



Research Article

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God Does Not Work in Us Without Us: On the Understanding of Divine–Human Cooperation in the Thought of Martin Luther

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Abstract: Roman-Catholic scholars tend to interpret Luther’s emphasis on the exteriority of salvation as a critique of the goodness of creation. Through an analysis of *De servo arbitrio*, this article shows this to be wrong. While emphasizing the unconditionality of God’s work in both creation and salvation, Luther still insists that humans are created in God’s image as his co-operators, thus repeating the divine lordship over creation. This is further emphasized in other works that go beyond *De servo arbitrio* in finding Christology to be a key to the relationship between God and humans. Luther thus has an integrated understanding of all aspects of human life as the area of divine creation and should not be seen as a forerunner of a modern, secularized worldview. This role rather belongs to Erasmus, who insists that God stands idly by while humans make up their minds about how to live their lives.

Keywords: Lutheran Reformation, Roman Catholicism, theology of creation, secularization

1 Introduction

In 2001, Margaret Daphne Hampson published a book, *Christian Contradictions*, where she documents and deplores the inability among Roman-Catholic scholars to understand Martin Luther and the Lutheran Reformation. In her view, this inability is related to the Lutheran emphasis on extrinsic or alien righteousness, which differs from the Roman-Catholic insistence on understanding salvation as a process of renewing the original human position of being created in the likeness of God. According to the accepted Roman-Catholic view, the Lutheran emphasis on the exteriority of salvation implies a rejection of the goodness of creation and of the human ability to cooperate with God. This emphasis may to some extent be excusable as a reaction against the one-sidedness of late medieval semi-Pelagianism.¹ A certain respect for Luther is therefore now acceptable even within a Roman-Catholic context.² Still, his emphasis on human sinfulness implies a deplorable rejection of the analogy between God and creation which, according to many of his critics, led to Luther, against his intentions, becoming an agent of secularisation.³

¹ According to Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 102, it is not difficult for Roman-Catholics to agree “that certain trends in the late Middle Ages were an unfortunate aberration.”

² See, e.g., *From Conflict to Communion*.

³ Important representatives of this view in addition to those discussed by Hampson are Alasdair MacIntyre and John Milbank. See MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 121–4; and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 64–6 (originally published 1981); Milbank, “Reformation 500.”

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In *Christian Contradictions*, Hampson points to ideas in the works of Søren Kierkegaard as a possible bridge between the two traditions. Useful as Kierkegaard may be in this context, I think that is to go one step too far. In my view, what Roman-Catholics find lacking in Luther's theology is there and has been there all the time; it is only a question of knowing where to look. Arguing from the two basic narratives of the Bible, the story of creation and the story of Christ, one has to present salvation as a renewal of the original human position as being created in the likeness of God.⁴ This is something the mature Luther understood very well – it is a cornerstone in his theological thinking at least from 1519.⁵

To defend this statement is the main goal of this article, and my main source will be the book Luther himself considered his most profound theological and metaphysical inquiry, *De servo arbitrio*, written in 1525,⁶ and the understanding of divine–human cooperation that is found in this book.⁷ To set things in context, however, I will start by presenting what provoked Luther into writing *De servo arbitrio*, which was the alternative understanding of the relationship between God and the human found in Erasmus of Rotterdam's book *Diatribes de libero arbitrio*, published in 1524.⁸

2 The Relation between God and the Human According to Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio*

Erasmus considers the question *de libero arbitrio* (concerning free choice)⁹ as one of the most complicated problems in biblical interpretation (Ia1). The reason is that the human ability to order one's behaviour by means of an informed and conscious choice touches upon questions concerning the contingency of divine foreknowledge, whether our will contributes to our salvation or we are only acted upon by grace,¹⁰ or whether everything happens by necessity or not (Ia8). These questions are in Erasmus's view rather left unsolved; they belong to the innermost sanctuaries into which God does not want us to penetrate (Ia7). The reason is that the exploration of these issues side-tracks us from what Erasmus considers the essence of the *via pietatis*, which is to strive for improvement while trusting divine mercy, knowing that no injustice can be caused by God who is by nature just.¹¹ But even without solving these problems, Erasmus considers it essential to think that free choice has at least some power (Ia5).¹²

Erasmus does not go into any details why he finds this to be the only acceptable solution. But it seems to be related to Erasmus's finding the implications of not holding this position to be unacceptable. If it is said that God causes both good and evil in us, this will according to Erasmus short-circuit the striving for improvement and lead to nothing but godlessness, as nobody can love a God who throws people into hell as punishment for

⁴ According to "Lutheran thought, the stance occupied by the one who knows himself justified by faith is essentially a reinstatement of the prelapsarian creation"; so Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 113.

⁵ In the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), Luther is very critical of all attempts at exploring the God–human relationship positively. This changed with *Operationes in Psalmos* and the works from 1520. Refer to Alfvåg, "Natural Theology." For a critique of the idea of Luther as a forerunner of disenchantment, but here directed mainly against Charles Taylor and Max Weber, see Thiemann, "Sacramental Realism."

⁶ Luther, *Werke* (WA), vol. 18, 600–788. For an English translation, see Luther, *Works*, vol. 33. On Luther's own evaluation of this work, see WA Briefe 8, 99, 7–8; LW 50, 172–3. For an updated overview of the scholarly discussion of *De servo arbitrio*, see Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 13–21.

⁷ Plathow, "Das Cooperatio-Verständnis M. Luthers;" Herms, "Opus Dei Gratiae."

⁸ Erasmus, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 4, gives the Latin text with a German translation. Numbers and letters in parenthesis in the following refer to this edition. For an English translation, see Erasmus, *Collected Works*.

⁹ To keep as close as possible to the original texts, I have consistently translated *arbitrium* as "choice" and *voluntas* as "will." For a defence of this distinction, see Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 35–7.

¹⁰ "[...] utrum nostra voluntas aliquid agat in his, quae pertinent ad aeternam salutem, an tantum patiat ab agente gratia..."

¹¹ "[...] nec ulli posse fieri iniuriam a dea natura iusto [...]"

¹² "Arbitror esse aliquam liberi arbitrii vim."

the evil deeds he has caused (Ia10).¹³ The outcome of the final judgement must therefore somehow be related to the quality of the human contribution. If this *vis liberi arbitrii* is totally rejected, the *via pietatis* is undermined. We therefore have to accept an understanding of free choice as the power of the human will whereby a person may connect oneself to or turn away from what leads to eternal salvation.¹⁴

The inconsistency of this argument is fairly obvious and was certainly not lost on an astute reader like Luther. Erasmus maintains that he wants to leave the questions concerning divine foreknowledge and power of grace unsolved but does in fact insist on a quite ambitious solution. If the power of free and unrestricted choice is real also in questions that are related to the divine–human relationship, then divine foreknowledge is necessarily contingent, and salvation is necessarily conceived as the outcome of cooperation between divine grace and human choice. Trying to the best of his ability not to be seen as a follower of Pelagius, Erasmus accepts as *satis probabilis* the position of those who contribute *pene nihil* (almost nothing) to free choice (IIa12). But as Luther repeatedly makes Erasmus aware, the question of the amount of the power of free choice is uninteresting; the interesting question is whether it is a part of the process or not.¹⁵ And regarding that question, Erasmus does not leave anybody in the dark concerning his own position.

But the argument is not only inconsistent; it also fails to consider an essential part of the problem.¹⁶ The one question Erasmus does not investigate, neither in the introduction nor in any other part of *De libero arbitrio*, is the question of what kind of relationship God and human have. Essential in the Bible and through most of the history of Christian thinking is the understanding that God is the Creator and that humans are created. The relationship is thus asymmetrical from the outset; the human is dependent on God in a way that cannot be turned the other way around. Irrespective of what humans do or do not do, they act from within the God relationship (Acts 17:28). At the same time, the divine way of dealing with the world is set as the ideal for humans to follow (Matt 5:48). God is thus not only the origin of human existence, but there is also an analogy between them. The dialectics of this analogous, though radically asymmetrical, relationship is something Erasmus fails to consider. As he tells the story, the human connects with or turns away from what leads to salvation while God is standing idly by; God thus abdicates as Creator while the human makes up his or her mind.¹⁷ God and the human are competitors, and human freedom is therefore only conceivable as divine absence. They only cooperate in the sense that they contribute to different parts of the solution.¹⁸

There are two implications of this approach that are important for the present investigation. For one thing, the foundation of Erasmus's understanding of God remains unclear. God's existence and the necessity of coming to terms with God through a negotiated solution are taken for granted, but it is unclear which problem this is supposed to solve. Erasmus's *via pietatis* is essentially a vision of morally acceptable behaviour, but it is not clear what God's role is in establishing and realizing this goal. While still being mentioned as a source of mercy and justice, God has no role to play when humans are making up their minds about which course to follow in life. A God who does not make any difference is easily dispensed with. The real secularizing influence from this debate thus comes from Erasmus's short-circuiting the God relationship in his understanding of human liberty.¹⁹ This was well understood by Luther, who found the main problem with Erasmus's approach in his understanding of God.²⁰

¹³ This is a position Erasmus consistently maintained also in other works; see von-Wedel, *Erasmus*, 170–4.

¹⁴ “Porro liberum arbitrium hoc loco sentimus vim humanae voluntatis, qua se possit homo applicare ad ea, quae perducunt ad aeternam salutem, aub ab iisdem avertere” (Ib9). This is Erasmus's definition of free choice.

¹⁵ E.g., WA 18, 667, 15–668, 5 (LW 33, 112–113).

¹⁶ For Luther's critique of Erasmus's attempt at discussing a problem while neglecting its basic elements, see WA 18, 614, 27–615, 11 (LW 33, 36–7).

¹⁷ For Luther's critique of Erasmus's (and Aristotle's) idea of a powerless God, see WA 18, 706, 21–33; LW 33, 171–2.

¹⁸ According to von-Wedel, *Erasmus*, 177–8, Erasmus is here “on shaky ground,” following the “questionable and unconvincing” arguments of Jerome and Duns Scotus. Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 39, says it more bluntly: “Erasmus is a typical representative of the doctrine of grace of the Late Medieval Nominalism or *Via Moderna* which promotes the principle of *facere quod in se est*.”

¹⁹ On the secularizing influence of late medieval Nominalism in general, see Dupré, *Passage to Modernity*, 174–81. In his discussion of Erasmus (pp. 194–9), Dupré pays no attention to Erasmus's dependence on this tradition, but he is aware that “the Reformation constituted the most theologically articulate attempt to overcome” the dualism of modernity (p. 203).

²⁰ As will be shown below, it is essential for Luther that God cannot be dependent on anything that is not God. This is usually overlooked by those who try to find some kind of compromise between the two in an improved understanding of human will and responsibility. Two recent attempts are Visala and Vainio, “Erasmus versus Luther;” and Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, Chapter 9.

The other implication is that Erasmus, in overlooking the foundational character of the God relationship, clearly differs from post-Tridentine Roman-Catholicism.²¹ For all its failures in grasping the essence of the theology of the Reformers, its representatives still understand the significance of the relation to the Creator for the understanding of the created.²² Luther's critique of Erasmus should therefore not be seen as paradigmatic for the relation between Lutheranism and Roman-Catholicism; on the contrary, it rather anticipates the Roman-Catholic critique of secularized liberalism.

An interesting illustration of this second point is D.C. Schindler's book *Freedom from Reality* from 2017.²³ Schindler is as uninformed and prejudiced concerning Luther's thought as any of the authors considered by Margaret Hampson, thus confirming her main thesis on all accounts.²⁴ Still, large parts of his critique of the deficiency of the self-referential understanding of freedom found in modern, secularized understandings of human liberty, which for Schindler above all is prefigured in the work of John Locke, read as a reiteration of Luther's critique of Erasmus.²⁵ No wonder, as Luther's and Schindler's starting points are virtually identical: If not informed by a thick description of the goodness of the created and its divine origin, any understanding of human liberty will move in the direction of formal definitions void of any content.²⁶

Luther is clearly not satisfied with Erasmus's approach, and it is not difficult to see why. What, then, are the main emphases of his own approach?

3 Divine–Human Cooperation According to *De servo arbitrio*

Luther's main point of orientation is a strong theology of creation.²⁷ Not only is God the origin of all there is; his creative activity is at the core of all that happens. The expression from 1 Corinthians 12:6, "Deus operetur omnia in omnibus" (God works all in all), runs like a refrain through *De servo arbitrio*; it is quoted no less than seven times.²⁸ What humans experience when they open their senses and take in what happens in the world is therefore nothing but the activity of God.

As the eternal One, God does this in a way that is always unconditioned by the created.²⁹ Temporal change does not apply to God.³⁰ While this puts the divine essence beyond what can be grasped by human

²¹ Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 100, is therefore correct when she states that "the Catholic church itself came to feel uncomfortable with Erasmus' advocacy of the 'freedom' of the will."

²² According to Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 99, it is essential for Catholicism "that our relationship to God is founded on our likeness to God."

²³ Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*.

²⁴ He pays Luther a visit in Schindler, "The Crisis of Marriage as a Crisis of Meaning." The presentation is totally confused, using Luther's critique of monastic vows, which for Luther was a human invention, as a source for his understanding of marriage, which for Luther – as for Schindler – is instituted by God. He may have found such a view of Luther by reading Heinrich Denifle (Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 118); he has certainly not found it by reading Luther.

²⁵ According to Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, 6, Locke maintains that individuals "never consent to an authority greater than their own will." That is an almost exact parallel to Luther's main critique of Erasmus.

²⁶ As the main example of this approach, one usually refers to Kant; that is at least what is done in MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Schindler, too, maintains that there are important parallels between Locke and Kant. What is often overlooked is that the first main critic of Kant's approach is Johann Georg Hamann, who in this respect just repeats typically Lutheran insights; see Alfsvåg, *Christology as Critique*, 95–105.

²⁷ Schwanke, "Luther's Theology of Creation."

²⁸ WA 18, 614, 12; 685, 22; 709, 10; 718, 30; 732, 19 and 26; 753, 29; LW 33, 35.140.175.189.210 (twice). 242; Plathow, "Das Cooperatio-Verständnis M. Luthers," 30, calls it a "roter Faden." On the significance of the idea of divine omnipresence in Luther's thought, see further Beintker, "Luthers Gotteserfahrung und Gottesanschauung."

²⁹ Unconditionality as an important aspect of Luther's understanding of God is strongly emphasized in Vestrucci, *Theology as Freedom*.

³⁰ "Si volens praescit [Deus], aeterna est et immobilis (quia natura) voluntas, si praesciens vult, aeterna est et immobilis (quia natura) scientia" (WA 18, 615, 29–30; LW 33, 37). On the significance of this aspect of Luther's thought, see further Alfsvåg, "Impassibility and Revelation."

rationality,³¹ the principle itself is in Luther's understanding something that follows with logical necessity from the distinction between Creator and creation and is for that reason perfectly rational. It can therefore be grasped even by those who do not know the biblical revelation, and this is in Luther's view also the case.³²

This is the reason for Luther's insistence that everything happens by necessity "as far as the will of God is concerned."³³ The point Luther is trying to make is that God is not dependent on anything outside himself for his will to occur.³⁴ Luther may have been in doubt whether the idea of necessity is the ideal one in this context;³⁵ he might have been better off by staying with the idea of divine unconditionality.³⁶ But there is no doubt this was absolutely essential in his understanding of God.

As far as I can see, Luther is emphasizing two points here. First of all, he is convinced that an understanding of a God as conditioned by elements in the created world literally does not make sense. If even God suffers change, there is nothing beyond the flux of change. Then, everything is arbitrary, and truth does not exist. The idea of divine foreknowledge contingent upon the decisions of humans is therefore incoherent. Philosophically, this insistence on the unconditionality of the origin both of the intelligible and of the sensible is based on an ultimately Platonic intuition of the necessity of transcendence as the only possible warrant against the world disappearing in the quagmire of arbitrariness.³⁷ If what is experienced by humans has a given structure, then the source of this structure cannot itself be a part of it. In actualizing this perspective, Luther is but a link in a chain that goes all the way from Plato to MacIntyre and Schindler.³⁸ From a theological perspective, the notion of divine unconditionality is founded on the biblical emphasis on God's eternity and unchangeability (Ps 90:2; Jam 1:17).

The other point Luther is making is that he connects divine infallibility to the trustworthiness of divine promises. As proclaimed by the New Testament authors, these promises are quite strong; they contain, among other things, a promise of eternal salvation.³⁹ If not backed by the trustworthiness of divine infallibility, they are necessarily reduced to a pious hope with no assurance of ever being fulfilled. For Luther, this is totally unacceptable. Statements backed by divine infallibility are as infallible as their source. They therefore generate absolute and unshakable trust, which Luther calls *assertio*. He does not let his readers remain in doubt about its significance but declares: "If you take away the assertions, you have taken away Christianity."⁴⁰

However, this is not interpreted by Luther as determinism in the sense that the acts of humans are predetermined in detail.⁴¹ If this were the case, divine decisions would merely be repeated in the area of

31 Cf. Luther's critique of Erasmus's inability to distinguish between the incomprehensibility of God, which for Luther is absolutely essential, and the incomprehensibility of the Scripture, which for Luther is sheer nonsense (WA 18, 607, 18–20; LW 33, 27).

32 In the philosophical theses of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther referred to Anaxagoras and Plato as having a much better understanding of the infinite and unlimited than Aristotle (WA 59, 424–6). In *De servo arbitrio*, he refers to what Vergil says about *fatum* (WA 18, 617, 23–618, 15; LW 33, 41), the conclusion being the following: "in vulgo non minus relictam esse scientiam praedestinationis et praescientiae Dei quam ipsam notitiam divinitatis."

33 "Omnia quae facimus, omnia quae fiunt, etsi nobis videntur mutabiliter et contingenter fieri, revera tamen fiunt necessario et immutabiliter, si Dei voluntatem spectes" (WA 18, 616, 31–3; LW 33, 37–8).

34 So Vestrucci, *Theology as Freedom*, 222–4. According to Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 123, "this is exactly what makes him God and not just a projection of the human imagination."

35 This is suggested by a passage, which WA 18 adds in a footnote on p. 616 and LW in brackets on p. 39, and which appeared for the first time in an edition of *De servo arbitrio* after Luther was dead. Whether he was its author, is unknown. For a discussion of the meaning and provenience of this passage, see Kolb, *Bound Choice*, 26–8.

36 For an updated summary of the extensive discussion of Luther's understanding of necessity, see Landrum, *Martin Luther's Hidden God*, 42–57.

37 Cf. the chapter on Plato in Gerson, *Ancient Epistemology*. Plato does not link this to a theology of creation, but this link is firmly in place in the works of the church fathers; see Alfsvåg, *What no Mind has Conceived*, 33–50.

38 Cf. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, Chapter 7: "Plato: The Golden Thread of Freedom."

39 WA 18,663,19; LW 33,105.

40 "Tolle assertiones, et Christianismum tulisti" (WA 18, 603, 28; LW 33, 21). On the significance of "die assertorische Behauptungssätze des Gottesglaubens," see further Lønning, "Gott," 702.

41 Cf. Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 100: "It is far from the case that Luther thinks that the human lacks free will in the sense that a determinist might hold. As he well says, the kingdom of heaven was not made for geese!" The geese-quotation is taken from WA 18, 636, 21; LW 33, 67.

the created through a kind of copy-and-paste mechanism, and the distinction between Creator and creation would be lost. The idea Luther employs to avoid this misunderstanding is the idea of divine–human cooperation. In applying this idea, he explicitly rejects Erasmus’s model, according to which what God does is added to what humans do to the effect that they together complete the work.⁴² This destroys the asymmetry of the relation, as I already have shown.⁴³ According to Luther, God does everything, but he does this in such a way that the human still has a complete task to fulfil. God is fully responsible for the preservation of the ship, and the sailor is fully responsible for guiding it.⁴⁴ The human thus has relative independence within the area of the created despite God’s foreknowledge not being contingent upon the contribution of the human. The human is involved as a self-determining entity; God does not work in us without us.⁴⁵

Luther applies this model in two different contexts, between which he finds an exact parallel.⁴⁶ Humans can do nothing to be created or to maintain their status of being created; both happen only through the power and goodness of the omnipotence of God, who creates and conserves us without us being in any way involved in this process.⁴⁷ In a strictly parallel way, humans are recreated in the kingdom of the Spirit, and once recreated, they are kept within this kingdom without any contribution from their part; this is solely the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ For Luther, any concession in the direction of an Erasmian, semi-Pelagian understanding of cooperation destroys the principle of divine unconditionality. Both creation and recreation are, however, done for the purpose of humans cooperating with God either in the world through God’s general omnipotence or in his kingdom through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹ God wants to have us as co-operators who openly proclaim what he whispers in our hearts.⁵⁰

Humans thus repeat within the realm of the created what God does as the Lord of the created.⁵¹ Humans are created to be lords themselves; they are created in the image of God and have for that reason a certain independence within the realm God has given them to lord over.⁵² When this plays out as intended, humans do what is good,⁵³ the goodness God made manifest when he let the created world come into being is then repeated within the realm of the created by humans created in God’s own image. Human goodness is a reality, and it is patterned after the model of God’s own manifestation of his goodness in creation and recreation.⁵⁴ God is under no

⁴² This implies an understanding of God and humans as copies of each other; so Herms, “Opus Dei Gratiae,” 103.

⁴³ When this asymmetry is not taken sufficiently seriously, the understanding of the God/human–relationship is reduced to the task of finding the “appropriate balance” between anti-Pelagianism and the principle of human responsibility; so Visala and Vainio, “Erasmus versus Luther,” 333. One then still works within the Erasmian $x + y = 1$ model, which Luther rejects.

⁴⁴ WA 18, 753, 13–8; LW 33, 241.

⁴⁵ “Non operatur in nobis sine nobis” (WA 18, 754, 5; LW 33, 243).

⁴⁶ So also Plathow, “Das Cooperatio-Verständnis M. Luthers,” 35; and Schwanke, “Luther’s Theology of Creation,” 210.

⁴⁷ “Utrunque fit sola voluntate omnipotentis virtutis et bonitatis Dei nos sine nobis creantis et conservantis” (WA 18, 754, 3–5; LW 33, 242–3). This is obviously true; nobody exists because they have chosen to come into existence.

⁴⁸ “Homo antequam renovetur in novam creaturam regni spiritus, nihil facit, nihil conatur, quo pareatur ad eam renovationem et regnum; Deinde recreatus, nihil facit nihil conatur, quo perseveret in eo regno, Sed utrunque facit solus spiritus in nobis, nos sine nobis recreans et conservans recreatos” (WA 18, 754, 8–12; LW 33, 243). The significance of this passage, according to which “the theology of creation, the work of the first person of the Trinity, is analogically and intrinsically united with the soteriological work of the third person,” is strongly emphasized in Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 112–3.

⁴⁹ “[...] ut in nobis operaretur et nos ei cooperaremur, sive hoc fiat extra regnum suum generali omnipotentia, sive intra regnum suum singulari virtute spiritus sui” (WA 18, 754, 5–7; LW 33, 243). In the latter case free choice is replaced “with the reality of the Holy Spirit”; so Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 45.

⁵⁰ “ut nos habeat suos cooperatores, dum foris sonamus, quod intus ipse solus spirat” (WA 18, 695, 29–30; LW 33, 155). Cf. Käfer, *Inkarnation und Schöpfung*, 80: “Die Hoffnung auf die Vollendung des Schöpfungsprozesses treibe den Glaubenden zur Mitwirkung an der Realisation des Reiches Gottes.”

⁵¹ As emphasized by Schwanke, “Luther’s Theology of Creation,” 209, divine–human cooperation is established by God giving “human beings a share in the divine attributes.”

⁵² Luther’s main reference is here the story of creation in Gen 1; see WA 18, 671, 33–672, 6; LW 33, 118. To see in this a return to secularized, Erasmian nominalism as is done in Berthoud, “Luther and Erasmus,” is to overlook the entire point of Luther’s argument.

⁵³ WA 18, 754, 33; LW 33, 244.

⁵⁴ This is paralleled by the critique of Locke’s rejection of the givenness of goodness in Schindler, *Freedom from Reality*, chapter 1: “Locke’s (Re-)Conception of Freedom.”

external obligation to do what is good; his loving goodness flows from his nature. In the same way, the repetition of divine goodness in humans can never be forced, and Luther therefore reacts strongly against any idea that would take us in that direction. The kind of necessity he is exploring is what he calls a necessity of immutability,⁵⁵ and this is what occurs when humans cannot but let the divinely induced attitude resonate in their lives.⁵⁶

The distinction employed by Scholastic theology to align the unconditionality of divine action with the relative independence of the human subject is the distinction between *necessitas consequentiae* (logical necessity) and *necessitas consequentis* (factual necessity), where the latter is supposed to give some latitude for the human capacity for self-determination.⁵⁷ Luther is aware both of the distinction and recognizes the significance of the problem it is supposed to solve, but he still considers it confusing and misleading.⁵⁸ The reason is that this distinction takes us in the wrong direction, involving us in complicated and unhelpful discussions. What keeps theology on track here is in Luther's view the conviction that what God wants always happens combined with trust that through the work of the Spirit, this overflowing goodness of divine presence is made manifest in the lives of the believers. An analysis that tries to divide responsibility between God and humans, or between primary and secondary causes, is therefore misguided, and – whether he is correct or not – it is Luther's conviction that this is what Scholasticism does.⁵⁹ What he aims at emphasizing is that God does everything, and when the human is successfully aligned with God's active goodness through the work of the Spirit, the human spontaneously and unforced manifests the same goodness.⁶⁰

There is thus not a single step in the direction of a separated, disenchanted, and purely secular understanding of the world in Luther's thought; on the contrary, he is at pains to reject Erasmus's anthropocentric and secularized understanding of goodness by replacing it by a firmly theocentric one. Humans are created for the purpose of realizing divine-human cooperation and will only realize the idea of what it is to be human by emulating God's way of dealing with the world from within the realm of the created.⁶¹

For Luther, this approach to the quest for God is the only one that is rationally consistent. The alternative, a God that is conditioned by the created or, which for Luther basically is the same thing, no God at all, is for Luther a man-made, and for that reason an arbitrary and incoherent, replacement. It is equal to creating one's own God in the image of the human. Luther's approach implies that the human experience of oneself as a (within limits) self-determining entity is rooted in the reality of humans being created in the likeness of God; it is an experience of what really is the case.

This leaves us with several unsolved questions: Why is this person recreated and not that person? Why does not God's loving omnipotence overcome all opposition? How can divine foreknowledge be infallible when humans have a relative liberty to make their own choices? These questions do not worry Luther. The problem is partly solved by referring to the difference between God and humans (Why should humans aspire to know everything about God?),⁶² partly by the distinction between the lights of nature, grace, and glory. The light of grace solves questions unsolvable by reason alone. In a similar way, the light of glory will also expand our knowledge, though the difference between God and creation will for ever remain in place.⁶³

The one event that opens our eyes to the light of grace is the resurrection of Christ.⁶⁴ It is thus, even for Luther, in the person of Christ we have the main example of divine-human cooperation. Important as this is in

⁵⁵ WA 18, 634, 21–5; LW 33, 64. On Luther's use of this term, see Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 74–6.

⁵⁶ Cf. the metaphor of resonance in the quotation in note 50. As emphasized by Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 93, this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁷ McSorley, *Luthers Lehre vom unfreien Willen*, 146–50; Hütter, “St. Thomas on Grace and Free Will.”

⁵⁸ WA 18, 616, 13–617, 19; LW 33, 39–40; WA 18, 719, 4–722, 19; LW 33, 190–195.

⁵⁹ So also Plathow, “Das Cooperatio-Verständnis M. Luthers,” 36–7.

⁶⁰ On this topic, see further Alfvåg, “Luther on Necessity;” Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 73.

⁶¹ Hampson, *Christian Contradictions*, 107, is therefore wrong when she suggests that “the last thing he [Luther] could be said to be interested in is human deification!” As maintained by, e.g., Vainio, “Luther and Theosis,” that is exactly what interests him. For a critique of the Ebeling school (to which Hampson belongs) in this respect, see also Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 21–31. Cf. also note 74 below.

⁶² WA 18, 685; LW 33, 139–40.

⁶³ WA 18, 785, 12–38; LW 33, 292. On the three lights, see further Herms, “Opus Dei Gratiae,” 102–10.

⁶⁴ WA 18, 606, 25; LW 33, 26.

Luther's thinking, it is not unfolded in *De servo arbitrio*.⁶⁵ To fully grasp Luther's understanding of divine-human cooperation, we therefore have to go to some of his other writings.

4 Luther's Incarnational Worldview

The central doctrine of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the incarnation, according to which God lets himself be known by becoming a human (John 1:18). Human nature is thus qualified as the area for divine revelation in a way that allows for a more precise understanding of the relationship between God and human, and this possibility was not lost on Luther. According to the idea of *communicatio idiomatum*, the human nature of Christ participates in the predicates of the divine and *vice versa*.⁶⁶ This adds a new layer of credibility to the rejection of determinism; as the area of divine revelation, human nature participates in divine freedom and goodness. At the same time, this sets the life of Christ as the ideal for humans to emulate; as he loved his neighbours with divine love and infinite forgiveness, so should we (John 13:34; Matt 6:14).

What Luther wrote after 1519/20 is informed by this christologically founded worldview. Two good examples are *De libertate Christiana* from 1520 and *Refutation of Latomus*, usually called Anti-Latomus, from 1521. According to *De libertate*, a Christian is both a free lord over all things and a most dutiful servant of all.⁶⁷ As united with Christ, one is united with his victory over sin and death, but at the same time also with his loving service for all humans. Through the happy exchange,⁶⁸ one receives one's identity from God and expresses it in the way one relates to others.⁶⁹ Luther finds this well expressed in Philippians 2. According to this passage, Christ did not need to do anything to be saved for his own part, but instead of demanding what was his right, he became one of us and served us as if this was something he needed. In this way, Christ achieves two things at the same time: He serves us by letting us receive what he has won for us as our servant, and in his loving service for others, he sets the model for us to emulate. As Christ served others in his incarnated manifestation, a Christian should be satisfied with the form of God he has obtained by faith while still increasing this faith until it is perfect⁷⁰ by taking upon himself the form of a servant. This is for Luther the fulfilment of the exhortation "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5).⁷¹

In Anti-Latomus, this is expressed through the distinction between Christ as grace and gift.⁷² The unconditionality of recreation is expressed through the understanding of Christ as pure grace; at the same time, however, one receives Christ as a gift who is united with the believer, who for that reason cannot fail to produce divine goodness in his or her life. Luther can here even use two nature Christology as a model for how grace is present in sinful humans, thus speaking of "impeccified grace" and "graced sin"⁷³ as a description of the "deified human."⁷⁴ In the Preface to Romans, written about the same time as Anti-Latomus, the gift-aspect

⁶⁵ According to Ruokanen, *Trinitarian Grace*, 43, *De servo arbitrio* differs from many of Luther's other writings by emphasizing Pneumatology over Christology.

⁶⁶ On the significance of this Christological model for Luther's soteriology and anthropology, see Steiger, "Die Communicatio Idiomatum als Achse und Motor der Theologie Luthers;" cf. the English translation. Steiger, "The Communicatio Idiomatum as the Axle and Motor of Luther's Theology."

⁶⁷ WA 7, 49, 22–5; LW 31, 344.

⁶⁸ The metaphor of the happy exchange is what structures *De libertate*, but according to Wendte, "Mystical Foundations of Politics? Luther on God's Presence and the Place of Human Beings," it was important also for Luther's later writings.

⁶⁹ For a rejection of the critique that this leads Luther into an anticipation of the modern contractual character of social processes, see Malysz, "Exchange and Ecstasy."

⁷⁰ "[...] contentus esse debet hac forma dei per fidem obtenta, nisi quod (ut dixi) ipsam hanc fidem augere debet, donec perficiatur" (WA 7, 65, 27–8).

⁷¹ WA 7, 65, 10–35; LW 31, 366.

⁷² WA 8, 106–8; LW 32, 227–230. See Skottene, *Grace and Gift*.

⁷³ "[...] possis imaginari gratiam seu donum dei esse impeccatificatum et peccatum gratificatum" (WA 8, 126, 30; the English translation in LW 32, 257 misses the point).

⁷⁴ WA 8, 126, 28.

is expressed through Luther's confidence that faith as God's work in us cannot but incessantly do what is good.⁷⁵

The application of Christology to the understanding of the human lets Luther identify the lack of the second aspect, the part of sanctification, as a kind of Nestorianism; it is an understanding of the human life that fails to apply the Chalcedonian doctrine of the inseparability of the divine and human nature of Christ correctly on the life of the Christian.⁷⁶ It is for Luther impossible to stay with a gospel of forgiveness alone; when receiving forgiveness, one is recreated into participation in Christ and thus placed in the world with the task of serving it with the gift of divine love.

This service even has a structure, which is explored by Luther precisely in a Christological context. In 1528, Luther wrote *Vom Abendmahl Christi*, where he rejects Zwingli's and Oecolampadius's spiritual understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper because of its Nestorian implications. Divine presence is not a spatially limited presence; it is God acting in creation.⁷⁷ To the refutation of the two, he adds a part where he explains his understanding of the Christian faith as faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the part concerning the confession of the faith in the Son, Luther gives the following interesting actualization: He rejects the doctrine of free will and the doctrine of old and new Pelagians who reject the doctrine of original sin. At the same time, he rejects those who have established vows and obligations like monastic orders and rules, which are human inventions with no biblical foundation;⁷⁸ they may still be kept, though, for the sake of educating the youth in the word of God. But the divinely instituted orders are only three: the office of the priesthood, marriage, and secular government. The first of these has to do with the task of preaching, administering the sacraments, supervising the common chest, etc. The second one is the task of maintaining one's house and bringing up children.⁷⁹ The third one is defined as the obligation of obedience toward one's superiors. These three tasks are founded on the word of God and are for that reason holy; they are "places in which God integrates human beings into God's own story with humankind."⁸⁰

Scholasticism often explored anthropology according to the Aristotelian doctrine of the four causes. Thereby, the understanding of the final cause becomes particularly important, as it sets the goal human flourishing is supposed to fulfil.⁸¹ Luther repeatedly uses the four causes-doctrine in a similar way, but he is sceptical towards a purely rational approach to this problem.⁸² The appropriate understanding of human existence must be based on the biblical uncovering of the all-determining power of divine presence,⁸³ and this is what in Luther's view is done through the doctrine of the three orders or estates. In all of these, one is to serve with love, and the one who does so, with or without faith, is holy. But faith in Christ is the only way to be saved. Holiness is understood as works of love within the divinely instituted orders that follow from faith but can also to some extent be realized without faith.⁸⁴ God works in everybody irrespective of their attitude towards him.

The first two of these offices are taken straight from the story of the creation in Genesis 1 and 2. The office of the priesthood is prefigured in God declaring that the fruits of all trees in the garden are for the humans to eat as a sign that humans are made for an immortal and spiritual life.⁸⁵ The office of marriage reflects the will of God as expressed through the creation of humans as man and woman, thereby enabling them to

⁷⁵ WADB (Deutsche Bibel) 7, 10, 7–11; LW 35, 370.

⁷⁶ WA 50, 599; LW 41, 113–4 (*Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*, 1539).

⁷⁷ This is emphasized in Wendte, "Mystical Foundations of Politics," 429.

⁷⁸ Refer note 24.

⁷⁹ On the significance of marriage within Luther's understanding of creation, see further Schwanke, "Luther's Theology of Creation," 203.

⁸⁰ Wendte, "Mystical Foundations of Politics," 423. On this central aspect of Luther's thought, see further Bayer, *Luther's Theology*, Chapter 6: "The Order of the World: Church, Household, State."

⁸¹ Pleines, "Teleologie."

⁸² See, e.g. *De homine* (1536), theses 12–5 (WA 30¹, 175, 11–5; LW 34, 138) and the discussion in Ebeling, *Lutherstudien II*.

⁸³ Ebeling, *Lutherstudien II*, chapter VIII: Der Aufweis der Unkenntnis vom Menschen am Leitfaden der vier causae.

⁸⁴ WA 26, 503–5; LW 37, 362–5. On the significance of this passage, see further Holm, "Det Legemlige Promissio," 30–2; on the significance of this topic in general, see Herman, "Embodying Confident Agency."

⁸⁵ "[...] conditus ad immortalem et spiritualem vitam" (WA 42, 79; LW 1, 103–4, Lectures on Genesis, 1535).

procreate.⁸⁶ Priesthood and marriage thus give structure to the idea of humans as God's co-operators participating in divine realities; they are to act as God did in creation. Differing from these, secular government is necessitated by the fall and for that reason does not reflect God's goodness as clearly and directly as the other two.⁸⁷ What is to be avoided in this context is primarily secular government yielding to the temptation to stray into the spiritual, thus confusing both the goals and the means of the temporal and the spiritual.⁸⁸

What Luther never does is to separate the secular and the spiritual in the sense that the latter does not inform the understanding of the former. Luther's worldview is both theological and teleological in the sense that the life of humans is prefigured by God's loving activity in creation and recreation as incarnated in the life and work of Jesus Christ. In Luther, there is no concession to the modern understanding of human liberty as the power to do what one wants to do as maintained by Erasmus and Locke.⁸⁹

5 Conclusions

There is a certain emphasis on the exteriority of salvation in Luther. This is related to his strong emphasis both on divine omnipotence and on divine unconditionality. There is no distance between thought and action in God; what God knows is – or, from the point of view of temporal beings, will become – real. An entity dependent on the immanent web of causality is for Luther a part of creation, not a Creator. There is thus a strict difference between the Creator and the created in Luther's thought.

God's creative activity is what determines even what humans do. There is thus no anticipation in Luther of a modern and secular worldview where God does not have any role to play. This unconditionality of God's creative activity is what sets the pattern for how humans should understand themselves. As caught up in divine unconditionality humans are called to emulate this unconditionality in their own lives. As loved by God, humans should love each other, inclusively and unconditionally. Luther's emphasis on divine unconditionality and his rejection of any concession to the idea of the contingency and conditionality of divine action is thus accompanied by a parallel emphasis on the importance of humans following the divine pattern in their own lives.

The implication of this simultaneous emphasis on divine unconditionality both as a reality and as the goal of the lives of humans lets Luther emphasize a relative independence of human agency within the realm of infallible divine omnipotence. This relative independence of human agency is an implication of the humans being created in the image of God. For that reason, it is a manifestation of the humans' inherent capacity for goodness; it can never be forced.⁹⁰

The outcome of this simultaneous emphasis on absolute divine freedom and relative human freedom is a strong emphasis on divine unknowability. How the infallibility of divine foreknowledge and the omnipotence of divine love can be compatible with the relative freedom of human choice and the danger of human perdition is unknowable even with the light of grace. What will be the case with the light of glory, time will show.

After the fall, human nature's potential for goodness is fully realized only in the person of Jesus Christ. It has always been the case that the realization of the truly human is conditioned upon its participation in the truly divine. The work of Christ through atonement and resurrection implies that this possibility has been re-established. The goal of his work of salvation is thus the restoration of divine–human cooperation as it existed before the fall. This sets the twin institutions of priesthood – the proclamation of divinely instituted

⁸⁶ Luther's main works on this topic are *Vom ehelichen Leben* (WA 10^{II}, 275–304; LW 45, 17–49) and *Von Ehesachen* (WA 30^{III}, 205–48; LW 46, 265–320).

⁸⁷ "Est enim Politia remedium necessarium naturae corrupta" (WA 42, 79, 8–9; LW 1, 104).

⁸⁸ This is a main topic of Luther's *Von weltlicher Oberkeytt* (On Temporal Authority, WA 11, 245–80; LW 45, 81–129).

⁸⁹ "Luther's great contribution to Christian ethics, therefore, is that he does not limit God's presence to a sacred realm, but sees God's presence in all of creation," so Schwanke, "Luther's Theology of Creation," 207.

⁹⁰ "God is a poet, not a dictator," so Schwanke, "Luther's Theology of Creation," 205.

unconditionality – and marriage, with its double emphasis on fecundity and intimacy, as the materialization of divine–human cooperation, with secular government added after the fall as a means of minimizing its effects. Living a loving life within the framework of these three estates, humans realize their inherent nature through their cooperation with their Creator.

There is thus no movement in the direction of a modern, secularized worldview in Luther's thought. On the contrary, his worldview is strictly theological and Christocentric. In a world where teleology has disappeared and human freedom has been reduced to a pointless ability to choose for no other purpose than the choice itself, the time is ripe for a renewal of this perspective. Scholars who agree with this analysis should see Luther as an ally, not an opponent.

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