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Salvation and Faith

With Special Reference to Martin Luther's and John Calvin's Ideas
A Theological Contribution to a General Theory of Religion¹

By

Edmund Weber

Introduction

The human being is forced to interpret its existence by itself. Reason is that its consciousness is free and not determined by given objects. More than that, the human consciousness is free to produce its own objects and contents. Therefore it is also free to determine itself. But this self-determination does not suspend its origin, the freedom of the human consciousness. There is no natural determination of self-understanding, and it is a sham idea to suppose that any product of self-determination is an irreversible fact. The self-consciousness does not depend on external parameters or on its own self-interpretive definitions. It is its fate to live out of its freedom, its indeterminability, and its utopian essence.

¹ This article is based on the keynote given to the Symposium in Commemoration of the 500th Birthday of John Calvin at the Evangelical Theological Seminary, Cairo, 15th of April, 2010.

Although the human being lives out of the infinite, it has - in order to realise its concrete life - to define it all the time. In this way all the non-defined existential possibilities are destroyed, and the defined ones do not have the power of eternity.

As pure constructions of an ultimately unbound consciousness all the self-definitions are extremely fragile and instable. Under any circumstances existential security cannot be guaranteed by them.

The traditional term of the conscious experience of this dialectic structure of the human existence, the conscious reflection of the unsolvable oscillation between infinite and definite, is religion.

Under this perspective religion is the common, basic, necessary, and greatest project of all the human beings.

Reducing religion to traditional forms of that experience leads to the split of mankind into two antagonistic groups: religious and non-religious people.

However, that split does not make any sense. It is theoretically useless because it ignores that both the groups have the same existential problem: the necessity of constructing a particular concept of existence and the knowledge of its indisputable instability.

Therefore, and in accordance with Thomas Luckmann's theory of modern religion, we use the traditional term religion for all these kinds of existential discourses.²

In religion the human consciousness confronts itself with its infinite basis as creative and dissolving power. The most general traditional terms of that ambiguous power are the Holy, God, and Transcendence.

All religions are dealing with that all concrete self-definitions transcending power of human consciousness. It is a power no human culture has been able to withstand.

However, religions deal with the Holy in different manners.

There are two basic streaming:

The first and most powerful one dogmatizes that succeeding in a perfect life depends on the human beings' culture or using our traditional term on human *work*. The second one completely denies that idea because no human *work* is able to withstand the creative and dissolving power of the Holy or the infinite ground of human existence.

Considering Luther's and Calvin's Ideas

In the history of the Christian religion this antagonism started from its beginning.

Its greatest historical clash, however, happened in the time of the so-called reformation when the reformers Martin Luther, John Calvin and other theologians protested the late mediaeval religion which favored concrete human *work* as the proper means ultimately defining a felicitous existence.

Both the reformers definitely denied that concept, i. e. denying that any human normative self-definition or *work* has the power to give an ultimate meaning of human existence.

² It is the proper task of serious religious studies to conceptualize that dialectical basic structure of human consciousness as a result of evolution.

Therefore, the ultimate meaning of human existence is neither intellectually identifiable nor practically manageable, nor emotionally palpable. As such it can't be actively or passively experienced at all.

That is the reason the Bible calls the human being God's image, reminding the human creatures that their essence is basically not at their intellectual, practical or emotional disposal.

Both the reformers decidedly fought the idea of human self-dependence which is the reverse of the ideology that human beings' identity is constituted by their '*works*' or by their '*culture*'.

The creature is in its essence absolutely free from its own *work*, it is essentially not self-dependent.

The opposite self-interpretation which is traditionally called 'original sin' means nothing else than human self-dependence.

Behind the idea of self-dependence we see the hidden self-idolization. The necessity of self-idolization is the logical consequence of the principal denegation that the human being is God's image a priori.

The fight against self-dependence of every description - that is the central and common subject of both the reformers.

Their religious interest consisted in the liberation of the objectively free human consciousness from the irrational idea that the human being's essence depends on its ridiculous fantasies, acts and emotions.

The most important argument of the reformers is: The human being does not depend on its own merits but on the grace of the Holy only.

If the essence of human existence is a gracious gift, then it does not belong to the competence of the human being at all.

The human beings have to live and die in this world according to the reason. Law as the materialized reason does not decide about the ultimate essence of the humans.

Both the reformers deal with this whole existential problem under the title 'salvation'. Salvation means nothing else than the liberation of human consciousness from the tyranny of the idea of the so-called justification by *work* will say from the self-delusion of self-dependence.

Instead of acknowledging itself as God's image the *work*-religion forces the human being to self-idolization.

But if the humans are not able and competent to set up their salvation, and salvation is given graciously by the Holy, what would be the correct relation to that gift?

Both the reformers agree: the gift of salvation can not be worked out but can be believed – can be believed only. Reason is: salvation is a promise, and a promise can only be an object of *faith*.

Let us say it in a different manner: life and death have got a positive meaning but there can not be any worldly evidence. In this perspective that meaning is an indefinable mystery; therefore we can only believe it.

Faith is not carrying out salvation. It subjectively registers the objectively given salvation; a salvation which was brought about by the *work* of Jesus Christ (*opus Christi*) only.

For this purpose Martin Luther developed the formulas: salvation is made 'extra nos', 'outside our reference', and salvation is 'umsonst' ('free of charge'). John Calvin intensified this concept by insisting on the doctrine that salvation is pre-destined by the will of the Holy.

Both the reformers' primary, definite, and common position was clear and plain: the complete eradication of the doctrine of justification by *work* or of self-idolisation.

That is the reason why they so uncompromisingly insisted on the doctrine that even *faith* has nothing to do with *work*. *Faith* is - like salvation - an unmerited gift or a result of God's pre-destination. *Faith* like salvation is under no circumstances at the disposal of man; it is not a bit manageable.

In order to avoid any misuse of *faith* as *work* which happened very often even in Protestantism John Calvin leaves no doubt that not only *faith* but also lack of *faith* is not at the human disposal; it is God's predestination, too.

The proofs of the reformers may be different; however, the basic argument is the same:

There is no doubt, the Lutheran doctrine of salvation as Christ's *work* only, excluding any meritorious value of *faith*, and the Calvinist doctrine of undisputable pre-destination of salvation and *faith*, both the doctrines jointly and uncompromisingly contradict the mediaeval Roman Catholic ideology that salvation would depend to some degree on human experience.

The reformers' sometimes divergent concepts are not so much directed against one another; they share one basic message which has only one spiritual enemy: the religion of self-dependence or self-idolization.

However, Protestantism, particularly of the 19th century, fell back into the religion of self-dependence. Calvinism was even misinterpreted as the spiritual root of modern capitalism propagating that worldly success would be a sign of eternal election.

In contrast to that ideology Luther and Calvin had told the people to stay in their traditional profession not trying to change their position.

Martin Luther favored the traditional agrarian culture, and John Calvin told the Christians to remain in their positions because it is God's will: to be rich or poor was pre-destined, too. John Calvin explicitly denied the right of a poor man to better his social position with the help of industry and hard *work* because his lasting poverty has been God's will.

The relapse into the religion of self-dependence is wide spread to-day.

Many Christians are of the opinion to become a right Christian one has to be a good citizen, a hard and ascetic worker in his profession, and a person who takes worldly care of the needy people, and is engaged in other progressive activities.

Protestant Pietism and to-day's charismatic movements think that *faith* has to be a deep or even overwhelming emotion.

And many orthodox and evangelical people tell us that believe in their doctrines is absolutely necessary for salvation.

All these Christian ideologies are only fragile cultural self-stabilizations which rebuild the illusion of self-dependence, and are completely contradictory to the doctrine of Martin Luther and John Calvin.

It is the proper function of religion to remind the human beings - whatever cultural behavior they may realize - of the rule of the free and unbound Holy, of the basic indefinability of human existence.

Both the reformers' doctrines fulfilled that function by attacking the self-idolization of - as the Genesis says – God's very good creature.

In spite of the fact that the self-depending religion, will say the illusionary counter-creation, dominates the human history Martin Luther precisely rediscovered and John Calvin rigorously defended the non-meritorious *faith* in unconditioned salvation.

Facing the inscrutable constitution of God's image, they did not fall into the trap of self-dependence or as our tradition says 'justification by *work*'.³

Concluding Remarks

Self-consciousness as *faith* admits the truth that all self-definitions are ultimately untenable; by this way *faith* does not misuse itself as means to get salvation or a successful existence.

It is obvious that all orthodoxies whether they are atheist or not have nothing to do with *faith*. In vain they try to deface *faith* as 'saving *work*' i.e. as an act by which human existence gets an ultimate meaning. However, salvation as it is seen by *faith* means nothing else than that the human consciousness is free, so that all concepts of ultimate meaning of human existence are completely illusionary. Human consciousness by its very nature transcends all its own creations including its noblest or most horrible self-interpretations.

Work-consciousness is always eager to produce pseudo-security by self-imposed so-called ultimate meaning of human existence.

Faith however recognizes the vital necessity of self-imposition of existence definitions, and it endures the basic instability of all these normative self-concepts. In contrast to *work* which justifies these self-concepts as substantiation of an ultimate destination *faith* radically denies its capacity and competence to justify any in reality only self-imposed so-called ultimate meaning of human existence. *Faith* restores *work* as non-justifying realization of the human being.

Faith is that formation of self-consciousness which respects the freedom or the indefinability or traditionally spoken the Holy as truth of human existence. It perceives all definitions of existence as self-imposed and therefore corruptive constructions. That is why 'failure' and 'fulfillment' as judgments on self-imposed and wrongly perceived ultimate existence definitions are in no way appropriate terms and categories to evaluate human life and death. The *faith*-consciousness is fully aware of the impossibility that a human being adjudicates an ultimate judgment upon its existence; it knows that last judgment is not left at a human being's disposal; beyond that it concludes that abandon oneself to a self-imposed ultimate meaning giving only breeds wrongly perceived but nevertheless most powerful ultimate despair or pride. In this

³ In the light of the evolutionary induced basic in-determination of human consciousness it is the proper task of Protestant theology to conceptualize *faith* as in this concern the only appropriate self-interpretation, and *work* as an illusionary but inevitable one.

way it tries to suppress the consciousness that the human being is unchangeably at the mercy of the Holy i.e. radically free. However that self-imposed suppression does not last long: in the history of human self-consciousness the Holy, the basic freedom, over and over again provokes people to opposition against orthodoxism and incites them to break out of the self-imposed fetters of *work*-illusion, and in this way they get the chance of consciously enjoying salvation, their original nature. Nevertheless, all human beings objectively share that nature even if they - turned to illusionary *work*-consciousness - do not subjectively enjoy it.