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Two Comments by Luther on the Historical Context of the Reuchlin Affair

Martin Luther (1483–1546), whose Ninety-five Theses have become synonymous with the beginning of the Reformation, repeatedly likened his position to that of Reuchlin and Erasmus, and for a time regarded it as politic to maintain a common front with the humanists in fending off the attacks of university theologians. The following extracts show Luther constructing an historical setting for his own case. Luther took an early interest in Reuchlin's case and sided with the humanist. In 1514 he wrote to Georg Spalatin, chancellor of Elector Frederick of Saxony: 'I hold Reuchlin in great esteem ... in my opinion there is nothing in his counsel that is dangerous' (WA Briefe I, Ep. 7). Drawing parallels between the treatment he had received at the hands of theologians and the experiences of earlier humanists, he suggested that they were attacked for similar reasons or that they defended positions similar to his own. The first excerpt comes from Luther's *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* (Resolutions of the Dispute Regarding the Efficacy of Indulgences, 1518), in which he defends his Ninety-five Theses in a traditional scholastic manner, that is, citing numerous prooftexts from the Bible, the Fathers, and Canon Law. The work was aimed primarily at theologians, but Luther also had his eye on humanistic readers and tried to enlist their support. The second excerpt comes from the *Responsio ad condemnationem doctrinalem per Lovanienses et Colonienses factam* (Response to the Condemnation of Doctrine Issued by the Theologians of Louvain and Cologne, 1520). While the *Resolutions* are written, for the most part, in a measured tone, the *Response* uses much harsher and indeed abusive language. It is a biting attack on the theologians who had officially condemned a number of passages from Luther's writings