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On the “Sacrifice of Conscience”

PAUL R. HINLICKY

I RECEIVED THIS ASSIGNMENT IN the Spring from Tim Furry at the same time Sarah Hinlicky Wilson (full disclosure: my daughter) was commissioned by the journal *Pro Ecclesia* to write a response for a forthcoming symposium on Ephraim Radner’s *Brutal Unity*. So she and I discussed the book together as we read it, coming to parallel appreciations and concerns. I was so taken by at least one way of reading the book (about to be put on display) that I chose to lift it up in my forthcoming systematic theology, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Eerdmans, 2014) as an alternative to the ecclesiological proposal that I make there. Maybe “alternative” is the wrong word; I don’t mean I am opposed to Radner’s ecclesiology so much as I offer a different proposal about what to do about the mess Christianity is as Radner diagnoses it. That difference in stratagem may indicate a difference in ecclesiology, but it would be a subtle one. In any case, I find myself both intrigued and perplexed by Radner’s advocacy of a “sacrifice of conscience” as the way to Christian unity. I will come to this perplexity in due course. But I think it well to begin by sketching my understanding of his intriguing proposal, developing in this way a basis for the questions I want to pose in the end.

I can begin pertinently enough with a word of appreciation for Radner’s skewering of the cliché that “Luther especially inaugurated a modern turn to individual conscience over and against communal authority.”³⁷ In Luther’s case, he writes, “conscience is bound to God’s own commands as given in Scripture. . . . Like any human

37. Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 324.

ruler, the conscience can err and is rightly set aside when it does . . . instruction is necessary . . . as a reasoning faculty, an instructed conscience, to be sure, can read the Scriptures correctly, and, when joined thereby to consciences of others, agreement can be reached among disputing Christians.”³⁸ Such interpretation of *Christian conscience as captive to the Word of God*, then, provides one justification that Radner gives for a “sacrifice of conscience” in the sense of a “certain abandonment, so that local loyalties, quite explicitly, and even convictions to forms of life, are necessarily exchanged for the sake of being able to place oneself literally ‘next to’ the ‘other’ in the solidarity of Christian love.”³⁹ “Conscience, understood as the consciousness that forms a value-laden world, is thus not only penultimate and provisional; it is dispensable and must be for the sake of God’s own movement” in Christ, who first became a neighbor to us, “next to” us in the divine movement of love incarnate for sinners.⁴⁰ So it is Christ who first sacrificed his conscience to befriend “real, not fictitious sinners,” as Luther would have put it, the Holy One who was made to be sin, as said the apostle Paul. In Radner’s words, “Jesus leaves behind his conscience as he moves towards those who would take it from him.”⁴¹

Transitioning to our present Euro-American situation of the divided, if no longer warring churches under the hegemony of liberal democratic regimes that arose historically to put a stop to the warring religions, we find Radner’s profoundly contrite Christian affirmation of “standard forms and themes of procedural regulation and fallibilist consensualism” as necessary to halt the killing, though not themselves sufficient to exorcize the “political devil, who always finds a new way to corrupt the freedoms and self-protecting procedures of his liberal worldlings.”⁴² I take that acknowledgment to mean that political liberalism is to be received today by the divided churches as judgment on the brutal politics of Christian disunity.⁴³ From this judgment, Radner further derives the church’s obligation to take responsibility within liberalism for the health of this political culture.⁴⁴ In these matters, if I correctly understand Radner, we are in considerable agreement.

38. Ibid., 325.

39. Thus when ecclesial unity is “rendered atemporal, undeveloping, bound the unchangeable selves of this or that commitment, it is only division that can be described historically, given contours and detail, and so granted an engaging personality. Discord, in such a view, can be judged (usually in the other); the Church itself, never.” Ibid., 396.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 351.

42. Ibid., 441.

43. Ibid., 462.

44. Ibid. I have come to the same conclusion in “Luther and Liberalism,” in *A Report from the Front Lines: Conversations on Public Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert Benne*, ed. Michael Shahan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 89–104.

Our agreement boils down to this: *the church qua church is sinful*.⁴⁵ That is not *all* the church is, but it is *one pole* of a dialectical truth to which I shall shortly attend. Yet it is the *pertinent* truth in any contemporary effort to diagnose Christian disunity in such fashion that moves all of us past self-justifying polemical positions and forward toward the unity petitioned in John 17. Radner contends that all self-privileging illusions about the ontic holiness of “the” church (that is, of *our* church) must be rigorously exposed in order to see this reality of the *simul peccatrix*. “There is no looking to Christ apart from the sinful Church.”⁴⁶ Further in agreement: it is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church that is also sinful, the very same church that cannot fatally err, against which the gates of hell will not prevail, that can and must teach the conscience-binding truth regarding Christ, who first became a neighbor to us. As in Luther’s dictum that “the true people of God are they who continually bring to bear the judgment of the cross upon themselves,”⁴⁷ this being of sinners in Christ is, in Radner’s words, “continually penitent and hence truly ‘holy’ from a human perspective just because the truly ‘righteous’ are those who are humbly contrite.”⁴⁸

What is new and intriguing in Radner’s retrieval of this paradoxical or dialectic understanding of the church’s holiness as the presence of Christ making himself neighbor to sinners is that conscientious agreement on this thesis among disputing Christians today seems to preclude a standard way in the history of the church on how to respond to manifest sinfulness—namely, by separation from an identifiably false church. For Radner we cannot faithfully separate even from the separatists. It “is not possible to identify the one Church except as she is given over to those who would divide. *Simul iusta et peccatrix* properly describes the Church.”⁴⁹ We cannot separate ourselves from the sinful separatism that would seduce and, *de facto* has seduced, all divided Christians; even less can we dualize in principle the sign that is this assembly of sinners around Jesus and the thing signified, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, in order to carve out a counter-cultural colony of the truly regenerate, howsoever we parse that allegedly authentic community. But the church “is born in time” and “exists in time” and exists precisely there as an “evangelical antinomy, the juxtaposition of contraries in the assertion of which lies the disclosure of God’s redemptive power.”⁵⁰ The Spirit unifies the sign and the thing signified as somehow in, with and under the dark, brutal, opaque covering of sinfulness that is given as the community of sinners and tax-collectors united to Jesus.

45. Radner, *A Brutal Unity*, 146–54.

46. Ibid., 153.

47. Martin Luther, *Luther: Lecture on Romans*, trans. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961).

48. Radner, *A Brutal Unity*, 154.

49. Ibid., 154.

50. Ibid., 157.

If this is the truth about the being of the church in time, however, we must find a new way of accessing this powerful and redemptive unification by way of “evangelical antimony” that does not perpetuate the sickness of divided Christendom. “For if the Church is not to be simply the replication of the sins of the past, [i.e.,] a porous community ‘bound to violence’ . . . normative and directive claims need to be given.”⁵¹ Critical dogmatic claims, thus, come forward proffering new solutions to this—truth be told, desperate—need within the broken communities of the divided churches under the humiliating hegemony of liberalism. It is a salutary humiliation, let us recall, since “modern political efforts have rightly come to see as necessary means of ordering and perhaps controlling religious self-deception.”⁵² Yet at just this juncture when a call for critical dogmatics seems implied, Radner, in a bold and unsettling stroke, invokes Hobbes over Kant: it is not critical “truth discovery,” that is, “enlightenment,” that is needed but the political “peacekeeping” that liberalism serves and puts into effect with its social contract. “And I would suggest that Hobbes’ view is the more accurate one, in terms of both anthropological foundation and, when rightly oriented, Christian vocation and meaning. . . . From the start what is required will have been some form of ordering, deferral, and perhaps sacrifice of conscientious aspects of our minds and hearts.”⁵³

So we come to the intriguing idea of a sacrifice of conscience and to the disturbing thought that it may be read, in one interpretation, as theological Hobbseanism. Radner in fact exposes a classical aporia of liberalism. Think of Henry David Thoreau’s retort to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had exclaimed, “Why are you *in there*?” to the jailed Thoreau after Thoreau had conscientiously refused to pay the war tax in support of Polk’s Mexican adventure; to which Thoreau replied, “Why are you *out there*?” That is my illustration, not Radner’s, of the aporia of private conscience against the rule of lawful procedure under liberalism. Radner writes,

the notion that only a ‘collective’ procedure can uphold cohesion and peace, but only ‘conscience’ itself—individual if need be—can maintain the moral accountability for collectivities and individuals alike, presents a classic conflict in decision making and a formidable challenge to the very notion of moral agreement in the standard understanding of the term. . . . What is involved in these kinds of conflicts is not *simply*, nor can it ever be, an encounter between ‘group’ and ‘individual,’ institutional demand and personal conscience, tradition and truth.

In other words, what divides Thoreau and Emerson is not Thoreau’s stand of conscience over against Emerson’s conformism, but Emerson’s conscientious

51. Ibid., 165.

52. Ibid., 165.

53. Ibid., 361.

commitment to lawful democratic procedure and Thoreau’s democratic commitment to regard Mexicans as bearers of rights. Both stands are conscientious. In this light, a “moral agreement,” Radner argues, is a matter of “deliberated subtraction, conscience retired from a host of often cacophonous conscientious demands working at once in collective and individual together. In Christian and Christian ecclesial terms, there is no agreement without sacrifice of conscience.”⁵⁴

If I have succeeded in describing Radner’s notion of the sacrifice of conscience in the foregoing, we have now come to the point upon which the first of my perplexities arise. Presumably a “moral agreement” as achieved precisely by “deliberated subtraction, conscience retired” is not least a *conscientious* consensus. I have alluded several times to the christological reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan because the parable serves Radner’s exposition of the mimetic ethos of sacrifice that he finds given to Christians in Christ. It is not the reciprocity of just relations that we find exemplified in the Good Samaritan: “For in Jesus’ story we find nothing of reciprocity, only of a giving, indeed one across the boundaries of enmity, and one finally that demands no future even of the relationship beyond the moment of that giving. . . . It is only in accepting the basic asymmetry of relationship in solidarity that the underlying dynamic of conscience’s renunciation [i.e., of Samaritan group loyalty]—rather than its other-demanding maintenance—can be seen as life-giving.”⁵⁵ Surely Radner has the parable right; but just as surely, he is speaking not of a sacrifice of conscience in general but a sacrifice of conscience bound to goods other than the Christ, whose particular goodness is a holiness that befriends the sinner as the Samaritan befriended the wounded Jew on the road. The “sacrifice of conscience,” then, is a conscientious sacrifice of idolatrous loves and partial loyalties and an equally conscientious sacrifice of one’s body, as per Romans 12:1–2, to the service of that particular Lord who first became a neighbor to us.

If this christological warrant of the sacrifice of conscience holds and so clarifies the content of Radner’s claim, it nevertheless leads to a second perplexity. For the kind of theological consensus to which Radner summons in recognition of the Christ who first became a neighbor to us sinners, is, as such, a “normative and directive claim;” it “needs to be given,” as we heard, if “the Church is not to be simply the replication of the sins of the past, [i.e.,] a porous community ‘bound to violence.’” I

54. Ibid., 315.

55. Ibid., 412–13. The passage continues, “So, Christianity solidarity is closer to Levinas’ fundamental ethic for the Other than to any reciprocal engagement. This was part of Levinas’ argument with Buber. The encounter with and ‘call’ of the ‘Other’ upon the self is primordial and constitutive of consciousness itself—this is Levinas’ basis for claiming the priority of ‘ethics’ over ‘ontology.’ And as constitutive of consciousness, the Other’s demand upon my own response—responsibility—for it is ‘prior’ to everything else, even to some kind of ‘self-consciousness’ that would demand from me structures of self-distinction in knowledge and understanding. . . . [Citing Levinas:] ‘at the outset, I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business; for me, he is above all the one I am responsible for.’”

heartily agree. What is needed is a renewal of dogmatics. Why else would we theologians write books? But I note we do not therewith step out of the critical arena of disputable claims to truth and somehow acquire a perspective transcendent to the fray by the mere fact of offering normative and directive claims. Rather, from within the divided churches we are, without illusions about our own sinlessness, making a claim about the truth of the gospel within the fractious reality of those who self-identify as Christians under the assumption that this truth ought both to clear the air and to bind the consciences of these disputing Christians on the basis of that Word of God that first tells of Christ who became a neighbor to sinners, one and all of us.

Thus I have made a point along the way to highlight Radner's ecclesiological proximity to Luther—a controversial name that surely betrays the fact that normative and directive claims that would fashion a moral consensus among disputing Christians may as readily divide as unite. In my own view, which I can hardly report without dismay, the retrieval of such normative and directive claims about Christ, as Radner has actually sketched, would work a division of the existing divisions rather than a visible unification of the divided churches.

In one admirable summation, Radner writes as though the sacrifice of conscience he commends is to be understood as a progressive growing into Christ.

Christian conscience is unceasingly relearned as the Christian him- or herself is restlessly reordered in and for the sake of "life together" . . . a reordering that brackets aspects of its apparent claims, dismisses others, and rearranges the rest. Let us call this process of learning the act of the conscience sacrificing itself in the ineluctable engagement of life with others. That at least captures some of the combination of intentionality and self-abandonment that a Christian will face in recognizing the limits of any stable consensus and the demand to go beyond it as means of apprehending the truth "with others."

As this is the specifically Christian baptismal ethos of the Spirit's refashioning of the existing self on the basis of specifically evangelical knowledge of the Christ who was "crucified for our sins but raised for our justification," Radner comments sharply but aptly in passing that "it has been a source and result of sin that Christian conscience has been thought of in any other terms."⁵⁶

My agreement, then, with the manifest thrust of this account notwithstanding, is my perplexity here purely a matter of semantics? For we have just spoken of "Christian conscience" that may not without sin be understood otherwise than as a conscience bound to Christ who became a neighbor to sinners so that Christ-befriended sinners might befriend one another. My perplexity about this increases when I read that "this is a process, defined in terms of a love that subordinates knowledge to its own out-working (1 Cor. 13:8-13)." The apostle in 1 Corinthians, of course, is speaking about

56. Ibid., 379.

an alleged gnosis that leaves the less spiritual behind, not the knowledge of Christ crucified, the sole foundation of the new communities' life together, as 1 Corinthians 2:2 makes clear. Sensing this, Radner immediately qualifies the claim of subordination. "If this is so, however, it is only so because the Christian self is not a self apart from such self-giving, and such self-giving manifests the character of the relationship that sustains Christian self-hood."⁵⁷ Granted. But that indicates that this self-giving, this offering of the self, as he continues, "is given only in the complete possession by Christ of the self. . . . The material and formal meet here, for it is Christ's own abandonment to the will of the Father, in the Spirit, that is taken hold of or takes hold of the self in this sanctifying life. Our selves become like and one with his self, a oneness that finds its substantive unity in the giving away of self to God with Christ."⁵⁸ If the material and the formal meet here, the sacrifice of conscience is in fact a conscientious surrender. While Radner can say "love subordinates knowledge," what can he mean other than that the knowledge of the love of Christ, the crucified friend of sinners, subordinates any other alleged claims to knowledge of God's truth?

So in the context of a deep appreciation I have elaborated two questions. First, putting aside the highly useful rhetorical provocation in speaking of a "sacrifice of conscience," might it be said the actual point is brought out by affirming that refusals of Radner's Christian claim to truth can be conscientious, and that surrender to Radner's Christian claim to truth, as exclusive as the First Commandment, is a conscientious subordination of all other loyalties to Christ in the soteriological sense of the christological reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan? Second, is not the soteriological sense of the christological reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan a disputable doctrinal claim that exposes conscientious divisions in the theologies of sinfully divided churches?

57. Ibid., 394.

58. Ibid., 417.