

BOOK REVIEWS

Trinitarian Grace in Martin Luther's The Bondage of the Will by Miikka Ruokanen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), xiii + 222 pp.

A most vexing text of Martin Luther is his polemic against Erasmus of Rotterdam concerning human bondage. Whenever I taught it, however, I would at some point instruct bewildered students to open to any random page and circle occurrences of "the Holy Spirit." Invariably the word count was revealing. With this insight, I segued into discussion of the fallacy of equivocation which haunts understanding of "*the bondage of the will*" as Luther's Latin has been mistranslated into English (with Robert Kolb, it should translate as "*captive choice*"). I would accordingly show the students several distinct usages in the text: freedom of desire (*voluntas*) according to which one does willingly whatever one does; freedom of choice (*arbitrium*) between varying paths to the same satisfaction of desire; and freedom of action (*vis*) according to which one has the power to enact a choice freely willed. All three senses of "will" are present in Luther's text, although Luther's penchant for rhetorical overkill readily obscures these logically crucial distinctions.

In author Miikka Ruokanen's words: "According to Luther, humans never had the capacity of absolutely free choice: in the state of integrity, the human being's *arbitrium* was a 'servant' of God, but after the fall it became the 'slave' of sin. For Luther, then, in relation to 'things above oneself' the true freedom of humanity equals humble and obedient servanthood under the creator and loving the creator above everything else, whereas after the fall, seduced by Satan to a fallacy of absolute freedom as independence from the creator, humanity fell under the imprisonment of sin and evil" (35 cf. 89).

For Luther, it is an analytical truth: one wills what one desires. In this sense free will is not at whim free to desire just anything but is rather bound to what one in fact willingly desires. This sense of *voluntas* is crucial for Luther's theological anthropology for which the *fides ex corde* which justifies *must* be freely and joyfully willed, never coerced. Conversely, love for God, in which the creature's rectification consists, is not within its own power. Justifying faith is thus a sovereign work and gift of the Spirit who sheds the love of God abroad in human hearts. Moreover, after exile from Paradise the original human choice to freely will the will of God and do it in filial fear, love and trust has been lost; all choices are henceforth captive to the diminished alternatives attending the state of exile, also the highest religious and moral choices therein. Finally, even if hypothetically one could willingly will the will of God, the power to do so is lacking because that power is the departed Spirit of God.

Ruokanen's study is long overdue. It should serve to reorient radically the reception of Luther's most "apocalyptic" and at the same time most "systematic" theological work. It is long overdue because the framework of thought inherited from the High Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant has biased conceptualization of the Luther text in favor of Erasmus's case for human freedom of choice and a corresponding calculus of merit in relation to the divine. Within this Kantian framework, Luther's indisputably Augustinian doctrines of the captivation of desire by contra-divine powers fatally compromising postlapsarian human choice have become all but invisible to modern scholarly interpretation. And with this invisibility Luther's vigorous contention for the person and work of the Holy Spirit as the saving power of God to will the will of God and do it has also disappeared—*not* excepting, as Ruokanen pointedly argues, from twentieth-century kerygmatic theologies.

Luther's robust account of the Holy Spirit in this text becomes intelligible, however, in the alternative framework of a Trinitarian theology according to which the Word alone is never alone but always accompanied by the animating Spirit and vice versa. The incisive critique of modern German Luther scholarship which Ruokanen executes along these lines, however, is accompanied by an equally probing revision of the Finnish Luther scholarship (in which school he stands) for the misleading deployment of metaphysical concepts like "ontic-real" to articulate the saving presence and efficacy of the Spirit-anointed Incarnate Word.

"Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* has very often been treated as a book concerned mainly with the classical problems of the freedom of the will and the question of divine predestination" (12). Indeed, this was already how Ulrich Zwingli's treatise on divine providence cast the matter and in the process castigated Luther's critical distinction in the argument of his treatise against Erasmus—so Ruokanen—between the "things above us" and the "things below us." For Luther the human powers at issue refer strictly to the human relationship to God where the "necessity of immutability," i.e., God's unchanging fidelity to his creative and redemptive purpose, prevails. In turn, Luther affirms human powers in relation to creation where mutability, i.e. contingency, is admitted. Zwingli, whose treatise originated in sermons delivered to Philip of Hesse following the Luther-Erasmus exchange, found Luther's distinction metaphysically untenable, since the entire nexus of secondary causes necessarily enacts the immutable purpose of the sole omnipotent causality, the sovereign God. Unlike Luther, Zwingli drew positively and affirmatively the dire doctrine of double predestination from such metaphysical theopanism.

But in fact Luther's concern in the treatise is not metaphysics but apocalyptic theology. "The transcendence of human existence, a person's relation to God's Spirit or to the opposing spiritual power—understood in terms of realistic biblical language—has a decisive role" (12). What hermeneutical difference does this claim make? "Here the German existentialist interpretations of Luther echo the rationalism of Erasmus Not recognizing the compelling captivity of the human *arbitrium* by a superhuman power drops the question of conversion and of the reception of grace onto the level of theological anthropology. This is what happened to Erasmus, and this is what happens in the modern liberal interpretation of Luther. For Erasmus, the drama of sin and salvation takes place in the sphere of human life, in anthropological reality, whereas for Luther, this is a drama of the transcendental powers which are beyond human comprehension and intervention" (59).

The richness of Ruokanen's work and the persuasiveness of his exposition can hardly be done justice in the space of this review. Suffice it to mention implications extending beyond the field of Luther research that are important for contemporary systematic theology.

Ruokanen rightly sees with Robert Kolb that the dilemma of "God's responsibility for evil" is the root problem in the debate between Erasmus and Luther. "Following the commonplace teachings of the *via moderna*," Erasmus defended a "minimal freedom of the human decision in matters of salvation with the intention of establishing an image of a 'just God'" (190). Luther's hyperbolic counter-attack on the moralistic and rationalistic theodicy of the so-called free will defense of God's permission of evil readily gives rise to the impression that he teaches in counterpoint a *Deus exlex*. Drawing that conclusion (which would put Luther into the camp of his opponent Zwingli), however, misses the point to which Luther is arguing. That point is what I have (elsewhere in a critical discussion of Leibniz) called the "theodicy of faith" in sharp distinction from any self-bootstrapping philosophical theodicy constructing a deity who plays fair by human rules. "According to Luther, the human beings must be content with the fact that the final solution to the problem of God's justice is an eschatological one" (79). By contrast with the free will defense of God's permission of evil, "Luther follows Augustine who openly admits that there is no solution to the very origin of evil will" (79), although there is indeed an illuminating account of the serpent's murderous lie in the *sicut Deus eritis*. Understood along the lines of Erasmus, then, indeed "the classical problem of theodicy finds no solution in Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*" (79). But what Luther does affirm in the dramatic conclusion of his treatise is that to believe God when he appears to be unrighteous is the essence of faith. With the prophet Habakkuk, as taken up by the apostle Paul, this is Luther's theodicy of faith which justifies God in his judgment by trusting in his righteousness concealed under the opposite, yet fully to be revealed.

This eschatological theodicy, moreover, sheds light on the apparently dualistic teaching of the *Deus absconditus* in Luther's treatise which greatly troubled Karl Barth and his American disciple Robert Jenson. Rhetorically, the most extreme statement in Luther's text "sets against each other *Deus revelatus*, Jesus lamenting over the hardness of his people, and *Deus absconditus*, his Father not granting them conversion by the power of the Spirit" (123). But Luther's doctrine is not, as they feared, the affirmation of a whimsical and unprincipled deity whose might makes right. Ruokanen's analysis of the problem indicates that, allowing for rhetorical excesses, recognition of the hidden God is in fact practice of the fear of the revealed God balancing for the interim the filial love and trust elicited by the light of grace, cognizant that the light of glory has not yet dawned and that the apocalyptic battle between God and Satan still rages. The necessarily accompanying perception of God still hidden along with his gracious self-revelation rightly evokes the fear of God as a check against human-all-too-human cheapening of grace into a human religious triumph already possessed in the mere idea of it. So Dietrich Bonhoeffer complained.

The concept of the hidden God articulates theologically the requirement to fear God (120), i.e., "only to fear and adore" (121). Corresponding to this fear of God is the salutary despair of self, therefore, lest the Spirit's assurance of saving faith become new grounds for human boasting. This fear of God comes by "facing even the horrible possibility that he/she is left outside God's saving grace and shall face

eternal separation from God's goodness ..." Yet, so Ruokanen argues, none but the one grasped by the Spirit worries about this! In other words, "the life that thinks about damnation is *already* the object of salvation" (129). "Any person who has become totally 'desperate about him/herself' is, paradoxically, already in the state of grace" (128). Thus, the hidden God "is a way of speaking about the sovereign divine mercy and about the human being's assurance of salvation *which is not within his/her own control*. Paradoxically, both of the concepts of God, the revealed and the hidden God, serve the same end of the assurance of salvation" (130, emphasis added), i.e., as salvation which is *ours ever as gift and never as a merited possession* under our command and control.

What, then, is the genuine alternative to the fear and adoration of the hidden God arising with trust in and love for the revealed God? For Luther it would be blasphemy or atheism. That would be falling back into an apprehension of God solely in the light of (fallen) nature. That the revealed God retains an aura of mystery beyond human fathoming blocks excessive theological conceptualization; with Andrea Vestrucci, Ruokanen maintains that there remains "a gap between divine revelation and inferred concepts." There is no rule for God's predestination enacted in history because there is no formal distinction between election and rejection which are simply our subjective takes on the revelatory fact of God's love as pure immutable grace (119). Thus, God's hidden will "cannot be scrutinized, it can only be respected and worshiped in humility" (120). Optimistic attempts to close the gap between God hidden and revealed inevitably crash against the hard rock of divine transcendence which Luther's distinction protects. "Erasmus requires transparent and fair rules in God's dealing with humanity; Luther denies all that. Here human logic does not avail and there is no eternal law above God's will ruling his decisions. This is exactly what makes him God and not just projection of the human imagination" (123). What remains is Spirit-given trust in God's revealed will in Christ to redeem and fulfill the creation.

The *locus classicus* in Scripture debated between Luther and Erasmus is the motif of the hardening of the heart of the wicked slavemaster, the Pharaoh of Egypt. "In those to whom God grants his Spirit a conversion takes place; those who lack the Spirit become irritated and angry at God ... permitting his ungodly corrupt nature under the rule of Satan to catch fire, flare up, range, and run riot with a kind of contemptuous self-confidence" (77). Scripture gives no explanation of this withholding of the Spirit, but Luther acknowledges that "in his foreknowledge and omnipotence, God may use the immutable bad will for his good purposes. This kind of instrumental use of evil is part of God's providential care of his creation" (77). Human sympathy for the hapless slavemaster condemned to self-destruction should not, for Luther, deflect attention from the Lord who in fidelity to his own sovereign creative and redemptive purpose takes sides with Pharaoh's victims and acts in history to bring about the end of his slaveholding by driving his evil to the extremity of self-destruction.

"Luther's concept of the necessity of immutability does not include a doctrine of predestination of individuals, not to speak of a concept of double predestination. He avoids using the term ... Luther connects the idea predestination ... with his defense of the sovereignty of God's grace in his eternal plan of salvation ..." (82). By way of conclusion, then, it is striking to observe how in his wartime radio broadcasts to the Resistance within Nazi Germany, Paul Tillich employed exactly this biblical argument, namely, that the Lord of the Exodus was now driving the Nazi regime to catastrophic self-destruction from which ruins alone could a new birth of freedom

come about. Just as striking is Martin Luther King Jr.'s question whether the rich young ruler who went away sad in encounter with Jesus stands for the contemporary West now in trial and under testing. In an epoch in which theological sentimentalism blindly accommodating structures of malice and injustice prevails, Ruokanen's path-breaking exposition of a classic text of Reformation theology merits wide reading and discussion.

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This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World by Norman Wirzba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), xxi + 263 pp.

It has been over fifty years since Lynn White Jr. published his famously polemical and highly influential essay "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis." At the heart of his argument was the then-novel assertion: "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion." At an historical moment when thinking about ecology was largely driven by science and technology, his call to reimagine our philosophy or theology of nature was deeply challenging—not only because of its suggestion that science alone would be unable to guide us out of our current environmental impasse, but also because of the charge laid against Christianity as being one the primary sources of our anthropocentric, dualistic and ultimately destructive thinking about nature. Many Christian thinkers objected to White's sweeping characterization of Christianity as almost utterly devoid of any sympathetic feeling toward nature; indeed, more than a few works of ecotheology in recent years have been written precisely as efforts to offer rejoinders to or corrections of White's thesis. Still, the force of his work endures, and its continuing value to us, I would suggest, has less to do with his precise characterization of Christianity than with his call to think more deeply about the root of our troubles. Until we "think about fundamentals," White said, we will not adequately address our environmental crisis.

I found myself considering this dimension of White's argument while reading Norman Wirzba's fine, creative and challenging work of ecotheology *This Sacred Life*. He is not responding directly to White's work; indeed, to my knowledge, he never mentions him. Still, Wirzba is in his own way taking up White's important challenge to rethink "fundamentals." Fifty years on, the task is different and more complex, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation having grown much more acute than anything White could have envisioned in 1967. So too have world-wide efforts to respond to this crisis—in political, economic and cultural terms—become more pronounced and sophisticated. And our thinking about the role of religion in responding to