EDITORIAL

Freedom of Conscience: The Reformers' and Ours

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This issue of *Unio cum Christo*, in the year preceding the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's 1517 posting of the Ninety-Five Theses on the church door at Wittenberg, presents several articles that touch on reformational issues and also on New Testament themes related to them.

A central issue at the time of the Reformation was freedom of conscience in the worship of God, and it is important to recall the words of Luther before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms in April 1521 that ring across the years. Interrogated by Johann Eck and requested to answer "without horns" and repudiate his books, Luther rejoined in German:

> Since Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason (I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other), my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right.

The earliest printed version of these words adds, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." There is, however, no indication of this finale in the transcripts of the Diet, although Roland Bainton suggests in his classic work on Luther that perhaps the witnesses were too moved at the time to record them, and no doubt confusion ensued as Luther left the scene.[1]

[1] Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon; New York: Cokesbury, 1950), 185–86.

So what is meant by a conscience captive to the Word of God? In spite of the enigmatic nature of the expression, there is no doubt that for Luther a conscience captive to God's Word was one that is truly free, and especially free from all human authorities. Conscience was an important item on the agenda at the time of the Reformation, following on from the debates about the rights of erroneous conscience instigated by Abelard and then Aquinas. It is often assumed that what the Reformers meant by freedom of conscience was the same as the values that make up the democratic baggage of today. So they are either presented in a favorable light as forerunners of modern liberties, via the Enlightenment, or negatively because they were supposedly the first to set foot on the slippery slope leading to free thinking, the French Revolution, and the contradiction of accepted authority. But are we actually talking about the same thing in the two cases?

Freedom of conscience is a core value in open societies, with its siblings, freedom of speech and of action. Today however, it is coming under increasing pressure from groups that limit it to things that do not give offense. This raises delicate questions in many areas as to where the limits lie. Can a Muslim advocate radicalization at Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park when atrocities are being committed in that name? In the past such a speaker would just have been shouted down, but now the law will be set in motion against those who are thought to advocate hate crimes.

These values are ones we trace back to the Reformation, and rightly so. One of the earliest expressions of freedom of conscience was the Edict of Nantes signed by Henry IV of France in 1598, putting an end to the bloody religious conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants that had plagued France for thirty years. The Huguenots, who were a minority, accepted the settlement, which granted a measure of religious tolerance and some social and political equality. They were to be entitled to worship freely in private, as well as publicly in two hundred towns and on the estates of Protestant landowners. Those who penned the document held the view current at the time, that it was wrong to force compliance in the worship of God upon free individuals against their conscience, which was seen as something sacred that must be respected.

The link may be made between this embryonic manifesto and the process it set in motion: the revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, the First Geneva Convention in 1864, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, drafted in 1950. In its preamble and in articles 1 and 18 the 1948 Declaration unequivocally proclaims the inherent rights of all human beings: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought,

conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance"(18). These are noble aspirations indeed, and those freedoms are not to be taken lightly, out of respect for the humanity of our fellow beings.

However, in so far as the Reformation is concerned, we should be on our guard against both the dangers of hagiography and facile links between the Reformers and modern ideals, including freedom of conscience. Who could affirm today with Philip Schaff that "the principles of the Republic of the United States can be traced, through the intervening link of Puritanism, to Calvinism, which, with all its theological rigor, has been the chief educator of manly characters and promoter of constitutional freedom in modern times"?[2] A bald statement such as this seems incomprehensible today not only in North America, but also in Europe, and might lead the rest of the world to think the West is still marked by those same Christian influences. So prudence is called for in tracing the effects of the Reformation, including in freedom of conscience.

Social historians tend to see some filiation, but often refer to the "unintended consequences" of Reform. We cannot naively suppose that the freedom of conscience to which the Protestant Reformers aspired is one and the same thing as modern freedom of conscience. The fact that the 1948 text quoted above places the right to freedom of thought before conscience and religions already shows which way the wind is blowing. In fact, in the spirit of 1789 freedom was upheld as a natural right of man, whereas freedom as desired by the Reformers was motivated by a different goal and had other objects in view. The service of God was far more important to them than any human right, precious though such a right may be. If the idea of conscience as such was highlighted by the Reformers' reliance on the New Testament, and the apostle Paul in particular, freedom of conscience, as it is put forward in modern terms, is another kettle of fish.

We might well wonder whether the modern idea of freedom of conscience has much at all to do with what the Reformers were speaking about when they used the expression "the liberty of the Christian man." Maybe we have been seduced by the half-truth that freedom of conscience is the *summum bonum* of human flourishing. But freedom of conscience is deadly when it leads to the supposition that human beings can legitimately use their

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[2] Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (1877; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 1:218–19, note 1.

conscience to justify thoughts or acts that are against God's law. When this freedom becomes an alibi for anything that goes, it is a mutant freedom, more of a freedom to think and do whatever we please, rather than something that involves the workings of conscience as such. Riding roughshod over right and wrong, good and bad, as expressed by God's law, this is no longer the noble, biblical freedom of conscience of the Reformed fathers, but an ersatz imitation, a dumbed-down free thinking that is ultimately self-serving. Perhaps this consideration explains why people often seem to confuse freedom of conscience with tolerance or a tolerant attitude towards everything, whereas the two are opposite poles of the same question, freedom of conscience being taken to be the right to think or do anything and tolerance meaning having to put up with it.

Two considerations may be introduced in this perspective regarding the modern notion of conscience. These describe attitudes that profoundly condition our ideas about Christianity in general and freedom of conscience in particular.

Firstly, we are continually assailed by an interpretation of history that propagates two big myths. First, the liberties of Greco-Roman antiquity are much more conducive to human flourishing than the restrictive anti-libertarian inhuman Judeo-Christian beliefs that replaced the glory of classic Rome. Second, the liberties of the Enlightenment overcame the authoritarianism of the Reformation and of the Christian church in general with free thinking procured by the liberating use of reason. In both cases Christianity is presented as a miserable substitute for, and a restriction of, real human flourishing, equality, and freedoms, including that of conscience. The impression is repeatedly given in the media and by modern and postmodern critics that Christianity is the source of all our ills. This approach often goes hand in glove with secularization theories in the Weberian mold that present the inevitable progress of the disembedding and disappearance of religion in modern times, on the assumption that today it is more feasible to be an unbeliever than not. In biblical terms, however, present unbelief is not an absence of faith but an idolatrous faith in something other than God's truth. This is always hidden behind the illusion of neutrality or other factors of what Charles Taylor calls "buffering."[3]

Anyone who is impressed by the glories of pagan antiquity might be pulled up short by Oxford professor Larry Siedentop's recent monograph, which is a salutary debunking of the ethos of pagan antiquity. It may come as a surprise that

[3] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2007), 37–42, etc.

> Paul's conception of Christ overturns the assumption on which ancient thinking had hitherto rested, the assumption of natural inequality. Instead Paul wagers on human equality. It is a wager that runs on transparency, that we can and should see ourselves in others, and others in ourselves. A leap of faith in human equality reveals … the universal availability of a God-given foundation for human action, the free action of love … a challenge to the ancient belief that humans are subject to an immutable order of "fate."[4]

It is a pity that Siedentop's cultural history does not extend beyond the late Middle Ages to the Reformation, but it is sufficient to expose the myth that classical paganism was the "big rock candy mountain" and that Christianity replaced it with a desert of inequalities and injustices. The opposite is closer to the truth. Christianity brought with it freedoms and justice, including a new view of the individual and a freedom of conscience unknown in pagan culture, and this profited Western liberties.

Cultural interpretations of the Enlightenment are based, as the word suggests, on the idea that it delivered human beings from religious darkness, by secularizing the Reformers' *Post tenebras lux*. These interpretations seem to work with the supposition that the bonus was enormous and the malus was correctible. People are taken in by the rhetoric of the humanistic Condorcets who prophetized of the day when tyrants and slaves would disappear together with priests and their hypocritical baggage, and humans would be free with no master other than reason: *Ni dieu, ni maître* (no god, no master). So man would progress inevitably toward a utopian society.[5] The Reformation was not so much undone as lost because it was buried by the spirit of Enlightenment, with its accent on reason and progress. It was overwhelmed by the humanistic beliefs, which generated their own illusions. But as one recent commentator has stated, "the philosophical efforts to contrive a universal, self-sufficient, rational replacement for religion … were self-deceived from the outset, and those intellectuals who continue today to carry on likewise are engaged in a similarly self-deceived enterprise."[6]

In particular, the Reformational doctrine of original sin was varnished over by Rousseauism, complemented by the idea that modern man is more developed, scientific, and advanced than our primitive predecessors. This is

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[4] Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 60.

[5] Sadly, Condorcet himself fell foul of progress after the Revolution and was probably murdered while under arrest in 1794. Cf. David Williams, *Condorcet and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[6] Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2012), 383.

true only when scientific is understood in the sense of technological, and advanced in that of the material quality of life. Otherwise people in the West today are afflicted by a one-dimensional moral misery that our Christian ancestors would have found distressing, and which we do when we reflect on it. By eliding the doctrine of sin from its understanding of human nature the Enlightenment countered what was true in the Reformation, and with it the need for grace, and replaced the biblical motifs of perdition and salvation with the illusions of modern history. Christianity is constantly berated for its antihumanity, its violences and past failures, while it is forgotten that the slaughterhouses of the twentieth century were the offspring of the illusions of ideological humanism, whether Marxist or liberal. And so it remains down to the present, when any number of social policies in progressive democracies are based on the blind supposition of the innate goodness of human beings and their right to fulfill whatever they consider to be their legitimate desires. Religion of any kind is thought to be primitive and unsophisticated, while all around us the fabric of society falls apart, with nothing to hold it together.

Secondly, let us consider what freedom of conscience really is. It differs considerably from what it is generally understood to be today, since it must have a reference point outside itself in order to function. Rousseau at least understood something of that when he defined it as the voice of nature in man, considering it to be in some way divine and useful when loosed from the constraints of social convention. But without a transcendent reference, freedom of conscience becomes a form of in-house quality control for fallen man, an inner self-reference, which may in the best of cases accuse sinfulness, but in the worst case will simply excuse it, and let the sinner off the hook. It may be altogether moribund, and as far as God's law is concerned its voice may be muted altogether. When this is the case, conscience as such is dead and moral blindness ensues, the freedom of "conscience" becoming simply the wandering of man's thought in a situation of lostness. Enlightenment without light is the blind leading the blind, and the plight of unidimensional man and his solitude is glossed over with rhetoric about how things are getting better and better.

The conscience of human beings is created and therefore it can never be free from God's standards of judgment, whatever humanists understand freedom to be, and whatever man does, good or evil. Natural law is not natural; it is God working through man's conscience in a variety of human expressions. So, in a certain respect, there is no such thing as freedom of conscience. God remains man's reference point and standard whether man recognizes it or not. A conscience that pretends to be free of God is enslaved

by its own false pretenses, leading to death, but it can never escape God and his judgment. In this respect freedom of conscience is comparable to so-called freedom of the will. It does not exist as an independent factor determined by man in his autonomy. Human nature exists in one of its fourfold states: created, fallen, redeemed, or glorified, to use the classic language. A fallen conscience can never be free, no more than a fallen will can be free, as Luther argued against Erasmus. Fallen conscience must be sinful, and to be free once more it must find liberty through the law leading to Christ and then by serving the law of love for God in Christ. Outside of Christ conscience is reduced to a function of self-exoneration whether it be in micro behavioral patterns or in all inclusive theories.

Fundamentally this means that man's conscience is never free from God and his standards, in spite of all that man might dream up about freedom. That is an objective reality: man remains a creature in the image of God, even in fallenness. Subjectively, freedom of conscience receives its ethos from the worldview in which it functions. In service to God and his law it is really free, in Christ, to function in such a way as to encourage human beings in their vocation as servants of the living God. Over against this, in the context of idolatrous worldviews, freedom of conscience metamorphoses to take on the apparel of many different perspectives. It can function in the context of a worldview that is rationalistic or romantic, it may become historical conscience as a form of materialism, or it can be nihilistic in denial of Christian ethics. Existentialism will transform freedom of conscience from an expression of the essence of man to an authentic action because it is man's destiny to be alone and free. And in political correctness, objective facts will tend to be replaced by what one wishes to believe because that seems most acceptable to the subjective, relativistic, and self-centered outlook. In all these variations of one-dimensional humanism, and many other similar cases, it is not ultimately *conscience* that is in view, but *self-consciousness* in the context of autonomy, as man worships at the altar of a stagnant pool, rather than at the cross from which flows the rivers of living water. Self-consciousness means self-absorption, self-satisfaction and self-centeredness. No wonder social media are so trivial, unconvivial, and uncivil: they represent what we have become.

True freedom of conscience is found in obedience to God, as the Reformers defined it. For them it is synonymous with the liberty of the Christian person, whose freedom it is to serve God without the imposition of human authorities, whether churchly, political, or other. Martin Luther wrote eloquently about it in his early writings, particularly in his commentary on Galatians. Philip Melanchthon developed the idea in his *Loci communes*. Following

them, Calvin penned the magistral chapter 19 in book III of the *Institutes* and the *Westminster Confession* devoted a chapter (20) to defining it. Outside of the liberty of the Christian conscience in Christ, other forms of freedom of conscience are falsehood at best and idolatrous at worst. That is why the Reformers and Puritans were concerned with freedom of conscience as a God-given grace, rather than as a human right. In the light of the greatness of God's grace, and knowing him as Lord and Savior, human rights pale into insignificance in the light of eternity. After the Reformers' time the notion of conscience was secularized, transformed into a human right as conscience before God gave way to free thinking.

Few of us would desire to live in a pre-Enlightenment world; I have no desire to decry the good done in many areas, and truth must be treasured wherever it is recognized. We have enormous material comforts that it would be difficult to live without, and the progress we benefit from reveals the complex wonder of the image of God in man. However, technological progress has paradoxically been accompanied by moral regress, and if it is not quite dark yet, it is certainly getting there. Some good has come from all this, in spite of man's sinfulness, but any forms of human freedom that have arisen from the spirit of humanism fall far short of the glorious freedom of the children of God in Christ, the freedom now revealed in the gospel through faith, which is a rumor of glory to come. As Abraham Kuyper concluded on the theme Calvinism and politics:

> in the French Revolution a civil liberty for every Christian *to agree with the unbelieving majority*; in Calvinism, a liberty of conscience, which enables every man to serve God *according to his own conviction and the dictates of his own heart*.[7]

[7] Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 109.