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TRANSPERSONAL AND PERSONAL IN LUTHER'S LIFE AND THEOLOGY

Aarne Siirala

The title for this paper indicates that we are going to reflect upon personal experiencing and knowing. Personal knowing is shaped by the uniqueness of the person; it is biographical and particular. It has to be communicated by sharing experiences. Personal learning and knowing searches for understanding, for meaning, through participation in life. It is a different way of learning and knowing than what is usually characterized as impersonal, objective knowledge. Objective knowledge claims universal validity and it is communicated through concepts common for all. It is generalizable and in principle verifiable by repeatable experiments. The search for objectivity leads to descriptions and explanations.

Luther claimed that experience alone makes a theologian, "sola experientia facit theologum." "A theologian is born by living, nay dying and being damned, not by thinking, reading, or speculating."¹ Anyone even slightly familiar with Luther's theology knows, however, that he did not always remain faithful to this view. He

1. WA 5, 163.

often claims verifiable objectivity and universal authority for his theological abstractions. In these reflections we will have reason to respond to those trends in Luther's theology and in our Lutheran heritage, which failed to express the personal and communal dynamics of faith. The focus of this presentation, however, is on Luther's search for personal, biographical knowing. In our preparations for celebrating the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth Erik Erikson's words in the epilogue to his study on Luther could give us a proper motto, "To relegate Luther to a shadowy greatness at the turbulent conclusion of the Age of Faith does not help us see what his life really stands for. To put it in his own words, 'I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me.' . . .

"Not to understand this message under the pretense of not wanting to make a great man too human—although he represented himself as human with relish and gusto—only means to protect ourselves from taking our chances with the *tentationes* of our day, as he did with his. Historical analysis should help us to study further our own immediate tasks, instead of hiding them in a leader's greatness."²

This kind of approach calls for the sharing of personal experiences. In attempting to do it I remind you and myself what Erikson said of the person he tried to understand, "Luther the public figure is not a very reliable reporter on Martin . . ."³ I am convinced, however, that even a limited sharing of experiences is better than articulating theology in impersonal terms.

One of the experiences which led me to study theology was the loss of my father's supportive presence in my early teens. So it was that in my search for transpersonal fatherhood I began to study theology. After having had a taste of Finnish Lutheran theology for two years I found myself a soldier in the war in which I was seriously wounded. That experience deeply shook my consciousness in general and my Lutheran theological thinking in particular. However, as a disabled war student I received a grant to study at the University of Lund in Sweden, where a Luther renaissance was emerging during this period in the 1930s and early 1940s with theologians like Gustaf Aulen, Anders Nygren and Ragnar Bring. In Lund I was inspired to begin an intensive study of Luther's theology.

During those doctoral studies I followed with respect Luther's own personal advice. He had once claimed that only two of his writings were worth preserving for posterity: *The Bondage of the Will* and *The Large Catechism*. I used these extensively, focusing on Luther's understanding of the first commandment. This study convinced me that Luther's deepest theological concern was to articulate the personalistic elements of Christian faith over against those tendencies in his theological tradition where the divine revelation was identified with objective, impersonal knowledge.

Since the first commandment is basically a promise—Luther claimed—that God and man are inseparable. In his table talks Luther articulates this powerfully, "Wo du mir Gott hinsetzest da mustu mir menschheit hin setzen, sie lassen sich nicht trennen—Where you present God to me, there you must also present mankind to me,

2. Erick Erikson, *Young Man Luther. A Study of Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1958), p. 251.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

for they are not to be separated or torn apart from each other."⁴ Despising one's own experience and being was, therefore, according to Luther, a violation of the first commandment, since man experiences in the depths of his own being the presence of the divine. The word of God never was a general, anonymous word to an anonymous being. It is always addressed to specific persons. In one of his sermons Luther expressed this colourfully, "But they begin to say, it may be so, but how do we know what is the word of God, what is right or wrong? That we must learn from the pope and the councils. Let them infer and say whatever they wish, but I say you cannot put your trust in it or quiet your conscience with it. It is your existence, your life, that is involved. God must therefore say to your heart, this is God's word, otherwise it remains undecided . . . They present the following assertion of Saint Augustine, 'I would not have believed the gospel did not the authority of the church compel me.' . . . But you must say, how does it concern me whether it was said by Augustine or Jerome, Saint Peter or Saint Paul, or even archangel Gabriel from heaven, which is much more? It does not help me, I must have God's word, I must know what God says to me."⁵ When Luther said in Worms "Here I Stand" he was not defending his subjective opinions over against those of his church and tradition. He was fighting for the personal character of Christian faith, for his right to unique personal experience over against claims that truth is possessed only by his church.

Luther challenged, as Nygren in his study *Agape and Eros* has demonstrated, the synthesis in his theological tradition between platonic-aristotelian philosophy and the Christian heritage.⁶ Luther characterized this approach as a theology of glory, *theologia gloriae*, because it claimed to view life from a divine perspective and to represent the true knowledge of reality. Luther claimed that such a kind of approach conceptualizes the divine as represented by the institutions of the State and the Church. They claimed to represent and embody the natural and supernatural laws of the universe. The divine is then described as being primarily present in that kind of transpersonal institution. People are then divided in categories of superior and inferior, of dispensers and receivers of truth and grace. The parental world is understood as having been vested with an unquestionable authority over against the world of children and youth. The institutions and authorities based on parenthood are considered as embodying the objective over against the subjective. What Luther experienced personally in this kind of constellation became for him a realm of arbitrary subjectivity.

In his encounter with Erasmus, Luther was struggling with an ideological block formed by the synthesis of objective knowledge to faith. The main thrust of Erasmus in his treatise *The Freedom of the Will* was to demonstrate that Luther was an arbitrary subjectivist. Erasmus pictured himself as a representative of a balanced, critical objectivity. Sometimes he called Luther a raving maniac and a drunkard, who was unable both intellectually and morally to subject himself to the authority either of reason or of faith. From Erasmus's perspective Luther only accepted the authority of

4. WA, Tr. 2, 248, 38-43.

5. WA 10¹, 325, 14-27.

6. Andres Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

his own inner self. Luther, on the other hand, experienced Erasmus as a representative of impersonal knowing. Ebeling says this about Luther's criticism of the tenor of Erasmus's style of writing, "For the right word is an event of love. Therefore God's word as authority for faith is authority for love, for God is love, and this is the source and the end of all speaking about God. Indeed, as Luther, shocked at Erasmus's frosty ice-cold way of speaking about God, says with full assurance of ultimate wisdom, God is 'a glowing baking-oven of love'."⁷

Erasmus's argumentation against Luther is calm, impersonal, logical. He represents the common sense of that period. His understanding of scholastic theology remains rather superficial, but in terms of his concept of authority he was faithful to his church. A Danish student of Luther's theology Ostergaard-Nielsen describes Erasmus' approach well when he says in his book *Scriptura Sacra et Viva Vox*, "Whether one recognizes Erasmus as representative of the Catholic church or not, the concept of authority is the same for Erasmus and for the Catholic church. Both stand here, together with all Protestant metaphysical theology, united against Luther . . ."⁸ It was the concept of authority in his theological heritage which Luther tried to break by his response to Erasmus. *The Bondage of the Will* is an absurd book if one reads it as an alternate explanation of reality, as a new theology of glory. If Luther is read in this constellation and in the mindset of hierarchical authority patterns of superiority and inferiority his theology does not make much sense. When he speaks, for example, of the Scriptures as the final authority he is then heard to claim that Scriptures—and not civil or ecclesiastical authorities—represent the truth. Luther's deepest concern is then lost, namely the claim that all true authority, according to the Scriptures grows from experiencing love, through sharing the burdens of one another.

In the midst of the predominance of a theology of glory, Luther characterized the theology he was searching for as a theology of the cross, as *theologia crucis*. He said, "A theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of God as crucified and concealed) teaches that punishments, crosses and death are the most precious treasure of all."⁹ In his articulations of *theologia crucis* Luther often wondered how little of the pains and sufferings of mankind were expressed in the philosophies and theologies of his tradition. From this perspective Luther received the strength to grow from his experiences of weakness, all health emerging as a healing from illness, all justice becoming realized by overcoming existing injustice. "Our good is hidden"—Luther said—"and so profoundly hidden that it is hidden under its opposite. Thus our life is under death, love of ourselves under the hate of ourselves, glory under ignominy, salvation under perdition, justice under sin, strength under infirmity, and universally every one of our affirmations under its negation."¹⁰ Luther characterized man as *simul iustus et peccator*, as a being who is simultaneously just and sinner.

From his perspective, loving God and loving oneself and one's fellow creatures becomes inseparable. Luther refers in this context to the fact that the commandment

7. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther. Einfuehrung in sein Denken* (Tuebingen: Mohr, 1965), p. 309.

8. Harald Ostergaard-Nielsen, *Scriptura Sacra et Viva Vox* (Munich: Kaiser, 1957), p. 28.

9. WA 1, 613, 21ff.

10. WA 18, 743.

of love uses as an illustration our love towards ourselves, "sicut teipsum." "For to whom will you present your needs except to God? And where can you find him except in your brother?"¹¹ And in one other context Luther says, "But he does not work in us without us, and for this purpose he creates and ministers, in order that he might operate in us and we might cooperate with him."¹² Luther perceives the basic matrix of life being in a covenantal mutuality between the Creator and the creature. He does not move in the alternatives of superior-inferior, of theocentricity and anthropocentricity, between objective and subjective. He claims that Erasmus is using such images of God and man which indicate that he thinks of them as two separate entities which are encountering each other in the realm of human consciousness. God reveals to man the options man has, and it is up to man to choose. For Luther this is rationalistic and mechanistic imagery. This approach—Luther claimed—moved on the surface, in the alternatives of a common sense consciousness. The reasoning of Erasmus blocks out from theology the realities of suffering and dying, all elements which do not fit to the realm of rationality.

My studies of Luther's catechetical writings brought me also in touch with the personalistic dynamics of his theology. It was surprising to me how different his approach became when he moved from theological polemics to more personal-communal concerns and contexts. There he very seldom used the law-gospel distinction or the 'two kingdoms' imagery, which often led him to violent abstractions in his writings against people like rebellious peasants, the pope, the enthusiasts and the Jews. The *sola scriptura* principle, which he so often used in a rigid way in the polemical writings was not used in his catechetical teaching. In his explanation of the ten commandments in the *Large Catechism* he hardly refers to any biblical material. He illustrates the character of divine commandments by referring to actual life experiences of his readers in their communities. In the "Sachsenspiegel" the same dynamics are expressed and experienced as in the mosaic decalogue. In these writings, which are carried by a spirit of pastoral care, Luther's theological language was primarily shaped by an interaction between the experiencing expressed in the Scriptures and his own experiencing. The Scriptures gained authority for him because he experienced through them divine care and because they made him trust his own experiences.

In the decade I was involved in an intensive dialogue with Luther, I first worked some years as a parish pastor. Immediately after the war I first became a teacher and later the principal of the adult educational centre and the Evangelical Academy of my church. With these people whom I had the privilege of working, I found such treasures as I had found in Luther. At the same time the hierarchical ecclesiastical authority patterns and the Lutheran theological rationalizations of them became more and more difficult to live with. Gradually I became aware of the tragic role played by Luther and Lutheran theologians in the history which culminated in the Jewish holocaust right in the midst of our Christian and Lutheran heritage. When I got the opportunity in 1960 for post-doctoral studies I felt a deep need to free myself for a while from my German-Scandinavian Lutheran heritage, which predominantly

11. WA 15, 488, 30.

12. WA 18, 745, 4.

moved in the traditional Lutheran theological constellations of law and gospel, of the two kingdoms, and was basically maintaining such patterns of ecclesiastical authority which Luther had tried to break.

Before entering for three years as a visiting scholar the program of Religion and Psychiatry at Union Theological Seminary in New York, I had been involved for many years in an intensive dialogue with my psychoanalyst brother Martti about our Lutheran heritage. He gradually found in Luther, especially in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will*, a pioneering predecessor of the therapeutic movements of our century, and I discovered in Freud's conceptualizations of the dynamics between the unconscious and conscious, similar kind of concerns which Luther had expressed especially in the struggle with Erasmus.

It was in this process I became acquainted with Erik Erikson's study *Young Man Luther*. It was intriguing to realize that the most advanced North American Freudian psychoanalyst focussed his study on Luther when he searched for a clarification of the dynamics between psychohistory and history, between the personal and the transpersonal. Erikson in his studies continues what Freud had called a movement from metaphysics to metapsychology. Erikson expresses this concern when he criticizes the way Lutheran theology has dealt with Luther. He claims that Lutheran theology has predominantly remained in the metaphysical mold. He writes, "Everything extraordinary, then, that happens to Luther is *befohlen*, ordered from above, without advance notice or explanation and completely without intention or motivation on Luther's part; consequently, all psychological speculation regarding motivation is strictly *verboten*. No wonder that Luther's 'personality' seems to be put together from scraps of conventional images which do not add up to a workable human being."¹³ In this study Erikson indicates that Luther's deepest achievement was in his intensive search for becoming a person, by finding an identity.

Kierkegaard who experienced the ecclesiastical authority structures and the theological consciousness of his Danish Lutheran church as powerful obstacles against the coming of the kingdom of God said, "Luther is a patient of exceeding import for Christendom."¹⁴ In choosing these words of Kierkegaard as a starting point for his study, Erikson wants to emphasize that Luther experienced deeply the communal nature of illness in his tradition and strove passionately to express both his sufferings and his urgent search for healing. Luther's proclamation was born in the midst of an encounter with illness. In the book *The Voice of Illness: A Study in Therapy and Prophecy*, I tried to demonstrate how the therapeutic movements of this century, which originated in Freud's work and writings, express some of Luther's deepest concerns more intensively than the Lutheran theological tradition. These movements also offer tools to cope with the destructive authority patterns and ideological blocks of our traditions which threaten to maintain among us a deceptive consciousness. The Religion and Psychiatry program at Union Theological Seminary was itself an example of such an awareness of the need to learn in theologizing from the therapeutic movements.

Kierkegaard's characterization of Luther as "a patient of exceeding import for

13. Erikson, p. 30.

14. P.A. Heiberg, ed., *Soren Kierkegaard's Efterladte Papirer* (Copenhagen, 1926), ix. 75.

Christendom" gained, furthermore even more new meaning for me. The Lutheran World Federation asked me to prepare a study on Luther and the Jews for a consultation on The Church and the Jewish People, to be held in Denmark in 1964. At that time I was already aware of the bankruptcy and blindness of Lutheran theology in its encounter with Nazism in general and of its indifference and silence in terms of the Jewish holocaust in particular. Slowly and gradually I began to realize the blind-spots that the Luther renaissance had created in me and in the Lutheran tradition in general. In the post-war world conferences on Luther research, Luther was never studied critically. It was painful to realize how a cult of Luther had become a reality in a situation where Luther and Lutheranism were experienced widely as sources of ideological and physical violence. It was at first difficult to face the deep ambiguities in Luther's theology. I resisted the realization that a theologian whom I had experienced as extremely liberating and thought-provoking could simultaneously be extremely prejudiced and violent in his theologizing.

The sources themselves, Luther's theological reflections on the Jews and his demonic anti-Jewish treatises convinced me otherwise. I became shocked by the fact that these elements had been entirely blocked out from the world of Luther-renaissance. There is no question in my mind that Luther's theological reflections about the Jews and his violent writings against the Jews are organic elements of his theology. Theology is as ambiguous as the experiences from which it grows. It is not possible to separate the strengths from weaknesses, the achievements from failures. When shadows are ignored in a personal or in a communal history, the consciousness becomes locked in destructive alternatives.

The Lutheran theological world has been very slow in letting the shadows in Luther's and in Lutheran theology become visible. Moellering's article in *Consensus*¹⁵ describes honestly both the demonic violence in Luther's theological approach towards the Jews and the incredibly dark history of both European and North American Lutheran theological traditions in their dealings with Jewish history and existence. Moellering states correctly, "The ghastly historical record of the persecution of the Jews culminating in the holocaust, with Christian participation or complicity, is indisputable and ineradicable." Moellering has done a real service for Lutherans in North America by making some of the deepest shadows of our Lutheran heritage visible. His theological response illustrates, however, how powerful the ideological block of a theology of the glory is among us. Moellering argues that what differentiates Luther's attitude towards the Jews, "sharply from most types of modern anti-Semitism, is that for him the decisive factor was religious conflict." This indicates that-theological thinking and religious experiencing are not fully human sharing the ambiguities of human experience. Moellering defends Luther because Luther prayed intensively for the Jews and praised the Jewish patriarchs, prophets, kings and Jesus as a Jew. The end result of his analysis is that Luther "does not dispute the Jewish claim that they were the chosen people of God. He does object when they flaunt their heritage before the Gentiles. Racial superiority, haughtiness, and glorification were precisely the characteristics which Luther presumed to find among the Jews and to

15. Ralph Moellering, "Lutheran-Jewish Relations and the Holocaust," *CONSENSUS*, 8 (January 1982), 21-32.

which he rigorously objected." Moellering tries to make his defense of Luther's rigid attitudes more convincing by referring to the fact that this kind of approach was not limited only to one people. "The Greeks and the Romans are chided for the same reason. No one was more outspoken than Luther in rebuking the Germans for their sins and shortcomings. It is incorrect and absurd to assume that the racial anti-semitism of the Nazis can be correlated with Luther's positions." Moellering also states about the situation during the reformation, "All in all the record of the Lutherans was better than that of their Roman Catholic antagonists."

Moellering does not consider the possibility that prejudice and mental violence could play a powerful role in religious conflicts and in theological confrontations. Even if we Lutherans express in our theological articulations the power of an all penetrating corruption in the midst of graciousness and goodness of life, we seldom apply this insight to our theological thought. We speak of a pure doctrine. Moellering claims the bankruptcy of Lutheran theology from 1933 to 1945 would not have become a reality "if secularism had not undermined the historic faith." He also claims that the ideological block of Nazism became a reality "because an ideological vacuum had arisen following the steady decline in church attendance and commitment to Christian beliefs." The corruption had no religious or theological sources.

This demonstrates how our Lutheran consciousness is locked in alternatives which Luther was trying to break in his personalistic theologizing and by which he was imprisoned in the mindcentred contexts of his thought. The focussing on the authority of the Scriptures and on the authority of the ordained clergy in our Lutheran merger discussion and in our celebration of the anniversary of the Augsburg Confession are also illustrations of the tendency in our Lutheran heritage to remain in alternatives which Luther found misleading. Erikson says about Luther, "After all, he was not a Lutheran; or, as he said himself, he was a mighty bad one. On the frontier of conscience, the dirty work never stops, the lying old words are never done with, and the new purities remain forever dimmed."¹⁶

Luther's great achievement in the midst of his tragic failures was in his boldness to express the deep shadows of his being, both in personal and transpersonal realms. Jung who experienced painfully the shadows of the Protestant pastoral and theological tradition articulated once in a perceptive way the dynamics of this aspect of transpersonal and personal experiencing, "Man bears in himself a secret, an unconscious which works in him as a debt, as guilt. This secret isolates man from himself, from others and it works in man as a foreign body. It follows man like a shadow and creates a feeling of unworthiness and of inferiority. When man becomes more and more conscious of this shadow, man rediscovers himself more and more as human being among other human beings. When man realizes this shadow and makes a 'confession' he throws himself—as it were—to the embrace of mankind!"

On some deep level of his being Luther was convinced that faith is not to be identified with knowledge that the divine is experienced as a presence of the transpersonal in the personal in the midst of the ambiguities of life. What William James said about what he called a rationalist temper articulates well what Luther struggled with in

16. Erikson, p. 197.

the impersonal patterns of theology in his tradition, James calls it dapper, noble in the bad sense in which to be noble is to be inapt for humble service. In this real world of sweat and dirt, James feels that when a view of things is noble that ought to count a presumption against its truth, and as a philosophical disqualification. The prince of darkness may be a gentleman but whatever the God of earth and heaven is, he can surely be no gentleman. His menial services are needed in the dust of our human trials even more than his dignity is needed in the empyrean.

When Luther speaks of the theology of the cross as a way of thinking which teaches one to regard punishment, suffering, cross and death as precious treasures he is not merely using poetic expressions or engaging in spiritual meditation. He calls for exercise in the kind of thinking which is open to thoughts which are contrary to one's own attitudes. When we barricade ourselves behind positions furnished by our own knowledge of good and evil, we select as the content of our thought only those elements of reality which fit into the world created by our knowledge. Then we refuse to receive new life, new thoughts. Only experiencing which faces up to the cruciform elements of reality remains open to it. Only when we are nailed on the cross contained in the basic condition of being human can we become detached from the old and share in the creation of the new.

A rationalist temper, an identification of faith with objectifying knowledge, and the patterns of authority growing from such individual and communal mindset, violate life's basic web where the divine kingdom is hidden. Luther says, "We rightly confess in the creed, 'We believe in the holy church.' But it is in an 'inaccessible' place, for its sanctity cannot be seen. God so conceals it and covers it up with infirmities, sins and errors, with various forms of the cross and scandal, that it cannot be reached by our senses."¹⁷ The mindset of a theology of the glory with its messianic pretensions and delusions to represent the divine transpersonal authority and truth over against the personal experiencing threatens to stifle—Luther claimed—the child in and among us. Luther expressed his experience in his family and church, "I did not know the Christchild any more." He felt he had been robbed of his childhood, that he had lost it. When Erikson dwells on these dynamics in Luther's life and theology he articulates well the character of the damage inflicted on life by a rationalist temper when he says, "that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit."¹⁸

In his articulations of the transpersonal-personal dynamics of Christ "extra nos, pro nobis" and of Christ "in nos, nobiscum," Luther is searching for a paradigmatic shift in theological reflections from a metaphysical, objectifying knowing to an incarnational, biographical learning. He focussed then on the meaning of the presence of Christ in the birth of Jesus and in the child Jesus, in his maternal matrix, for our birth and for the child in us and among us.

Perhaps this would be the most appropriate focus for the celebration we are now preparing for.

NOTE

The quotes in this presentation and additional material related to transpersonal-

17. WA 40¹¹, 106, 19.

18. Erikson, p. 119.

personal dynamics in Luther's life and theology can be found in my books: *Gottes Gebot Bei Martin Luther*, Helsinki-Stuttgart, 1956; *The Voice of Illness: A Study in Therapy and Prophecy*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981; *Divine Humanness. Towards an Empirical Theology in the Light of the Controversy Between Luther and Erasmus*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1970, and in my articles: "Luther and the Jews," *Lutheran World* 3, 1964; "Implications of the Personalistic Era for Theological Education," *Ambulatio Fidei*, Waterloo Lutheran University, 1965; "Freedom and Authority in Erasmus and Luther," *Dialog*, Vol. 7, 1968; "Crisis in Institutions: Luther Versus Erasmus," *The Ecumenist*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1969; "Theology and the Unconscious," *Studies in Religion*, Vol. 6, No. 6, 1976-1977; "The Jewish Christian Encounter in a Lutheran Perspective," E. Fleischer (Ed.), *Auschwitz: A Beginning of a New Era?*, New York: KTAV Pub., 1977; Erik Erikson is quoted from his book, *Young Man Luther. A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1958.

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