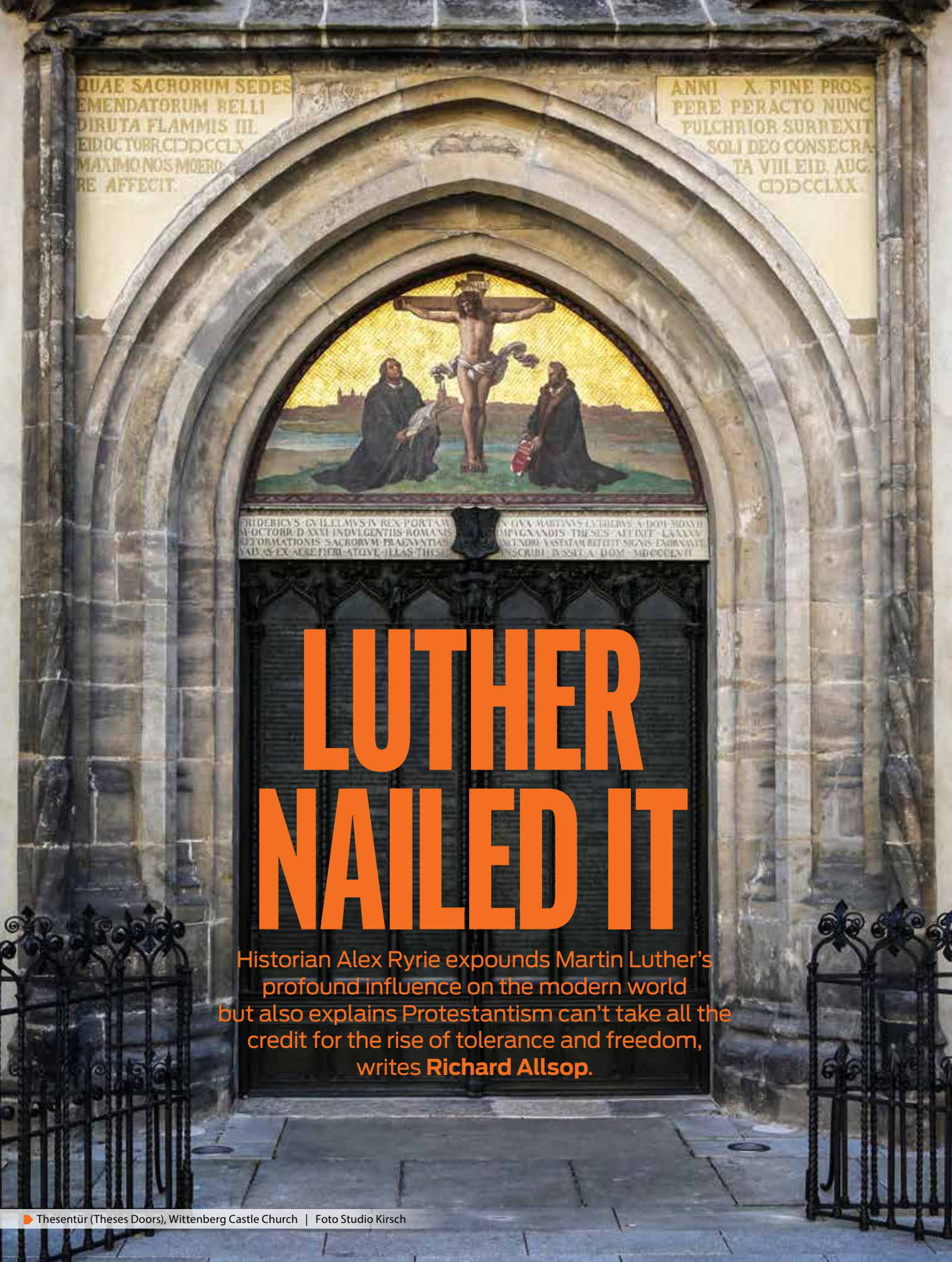

LUTHER NAILED IT

Historian Alex Ryrie expounds Martin Luther's profound influence on the modern world but also explains Protestantism can't take all the credit for the rise of tolerance and freedom, writes **Richard Allsop**.

Thesentür (Theses Doors), Wittenberg Castle Church | Foto Studio Kirsch

Without Protestants, the story of Western Civilisation in the past 500 years would have been very different.

That is not to say that if Martin Luther had not nailed his theses on the door of Wittenberg Castle Church in 1517, then the Catholic Church would have continued in its medieval form for another half-millennium. However, it's hard to overstate the significance of the Reformation which Luther triggered, a revolution in religious and political thinking which has had a profound impact on the modern world.

The author of this new history of Protestantism, Alec Ryrie, Professor of the History of Christianity at Durham University and Anglican lay preacher, argues we should not date his subject from 1517, as is conventionally done, but from 1519.

Between 1517 and 1519, a series of debates with theological opponents made it abundantly clear to church authorities that Luther was a heretic. In normal circumstances, 1519 would have seen Luther suffer the usual fate of those who crossed the established church, but a piece of fortuitous timing meant Luther and his novel religious ideas were not abruptly stopped.

Luther resided in the Electorate of Saxony, and Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, became a key swing vote in determining the choice of the next Holy Roman Emperor, after the incumbent died in January 1519. Frederick had mixed feelings about Luther's teachings, but saw defending him as a way of asserting his own independent authority. In the unique political circumstances of 1519, nobody was going to challenge the Elector on this point. Luther was excommunicated in 1521 but, by delaying this action, Frederick 'had bought Luther enough time to turn his personal crisis of conscience into a mass movement threatening the church's entire structure of authority'.

CROMWELL'S SUPPORT FOR TOLERATION HORRIFIED PRESBYTERIAN PURISTS, WHO HAD EXPECTED HIM TO IMPOSE A NEW STYLE OF NATIONAL CHURCH IN THEIR IMAGE

To modern eyes, it can look inevitable that the rise of Protestantism from 1519 onwards would lead to tolerant, liberal modernity in countries which have inherited Western Civilisation; places where multiple religions (and atheism) are tolerated in the public square. However, the road to this destination was circuitous, difficult and bloody. As Ryrie comments, 'modern Protestants have often enjoyed telling themselves a self-congratulatory story in which their tradition gave rise to tolerance and freedom, and that is rather less than a half truth … but it is not completely false'.

Ryrie takes his readers through all the landmarks on that journey from John Calvin and Henry VIII, through to the varied Protestant denominations around the contemporary world. He describes both the suffering of Protestant martyrs and the punishment meted out by Protestants, not only to Catholics, but to rival groups within the vast panorama of Protestantism.

Ryrie identifies mid-17th century England as the seminal time and place when toleration first became a realistic possibility. After the victory by the parliamentary forces in the English Civil War led to the beheading of King Charles I and the establishment of a republic, Oliver Cromwell became the Lord Protector of this new Commonwealth which replaced the discredited monarchy. Building on ideas which emerged during the Civil War, Cromwell 'became the first Protestant ruler anywhere to support religious toleration as a matter of principle, and as a result presided over a sectarian flowering unmatched since Luther'.

This toleration extended to Muslims and Jews but, for political reasons, could not include Catholics, a group whose loyalty was perceived to be to a foreign power rather than to England. Cromwell's support for toleration horrified the Presbyterian purists among his supporters, who had expected him to impose a new style of national church in their image to replace the one which had supported the King in the Civil War.

If the Cromwellian age of toleration had continued beyond the 1650s one by-product would almost certainly have been the collapse of the North American colonies. Many of the religious exiles to New England returned to England in the 1640s to fight for religious freedom and in the 1650s to enjoy it, but the Anglican restoration in 1660 put an end to this reverse migration.

Protestants: The Radicals Who Made the Modern World

By Alec Ryrie
William Collins, 2017, 528pp

Painting of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach, 1528

Ryrie argues that, in the decades from the 1660s onwards, the prospects for Protestantism were looking bleak across much of Europe, as it was challenged from resurgent Catholicism, radical internal sectarianism and embryonic atheism. However, Protestantism continued to flourish in large part due to its sheer diversity.

Ryrie emphasises the importance of this diversity in Protestantism's success, although it presents him with the challenge of deciding which sects to include under the Protestant banner. Jehovah's Witnesses are in, Mormons are out. He also excludes the Taiping in China, although their worldview did 'contain plenty of disconnected Protestant fragments'. The Taiping Rebellion from 1851 to 1864 left about twenty million dead and Ryrie argues that if the Taiping had been a bit less extreme—maybe a bit more like other Protestants—they may well have won the war, setting China on a modernising path and 'radically changing the course of world history'.

The diversity of biblical interpretation always has been vast within Protestantism. In 1535, some Anabaptists took to the streets of Amsterdam naked after burning their clothes, on the basis that Adam and Eve had only sinned after they had begun wearing clothes. In 19th century America a different take on clothes was provided by the

Holiness movement, which objected to the wearing of ties as they were considered a 'diabolical monument to male vanity'.

Protestant diversity not only covered personal matters such as clothes, dancing and alcohol, but many of the key political struggles of the modern world. There were Protestants for and against slavery, the Nazi regime and Apartheid to name but a few controversies.

In relation to South Africa, Ryrie argues that while Protestantism allowed the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to defend Apartheid on religious grounds, it was not so rigid as to prevent this position being assailed by other Protestants with a different interpretation. Aided by the DRC, Afrikaners saw their nation as a spiritual entity rather than a geographic one, and 'like all good Calvinists, nothing encouraged Afrikaners like defeat, isolation, discrimination and contempt'. Like all aggressive nationalists, the Apartheid regime perceived the enemy to be 'capitalist elites of cosmopolitan liberalism' and ultimately it was this 'homogenizing logic of cosmopolitan capitalism' which was the major contributor to the collapse of Apartheid.

A happier task for Ryrie, than explaining how some Protestants defended the indefensible, is writing about those places in the world where Protestantism has won significant numbers of converts. For example, in Latin America the increase in Protestant numbers is 'one of the most dramatic religious shifts in modern history'. In the early 20th century there were very few Protestants in Latin America and yet, by 2014, they made up 19 per cent of the population across the continent, including 26 per cent in Brazil and as many as 40 per cent in some Central American countries.

Another bastion of Protestantism is Korea. An important factor in how this came about is that Korea was one of the rare countries in the colonial world where Christianity was the religion of the resistance to the colonial power (Japan), rather than of the coloniser. However, unlike Latin America, growth in Protestant numbers has stalled in recent decades in South Korea.

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One of the features of several branches of Protestantism is the belief that their business was saving souls, not political activism. Ryrie concludes his chapter on Apartheid by describing how South Africa's independent churches gave its black members a spiritual strength which enabled them to cope better with the indignities of Apartheid. He also observes in the Korean context that 'having no interest in political activism does not make a church uncaring'.

Yet, later in the narrative, Ryrie suddenly slams non-participation in politics as favouring 'oppressive and authoritarian regimes'. His reasoning is that 'the presumption that politics is corrupt is itself inherently right wing, because many left-wing policies depend on active government intervention'.

There are aspects of Protestantism which could have been dealt with in greater depth in this work. Ryrie mentions Weber and his description of 'the Protestant work ethic' in his introduction, but does not return to this topic in any detail. The link between Protestantism and economic progress rarely features, other than in a discussion of the simultaneous advance of the two in South Korea from the 1960s onwards. There, the particular church which was most successful was the one which said the poor do not have to be poor and which glorified economic success.

Another absentee from the narrative is Northern Ireland. Surely nowhere in the world has Protestantism held such resonance as a cultural and political force as it has over the Loyalist community in Ulster, with Loyalist paramilitary groups prepared to kill to keep their Protestant community intact.

There is also not much said about why secularism has been so successful in stripping people away from mainstream Protestant churches in much of the Western world. However, he does describe how the left-wing Student Christian Movement in Britain managed to lose mainstream and radical students simultaneously as 'Christians who disliked radical politics withdrew from the SCM, and Christians who embraced radical politics increasingly saw themselves as radicals and no longer as Christians'. In contrast, in certain countries fundamentalists and Pentecostal churches have been very successful in winning new converts, helping to keep Protestantism as a creed with ongoing importance in many countries.

The subtitle of this book proclaims Protestants 'made the modern world'. That may contain a touch of hyperbole, but there's no doubt the rise of Protestantism has had a profound influence on the way we live today. Ryrie's work provides many fascinating insights into how that has happened across the past 500 years.