

Traditional religion

Luther

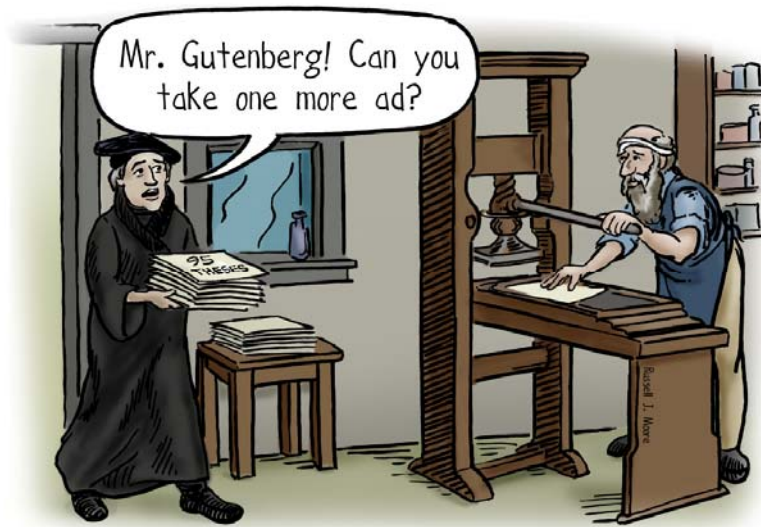
Swedes are known to follow the teachings of Martin Luther; more than 80% are Lutherans. Studying Luther provides the key to understanding the Swedish character.

Martin Luther (Germany, 1483–1546) changed the course of Western civilization by initiating the Protestant Reformation. In accordance with his father's wishes, he enrolled in law school at the university of Erfurt, which he called a “*beerhouse and a whorehouse*”, but dropped out almost immediately, believing that law represented uncertainty. He learned early to be suspicious of even the greatest thinkers and to test everything himself by experience. He became a monk at the age of 22 and dedicated himself to the monastic life, devoting himself to fasting, long hours of prayer, pilgrimage, and frequent confession. This way was not without difficulties for him and he claimed that he “*lost touch with Christ the Savior and Comforter, and made of him the jailor and hangman of his poor soul*”. But it finally worked out for him and he became a *Doctor of Theology*. The story could have ended here, but the Roman Catholic Church started to sell indulgences to raise money to rebuild St Peter’s Basilica in Rome.



The “famous indulgentia” started the reformation of the Christian church

The church used its spiritual power and tried to convince the people that only faith, such as is active in charity and good works, can justify man, and such good works could be achieved by donating money to the church. Of course, that was a wonderful business idea, but it upset Luther because it excluded the poor from Heaven [is it Heaven where there are poor?]. He wrote his famous *The 95 Theses* and nailed it on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The nailing could have passed without too much notice, but the invention of Johannes Gutenberg, the printing press, was already in use (since 1439) and they printed *The 95 Theses* - a controversy known to be the first in the history to be aided by the printing press. People liked the idea of opposing the Pope and it split the body of Christianity (called Reformation). Luther was excommunicated from the church, of course, as a heretic and it made him world famous for the coming centuries.



Cartoon 23: Luther wisely marketed his views in the new media, developed by Gutenberg: The Press.

Luther is often regarded as a Puritan and the expression “*Lutheran Puritan*” is in use for people who completely lack any feeling or capacity for joy and happiness. Swedish people are eager to point out that the coupling between Luther and Puritanism is not so simple and is probably unfair. I agree.

He encouraged sinning, saying: “*Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong...,this life is not a place where justice resides*”. He assured monks and nuns that they could break their vows without sin, because vows are an illegitimate and vain attempt to win salvation. The Reformation provoked unrest and violence such as widespread burning of convents, monasteries, bishops’ palaces and libraries. Some Lutherans (peasants) believed that the time has coming for an attack on the upper classes in general.

Luther married, which was unusual for a priest. He married a nun 16 years younger than him, after smuggling her out of her convent in a herring barrel. Later he claimed that “*the Lord has plunged him into marriage*”. The Lord gave him a good wife, who not only gave birth to 6 kids, but even helped earn the couple a living by farming the land and taking in boarders (the wife, Katharina von Bora, was not Swedish).



Cartoon 24: God gave Luther a herring barrel to find a bride.

Luther became implicated in the bigamy of Philip I, Landgrave of Hesse by advising him to “marry the second woman secretly and keep quite about the matter”. Later, when the story came out, he gave even worse advice: to “tell a good, strong lie” and deny the marriage completely. This affair caused lasting damage to Luther’s reputation. At the same time it made him the archetype of Swedish double-morality and political hypocrisy with numerous fans.

Luther was famous for his religious (not racial) anti-Semitism and his anti-Jewish arguments were generously used by German National Socialists and became a key element of German culture and national identity.

I think the main feature of Luther’s character was its anti-establishment ideology. He was very critical of the sins of the rich and very permissive regarding the sins of ordinary people. Note that he was frightened by the unpredictability of the law (already as a student) and chose religion (which in Christianity predicted forgiveness after your death) as a safer, more secure occupation.