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ENTHEOKARIC FREEDOM: CLARIFYING CONFUSIONS

Ted Peters

Michael Welker gets it right when he trumpets, »As truth and justice-seeking communities, the church of Jesus Christ allows itself to be filled with the Spirit of freedom.«¹ He also gets it right when he describes the church's mission as one of bestowing freedom. But, does he get it right when he describes the church's method as »one's *free and creative self-withdrawal*« for the sake of the good of the other?² Here I demure. Welker gets it wrong, I will argue, when he proposes that when we are in God's Spirit that God withdraws, and with this withdrawal a space opens up for creaturely self-expression. Rather than God's withdrawal, it is God's presence in power which empowers human freedom. The resulting freedom is *entheokaric* human self-determination, the highest form of which is love toward one's neighbor. *Entheokaric* freedom is a gift of God's gracious presence.

In order to clarify what is at stake here, we will need to specify what we mean by freedom. I find it helpful to presuppose four different though complementary notions of freedom. First, political freedom or *liberty* refers to independence from external coercion, especially governmental coercion. Second, *freedom of the will*, sometimes known as natural freedom, is the freedom of choice among alternatives. Third, *Christian freedom* or moral freedom is the capacity to pursue the good of the neighbor free from the compulsions of self-interest. Fourth, *future freedom* is the capacity to creatively influence the course of future events.³

It appears that Michael Welker relies on the first notion of freedom to make the second and fourth possible: one party withdraws power, and this self-withdrawal leaves an open space for the other to exercise freedom of choice along with future freedom. This appears to be Welker's logic of freedom. Such an understanding certainly makes sense in the domain of government or politics. But, does it apply to our understanding of God making us free?

¹ Michael Welker, »Divine Spirit and Human Freedom«, in *Quests for Freedom: Biblical, Historical, Contemporary*, ed. Michael Welker (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 2015), 403.

² Ibid., 399. Welker's italics.

³ Ted Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2003), 17-20.

»For freedom Christ has set us free,« blasts St. Paul (Gal. 5:1). Just how does God in Christ set us free? Not by withdrawal, I will argue. Rather, the very presence of God's Spirit with all its empowerment is what makes us free. It not God's absence, not God's kenotic self-removal, not God's withdrawal that frees us. Rather, it is the presence of God in power which liberates us. Our human freedom is embedded in God's grace. It is entheokaric.

THREE CONFUSIONS

Despite the familiarity and reverence with which we in the 21st century treat the concept of freedom, at least three confusions plague contemporary discourse. The first confusion has to do with our second notion of freedom: do human persons possess free will or are they predetermined exhaustively by the neuronal firings in their brains? The confusion arises when this issue is cast as a debate between determinism and indeterminism. ~~In fact, the question is of biological determinism, not a debate between determinism and indeterminism.~~ Rather, the debate is over the existence or non-existence of a human self, a self which determines the course of events.

The second confusion has to do with the question we pose to Michael Welker: does God withdraw divine presence (kenosis) to permit creaturely freedom? Or is creaturely freedom a gift of divine presence? The confusion appears when proponents of divine kenosis in creation presuppose the second rather than the third notion of freedom, when they assume human freedom is in competition with divine freedom. Kenotic theologians overlook the way God's power liberates.

This alerts us to the third confusion, namely, many theologians seem to have forgotten Christian freedom as they try to justify Christian conscription of political liberation into the church's mission. Moral freedom or distinctively Christian freedom differs from both political liberty and freedom of choice. Christian freedom consists rather in freedom from the self to devote oneself to loving service to the neighbor. In what follows it will be my task to clarify these three confusions and to enhance and augment Welker's understanding of the church's mission.

Confusion One: Biological Determinism vs Self-Determination

Many interpreters of the fast moving frontier in neuroscience work with the assumption that we human beings are biologically predetermined. Determinists work with a brain-mind identity theory, according to which mental activity can be exhaustively explained by tracking brain activity. »The mind [...] is the brain,« contends philosopher Daniel Dennett.⁴ The term for this school of thought is

⁴ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Viking, 2006), 107.

Neurocentrism, »the view that human experience can be best explained from the predominant or even exclusive perspective of the brain.«⁵

Within the framework of neurocentrism, it is almost automatic that we dip into the philosophical reservoir containing former debates between determinism and indeterminism. If the brain is less than fully deterministic, allegedly, then there is room for mental freedom and, hence, free will. But, I suggest this amounts to a confusion. Human free will does not require indeterminism. Instead, human free will requires a self, a center of initiation, an independent factor that determines what happens. The serious implication of brain-mind identity theory is the elimination of the self as a determinant. The real issue is this: does the human self exist and, if so, does the human self make decisions that affect the course of future events? My answer is: yes, indeed.

One philosopher of religion formulates the issue this misleading way: »If determinism is true, there is no free will.«⁶ No. This position confuses indeterminism with free will. One could easily incorporate free will into a deterministic scheme by designating three determinants: biology, environment, and self. Free will consists of self-determination, not indeterminism. Social theorist George Lakoff's term is *self-governance*. »Freedom requires government of the self, by the self, and for the self.«⁷

Freedom designates the self governing itself. What is a self? Ian G. Barbour reminds us that the human self is the whole of who we are as a person, not a substantial entity separated from our biology. »Selfhood [is] a concept of the total person as an active, integrated system.«⁸ What then is freedom? »Freedom

⁵ Sall Satel and Scott O. Lilienfeld, »Losing Our Minds in the Age of Brain Science,« *Skeptical Inquirer* 37:6 (November/December 2013): 35.

⁶ Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 106.

⁷ George Lakoff, *Whose Freedom? The Battle Over America's Most Important Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 36. Self-governance or autonomy does not imply infinite freedom. Finite limits always obtain. In addition, if personhood is defined narratively, then each of our stories can finally be told only by others or by God. Our individual freedom inextricably sits within a relational narrative that lies beyond our self-determination. »In the end, each person must hand over the narration of one's life to others and to God's transforming »knowledge« of one's life.« Günther Thomas, »Human Personhood at the Edges of Life,« in *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 390.

⁸ Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York: Prentice Hall and Harper, 1966), 312. The affirmation of the existence does not require substance dualism; it requires holism. »A holistic model of the human person does most justice to the scientific understanding of ourselves. Dualisms of parts or substances will not do. There is no scientific evidence for them, and there is no biblical warrant for them. Our unity is central. We know each other, not as brains ensheathed in bodies, but as embodied.« Malcolm Jeeves, »Brains, Minds, Souls, and People: A Scientific Perspective on Complex Human Personhood,« in *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 107.

of the
person

is the real possibility of being myself,« comments Wolfhart Pannenberg rightly.⁹ One neurocentrist, Michael Gazzaniga, gets the issue right: it is the existence of the self that is at stake. »There is a puzzle about everyday life: we all feel like unified conscious agents acting with self-purpose, and we are free to make choices of almost any kind. At the same time everyone realizes we are machines [... we are] completely determined.«¹⁰ Note that Gazzaniga does not argue against indeterminism. Rather, he says: our self is a delusion. Regardless of whether his conclusion is correct or not, he asks the right question.

Here is a science journalist who realizes that it is the existence of the self, not the existence of indeterminism, which is at stake. »Neuroscientists increasingly describe our behavior as the result of a chain of cause and effect, in which one physical brain state or pattern of neural activity inexorably leads to the next, culminating in a particular action or decision. With little space for free choice in this chain of causation, the conscious, deliberating self seems to be a fiction.«¹¹ To dispel the confusion, the issue posed by neurocentrism is whether or not a self exists, not whether indeterminism trumps determinism. Before we answer the question, we must get the question right: is there such a thing as a human self engaging in self-determination?

To my observation, the human self exists indubitably. René Descartes got it right: *cogito ergo sum*. The scientific task is to explain this, not explain it away.

Each of us knows our own self intuitively, subjectively. Because of what anthropologists call *theory of mind*, we also know intuitively that other selves exist. Dan Zahavi, who directs the Center for Subjectivity Research at the University of Copenhagen, recognizes the significance of the self as a fundamental phenomenon, a phenomenon upon which other phenomenal experiences depend. »The self is claimed to possess experiential reality, is taken to be closely linked to the first-person perspective, and is, in fact, identified with the very first-person *givenness* of the experiential phenomena.«¹² The task of neuroscience and neurophilosophy is to explain this intuition, not explain it away.

Free will when situated within political liberty enjoys future freedom. This means that the actions taken by a self-determining person have an effect. Free actions change the environment. They innovate. They make history.

Natural Free Will is the term I apply to a human person expressing himself or herself through deliberation, decision, and action. Paul Tillich puts it this way: »Freedom is experienced as deliberation, decision, and responsibility.«¹³

⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 240.

¹⁰ Michael S. Gazzaniga, *Who's in Charge? Free Will and the Science of the Brain* (New York: Harper, 2011), 7.

¹¹ Dan Jones, »The Free Will Delusion,« *New Scientist* 210:2808 (16 April 2011): 32.

¹² Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008), 106.

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963), 1:184.

Karl Barth says it in almost the same fashion. »A free [person] is one who chooses, decides, and determines himself and who acts according to his thoughts, words, and deeds.«¹⁴ It is my argument that we grasp this form of freedom most clearly as self-determination, not indeterminism.

Confusion Two: Divine Kenosis & Creaturely Freedom

If God would just get out of the way, then we creatures would be free to do what we want to do! This has become a prevalent belief among the current generation of theologians, whom we might designate as the *kenotic creationists*. Jürgen Moltmann provides a prototypical example. »God does not create merely by calling something into existence, or by setting something afoot. In a more profound sense he creates by letting-be, by making room, and by withdrawing himself.«¹⁵ If God withdraws, then we creatures can operate in God's vacated empty space with our free and creative contributions. So goes the logic of those theologians who apply *kenosis* to creation. What this presupposes, of course, is our first notion of freedom, namely, political liberty. Is this adequate for Christian theology? I don't think so.

Sallie McFague belongs to the new club of kenotic creationists. »In the kenotic theological paradigm, there is continuity all the way from evolution to God and vice versa: one ›reality‹ that is characterized at all levels by various forms and expressions of self-emptying.«¹⁶ S. Mark Heim belongs to the same club. »Creation is shot through and through with freedom, including freedom ›from‹ God by virtue of God's withdrawal to give it space for self-determination.«¹⁷ To be free, according to the kenotic creationists, is to be separated from God due to God's own self-withdrawal. It relies on a simile: when the parents are not home it's time for the teenagers to throw a wild party. But, I ask, does this adequately describe the relationship between God and creation revealed in the incarnation? I don't think so. What we learn from the Son and the Spirit in the Trinity is that God abides with us—intimately abides with us—and this divine presence liberates, frees, and empowers us. It is not God's absence that liberates us. Rather, it is God's presence.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1968), 84.

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (New York: Harper, 1985), 88. Rather than withdrawing, Christoph Schwöbel believes God creates in order to establish presence, relationship, engagement. »In creation God freely creates a material universe in order to be in communion with material creation.« »Personhood and Bodily Resurrection,« in *Who is Jesus Christ for us Today? Pathways to Contemporary Christology in Honor of Michael Welker*, ed. Andreas Schuele and Günther Thomas (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 229.

¹⁶ Sallie McFague, »Falling in Love with God and the World: Some Reflections on the Doctrine of God,« *The Ecumenical Review* 65:1 (March 2013): 33.

¹⁷ S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 267.

When it comes to the only place in the New Testament where kenosis appears, it is clear that it was intended to be a Christological concept. »Though he (Christ) was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied (*kenosis*) himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness« (Phil. 2,6-7). Kenosis applies to the self-differentiation of the Son from the Father, not to the Father's alleged withdrawal from the created world.

Nowhere in Scripture is either the term or concept of kenosis applied to God as creator emptying the divine self of creation. For a systematic theologian to apply kenosis to the Genesis creation cannot be exegetically supported, just as it cannot be conceptually supported. Human freedom does not depend on God's absence. This means some theologians, such as Notre Dame's Celia Deane-Drummond, simply refuse membership in the kenotic creationist club. »Extending kenosis to include God is, in my view, far more problematic if it envisages some sort of spatial withdrawal prior to self-involvement.«¹⁸

To clarify the confusion introduced by the kenotic creationists, we must insist that it is God's presence, not absence, which makes creaturely freedom possible. Process theologian John Cobb articulates this point with appropriate force. »[God is] the cause of freedom [...] it is by virtue of the presence of God that I experience a call to be more than I have been and more than my circumstances necessitate that I be. It is that call to transcendence that frees me from simply acting by habit and reacting to the forces of the world. In short, it is by God's grace that I am free.«¹⁹

Despite the confusion introduced by the kenotic creationists, one edifying product of this school of thought is its ethics: creaturely morality takes the form of imitating divine kenosis. Philippians 2:3-5: »Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.« For the author of Philippians, a *kenotic* spirituality or ethic consists of transcending one's own self interests on behalf of the welfare of the neighbor. Does disinterested love require self-withdrawal, absence?

Nancey Murphy and George Ellis make this moral move beautifully, despite the falsity of the main premise. »God's nature is essentially kenotic, as is demonstrated by the life and teaching of Jesus and in particular by his death on the cross. The implication is that there should be a kenotic response by men and women, who are made in the image of God, mirroring this kenotic nature

¹⁸ Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 172-3.

¹⁹ John B. Cobb, Jr., »God and the Scientific Worldview,« in *Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism*, ed. David Tracy and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Seabury, 1983), 53.

and reflecting it in their relations to each other and to God.²⁰ In short, we love because God first loved us, and our loving consists of enhancing the freedom of the neighbor.

Does Welker belong in the same club with Murphy and Ellis? Welker heuristically uses the concept of kenosis to describe the liberation agenda of the Christian church. Freedom depends on the »free self-withdrawal and self-giving for the benefit of other creatures, whether given in a liberating manner or received in a liberating manner.«²¹ Love and liberation come together in a single package. Love here consists of withdrawal, letting-be, liberating, allowing for the free will of the other. We know from our own experience that Welker rightly describes human liberation. Yet, we must press the matter: does this experience of human liberation on behalf of free will also apply to God's relationship to the creation? Does God liberate through self-withdrawal? Does the *agape* love we express consist of withdrawal, absence?

To clarify this second confusion, we must make clear that God's freedom does not conflict with human freedom. »God's creative and self-communicating love is at the heart of God's sovereignty vis-a-vis the world; it is not in competition with human freedom.«²² It is God's presence, not God's withdrawal, that makes human freedom possible.

Confusion Three: What is Christian Freedom?

Is distinctively Christian freedom a form of free will won for us by political liberation? Is Christian freedom a combination of notions one, two, and four? Or, might there be a dimension of Christian freedom which differs from political liberation or garden variety free will?

Abstractly, we might suggest that distinctively Christian freedom is a subset within moral freedom. Moral freedom occurs when the self dedicates itself to something other than self-interest. Moral freedom is exercised when the self dedicates itself to the good expressed in virtue or to the need of the neighbor. For virtue philosopher Otfried Höffe, moral freedom is a step beyond a liberated free will. »Freedom of the will in its fullest sense [...] is achieved [...] only with the readiness in a situation of conflict to put aside one's personal well-being

²⁰ Nancey Murphy and George F.R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 194.

²¹ Michael Welker, *God in the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 248–9. Welker is quite at home with co-extensive agency: heart initiated human agency combined with divine agency initiated by the third person of the Trinity. »It is via the heart that the divine Spirit reaches the human body and its mental capacities.« Michael Welker, »Flesh-Body-Heart-Soul-Spirit: Paul's Anthropology as an Interdisciplinary Bridge-Theory,« in *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 55.

²² Brian O. McDermott, »The Bonds of Freedom,« in *A World of Grace: Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo J. O'Donovan (New York: Seabury, Crossroad, 1980), 57.

for the sake of morals.²³ Virtue consists of a self deciding to sacrifice its self-interest on behalf of a virtue, on behalf of a good that transcends the self. Virtue requires a degree of self-transcendence achieved by the self in action. Through self-determination, moral freedom or virtue leads to a self which transcends itself.

If freedom of the will consists of self-determination, then moral freedom consists of a self transcending itself so as to give expression to a higher moral ideal or to enhancing the freedom and wellbeing of the other. In part, moral freedom is freedom from the self on behalf of the other. It is still the self which deliberates, decides, and acts, to be sure; yet, this free self elects to deny itself on behalf of a good which transcends the self.

It is Martin Luther who straightened out the intertwined logic that we now know concretely as Christian freedom.

The Christian individual is a completely free lord of all, subject to none.

The Christian individual is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all.²⁴

By »servant,« Luther intends to say that the person of faith serves the neighbor according to the agenda set by the neighbor's needs. »In all of one's works a person should [...] be shaped by and contemplate this thought alone: to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbor.«²⁵ Or, »Christian individuals do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love.«²⁶

What has happened here? The second notion of freedom—freedom of the will understood as self-determination—has just been taken up into freedom *from* the self and become a freedom *for* the benefit of the other. In Luther's view, what makes this possible is the presence in faith of the living Christ, the same Christ who kenotically self-differentiated from the Father. The power of self-surrender is bestowed by the presence, not the absence, of our trinitarian God.

On the one hand, we might say that the self-determining self has been liberated from willing strictly on behalf of itself in order to will on behalf another self. On the other hand, it is still the self-determining self which is entheokaric, a self grounded in divine grace that expresses itself as a self who loves.

Entheokaris is the point made by Eastern Orthodox theologian Verna Harrison: »Divine freedom supports human freedom, and human freedom is called to cooperate with divine freedom [...]. Human freedom is a good gift because it

²³ Ottfried Höffe, *Can Virtue Make us Happy?*, trans. Douglas R. McGauhey and Aaron Bunch (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 254.

²⁴ Martin Luther, »The Freedom of a Christian,« trans. Timothy J. Wengert, in *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirs I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 488.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 520.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 530.

makes it possible for us to love God in return, to assist in God's work, to grow into the divine likeness.²⁷

Entheokaric freedom, like free will, also enjoys future freedom. Christians, according to Ingolf Dalferth, are »free to use all their capacities to mold and change human life in the world in accordance with the gospel message of the saving and perfecting presence of God's creative love [...]. [This is] a *created* freedom, i.e., a freedom that is grounded in a prior passivity that is not of its own making.²⁸ People of faith who live in Christian freedom want to make a difference, want to see the condition of the poor and marginalized among their neighbors changed, altered, improved, transformed. Neighbor loving (*Nächstenliebe*) becomes practical; it seeks to get the job done.

CONCLUSION

In summary, I recommend that Michael Welker discard the assumption that divine self-withdrawal leads to creaturely freedom. Further, I recommend he also refrain from assigning »creative self-withdrawal« to the church's mission. Instead, I recommend he adopt the notion that divine presence empowers creatures to transcend their inherited circumstances and, in the case of Christian freedom, even transcend their own self-interest on behalf of virtue or on behalf of the neighbor's needs. It takes the presence of God's power for the self to transcend itself.

I have coined the somewhat awkward term, *entheokaric* freedom, to make this point. The freedom we seek is entheokaric human self-determination, the highest form of which is love toward one's neighbor. Entheokaric freedom is a gift of God's gracious presence with its liberating power.

²⁷ Nonna Verna Harrison, »The human person as an image and likeness of God,« in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82.

²⁸ Ingolf U. Dalferth, »Post-secular Society: Christianity and the Dialectics of the Secular,« *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:2 (June 2010): 338.