

Michael Welker (Ed.)

# Quests for Freedom

Biblical – Historical – Contemporary

Neukirchener Theologie

## 5.

# THE DIALECTICS OF FREEDOM AND MODERNITY

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### Introduction

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The last part of the book starts with perspectives on the topic of freedom by Asian scholars, respectively scholars with Asian roots, engaging Western classics in the contexts of economic and ecological brutalism and the (post)colonial climate. Carver Yu (*Freedom and Commitment - Christian Tradition and Liberal Humanism*) engages what he takes as “the two most powerful essays in shaping the idea of freedom in our contemporary culture,” namely Isaiah Berlin’s Oxford inaugural address “Two Concepts of Liberty” and John Rawls’ “A Theory of Justice.”

He first investigates Berlin’s option for “negative freedom” and his rejection of any notion of freedom as “freedom for.” He sees the rejection of any idea of the common good as a result of bitter experiences of totalitarian regimes. But he questions whether a vision of negative freedom alone can be practically implemented without the support of moral commitments, particularly in the context of contemporary economic and ecological threats.

Rawls’ vision of a society upholding “justice as fairness” and the attempt to direct moral and legal orientation toward “the greatest benefits of the least advantaged” offers in his view a more convincing approach toward individual and communal freedom. But one should acknowledge that it is loaded by a latent ethos of empathy, mercy and love. In Rawls’ anthropological and epistemological presuppositions, he sees himself abstracting human existence from the natural and bio-

logical needs of self-sustenance and from the “life-supporting system that nurtures ... (and educates concrete individuals) into a full human person.”

He argues that a Christian ethos of good neighborhood in covenantal partnership, ultimately conditioned by love, can confront the challenges of natural limitations and the sinful distortions in social and economic life that generate pretenses of human freedom. He argues for an appreciation of the divine and human freedom in the form of free self-limitation in favor of others.

The cosmopolitan and postcolonial visions of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Pheng Cheah are reconstructed and presented in Susan Abraham’s contribution (*Freedom in Postcolonial Perspective*). Arguing for the need to relate freedom to liberation and questioning the “assumption that there is already a positive reality called ‘postcolonial freedom,’” she presents two critical readings of the modern classic ethics of Kant. Spivak (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*) shows how much most national liberation movements and their results (“citizenship, sovereignty and nationhood”) are grounded in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century European Enlightenment. She uncovers Kant’s ethnocentric and classist (against the “raw man”), patriarchal and even racist assumptions. Like already Hegel, she sees that in Kant freedom sadly becomes a mere desire.

Cheah (*Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*) explores the framework of “European arguments for organismic vitalism” as a basis for Kant’s ideal of a cosmopolitan federation. He identifies “three matrices of freedom in Kant – the transcendental idea of freedom, the concept of culture and the idea of organism.” How fruitful or how dangerous is the organismic metaphor, particularly in connection with the nationalist spirit? Cheah shows that Kant does not develop a consistent attitude toward organic life. His own thought and all forms of political organicism suffer from “irreducible heteronomy.” They threaten to turn well-meant projects of instantiated freedom into ambivalent and even dangerous specters.

Susan Abraham offers a subtle reconstruction that differentiates respect for Kant’s genius and the philosophical merits of his transcendental framework and the shortcomings in his practical and political visions and even ideological blockages. She argues that a consistent resistance against old and new forms of colonial violence and constructive work for participatory and representative democracies must be directed concretely. The poor women of the South should not be “subsumed into a general category of freedom.” And the critique of ideological and colonial nationalism should not lead to a dismissal of “the living nation people” and territorialized approaches to liberation. “Freedom is not an escape from one’s historical and cultural condi-

tions.” And these include not only political but also the religious and theological narratives of freedom and practices of liberation.

The last two contributions to the book – by an American Roman Catholic and a German Protestant theologian – turn to such narratives and reflect their orienting potentials. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (*Freedom and Human Rights: The Cosmopolitan Context of the Justification of Human Rights in Roman Catholicism*) investigates the affirmation of human rights in Roman Catholic teaching (papal teaching and Vatican II) after World War II. He illuminates as a background of the new view “an emerging cosmopolitan understanding of human rights” and the growing respect for their “social dimensions.” Already in his 1942 Christmas message, Pope Pius XII connects the affirmation of human rights and his critique of totalitarian societies. He not only affirms respect for human dignity-connected fundamental personal rights, but also the rehabilitation of the juridical order. This leads in the following papal messages and statements to a growing explicit respect for international organizations that care for the juridical and political ordering of the global community. Schüssler Fiorenza shows how also the following popes and the Vatican Council respect the United Nations and the declarations for human dignity, freedom and peace.

A growing concern becomes the increasing disparity between the rich and the poor nations of the world and the call for economic justice and ethics of solidarity. This concern has parallels in the evolution of the declarations and documents of the United Nations, which developed lists of social rights and later environmental rights. At the same time the long shadow of the atrocities of the Third Reich and other totalitarian regimes remained present and conditioned precautions against political appeals to emergency, exception and pre-emption.

Schüssler Fiorenza reconstruct the complex global history of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the shifting political and ideological moods. He argues that the voices and documents of the Catholic teaching, particularly on the disparity between the rich and the poor nations, became a very strong moral and political factor in the international discourse on justice and freedom. Cosmopolitan multicentric perspectives and a thorough balance between the appeal to efficient leadership on the one hand and the warning against dangers of emergency legislation on the other have been developed. Definite needs for further development in Roman Catholic teaching on human dignity and freedom are finally diagnosed at the frontiers of equality of gender within the church and the legitimacy of a plurality of religious viewpoints in contemporary societies.

The contribution by Michael Welker (*Divine Spirit and Human Freedom*) enters the contemporary academic and media discourse on concepts of freedom in Euro-American environments. It encourages

facing the future discourse on the most important difference between dominant notions of the spirit – both human and divine – in the occidental philosophical and metaphysical traditions and the common sense shaped by them, and in biblical traditions, which offer a much more nuanced and multidimensional view. In both anthropology and theology an organismic pluralism should be discovered and treasured, which could provide great potential for promoting liberation and freedom.

The challenging figure of the “pouring out of the Spirit” offers a direct critique of thinking in binary or only triadic “relational constellations.” In an explicitly subversive mode, it focuses in biblical Spirit-Classics on constellations in which male and female, old and young, even male and female slaves become ennobled and empowered – and this in definitely patriarchal, gerontocratic and slaveholder societies. Tribalistic and ethnocentric perspectives become relativized and critiqued by the pouring of the Spirit of God upon human beings from different nations, cultures, histories and languages. This doesn’t lead to the promotion of spiritual fantasies, but to the discovery of different capacities and gifts, different deficiencies and needs, and the constitution of an organismic pluralism on all levels of individual, communal and social life.

Complex anthropologies, complex forms of social and societal order, and a strong appreciation of pluralistic forms of organization in social and political, in religious and cultural, in academic and civil societal environments can be discovered, envisioned, organized and institutionalized in the light of the spirit of freedom. In Spirit-Christologically oriented contexts, the differentiated dynamics of a strong culture of mutual diaconal support and help, the differentiated dynamics of prophetic engagement in moral and political critique, based on the working of truth- and justice-seeking communities, and the differentiated dynamics of appreciating venerable liturgical practices and deep spiritual forms of communication can generate an ethos and many practices of freedom in local associations, in civil societal contexts, but also in broad international and ecumenical cooperation and orientation.