

## NUF Reflection October 2017

### Martin Luther by Rev Sue Woolley

Five hundred years ago, the late Medieval Church was in a bit of a mess. The papacy had gone through a bad period; it had moved from Rome to Avignon, rival popes had set themselves up in opposition to each other, and the Church was in financial straits too. At the time, St. Peter's Church in Rome was being rebuilt, funded by increases in ecclesiastical taxation, which were increasingly resented by European Christians, particularly north of the Alps. Some of the Church's other methods of raising funds were also unpopular: the sale of indulgences, which were supposed to buy the soul remission from purgatory; income from vacant livings; and the practice of simony i.e. creating new posts and selling them.

This is not to say that the entire Church was corrupt, but there were some very questionable practices going on. In addition, all church services and the Vulgate Bible were in Latin, the language of the Church and of scholars, which most people could neither understand nor read. The Bible did not play an important part in Church worship; a few key passages were read out in Latin by the priest, but the congregation did not know what the words meant. Their main function was to witness the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Bible was not, but **not**, for study by the laity.

Which brings us to Martin Luther, granddaddy of the Reformation. Five hundred years ago, on 31<sup>st</sup> October, this Augustinian monk famously nailed his *95 Theses* to the door of Wittenberg church. This act is generally agreed to have signalled the start of the Reformation.

For me, one of Luther's main achievements was the translation of the Bible into German, so that the people could read it for themselves. By all accounts, it was a brilliant success, selling about 200,000 copies between 1522 and 1534. His Old Testament appeared in 1534. At last the German people had access to a complete Bible, written in clear, readable German, that they could understand, and so discover God's word for themselves. Luther's example was followed by other brave pioneers throughout Europe, and by the end of the sixteenth century, it was possible for the majority of people in Europe to read the Bible in their own tongues. These vernacular Bibles also had a profound influence on the formation of the languages they were written in.

The printing press enabled more books to be published in the vernacular, which in turn led to a sort of virtuous circle: the more books that were available, the more people were likely to be able to learn to read, and hence educate themselves. Unitarianism is a most unusual faith, in that it evolved simultaneously in many countries at about the same time. To quote Alfred Hall: "men living in different lands, under different conditions, with different experiences, aided only by their own earnest study of the Bible and their spiritual endeavours, arrived at the Unitarian position. Thus it had an independent origin in the minds of various individuals and communities in England, America, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Poland, France, Switzerland, Italy, Russia and other countries in the West." In other words, people were studying their Bibles, and finding no evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity (which had been accepted as orthodox Christian doctrine at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE). So they rejected it, going back to their Bibles to find out what Christianity had been like in the earliest days.

And we're still in the process of reading and discerning and making independent judgement today, which I think is splendid.

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