



On Being and Becoming before God: A Response to Daphne Hampson

PAUL R. SPONHEIM

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

I AM GLAD TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS CONVERSATION, THOUGH I DO NOT POSSESS a clear and distinct direction to propose for the conversation which may happen when we put together the Lutheran theological tradition and the feminist critique. Perhaps part of the problem is that each of the two realities coming together, each of them, is not simply one but many. A sign of the maturity and import of the feminist movement is that there is genuine range or diversity to be found here. I have found helpful the categorization provided by Alison Jaggar in this regard.¹ I also believe that there is more than one way to be Lutheran. E. Clifford Nelson's volume makes that clear. In that work, for example, Eugene Fevold has provided a particularly helpful discussion of the election controversy.²

So, one of the difficulties we face is that each of the two things we bring together is not one but many. But perhaps there is also in this a resource for us: we can avoid a simplistic kind of either/or thinking. We can avoid the flamboyance of a dramatic and decisive choice, as it were, between two opposed singular entities.

¹Alison Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983).

²Eugene L. Fevold, "The Theological Scene," in *The Lutherans in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 305-328.

PAUL R. SPONHEIM is professor of systematic theology. His most recent book, *Faith and the Other: A Relational Theology* (Fortress, 1993), calls for attention to voices "other" than the dominant tradition.

Instead, I trust we will find ourselves relating particular feminist proposals to particular strands within the Lutheran theological tradition. I doubt that I am alone in being more comfortable with such an approach. I doubt I am alone, for example, in finding alienating and offensive certain utterances from persons at least claiming to speak from within the Lutheran theological tradition. I doubt I am alone in struggling to see how certain contemporary questions are fully addressed in that tradition. And yet I doubt that I am alone in the stubborn sense that Martin Luther saw something of the truth of God with exceptional clarity and power. So, too, I doubt that I am alone in being gripped by the power of the feminist critique and yet wondering at times whether such appreciation places me on a slippery slope at the bottom of which lies something that could not credibly claim to be Christian. How then can we proceed in bringing feminist critique and Lutheran theological reflection together? Perhaps we will find ourselves needing to work with some real tentativity, proceeding slowly, at times even tortuously. We will, as it were, be choosing to incorporate various bricks of differing colors and textures in the house we build, or, alternatively, several strands in the tapestry we weave. This suggests to me that our speaking together is more in the nature of a conversation than a debate. It will be a continuing conversation, I believe, as we seek to find the most serviceable vessels for the treasure of the gospel.

I find Daphne Hampson's article, as well as her book *Theology and Feminism*, particularly useful in raising concerns in a radically pointed way.³ She challenges me, she challenges us, for she writes as a woman and scholar who knows Christian tradition well and yet who has found it necessary to move to a position she identifies as theist but post-Christian. Is it, after all, possible to stand on a slippery slope? Do we face an either/or in these matters, after all? On the way to where she stands — is that at the bottom of a slope or at the top of a mountain? — she considers and rejects theologians, men and especially women, who have struggled somehow to stay within the church. The familiar names — Ruether, McFague, Tribble, Fiorenza, people we are accustomed to hearing being attacked from "the right" — pass before our eyes in a new critical light in Hampson's pages. Yet in a sense Hampson's critique supports the analysis from the right. She seems to be saying, "Get serious! If you believe what you say you believe, you cannot stay within the confines of Christianity!" That is the way Carl Braaten has used Hampson, for example. He writes: "No one who reads her book will find it easy to scoff at her thesis, as disconcerting as it may seem to those whose project is to reform the Christian faith on a feminist model."⁴

My intention is not to scoff, but I hope to chart a different course than Braaten's disjunctive appeal. I want to stand with Hampson as she puts her questions to us. I believe her questions can be the occasion for breaking through to truly significant insights. I believe these insights may be rooted in the best of Christian tradition, though I think we have often failed to articulate them with

³Daphne Hampson, "Luther on the Self: A Feminist Critique," *Word & World* 8/4 (1988) 334-342; see also her *Theology and Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: B. Blackwell, 1990).

⁴Carl Braaten, review of *Theology and Feminism*, *dialog* 31 (1992) 87.

clarity and power. In many ways I believe feminism has been and is a voice through which God is speaking to the church, at times from outside the church. I don't want to be guilty of the arrogance which would make self-declared post-Christian feminists out to be some new kind of "anonymous" Christians. But I believe God may be speaking here to the church, despite the integrity of the speakers' self-identification as post-Christian. This does not require writing "*nihil obstat*" over everything a Daphne Hampson says. Not at all. As Kierkegaard once said, God can write straight with crooked lines. If we did not believe that, would we not regularly be done very early indeed? That raises one further preliminary question: If God is speaking through a Daphne Hampson, speaking to the church from outside the church, is God calling the church back or ahead? The answer, I think, is yes. So, the question is not so much to establish the lineage of every statement we make in this tumultuous time; the question to be asked of any formulation is indeed rather: "Does this speak with grace and power today?"

In the article assigned there are three challenges I want to consider:

(1) "The Lutheran system" is "unacceptable" because it calls for "basing oneself on one who is not oneself." She goes on to add, "this is integral to that system in that it has posited God as exterior to the self" (342).

(2) "The Lutheran tradition" is "highly detrimental" in that it advocates "that the self should be broken." She adds, "Women are not typically self-enclosed...their problem has rather been a lack of centeredness in self; their need, to come to themselves" (339).

(3) The "Lutheran system" must be "judged negatively" in that it tells a woman that "she must constantly live from some future not yet given, or from another's sense of her – that indeed, a growth from within oneself and a concern with continuity of self is in essence 'sin'" (340).

The issues, then, are: (1) the self and God; (2) the self and sin; and (3) the self and growth. In considering these challenges and responding to them, I shall be trying to develop a sketch of a self in relationship. My argument – or should I say, my hope – is that Christian faith does entail affirmation of a self truly in a living relationship with God. If Hampson wishes to have, as she puts it, "an explicitly theistic sense" in which God is "not disconnected from myself and the web of human relationships," I would hope to offer her an understanding of Christianity which does just that.

I. GOD AND THE SELF

Hampson writes: "Feminists, who have wanted to get away from a heteronomous situation in which the will of one other than themselves ruled them, will scarcely want to replace dominant males by such a God" (341). I should hope not. Hampson is critiquing here and elsewhere what I have called a "logic of disjunction." In her book she speaks of this as a "dipolar construal of reality" (121). Values get assigned pretty quickly and decisively in such a disjunction. As she puts it, again in her book: "God is considered good; humans, by contrast with God, sinful" (121). I have said that the way this logic functions is to lead us to suppose that by

cursing humankind we are somehow praising God. If that is so, we Lutherans do a lot of praising God – one might say.

But does not Christian faith insist that the fundamental ontological distinction is between God the creator and all else, the creaturely? God does not need our sin to be God. This is not merely a “first article concern,” soon to be trumped by second article oppositions. In his lectures on the Psalms, Luther writes:

For as in Adam we have risen to the image of God, so he has descended to our image, that he might lead us back to a knowledge of ourselves. And this takes place in the sacrament of his incarnation. This is the kingdom of faith, in which the cross of Christ reigns, which hurls pretended divinity down and summons per-versely deserted humanity and the despised infirmity of the flesh to honor again.⁵

At this point I am puzzled. Hampson says that it is “imperative to develop Luther’s insight that God must be seen as one who is fundamental to our being ourselves, not as some exterior other with whom we inter-relate” (341). What seems to be objectionable is either a view of God in which God is an absolutized male figure, controlling and dominating or, quite differently, an external figure with whom we can and do interact. In her book she seems again to identify these two targets:

Maybe there will always be times when humans, because of what they are, need to turn to “God” as to a very real “other.” As human beings we only know of relations with other persons which are inter-personal – and we naturally model God upon such relationships. We should hold in mind, however, that because we picture God in this way, it does not necessarily follow that God is in fact a kind of anthropomorphic agent *able to intervene in the world or indeed a spiritual entity, complete in God’s self and independent of the world.* (168-9; emphasis mine)

It is difficult to know how to respond. On the one hand there is here the intriguing and I think likely helpful suggestion that God is not a self in the way human beings are selves, a sort of Tom or Jane writ very large indeed. We do need to reject anthropomorphizing in our theological reflection. Yet Hampson will at times use personal language of the relationship with God. She writes, again in her book, “One may think of oneself as being open and present to what one conceives to be a greater reality than one’s self, knowing oneself as loved and upheld.” But, on the other hand, she finds worship to have hierarchical connotations and backs away from speaking of God as a “thou.” She will speak with Julian of Norwich of God as “the one in whom my soul standeth.” I am uncertain how to sort this out. My suggestion is that the objection to God as thou, as an external other is tied in with what she perceives as a tendency to place that external other in a place of dominance. That must be resisted at all costs. Indeed, she can write “as a feminist interested in *coming into my own*,” I am “excited by the possibility of taking up the daring words which Catherine of Siena is reputed to have uttered, ‘My real me is God.’” (169; emphasis mine).

⁵WA 5:128-129; cited in Eberhard Jüngel, *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther’s Significance for Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 25.

In reading feminist literature I often find myself saying, “Can’t I be for what you want to be for, without being against what you are against?” But here I find myself saying, “surely we want to stand with you in standing against a view of God as an absolutized male tyrant—at least, I do.” And I perhaps need to grant that some of the ways we have spoken of God do seem to entail that understanding. For example, I find difficult the Luther passages about God foreknowing all things with necessity, and I don’t enjoy being told that the fact that I find them difficult proves their truth. But may not God’s transcendence be formulated in truly relational terms? Recall Kierkegaard’s parable of a king who loved a humble maiden. The king *pretended* to be a servant boy in order to win the maiden’s love. But with God there is no such deception:

The servant form is not something put on but is actual,...and the god, from the hour when by the omnipotent resolution of his omnipotent love he became a servant, he has himself become captive, so to speak, in his resolution and is now obliged to continue (to go on talking loosely) whether he wants to or not. He cannot betray his identity; unlike that noble king, he does not have the possibility of suddenly disclosing that he is, after all, the king—which is no perfection in the king (to have this possibility) but merely manifests his impotence and the impotence of his resolution, that he actually is incapable of becoming what he wanted to become.⁶

The God whom Christians confess is surely not a being complete in *himself*. Kierkegaard is using some “omni-” language he would not use of human beings. But that qualitative difference is realized precisely in the decisiveness with which God is for us. Or consider Eberhard Jüngel’s formulation:

God has himself only in that he gives himself away. But, in giving himself away, he has himself. That is how he *is*. His self-having is the event, is the history of giving himself away and thus is the end of all mere self-having.⁷

It is heartening in this connection to take note of the development in trinitarian theology by which the immanent trinity and the economic trinity are brought into much closer relationship. Feminist theologians have been instrumental in that development. Certainly there has been in Christian history a lamentable tendency at times to speak as if the real God were off somewhere else or—if here—were intervening, interfering, controlling, and dominating. Daphne Hampson seeks an understanding by which she can understand herself, as she comes to herself, to be loved and upheld. I wonder if Luther does not offer that, even—if I may put it so—in that notorious work, *The Bondage of the Will*. He warns us against probing the “secret will” of the divine majesty, for that “is impossible to penetrate because he dwells in light inaccessible.” But what is the venture of human understanding then to do? Luther’s answer:

Let it occupy itself instead with God incarnate, or as Paul puts it, with Jesus crucified, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, though in a hidden manner; for through him it is furnished abundantly with what it ought

⁶Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1985) 55.

⁷Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 328.

to know and ought not to know. It is God incarnate, moreover, who is speaking here: "I would...you would not" – God incarnate, I say, who has been sent into the world for the very purpose of willing, speaking, doing, suffering, and offering to all everything necessary for salvation.⁸

Here one might find a sense of being loved and upheld, might one not?

In her article, in a fascinating footnote, Hampson speaks of Luther as being afraid of "the transcendent God, the Father." She then quotes Luther: "We are lifted up into the bosom of the Father...We dwell under the shadow of the wings of our mother hen" (337). Could she not develop this into a notion of qualitative otherness, of transcendence in relationship, which provides what she seeks in her theistic understanding, while avoiding the dangers she well points out? I would hope so. Might she not spur us to take up Luther's own call to "occupy ourselves with God incarnate"? Would that not be enough for us to do? One thing that may hold Hampson back is her apparent understanding that to speak of God as active in the world is to violate our understanding that "we know history and nature to be closed causal nexuses" (341). This is, of course, a massive topic – but I would hope Hampson could converse with such other Englanders as John Polkinghorne and Keith Ward, who have written extensively of how God interacts within what we may call a "loose causal weave."

If relationships are real, if the God relationship is real, perhaps God could be "external" to the self – that is, truly other – and yet precisely in Hampson's terms "fundamental to our being ourselves."

But is that the way it works? I suspect that where "the rubber hits the road" most decisively is not with the question of *whether* God can act within the world, but rather with *what* God is doing here. And that brings us to our second topic: the self and sin.

II. THE SELF AND SIN

So, what's with all this death talk? How life-giving is such talk, after all? Here I need to bear testimony: *given what we face*, unless there is death there will be no life. Or, using Hampson's own language, if she is to "come into her own," there must be death. We are speaking about a situation which is such that natural development, natural "coming into one's own" is excluded. Or, using Hampson's language again, unless there comes into play a reality other than the self – external to the self, if you will – there will be no "coming into one's own." We are speaking about sin. And sin's consequences. Douglas John Hall has emphasized the relational character of the reformers' concept of the image of God. Claus Westermann has written that the image of God refers to the fact that humans are created in such a way that "something can happen between God and the human."⁹ Hall is making the point that if what is happening is not what God seeks, one must speak of the image as "lost." And Hall notes: "Whenever this 'lost' of Luther and other Reform-

⁸Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW33:145-146.

⁹Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 56.

ers was (and is) heard within the camp of the substantialists, it sounds like an absurdity."¹⁰ Thus, Hall notes, does Luther acquire the reputation of an irrationalist and fideist.

I do not know whether Dr. Hampson might be able to agree up to this point. She does grant that language about a violent breaking of the self does make sense for men for whom the culturally favored reality of pride prevails. And what of women in such a culture? Following the suggestion of Valerie Saiving back in 1960, Hampson argues in her book that the typical problem for women is better suggested by such terms as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness, lack of an organizing center or focus, dependence on others for one's own self—in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self (123). She seems disinclined to speak of this as sin. The situation does not call for saving by breaking but for healing.

To this continuing feminist challenge I make three comments:

(1) Lutherans need to be as specific and explicit as possible in identifying what it is that must die. Thus, in his commentary on Galatians, after speaking of greed, sexual desire, anger, and pride, Luther writes:

For just as Christ came once physically, according to time, abrogating the entire Law, abolishing sin and destroying death and hell, so He comes to us spiritually without interruption and continually smothered and kills *these things* in us.¹¹

(2) Thus Lutherans need to face the issue of recognizing some continuity in the creature whom God acts to save, something that does not die. Again, I believe there is preparation for this in Luther. We all know that in *The Bondage of the Will* Luther denies any power to human free will to move toward God. But even in that denial Luther makes one of his famous distinctions:

But if the power of free choice were said to mean that by which a [person] is capable of being taken hold of by the Spirit and imbued with the grace of God, as a being created for eternal life or death, no objection could be taken. For this power or aptitude, or as the Sophists say, this disposing quality or passive aptitude, we also admit; and who does not know that it is not found in trees or animals? For heaven, as the saying is, was not made for geese.¹²

It is this kind of material that makes it possible for Luther elsewhere to speak of the image of God being restored¹³ or regained.¹⁴

(3) Lutherans and feminists, Lutheran and otherwise, need to ponder the question of agency with respect to the situation of women which salvation addresses. A familiar move is to say both forms of sin—self-elevation and self-denigration—are really a matter of being caught up in the self, of being curved in upon the self, after all. This, I submit, will not work, and I hope feminist voices will keep our feet to the fire. There may be some sense in which the *result* in both cases leaves the person stuck with her or himself. But it will not do to argue that the *intention*

¹⁰Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 100.

¹¹LW 26:350 (emphasis mine).

¹²LW 33:67.

¹³LW 2:141.

¹⁴LW 12:285-286.

reveals a prideful self. We need to ask what kind of agency lies between a situation in which one is essentially a victim and one in which one is pridefully elevating the self. It is necessary, but I think not sufficient, to speak of the sin of omission. Here feminist reflection on the structural aspects of sin, on what goes on *between* persons, may help us. And we may come to stress the recognition of the components that come together in what we routinely recognize as self.

To sum up: I propose we work at distinctions such that we can say that something in us needs healing (Hampson's preferred term) and something needs killing, and that that second something will wear a different face in different folks. That sets up my final question: Do some such distinctions permit us to speak of growth or development in the self?

III. THE SELF AND GROWTH

The charge here is, you will recall, that in the Lutheran view "a growth from within oneself and a concern with continuity of self is in essence sin" (340). What are we to say to this? Well, some conversation will be needed regarding the "from within oneself," and I reckon there is growth and then there is growth. But somewhere in this discussion the point surely needs to be made that to speak of Christian life is indeed to speak of change, of temporality, of journey -- yes, I will say, to speak of growth. One of my favorite sermons of Luther is that one entitled "Two Kinds of Righteousness" from 1519. The two kinds of righteousness are not our sinful self-righteousness, on the one hand, and God's bestowed righteousness on the other. Rather Luther speaks of two kinds of genuine righteousness. The first is the righteousness of justification by faith, which -- Luther says -- "swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ."¹⁵ But then he goes on to say this:

This alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone -- while the Father, to be sure, inwardly draws us to Christ -- is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. Christ daily drives out the old Adam *more and more* in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ *grow*. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but *it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death*.¹⁶

Yes, I understand the point is not to proof-text, but somehow some accounting must be made of the way in which Luther does say things like this. For one more example, he comments on 2 Cor 3:8 in these terms:

Our life is one of the beginning and of growth, not one of consummation. That person is better who has come closer to the spirit. If I have reached the moon, I must not immediately suppose that I have reached the sun as well; nor should I then despise the lesser stars. There are degrees of living and of working, then why not of understanding?... We are being changed from one degree of clarity to another.¹⁷

¹⁵LW 31:298.

¹⁶LW 31:299 (emphasis mine).

¹⁷LW 14:285.

Other such passages could easily be added.¹⁸

Daphne Hampson is not a careless scholar. How do we put together her severe judgment and the presence of such passages? I suggest three points:

(1) Lutherans have been so concerned to stress the radical discontinuity that is created by the dying in us of that which needs to die (the second point above) that we neglect or veer away from this theme of growth. Moreover, the use of language regarding growth like “from within oneself” raises all the concerns we have discussed under our first point, God and the self.

(2) The fragility of the self’s life is such that language of growth may seem strangely inappropriate. The old Adam and old Eve still do hang around, so that the point about needing to die does not get to be (merely) ancient history. So it is not so strange that Hampson can quote Luther, “When security comes, then God imputes it again for sin” (335). And yet Luther could speak of the one who firmly believes as being blessed, “secure from and unafraid of any mishap that may befall, of the devil, of sin, and of death.”¹⁹

(3) The category of “growth” may materially have been so usurped by a given culture that it is simply next to impossible to pry it loose and fill it with new content. Thus Luther writes:

Christ is being preached in the gospel and *is growing and increasing in the world*. But this is a *strange growing*, one that looks to the world like something withering and perishing. For we find the cross of Christ in it and all kinds of persecution. But we also find pure growth in it; for in the midst of death there is life, in poverty riches, in disgrace honor, and so forth – amidst evil there is sheer goodness.²⁰

I hope I have indicated that within the Lutheran theological tradition one can speak significantly of growth within the God relationship. Put colloquially, God does not leave us as we were! As to what that “strange” growth would look like, I think there might well be significant convergence between Lutheran emphases and feminist voices. Hampson makes much of developing the natural connectedness; she avoids an ontological sexism by expressing the hope that men might grow “to develop a relationality with others” (340). Might there not be some respondent chord in the Lutheran emphasis on living in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love?²¹

I do not want to say that everything is just the same. Hampson would not be prepared to say with Luther that the Christian lives *only* for others. But given the recognition of some anthropological continuity, could not we hear in this “only” once again essentially the cautionary word about needful dying? If that dying is specified more clearly and still emphatically in mind, would not the Lutheran talk of growth for that continuing self have some connection with the theme of life with the neighbor? It does not start there – that is clear – hence all Luther’s talk about the “outer” person being defined by the “inner” person. But then I recall again

¹⁸Cf. LW 25:51, 225; 26:351.

¹⁹LW 22:100f.

²⁰Commenting on Zech 3:8-9 in LW 20:217 (emphasis mine).

²¹*The Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:371.

Hampson's noteworthy theme that it is "imperative to develop Luther's insight that God must be seen as one who is fundamental to our being ourselves" (341).

Finally, for a last move, to come at this third theme of growth and the self from "the other side," I think it important to note that the self that feminists wish to celebrate in natural connectedness is, by virtue of that constitutive connectedness, precisely not the hard gathered self we might call the normative western male ego. Again, that must die. What can be reclaimed, saved, is a softer self. I rather like Catherine Keller's description:

Some of us will go on working and playing at an alternative sense of self, one quicksilver enough to elude the fixed centers of essence, one firm enough to stand its ground. Standing one's ground: this allows the persistence needed not to remain self-identical, which only blocks the flow of relation and energy; but to face difference, conflict, loss, reality, future. And a grounded self, unlike a fixed ego, thrives in its dependence on earth and only as earthling, on the matrix of relations to all the other earthlings.²²

Is there some congruence between Keller's "only as earthling" and Lutheran talk about being freed "to be a creature"?

So, in conclusion, I am glad for this conversation. Conversations are strange affairs; they tend to have a life of their own. I hope this one will. I hope that spokespersons for the Lutheran theological tradition and feminists will not come to the tragic agreement that they cannot talk together. I worry that a Daphne Hampson might strangely rigidify her post-Christian choice, absolutizing it in effect. And I worry that some or many of us in the Lutheran tradition might find that all too convenient, hunkering down in our fortresses with an "I told you so" smugness.

I am glad, I say, for this conversation. I hope it will continue with a life of its own. Let us not be too busy predicting the outcome. Consider in closing this statement from Rosemary Radford Ruether in her review of Hampson's book:

The reason why Christianity has been able to reinterpret itself continually, in response to new scientific knowledge and social exigencies is that it is a historical religion in a completely different sense than Hampson understands the term. It is a living community in history, which does not just have a past, but a present and a future. Like any living community, it has pasts that it remembers, that are foundational for its identity. But, just as a living person continually re-evaluates and even revises what it remembers in response to new demands and new perceptions of meaning, so the church, as a historical community, continually re-evaluates how it reads its past memories and even revises that which it remembers.²³ ⊕

²²Catherine Keller, "To Illuminate Your Trace: Self in Late Modern Feminist Theology," *Listening* 25/3 (1990) 221.

²³Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Is Feminism the End of Christianity? A Critique of Daphne Hampson's *Theology and Feminism*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43/3 (1990) 396.