



**Article : The Spiritual Struggle of John Osborne's Martin Luther**

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John Osborne's "Luther" is based on the historical reformer, yet the play remains characteristically Osborne's. Martin is not an Antichrist but still he goes against the existing Christianity, the Church. What he denounces is not sincere Christianity but insincere Christianity, and those who are unchristian in their practice but never the less profess Christianity, as well as those who superficially seem Christian in their practice but whose motivations and state of mind are essentially unchristian. If Osborne's Luther is blasphemous, he is angry at the queer and sick world into which the Gospels introduce us. Osborne's prophetic indignation through Martin is against those who limp on both legs : He seems to question directly the decency of those respected statesmen in our society, who are anti – Christians out and out in their deeds, and still call themselves Christians today and attend, Communion. In such case, who then does Christianity negate? Osborne also opposes 'faith' as that which modern man glibly professes just because he goes to communion.

In this manner, Martin becomes as essentially Osbornian hero who cries against false religion and false beliefs which have taken the place of the original. He raises his voice against the authoritative forces that brought this condition and strives for a genuine 'religious experience' in a spirit very much like Jimmy Porter and Billy Rice who fight for the 'ideal' world.

The play itself consists of twelve self contained scenes. The First Act deals with Martin's Monastery life and leaves some traces for understanding Luther's later action. The whole of the Second Act and the first scene in the Third Act are taken up with the battle over Indulgences. Finally, we see Martin again returning to the Monastery.

The play presents the conflict between Martin who is a man of uncompromising integrity, who can find nothing to do in a corrupt and uncompromising society and the authority, demanding an absolute conformity personified in Cajetan and Pope in the drama. We meet the Pope himself at a hunting – lodge, where he dictates an order for Luther to be excommunicated unless he can either be made to submit or brought into custody in Rome.

In the First Act, Osborne sheds some light on the causes that lead Martin to his 'monkery' and a new beginning which is mostly revealed through the conversation of the filial relationship, between Martin and Hans his father. From their discussion we can infer how an unsatisfactory filial relationship could fore-shadow Martin's ambivalent attitude to God- a sense of desperate need and a sense of being singled out for special victimization.

"Martin : Some where, in the body of a child, satan

foresaw in me what I'm suffering now...."(1)

In his spiritual struggle Martin progresses through a continuous conflict between his desire to humiliate his pride and his troubled sense of the validity of his hubristically independent thinking. Hence the doubt :

"Martin : What is the use of this talk of this

Penitence if I can't feel it ?"(2)

The solution for all Martin's growing isolation and his internal pressure that lead to an exorbitant guilt is offered in the form of confession. But this does not serve as ventilation for release of Martin's troubles. In such a state, the consolation of his brother monks, the communal religious practices or the submission to authority doesn't work. Because the question or salvation is question for the individual himself. It is a question 'for the single one'. Like the Kierkegaardian tragic visionary, Martin cannot resist the temptation to let his doubts go and so wishes to 'leap' into faith. Dissatisfied with the offered alternatives, he wants to have an unmediated contact with God; and so he prays:

Martin : Receive, Oh Holy Father, almighty and eternal

God, this spotless host... When I entered the monastery,

I wanted to speak to God directly you see....(3)

This sets the ground for Martin's battle against the authority, the very crux of the play itself "Justification by faith" rather than by works. Osborne describes the convent and the monks as a place of compromise and pettiness; a world in which Luther and his fellow monks are speaking different languages. His superiors tell him to remember that the Creed expresses belief in the forgiveness of sins, but to Martin reliance on that in no way leads to the kingdom of Heaven. Osborne

prepares the way here to Luther's divergence from the official line of the Church when, some years later at Wittenberg, he was to develop his concept that, as everything man does is sinful, it is faith in God that will save him, not forgiveness of sins or penance.

From this despair of Martin stems the anger and rudeness of man. He does not accept either the works or any other outer means which are supposed to be the solution for his salvation. The personal crisis that is presented in Act One is taken at public level from the Second Act onwards. Now Martin begins to condemn the Church openly, a blind rebellion without knowing the alternatives to substitute the existing disorder. His helplessness finds its out - let in his words, as an evil is to be damned, he turns a flood of rhetoric against it. When he exposes the pitiful meaninglessness of the sacred relics, he condemns the peasants with the following words :

Martin : ... Shells for shells, empty things for empty men. But there are some

who complain of these things, but they write in Latin for scholars,

Who'll speak out in rough German ? Some one's got to bell the cat.<sup>(4)</sup>

His earlier humiliation now paradoxically turns into pride, and Martin is bold enough to take the existential consequences of his godlessness and valuelessness. In the first scene of the Second Act there is a savage parody of the selling of indulgences by Church officials. Here Osborne produces one of the finest pieces of writing for the stage – the speech of John Tetzel, the glib hypocritical salesman of indulgences – strategically placed by Osborne to underline Luther's doubts, and to dramatize the unscrupulous behaviour, within the Church, that Luther was so vigorously to attack. Tetzel's approach to his audience is direct and attacking. He has not come to ask but to demand, and his argument is straight forward in blackmail, exploiting the fears aroused by the Church's preaching concerning the horrors and damnation that is the consequence of unrepented sins.

In response the crowd throw their coins into the collecting box to obtain the Pope's insurance policy for their souls. With this, Osborne has thrown down the gauntlet to the Luther he has been exploring in the earlier scenes, and from this moment on the conflict between reformer and Church is in the open, and the play moves forward with a new vigour. Luther, now at the Eremite Cloister at Wittenberg under the Vicar General Johann von Staupitz, and teaching at the University, begins to preach against such abuses of the Church as indulgences, and

the exploitation of dubious holy relics. His sermon (II iii) attacks the Church and its influence upon the people in “rough German” and Osborne gives fluency and strength once more in his plays to a rebel against established authority.

In the confrontation with the papal legate in Germany , Luther asks, “Where have I erred ?” but receives no answer from the Church that he can accept as any reply at all. Osborne develops the growing division between Luther not as seeking division, but forced to it by the inability as seeking division, but forced to it by the inability of the Church to respond to his pleas for the reform not of itself but of its clergy.

Martin’s and so Osborne’s repudiation of Christ can not be understood any more than Martin’s attack on Christendom – unless one distinguishes between contemporary Christianity and the original Gospel. Discrimination between these conceptions makes clear a systematic exposition of what Osborne has to say on Religion.

Jesus himself rebelled against the Jewish Church exactly in the same sense in which we use the word today. It was a rebellion against the ‘Saints of Israel’, against the hierarchy of society – not against its corruption but against caste, privilege, order, and formula. It was the disbelief in higher men; the ‘No’ to all that was priest or theologian. Briefly, this is what brought Jesus to the Cross: the proof of this is the inscription on the Cross. He died ‘for’ his guilt. And all evidence is lacking however often it has been claimed that he died for the guilt of others. The Kingdom of God Martin believes is in the hearts of men and when it is sought in another life the central insight of Jesus seems to him to be betrayed. Thus when the original meaning of Christianity itself is lost, and replaced by selfish ideals by which it is rotted, Martin answers to Cajetan that it is better to destroy the hypocritic Christendom even though he doesn’t have as alternative:

Martin : A withered arm is best amputated, an infected

place is best scoured out....<sup>(5)</sup>

The Church as well as State intimidate man into conformity and thus tempts and coerces him to betray his proper destiny. The State and the Church become arch enemies of self – realization in the ‘individual’s’ remaking of his own nature. The dictatorial attitude of the Church is well presented by the Pope, Leo X. Soon after listening to the news that Martin is going in defiance of the will of the Church and its practices, he realizes that the Teutonic ‘peasant’ could upset his elegant

world and the control of his own sophisticated Latins over the Christian hegemony. He issues orders to Cajetan either to take Luther custody or banish and excommunicate him:

Pope : “There’s a wild pig in our vineyard, and it must  
be hunted down and shot”.<sup>(6)</sup>

This is but the decadence of the Church symbolized in Pope. In retaliation, the monks throw books of Canon Law and Papal Decretals into the huge fire outside Elster Gate, Witten berg. Martin furiously declaims the Papal bull which excommunicates him and casts it into the flames. Martin continues preaching defiant sermons. Finally, in the scene at the Diet of Worms, John Von Eck debates with Martin in the presence of the Emperor Charles V, and Eck, in his argument asks Martin to retract his books and correct their errors. He insists not to doubt on the holy orthodox faith which had been established by the most perfect legislator known to us, a faith defined by sacred councils, and confirmed by the Church. But this does not change the will of Martin:

“Martin : ... I don’t believe in Popes or councils  
unless I am refuted by scripture and my conscience is  
captured by God’s own word, I cannot and will not  
recant, since to act against one’s conscience is  
neither safe nor honest. Here I stand; God help me;  
I can do no more.”<sup>(7)</sup>

Having been overpowered by the ‘ultimate despair’, Martin is not satisfied with anything less than God who is the “really highest Good”. Conviction means something to be convinced. It is an objection, question, to be answered. And the Church apparently failed in this regard, hence its rejection by the protagonist. Martin has realized the complete futility of human existence, who can not find any meaningful relationship beyond it. Thus the essence of the tragic vision becomes “The sickness unto death”. Only despair prevails. Martin, in taking the alternative of defiance and seizing upon nothingness, is alone, bold enough to take up the existential consequences of his godlessness. But he takes them with pride, the very

‘hubris’, that in its rebellion moved him to nihilism or godlessness, rather than transcendence.

In his prolonged battle, Martin finally meets the knight. who helped to put down the peasants’ rebellion. When Luther maintains the power of the “word”, the Knight dismisses it as “poetry” – “why, none of it might be any more than poetry, have you thought of that Martin?” Luther finds no answer to disprove him when the Knight is tired of battle and puzzled by Luther’s desertion, he sees war as a sort of upper – class and Christianity with its insistence that Christ was more than a prophet as another. Angrily he smears Luther with the peasant’s blood, which he holds him to be guilty of. Luther defends himself : the peasants deserved to die because they “kicked against authority”. Unfortunately the peasants see in Luther not a theological, but a social reformer to lead them against the oppressive powers of Church and State. Hence Luther seems to betray them when he backs the suppression of their revolution in the name of order. Luther’s dilemma is movingly pointed by Osborne in the scene with the Knight – now moving outside his role as a mere scene-setter into a commentator-almost a judge. The fact that people came to see him as a leader was not of Martin’s choosing, yet he is left with the consequences as the Knight blames him :

“Martin : The princes blame me, you blame me and the peasants blame me.

Knight : You put the water in the wine did not you ?

Martin : When I see chaos, then I see the devil’s organ and then I am afraid.”<sup>(8)</sup>

He sees the revolt of the peasants as a revolt against God, whilst his revolt has been not against God but His clergy. Osborne does not clarify the confusion of this incident, nor seeks to lay blame at Luther’s feet, but he does show very movingly the suffering of peasants who, unaware of the niceties and subtleties of Luther’s theological arguments, rose in support of what they thought he stood for, and were then betrayed by him. However, after the subsequent failure on both the sides in convincing each other, the Knight curses Martin to stew with his nun. And this is how also the play ends leaving Martin with his nun (married) with his infant son cradled in his arms. The play ends just where it began, with a hope to convince the world.

After his defeat at the hands of the Church and authority, Martin however has resigned himself to the external world only to turn inwards. After such resignation to the godless universe Martin is left with nothing; and out of such nothingness he now again hopes because he wants to reconstruct something afresh.

Martin's return to Monastery, and his marriage with the nun as the Knight earlier curse him, become symbolic, not only in suggesting the hero's withdrawal from his active life but also signifying his spiritual death, on which the final curtain falls.

### REFERENCES

1. John Osborne Luther, (London, 1961), p.30.
2. Luther, p.26.
3. Luther, p.38
4. Luther, p.62
5. Luther, p.72
6. Luther, p.78
7. Luther, p.85
8. Luther, p.89