

Grace and Free Will:

Luther and Erasmus's Debate on the Freedom of the Will

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Introduction

TWENTY-FIVE years ago in 1993, IOP founder Daisaku Ikeda delivered a lecture at Harvard University entitled, 'Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first Century Civilization', in which he stated that a central and fundamental challenge for the 21st century would be correctly confronting and understanding the issue of life and death. He went on to discuss three areas in which the Mahayana Buddhist perspective can contribute to civilization and the understanding of religion's role in the 21st century and beyond. The first is Buddhism's role as a driving force for the creation of a peaceful society; the second, the role it can play in the restoration and rejuvenation of humanity; and the third, the philosophical basis it provides for the coexistence of all things.

Discussing the second, Buddhism's role in restoring humanity, he questions the purpose of religion anew and refers to the importance of examining the balance in different belief systems: between reliance on our own internal powers and reliance on powers external to ourselves. Buddhism refers to them as internal force 自力 and external force 他力 and in Christian terminology they would correspond to free will and grace. Daisaku Ikeda also states: "Without assistance we are incapable of living up to our potential. Only by relying on and merging with the eternal can we fully activate all our capabilities. Thus, we need help, but our human potential does not come from outside; it is, and always has been, of us and within us."¹ Keeping this point in mind, in this article, I examine the famous debate in Christian history between Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther on the topic of grace and free will.

Luther's *Assertio*

Martin Luther's religious reformation in the 16th century began with his taking issue with the sale of indulgences in the church. His argument, the *95 Theses*, written in October 1517, is well known. In it, he argues

that salvation is brought about through repentance and only God can grant it; it is not something that can be bought from the clergy. Here he explores the question of whether humans can, of their own will and actions, achieve salvation. The following year, during a meeting of Augustinian monks held in Heidelberg (later known as the Heidelberg Disputation), Luther declared that humans are incapable of obtaining salvation through their own effort, and that human free will is only capable of evil. This was in April 1518, 500 years ago.

After that, Luther was requested to withdraw his views but he refused, so in 1520, Pope Leo X issued a bull of the threat of excommunication, outlining 41 articles which censured Luther's arguments as heretical. Luther responded to all 41 of these points in his rebuttal, *Assertio*, in which he made the issue of grace and free will a central focus among other structural issues: the popedom, church system, ecumenical council and sacrament.

In *Assertio*, Luther first takes up the point that was his central theme during the Heidelberg Disputation: "After sin free will exists in name only and when it does what in it lies it sins mortally."² Here "when it does what in it lies"³ can also be rendered "as long as free will exercises its inherent capacity". As such, it means that Luther denies the possibility of humans receiving God's grace out of their own powers. He cites Augustine, who says, "Free will without grace can do nothing but sin,"⁴ and further cites the following passage from the Gospel according to John (15:5-6):

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. [Revised Standard Version=RSV]

Referring to these passages in which God is saying "[Y]ou can do nothing," Luther criticizes the Pope for going against the Lord's teachings by asserting that humans are capable of receiving the grace of God out of their own free will.

Erasmus's *A Discussion of Free Will*

Erasmus is said to have written his *A Discussion of Free Will* after he had read Luther's *Assertio*. The original title of his work is *De liber arbitrio διατριβή sive collatio* which means, Of Free Will: Deliberation

or Discussion. This title indicates a discursive quality quite different in character from Luther's *Assertio*. In contrast to Luther's firm assertions, Erasmus's positioning of his work as a discussion based on a comparative review suggests his critique of Luther's one-sided approach to issues of theological nature and total denial of opposing viewpoints. Erasmus believed that such attitudes would lead to discord among Christian people. He compares impartially Biblical passages that seem to affirm the existence of human free will and those that seem to deny it.

Erasmus also indicates that there are sections of the New Testament where passages affirming and denying free will coexist—occur together—even in the Pauline epistles which emphasize the grace of God most. For example, he cites Philippians 2:12–13:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. [RSV]

To explain such seemingly contradictory passages which indicate God's hand in everything while also commanding human exertion, of which there are many in the Bible, Erasmus says, "Yet these scriptural verses, which seem to be in conflict, are easily reconciled if we join the efforts of our will to the assistance of God's grace."⁵ Commenting on the passage from the Pauline epistle just mentioned, Erasmus says: "[W]ork out your own salvation with fear and trembling,' from which it can be deduced that God works in us, and that our will and our anxious concern strive along with God."⁶

This relationship between grace and free will is further explained in the following passage by Erasmus:

[C]ertain orthodox Fathers posit three stages of human activity: first comes thought; then follows the wish to carry it out; the third is actually performing it. And in the first and last stages they deny that there is any room for the working of free will. For the soul is impelled by grace alone to imagine the good, and by grace alone is brought to carry out what it has imagined. But in the second phase, wishing to carry out, grace and human will work together, grace, however, being the principal, and our will the secondary, cause. But since the whole process is attributed to him who has brought everything to completion, man has no claim to any credit for himself as

the result of a good work, given that his very ability to consent to and cooperate with God's grace is itself a gift of God.⁷

One may doubt that this passage defends free will, but what Erasmus is trying to emphasize here is that the Catholic Church admits that free will plays a very minimal role. In the concluding portion, Erasmus cites the following line from Romans 8:26 which reads: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness." Here, "weakness" does not point to human inability to perform an action. Rather, it means that humans don't have the strength to accomplish what they strive to carry out. Also, the very instance of the word "help" suggests that God's help is being given to those who try to take action. As such, Erasmus stresses that as long as the Bible contains the phrase "God's help", free will—no matter how limited its scope may be—is still retained. Erasmus continues:

And so to those who conclude: "There is nothing that man can do without the help of God's grace; therefore there are no human good works" we will oppose a conclusion which I believe is more probable: There is nothing that man cannot do with the help of God's grace; therefore all human works can be good. Therefore, as many references as there are in the Scriptures to God's help, just as many proofs are there of the existence of free will; and they are innumerable. And so, if the issue is decided on the number of scriptural proofs, the victory is mine.⁸

After writing this, Erasmus explains that entrapping people's conscience by way of indulgences and asserting that human capacity for good has been completely destroyed after original sin are both extreme exaggerations of Christian faith and it is these kinds of opposing exaggerations that are throwing the world into confusion: the conflict between the Catholic Church and the reformers. He also says that he hopes it becomes clear to the world that Luther's assertion that one should still not trust his own will or actions continues to stand even if Erasmus's own views were to be largely accepted.

Luther's *The Enslaved Will*

In December 1525, one year after the release of Erasmus's *A Discussion of Free Will*, Luther publishes *The Enslaved Will* in response, severely criticizing Erasmus. I mentioned earlier that *A Discussion of Free Will* was structured as a comparative discussion of opposing viewpoints.

Luther takes issue with this fact, arguing that Erasmus evades taking a more assertive stand on his views with the result that he gives priority to Church edicts over the authority of the Bible. Luther writes, "For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian."⁹

In response to Erasmus's conclusion that there is nothing man cannot do with the help of God's grace, Luther decided that Erasmus admits human free will indeed has no capacity to carry out anything without grace. He writes:

You make the power of free choice very slight and of a kind that is entirely ineffective apart from the grace of God. Do you not agree? Now I ask you, if the grace of God is absent or separated from it, what can that very slight power do of itself? It is ineffective, you say, and does nothing good. Then it cannot do what God or his grace wills, at any rate if we suppose the grace of God to be separated from it. But what the grace of God does not do is not good. Hence it follows that free choice without the grace of God is not free at all, but immutably the captive and slave of evil, since it cannot of itself turn to the good.¹⁰

Erasmus and Luther

The points of contention between Erasmus and Luther lie in whether human salvation is completely determined by God's grace, or whether there is some extent of human free will involved. This is a fundamental dispute within Christianity, most famously debated between the Pelagians and Augustine in the fifth century.

Pelagius believed that humans, who are God's creation, are fundamentally good and capable of exercising free will. Even if they have weakened considerably since the Fall of Man (original sin), human nature can be trusted, and they have the power to choose good of their own accord; and in the event they do choose the path of evil, they will be punished for it.

In contrast, Augustine's central focus was the influence of original sin on humanity. He maintained that even after Christ's atonement, humanity may be capable of choosing the path of evil but it does not have the power to choose good. In other words, choosing the path of faith is completely a result of God's grace with no involvement whatsoever of free will. His view was that of predestination: that whether one would receive God's salvation was already predetermined.

Luther shares Augustine's rather pessimistic view of humanity: that because they have fallen from grace and been corrupted by original sin, humans can only be inclined towards evil.

On the other hand, Erasmus's view of humanity bears a resemblance to that of the humanist philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola of the Italian Renaissance, as described in his work *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which holds that humans are somewhere between gods and beasts and can freely choose either existence. In his early work *Enchiridion militis christiani*, Erasmus cites the theologian Origen—who undoubtedly had a great impact on his thinking—and describes man in three parts: the flesh, the spirit and the soul.¹¹ The body or the flesh, he writes, is that “in which through the fault of our first parents the cunning serpent has inscribed the law of sin”. The spirit is that “in which the supreme maker has engraved with his finger, that is, his Spirit, the eternal law of goodness”. And finally, the third and middle part, the Soul, which lies between the other two and is “free to incline to whichever direction it wishes”. In addition, Erasmus stresses the importance of leading a life that follows Christ's example. In other words, to learn from Christ's life and teachings and continually strive to bring oneself closer to Christ's image.

In sharp contrast, Luther did not acknowledge the existence of any medial space. In the following passage from *The Enslaved Will*, he writes:

Furthermore, when Christ is called the way, the truth, and the life [John 14:6], and that antithetically, so that whatever is not Christ is not the way but error, not the truth but a lie, not the life but death, then it necessarily follows that free choice, since it is neither Christ nor in Christ, is included in the error, the lie, and the death.¹²

In the passage that follows this one, Luther continues to accentuate dualistic forms, listing such contrasting ideas as Christ and Satan, God's Grace and anger, truth and lies, and life and death. Luther expresses his view of man in the phrase “simultaneously righteous and a sinner”, which means that due to original sin humans are not capable of saving themselves through their own efforts but they are made righteous by one-sided grace from God. I believe it is distinctly Lutheran to pose contrasting images, such as “righteous and a sinner” or “free and servant”.¹³ Whereas Erasmus saw humans as existing in a medial space, Luther saw dualistic forces existing at the same time in a human being.

Erasmus entered the monastery after losing both parents at an early age. There, he enjoyed reading and writing literature—an art produced

by humankind. Luther was raised in a relatively wealthier family, and after entering the monastery he believed that no matter how earnestly and sincerely he followed the monastic rules he would not receive God's love. There is a striking difference in the degree to which these individuals retained trust in humanity, which is I believe greatly influenced by their temperament and character.

Perhaps this is the difference of what William James would refer to as "the tender-minded and the tough-minded",¹⁴ or "the healthy-minded person and the sick-souled person".

I would also like to mention the similarities between Erasmus and Luther. Luther denied the ability of humans to receive God's salvation through their own efforts and condemned the granting of indulgences. Highly valuing internal faith, Erasmus also criticized the acts of pilgrimages and worshipping of sacred relics and attacked the corruption of the clergy. Both individuals saw eye to eye when it came to reforming the Church. Yet history shows that Erasmus's desire to protect the Christian order was in vain as Luther's actions eventually led to a schism in the Church.

Conclusion

The debate on free will and grace has continued in Christian history even after Erasmus and Luther, manifesting in different ways. A significant event in recent years was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,¹⁵ signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church on 31 October 1999. It is considered the greatest achievement of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century. The declaration states that both doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century would be made invalid (which I'm sure Erasmus would be very happy about). The declaration also states that "all people are incapable of attaining salvation by their own abilities" (which I'm sure would make Luther very happy as well). It took almost 500 years to restore the relationship between them, a fact that makes one feel the weight of history.

To conclude, in light of Daisaku Ikeda's Harvard University lecture, which I mentioned at the beginning of this article, in which he asked us to examine the balance between grace and free will—I can say that when viewed by someone who is not a Christian, the difference between Erasmus's and Luther's positions on this is actually very small (which might be testified by the Joint Declaration). And yet, such fine differences in doctrine led to a schism in the Church—a warning and reminder of the frightening aspect of religion, one we mustn't forget.

Notes

- ¹ Daisaku Ikeda, *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda* (New York: Weatherhill, 1996), 158.
- ² *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe, Bd. 7, S. 142, trans., Clarence H. Miller, *An Assertion of All The Articles of Martin Luther Which Were Quite Recently Condemned by A Bull of Leo X, Article 36, Collected Works of Erasmus (CWE)*, vol. 76 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 301.
- ³ The doctrine of *facere quod in se est* or *meritum de congruo*: that God will not withhold his grace from those who do their very best. *CWE*, vol. 76, 32.
- ⁴ The first sentence of chapter 4 in Augustine's *Concerning the Spirit and the Letter*. *CWE*, vol. 76, 301.
- ⁵ Erasmus von Rotterdam, *Ausgewählte Schriften (AS)*, hrsg. v. W. Welzig, Darmstadt 1995, Bd. 4, S. 120., trans., Peter Macardle, *A Discussion of Free Will, CWE*, vol. 76, 58.
- ⁶ *AS*, Bd. 4, S. 144, *CWE*, vol. 76, 69.
- ⁷ *AS*, Bd. 4, S. 140, 142, *CWE*, vol. 76, 67.
- ⁸ *AS*, Bd. 4, S. 156, *CWE*, vol. 76, 73–74.
- ⁹ *Luthers Werke*, hrsg. v. Otto Clemen (*Clemen Ausgabe*), Berlin 1966, Bd. 3, S. 97, trans., Philip S. Watson, *The Bondage of the Will, Luther Works*, vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 19–20.
- ¹⁰ *Clemen Ausgabe*, Bd. 3, S. 126, *Luther Works*, vol. 33, 66–67.
- ¹¹ *The Handbook of The Christian Soldier*, trans., Charles Fantazzi, *CWE*, vol. 66, 1988, 51.
- ¹² *Clemen Ausgabe*, Bd. 3, S. 283, *Luther Works*, vol. 33, 281–82.
- ¹³ *Christianus homo omnium dominus est liberrimus, nulli subiectus. Christianus homo omnium servus est officiosissimus, omnibus subiectus. D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe, Bd. 7, S. 49, trans., W. A. Lambert, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 277. A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.
- ¹⁴ 'The Present Dilemma in Philosophy', in John J. McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 365.
- ¹⁵ The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification', The Lutheran World Federation website, accessed 18 July 2018, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Joint%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Doctrine%20of%20Justification.pdf>.

Author's Biography

Masahiro Yaginuma is research fellow of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and part-time instructor at Soka University. Having received a PhD in Humanities from Soka University in 2012, he currently specializes in the history of Western thought, especially thought of Erasmus. His published works include 'Erasmian Quotation from St. Jerome in *Antibarbarorum liber*' (2012) and 'Introduction and Translation of "FESTINA LENTE" from *Adages* of Erasmus' (2010).