

❖ Other Voices ❖

Freedom is at the heart of our existence. It would seem that there is nothing about ourselves that we are more aware of.... And yet, when we question ourselves about the nature of human freedom, when we attempt to grasp, describe, and define it, it always escapes us.

SERVAIS PINCKAERS, O.P. (1925-2008), *THE SOURCES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS* (1995)

In our day-to-day thinking and conversation we tend to confuse three levels of freedom.

First, when the topic of freedom comes up, we tend to think of political freedom: ...that is, Jefferson's, Franklin's, and Washington's freedom, and by extension, the freedom sought by Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. Yet when we reflect longer and push further, we arrive, *second*, at that freedom that is the very presupposition of political freedom. It is moral freedom: the freedom on the grounds of which we are morally responsible. This aspect of freedom was most famously and lastingly developed by Immanuel Kant in his concept of autonomy....

Moving to the *third* level, we suddenly find ourselves in strange but exhilarating company. There are Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, Jonathan Edwards and Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Edith Stein and Sergius Bulgakov....

At stake on this third, most fundamental level is the question, *What constitutes the human as human? What makes us who we essentially are?*

REINHARD HÜTTER, *BOUND TO BE FREE* (2004)

The Christian Gospel is an offer of freedom which is often accused of being the opposite.

COLIN E. GUNTON (1941-2003), *ENLIGHTENMENT AND ALIENATION* (1985)

In this prayer [of quiet]...the will is occupied in such a way that without knowing how, it becomes captive; it merely consents to God allowing Him to imprison it as one who well knows how to be the captive of its lover. O Jesus and my Lord! How valuable is Your love to us here! It holds our love so bound that it doesn't allow it the freedom during that time to love anything else but You.

TERESA OF AVILA (1515-1582), *THE BOOK OF HER LIFE*, 14.2, TRANS. BY KEIRAN KAVANAUGH AND OTILIO RODRIGUEZ

There is no way to address what Christian ethics should look like in the contemporary matrix of the Western world without considering and correcting the deeply problematic opposition that is widely assumed to exist between freedom and law. Because “freedom” most often is understood as the license of autarky, any concept of “law” must be seen as random legislative imposition. Yet if “freedom” is understood as the movement of the human toward good – any good, but especially toward God – “law” can be seen as the external principle of action that gives shape and form to this freedom in its directedness toward both God and created goods.

REINHARD HÜTTER, *BOUND TO BE FREE* (2004)

Christianity teaches that you should choose the one thing needful, but in such a way that there must be no question of any choice. That is, if you fool around a long time, then you are not really choosing the one thing needful.The very truth of freedom of choice is that there must be no choice, even though there is a choice.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855), *JOURNALS AND PAPERS, II, 68*, TRANS. BY HOWARD V. HONG AND EDNA H. HONG

[In Galatians 5:13] Paul understands freedom not as the opportunity to pursue one’s own interests but to be even more at the service of others. That this is costly service can be seen in the fact that in this charter of Christian freedom he also refers frequently to the cross.... Paul may be doing something quite radical here: he is holding up traditionally feminine values as ideals for everyone, male and female.... Women too need to appropriate these values, but they need also to balance this ideal carefully against their legitimate psychological needs. Bearing the cross in freedom does not mean enduring abuse and victimhood, but living genuinely for others out of one’s own inner freedom by claiming the inheritance of the “sons of God.”

CAROLYN OSIEK, “GALATIANS” IN CAROL A. NEWSOM AND SHARON H. RINGE, EDS., *WOMEN’S BIBLE COMMENTARY* (1992)

Stations on the Road to Freedom

Discipline

If you set out to seek freedom, then learn above all things to govern your soul and your senses, for fear that your passions and longing may lead you away from the path you should follow. Chaste be your mind and your body, and both in subjection, obediently, steadfastly seeking the aim set before them; only through discipline may a man learn to be free.

Action

Daring to do what is right, not what fancy may tell you,
valiantly grasping occasions, not cravenly doubting—
freedom comes only through deeds, not through thoughts taking wing.
Faint not with fear, but go out to the storm and the action,
trusting in God whose commandment you faithfully follow;
freedom, exultant, will welcome your spirit with joy.

Suffering

A change has come indeed. Your hands, so strong and active,
are bound; in helplessness now you see your action
is ended; you sigh in relief, your cause committing
to stronger hands; so now you may rest contented.
Only for one blissful moment could you draw near to touch freedom;
then, that it might be perfected in glory, you gave it to God.

Death

Come now, thou greatest of feasts on the journey to freedom eternal;
death, cast aside all the burdensome chains, and demolish
the walls of our temporal body, the walls of our souls that are blinded,
so that at last we may see that which here remains hidden.
Freedom, how long have we sought thee in discipline, action, and suffering;
dying, we now may behold thee revealed in the Lord.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER (1906-1945), *LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON* (1953)

A key characteristic of a liberal society is its ambivalence, its propensity to tell two stories. The first of these stories is of individual freedom as the source of creativity and diversity, as the warrant of critical reason to constantly reform social institutions for the sake of the common good; this story proclaims the right of even the most apparently insignificant to make their voices heard in the debates that concern their destiny. The other story is of freedom as a voluntarism that destroys the ethical and cultural substance of tradition, leaving only the emptiness of self-indulgent whim; it is a story of a society with astonishingly sophisticated means of communication but with little more than trivia and sensationalism to communicate. This ambivalence about freedom suggests a particular role for the Christian church in the context of liberal societies: to assist those societies in telling their positive story of freedom by illuminating the sources of freedom in human dignity and by acting in solidarity with those who commit themselves to enhancing our consciousness of this dignity and to giving it practical effect.

ROBERT GASCOIGNE, *THE CHURCH AND SECULARITY: TWO STORIES OF LIBERAL SOCIETY* (2009)