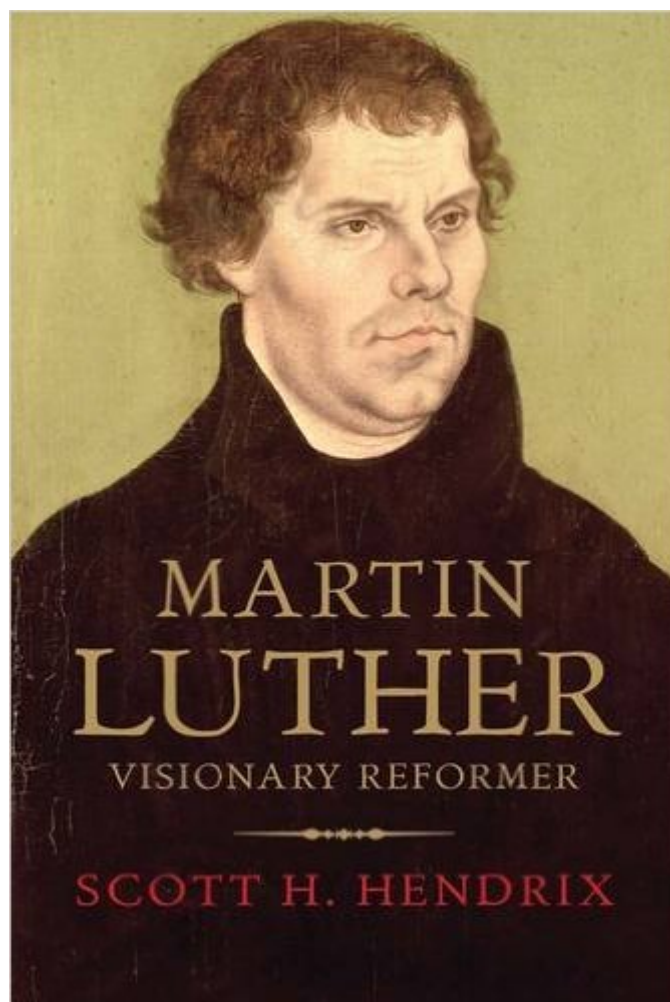


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Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer



Synopsis

A fresh account of the life of Martin Luther The sixteenth-century German friar whose public conflict with the medieval Roman Church triggered the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther was neither an unblemished saint nor a single-minded religious zealot according to this provocative new biography by Scott Hendrix. The author presents Luther as a man of his time: a highly educated scholar and teacher and a gifted yet flawed human being driven by an optimistic yet ultimately unrealized vision of a true religion. This bold, insightful account of the life of Martin Luther provides a new perspective on one of the most important religious figures in history, focusing on Luther's entire life, his personal relationships and political motivations, rather than on his theology alone. Relying on the latest research and quoting extensively from Luther's correspondence, Hendrix paints a richly detailed portrait of an extraordinary man who, while devout and courageous, had a dark side as well. No recent biography in English explores as fully the life and work of Martin Luther long before and far beyond the controversial posting of his 95 Theses in 1517, an event that will soon be celebrated as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's nearly 500 years since Martin Luther kicked off the Reformation by criticising the practices of the Roman Catholic church and refusing to accept the Pope as the sole arbiter of the meaning of the Bible. What started as a fairly straightforward dispute over the sale of indulgences grew into a theological war that first split the church and then splintered the Reformers themselves into different

factions, arguing over some pretty esoteric points of interpretation of the gospels. Scott H. Hendrix is Emeritus Professor of Reformation History, Princeton Theological Seminary, and tells us in the preface that he struggled during his teaching years to find a full and well-researched but readable biography of Luther to recommend to his students, so decided to write one. Unusually, the problem for Luther biographers is one of too much, rather than too little, information, making the biographer's task one of deciding what is true and relevant. Although this isn't the chunkiest biography in the world, its 290 pages plus notes give a thorough account both of Luther's personal life, at least as much as is known about it, and of the various steps that led him from monk to leader of the Reformation. He explains the main points of Luther's theological insights clearly enough for this atheist to understand, including the finer points where differences of interpretation arose amongst the Reformers. Hendrix also gives enough information about the prevailing political situation in Germany and further afield to put the Reformation into its historical context, particularly in explaining the level of protection Luther and his colleagues gained from the need of the Emperor to keep the various reformed Princes onside.

The observance of the Five Hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation in October 2017 has resulted in a new flurry of publishing projects and books about Martin Luther. I was intrigued to read what the church historian Scott Hendrix had to say about Luther in this one volume biography. To cut to the chase, this book has proven to be an abysmally disappointing work. It offers little to no new insights. Hendrix explains why he felt yet another biography of Martin Luther would be helpful. He said that over the years people have asked him to recommend a single volume biography, but alas he "could not find a biography that satisfied him" (p. xi). It is as if he is completely oblivious to James Kittelson's 1987 masterpiece *Martin Luther: The Story of the Man and His Career*. Kittelson's work is not that old and there have been no groundbreaking discoveries to justify Hendrix's work. I was looking forward to a satisfying reading experience and writing a thoughtful review to interact with the author's assertions and points of view, but frankly, all I can do with this review is point out that Hendrix's work is sloppy and his underlying premise about Martin Luther makes this work a non-starter. Hendrix claims that Martin Luther is "best understood not as a reformer of the church but as a reformer of religion, who strove to replace bad religion with a faith that valued freedom and justice instead of narrow orthodoxy and moralism" (p. xii). The book goes downhill from there. I found myself putting notes in the margin: "Documentation?" "Proof?" "Footnote?" "Wrong!" "Ridiculous!" and even a few choice harsher adjectives here and there.

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