

The shadow of Luther's depressions

Introduction

We can safely assume that through the ages persons suffered from what we now call 'clinical depression.' It is however difficult to trace its occurrence and implications, because of the language barrier. Another culture implies different words signifying the symptoms, causes and implications of this disorder. One has to look through strange words to be able to spot the similarities with the disorder we know. In this article I present one case, that of the Reformer Martin Luther, (1483-1546). He used the religiously coloured wording of his time to describe his episodes of despair. My goal is not only to show the similarities of his suffering to what we now call clinical depression. I also investigate how he interpreted these moods, distilling from his personal experiences general theological norms valid for all. The conclusions to which he came were contested in his time by Erasmus, (1466 – 1536),. Their debate is touched upon under the heading 'discussion'.

Method

The method used is that of philosophical (hermeneutical) interpretation of relevant texts, looking through unfamiliar wording to find what the author intended. I compare Bible texts, texts from Luther and Erasmus with today's DSM 5 to find similarities and differences.

The depressions of Martin Luther

Martin Luther was very open about his spiritual tribulations. He describes his suffering in this verse of a hymn.

'Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay.
 Death brooded darkly o'er me.
 Sin was my torment night and day.
 In sin my mother bore me.
 Yea, deep and deeper still I fell.
 Life had become a living hell,
 So firmly sin possessed me. ¹

In a letter to his friend and biographer Melancthon Luther wrote:

'I spent more than a week in death and hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I laboured under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God.²

That Luther suffered from depression is acknowledged and discussed in Christian circles. Thus Ryan Griffith from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

‘Luther’s depression was always marked by the same features: a feeling of profound aloneness, a sense that God was singling him out for suffering, a loss of faith that God is good.’³

Allan Adams states on the site Biblical Evidence for Catholicism⁴ that

‘Luther himself endured many instances of depression. He described the experience in varied terms: melancholy, heaviness, depression, dejection of spirit; downcast, sad, downhearted. He suffered in this area for much of his life and often revealed these struggles in his works. Evidently he did not think it a shameful problem to be hidden.’

‘God out of his mere whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them...

‘We seek to be saved and God in order that He may save rather damns.’⁵

Recurrent depressions and exultation

On the same site Dave Armstrong puts the question:

‘Did Luther suffer from recurring depression?’

Indeed Luther complained that his attacks of despair returned.

‘I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created.’²

From one hymn we may conclude that Luther also experienced the other extreme of depression, ecstasy. He described such a joyful, mystical experience as follows:

‘Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have entered through open doors into paradise.’⁶

He also expresses this in the famous hymn.

‘Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, with exultation springing, and with united heart and voice and holy rapture singing, proclaim the wonders God has done.’²

This makes Luther eligible for the list of excellent melancholics, brilliant persons with mood swings who according to Aristotle have an outstanding performance. Dr Gachet the doctor of Vincent van Gogh mentioned Luther in his list of brilliant melancholics⁷.

Adams argues for openness on the issue of Luther’s depressions.

‘Nor is it improper and outrageous to opine that the existence of such things, if documented, might have some small degree of effect on the man’s theology.’

Some theological implications

The impact of Luther’s depressions on his theology is a central question of this article. To find an answer I turn to the theses that Luther hammered to the church door at Wittenberg, thus triggering the Reformation. These theses are originally in Latin.⁸ The translations in this

article are the responsibility of the author. Most of these one-liners are about indulgences, paying the church so that the years spent in purgatory before entering heaven might be reduced. Forgiveness of sins could in Luther's view not be granted by priests.

'Atonement cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.' 2nd thesis

Of course the system of indulgences was corrupt serving the financial interests of the church rather than the wellbeing of believers. Luther's criticism of indulgences as such was legitimate. His position had a deeper basis, his experience of impotence to overcome his dejected moods. That sins are forgiven by confessions, by buying indulgences or even by performing good, charitable works ran counter to Luther's experience that he could do nothing to shorten the time spent in hellish despair.

'My own good works availed me naught,
No merit they attaining...
My fears increased till sheer despair
Left naught but death to be my share.
The pains of hell I suffered.'²

This strengthened his belief in predestination. This doctrine holds that, for attaining salvation, a place in heavenly afterlife, the exertions of the individual were irrelevant. For God had pre-determined who should enter heaven and who would inhabit hell. God determined who should undergo hellish despair in this life. He denied that the free will of humans had any potency to bring nearer their salvation. In 1525 he published 'On the Bondage of the Will'⁹, arguing that people can only achieve salvation or redemption through God. For Luther. Any claim to virtue apart from divine grace was sheer human arrogance. This view was based on his own experience.

'My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him.'¹⁰

Sin and despair were not incidental but structural.

'Sin was my torment night and day. In sin my mother bore me.'²

Luther is convinced that his sinfulness started even before he was born. The origin of human sin went even further back. When sin entered the world through Adam, all mankind became spiritually enslaved to sin. This is an extreme form of the low self-esteem associated with deep depression. He must have truly felt it in his periods of despair. However he generalizes it into part of his theological doctrine. Every individual is structurally sinful.

For this extreme sinfulness some form of atonement or payment is called for. That will not be achieved by doing good or confessing or being absolved by a priest. So what type of atonement is called for? There is an atonement, of payment for our structural offenses and injuries done by us, which is relevant. That is 'sui odium' 'Selbst Hass', hating oneself. That may not be a passing mood. It should last for a lifetime.

'Hatred of self, that punishment, that true heartfelt atonement, will remain until we enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'⁴ thesis

Luther did not only hate himself but also the Jews. I only mention in passing his booklet 'The Jews and their lies' which is available on internet.¹¹ I return to the implications of Luther's depressions for his theology of atonement.

'For our Lord and Master Jesus Christ... wanted our whole life to be atonement.' 1st thesis

Luther was preoccupied with death and hell during his episodes of despair. From this experience he distilled a general norm.

'Christians are to be exhorted that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell.' 94th thesis

The last thesis makes sorrow the general norm. Sorrow or sadness are common symptoms of depression. Luther felt deep sorrow. Again he distils from what he felt during his depressions a general norm for every individual.

'And thus you may be more confident of entering into heaven through continuing sorrow than through the false security of peace.' 95th thesis

So we see Luther generalizing from his own experience with depression to norms which he declares valid, indeed compulsory for every individual. In Luther's theology symptoms today considered relevant for diagnosing a depressive episode, a state to be overcome, become the rule for all individuals. Their depressed mood must last a lifetime, as must their low self-esteem. Recurrent thoughts of death are to be admired and sought after.

Depressed inspiration from the Bible

Luther was not alone in this dark approach. From his selective approach, focussing on the negative, he found what he needed in the Bible. Thus he follows David's notion that he was sinful from a very early hour.

'Behold I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.'¹²

When I call the psalmist 'David' that is not because David is the uncontested author of these phrases. I use his name in order to give my argument a personal touch. On top of his sinfulness David gives a striking description of a very low self-esteem.

In Latin the term for sin is not just a moral term, it also designates a disturbance of the soul or psyche. This is the deeper meaning of the Latin term 'vitium' which must be translated not only with the moral term 'vice' but also as a defect, blemish, fault of the soul. This suddenly brings us much closer to the modern view that a sense of sinfulness can be seen as the expression of a defect in the psyche.

The same might be said of the very low self-esteem expressed by David

'But I am a worm, and no man; reproached by men, and despised of the people.
All they that see me laugh me to scorn.'¹³

As atonement for this structural sinfulness the psalmist pointed to sorrow, the burning of the heart, as a necessary sacrifice.

‘For Thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.¹⁴’

Luther followed Solomon in his appreciation of sorrow.

‘‘It is better to go into the house of mourning, than to go into the house of feasting; ...Sorrow is better than laughter; for by the sadness of countenance the heart is made better.¹⁵’

These quotes give a very one sided view of the Bible. Of course there is much more. The Bible contains beautiful poems and tales and history, and four biographies of Jesus. In one Jesus is quoted to say

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself¹⁶.

The same expression is to be found in the Old Testament.

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.¹⁷

For our purpose the second part of the phrase is particularly important. The commandment: Love thyself stands in stark contrast with the Hate Thyself demanded by Luther.

Discussion: the debate with Erasmus

The philosopher Desiderius Erasmus was a theologian committed to reforming the church from within. He debated with his contemporary Martin Luther. He disagreed with Luther on the points mentioned above. The first was Luther’s idea of predestination, implying the impotency of any and all human efforts to attain salvation as developed in his *The Bondage of the Will*⁹ God could and had decided who was to attain salvation.

In 1524, Erasmus published ‘*The Freedom of the Will*¹⁸’ arguing against Luther’s denial of the human will’s capacity to choose and achieve anything that could lead to salvation .

‘By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.¹⁹’

In his *Praise of Folly*²⁰. Erasmus makes fun of a life dedicated to sorrow. A person who is downcast, not content with himself and harsh towards himself. To others he is irritating and hateful. He is pale and unhealthy and grey before his time. He dies an early death without having lived.

Erasmus also saw the destructive debilitating effect of self-hate. ’

Erasmus particularly mentions Luther who is so pricked in conscience as to be lashed and stung with the whips and snakes of grief and remorse.’

Self-hate makes love for another person very difficult.

Loving one’s neighbour must be accompanied by, be based on loving oneself. Erasmus makes this point.

I ask you: can any-one love another that first hates himself?²¹’

Self-esteem is essential.

‘We should sink without rescue into misery and despair, is we were not buoyed up and supported by self-love.’

‘Can one achieve anything that is either charming, respectable or worthwhile, if one is not content with oneself?’

Conclusion

One might be compassionate with Martin in his deep sorrow, his sense of being a sinner and hating himself, and his preoccupation with death and hell. A person can be so depressed as to have no hope of contributing to his own wellbeing. Seeing through cultural and language barriers I conclude that Martin Luther and today's psychiatrists are discussing the same phenomenon, what the last call major clinical depression. Today's patients and therapists are more optimistic than Luther about what they can achieve together. However low the mood, there is as Erasmus noted, a free will to choose for salvation and wellbeing rather than resign oneself to damnation.

As showed, Martin Luther evaluated certain 'symptoms' of depression in a positive way. He saw lifelong sorrow and self-hate as atonement for man's structural sinfulness. He encouraged preoccupation with death. Today's psychiatrists do not share Luther's positive evaluation of these 'symptoms' of low self-esteem, depressed mood and recurrent thought of death. With Erasmus they see self-hate and lasting sorrow as morbid, unhealthy states.

We must admire Luther for what he achieved in spite of or through his mood disorder. We might acknowledge that he needed to give his own suffering a positive meaning. However I do have a problem with the way he transformed the positive evaluation of his own suffering into a general rule for all individuals. I fear this has thrown a lasting shadow upon his followers.

Today both Christian and secular therapists work to alleviate depressed mood or sorrow and boost self-esteem, encouraging patients to work with them to increase their well-being.

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- ¹ Luther M The Lutheran Hymnal 387 Dear Christians, one and all rejoice, German title Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein, 1523, translator Richard Massie, 1854, website Hymnary.org
- ² Luther M Letter to Melancthon August 2, 1527
- ³ Griffith R from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary website The Gospel Coalition. July 6 2017
- ⁴ Armstrong D website Biblical Evidence for Catholicism April 14, 2016 April 14, 2016
- ⁵ Bainton R H Here I stand, a life of Martin Luther 2002, Penguin Random House 1995 p. 65
- ⁶ Bainton p. 59
- ⁷ Ter Borg M Bipolar creativity through the ages, independent publisher 2021 p. 49
- ⁸ Luther M Disputatio pro Declaratione Virtutis Indulgentiarum. All Souls Allerheiligen Abend 1517 available online Website Luther's 95 theses (in Latin) (georgetown.edu)
- ⁹ Luther M The bondage of Will in Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther discourse on free will translated by Winter E F Bloomsbury Revelations 2013 De servo Arbitrio 1525
- ¹⁰ Bainton 135
- ¹¹ Martin Luther – 'The Jews & Their Lies' 1543 jewishvirtuallibrary.org
- ¹² Idem Psalm 51,5
- ¹³ Idem Psalm 22; 6-7
- ¹⁴ Idem Psalm 51:16-17
- ¹⁵ Idem Ecclesiastes 7:2
- ¹⁶ Idem New Testament Mark 12:31
- ¹⁷ Idem Old Testament, Leviticus 19:18
- ¹⁸ Erasmus D Discourse on Free Will, in Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther discourse on free will translated by Winter E F Bloomsbury Revelations 2013 first published in 1524 as De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collation
- ¹⁹ Barret M Luther, The Bondage of the Will and Liberation of the will, translator Winter E F Quote Erasmus p 459 in Barret M editor Reformation Theology a systematic survey, Crossway 2017
- ²⁰ Erasmus D In praise of folly ch. 37 translator Wilson J Dover Thrift editions 2003
- ²¹ Idem ch. 22 Quotes taken from the online edition oll.libertyfund.org/title/erasmus-in-praise-of-folly