# HUMAN FREEDOM IN A LUTHERAN THEORY OF EDUCATION

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[Printed in The Cresset 22, No. 9 (September, 1959): 16-20.
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## I. Freedom of the Teachable Learner

Christian education, which paradoxically invites people to believe and he what they are inherently incapable of believing and being, seems a contradiction in terms. One of the first ingredients any education requires is a teachable learner. But that is the very ingredient, apparently, which Christian education has to forego. Then, what educational prospects could there be for a Gospel whose hearers are themselves unable to understand it, unable to want it, unable to believe it, unable to live by it? People, to be educable at all, have to be treated bot as puppets bus as responsive subjects, as persons who are somehow free – free to harbor interests, free to make sense of their experience, free to accept obligation and acknowledge failure, free to ponder alternatives, free to be persuaded. If education is unthinkable without that personal freedom and yet if people, being what they are, are not free but enslaved, what chance could there be of *educating* them to Christianity?

The fact is, though, that the Church does go about its educational tasks as though people were indeed educable and,

therefore, in some sense free and responsive learners. To bring fearful men to honest recognition of their tragedy, to transmute their cynicism into repentance, to tax their intelligence with an incredible Gospel and persuade them at the risk of their survival to trust it boldly, to sustain them against all odds in unwearying faith and home and love – all this is, to put the matter modestly, and educational enterprise. It addresses the learner's profoundest interests and engages every power of his soul. It assumes that he in turn is somehow a teachable subject, not an automation to be manipulated against his own will and judgment but a conscious self who responds thinkingly and approvingly from some inner life-center. It assumes, in brief, that he is somehow a free person.

On the other hand, this same human being is exposed, by the very Gospel he adopts, as having been anything but free. He comes to faith and persists in it, as he himself confesses, not by his own reason or strength but by the power of Another, the Holy Spirit. Then, how speak of him as free, as responsive, as teachable? Martin Luther, while his solution is neither original nor exhaustive, might offer some help.

# II. Free Will

The term "free will," Luther says in effect night mean nothing more than that a man is free to be what he is, free to act in accordance with his own nature. It means simply that his existence is determined by that basic premise of his life, that animating first principle, that root religious conviction, which defines his essential self. This definition of free will is religiously neutral, for it describes Christians and non-Christians alike. It makes no judgment as to whether the human self which is being asserted is even *worth* asserting. It is this ambiguous, minimal freedom which, Luther agrees, is available to

every man, be he believer or unbeliever.

Luther seems to be saying that what defines a person's essential self-centre, at least for theological purposes, is that person's basic religious assumption. Psychologically, this basic assumption is a function of those powers which represent man's highest endowments (*dona*), his reason and his will (*ratio et voluntas*). The basic assumptions from which men operate can be reduced to two: *fides* and the *opinio iustitiae* – Christian faith and the assumption of self-righteousness. The non-Christian's existence is rooted in the latter. The Christian's existence is rooted ambivalently in both.

It should be noted that, even in the case of the non-Christian, the *iustita civvilis* which he achieves – his humane and cultural goodness, which deserves serious credit and which frequently puts Christian performance to shame – is not just an accident in his behavior but flows, at least in part, freely and consistently from his basic assumption, however tragic and perverse that assumption may be on theological grounds.

Furthermore, when Luther acknowledges "free will" in this religiously neutral sense, he proves thereby that he is not a naturalistic determinist. Our behavior as human beings is not merely the result of the myriad, previously existing, efficient causes – atmospheric pressure, our emotional or gastric condition, the demands or threats of our fellows, the burden of our own pasts – which converge upon us and mold us. No, we are also free to survey alternatives which at the moment are only future possibilities, and free to act upon these simply on the ground that we find them to be reasonable. It is true, the basic assumption from which we make our subsequent choices is not itself an option which we are free to take or leave. But given that basic assumption, we are able to make free and rational choices consistent with it. This sort of freedom is available to

me whether they are Christian or not.

# III. *Opinio Iustitiae*

What is the basic religious assumption which defines the essential self of the non-Christian person? It is what Luther calls the *opinio iustitiae*, or in the more highly developed form, the *opinio legis*.

By the *opinio iustitiae* Luther means the inbred, universally human conviction that a man is good enough, at least potentially, to justify his existence, that it is up to him to establish his ultimate worth on the strength of his good work and life, that he has it within his moral and religious power to be deserving of his life and of the divine favor.

This *opinio* is not the same thing as saying, simply that righteousness is the prerequisite of life. That Luther would say, too. He does not deny that, in order for a man to have "life" – the only life which is appropriate for a man, namely the life from God – he must first have "righteousness," God's kind of righteousness. What Luther does deny, yet what all sinners like himself assume, is that this righteousness which alone furnishes the ground of life can be a righteousness of their own making and doing. It is this universal assumption of self-righteousness which constitutes the *opinio iustitiae*.

## Lex

In actual human experience, though, the *opinio iustitiae* seldom if ever appears as blatantly and baldly as this. Seldom do men say or think that they, as they now stand, are perfectly and sufficiently righteous or that their claim to life and to God's favor lies entirely within their control. Their experience is too obviously, to inescapably, haunted by evidences of sin,

devil, death, curse, guilt, and divine wrath to allow them to be completely sanguine about their own inherent righteousness.

The one factor in human experience which, perhaps more tan any other, threatens the complacency of the *opinio iustitiae* is that factor which Luther calls the "law" (lex). By hounding a man, especially the sensitively religious man, with its innumerable and inescapable demands, it at least dampens his self-assurance.

However, what is probably even more remarkable is the ingenious way in which a human being seems to be able to domesticate this law, to assimilate it to his own proud purposes, and to exploit it – of all things – as a tool of his own *opinio iustitiae*. This *opinio*, we have said, seldom appears in its naked boldness. Instead it disguises itself, even to its owner, in the respectable terms of the law. He does not say, even to himself, I *am* righteous enough to justify myself. Rather he says, *if* I can love God and my neighbor – and I *must* – than I can justify myself.

## Opinio lustitiae + Lex = Opinio Legis

Where does the self-righteous man get his notion of righteousness? And where does he get the notion that righteousness is a divine obligation? He gets these from the law. He extracts from the law at least two of its ingredients, its content and its obligatoriness. These two ingredients he now incorporates into his pride, his *opinio iustitiae*. "Righteousness," he learns from the law, means living God, loving neighbor, etc. This gives content to his notion of his own righteousness. The law's "thou shalt," its oughtness, is likewise absorbed by his *opinio* so that it now reads: That I should love God and my neighbor in order to justify myself is nothing less than a divine command, a holy obligation, which to deny would be blasphemy. So *opinio iustitiae* plus the law's

definition of righteousness plus the law's obligatoriness equal the *opinio legis*. At least in those religious people with whom Luther was familiar, the *opinio legis* was the sophisticated, working form of the *opinio iustitiae*.

The way in which the sinner constructs the *opinio legis* illustrates what we previously called his "free will," his acting in accordance with his own basic religious assumption. That assumption, the *opinio iustitiae*, reaches out to even that element of his environment, the holy law of God, and adapts it to the requirements of his self-center.

As the sinner responds to the law so he also responds to the Christian gospel, from the determinative self-center of his *opinio iustitiae*. When this gospel announces to him, for example, that men can be justified only by the mercy of God without any good work of heir own, he must, because his basic assumption demands it, repudiate this gospel as untrue. Moreover, not only can not believe this gospel, he cannot even understand it, except on his own terms. For example, proceeding from his own basic assumption that a man is under orders to merit divine factor by obedience to the law, he must conclude that the gospel of justification by grace alone will dangerously weaken men's religions obligation and make light of God's justice. This understanding of the gospel is also an instance of his "free will." It is a conclusion which flows freely and consistently from his own basic assumption.

## The Law, A Trojan Horse

However, this law which the sinner mistakes as a source of religious help, God now employs as a "hammer" to smash the sinner's self at its very foundation, that is, at the level of his basic religious assumption. The law, which it seemed earlier, the sinner had managed to domesticate is actually God's

foot-in-the-door, a Trojan horse, by which God has gained entrance to the sinner's very religiousness in order to subvert it at its core.

God accomplishes this subversion, first, simply by intensifying the law's demands. "Thou shalt love the Lord they God with all they heart and with all they soul and with all they strength and with all they mind, and thy neighbor as thyself." "Till heaven and earth shall pass away, not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass away." "Ye shall be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Just because God demands all that He does and reiterates His demands with unyielding insistence, the sinner's *opinio legis* is driven not only to failure by eventually to self-contradiction. On the one hand, his *opinio iustitiae* impels him to hope for sufficient righteousness of his own, through fulfilling the law. But on the other hand the law itself insists that to be righteous be must hope not at all in himself but in God only. So the more zealously he nourishes a self-centered hope, the more flaringly he frustrates any God-centered hope. And the more desperately he tries to restore his hope in God, the more his despair reveals his hopes as selfish.

But the law turns out to be more than stern commands. It is also aways something of a taunt. When it commands the sinner, for example, to love his neighbor, it is saying in effect, "So you claim to be good enough to justify yourself – just try and prove it, if you can, by loving your neighbor as you ought." When Saint Paul quotes *Leviticus* to the Galatians, "He who does them shall live by them," or when Christ advises the insolent lawyer, "Do this and you shall live," Luther interprets their advice *ironice* and sees in it "a certain irony or scorn"; "Ja, du bist iusstus! Ja, thut's!" ("Yes, you're just all right. So do it already.") So also with all the laws commands: "Ja, thue es

nur." ("Sure, just do it.") See for yourself how righteous you really are. In the very same breath when the law commands a sinner to be concerned with no one but God it immediately commands him to give account of himself and thus plunges him back into a concern for himself and his own worth. *Led semper accusat*. The net result if this persistent legal taunt is that the sinner is finally, frontally, presented with the untenability of his own basic religious assumption, his assumption of self-righteousness.

## That Dubious Freedom

Meanwhile, the Creator God drives this sinner to go on living out the role which, by virtue of his nature, he is bound to live out. So it is not enough to say simply that he has "free will," in the sense that he is in a position to act in accordance with his own nature. Actually, he seems to be hounded and enslaved into being who he is. What becomes increasingly clear to him is that this sort of freedom is exceedingly dubious. What he is, it no appears, is the very opposite of righteous. He is in fact *inimicus Dei*, the enemy of God. What is worse, God Himself emerges as the wrathful Enemy.

# IV. The Sinner's Freedom and The Law's Pedagogy

It is true that the sinner together with all that he thinks and wills is bound fast by his fundamental life premise, the *opinio legis*. Thus he is unfree even to understand, much less want, a trust in God's mercy alone. On the other hand, it is equally true that he is free at least in the sense that his thinking and willing do stem from a fundamental life premise. To this extent he is a responsive subject, a self. It is *he* who believes or disbelieves, *he* who wills. This is of considerable significance

for the law's pedagogical function: To enable sinners to know themselves. In order to achieve this self-knowledge in them, the law must address them as teachable subjects who can be appealed to with commands, questions, threats, blame, even discursive argument, and who can respond consistently to such teaching from their own self-centers. So, even to apprise a man of his religious enslavement, he can only be dealt with as a free – that is a self-consistent– subject.

Of course, a sinner is a sinner whether he knows it or not. His enslavement does not depend on his acknowledging it. Yet it is the law's task as pedagogue to see to it that he does know and feel he is a sinner. Granted, one of Luther's first intentions in speaking to Erasmus about God's "necessitating foreknowledge" is his concern to show that the sovereign truth about us men lies not in what we may happen to think about ourselves, however piously we may think it, but rather in what God knows us to be. Hence we cannot change fundamental identity, we cannot even want to, except as He provides for that in His previous judgment about us.

It is a fact, nevertheless, that this doctrine about God's foreknowledge has been revealed in Scripture. It has been revealed for our learning. Therefore it is not enough for *God* to know who we are, even as slaves. He will that we, too, should know how determinative His knowledge about us really is four our destinies. But precisely as we come to learn this, our very destinies may be changed. Paradoxically, God adjudges us to be slaves whether we know it or not, but as we do come to know it, we may well be on our way to becoming something very different from slaves, also in His sight.

In any case Luther says that the pedagogical function of the law is to show a man how enslaved he is by his basic religious assumption, the *opinio legis*. Yet, as we have shown, this *opinio*

operates at the center of the man's existence and gives all that he thinks and wills the peculiar quality of his kind of self. This *opinio legis*, then – apart from its religious liabilities – does perform a significant psychological and educational function. It is that organizing principle within the sinner's psyche which allows the law to address the sinner as a free – that is, a self-consistent – subject, a subject who can respond to the law's teaching from some organic and meaningful center. The law addresses his as a person, as a self-identical ego, and it is his *opinio legis* which gives him his identity.

## The Law's Personal Appeals

This is borne out in the law's actual pedagogical procedures. It employs devices which could only apply to a responsible, teachable, deeply personal subject. For example, the law's characteristic method is not to tell the sinner point-blank in didactic, declarative statements that he is a sinner but rather to incite him to this knowledge indirectly through imperatives and demands and obligations, on the assumption that he will then make the painful discovery for himself. Much of Luther's own law preaching seems to be not so much an announcing to sinners what they do not already know as it is an interpreting, an explicating, of what they previously should have encountered in their *Anfechtungen*, their worries, guiltiness, and remorse.

It is instructive in this connection to note what Luther means by the word "know" in the phrase "to know ourselves as sinners." Knowledge in this case is a knowledge at first hand, a learning by doing. More accurately, it is a learning by trying and failing. It is as clinical and as intensely experiential as any knowledge could be. A sinner learns that he is an enemy of God by actually being driven, under the law, to an explicitly felt resentment.

Furthermore, it is typical of legal self-knowledge that it involves not only propositional descriptions of human sin and divine judgment but, more intimately, an encounter between persons, between the Accuser and the accused. But propositional knowledge there is, too. Luther's teaching of the law proceeds through highly intricate discursive devices, always on the assumption that the sinner who is being encountered by such argument is rationally capable of following it and of feeling pinched by it. This kind of learning can be sustained only in a creature who is free, in the sense that he is a self-consistent subject who responds from an integrating personal center.

## That Glorious Freedom

When the sinner is dealt with under the educational auspices of the law, he is conceived of as free and as a person also in another sense. He is eligible – not on the strength of his own worth but on the strength of God's mercy in Christ – to be a candidate for that new and higher freedom, the glorious liberty of the sons of God. To be sure, for the sinner who is only under the law this spiritual freedom is but a future possibility.
Still, it is this possibility which provides the Church with her highest pedagogical goal, even when her pedagogical methods seem to be only those of the law. In other words, in that very act in which the Church exploits the minimal psychological freedom of the slave in order to confront him with the truth of his enslavement, she purposes eventually to inaugurate him into that other truth, the truth which alone will make him free indeed.

# V Fides

The basic religions conviction which animates the Christian as believer, namely his *fides*, is something very different from the conviction which animates him as a sinner. What his new life

assumes is that God, now merciful, has effectively purged his sinner-self through the vicarious Cross, that the law's accusations are now as invalid for the believer as they were for his Substitute, and that the Substitute's righteousness and life in turn accrue to those who trust Him.

Just as in the case of the sinner's *opinio legis*, so the believer's basic assumption, his *fides*, functions logically to integrate all his experience, thought, and life into a coherent worldview. For example, in the light of the basic assumption of justification by faith the same suffering and deprivations which would have been construed by the *opinio legis* as threats now appear as the privileged bearing of the Cross of Christ. The formerly strenuous obligations to be charitable and cheerful and useful now become opportunities for returning thanks to a merciful God. The fearful assaults of the Devil lose their terror, and sometimes at least, provide occasion for joking. The Scriptures divulge meaning where previously they had been only puzzling and obscure. Old theological terms like sin, man, church, righteousness, Jesus Christ, acquire new *definitions*. The "whore Reason" is transformed into *ratio illuminatione fide*. And those logical oppositions which do still remain, even in the world-view of the wisest Christian, promise to be resolved in the resurrection.

## I, Yet Not I

However, one important distinction —perhaps the most important distinction — still remains. In the case of the inner, his basic religious assumption, his *opinio iustitiae,s was* his self-center. But in the case of the believer, his *fides* — insofar as it is his at all — is *not* his self-center. His new self-center, his animating life-principle, is not so much his faith as it is another Self, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. This Christ has been not only imputed but also imparted to the believer as

the “Christ who lives in me.” He is the constant Advocate with the Father in whose advocacy the believer’s prayers are harmonized. He is the Head in whom the believer and all believers are embodied as the Church. He is the risen Lord who has sent His Spirit to lead believers into all truth and to testify of Him to them and through them. Faith, in other words, is not only an act of conviction, not only a basic assumption, but “the hand which grasps Christ,” the “adhesive” by which a sinner clings to his *alter Ego*, to the only righteousness and life which avail in his stead before God.

It does not follow from this substitutionary character of Christ, however, that the believer’s self is simply absorbed into the Christ without remainder, as the mystics might have hoped. Paul is still Paul and Peter is still Peter. The believer, in other words, is still a human person with his own identity, his own acts of will and intelligence, exercising his own characteristic responses. That is, with our earlier understanding of freedom, he is still a free and responsive and teachable subject – even as a new man in Christ. For that reason he is appealed to by means of all the usual pedagogical devices of language and gesture, question and answer. His faith is “coaxed” and “exercised” by admonition and precept and example. He employs memory and reflection and hope, even logical distinctions and persuasive rhetoric. He is fortified by palpable reassurances like the elements in the Sacraments, by the “conversation of the brethren,” by the Word spoken *viva voce* rather than in the static tones of the printed word.

Still, as Saint Paul says, “I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me.” To which Luther replies:

But who is that ‘I’ of whom Paul says, ‘Yet not I.’ This is my “I’ who still has the law and is bound to do its works. This is my person who is still separated from Christ. This person Paul

rejects, for ‘I’ as a separate person from Christ belongs to death and hell. Then who is the ‘I’ that loves? The Christian. Paul therefore, as he lives in himself, is entirely dead through the law. But as he lives in Christ, or rather as Christ lives in him, he lives by another life. For Christ speaks in him, works in him, and exercises all the functions of life in him. I cannot teach, write, pray, or give thanks, without those organs of the flesh which are necessary for performing these functions. Still these functions do not originate in my flesh. They are given by God from above.

I would be only too happy to explain this more fully – if by some means I could.

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