

Kristóf Oltvai

Rethinking Luther's Political Theology

God who gave us life gave us liberty... Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?¹ – JEFFERSON

In his masterwork of Trinitarian theology, *God as the Mystery of the World*, Eberhard Jüngel remarks on a “historical paradox. Reason, which must think the absoluteness of God and yet cannot bear it, becomes practical as the awareness of one’s own *freedom*, yet this modern awareness of freedom became possible historically through the Reformation’s insistence on the absoluteness of God’s claims over against all earthly claims.”² How does this intellectual-historical event – conceptually or, as it were, ‘architectonically’ – take place? And, if this event is one of the, if not *the*, main genetic origins of modernity as a project of political freedom – as the later Hegel³ and Marx⁴ themselves came to see – what preconditions, limits, and deviations does this project contain? If, from the get-go and following traditional historiography, we identify the ‘magisterial’ and ‘radical’ Reformations as our two main live options, then, almost universally, the political reputation of the latter outshines the former for the Reformers’ defenders and critics alike. Holding high rank in the first camp is none other than Engels, whose *The Peasant War in Germany* influentially identified Thomas Müntzer as the Reformation’s liberatory potential’s authentic representative. For Engels, Luther’s violent dismissal of Müntzer cements the Wittenberg reformer as a bourgeois conformist, whose doctrine of free justification wins a purely internal freedom at the cost of external political submission and the divinization of the state.⁵

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Query XVIII, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1955), p. 163.

² Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (1977), trans. Darrell L. Guder (New York: T&T Clark, 2014), p. 41.

³ “This is the essence of the Reformation: Man is in his very nature destined to be free.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1830/31), trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 417.

⁴ “Germany’s revolutionary past is...the *Reformation*. As the revolution then began in the name of a *monk*, so now it begins in the brain of the *philosopher*. *Luther*, we grant, overcame the bondage out of *devotion* by replacing it with a bondage out of *conviction*. He shattered faith in authority because he restored the authority of faith.” Karl Marx, “Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), p. 50 ff.

⁵ “Luther...dropped the popular elements of the movement, and joined the train of the middle-class, the nobility, and the princes. Appeals to a war of extermination against Rome were heard no more. Luther was now preaching *peaceful progress* and passive resistance.” Friedrich Engels, “The Peasant War in Germany” (1850), in *The German Revolutions*, ed. Leonard Krieger (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 40.

Marxist historiography has generally followed Engels, as evinced by, say, Bloch's⁶ and Fromm's⁷ negative evaluations of Luther. Catholic critics of Protestantism often mirror Engels's views, although for them, the radical Reformer's revolutionary tendencies, instead of positively developing Luther's rebellion against tradition, represent but the logical endpoint of a disastrous subjectivism: sans Petrine primacy, moral relativism, mob rule, and ultimately totalitarianism are inevitable outcomes. The self-professed 'arch-reactionary' and monarchist Catholic Austrian historian Erik von Kühnelt-Leddihn, for example, traced National Socialism's origins, through the Paris Commune and Rousseau's Geneva, to Calvin, Luther, and, ultimately, Jan Hus's *De ecclesia*, and was convinced that Luther's supposed irrationalism founds modern dictatorships' arbitrariness and rejection of natural law.⁸ Luther's political theology has had its defenders, too, of course – Hegel, for one, or Heinrich Heine – and, more recently, theologically fluent philosophers like Slavoj Žižek and Marius Mjaaland⁹ have begun openly questioning Engels's interpretation. This hints at the way forward, since both the Marxist and Catholic critics' most obvious shortcoming is their insufficient familiarity with Luther's corpus: often, they cite only polemical exaggerations (his famously vitriolic outbursts against 'reason,' for example) or, as in the case of Kühnelt-Leddihn, even openly admit their inability to survey the material for its scope.¹⁰

This presents an intellectual problem, not just because if, in the age of democracy's undoubted crisis, a rigorous return to its archive is, in general, needful, but because a 'manualism' that relies only on Luther's most explicitly political source-texts misses a crucial facet of his thought in particular: namely, that the conceptual architecture of the Wittenberg reformer's initial rejection of Müntzer can only be understood from the perspective of its sequel in the Eucharistic controversy against Andreas Karlstadt, Ulrich Zwingli, and Johannes Oecolampadius. In other words, the *locus* of the debate shifts,

⁶ "Müntzer could turn the Bible against Ahab and Jezebel, and even against Nimrod, in a way that would not have been possible with any other religious text. But Luther could take the same text and read it as a work not only of inwardness but also of 'aboveness,' of authority. And he did so with such ruthlessness and strength of language that some of the things he said sound as though they came from Moloch." Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity* (1968), trans. Peter Thompson (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 14.

⁷ "In making the individual feel worthless and insignificant as far as his own merits are concerned, in making him feel like a powerless tool in the hands of God, [Luther] deprived man of the self-confidence and of the feeling of human dignity which is the premise for any firm stand against oppressing secular authorities." Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Discus, 1965 [1941]), p. 102.

⁸ See Erik von Kühnelt-Leddihn, "Hus, Luther, and National Socialism; The Genesis of a Totalitarian Movement, I," in *Liberty or Equality: The Challenge of our Time*, ed. John P. Hughes (London: Hollis & Carter, 1952), pp. 209-245.

⁹ See Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *The Hidden God: Luther, Philosophy, and Political Theology* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 2016), in which Mjaaland defends Luther's critique of Müntzer's 'theo-politics.'

¹⁰ Kühnelt-Leddihn, "Hus, Luther, and National Socialism," p. 220: "The study of Luther's life work is a Herculean task. The modern, up-to-date, scholarly edition of his works...contains so far about seventy volumes... This alone should give us an indication of the limitations which a wide popularity of the real Martin Luther would almost automatically encounter... Another matter is the spirit of the Reformation itself." Kühnelt-Leddihn then continues his argument on the basis of his assessment of this 'spirit.'

and although the motives behind Luther's repudiation of all four 'radicals' or 'Spiritualists' are consistent, these are only fully elaborated in the *Abendmahlsstreit*. We can thus only gain a thorough picture of his repudiation of revolutionary politics if we 'read backwards' from the massive Eucharistic treatises – the *Wider die himmlischen Propheten* (1525), the *Hoc Est Corpus Meum* (1527) and the "Great Confession" (1528) – to the earlier, obviously political texts like *Wider die Rotten* (1525) and *On Temporal Authority* (1523). Doing so reveals that, for Luther, Christian freedom is grounded in the objective Word of God and its gift of free justification, the appropriation of which freedom as a subjective possession, whether by an institution ('the papacy') or the vanguard activist, erases the Christological relationship in which that freedom must exist and results in the coercion of belief by force. That the scriptural Word stands over against the interpretive community is what guarantees the community's intellectual and deliberative freedom, which the Spiritualists' identification of affect as the criterion of divine presence, whether textually or sacramentally, abolishes. Far from advocating theocracy, as is sometimes alleged, Luther argues that a sacralized politics will be the radical Reformation's logical outcome, a return to the amalgam of temporal and spiritual authority stigmatized as 'Rome.'

At first glance, Luther's argument looks to be a meek centrism. "One errs on the left side, the other on the right (*eyner felt zur lincken seyten, der ander zur rechten seyten*), and neither remains on the path of true freedom... We however take the middle course (*mittel ban*) and say: There is to be neither commanding nor forbidding, neither to the right nor to the left. We are neither papistic nor Karlstadtian, but free and Christian (*frey und Christisch*)."¹¹ Karl Barth, however, in his 1929 methodological credo "Fate and Idea in Theology," saw the Wittenberg reformer's breakthrough in precisely these sorts of statements. Luther was "on target," Barth claims, "when he lumped together the Anabaptist claim that the Holy Spirit was given in the individual's heart with the Roman Catholic claim that it was given in papal authority,"¹² since both wish to hold, by right, a freedom that is only made real in the merciful Word's liberation of the conscience from soteriological anxiety. This liberation, however, is not a one-time event that permanently (we could say 'ontologically') alters the freed subject such that she can thenceforward go on without referring back to it; rather, it is an eternal imputation of righteousness existing only in the relation between Word and auditor. Now the Word, the *Logos*, has at least a threefold meaning in Luther's thought as the eternal Word (God the Son), the

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten, von den Bildern und Sakrament*, I (1525) (LW 40, pp. 129-130 = WA 18, pp. 111-112).

¹² Karl Barth, "Fate and Idea in Theology" (1929), in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1986), pp. 33-34.

scriptural Word, and the Word preached in the congregation, and has its basis in the reformer's Christo- and crucicentric theological epistemology as developed in the *De servo arbitrio*, *ad Galatas*, *in Genesis*, and a number of other *chefs d'oeuvre* that do not directly deal with the radical Reformation. However, that (1) the Christian is justified *gratis*, by faith apart from works; that (2) faith is not itself a work but the mere subjective 'correlate' of Christ's, the eternal Word's, objective *opus proprium*; and that (3) the written Word, both materially and formally, as that which objectively stands against human traditions' subjectivism, teaches this doctrine, together form the background of Luther's struggle against Spiritualism. "For everything depends on the conscience (*es ligt am gewissen alles miteynander*),"¹³ but this conscience is only freed by the Word, which imparts the doctrine of justification. "Because it is one thing if God is present (*wenn Gott da ist*), and another if he is present for you (*wenn er dir da ist*). He is there for you when he adds his Word and bind himself (*wenn er sein wort dazu thut und bindet sich*), saying, 'Here you are to find me.'"¹⁴ Karlstadt, on the other hand, "proves nothing, but only recites his claims, as one might recite a fairy tale (*meerlin*)... No conscience can rest or depend on such a foundation (*grund*)."¹⁵ "Teaching," then, "belongs only to God. He has the right and power to command, forbid, and be master over the conscience."¹⁶

Luther translates the Spiritualists' departure from the scriptural Word into Trinitarian terms as well, clearly evincing that he sees his core Christological insights as being at stake. "[T]hey think, when they dream something up (*etwas treumet*), it is forthwith the Holy Spirit,"¹⁷ yet this is a Spirit without the Word, a pneumatology without a Christology. "[T]hey do not come through the external Word to the spirit but from the spirit they come to the external Word (*sie nicht zuvor durchs eusserliche wort zum geyst sondern zuvor aus dem geyst auff das euserlich wort komen*)," claiming to "hold to the word of Christ in John 12: 'The Spirit of truth will bear witness and you will also be witnesses,' just as if the Spirit had come over the apostles without the external Word of Christ (*den geyst uberkomen on das eusserliche wort Christi*)."¹⁸ Without this Word, only capricious human 'reason' ("Frau Hulda"¹⁹) remains. "Thus here [Karlstadt] constructs his own Christ (*macht eynen eygen Christum*) that we are to follow his works without the Word. But he does not understand how Christ is first of all our salvation (*heyd*)" –

¹³ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, I (LW 40, p. 140 = WA 18, p. 122).

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Daß diese Wort Christi "Das is mein Leib" noch fest stehen, wider die Schwärmergeister* (1527) (LW 37, p. 68 = WA 13, p. 151).

¹⁵ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, II (LW 40, p. 191 = WA 18, p. 181).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, (LW 40, p. 129 = WA 18, p. 112).

¹⁷ Luther, "Das is mein Leib" (LW 37, p. 45 = WA 23, p. 114).

¹⁸ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, II (LW 40, p. 195 = WA 18, p. 185).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (LW 40, p. 174 = WA 18, p. 164).

i.e., we are justified freely – “and thereafter his works with the Word are our example (*exempel*).”²⁰ Sanctification follows justification. For “when God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner (*zweyerley weyse*), first outwardly (*eusserlich*), then inwardly (*ynnerlich*). Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel (*muendliche wort des Euangelij*) and through material signs, that is, [the sacraments]. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure...the outward factors *must precede* (*die eusserlichen muessen vorgehen*). The inward things *come after* (*die ynnerlichen hernach komen*).”²¹ To reverse this ‘order of operations’ is to deny the *filioque* and install one’s “own spirit and inner feelings (*seynen geyst und ynnwendig fulen*)”²² as a theological-epistemological criterion.

Even minor examples from the Eucharistic treatises evince that, for Luther, the controversy centers on the relationship between justification and freedom. The *Hoc Est Corpus Meum*, for instance, repeatedly attacks Zwingli for ‘atheism,’ for if popular comprehension of doctrine is a theologian’s benchmark, whole lists of “hard sayings” (Jn. 6:60), like Christ’s divinity, could be considered “disproven.”²³ The *De servo arbitrio* uses these same lists to argue that free election’s apparent ‘irrationality’ cannot count against it.²⁴ By far the most serious offense, however, is that Zwingli, Karlstadt, and their allies even import their subjectivism into their sacramental theology. Their memorialism – according to which the body of Christ is only ‘spiritually’ present in the Lord’s Supper for those who have true faith and that the unworthy do not truly eat Christ’s body in the sacrament – can only mean, on Luther’s reading, that faith has once again become a work. In other words, if faith is the subjective prerequisite for God’s objective action in the sacrament, then free justification is overthrown once more. There is a “natural union (*natuerliche vereinigung*) of the body of Christ with us, and not only a spiritual one existing in the will and the mind (*nicht eine geistliche, die ym willen und ynn stebe*)”²⁵ that is, in the ‘faculties’ of the Scholastics’ *humanitas*. The Word is efficacious, regardless of human comportment; otherwise, we doubt God’s promise (in this case, Christ’s promise in the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I (LW 40, p. 135 = WA 18, p. 117).

²¹ *Ibid.*, II (LW 40, p. 146 = WA 18, p. 136). Emphasis mine.

²² *Ibid.*, I (LW 40, p. 113 = WA 18, p. 97).

²³ Luther, “*Das is mein Leib*” (LW 37, p. 53 = WA 23, p. 127).

²⁴ *Ibid.* (LW 37, pp. 53, 67-8, 75, 103 = WA 23, pp. 127, 147-151, 161, 207-209); cf. *De servo arbitrio* (1525), §3 (LW 33, p. 173 = WA 18, p. 706).

²⁵ *Ibid.* (LW 37, p. 121 = WA 23, p. 239).

Eucharistic prayer²⁶), which is the essence of unbelief.²⁷ “So, when we eat Christ’s flesh physically and spiritually, the food is so powerful that it transforms us into itself and out of fleshly, sinful, mortal men makes spiritual, holy, living men.”²⁸ And while Luther agrees with Zwingli that only the elect are thereby sanctified, to allow unworthy eating to disqualify real presence means to be scandalized by the *κένωσις* and resurrect a *theologia gloriae*. “[I]f your conclusion were good and convincing, I also would brag and boast that the Son of God was not born of a woman... Why? Because it is not glorious for God to be born from the frail body of a human... But the glory of our God is precisely that for our sakes he comes down to the very depths, into human flesh, into bread, into our mouth... moreover, for our sakes he allows himself to be treated ingloriously both on the cross and on the altar, as St. Paul says... that some eat the bread in an unworthy manner.”²⁹ Likewise, Luther concurs with Zwingli’s rejection of the language of transubstantiation. However, he does not wish to place a rival theory in its place; the much-heralded ‘ubiquity’ of Christ’s body, which even Calvin will agonize over in the *Institutes*, serves only as a thought experiment.³⁰ Ultimately, the ‘how’ of real presence is not relevant. “[H]ow this takes place or how he is in the bread, we do not know and should not know (*wissen wir nicht, sollens auch nicht wissen*). God’s Word we should believe without setting bounds or measure to it.”³¹ This is no fundamentalist gesture, as we will shortly revisit. Rather, ‘the Word’ here is that of God’s forgiveness and mercy, and the inability of the faithful to depend on it if memorialism holds. As Luther polemicizes, now against Karlstadt,

...suppose your knowledge and remembrance of Christ (*erkenntnis und gedechtnis von Christo*) were this pure passion, pure heart, pure ardor, pure fire, before which also the sectarian spirits were to melt away and to blow up their spirituality with words which are a thousand times more high-sounding, what then? What would be gained? Nothing except monks and hypocrites who would with greater devotion and earnestness

²⁶ *Ibid.* (LW 37, p. 139 = WA 23, p. 267): “Briefly, the first need is on God’s side (*die erst not Gottes halben*). For if it were not so, Christ would be a liar in his words, ‘Take, eat, this is my body, given for you.’ Here, you handsome devil, here is the need! God is truthful; what he says he can do, and does.”

²⁷ Martin Luther, *De libertate Christiana* (1525) (LW 31, p. 350 = WA 7, p. 54): “So when the soul firmly trusts God’s promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. The very highest worship of God (*summus cultus dei*) is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted.”

²⁸ Luther, “*Das is mein Leib*” (LW 37, 101 = WA 23, p. 205).

²⁹ *Ibid.* (LW 37, p. 72 = WA 23, p. 157).

³⁰ Martin Luther, *Vom abendmal Christi, Bekenndnis* (1528) (LW 37, p. 207 = WA 26, p. 318b): “When I proved that Christ’s body is everywhere (*allenthalben*) because the right hand of God is everywhere, I did so – as I quite openly explained at the time – in order to show at least one way how God could bring it about that Christ is in heaven and his body in the Supper at the same time.” Cf. *id.* (LW 23, pp. 223-224 = WA 26, pp. 336b-337b): “I do not wish to have denied by the foregoing that God may have and know still other modes whereby Christ’s body can be in a given place. My only purpose was to show what crass fools our fanatics are when they concede only the first, circumscribed mode of presence to the body of Christ although they are unable to prove that even this mode is contrary to our view.”

³¹ Luther, “*Das ist mein Leib*” (LW 37, p. 29 = WA 23, p. 87).

(*andacht und ernst*) stand before the bread and wine, as hitherto sensitive consciences have stood before the sacrament. Indeed, as great a concern and anxiety would manifest itself about this knowledge and remembrance as hitherto has been felt for the worthy reception of the body of Christ. For the acknowledgment which they advocate accomplishes nothing... [It] makes this acknowledgment nothing else than a work that we do (*das erkenntnis nichts anders denn eyn werck macht*)... [H]e [Karlstadt] *gives such remembrance the power to justify (er solchem gedechtnis gibt die macht, das er rechtfertige)*, as faith does.³²

These selfsame concerns about subjectivism and works-righteousness underlie Luther's disagreement with Karlstadt's iconoclasm and Müntzer's revolutionary prophetism. The Wittenberg reformer says so explicitly, ominously and repeatedly invoking these earlier conflicts in the Eucharistic tracts. "The result of this great and arrogant wisdom by which they scorn God's Word so shamefully... is the seed of Müntzer's and Karlstadt's spirit (*der same von Muentzers und Karlstads geist*)."³³ Again: the radicals "wish to be so much like Müntzer (*so fast Muentzerisch*), and not tolerate flesh and bone."³⁴ Nor "will [they] abandon this Müntzerish spirit (*Muentzerischen geist*) until they have caused trouble just as Müntzer did. For... they have the very same spirit" and will, like their forefather, hold "that civil government is of no avail, being an outward thing (*eusserlich ding*)."³⁵ Zwingli's camp, too, apparently makes this link between political and sacramental theology ("[t]heir faction also maligns me with the judgment that, because I wrote against the peasants, the Spirit has departed from me"³⁶), a link which *Wider die himmlischen Propheten* explains most clearly. Images' and rituals' incapacity to justify does not mean they are malignant, and so to claim, as Karlstadt does, that freedom turns on aniconism or on ceasing the elevation of the Eucharistic elements brings a new rigorism into Christian spirituality. Though the "profile of the factious spirit differs from that of the pope," Luther writes, and while "[t]hey both break Christian freedom (*brechen beyde die Christliche freyheydt*)... the pope does it through commandments (*durch gepot*), Dr. Karlstadt through prohibitions (*durch verbot*)... For my conscience is ensnared and misled just as much when it must refrain from doing something, which it is not necessary to refrain from doing, as when it must do something, which it is not necessary to do."³⁷ When a ritual or object is an ἀδιάφορον, what matters is one's internal comportment toward it,

³² Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, II, (LW 40, pp. 205-207 = WA 18, pp. 195-197). Emphasis mine.

³³ Luther, "Das is mein Leib" (LW 37, p. 135 = WA 23, p. 261).

³⁴ *Ibid.* (LW 37, p. 136 = WA 23, p. 261).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, (LW 37, p. 137 = WA 23, p. 263).

³⁶ *Ibid.* (LW 37, p. 149 = WA 23, p. 281): "Es tregt mich auch yhre rotte spielen mit solchem urteil, Das, weil ich widder die bawren geschrieben habe, sey der geist von mir gewichen."

³⁷ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, I (LW 40, p. 128 = WA 18, p. 111).

not its external existence.³⁸ Regarding sacred art, for example, “I,” Luther says, “approached the task of destroying images by first tearing them out of the heart through God’s Word and making them worthless (*unwerd*),” while Karlstadt “only smashes them to pieces outwardly (*auswendig*), while he permits idols to remain in the heart and sets up others alongside them, namely false confidence and pride in [iconoclastic] works (*falsch vertrauen und rhum des wercks*).”³⁹ The same applies to the elements’ elevation,⁴⁰ although, in this matter, Luther considers Karlstadt’s policing of language – here, over the term ‘Mass’ – the most egregious. “So senseless and possessed have envy and vain ambition made this man, that he no longer sees how the heart gives the name to the deed (*werck*), and not the deed the name to the heart. If the heart is right and good, no matter what the name, it can do no harm.”⁴¹ In these issues of conduct and terminology, as in the question of real presence, what Luther finds problematic is the subject’s assertion of epistemic, and then soteriological, autonomy. Karlstadt “has completely fallen again from faith into works (*gar von glauben auff werck*), and unfortunately into human or rational works (*menschen odder vernunftt wreck*), which he himself has invented (*von ihm selbs ertichttet*).”⁴² This subjectivism leads both to spiritual tyranny, *qua* the reintroduction of “the whole of Moses (*den gantzen Mose*),”⁴³ and to anarchy as all inflate their personal political prerogatives into crusades, “[f]orgetting civil disciplines and manners, and no longer fear[ing] and respect[ing] anyone but themselves alone,” “all...preliminaries to the mob (*vorlauffte zur rotten*).”⁴⁴

At this point – as we now return, from behind, to Luther’s directly political commentary – we must make a distinction between the reformer’s views about obedience to temporal authority as such and excoigating theological rationale for disobedience. On the most basic level, Luther is a political realist. He is aware of the fact that not all earthly rulers are just – “for a prince to be a Christian...is a rare thing and beset with difficulties”⁴⁵ – and that God often providentially uses upheavals to punish

³⁸ *Ibid.* (LW 40, p. 91 = WA 18, p. 74): “Beyond this let the external matters take their course (*las sie eusserlich faren*). God grant that [the images] may be destroyed, become dilapidated, or that they remain. It is all the same, it makes no difference (*das gilt gleich viel und geht nichts an*), just as when the poison has been removed from a snake.”

³⁹ *Ibid.* (LW 40, pp. 84-85 = WA 18, p. 68).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* (LW 40, p. 133 = WA 18, p. 115): “In summing up we assert that we do everything in the sacrament that Christ by his words has commanded (*was Christus mit wortten gepotten hat*), when he says: ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ In what he has not forbidden we act freely, as far as we desire (*so ferne es uns lustet*), saying: No one is to command or prohibit anything which he [Christ] has neither commanded nor forbidden. And although I had intended also to abolish the elevation, now I will not do it, to defy for a while the fanatic spirit, since he would forbid it and consider it a sin.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.* (LW 40, p. 124 = WA 18, p. 107). Cf. also *ibid.* (LW 40, p. 119 = WA 18, p. 103): “Even in the eyes of the world it is a disgraceful, childish, and effeminate (*schimpfflich, kindisch, und weybisch*) thing to be in agreement about substance and yet quarrel about words (*uber den worten zancckt*).”

⁴² *Ibid.* (LW 40, p. 133 = WA 18, p. 115).

⁴³ *Ibid.* (LW 40, p. 94 = WA 18, p. 78).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (LW 40, p. 101 = WA 18, p. 84).

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, *Von weltlicher Uberkeytt, wie weyt man yhr gehorsam schuldig sey* (1523), III (LW 45, p. 121 = WA 11, 273-274).

the powerful. Wicked rulers “blithely heap alien sins upon themselves and incur the hatred of God and man, until they come to ruin” while “lay[ing] all the blame on the gospel...and say that our preaching has brought about that which their perverse wickedness has deserved.”⁴⁶ At a second level, though, the Word reveals that God, because God uses the rulers in the world’s providential government, bids Christians obey temporal authority. Scripture not only explicitly says so (Matt. 22:15-22, Rom. 13:1-7) but “[i]f this were not so, men would devour one another, seeing that the whole world is evil and that among thousands there is scarcely a true Christian.”⁴⁷ Temporal authority has its limits, however; it “appl[ies] only externally (*eußerlich*) to taxes, revenue, honor, and respect.”⁴⁸ It cannot impinge on matters of conscience. “If your prince or temporal ruler commands you to side with the pope, to believe thus and so (*sonst oder so zu glauben*), or to get rid of certain books, you should...not obey,” for that ruler is “a tyrant (*tyrann*) and overreach[es]...commanding where [he has] neither the right nor the authority (*da yhr widder recht noch macht habt*).” For the Christian, however, this disobedience must not take the form of violence. “Outrage is not to be resisted but endured; yet we should not sanction it, or lift a little finger to conform, or obey.”⁴⁹ On the third level, then, Christian doctrine does legitimate certain forms of political disobedience, but not to the extent that disobedience *sans phrase* becomes a theological right, lest “the gospel be brought into disrepute, as though it taught insurrection and produced self-willed people unable to benefit or serve others.”⁵⁰ This distinction is clear even in the *Wider die Rotten*, where the peasants’ rebellion and their claiming evangelical sanction therefor receive two different rebukes.⁵¹

Luther has typically been received here as *de facto* sanctioning state absolutism, with resistance to authority being relegated to a purely inner realm that cannot affect material, political life. Reading these texts through the Eucharistic tracts’ more developed critique of subjectivism, however, we can see that the heart of the reformer’s concern here is not the reality of violence but the claim, whether by rulers or their subjects, that any particular political program merits divine sanction or wins salvation.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II (LW 45, pp. 109-110 = WA 11, p. 265). Cf. also *ibid.* (LW 45, p. 116 = WA 11, p. 270): “The common man (*gemeyn man*) is learning to think, and the scourge of princes is gathering force among the mob and with the common man. I fear there will be no way to avert it, unless the princes conduct themselves in a princely manner and begin again to rule decently and reasonably. Men will not, men cannot, refuse to endure your tyranny and wantonness much longer.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, I (LW 45, p. 91 = WA 11, p. 251-252).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II (LW 45, p. 110 = WA 11, p. 266).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (LW 45, pp. 111-112 = WA 11, p. 267).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I (LW 45, p. 94 = WA 11, p. 254).

⁵¹ Martin Luther, *Wider die räuberischen und mörderischen Rotten den Bauren* (1525) (LW 46, p. 50 = WA 18, pp. 357-358): “In the second place, they are starting a rebellion... In the third place, they cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the gospel, call themselves ‘Christian brethren,’ take oaths and submit to them, and compel people to go along with them in these abominations.”

Luther is not a quietist: later in his career, in fact, Christians’ active political participation will receive renewed warrant: “one should not refuse or shun civic duties under the pretext of religion, as the monks do.”⁵² What he does oppose, however, is the notion that politics can justify. Even those whose “use of the sword” is lawful should “not suppose that [they] will thereby become righteous or be saved (*nicht gedenckist frum odder selig zu werden*)...but leave this to faith, which without works makes you a new creature.”⁵³ In this regard it is crucial to note that the enjoinder of temporal obedience for Christian subjects does not sacralize the state. The Christian community does know of the general biblical sanction of earthly authority through the Word, but this sanction is one which each particular temporal ruler, even if Christian, cannot claim for any distinct political act. This epistemological break, which maps onto that between worthy and unworthy eating in the *Abendmahlsstreit*, finds expression in Luther’s doctrine of God’s “two governments (*dise beyde regiment*).” This doctrine, far from claiming that temporal authority directly participates in God’s sacramental activity, as in the medieval doctrine of the sun and moon, stigmatizes this authority as God’s ‘left hand.’ “Christ’s government does not extend over all men”⁵⁴; “the kingdom of God...exists solely by God’s Word and Spirit,” not through “matrimony and the sword and similar externals (*eußerlichs dings*).”⁵⁵ The sovereign is not an icon of Christ the King; he is likely among “the rulers of this age, who are passing away” (1 Cor. 2:6). For “the world is God’s enemy; hence, [the princes] still too have to do what is antagonistic to God and agreeable to the world, that they may not be bereft of honor, but remain worldly princes.”⁵⁶ This may sound cynical, but what Luther is actually doing here is distinguishing God’s providential *use* of a temporal instrument from that instrument’s intrinsic sacral *character*. This is a classic trope in Augustinian political thought, the concepts of which are also closely related to sacramental theology via the Donatist controversy, as Luther himself indexes.⁵⁷ God may use state violence to achieve providential, salutary ends, but we cannot know, *in via*, when and how God is doing so.

What distinguishes Luther’s political theology, however, is that, for him, the objective Word both places a concrete limit on temporal authority and establishes a deliberative space within which persuasion, and not force, governs. Because the limit of the former is the conscience, the latter will be the justified discursive community: the congregation (*die Gemeinde*). “[T]he thoughts and inclinations

⁵² Martin Luther, *in Genesim Enarrationum* (1544/45), 3, v. 19 (LW 1, p. 214 = WA 43, p. 198).

⁵³ Luther, *Von weltlicher Oberkeytt*, I (LW 45, p. 98 = WA 11, p. 256).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* (LW 45, p. 92 = WA 11, p. 252): “For this reason one must distinguish carefully between [the] two governments.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* (LW 45, p. 101 = WA 11, p. 258).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, II (LW 45, p. 113 = WA 11, p. 267).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, I (LW 45, p. 81 = WA 11, p. 245).

of the soul can be known to no one but God. Therefore, it is futile and impossible (*umb sonst unnd unmoeglich*) to command or compel anyone by force to believe this or that (*sonst oder so zu gלבen*).⁵⁸ On the one hand, Luther here just acknowledges the practical limits of state power; after all, “faith and heresy are never so strong as when men oppose them by sheer force, without God’s word. For men count it certain that such force is for a wrong cause.”⁵⁹ On the other, however, he also finds the source of Christian resistance to such tyranny in the Word’s certainty. “Faith should and must rest on certainty, not on punctuation marks and capitals. It must have clear, distinct passages and altogether plain words out of Scripture as its foundation (*mus helle duerre sprueche und gantze deutliche wort aus der schrift zum seym grunde haben*).”⁶⁰ And so, “if a prince is in the wrong...[a]re his people bound to follow him? Answer: No, for it no one’s duty to do wrong; we must obey God (who desires the right) rather than men.”⁶¹ And when is a prince wrong? When “a man-made law is imposed upon the soul to make it believe this or that (*das sie soll gלבen sonst oder so*) as its human author may prescribe.” In such cases, “there is certainly no word of God for it (*keyn klar Gottis wort da ist*),”⁶² and one will “have to resist them, at least with words (*mitt wortten widerstehen*).”⁶³ This proviso is crucial, however, because Luther does not here reverse course and endorse revolutionary violence through the back door. Rather, the conscience’s inviolability means one must not abandon the Word’s communicability, indeed, its rationality, even at the cost of martyrdom.⁶⁴ The martyr participates, bodily, in the kenotic “weak[ness]” of the Word, which often “seem[s] on the point of extinction, in order that the godless should thereby be hardened and blinded,”⁶⁵ as Pharaoh was before God’s eventual and miraculous triumph over Egypt. Luther thus seems to share the patristic view that martyrdom is the sole credible political testimony to the Word’s universality, as Emilie Tardivel-Schick has recently argued.⁶⁶

Within the Christian community, however, that is, in the community that receives the objective Word of forgiveness, force need not govern. Understanding why requires recalling the play between eternal, biblical, and preached *Logos* that structures the whole of Luther’s thought. The community knows itself to be justified by faith, which doctrine it recovers through the scriptures’ own

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, II (LW 45, p. 107 = WA 11, p. 264).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* (LW 45, p. 114 = WA 11, pp. 268-269).

⁶⁰ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, II (LW 40, p. 160 = WA 18, p. 150).

⁶¹ Luther, *Vom weltlicher Uberkeytt*, III (LW 45, p. 125 = WA 11, 277).

⁶² *Ibid.*, II (LW 45, p. 105 = WA 11, p. 262).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, I (LW 45, pp. 84-85 = WA 11, p. 247).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, II (LW 45, p. 112 = WA 11, p. 267): “Should [the prince] seize your property on account of this and punish such disobedience, then blessed are you; thank God that you are worthy to suffer for the sake of the divine word.”

⁶⁵ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, II (LW 40, p. 145 = WA 18, p. 135).

⁶⁶ See Emilie Tardivel-Schick, *Tout pouvoir vient de Dieu: Un paradoxe chrétien* (Paris: Ad Solem, 2015).

revivification (*sola scriptura*). So, while it can no longer consider internal disagreement cause for soteriological crisis, that crisis is only avoided insofar as the same medium that delivered the kerygma of justification, the written Word, stands over against the community as an objective norm. This is why, in the Eucharistic controversy, Luther takes such issue with the Spiritualists' hermeneutic. The problem is not that Zwingli, Karlstadt, and their allies interpret Scripture differently. Fundamentalism is disqualified, for "dissension and contention over the Scriptures... is a divine quarrel wherein God contends with the devil."⁶⁷ Rather, it is that the conclusions the Spiritualists reach are only credible if one denies Scripture's basic textual intelligibility. For example, Karlstadt interprets the phrase "Take, eat, this is my body" (Matt 26:26) as two separate and unrelated clauses, such that the imperative verbs do not take the 'this' (τοῦτο) as their implied direct object. But "in speaking, hearing, and reading (*wenn mans redet, lieset, und hoeret*)" – i.e., in the proclamation of the *Verbum expositum* in the congregation – "the one naturally (*natürlicher*) follows the other and I know no reason why I may or should separate the natural order and sequence of the discourse (*natürlichen orden und anhang der rede*)." Indeed, "the burden of proof lies on him who would separate them,"⁶⁸ just as, in the dispute over the phrase "*hoc est corpus meum*" itself, Luther insists that it is Zwingli who must prove that "*est*" means "*significat*." Luther does not outright deny this possibility, only that it would be his task to defend the literal meaning. "They wish to change the natural words and meanings of the Scriptures into their own words and meanings; then they boast that we do not have Scripture... They rant and rave, 'Where is your Scripture? Where is your Scripture?' and press us to prove that the gospel says, 'This is my body,' though the world reads it and must read it"⁶⁹ thus.

A rational debate about Scripture can only occur if the text's literal meaning confronts the discussants as an objective *datum* behind which it is epistemologically illegitimate to go. Under those conditions, theological speech can and should be free and public. "God's word... enlightens the heart, and so all heresies and errors vanish... of their own accord,"⁷⁰ just as Karlstadt's earliest grammatical thesis about τοῦτο is – at least on Luther's accounting – "publicly and irrefutably vanquished (*öffentliche und unwidderprechlich überwundene*)."⁷¹ Indeed, that Karlstadt later refuses to publicly dispute at Wittenberg confirms, for Luther, Karlstadt's inability to persuade an educated audience and need to

⁶⁷ Luther, "Das ist mein Leib" (LW 37, 15 = WA 23, pp. 67-69).

⁶⁸ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, II (LW 40, 161 = WA 18, p. 151).

⁶⁹ Luther, "Das ist mein Leib" (LW 37, p. 32 = WA 23, p. 93).

⁷⁰ Luther, *Vom weltlicher Überkeytt*, II (LW 45, p. 115 = WA 11, p. 269).

⁷¹ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, II (LW 40, p. 166 = WA 18, p. 156).

resort to demagoguery.⁷² In marked contrast, the community under the Word is egalitarian, because there reasoned discourse is possible. “Among Christians there shall and can be no authority (*Unter den Christen soll und kan kein uberkeyt sein*); rather all are alike subject to one another (*eyn iglicher ist zu gleych den andern unterthan*)... What kind of authority can there be where all are equal and have the same right (*alle gleych sind und eynerley recht*), power, possession, and honor...?” Indeed, there, ‘consent of the governed’ reigns. “Their government is not a matter of authority and power, but a service and an office... Therefore, they should impose no law or decree on others without their will and consent.” Luther immediately connects this political norm to the norm of Scripture. “Their ruling is rather nothing than the inculcating of God’s word, by which they guide Christians... As we have said, Christians can be ruled by nothing except God’s word, for Christians must be ruled in faith (*ym glawben regiert werden*).”⁷³ Evangelical subjects’ mutual equality is founded, then, not on the autonomy of each, but on their shared heteronomy vis-à-vis the biblical text. That is why the community’s ethical conclusions, such as holding property in common, cannot be globalized,⁷⁴ and it is also what allows Luther to summon his readers, and even his opponents, to depend not on his authority but assume public accountability for their own interpretation. “[E]very man runs his own risk in believing as he does, and he must see to it himself that he believes rightly.”⁷⁵ And, at Marburg, to the assembled memorialists: “I am not your master, not your judge, and not your teacher either... Teach, as you can account for it before God.”⁷⁶

“Fundamentally,” Étienne Gilson once wrote, the difficulty at the heart of all Augustinian political theology is that because the society of the elect “rests upon the common acceptance of a belief transcending reason, it will only be universal through faith. But the content of faith is not a rationally universalizable knowledge.”⁷⁷ The larger constellation of Luther’s political thought, in its strict separation of temporal and spiritual authority, shares this assessment. Temporal lawmaking is only ever a matter of prudential judgment⁷⁸; it cannot, and should not, legislate belief, nor claim to be

⁷² *Ibid.*, I (LW 40, pp. 107-108 = WA 18, pp. 90-91).

⁷³ Luther, *Vom weltlicher Uberkeytt*, II (LW 45, p. 117 = WA 11, pp. 270-271).

⁷⁴ Luther, *Wider die Rotten* (LW 46, p. 51 = WA 18, p. 359): “For baptism does not make men free in body and property, but in soul; and the gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who willed, of themselves, to do what the apostles and disciples did in Acts 4 [32-37]. They did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others... should be common, but only their own goods.”

⁷⁵ Luther, *Vom weltlicher Uberkeytt*, II (LW 45, p. 108 = WA 11, p. 264).

⁷⁶ Andreas Osiander, *Osianders Bericht* (1529/32) (LW 38, pp. 70-71 = WA 30³, p. 150).

⁷⁷ Étienne Gilson, *Les métamorphoses de la cité de Dieu* (Leuven: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1952), p. 19.

⁷⁸ Luther, *Vom weltlichen Uberkeytt* (LW 45, p. 119 = WA 11, pp. 272-273): “For this reason I know of no law to prescribe for a prince; instead, I will simply instruct his heart and mind on what his attitude should be toward all laws, counsels, judgments, and actions.”

providence's direct instrument. Luther's criticism of both 'Rome' and the Spiritualists rests on this conviction, which is itself inseparable from his other core theological commitments. Thus, insofar as it is those commitments, such as *sola fide*, that launch the Reformation in the first place, the Engels-inspired reading, that Luther betrays his own principles in his polemic against Müntzer, is incorrect. Where Luther has radicalized Augustine's critique, however, as our analysis of his Eucharistic tracts has brought to the fore, is in his distrust of reason itself. Reason, without the Word, becomes a route by which our "pet ideas (*dunckel*)"⁷⁹ and "own dreams (*eigen tremme*)"⁸⁰ begin to ideologically assert themselves over reality. An additional claim Luther makes, then, is that the basic Augustinian position, "*hominum confusione et Dei providentia regitur*,"⁸¹ is insufficient: deliberative reason needs, for its proper functioning, not only a formal epistemological limit spurring it to humility, but a material confrontation with a content that makes that limit concrete.⁸² Faith in the objective Word is thus, far from being irrational, a precondition for reason's full use: the *Logos* is what grounds *logos*. The paradox of Luther's political thought is thus ultimately that while public rationality and the conscience's rights place universal limits on temporal authority, this limit is only actualized by the presence of the particular community of faith within the body politic. The choice Luther offers his readers with is not one between theocratic absolutism or democratic anarchy but between purely secular absolutism and Christian democracy. A further study would extend this analysis into Calvin's *Institutes*, where the *Abendmahlslehre* and its relation to sanctification are further scrutinized. For Calvin, after all, the Word of forgiveness as well as the Word of the Law are received as part of God's self-revelation in the congregation, which ubiquity, since it occludes Christ's true humanity as the obedient Son, downplays. Calvin argues that a grateful striving to fulfill the revealed moral Law is inseparable from Christian liberty, a political claim for which a genealogy of the modern, democratic imaginary must also account.

⁷⁹ Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, II (LW 40, p. 153 = WA 18, p. 143).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, I (LW 40, p. 92 = WA 18, p. 76).

⁸¹ This being Karl Barth's (in my view, accurate) summary of Augustine's view in *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, §72, p. 693 [=KD 793]. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 1936-1976); and Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 13 vols. (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1932-1967).

⁸² "[P]hilosophy only encounters a genuine limit from the *actuality* of revelation, which comes from outside of philosophical reflection. In this regard, a distinctly Christian philosophy is confronted by a limit that philosophy otherwise lacks," Brian Gregor, *A Philosophical Anthropology of the Cross* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 2013), p. 12.