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## SENSE AND NONSENSE ABOUT LUTHER

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Somehow it seems terribly difficult for us to arrive at a sensible and balanced view of our spiritual fathers. We alternate between worshipping them as heroes who can do no wrong and vindictively kicking them for an unreasonable number of sins when we discover that they were only human after all. Luther is a prime example. After lionizing him for centuries we now seem to be degenerating into a veritable "can-you-top-this" orgy of laying all sorts of ridiculous charges at his door.

No doubt it is a good thing that he be removed from the pedestal upon which he had been placed. But it is hardly in the service of good historical sense, to say nothing of justice, to make him responsible for all the ills of the post-Reformation era. One of the problems with pivotal figures like Luther is that more often than not they are celebrated for the wrong reasons. Also, such men seldom have the luxury of choosing their own followers. That being the case, it behooves the historian, I should think, to exercise some care in ascertaining just what, exactly, such men were trying to say. If they have been accepted for the wrong reasons by many of their followers, nothing at all is gained by rejecting them for equally distorted reasons.

The essay on *Luther, Descartes and Dehumanization* by Harold Bauman in the last issue of *Dialog* (Volume 9, Autumn 1970) is a good example of this kind of procedure. To be sure, Bauman quite rightly reminds us of much that came with the Reformation that can only be regretted and repented of. But in the process, he makes a number of assertions and intimations which are hardly supportable. The essay is so full of innuendo, specious reasoning and

academic prejudice that it is impossible to respond to every point. I shall try, therefore, only to select a few.

In the first place it seems to me highly misleading to state that Luther purchased the restoration of the God-man relationship at a "terrible price, the price of dualism." Dualism is, of course, one of those loaded words which can be used to cover a multitude of sins and is thrown about all too recklessly whenever one wants to discredit an opposing view with a minimum of effort. Luther's "dualism" according to Bauman, comes to light preeminently in his *Treatise on the Liberty of the Christian Man*. In this work, says Bauman, Luther "divided man's spiritual nature from his physical nature, calling the spiritual nature 'the inner man' and man's bodily nature the 'outer man.'" In Bauman's view, the point of all this is that it allows Luther to say that the inner man is free, subject to no one, while the outer man is in bondage to all. The upshot of this is that freedom is purely an internal matter while the outer man is delivered over to the state, paving the way for the abject subordination of man to the state characteristic of Lutheranism. This construction of the matter allows Bauman to revive the tired old argument that Luther is somehow responsible for the rise of Hitler and Nazism—one of the more ridiculous bits of modern historical *Konsequenz-macherei*.

To be sure, Bauman reproduces some of Luther's words. But, like most interpreters, he doesn't seem to get the essential point of the treatise. That is that it is precisely an attack on the kind of dualism which had prevailed in ecclesiastical circles prior to his time, the static, metaphysically fixed body-soul dualism of medieval realism. Luther's point is not to *fix* a dualism, but to join the battle so it can be overcome. He is not recognizing a *permanent* dichotomy between inner and outer man, nor is he carving up man and giving part to the state.

His position is that we *ought* to be entirely "inner" or "spiritual" or free men and that that is the goal toward which we must strive. What that means is that we ought to be the kind of people who freely and spontaneously give of ourselves in the service of others. It is only because we are *not yet* such people that we need to bring what Luther calls "the outer" or bodily man under control. But the sole purpose of such disciplining of the body is for the doing of good to others. That is what he means by saying that the Christian man, while inwardly free, must,

nevertheless, outwardly be the servant of all. The inner freedom must issue in outward acts of love to the neighbor. If that is dualism it could only be considered an eschatologically oriented one (quite unlike what Bauman seems to find there)—eschatological in the sense that *for the time being* the body needs disciplining until perfect freedom is realized.

What Bauman, like so many of Luther's would-be interpreters, fails to realize, it seems to me, is that Luther simply does not share the presuppositions of the medieval realist tradition (nor, for that matter, of the "chain of being" with which Bauman attempts to associate him) with its tendency to lapse into a static body-soul dualism. This is why, I suspect, Luther searches for other rather strange words like "inner" and "outer" rather than sticking to more traditional words. And the fact that he does not intend these words to be understood in terms of a metaphysical dualism is clearly and explicitly indicated by his identification of "inner" and "outer" with the "new man" and the "old man." In other words, he is not talking at all about a static part or dimension of man, but rather about the battle between the eschatological new man and the old man.

Through faith man is new, but since the old still persists, he must take steps to root it out through and for the service of others. Significantly, Bauman completely overlooks the eschatological language.

Luther sees one's duties as a citizen of the state in the same light. Although the Christian is free and subject to no one, he should, nevertheless, look upon the state as an instrument in this world through which to do good for others. In other words, self-love ought to be tempered by the needs of the community. It is difficult to see how there is, in principle, anything so diabolical about that. (Unless, of course, one is a dualist who believes that the state is inherently evil!)

This is hardly the place to argue the complex question of Luther's view of the state. No doubt there is much in it that is naive and dated. I think it could be maintained, however, that as much of the difficulty stems from a basic failure to grasp what he was talking about as it does from his own mistakes. At any rate, it is nonsense to say that Luther "granted the state unrestricted power over all subjects." He always recognized that no state has a right to demand what is contrary to God. Furthermore, the point of his construction, particularly in the

*Treatise on Christian Liberty*, is that service to the state is one of the things one does with his *freedom*, not in obedience to some absolute law. There simply are no such absolutes in Luther's thinking. Bauman rather perversely misleads by saying that according to Luther the "outer man" is "in bondage to all." What Luther says is that though free, man is the dutiful servant of all.

The difficulty most people seem to have is that they simply cannot grasp the dialectic of freedom and service that Luther is attempting to convey. Usually this dialectic is dissolved in one direction or another—as it is flagrantly in Bauman's case. But anyone who really understands what it means, Luther says, "could easily and without danger find his way through those numberless mandates and precepts of popes, bishops, monasteries, churches, *princes and magistrates* upon which some ignorant pastors insist as if they were necessary to righteousness and salvation, calling them 'precepts of the church,' although *they are nothing of the kind.*"

No doubt it is not as easy to find one's way through all the precepts and mandates as Luther seems to think. But his mistake, it seems to me, lies not in taking this line of thinking, but rather in not going far enough in spelling out clearly how this eschatological dialectic of freedom and service should lead to constant vigilance over against demonic perversions of political power.

A second issue which Bauman raises is that of the understanding of the demonic which was a part of the medieval view of reality. As Bauman points out, this bore terrible and tragic fruit in the witch-hunting of the post-Reformation era. No one would want to excuse that nor, for that matter, the measure in which Luther, as a man of the time, shared the blame for it. It is nonsense, however, to state that Luther's own work *depended* on this "view of reality." That is simply a gross misunderstanding of the way in which Luther's theology—and perhaps any theology—relates to a specific view of reality. Theology, including Luther's, *depends* only on the grace of God and his Kingdom, not on a view of reality, nor on any specific understanding of the demons. To be sure, theology always assumes that there are "enemies" to be overcome as long as the Kingdom has not arrived, and it usually refers to these enemies as "the demons" or "the demonic." But it is nonsense to say that theology, i.e., the message about the Kingdom, *depends* on these enemies.

I suppose one could say that if the demonic were completely extirpated then theology would have nothing to do. But for theology that could only mean that the Kingdom had, in fact, arrived and it would then gladly resign its task.

Likewise it is nonsense to say that if Luther had accepted the Copernican hypothesis (which was published, incidentally, by one of Luther's disciples!) he would have had the intellectual props pulled out from under his life's work. That is again a complete failure to understand what Luther's "intellectual props" were, or what kind of relationship obtained, for Luther, between theology and a scientific hypothesis.

For Luther, theology was concerned with the message about what was "above" man, i.e., a relationship to God utterly out of the reach of his rational (including his scientific) constructions. And since the question of what was "above" man had been taken care of by Christ, man's reason, for Luther, is set free to take care of what is "below," i.e., to strive for rational and pragmatic solutions to the problems of this earth. Bauman simply repeats stock textbook nonsense about Luther's attitude to reason. He seems completely oblivious to the fact that if anything, Luther is often criticized for being too pragmatic in his approach to the problems of this world. As a matter of fact, Luther has even been criticized (by William Temple) for doing the same sort of thing spiritually which Bauman's hero Descartes did intellectually! That, I think, is equally a distortion of Luther's view. But the fact is that Luther simply does not depend on the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic world view with its understanding of causality, its teleology, and its chain of being.

Bauman is, therefore, simply historically inaccurate and superficial when he throws everything that happened after the Reformation—witch burning, persecution of heretics, massacre of rebellious peasants and so on—into one pot and implies that this all was the result of some monolithic "view of reality" which the reformers perpetrated or against which they had nothing to say. That simply was not the case. Luther's main objection, for instance, to many of the movements of his own time, including the tragic affair of the peasants' revolt, was precisely that everyone wanted to turn what were essentially political and social concerns into religious crusades. He was arguing for a clarification of the human task.

It is, of course, true that the post-Reformation period was an exceedingly dark one in Europe. And it is also true that the modern

world owes a great deal to men like Descartes, Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, etc., who formulated a new view of reality. Thankfully, witch hunting is dead (except, perhaps among some historians!). It is doubtful, however, that these rather academic achievements actually contributed as much to the growth of tolerance and humanity as Bauman seems to think. He evidences a typical academic prejudice in thinking so. Having set the stage by trying to convince us that it was an old "view of reality" that was really the cause of all the difficulty, he can now introduce the white knights who championed a new "view of reality" as the heroes of the piece. But it takes a lot more than something so esoteric as a "view of reality" to effect the changes Bauman is talking about. After all, who upon being asked to give a reason for tolerance would say that it was Descartes who had made a distinction between extended and nonextended matter and thereby banished the demons?

Moreover, academic and philosophical world views are more often than not the product rather than the cause of great changes. As Hegel put it, the owl of Minerva takes flight only in the gathering dusk. Bauman conveniently overlooks the fact that there were many forces at work within other circles—including religious circles—eroding the bases of old prejudices. It is rather nonsensical to imply that the modern view of reality is the creation of a few scientists and philosophers—as nonsensical as it is to blame the reformers for the tragedies of the post-Reformation era.

Finally, as Bauman indicates at the end of his essay, and as we are increasingly aware today, the scientific view of reality has not brought us to the promised land. Apparently Descartes did not, after all, slay the demons. Perhaps the lesson to be learned from that is that it is a fatal mistake to assume that scientific enlightenment can rid society of the demonic.

The modern world seems to be more like that empty house in Luke 11 from which the demon had supposedly been banished. Finding it swept and clean and empty, the demon went and got seven of his friends and returned. And the last state was worse than the first—worse, no doubt, because it was assumed that the demons had left. And it may just be that the reformers, for all their shortcomings, still have something to say to us about that problem.

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