

Disciplined Freedom, or Free versus Slave? Recuperating Luther for Feminist Theology in an Age of Terror

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The seminar had as its goal to find ways of recuperating Luther for feminist theology by taking its point of departure in Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*.¹ Hence, its focus was not historical, but theological, addressing the question of Lutheran theology in the 21st century, especially how Lutheran theology can be critiqued and corrected by an engagement with feminist theology challenging also some of the taboos.

With the paper »Reading Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* in the 21st century,« Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen introduced the theme of the seminar and Luther's treatise through an overview of its

dual-dialectical structure. In *Freedom of a Christian*, Luther in the tradition from Paul to Bernard of Clairvaux uses the dialectics of the human double nature of inner (the justified human being where God's gift, faith, operates with Christ as gift) and outer (the sinful human being where human love should operate with Christ as example) being. Luther uses different relational metaphors for the two natures (mirroring Christ's two natures). The nuptial metaphor pictures the sharing of grace between Christ and humans as *imago Dei*² in a three-dimensional giving and receiving: a physical dimension, bride and groom becoming one flesh (Eph

1 Luther wrote the treatise in Latin for Pope Leo, *De libertate christiana*, but also composed a text in German, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*. These are different on several points, but are found in a sequel in WA 7; 20–28 (the Latin) and 39–73 (the German), and in Clemens 2; 10ff; as parallel texts in StA 2; 263–309. For an English translation of the Latin, see LW 31,333–377; of both the Latin and the German, see WOOLF, *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, 1952. It should be noted that some words in the original versions may gain other meanings in English such as the term *Mensch* in German and *homo* in Latin, which, when translated into *man* in English, is often misread as *male* though the meaning is *human being*.

2 The human being as *imago Dei* is absent in the German version.

5:26–32); a grace-economical dimension, the sinless groom, Christ as both God and human (*homo*, not *vir*!), sharing sin and justice with the sinful bride (*homo*, not *mulier*!) (Hos 2: 19ff); and a social dimension, groom and bride belonging to each other (Songs 2: 16).³

Expounding the relation between the outer human being and God, Luther shifts to the child-parent metaphor, transitioning from the »dogmatic« to the »ethical« domain, from the creational-anthropological aspect of the human being as *imago Dei* to the soteriological-Christological aspect of God in Christ being *similitudo hominis*. Both concur in a circulation of love, from God to the individual human to the inter-human, lifting up the interrelatedness of otherness.

Jone Salomonsen posed the question of how the text can be read in light of acts of terror perpetrated by Christians, focusing on the act of terror in Norway on 22 July 2011 by the radical right-wing Anders Behring Breivik. Envisioning himself as a Christian crusader, he went on a political mission and killed 77 people, mainly young Social Democrats.

Arnfridur Gudmundsdottir focused on the question whether Luther's idea of the priesthood of all believers through baptism as a foundation for his critique of the distinction between spiritual and worldly people, launched in his Reformation writings of 1520, really made a difference for women. Luther's idea of the priesthood as responsibility toward the neighbor and his rejection of an ontological distinction between lay and ordained in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* opened avenues to women, yet they remained subjected to a patriarchal understanding of gender roles and were silenced both then and in most history books. She concluded that Luther's radical notion of baptism as the true ordination of all believers was only partially *in re*, while truly *in spe* as the foretaste of an eschatological future. Women were free, but they remained slaves to the patriarchal understanding of their freedom.

In her paper »Luther's Nuptial Imagery Revisited – Erotic Union of Business Exchange?« Elisabeth Gerle discussed two feminist readings of Luther's use of the nuptial metaphor. With their focus on

3 The reference to Songs 2: 16 is absent in the German version.

fluidity, hybridity, and queer features of his employment of the metaphor both Wiberg Pedersen and Kleinhans offer readings that deconstruct the Luther reception's gender hierarchical reading, while emphasizing its meaning of intimate relationship. She concluded that such fluid readings could serve as an ecumenical resource as well as a resource for contemporary ethics in creating space for multiple forms of affective relationships.

Sini Mikkola discussed in her paper »Gendered Sexuality in Marriage in Luther's Anthropology in the Treatise *Estate of Marriage* (1522)« the focal points concerning sexuality in Luther's thoughts in the early 1520s, exemplified by *The Estate of Marriage*.⁴ She stated that Luther differed from tradition in his view on sexual desire, in his terminology »shameful desire« originating from the fall, as he tied this solely to male bodies, though he saw the sexual act as part of the human creational situation, though without desire. The fallen and gendered life thus had to be controlled within marriage. Though it is clear that Luther problematized sexually cold wives on the one hand and castrates on the other as not fulfilling

the creational order of life either through lack of will or lack of masculinity, she concluded that the picture of Luther's view on sexuality seems to be gendered, male sexuality being bound to lust and female to self-control. But given the fact that the still celibate Luther is defending marriage in this treatise and holding other thoughts on sexuality, his view on the matter is rather more complex than this one text reveals.

Mary Streufert redressed in her paper Paul's proclamation of justification by grace through faith, understood by Luther as the antithesis of the law according to his freedom treatise. Using the criticism by B. Kahl and Popez of a forensic understanding of Galatians, she contended that this understanding of justification builds on a combative hierarchical binary between Self and Other, true of much Lutheran theology following a patriarchal pattern of gender construction as in the United States, but not congruent with Paul's and Luther's own understanding of justification by faith as a new law, love as self-othering as opposed to Roman imperial law or the Roman curia. She concluded that Paul is a gender

4 WA 10,2; 275–304.

transgressor preaching a theology of »one-an(d)-otherness,« just as Luther propagates transgressing boundaries by alienation of the Self into the place of the Other.

Marit Trelstad continued in her paper »Terror begins at Home: Luther and the »terrifying and killing Law« by addressing Luther's understanding of the law as driving us to Christ. Exploring connections between terror, domestic violence, Luther and law, she challenged and corrected Luther in his law-gospel dynamic and pointed to the fact that he himself had a critical view on his freedom treatise, e.g. in his *First Disputation Against the Antinomians*, where he expounds on the two functions of the law, the theological use being both descriptive and performative. While the descriptive is neutral, she found the performative function – where God pulls down the self-satisfied – abusive and terrorizing. In order to avoid abusive images of God as justification of domestic violence and terror, she concluded by suggesting to place God's love and grace before the law.

Åste Dokka focused on Luther's anthropology and the constitution of the subject in contrast to postmodernity's subject theory of no pre-discursive subjects (Foucault) or

gender theories on de-stabilizing the gendered subject (Butler). Based on his *Large Catechism*, she proposed to see Luther's idea of relational anthropology and continual creation as resonating with the idea of a fluid subject in constant mediation between relations, situations and other factors. A person's subject is constituted every day by way of the God relation and the inter-human relation; both communal and social relations are constantly processed.

Finally, by focusing on Christ's love for the harlot, *Christine Helmer* laid out a project for reading Luther's freedom treatise through a new angle of the agape-tradition, and to use it as a starting-point for exploring theological method in relation to its subject matter that integrates love and truth. She assessed love in the epistemological and theological terms of the love of the subject matter and love for the other, both loves grounding three aspects of truth: coherence, correspondence and comprehensiveness. She stated that since neither love nor doctrinal truth are perfect in time, theology must be developed in a happy exchange that deals with difference and involves God and others in relationship.