

Michael Welker (Ed.)

Quests for Freedom

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Michael Welker

Introduction

Concepts and Practices of Freedom in the Biblical Traditions and in Contemporary Contexts

Michael Welker

In his contribution “What it is to be Free,” the philosopher Rüdiger Bittner argues that freedom is marked by a degree, by a caliber. “Your freedom is nothing but your world’s unhostility” – and our world can be more or less hostile or unhostile towards us. He warns against “high-minded statements both of individual and political freedom.” We should rather ask where we are “held back, where we are oppressed, and what to do about it,” where we can avoid, circumvent or overcome barriers. Thus, we should understand freedom as “a direction of some of our endeavors.” With this proposal, Bittner’s proposal fits in with those contributions that have suggested focusing our attention on “concepts of freedom” with a concentration on “practices and contexts of freedom.”

I.

Several of the chapters presented deal with the topic of freedom as liberation from slavery, mainly in the biblical traditions, but with perspectives on contemporary contexts (Manfred Oeming and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza); in one case a whole people is concerned (OT), in the other case one of the weakest groups in society, the female slaves (NT). Ron Sodalter and Katharina von Kellenbach explore exemplary contemporary situations of slavery and oppression.

In the following parts several chapters consider political and legal attempts to identify directions in which not only individual but also communal endeavors work against existing or potential limitations and barriers or try to prevent the establishment of barriers that hinder or limit individuals and communities “to do this or that.” They focus on the ancient Greek notions of the freedom of speech in the assembly (*parrhesia*), the equal right to speak publicly (*isegoria*), equality before the law (*isonomia*) and the equality of polis leadership (*isokratia*) as

elements of the ability of individuals or groups in the society to govern themselves (*eleutheria*) (Jan Gertz, Jürgen van Oorschot, Larry Hurtado, Peter Lampe).

II.

Important attempts to transcend the oligarchic limitations of these strivings are explored in the Old Testaments traditions: The remembrance of the successful emancipation and liberation of the people from foreign oppression and from captivity becomes the basis for a pathos of release and emancipation from foreign rulership in general (Patrick Miller). Various attempts to limit the situation of individual slavery on the one hand and the introduction of a neighborhood ethos, a fraternal ethos and even an ethos of love on the other aim at the establishment of morals that support mutual respect and care. Some contributions also reflect on religious attempts to limit political power over individuals, groups or a whole society by understanding and respecting God as the source and guarantee of freedom (Jürgen van Oorschot, Jan Gertz, Beverly Gaventa, Hans-Joachim Eckstein and others).

This religious claim tries to relativize the barriers between social classes, even between the king and the (full) citizens. It can go hand in hand with an ambivalent rhetoric of “slavery” with respect to the human relation to God (Jan Gertz, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Hans-Joachim Eckstein), but also with “covenantal” reflections that see God in a perspective of kenosis and partnership. Religious thought also tries to deal with the topic of individual and communal self-jeopardizing, which even uses religious, legal and moral means (sin). It even tries to deal with the barriers erected by powers such as death, which seem to set ultimate limits to freedom (Patrick Miller, Jan Gertz, Hans-Joachim Eckstein, Beverly Gaventa).

III.

Several chapters show that some of the aspects and directions mentioned above are more or less dominant or weakened in specific biblical contexts and traditions, depending on situations and contexts. With regard to the topic of slavery these tendencies were partly criticized and partly justified as strategies to stimulate emergent processes of transformation (Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, Larry Hurtado, Hans-Joachim Eckstein). Several contributions explore biblical attempts to develop exemplary patterns of thought, behavior and action that enhance the sensitivity toward typical forms of mutual hindrance,

impediment and subordination. These prohibitive and defensive strategies can move towards (or can be generated by) the development of forms of mutual honoring and care that enhance the other person's freedom. The interest in the development of these patterns of thought and behavior is characteristic of many biblical traditions and contexts. Paul can connect an ethos of creative self-limitation in favor of others with the recommendation "to become slave to one another through love" (Gal 5:13). Several biblical traditions correlate these ethical patterns with an appreciation of attempts to understand and respect the freedom of God (in doxology) as a source of human freedom (Beverly Gaventa).

Over against these observations, a warning against texts centered on a male elite with an imperial rhetoric of enslavement to God brought the challenge to discern imperial rhetoric or anti-imperial discourse in the Pauline corpus. In what forms and under which conditions do religious strategies to support emergent transformations of social and moral traditions tend to serve appeasement and camouflage (Elisabeth Schuessler-Fiorenza) and turn into sterile forms of mere moral appeal?

IV.

Another tradition of thought, introduced with respect to Patristic texts, centers on the differentiation of freedom as *autexousia*, as self-control, "innate to all human beings," and as *eleutheria*, the search for and the ability to enjoy beatitude (Cyril Hovorun). Both dimensions are seen in the "inner realm" of the human person. This stimulates challenges to differentiate and, in the line with Reformation thought, to relate "natural capacity" and "spiritual dignity" (Risto Saarinen) and directs attention to the potentials of "free will" and the individual moral and religious experience.

Several chapters indicate that the anthropological discourse correlated with these interests should on the one hand not lose the differentiated field of experience and insight described above and on the other hand should rise to the challenge of contemporary scientific anthropological research (Friederike Nüssel). Reformation thought anticipates modern ideas such as "freedom as a matter of individual fulfillment in individual identity and distinctiveness" versus "individual and communal fulfillment in the context of communal fulfillment and sacrifice" or in "changing political and economic conditions of life and institutions" (Dirk Smit). This leads to the questions how Christian symbols, rhetoric and practices have been able to shape and will continue to shape a multidimensional "ethos of belonging" (Dirk Smit), an "ethos of commitment" (Carver Yu) or an "ethos of tolerance" (Jindrich

Halama), a tolerance that leaves room for the appreciation of radically different types of Christianity and different religious and moral traditions.

V.

These directions of thought can be correlated with the question of how dominant religious traditions such as Roman Catholicism are able to relate today to human rights ethics and policies and a cosmopolitanism that tries to mobilize against political and religious “imbalances” in the name of freedom (Francis Fiorenza, Susan Abraham). Of interest is the compatibility of religious thought with legal and political evolutions that we connect with the notion of freedom. Legal and political dynamics are expected to work against a mere rhetoric of moral appeals and Sunday speech declarations. In the opposite direction, how and on what basis can insights of the biblical traditions illuminate and overcome shortcomings in political and moral visions of leading contemporary voices (Michael Welker)? Can we make the “Spirit” plausible as a religious and cultural reality and as a measure of freedom?