



## Luther on the Self: A Feminist Critique

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It is imperative that feminists working in theology should pay attention to the implications of feminist thought for the structure of theology. In this essay I shall suggest that, while there can be no incompatibility between feminism and being religious, feminism comports ill with Christianity. This is particularly the case when we consider Christianity in its Lutheran form. On the other hand, I believe that Luther's understanding that if one is to speak of God one must say that the self cannot be itself except as God is fundamental to the constitution of that self, must be retained within theology, and indeed can appropriately be developed by feminists. (Luther would not have used the term "self" and lacked a post-Enlightenment conception of the "self," but this is the best word to use when translating his insight into a modern idiom.)

### I. LUTHER AND THE SELF

Luther's achievement lay in his reconceptualization of the human relation to God. The medieval Catholic understanding of the human relation to God, grounded as it was in the thought of the ancient world, had supposed (as does modern Catholicism) that it is God's work to transform the human. Luther denied this. For him the revolution involved in being a Christian is that one is no longer concerned about what one is in oneself, or what one could become through God's grace. For the Christian lives by God's righteousness and not by his own.

Therefore to be a Christian means that one has a radically different sense of oneself as being bound up with God and what God is. As my teacher in Lutheran theology Arthur McGill expressed it, one's understanding of the "circumference" of oneself is changed. The Christian, Luther said in his essay of 1520 in which he first fully grasped his breakthrough, lives "not in himself."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961) 80.

Catholic scholars have often failed to understand the import of Luther's thought here, saying that in the Lutheran scheme justification consists solely in the non-imputation of sins, whereas Catholicism allows that God should actually change the person. But it is not that Luther would rather that God should give him grace for himself, so transforming him. He has gotten away from any such self-preoccupation. "We know that our theology is certain," says Luther, "because it sets us outside ourselves."<sup>2</sup> The Christian lives *extra se*.

The word for this placing of oneself with God is faith. For faith is trust, and when I trust,

my sense of who I am comes to lie with another. This novel sense which the Christian has of himself is well captured by Wolfhart Pannenberg:

Luther not only added the notion of trust, but he wanted to emphasize that the personal center itself changes in the act of trust, because the trusting person surrenders to the one in whom such confidence is entrusted. The point was crucial in Luther's argument, but difficult to grasp...Melancthon did not grasp Luther's profound insight that faith by way of ecstasis participates in the reality of Christ himself...Even Calvin did not realize that the very foundation of the traditional concept of a personal self was shaken by Luther's discovery concerning the nature of faith.<sup>3</sup>

The relation with God is not an inter-relationship with one who is conceived as an other—a relationship of a type which would best be known as love, such as we have with our neighbor. The passage from which I quoted in *The Freedom of a Christian* reads at greater length:

A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God.

To have this new self-understanding is what it means to be Christian.

But it is not natural for humans so to base themselves on God. Thus central to the structure of Luther's thought is a dichotomy. Once and again we try to set ourselves up in apposition to God, to deal with God as with an other, attempting to be adequate of ourselves. This is sin. Once and again we must hear the gospel message that it is not for us to try to be adequate of ourselves, that God accepts us independently of our merits. Once and again we learn to trust in God, to live by "extrinsic" righteousness, and not by our own "intrinsic" righteousness. We are, says Luther, *semper iustus, semper peccator, semper reformans*. Again he comments "Progress is nothing other than constantly beginning."<sup>4</sup> It follows from this that there is no history of the development of the self; no movement within ourselves from being a sinner to being righteous. Rather are there two ways in which we can live: in opposition to God (sin), and from God (faith). Each moment we must live anew from God. Luther writes: "When security comes, then God imputes it again for sin."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>"*Ideo theologica est certa, quia ponit nos extra nos*," WA 40,1.589.8 (1531 Galatians lectures), quoted by Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 174. The chapter of Ebeling's book, "Faith and Love," in which he quotes this line is I think the best exposition of this theme in English. The major work in the field is Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967).

<sup>3</sup>Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Freedom and the Lutheran Reformation," *Theology Today* 38 (1981) 291-92.

<sup>4</sup>WA 56.442.17 (1515-16); WA 4.350.15f (1513-15). Quoted by G. Ebeling, *Luther*, 162.

<sup>5</sup>WA 56.281.11.

This structure to Luther's thought is found again in the thought of later Lutheran

theologians. I take as examples one from the nineteenth century and one from the twentieth. For the nineteenth-century Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard, it is not that God confirms the ethical man (the man who attempts by himself to be himself); it is not that the religious stage in life is built upon the ethical. Rather must a man fall down before his own eyes, recognizing that he has failed, before he can have any reason to make recourse to God. Kierkegaard's ethical man who tries of himself to be adequate in the face of God (as Luther's man who would justify himself by good works) lands up in despair. It is only as we consent to dependence on God (faith) that we can be the person whom we should be. (Kierkegaard however also differs from Luther here, for he not only—in a parallel way to Luther—speaks of the self as being “grounded transparently” in God (faith), but also of there being a reciprocal relation between the person and God (love).<sup>6</sup>)

In the twentieth century Rudolf Bultmann's thought has such a structure. Only God can deliver one into authenticity; the attempt to become oneself by oneself will fail. We must, he says, live from the future, from God. This we must in each moment do again, not falling back on what we already are. Thus Bultmann:

The new life of faith is not an assured possession or endowment....Life in faith is not a possession at all....In other words, the decision of faith is never final; it needs constant renewal in every fresh situation.<sup>7</sup>

There is for Bultmann no self, which is indeed a self which has come to itself, which can be carried forward from one moment to the next. We must find ourselves each moment anew as we live from God. Of man's relation to his past Bultmann can say: “He may take it with him as that for which he has been forgiven.” Of the Christian proclamation, he says that it announces to man “the possibility of becoming free from his past.”<sup>8</sup>

There is thus a dichotomy running through the center of Lutheran thought, the dichotomy between trying to exist by myself (sin) in which I shall fail to be a self, and living from God (faith) whereupon I come to live as God intended that I should live. It should be noted that this dichotomy is the necessary corollary of saying that there is God, and that it is not natural for man to depend on God. Since God is other than myself, I must transfer my center of gravity to one who lies outside myself. God is integral to the self's being itself, such that God is conceived to be fundamental to the very constitution of the self in each moment. This could not be said to be the case were one to speak (as does Catholicism) of the person as existing through creation and then as having the capacity to choose to relate to God; or of God as completing in salvation what is given in creation. Luther contends that each moment I must anew base myself on God and so be the creature I was intended to be. To think

<sup>6</sup>I explore this in “Kierkegaard on the Self,” *Kierkegaard at Sunderland*, ed. J. Watkin (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, forthcoming 1988). Kierkegaard's analysis of the structure of the self is found in particular in *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), from which the quotation is taken (ET, Princeton: Princeton University, 1941) 213.

<sup>7</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, “The New Testament and Mythology,” *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H. W. Bartsch (2 vols.; London: SPCK, 1957-62) 1.21.

<sup>8</sup>R. Bultmann, “Church and Teaching in the New Testament,” *Faith and Understanding*, ed. Robert W. Funk (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 200.

that I could in some sense first possess myself, then to relate to God as to another, would be to

have an idol—one with whom I think I can deal.

What then of the person who tries to exist of himself in the face of God? (And unlike for Kierkegaard, for whom the ethical man can be in essential ignorance of God's existence, for Luther as a sixteenth-century man it is always in the face of God that one tries to maintain oneself.) The situation of the human *coram deo*, before God's face, is one of terror. Luther here was a student of the Hebrew Scriptures. Moreover, God's transcendence and the goodness which God demands were accentuated in the late Nominalism within which his sensibilities were formed. There is a sense of the human's aloneness, unable to support himself. (Was Luther the first modern man?<sup>9</sup>) Furthermore, for Luther such a person is caught up in himself, bent into himself: the human in sin is *incurvatus in se*. Thus the move from sin to faith is a move from an essential isolation to a connectedness to another who is God. Echoes of this are once again found in the later tradition. Notably in Kierkegaard's writing the attempt to exist of oneself before God represents a situation of terror; the Jews, he says, were a wise people—they knew that to see God was to die.<sup>10</sup> Likewise for Kierkegaard the self as it comes to itself has an essential relationality. Martin Buber observes that when, in his youth, he had read Kierkegaard he had thought that Kierkegaard's man was "man on the edge." But in comparison with Heidegger there is a connectedness: "Kierkegaard's Single One is an open system, even if open solely to God."<sup>11</sup>

Within this tradition there is no sense that the self, secure in itself, can freely exist in easy relationship with others. We cannot maintain ourselves; we are insecure. For Luther we are always bound, if not to God, then to the devil. To be "free," as his famous debate with Erasmus makes clear, is to be bound to God. The person who tries to maintain himself will, in his insecurity, see all else (even God, says Luther) in relation to himself. Such an analysis is markedly present at a later date in existentialism. Bultmann sees us as grasping at others, using them as tools which are *vorhanden*, available to us, in our attempt to shore ourselves up. Of this tradition as a whole we may say—to use a phrase of Heidegger's—that the human is "not at home" in the world. It could not be said of humans as depicted by Luther, Kierkegaard, or Bultmann that we are creatures contentedly. The later tradition has named this basic dis-ease *Angst*; that anxiety which, not arising from a specific situation, belongs rather to our basic constitution. Kierkegaard attributed this basic insecurity to the fact that

<sup>9</sup>It may be an interesting gloss to suggest that the transcendent God, before whom one cannot stand, represents "the Father." Luther indeed seems to have been much afraid of his Father. When he speaks of living by God's righteousness, his picture of God is in contrast motherly. Thus: "The person who believes in Christ is righteous and holy through divine imputation. He already sees himself, and is, in heaven, being surrounded by the heaven of mercy.... We are lifted up into the bosom of the Father... We dwell under the shadow of the wings of our mother hen" (WA 39,1.521.5-522.3; quoted from G. Ebeling, *Luther*, 163-164). Unable to face the Father directly (and having cast aside the female intercessor in the form of the Virgin Mary), Luther overcomes his fear by making the Father God into a Mother who protects him.

<sup>10</sup>S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (1844; ET, Princeton: Princeton University, 1967) 37. Kierkegaard's major discussion of the inability of the individual—an entirely isolated individual—to exist before God is however found in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846; ET, Princeton: Princeton University, 1941); especially pp. 410-11, 432-33.

<sup>11</sup>Martin Buber, "Between Man and Man," *Between Man and Man* (New York: Collier Books, 1985 [1965]) 167-81.

humans are twofold, both body and spirit. Man in his imagination soars into the realm of

possibility, yet knows that like other creatures he must die. It is this analysis which Reinhold Niebuhr—not himself a Lutheran—takes up in his well-known depiction of sin as a pride stemming from insecurity.<sup>12</sup> But Luther too knows of a dis-ease, often spoken of as *Anfechtung*, a terror before God, which should cause us to flee. It is to this situation that the gospel speaks. By putting our trust in God we are delivered from our insecurity.

The relation to God is thus held to be primary. It is in relation to God (and not through the world) that we come to ourselves. Constituted by God, however, we are turned to the world as the scene of our activity and service. (There is no mysticism present, as though we could simply “be” in God; we are not speaking of loss of self in God, but of God being that through dependence on which the self is constituted.) The good tree, says Luther, will bear good fruit. Theology (the relation to God) leads, as Gerhard Ebeling puts it, to ethics (the relation to the world). This structure is particularly apparent in Bultmann’s Gifford lectures, delivered in Scotland to an audience which, after the Third Reich, might well have been tempted to believe of Lutheranism that, having no natural law ethic, it lacked any ethic. Faith (the relation to God), says Bultmann, leads to love (a serving of the neighbor).

## II. FEMINISM AND THE SELF

Now feminists, in considering women, have conceived of the nature of the human person in a profoundly different way. In the first place, feminists conceive differently how women naturally are. For they speak of women as having an essential connectedness with others, a relationality which is integral to the self. It is suggested that women tend to think in terms of (and to have as their ideal) a “web”-like participatory structure of human relationships. It has been shown that to a marked degree in comparison with men, women in speaking of themselves make mention of significant others.<sup>13</sup>

A sense of anxiety resulting from an essential isolation may then be much less pronounced in women. Not having been in command, women have had to see themselves as being in relationship. Through the very tasks on which they have expended their daily lives, women have often experienced greater intimacy with others. They have been less divorced than have men from the very material needs of children, or indeed of other adults for whom they care. The society of women has allowed for a greater inter-relatedness and sanctioned the expression of feelings. Relationships between women have been less hierarchical than in the male world of work. The characterization of sin within masculinist theology as consisting in the domination of others, on the part of an isolated self, in a mistaken attempt to gain security, would as a result seem

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<sup>12</sup>See my “Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique,” *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed. Richard Harries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 46-60.

<sup>13</sup>I cannot here discuss the feminist literature which has developed round these themes in recent years. Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1982), to which I allude, has been influential. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978) suggests that the more relational sense of women, and individuated sense of men, owes to the fact that in all societies women perform the task of mothering; thus the female child learns relationality, while the male child has to gain a sense of himself in opposition to the mother.

Furthermore, feminist women are unhappy about the disjunction, prevalent in masculinist thought, between “mind” and “body.” Of course it is the case that, since we have self-consciousness, humans are not like other creatures. Having only too often been classed with “nature,” while men were seen as more “spiritual,” women should be the last to deny this. But does it follow that we have a disjunction between “mind” and “body” such that we are in the schizophrenic situation of reconciling the fact that we are more than the brute creation with the knowledge that we shall die? Can we not be creatures? Indeed the obsession which masculinist thought manifests with the possibility of preserving an individuated self even after death may well be thought to be an extreme instance of the male’s inability to see himself as bound up with the whole. Again it must for feminists be highly questionable that we should think of ourselves as “not at home” in the world. The feminist ethicist Eleanor Haney conceives that just the opposite should be the case. She writes of the ideal of “being at-home-in-the-universe and of living freely—graciously, gracefully.” “Grace” connotes for her “the reality of being a host as well as a guest, a resident as well as a stranger and pilgrim.”<sup>15</sup>

Feminism, in both theory and praxis, has been concerned for women to come into their own. Only too often have women been unable to sufficiently value themselves. The reality of women’s lives has been that they had to circle round other people. What plans they might have had gave way to what others determined should be, resulting in a sense of powerlessness, of lacking control even of their own lives. Meaning had to be found through the lives of others. Typically the problems which women have manifested have been those resulting from a lack of a sense of self-worth, leading to depression, anorexia, or suicidal tendencies. The feminist response of recent years has been consciousness-raising groups in which women have been enabled to find voice, therapy which has allowed a feminist analysis of the situation in which a woman is placed, and assertiveness training in which women have learned to hold their own. In a word, feminism has stood for empowerment.

### III. LUTHERANISM AND FEMINISM

In this situation to advocate that the self should be broken, that the person should learn to live from another who is God, as does the Lutheran tradition, must be judged highly detrimental. Women are not typically self-enclosed and in need of finding connectedness. Their problem has rather been a lack of centeredness in self; their need, to come to themselves. The whole dynamic of being a self is very different from what Lutheranism has proposed. Thus its prescription must appear irrelevant, indeed counter-productive.

Furthermore, it may well be thought to be the case that women naturally have a strong sense of continuity and growth. They wish to see their lives as an unfolding pattern. More women than men—and I count this statistic

<sup>14</sup>There has been considerable feminist writing on this theme. For bibliography, see my “Reinhold Niebuhr,” 59 (n. 1).

<sup>15</sup>Eleanor Haney, “What Is Feminist Ethics?,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8 (1980) 115-124. Quotation, p. 123.

favorable to women—seek to understand themselves in therapy. Women are more thoughtfully introspective. Their conversations revert to the personal, or weave that dimension into a greater

whole. They are interested in human lives, whether in their own person or the lives of others. Typically women have written letters, biographies, and novels. Often they have tended life. They have raised children and nursed the sick. (It is women who grow potted plants!) Women, in sum, are concerned for growth and becoming within a continuity of caring relationship.

To one who thinks in these terms again the Lutheran system must be judged negatively. For it must be profoundly jarring to hear that she is only herself as she bases herself on one who lies outside herself; that she must constantly live from some future not yet given, or from another's sense of her—even though that other be God; that, indeed, a growth from within oneself and a concern with continuity of self is in essence "sin." There is some evidence that (to use the terms popularized by William James) women's religion is of the "once-born" type, a religion in which life is seen to come forth from life. Men by contrast tend to find natural a religion which speaks of a discontinuity—a discontinuity which may reflect the break which the male experiences when he leaves behind the world of mother and sisters to join male society. Masculinist religions—Christianity here is no exception—may typically be religions of death and re-birth, crucifixion and resurrection, a breaking and reconstructing of the self.<sup>16</sup>

To advocate—within a feminist context—that persons should come into their own is not once more to understand the self as the atomic entity of which feminists are so critical. For women conceive selfhood to be achieved in and through relationship. One may say that there needs to be a creative tension between autonomy (which has in the past been denied to women) and relationality. Nor are these two mutually exclusive. It has been the experience of many within the women's movement that one can come to clearer self-understanding and greater self-assurance when held within relationship. conversely it may be said that it is the person who has come to herself who can truly be in relation. Such a person neither dominates others, nor attempts to lose herself in them. The love of others promotes a rightful love of self, while a secure self is self-forgetful in delight in others. Thus it is within the interplay of relationship and individuality that we become ourselves. Within such a context "salvation" may well be understood as becoming whole.

Women must will that men too should come to such a sense of the self in relation. This is not of course to say that the male analysis which is central to Lutheran theology is false! That men tend to have an isolated self and that, in its insecurity, the isolated self exploits others is not a dynamic the truth of which women are likely to contend! Could men however but learn both to come "to" themselves and to develop a relationality with others, a violent breaking of an egocentric self would be unnecessary. At present the lack of a perspicacious knowledge of self and an inability to relate in personal ways (particularly with other men but also with women) seem to many women to be only too characteristic of the male world. What women must long for is that men should come

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<sup>16</sup>See Sheila Collins' discussion of this theme in *A Different Heaven and Earth* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1974) 202-205.

to be centered, yet relational, selves.

Has God then become superfluous? Should it be said that we acquire relationality in relation to other persons? The great advantage of this would seem to be that one can speak of growth from a centered self, rather than of having to break the self and be based on another (who

is God). Feminists may well be more optimistic about our being able to learn relationality in relation to others than Lutheran thought has allowed. And they may, out of women's past experience, both negative and positive, wish to put more stress on developing a centeredness and a continuity of self. (It could further be asked whether the acceptance which Luther believed God gives us, and which he found so life-transforming, cannot be given by others. Indeed, it could be asked whether we should demand complete acceptance, or whether it is not important to learn also to stand on one's own in the face of a less than total acceptance. Luther's system, if it suggests that we can have no sense of our own integrity, could be said to work against becoming a centered self.)

The direction in which feminism pushes us here would seem to be in accord with much else. In a world in which it becomes increasingly apparent (as modern physics suggests) that all is interconnected, it is difficult to think in terms of a God who is separate from the world and humankind. Indeed feminists may well contend that the postulation of God, conceived as exterior, other, and in opposition to the self, is a striking instance of male thought-forms.<sup>17</sup> How, moreover, should we think of such a God "intervening" in the world when we know history and nature to be closed causal nexuses? Last but not least it may be asked whether it is moral to think in terms of such a God. Since the Enlightenment that has become increasingly doubtful. 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. (Indeed one may note that much manifestation of human religiousness in recent years has started with the human person, as people—since the sixties in particular—have developed techniques of meditation and contemplation and have cultivated an intrinsic human spirituality.)

It becomes all the more 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. In that respect his thought surely needs to be taken up. Protestantism, in at least one of its strands, has indeed done this. I am thinking in particular of the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (who in fact saw himself as taking the Reformation to its logical conclusion). Schleiermacher was not a Lutheran, and the Lutheran dichotomy is not present in his work. But he does have the sense, perhaps much more than Luther, that God is that on which I base myself (my sense of being derived, he named it) and not one with whom I inter-act as with an other. Thus for Schleiermacher the relation with God and the relation with the neighbor are quite distinct. God is one through whom I become myself, my neighbor one with whom I inter-relate in a relationship of reciprocity.

Thus the response to be made to one inclined to say that relationality can be developed in relationship to other persons must surely be that, though up

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<sup>17</sup>See my discussion in *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, forthcoming 1989), chapter V.

to a point this may be true, when one speaks of God one is conceiving of what is far more fundamental to being oneself than the relationship with another person (who must always in some sense remain an other) could ever be. Feminism may well be a context within which such understandings may be developed further, for feminists have thought much both about connectedness and about what it means to come into one's own. (I believe therefore that the direction which much Christian feminism has taken in recent years in speaking of God as



“mother,” “friend,” or “lover” is beside the point, for so conceived God remains one with whom I inter-relate as with an other, and this may not be the function which God, but rather other people should perform.)

#### IV. FEMINIST AND RELIGIOUS?

What women may find unacceptable about the Lutheran system is the sense that one must be continually breaking oneself and basing oneself on one who is not oneself. (Yet this is integral to that system in that it has posited God as exterior to the self.) Rather should one speak of continuity and growth from within oneself. This alone I think to be commensurate with feminism. One may in passing ask whether Catholicism would here be more acceptable. In one sense, yes. For Catholicism sees God as working with an already given self, rather than as enabling us to have a new sense of ourselves. But God is still in large part postulated as an exterior other. Meanwhile, Catholicism lacks (other than through a doctrine of creation and preservation which is not at all the same thing) a sense that God is fundamental to the self's being itself in each moment.

If then we feel constrained as religious persons to speak of God, I think that we must conceive God to have an essential connectedness with all else that is. God then cannot become an other, one whose will to act in accord with would be to act heteronomously. Nor shall we have to base ourselves on another in order to be based on God. The starting point for knowledge of God becomes knowledge of ourselves. But this is not Christianity. For Christians of all varieties, insofar as they look to the Bible, see God to be in apposition to us. God is conceived to have existed before creation and to intervene in the world. Indeed, essential to the knowledge of God is revelation. Even Schleiermacher, who comes the closest to what I would want to say, having spoken of religious experience must also—for he wishes to remain Christian—speak of revelation. For myself I would wish to have an explicitly theistic sense, developed through prayer, while seeing God as not disconnected from myself and the web of human relationships.

It will be clear then that there is nothing intrinsically incompatible between being a feminist and conceiving of oneself as a religious person. Indeed feminism may well allow us to develop our conceptualization of God in helpful ways. There is however, I believe, an incompatibility between being feminist and Christian. (This quite apart from the question of the truth of Christianity.) This clash is structural and relates to the nature of feminist and of Christian thought. It is extraordinarily important that feminists should think out these basic structural issues. Only so will their theology be commensurate with their ideals and their structuring of reality.