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MARTIN LUTHER

500 YEARS OF PROTESTANT REFORMATION, BRAND MARKETING & MASS MEDIA

As children growing up in the German State of Rhineland-Palatinate (Rheinland-Pfalz) after World War II, the end of October and beginning of November held a special significance. No, we did not know about the American tradition of Halloween, but October 31 was Reformation Day and on November 1, our Catholic friends celebrated All Saints Day - both were legal holidays! After immigrating to the United States more than 50 years ago, I quickly learned that Reformation Day enjoyed no special significance here.

The year 2017 is different! We have started to celebrate the 500th Anniversary Year of the Reformation which will culminate with the actual Anniversary on October 31, 2017. On October 31, 1517, an obscure Roman Catholic monk set the stage to become the most widely recognized and read author/teacher of his era within a few short years. His fame started with an academic dispute over religious dogma, grew into a major religious movement and within a century resulted in a significant international conflict which decimated a large part of the population in what is now Germany. October 31, 1517 marks the beginning of a religious movement that has influenced world history profoundly over the past five centuries, culminating in 800 million worldwide members of today's various Protestant Denominations.

While most of us are somewhat familiar with the highlights of Martin Luther's ascent from obscurity, several important external factors were responsible for his incredibly rapid fame: 70 years earlier, Johannes Gutenberg had developed the printing press, a new technology still looking for a profitable application. One of Luther's early projects was to translate the New Testament and later the Old Testament into German, making the Bible accessible to almost everyone and creating a unified German language. A prolific writer, he worked with the local court painters and graphic artists, Lucas Cranach and his son, in developing a consistent and distinctive look for his publications -- one that made them stand out on a bookshelf. In addition to outward appearance, his books were richly illustrated with engravings, making them attractive to a wide audience. Luther became one of the first recognizable brands and Wittenberg prospered as one of the era's book publishing centers.

This presentation will review the beginnings of higher education outside the religious establishment and summarize the works of the early reformers Peter Waldo, John Wyclif and Jan Hus. It will discuss the printing of the Bible by Gutenberg in 1455, the first German Bible by Mantelin in 1466 and the impact of printing technology on the development of 15th century European culture. It will emphasize the unique events and outside influences that enabled Martin Luther to succeed where previous reformers had failed: a series of events impossible without the development of mass media including printed texts, art works, illustrations, sermons and music. The presentation will provide a summary of the century that followed the Reformation, culminating in the Thirty Year War, a period during which parts of the Holy Roman Empire lost more than two thirds of its population. Finally, we will highlight the mythology which developed around Martin Luther's image over the five centuries following the Reformation, making him one of the most noted and controversial figures in World history.



Wolf Koch grew up in the Rhine River valley and immigrated to this country more than five decades ago. He recalls his daily religious instructions while attending public school; much later, he attended four graduate-level courses on German Civilization as part of meeting undergraduate humanity requirements, courses taught by an alumnus of the Gymnasium (High School) Luther had attended much earlier. Wolf and his wife Linnea travel extensively; their interest in history has taken them to many historical sites in European countries, covering the period between the Stone Age and medieval times. Locally, they have studied accounts of the Hopewell civilization; Dr. Koch has given many talks on the Hopewell and was an invited speaker at a combined Annual Meeting of the Iowa and Illinois Archeological Societies. He has also lectured on events in Germany surrounding the end of World War II, including an international perspective on US Forces taking the Remagen Bridge, located near his home town of Oberwinter, now a suburb of Remagen. Together with his wife, he has just completed a presentation on the Kaskaskia-Cahokia Trail, Illinois' First Road. Dr. Koch, a resident of Sterling, Illinois, is a consultant to the oil and petrochemical industries and has been a Professor of Chemical Engineering and Dean of an Engineering College. He regularly presents talks on energy related topics at professional society and civic group meetings.

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