



Reading Luther on Plague in a Technological Age

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In the introduction to his recent Luther anthology, Timothy Lull commends the reformer's work as a constructive resource for contemporary theology and ethics. If we read Luther with generosity and imagination, this complex thinker may contribute more to current debates than counterpoint. In this essay, I analyze Luther's fascinating statement on plague as a proposal for thought and action at the limits of human powers.¹ For people formed by the structures of a technological culture, Luther's plague ethic is not a real possibility. The world that funds the ethic is alien and gone. The theistic soteriological system that supports Luther's norms has been supplanted by the technological. Yet, in a time of "postmodern" reconsideration of technology, Luther's ideas deserve attention. Luther sets forth a basic religious question that the technological project poses for Christians.

I. TECHNOLOGY OVERMASTERED

Ingenuity, knowledge, and organization alter but cannot cancel humanity's vulnerability to invasion by parasitic forms of life. Infectious disease which antedated the emergence of humankind will last as long as humanity itself, and will surely remain, as it has been hitherto, one of the fundamental parameters and determinants of human history.²

¹Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 736-55.

²William H. McNeill, *Plagues and People* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1976) 291.

William McNeill's judgment about technology and history has been played out in the contemporary experience of AIDS. Over the last decade, this pandemic has affected American life in several ways. It has become a visible gathering point for entrenched, diverse forms of poverty. It has commanded change in pervasive yet tolerated patterns of personal behavior. It has provoked militant protest and bureaucratic resolve, chronic mourning and incorrigible fear. AIDS holds a claim on the agenda of the future as it now reshapes meanings, practices, and populations in this society and beyond.

As the AIDS crisis commands human resistance, it also poses a disquieting challenge to modern aspirations for practical mastery of disease and other natural-social evils. The surprise of a uniformly fatal, transmissible disease, highly resistant to medical control, appearing in the late twentieth century in an advanced technological society was not lost on people in science.³ The

American Medical Association became a party to vocational crisis among many doctors when it reversed a 1957 decision that the age of pestilential disease had passed and with it the duty to treat at risk to oneself. Though expected progress toward prophylactic and therapeutic vaccines has been reported, the problems yet to be solved are daunting. Appearing in ever mutating strains that can infect people in combination, HIV seems destined to limit human interests and achievements indefinitely.

Awareness that negative powers will ever structure human experience is not limited to reflection upon AIDS. From the biosphere and the economy, from historical and personal experience, on-going episodes of the ambiguity of technology have provoked doubt about the viability and goodness of unchecked technological progress. As restless, melioristic innovation is constitutive of autonomous technique, so too is its aggressive cultural hegemony. Some critics already see modern technology in decline, making space for alternative forms of life.⁴ Others continue to press the prophetic critique of technology's advance, hoping to gain a hearing before too many lose too much memory of something different.⁵

Though "postmodern technology" remains an idea waiting for structural presence, a consciousness of limits to progress may be building in American society. In this context, the testimony of premodern sensibilities like Luther's medieval reflections upon plague is worth hearing. In the Christian tradition, human agency occurs in a world pervaded by sovereign divine powers which constrain or limit human agency as well as guide it. The enchanted world of a Luther, where Christ, the angels, and the devil are active in daily life, provides a case study for a culture now wondering whether and how to live again in a world of determining powers.

Yet, the technological phenomenon itself raises questions about the relevance

³Mathilde Krim, "AIDS: The Challenge to Science and Medicine," *Hastings Center Report* 15 (August 1985) 2-7.

⁴Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992).

⁵For recent examples, see: Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York, Knopf, 1992); Barry Cooper, *Action into Nature: An Essay on the Meaning of Technology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991); Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

of appeals to past fatedness. Has history brought irreversible change that forecloses credible retrieval of premodern conceptions of human agency? Just as humans are forever required to live with the knowledge that could end history with atomic bombs, so the memory of seductive technological ideas about reality may ever torment people who seek to revise a cultural system which has rendered the existential life-world of Luther virtually extinct.

II. LUTHER ON PLAGUE

Whether the weight of accountability for the ordering of life has shifted, in a sense, from God to man, that is, whether we now have each achieved such knowledge and such capacities for intervention that man and technology control the destiny of our planet, is a matter of debate. Certainly the balance has shifted to some degree since primitive times, and is shifting more rapidly in this century than in all previous centuries of human culture combined.⁶

Reflection upon Luther's plague ethic affords us an opportunity to consider how significant alterations in practical human powers affect perceptions of moral relevance and responsibility.⁷ In the 1940s, about sixty years after microscopes proved the germ theory of disease (rather than miasmas), scientific medicine joined forces with public health administration and rendered epidemic disease and infection inconsequential for billions of humans. These people no longer know what infectious disease has meant for most of humanity, how it has ravaged health and happiness. Powerful and rapidly developing technologies for addressing typhoid and other scourges have caused many humans to believe that infectious disease can and should be eradicated from human experience.

When Luther addresses "whether it is proper for a Christian to run away from a deadly plague," he offers an account of right action which presupposes little power over and thus little human responsibility for the ordering of life. The "weight of accountability" rests firmly upon God. Yet, Luther argues some points that sound friendly to modern activism. Writing in 1527, two centuries after Europe's first encounter with plague, Luther's thought reflects then current European practice. Luther rejects fatalism, against some Christian advocates. He advocates a variety of public health measures that probably made some difference to human welfare, like the common practice of quarantine which was derived from old Testament teaching about "lepers" (Leviticus 13-14). Quarantine and other prophylactic measures such as organizing burials and hiring doctors had been undertaken by city and state governments since the fourteenth century, and Luther supports civic action without hesitation (Romans 13). He praises human medicine and the intelligence from which it stems as God's good gifts. Hospitals should be built to relieve family burdens. Luther encourages people to "do as much as they are capable of doing" to preserve health and to limit the spread of disease. People

⁶James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 281.

⁷For a groundbreaking discussion of this correlation, see Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984).

careless about their health, who get sick and infect others, are morally culpable of murder. Those who deliberately spread disease should be executed.

But Luther does not know that bubonic plague is communicated by fleas on rats (a nineteenth-century discovery). Plague is a highly erratic, unpredictable phenomenon, not yet thought to obey the mechanics of nature. Evil spirits who breathe poison are thought to be the cause. Though Luther defends the dignity of human medicine, he also promotes the crucial role of angels as guardians of health. Those who do God's will are "generally protected" from harm. Yet, this same God also wields (or delegates to the devil) destructive force that mocks human preventive health measures. In the end, the point of action is not to secure life but to show fidelity to God and scorn for the devil.

Luther's treatment of plague exhibits his typical interest in ethics and the God-self relation.⁸ The relevant question is not about choosing correctly between death or life. Plague is deadly, but whether humans live, get sick, or die is finally God's decision. Plague is a question of morality only after it has been understood within the saving economy of God. Luther accepts as "excellent" the contention that Christians should not flee plague. Plague means punishment for

sin. Humans should submit to what they deserve. But people do feel overwhelming dread before the uncertainty and calamity of plague. As with all illness, God in plague gives the devil power to terrorize and so to test human dependence upon God in Christ. When humans flee, they succumb to the devil's attack, victims of a cosmic war between Christ and the devil.⁹

But is flight from the devil an act of unbelief? Simple submission to possible death does not necessarily satisfy the subtle religio-ethical norms that Luther defends. Both submission and flight can be legitimate within certain parameters that redound to a right relation of self to God. One parameter is the biblical command about obligation to the neighbor. Regardless of our interests, the afflicted and the dependent need care, as in ministry to the dying, protection of civil order, and the parenting of orphans. But when there are enough people to meet such needs, the Christian may run. The devil's interest in chaos has been thwarted, and God's will is done. Further, to want to save one's life is a natural desire, given of God and amply illustrated in the Bible.

The drive of self-preservation points to the other parameter: prohibition of suicide. Luther encourages Christians to use known practices to avoid plague (medicines, fumigation, segregation of the sick, etc.). This includes those who stay and submit to God's action. Those who refuse all precaution, thinking that God can protect them if God desires, are guilty of "tempting" God to strike. Luther regards those who reject disease prevention as people courting suicide, just as though they refused to eat. Worse, such people may also infect others in the process, making their actions murderous.

These parameters serve a common religious norm that gives decisive shape

⁸George Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1954) 44-69.

⁹Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York: Image, 1992) 102-6.

to Luther's practical counsel. Care for the other and care for the body, with resources that God provides, affirm human being at the disposal of God. The neighbor must always come before self, and the self must not play God by virtually willing its death. Luther counsels consistently that Christians should do as much as they can to care for the body and to fight plague. Such powers are not viewed as autonomous human creations (a modern meaning) but as God's gifts that should not be refused (especially when their use makes the devil so angry!).

This affirmation of human dependence warrants emphasis. Luther views the difference between submission or flight as different degrees of a common religious posture: strong faith and weak faith. Under certain conditions, both responses can be affirmed and both condemned. Both can be affirmed when they serve a larger project of living in confidence or trust in the power and promise of God. That project does not include human action to solve plague. On this front, Christians can only join the battle between Christ and the devil in prayer.

We must pray against every form of evil and guard against it to the best of our ability in order not to act contrary to God....If it be God's will that evil come upon us and destroy us, none of our precautions will help us. Everybody must take this to heart: first of all, if he feels bound to remain where death rages in order to serve his neighbor, let him commend himself to God and say "Lord, I am in thy hands; thou hast kept me here; thy will be done. I am thy lowly creature. Thou canst kill

me or preserve me in this pestilence in the same way as if I were in fire, water, drought, or any other danger.” If a man is free, however, and can escape, let him commend himself and say, “Lord God, I am weak and fearful. Therefore I am running away from evil and am doing what I can to protect myself against it. I am nevertheless in thy hands in this danger as in any other which might overtake me. Thy will be done. My flight alone will not succeed of itself because calamity and harm are everywhere.”¹⁰

Here piety or faith counts more than practice. Either submission or flight can exhibit recognition of God’s sovereignty and consent to God’s action. Accordingly, prayer and godliness are ways of being that produce the highest promise of escape from evil. Godliness is also a precondition for love of the neighbor. Such service requires a desire to please God that is equal to the devil’s fury. Living belief in Christ provides the necessary motivating power to resist mortal fear. Belief in Christ also means confidence in God’s promise to protect those who minister in danger. Christ and the angels will guard those who serve. Existential trust in God frames and empowers the moral life in a world of deadly plague.

III. FAITH IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL PROJECT

What does Luther’s writing on plague offer the contemporary discussion about technological life? Luther’s affirmation of resistance to plague may impress the contemporary reader. Against expectations of a medieval fatalism, Luther repeatedly encourages Christians to do as much as they can to prevent or relieve illness. In this respect, he reads like the first modern man who happens still to believe in angels and devils. Yet, it would be a mistake to see Luther as a champion

¹⁰Luther, “Plague,” 742.

of the progressive improvement of nature for human benefit. Luther wants to resist plague because he wants to serve the neighbor and fight the devil. Accordingly, Luther’s do-what-you-can-and-pray ethic does not provide a ready principle for action in our culture, unless we know what it would mean now to reassign problems like plague to God.

Luther’s plague ethic offers insight into a world where human powers over nature are limited to the point where the burden of responsibility for human weal or woe rests in God’s “hands” and where humans, like it or not, must accept a bounded place in the scheme of things. That place involves radical dependence upon God and relative interdependence with the neighbor. Belief in God secures the motivation and dignity of neighbor love as an act of gratitude for God’s fructifying action. Precisely when humans respect God’s ordering of life do they find reason to glorify and please God in acts of obedience to God’s command. For Luther, the question raised by plague is not whether human flight represents a failure of responsibility to alter nature in quite radical but possible ways. The Baconian idea that nature is an object which human power can influence to improve human life does not arise in Luther’s thinking. His view of plague is supernatural, seen perhaps as punishment or more often as test of faith, and so the question of flight is inherently religious.

Search and examine your own heart thoroughly and you will find whether or not it clings to God alone. Do you have the kind of heart that expects from him nothing but good, especially in distress and want, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God? Then you have the one true God. On the contrary, does your heart cling to something else, from which it hopes to receive more good and help than from God, and does it flee not to him but from him when things go wrong? Then you have an idol, another god.¹¹

For Luther, God is the source of all good, temporal and eternal, and the one who delivers from all evil. Some goods are mediated by humans, but they are still God's gifts without which we would perish. Life in a world of plague derives its sense of an open future from God's manifold activity. The human task is to trust in God's promise and to turn to God in time of need, expecting the good. By trusting in God, humans can live fully and normally with hope toward the future. Such is the sense of fatedness and possibility that controls Luther's reflection upon plague.

Contemporary experience of the limits of dependable order secured by technology is a situation where Luther's sense of fatedness may be felt and reflected upon. But his sense of possibility will be a more unlikely achievement. In the technological society, the ordering of temporal life depends to an ever growing degree upon human hands. When chaos appears, people may pray for divine intervention, but they will also dial 911 with expectations for success that would astonish Luther. Viewed from within Luther's religious framework, it seems clear that contemporary "faith" sides first, if not entirely, with technology when it looks for saving power in time of trouble. Further, it is doubtful that this good power is construed by its recipients to be God's mediated work. Those who look to technol-

¹¹Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 12.

ogy in time of need see that they place their trust in human powers, and they do not seem to be troubled about idolatry.

Modern technology seen through Luther's thought looks like unbelief. Such a judgment is not idiosyncratic and should not be rejected without fundamental reflection upon the way of Jesus.¹² Nevertheless, whatever shape the "postmodern" technological society takes, it will not result in the return of Luther's sense of inconsequential human powers. The search for ever more extensive and invasive control over the world may slow, but we will not renounce the phenomenal range and extent of current powers. Though the new technological society may come to doubt its ultimate trust in more and better technique, it will not stop looking to human powers in time of need. Luther's reflection upon plague gives us reason to wonder whether modern technology is a massive, now established project of unbelief. If so, how might a postmodern technology respond to this religious criticism?

¹²See Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 97-124.