

The Luther effect: How Protestantism went global

When he pinned his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg 500 years ago, Martin Luther didn't just spark a church reformation, but a global movement. An exhibition in Berlin examines his wider impact.



© Deutsches Historisches Museum

THE REFORMATION: THE LUTHER EFFECT GOES GLOBAL

All roads led to Rome

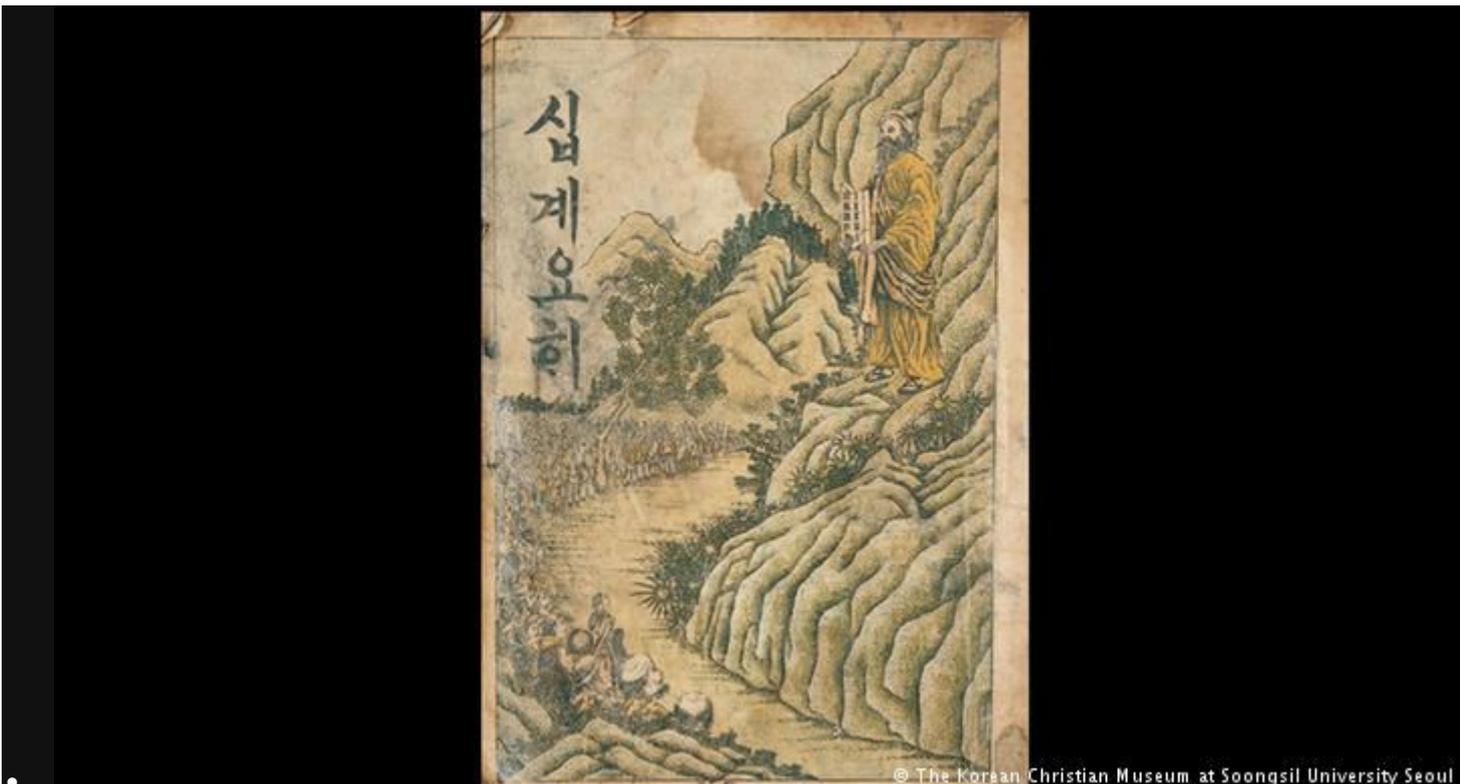
In this painting (1625-1650) dating from around 100 years after the Reformation, Martin Luther (center) is among a circle of reformers. Portraying the renewal of the church and the battle of wills among religious scholars as secular rulers watch on in the foreground, the painting signifies the interwoven nature of religion and politics at the time.



THE REFORMATION: THE LUTHER EFFECT GOES GLOBAL

A child reforms the Church of England

Edward VI (1537-1553), whose father Henry VIII had separated the English church from Rome, was the first English king with a Protestant education. Edward held religious services in the English language, abolished celibacy for priests and introduced the Book of Common Prayer before dying as a 15-year-old. The painting is "King Edward VI and the Pope" by an unknown artist from circa 1575.



Korean translation of the Ten Commandments, 1911

Korea and then later South Korea were considered boom countries for Protestantism as it spread east. An important part of the mission was to make use of the phonemic Korean alphabetic, Hangul, for Bible translations. Today, nearly one fifth of the South Korean population follows the Protestant doctrine, which is a record in East Asia.



The Protestant empire

"Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," a mural by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze on display in the United States Capitol Building, shows American pioneers reaching the Rocky Mountains as they head West. Below them is a panorama of the pristine San Francisco Bay in the distance. Many such pilgrims were Protestants who had been persecuted in Europe, but left and spread their faith across America.



© Deutsches Historisches Museum / Karsten Hein

THE REFORMATION: THE LUTHER EFFECT GOES GLOBAL

Going back to Luther

Morning prayer in the Lutheran Kariakoo church in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The Evangelical church in the East African nation is the largest Lutheran parish on the continent. Their charismatic leaders see themselves as representatives of the original Lutheran ideals.



© Unitätsarchiv der Evang. Brüder-Unität, Herrnhut, Unitätsarchiv: G5 463

THE REFORMATION: THE LUTHER EFFECT GOES GLOBAL

From Bohemia to Tanzania

The Moravian Brotherhood, a Christian faith movement originating from the Bohemian Reformation that is not bound by any denomination, played a major role in the spread of Protestantism throughout Africa. Their charismatic preachers spread from Tanzania across the entire African continent doing missionary work. Johann Valentin Haidt portrays this Luther effect in his "Erstlingsbild" from 1748.



THE REFORMATION: THE LUTHER EFFECT GOES GLOBAL

Protestantism in 17th-century Lapland

Protestantism penetrated the remotest corners of Northern Europe. The church abruptly changed the life of the indigenous residents as their local rites and customs had to give way to Christianization and the church. An unknown painter captured this theme sometimes prior to 1668 in far northern Lapland using both summer and winter landscapes.



© Nationalmuseum Stockholm, Schweden

THE REFORMATION: THE LUTHER EFFECT GOES GLOBAL

The deification of the Swedish king

When Sweden's King Gustavus II Adolphus attacked parts of what is now Germany during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and prevented a victory for the Habsburg-Catholic coalition, he inadvertently secured the future of German Protestantism. The act was glorified in this painting titled "Apotheosis of King Gustavus II Adolphus" from around 1650.



© Östergötlands Museum, Linköping

THE REFORMATION: THE LUTHER EFFECT GOES GLOBAL

A new oath on wool and silk

This tapestry embroidered with silk and wool shows the interweaving of Lutheran faith into the state. The Swedish parliament adopted a new law in 1686 that sealed the unity of the church and state, and Lutheranism became the state religion. The textile from around 1690 shows the swearing-in of the representatives of the estates on both the Bible and the Swedish Book of Law.

Author: Stefan Dege (sb)

The museum in Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau promises global time travel across five centuries and four continents. Half a millennium after Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, the German Historical Museum explores the impact of Protestantism.

How has Protestantism affected other denominations and religions? How have people from different cultures adopted Protestant teachings? And which conflicts have arisen?

Germany, Sweden, the US, Korea and Tanzania are the five countries the exhibition takes a closer look at with numerous examples. The conclusion is not hard to guess: The Reformation has dramatically impacted modern culture everywhere - from theology and law to business ethics and the humanities. From the Thuringian town of Wittenberg, Protestantism has reached the farthest corners of the globe.

Spanning 3,000 square meters (over 32,000 square feet), the exhibition incorporates more than 500 objects, including rare works of art and everyday historical artifacts. It makes use of multimedia methods of presentation that Luther could hardly have imagined in his day - which paralleled the advent of the printing press.

Lutheranism in Sweden

Many religious reforms have been undertaken since the 16th century, but prior to Luther far less people took part in church conflicts. The front line didn't just run cleanly between reform supporters and opponents. Over time, various Christian interpretations solidified into denominations, including Lutherans, Baptists, Anglicans, Protestants, and others.



A special stamp was issued to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Luther's theses

Influenced by the Lutheran Reformation, Sweden's King Gustav Wasa renounced Rome in 1527. The Uppsala Synod in 1593 made Luther's Protestantism binding for the country, and Sweden established a Lutheran state church.

Seeing itself as a protector of Lutheranism, the Swedish military promptly stormed the battle fields of Europe and asserted its position of power.

The US: The modern-day Promised Land?

Pioneers from Europe brought Protestantism to the British colony in North America that would later become the United States. There, it continues to take many forms, though unlike in many European countries, there is no state church.

Revival preachers gave Protestantism its voice, and from the 18th century various Great Awakenings led to the development of numerous denominations, including the Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals.

"Protestantism contributed largely to the development of the American nation and its self-image," say the exhibition organizers in Berlin. "It impacted the idea of America as the Promised Land and of the Americans at the Chosen People."



From the exhibition, the pendant reads "Better a Turk than a papist"

Missionaries in Tanzania and beyond

In the East African country of Tanzania, Protestantism is also on the rise, as the exhibition shows. With over six million members and 24 dioceses, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Tanzania is the largest Lutheran church in Africa and the second largest in the world.

Its origins can be traced back to German, Scandinavian and American missionaries who were active in what used to be part of a German colony.

In addition, the Moravian Church, the Anglican Church and the charismatic movement are also significant Protestant groups in Tanzania. These days, Tanzanian missionaries work across the African continent, seeing themselves as representatives of original Lutheran ideals.

Today, South Korea is the only East Asian country with a large Protestant population. Nearly 30 percent of South Koreans identify as Christians. Nearly two-thirds of those are Protestants and the group is growing. The first Protestant missionaries came to Korea towards the end of the 19th century.

This is just some of what awaits visitors to "The Luther Effect" exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin. Marking the 500th anniversary of Luther's theses, other major German exhibitions are slated to take place in the cities that played a major role in Luther's life, Eisenach and Wittenberg.