

# Harvard Theological Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/HTR>

Additional services for *Harvard Theological Review*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## Luther and Others

Francis A. Christie

Harvard Theological Review / Volume 5 / Issue 02 / April 1912, pp 240 - 250  
DOI: 10.1017/S001781600001347X, Published online: 03 November 2011

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S001781600001347X](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S001781600001347X)

### How to cite this article:

Francis A. Christie (1912). Luther and Others. Harvard Theological Review, 5, pp 240-250 doi:10.1017/S001781600001347X

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

*LUTHER AND OTHERS*

FRANCIS A. CHRISTIE

MEADVILLE THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

The recent books on the life of Luther by Dr. Preserved Smith and Dr. A. C. McGiffert may well rouse new consideration of Luther's religious experience. America was dominated by Calvinism, but there is small reward today in going back to Calvin, who applied the logic of a legal mind to a subject beyond the sphere of jurisprudence. Luther, on the other hand, was trying to utter the apprehensions of a great heart. Calvin's thought is dead. Luther's heart still throbs. We shall perhaps understand our own hearts more clearly if we apply religious psychology to his.

Religious psychology is not all pathological. True, some of its devotees write of ecstasies and trances and convulsive conversions and talking in tongues and the loss of the sense of personality. They tell of subliminal selves and intellectual visions and visual or auditory hallucinations. They describe primitive or still surviving methods of inducing these states by wine or dancing or howling, or by starvation and repression of sleep, by terrifying images or by hypnotic suggestion. If a man demurs that he is seeking for something still rational, he is answered that religion is not rational, and then, if honest, he may confess that he has no religion, since he has none of these pathological experiences, and in fact does not desire them. Such a man may take great comfort in Luther. That "Philistine of genius" understood religious experience as the activity of normal and healthy consciousness, and he understood that this normal and healthy consciousness was evoked by truth. He meant that people could have a complete and perfect religious experience without tampering with the balance of a clear and self-possessed mind and without getting under or over the threshold of natural consciousness.

It is true that Luther was not a rationalist, and he would, if on the scene today, heartily indorse our "anti-intellectualists." He certainly did not identify religion with the acceptance of an opinion on logical grounds. He would agree that faith is not logical

knowing, not the ethical response of the sense of obligation, not the same thing as the perception of beauty. He would say that it is a form of consciousness specifically different from all these,—namely, faith or the religious consciousness. But in his inelegant way he would declare that faith is always an activity of a wide-awake, unbefuddled consciousness. He would also declare that this activity has its stimulus in the old familiar truth of the Fatherhood of God, and that the truth is given in a concrete human image of God, namely, in the Jesus of whom we read in the Bible and who is preached in church. He would insist that religion is psychologically intelligible and healthy, and that to be religious does not require any injections of new forces from without or any impartation of new capacities or new organs. Religious experience comes when the truth essential to that sphere is presented to a man just as he is, without supernatural additions, and when the man's self responds in the psychological manner proper for such a truth. Luther called the truth in question the Word of God. The psychological response he called faith.

It will be objected to this that something has been omitted, namely, the action of God, since Luther spoke of faith as divinely caused. We are, however, omitting what for Luther was a constant factor in all experience. Luther did not mean, in speaking of the *gift* of faith, that an individual miracle broke through the natural nexus of experience so that the divine causation of faith is a supernatural interruption. He meant that the whole natural nexus, whether we mean things physical or things psychical, is grounded in the eternal divine will.<sup>1</sup> I am descended from parents who owed their being to parents before them and so on back to Adam, but the whole human line of descent in time has its cause in the timeless action of God. I am therefore in proper sense a creation of God without a supernatural intervention in my case. So God works timelessly through a truth transmitted historically from generation to generation and communicated by one mind to another. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. The operation of the truth in time is psychologically intelligible, not a miraculous intrusion, and yet the gift of God. This was Luther's answer to the Zwickau prophets.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Otto, *Darwinismus und Religion*, p. 26.

Again it will be said that it cannot be so simple a story of a truth and its natural effect on consciousness, since in view of the fact that the truth did not evoke the religious psychological response in all, Luther held firmly to the doctrine of election and meant that God did not will the salvation of all. The answer is that Luther did indeed indulge in contradictory ideas, but that the main fact remains as stated. He did not hold the idea of election on general philosophical grounds, but as interpretation of the obvious fact that some men respond to a truth and others do not. The idea of election as a permanent reprobation of some is a too quick despair about this melancholy fact, and a little argument on our part might induce Luther to modify it with advantage to his general view. Our response to this truth or that has its own natural time, and the time is not the same for every man. For the youth in Wordsworth's "Excursion" the sunrise over the ocean's liquid mass was a "high hour of visitation from the living God," but some youths remain insensitive. Music may be mere sound to me, while it brings all heaven before your eyes. These cases of dulness and insensitiveness are no warrant for a doctrine of limited election. They do not prove a hopeless incapacity. They mean only that for some the day of visitation has not yet come, that the soul is not yet ready to make the proper human response. We may have no off-hand explanation of the inertia, of the fact of the *not yet*, but so long as it is a case of a given truth securing a normal human response we do not need to interpret the human delay as an inconsistency in the divine causality. The associated doctrine of man's total corruption of will and affection before the experience of faith simply cannot be reconciled with Luther's real and fundamental truth, which is that the religious truth wakens a normal religious response without any reconstitution of human faculties.

We are therefore ready to consider what the religious truth is and what the response of faith is, and this we shall do in complete independence of Lutheran theology, though with fidelity to the actual experience of Luther and to his account of that experience.

What, then, is the religious truth or Word of God, and what is the response of faith? Luther was reared in a circle sensitive to

fear and terror. Satan visited men with calamities, and the wrath of God menaced the sinner with eternal torment. God was the terrifying avenger of sin. Piety meant the practices and use of agencies by which one cancelled offences and merited mercy. The sincere and sensitive conscience that could not claim moral perfection must live in anxiety, and the anxiety was engrossing, paralyzing the free play of life and checking the spontaneity of active moral work with other men in the world's common interests. The malady here was that for its engrossing object consciousness had God as the wrathful avenger of sin. Luther won redemption, renewal, justification, salvation, eternal life—all these being the same thing—when his consciousness found another object than the wrathful, avenging power. The new object that he found was the infinitely gracious and forgiving and loving being whom the Christian calls *Abba*, Father. In his wretchedness and anxiety there was brought home to him the conviction that the power claiming from him a perfect life was all friendship and graciousness to him in spite of all his defects and sinfulness. This was not an opinion entertained on any logical ground. It was brought home to him. It established itself as truth to his soul, and thereby inevitably, spontaneously, irresistibly, arose the emotion blended of humility and trust and gratitude and joy which he called *Glaube*, or faith, the sense of complete liberation from fear, freedom from constraint of external mandate, freedom to do all the good which a spirit thus humble and trusting and sure of friendship in the Holy Authority would fain and naturally do. The vital point is that Luther discovered a new object, namely, God as Jesus presented God, and that it was discovery, not wish or surmise.

To apprehend this vital point adequately we need to observe the present situation. The starting-point for vast numbers of men today is not anxiety and fear before the avenger of human imperfection. The object that confronts them is not a God of wrath, but a world indifferent to the human soul and its ideals, its self-condemnation, its yearnings, its homesickness for the perfect.

“Nature whose free, light, cheerful air  
Oft made thee in thy gloom despair.”

The consequence for such men is not the paralysis of fear, but the paralysis of moral indifference, moral scepticism, the chill of spiritual loneliness in an unspiritual world. The salvation of such men comes when they discover through the veil of the phenomenal world a Being of holy perfection towards whom the high human ideals go out in embrace and who embraces man's soul through the very constraint of those ideals. When a man in this modern situation discovers that object, then he cries out that underneath are the everlasting arms, then he too is rejoicing and free, then for him too begins the spontaneous activity of all his higher nature. He too has awe and humility, love and peace and trust and liberation and enthusiasm. He too has all the rich emotional content that Luther called faith, and he finds in it a sense of linkage and affinity with the eternal, the timelessly worthwhile being. He too has salvation and knows eternal life.

It is obvious that the keenest interest attaches to the discovery of the object. What is that discovery? How is it that the verity becomes truth for a man's consciousness? In considering Luther in his relation to these questions, we need to discriminate between his retention of the definitions of the ecumenical creeds and the value they had for religious experience itself. We need to be free also to judge his experience by the aid of a modern understanding of religious cognition.

Luther was bound not to be a heretic, and we need not try to prove him one, but when Luther discovered the God who is compassionate love, it was not a discovery of the Trinity. As a conservative child of Christianity he held the doctrine, and in theological utterances seemed to place a high value on it. Even so he spoke of it as incomprehensible mystery which thought could not appropriate. It must be "*ungemeistert geglaubt.*" Yet he omitted it from his popular catechism and does not use it in his expositions of faith. The propositions of the Athanasian creed were not a part of the "Word of God," of the 'Gospel,' of the truth productive of religious experience. Luther does speak of the action of the Holy Spirit in this experience, but when examined the utterances are inapplicable to a third person in trinity. They are but variant expressions for the action of the Gospel, the Word, when he wishes to say that God acts by means of the

Word.<sup>2</sup> What Luther discovered was not God as trinity, but God as a gracious will, bestowing compassion and help, a will that is illustrated by the father of the prodigal son.

Luther discovered this divine Father in a man. Undoubtedly he kept the historic idea of the two natures in one person, and how valiantly he could use the *communicatio idiomatum* to meet all the difficulties can be seen in the disputation of February 28, 1540.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand it is equally certain that he consciously and clearly distinguished between such theological reflection and the meaning of the deity of Christ for religious experience. In that relation, he said, the union of two natures in one person is a belief that helps no man in the least.<sup>4</sup> Early, in the cloister of Erfurt, he concluded that to confess Christ as God meant to acknowledge spiritual good as received from him,—and Melanchthon formulated this: to know Christ was not to contemplate his two natures and the modes of incarnation, but to know the beneficent action of Christ on the soul. To the apprehension of religious experience the deity of Christ was not then a metaphysical truth. The meaning for experience is that Christ performs a divine office for men, namely, in revealing the gracious character of divine Fatherhood. There are passages in which Luther dwells on the thought that all believers may serve as Christ to others. The grace that comes to them through faith makes them, too, more than man; it deifies them.<sup>5</sup> Luther discovered the heavenly Father through the medium of a man. A man was the Word of God. Whatever divine majesty of being in an ontological sense belonged to this man was not recognizable in the religious experience. The object contemplated is "*lauterer Mensch*," Jesus as he was between the cradle and the cross. When theologians "bore through the sky with their heads and look around in heaven, they find no one, for Christ lives in the manger and in the woman's bosom." "The sophists have depicted him to show how he is at once both God and man—but this is only a sophistic knowledge of the Lord Christ. For Christ is not called

<sup>2</sup> Otto, *Die Anschauung vom heiligen Geiste bei Luther*, 1899.

<sup>3</sup> Drews, *Disputationen*, p. 535.

<sup>4</sup> Erlangen Edition, vol. xii, p. 163.

<sup>5</sup> Weimar Edition, vol. ii, p. 248.

Christ for the reason that he has two natures. How does that concern me? Rather does he bear this glorious and comforting name from the office and work which he took on himself." In preaching, said Luther, act as if you had a Jew to convert. At the outset be silent about Jesus as the Son of God. "I should say he was a man like any other, sent from God, and tell what benefit God has done to man through him. If now I had brought that home to his heart, so that his heart should burn within him and have love and pleasure in Christ, then I would carry him further to believe that Christ was God." Yet Luther would certainly not guarantee certainty of metaphysical comprehension. "He who will brood and reckon how to make it rhyme that God and man are one person, let him brood on forever and see what he gets out of it. Many have lost their wits over that reckoning and rhyming."

Luther spoke of Jesus as a born Jew, a child that ate milk and honey at his mother's breast, a boy that was stupid and ignorant like other small children. There is no room for doubt that Luther, like Augustine, meant *mediator tanquam homo*. As a man Jesus revealed to other men the gracious character of God. For the most part, when Luther spoke of the presence of Jesus to men in the sixteenth century, he meant his presence as the word in memory, the truth preached as it had been preached through the ages. The exception to this is his incongruous insistence about the omnipresence of Jesus in the sacramental bread and wine, and for this insistence there is a special motive.<sup>6</sup>

If we ask, then, what does it mean to discover the heavenly Father in this Jewish man subject to human limitations, the answer is plain. This Jewish man had a measureless love for undeserving sinners, living and dying for their spiritual good and their eternal blessedness, and this man was always and continually responsive to the divine wish and will. His sheer beneficence and graciousness, his human character and disposition, was a revelation of the heart and disposition of God towards men. Did Luther apprehend this in mere reflection? Did Luther believe that the man imaged God's disposition because he was told so in the gospels and epistles? Other men were told and

<sup>6</sup> Von Kügelgen, *Luthers Auffassung der Gottheit Christi*, pp. 55 ff.



remained cold. What was told became for Luther personal revelation,—the experience of faith; and the description of faith as we have heard it shows that it was no mere reflective assent to a justified conclusion. It was not assent but consent. After his Christian instruction from the Bible, from Augustine, from Bernard, from Staupitz, he had before him the picture of the great historic fact of Jesus. When he in his wretchedness of self-condemnation, in his need of complete love and favor from the Holy One who claimed holiness of him, saw the man of Galilee, himself the oracle of righteous demands and at the same time of measureless and self-sacrificing love to the meritless, he found in that character the same power of necessitation over his inner being as belonged to the power of right. It was supremely valid to him. Immediately, without a conscious process of reflective thought, there was a rejoicing consent of heart and conscience. It was an immediate apprehension and valuation by feeling—a non-logical affirmation of an eternal and unconditioned worth. That character, that personal being, had supreme constraining necessitation for him, and his own heart and will gave unreasoning direct consent. To say this same thing in other terms, the eternal divine Power had revealed to Martin Luther His gracious fatherhood through a man whose character and deeds imaged that fatherhood. The assertion that such religious faith is not a rational act means only that it was not a process of reflective reasoning. The object contemplated was not consciously referred to an inclusive concept. It was nevertheless an act of reason in a sense of reason higher than the logical understanding. Feeling is the act of reason when it is response to that which is valid object for the Ideas of the reason. Many of us under scientific education were taught that feeling was not an organ of discovery, but moral and aesthetic and religious experiences have shown us the contrary. In these highest activities of our nature, which are feeling activities, there is a glimpsing of an eternal and absolute worth, the worth that belongs to eternal and absolute being shimmering through the particular object of our experience. It is recognition—even though it is not the kind of recognition that the logical understanding makes. It is direct recognition without a clear consciousness of the standard by which we measure

the worth and identify the object as supremely worthy. But the standard is in our possession. It is a latent and obscure possession in the depth of our spirit, and it is the difficult work of critical philosophy to bring our possession to light as the Ideas of the Reason. The direct non-logical recognitions of the religious consciousness are possible by virtue of these deeply hidden Ideas.

It is profitable for us of American inheritance to turn from Luther to Edwards. At first we have a sense of complete contrast. The figure of the historical Jesus does not belong to the preaching of Edwards. When he had brought his hearers to the intense religious experience by which they could claim salvation, he observed that Christ was absent from their thought, and needed to remind them that Christ had purchased their salvation. Christ belonged to their theological reflection, not to their religious experience, just as Trinity and Two Natures were institutional truth for Luther. Edwards, however, is not a complete contrast to Luther. His "word of God" was called Divine Sovereignty. Every parishioner knew that word and believed it, but few had experienced it. The homiletic method of Edwards was to inculcate a sense of complete human degradation and moral inability, to intensify the sense of need by vivid pictures of the eternal torment for sin, to win acquiescence to the claim that God was absolutely just in so avenging sin. Then he presented to his shuddering hearers the ineffable clemency of God, who out of sheer sovereignty of good pleasure gave infinite bliss to some of the completely depraved and undeserving mass of men. Thereupon some from the depths of their own self-condemnation praised such sheer absolute mercifulness with disinterested approbation, aware now of the glory of such a graciousness, tasting the sweetness and the beauty of such a will, consenting to it with all the ardor of their being. Such a will as God's free sovereign will in the bestowal of mercy was recognized as absolutely worthy. The conception had always been in their minds. Now they had appropriated its truth with the humble, disinterested, rejoicing consent of a judgment of feeling. It was this direct aesthetic appropriation of feeling that Edwards regarded as experience of God,—and no one need gainsay him, even if he deems

that there was a perturbing error in this presentation of the Word of God. Men were indeed brought to a sense of present eternal being, the latent *a priori* capacities of their spirit being brought to play even by an imperfect presentation of the heavenly fatherhood. Edwards's preaching method was an effort to psychologically expel from consciousness those objections to the Calvinist conception of God which he himself had had to overcome. He quelled the sense of the injustice and cruelty belonging to the Calvinist God and he intensified the residue of conception which imperfectly stood for the Fatherhood of God. In comparison with Luther's experience there is an evident artificiality. In the Northampton parish God was recognized through an idea. In Erfurt God was seen through the person of a man. Edwards could have achieved his end with Mohammedan ideas. Luther's experience was Christian—and due to the historical Jesus.

The American who thinks of Edwards will think also of Channing. The youthful Channing had a religious experience which he always remembered with awe. He read in Hutcheson of man's capacity for "disinterested affection"—a cold and inexpressive term for an intense meaning—and then the full glory of such a dignity or divinity of human nature burst upon him. The infinitely worthful personal character was revealed to him, and, as the description given of the experience shows, it was a recognition of God through the human nature that imaged God. Here was the same kind of feeling recognition that belonged to Luther's experience, although the antecedent psychological steps are different. At that time Channing saw God through man, the analogue of God. His Christ was the Arian Christ, not a man. Later the Arian conception faded away, and Jesus became for him the supreme illustration of the divinity of human nature, the image of divine character. And the divine character so imaged was just the heavenly fatherhood of infinite love that Luther preached. The leading difference is that to the Boston preacher Jesus, being a measure of the human highest, is more than a comforter of conscience, is more distinctly the inspiration of an historic social work whereby the divine humanity seen in Jesus may find complete expression in the life of the community.

Dr. Martineau, again, springs to mind. Influenced by Priestley,

he held to a religion of divine causation. That thought was at first his word of God. Under Channing's influence he added the "religion of conscience." Now man was seen as the true image of God in proportion as man wins disinterested love. Finally Martineau arrived at what he called the religion of the spirit, by which he meant an ascent beyond reflection to personal communion, an exchange of love between the human spirit and the divine. He was passing from the apprehension of religion as devout thought to the apprehension of it as spiritual emotional experience, and this emotional recognition of God found increasing stimulus and provocation in the contemplation of the man Jesus, who was "the supreme witness to the spiritual union of man and God; a union which, were it constant as in him, might be deemed an Incarnation."

Luther experienced God through a man presented to his consciousness. So did Channing. So did Martineau. All alike meant the historical Jesus. In the case of Channing and Martineau, Jesus is seen in relation to the spiritual personality of man in the fulness of its meaning, and less exclusively in relation to the distresses of conscience. For all alike Jesus was, in the profound sense in which De Wette used the term, a spiritual symbol. He was a person who stirs the slumbering powers of our spirit to the recognition of the Eternal and Unconditioned Holy Father of Love. This is not Sabellianism. It does not identify the man and God. It means that through the man we glimpse the spiritual being in whom our being has its coessential ground and whose friendship revealed is our peace and the release of all our higher energy.