clear to us what was at stake on that day."[10]

Today we know that the Stasi, East Germany's state security agency, had prepared for a massacre. In Leipzig's hospitals, entire wards were cleared of patients. According to Bishop Werner Leich, who was the president of the federation of evangelical churches in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) at that time, hospital staff had their leaves canceled, and ample amounts of coffins and body bags were brought into town. Leich was also the head of the Lutheran church in neighboring Thuringia. And there, in the quaint

9 WA 19:401.6–9.

10 Friedrich Schorlemmer, "Die Menschheit reicht weiter," in *Räumt die Steine hinweg*, ed. Andreas Ebert, Johanna Haberer, Friedrich Kraft (Munich: Claudius, 1990), 108.

town of Arnstadt, the Stasi had rehearsed the crackdown it planned for Leipzig two days later.

Arnstadt was where Johann Sebastian Bach had his first job in a pretty church that now bears his name. Demonstrators fled into that church on October 7, 1989, after the Stasi and the "people's police" (*Vopo*) had closed in on them from all sides. Deacon Klaus Gerth and Vicar Anne-Katrin Schiek rushed into the *Bachkirche* to comfort the frightened crowd. When they emerged again, they were immediately handcuffed and led away—an unusual action, even by East German standards. They were released a few hours later. This was, after all, only a rehearsal.

The ninth of October was a Monday. For quite some time, "prayers for peace" were conducted every Monday evening in Leipzig's downtown churches, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic. The worshipers had no idea of what the Stasi had in mind for them. An agricultural fairground on the outskirts of Leipzig was to be transformed into a concentration camp for opposition leaders. Lists of prospective inmates were drawn up, which included the names of all prominent clergymen.[11]

Resistance, Lutheran style: Friedrich Magirius, superintendent (regional bishop) of parishes in the eastern part of Leipzig. (Courtesy City of Leipzig/Rico Thumser)

One of those listed was Provost Günter Hanisch, the highest-ranking prelate of the Roman Catholic minority in Leipzig. From the very beginning of the protest movement, he had stood faithfully with his Evangelical brother-ministers and preached from their pulpits. The two Lutheran superintendents (regional bishops), Friedrich Magirius and Johannes Richter, were also marked for internment. Also at risk was Pastor Christian, *Führer* of the *Nikolaikirche*, whom anonymous callers had threatened, "One more prayer service, and your church will be in flames!"

11 Werner Leich, in an interview with the author, July 1990.

There are many explanations as to why Leipzig was spared a bloodbath and mass arrests. One reason is definitely true. The nonviolence of the demonstrators was a crucial factor. Not that all 70,000 demonstrators were Christians. In fact, of Leipzig's total population of 530,000, only 12 percent of the city belonged to the Protestant Church and not even 4 percent were Roman Catholics. "What happened in Leipzig was a good example for Jesus' definition of the people of God as the salt of the earth: 15,000 worshipers determined the behavior of 70,000 protesters," said Superintendent Richter. On the Monday the wall fell, Richter had ended his sermon in the *Thomaskirche* with these prayerful words: "May you be given the courage to be patient. May you and I be given the strength for good language. May you and I be valiant enough to resist anger."

Resistance, Lutheran style: Johannes Richter, superintendent (regional bishop) of parishes in the western part of Leipzig.

As the demonstrators marched around Leipzig's medieval center, they arrived at the most dreaded place in their city—the local Stasi headquarters, called *Runde Ecke*, or "round corner." Suddenly, *agents provocateurs* in their midst tried to storm this massive building to give the huge army of secret police, militiamen, and regular soldiers waiting in the side streets an excuse for a "Chinese solution" to put down the unrest. But well-organized Christian groups within the crowd separated the agitators from the other demonstrators. They formed a *cordon sanitaire* around the Stasi building. And that was the beginning of the end of Communist East Germany.

The security forces withdrew. At whose orders? That is still unclear. But this much is certain—they would not have done so had violence broken out. Without the courageous action of the Christians, civil war would have been the most likely result. As it was, tyranny retreated in the face of a few people armed only with

candles and singing hymns. Their gentleness turned out to be the first hammer-blow against the Berlin Wall.

That event was a major victory of Luther over Lenin, who had thought the Germans incapable of making revolution, for before storming a railroad station, the Germans would buy platform tickets. To be fair to Lenin, the Leipzig demonstrators proved him right in one respect. In a sense, they did buy their platform tickets. They were orderly. They came after work. They paid their tram, train, or bus fares. They shed no blood and destroyed no property.

But Lenin erred, for this *was* a revolution. But it was a very German, a quintessentially Lutheran, revolution. It was a revolution without insurrection and bloodshed. It was an "orderly" revolution. Some readers might object, "How could this have been a Lutheran revolution if most of the demonstrators were doubtless atheists or agnostics?" Here I have to appeal to Max Weber, who has shown that *internalized* Calvinistic attitudes are still shaping the social behavior even of secularized Americans. If this is so, then it is fair to say that an *internalized* Lutheranism must have had a major influence on the behavior of secularized East Germans.

In my last chapter, I shall return to the events in East Germany. But first I must explain the phenomenon that these events, as well as the resistance against Hitler almost two generations earlier, have reduced to absurdity—the cliché.

Thinking in Clichés: A Perverted Typification

Thinking in clichés resembles a process that Alfred Schutz considers an inevitable prerequisite of social life.[12] It is called *typification*.

We typify continuously. For example, being lost in a strange town we spot a blue uniform and a badge and think: *police officer*. We do not think, "Here is an Irish-American who loves to eat oysters and collects butterflies." We know none of that; if we did, we might invite the officer to an oyster dinner to discuss butterflies. But having typified this individual as a police officer, we deal with him or her in that capacity. In this case, we ask for directions.

12 Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1962), 1:6.

A second time, while speeding, we see a blue uniform and a badge. Again we think: *police officer*. But now we slow down because we do not want to get a ticket.

A third time we may observe someone in a blue uniform with a badge running across the street in the pursuit of another person. Once more we think: *police officer*. But this time we neither ask for directions nor slow down for fear of getting a ticket. Instead, we respond to the officer in his or her present function. We might help to nab the villain, or we might stand and gawk at the unfolding drama of a police chase.

But if we narrowed our typification of the officer to only one aspect of the profession, we might always ask the officer for directions, regardless of whether the officer was chasing a criminal or trying to catch us speeding. Thus we would not only typify the officer but also register his or her presence in a stereotypical manner. And that would be typification of a perverted kind. This typification would resist modification. It would not allow for the possibility that at this very moment the police officer has a different task. Therefore, typification has degenerated into a cliché—the rather idiosyncratic cliché that a cop's only job is that of a guide.

"Clichés manage to avoid . . . relativization brought about by reflections," Anton Zijderveld observes. "They . . . influence people on the attitudinal level."[13] In our example, a multitude of potential relativizations is bypassed in our behavior if we asked every person in a blue uniform with a badge for directions, relativizations such as: (1) at this point it is not his job to show us the way; (2) we may not slow down when we see her and consequently be fined for speeding; (3) we may prevent him from arresting a criminal; (4) we may not need any directions right now.

Clichés come in a host of varieties. Our lives are so filled with stereotypical expressions, acts, and gestures that they have lost their original meaning. When we say that something will happen "at the end of the day," everybody realizes that we are not thinking of the end of any specific day; in fact, whatever will occur may well take place early in the morning or at noon or at teatime.

When we claim "blondes have more fun," we tend to say it in jest, knowing that our statement would only be true from the

13 Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 6.

perspective of an envious brunette vying for the attention of a gentleman who prefers to romance blonde ladies. And even in that case, we know that it takes more than the color of her hair to let a woman have more fun. Moreover, anybody who has ever been in Rio de Janeiro, as well as in Iceland, will find the assertion that blondes have more fun blatantly absurd—an absurd cliché.

Similarly, when we engage in stereotypical gestures such as the French habit of kissing one another on the cheeks, we are aware that in most cases this act signifies neither love nor concupiscence, as it might have centuries ago. Clichés, including stereotypical gestures, are simply "containers of old experiences" that have "grown stale and common through repetitive overuse," writes Zijderveld,[14] who also points out that clichés are exchanged "like the many coins of our inflated economic system."[15] According to Zijderveld, a cliché should be seen "as a specimen of human expression which has lost much of its original ingenuity and semantic power, but gained in social functionality."[16] The kissing ritual serves as a form of greeting. It has no real meaning. The gesture is the mark of a cliché whose meaning is superseded by function, says Zijderveld.

Nowhere is this more evident than in television commercials. We are frequently shown couples clinking champagne glasses to welcome the new carpet in their house, to accompany a microwave meal served by candlelight, or to relax on a cruise ship. These scenes are not followed by information about the different *crus* of champagne or why some glasses produce a wondrous chime when clinked. Neither the champagne nor the glasses really matter in these commercials. Rather, they are components of a cliché whose function it is to impart to the viewers a sense of celebration. The champagne and glasses are another way of communicating that it feels good to have that particular carpet in the house, eat that microwave meal, or travel on that cruise ship. If the same could be accomplished by pouring a cup of coffee over the new carpet, into the microwave oven, or into the ship's funnel, we would probably get more amusing commercials. But for the time being, dealing with

14 Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 11.

15 Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 6.

16 Zijderveld, *On Clichés*, 24.