11. Martin Luther and the Supremacy of Filial Piety

William Haines, November 7, 2026

Luther on filial piety

In line with mainstream Christian tradition, Martin Luther (1483-1546) held that God is our father. From the exposition of the Lord's Prayer in his 1529 *Small Catechism* "as the head of a household should teach it in a simple way to his household":

> Our Father, who art in heaven.
> *What does this mean?*
> Answer: By these words God would tenderly encourage us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that we may ask Him confidently with all assurance, as dear children ask their dear father.[1]

Here fatherhood is not seen primarily as authority, power or threat.

At the same time, Luther held that filial piety is our supreme duty to human beings. From the exposition of the Commandment to honor father and mother in his *Large Catechism*, appearing in the same year:

> To the position of fatherhood and motherhood God has given special distinction above all positions that are beneath it: He does not simply command us to love our parents, but to honor them. … For it is a far higher thing to honor someone than to love someone, because honor includes not only love, but also modesty, humility, and submission to a

[1] Luther 2005, p. 457; also at https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/small-catechism/lords-prayer/

majesty hidden in them. [107] Honor requires not only that parents be addressed kindly and with reverence, but also that, both in the heart and with the body, we demonstrate that we value them very highly, and that, next to God, we regard them as the very highest.[2] …

Learn, therefore, what is the honor towards parents that this commandment requires. (a) They must be held in distinction and esteem above all things, as the most precious treasure on earth. (b) In our words we must speak modestly toward them. Do not address them roughly, haughtily, and defiantly. But yield to them and be silent, even though they go too far. (c) We must show them such honor also by works, that is, with our body and possessions. We must serve them, help them, and provide for them when they are old, sick, infirm, or poor. We must do all this not only gladly, but with humility and reverence, as doing it before God. For the child who knows how to regard parents in his heart will not allow them to do without or hunger, but will place them above him and at his side and will share with them whatever he has and possesses.[3] …

[We should] rejoice to show them honor and obedience … [this is] the highest work which we can do, after the grand divine worship included in the previous commandments. Giving to the poor and every other good work toward our neighbor is not equal to this. For God has assigned parenthood the highest place.[4]

Luther adds that the authority of parents (he seems to mean mainly fathers) over their children is the basis and model of all human authority in government and religion:

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[2] Luther 2005, p. 510f., §§105-107; also at https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/large-catechism/part_1/the_fourth_commandment

[3] Luther 2005, p. 511f., §§109-111; also at https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/large-catechism/part_1/the_fourth_commandment

[4] Luther 2005, p. 515., §125f.; also at https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/large-catechism/part_1/the_fourth_commandment

In this commandment belongs a further statement about all kinds of obedience to persons in authority who have to command and to govern. For all authority flows and is born from the authority of parents. … So all whom we call "masters" are in the place of parents and must get their power and authority to govern from them. So also men are all called fathers in the Scriptures, who in their government perform the functions of a father, and have a paternal heart toward their subordinates. From antiquity the Romans and other nations called the masters and mistresses of the household "housefathers" and "housemothers." They called their national rulers and overlords "fathers of the entire country." This is a great shame to us who would be Christians because we do not give them the same title or, at least, do not value and honor them as fathers.[5] …

The same should also be said about obedience to civil government. This (as we have said) is all included in the place of fatherhood and extends farthest of all relations. Here "father" is not one person from a single family, but it means the many people the father has as tenants, citizens, or subjects. Through them, as through our parents, God gives to us food, house and home, protection, and security. They bear such name and title with all honor as their highest dignity that it is our duty to honor them and to value them greatly as the dearest treasure and the most precious jewel upon earth.[6] …

So we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment: fathers in blood and fathers in office. Or, those who have the care of the family and those who have the care of the country. Besides these there are still spiritual fathers. They are not like those in the papacy, who have had themselves called fathers but have performed no function of the fatherly office. For the only ones called spiritual fathers are those who govern and guide us by God's Word. In this sense, St. Paul boasts his fatherhood in 1

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5 Luther 2005, p. 518f., §141f.; also at https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/large-catechism/part_1/the_fourth_commandment

6 Luther 2005, p. 520f., §150; also at https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/large-catechism/part_1/the_fourth_commandment

> Corinthians 4:15, where he says, "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel."[7]

Contrast with Confucianism

While granting that the Western tradition has often valued filial piety, some comparativist scholars have contrasted filial piety in the pre-liberal West with filial piety in Confucianism on the grounds that in the Western tradition,

> while it is probably good to honor one's parents for their own sake, in the end we are to do so because God the (transcendental) Father told us to, and He will punish us if we do not.[8]

In other words, while the pre-liberal West has other arguments for filial piety in addition, it has nevertheless had a shallow divine-command view (or even a positivistic or egoistic-instrumental view) of justification in general as resting on the commands (or punishments) of a cosmic Father and therefore as external to filial piety and alien to any good conception of filial piety. By contrast, Confucianism sees filial piety as basic.

But the true contrast between traditions on filial piety may not be so stark.

For, first, as argued in the Preface to the present series of sketches, there are some reasons to doubt the generalization that Confucian philosophy has seen filial piety as fundamental in justification, or as the starting-point of self-cultivation or moral development (pp. 8ff.). Rather, the tradition has prominently defended filial piety as a valuable source of general virtue, or as an obligation of fairness or gratitude to those who made us and cared for us, and/or as a stage of cultivation posterior to a general understanding of things, of goodness, or of oneself.

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7 Luther 2005, p. 522, §158f,; also at https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/large-catechism/part_1/the_fourth_commandment

8 Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 33.

Second, we might question how far the appeal to God or scripture in the Western tradition functions in fact as a source of moral direction, rather than as a flexible way of legitimating the norms people find compelling on other grounds (or as an even more flexible way of feeling special or superior).

Third, the vision of God's law as having its meaning in the threat of punishment for violation is in some tension with the heavy Christian emphasis on forgiveness and (in e.g. Lutheranism) justification by faith or grace. The authority of a command is not in the punishment if the punishment is supposed to be easily evaded, or if we all always merit the punishment by our very nature and its suspension is in no way up to us or due to our works.

Fourth, it is not obvious (at least to me) that the West has seen the moral authority of God primarily in terms of his threat to punish. Another view in the mix is that God's authority derives from God's goodness, which has been seen especially as love for all rather than as a tautological implication of a divine command view. (Even in the context of theism the West has had philosophical conceptions of goodness that do not make the goodness of God an empty tautology; recent examples are utilitarianism and, later, Kantianism.) It is reasonable to trust those who love us, and be guided by them when we grant their superior knowledge. Yet another view is that the moral authority of God over us is grounded in his having created us.

Fifth, as the scholars suggest, the West has tended to see God as people's *father* in some strong sense,[9] and thus to see honoring and obeying God as in a sense an application of filial piety, not a distinct foundation for it, or at least not a very alien foundation, and not obviously inconsistent with good filial piety toward human parents. The image arguably encapsulates God's role as creator, or rather as wise loving creator and protector, and as object of our love. Recall

[9] Our sense that God is obviously not *literally* our father may depend to some extent on a relatively recent view of the mechanism of human reproduction.

Aquinas' contrast between "servile fear," i.e. the fear of punishment, and "filial fear," i.e. the fear of offending those we love.[10]

The image of God as Father, as most of the Christian tradition understands it, also includes God's responsiveness to prayer (from his loving nature). Like the idea that God will in fact punish our disobedience, this idea has long been in tension with another of the ideas that Christians struggle to have: God's transcendence.

It must be granted of course that Martin Luther was haunted by fear of God's wrath, especially in his youth. But two scholars of Luther describe his mature view as follows:

> It is thus clear throughout his writings that Luther saw his transition from "justification through works" to "justification through faith" as having a major impact on his conception of ethics and social philosophy. …
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> At the centre of Christian ethics is the commandment to love one's neighbour; but Luther thinks this is only properly understood and made possible on his account of our relation to God, for a variety of reasons. First, if justification is to be earned through works, our justification remains uncertain in a way that fuels the kind of introspective anxiety that makes it impossible to love the neighbour …. Second, these works become instrumental in earning our own salvation, thus no longer involving genuine concern for our neighbour …. Third …. Fourth …. Thus by starting with justification through works we will be unable to truly love the neighbour, for as we have seen, this love will be blocked by a mixture of anxiety about our own salvation and pride at our own achievements, so finally the most we will be able manage in relation to the neighbour is a kind of dutiful obedience of the commandment as a law, which itself gets in the way of a genuine attitude of love.
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> By contrast, Luther argues, once we move from justification through works to justification through faith, love of the neighbour becomes

[10] Sketch 8, p. 7.

possible as these obstacles are removed. Instead of feeling both anxious and prideful, the believer is released from this anxiety through the promise of a grace that does not have to be earned, and from their pride by realising that this grace is unmerited. … In experiencing God's love of us through grace, and of Christ's giving of himself for us, we then turn to express this love not only to God, but also to pass on this gift to the neighbour, thereby doing the good works we ought to do in a spontaneous way rather than feeling compelled to act in an imperatival manner. …

Luther frequently argu[es] on the basis of Paul's statement in Romans 2:15, that this natural law "is written in the depth of the heart and cannot be erased" … so that human beings are naturally born with a knowledge of fundamental moral precepts, which are accessible to us through reason and felt through conscience. However, the Fall has impacted on this knowledge, which is why there can also be a place for a law that is revealed to us.[11]

As a foil for the Confucian view of family and especially filial piety, the comparativist scholars quote and endorse Richard Madsen's proposal that the dominant view in modern Western culture is

> a powerful liberal myth which narrates the modernization of this culture in terms of a liberation of individuals (through the energies of the economic market and the recognition of inalienable rights within liberal democracy) from rigid primordial loyalties, represented by the feudal family system. . . . According to the liberal myth, the modern family is different from (and better than) the pre-modern family insofar as it is more like a voluntary association than a primordial institution. That is, the modern family is based on a contract between consenting adults, which can (and should) be broken when it is no longer in their mutual self-interests.[12]

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11 Stern & Volker 2025, §5.

12 Madsen 2002, p. 280; quoted in Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 31.

On the one hand, Madsen claims to be describing a view of family obligations generally; on the other hand, he cannot be. One can hardly think we have a right to choose our parents or siblings or offspring. The main application of Madsen's picture is to the spousal relation. Any application to the majority of our family commitments is swept under the term "based on."

Regarding the spousal relation, while there are selfish people and shallow thinkers in all times and places, I question whether the modern Western view is that it should be generally understood that in deciding whether to stay married, a couple should consult only their own interests, and not the welfare of their children or other considerations. For even among philosophers, some liberals have views that seem opposed to this one, such as utilitarianism or Kantianism.

By a "family," the modern West means especially a household consisting of a married couple and their minor children; while in the area of kinship relations, the Confucian tradition focuses mainly on the filial position (not specifically of minors). If we want to compare the Western and Confucian traditions on "family," then we should look especially at views on the spousal relation and the rearing of sons and daughters, and on kinship-based households. But if we want to compare the Confucian and Western traditions on filial piety, then views specifically about the spousal relation should not be the focus.

After describing the Abrahamic penal view of filial piety, the comparativist scholars quote Madsen again in order to contrast the Confucian view of family with the Western views:

> In the Confucian perspective . . . freedom does not consist in choosing which group one will belong to. It consists in creatively contextualizing those commitments which fate has assigned. It involves ever deeper understanding of the meaning of one's roles as father, son, husband, wife, sibling, friend, subject, so that one can flexibly reconcile them with all of the other roles one must play in a world that is complex and changing, but

in the end capable of achieving a harmonious integration among its major institutions.[13]

It is unclear to me to what extent we are to see Madsen's reference to the assignment of family commitments by "fate" as a reference to (a) the idea that the parties to a family relation do not choose their own counterparts in those relations,[14] or to (b) the idea that they do not choose the initial outline of the content of their commitments in those relations, or to (c) the culture's taking an uncritical attitude toward the family role duties it recognizes, or not making a concerted effort at articulate evaluations of current family norms as against possible alternatives.

Regarding (a), there is no doubt a disagreement between parts of the Confucian tradition and parts of the Western about the value of having people choose their own spouses. Regarding (a) and (b), I submit that Confucianism and the West agree about all other family relational positions, and in particular the filial position. Regarding (b) in connection with the spousal positions, I submit that the West allows couples some room to determine fine points at the outset, but is not prepared to regard just any contract between people as marriage and regard its parties as spouses, independently of the content of the contract. Regarding (c), there is indeed something to be said in favor of humility by theorists, alongside effort commensurate with the potential need for change.

As for the point about "ever deeper understanding," the scholars' interpretation may be that in the Western view, family commitments do not allow or require the parties to learn by long relational experience the specifics of their commitments and how to reconcile them with other priorities. The background premise of such an interpretation of the West could perhaps be the idea that

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[13] Madsen 2002, p. 285; quoted in Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 33f.

[14] Madsen speaks of choosing a "group," but presumably does not mean that in choosing my spouse I am also choosing my particular children, much less my siblings or parents. Perhaps the "group" he speaks of me as choosing is my spouse and my in-laws.

family commitments as the West conceives them rest wholly on contract (or command) and must therefore already be fully articulated.

But I submit that on any ordinary Western understanding of the commitments we undertake in marriage, e.g. that they include "to love, honor and obey" a particular person, or at least to try living with them, those commitments obviously do allow and require the parties to learn by long relational experience the specifics of their commitments and how to reconcile them with other priorities. And of course we learn by experience the specifics of how to relate to our particular parents, siblings and children (if any).

Granted, even the absence of a view about the moral grounding of family relations would be wise in comparison to divine-command or positivistic scripturalism, or radical libertarianism, about family or about the spousal relation. But how far are these views representative of the West, or of Western philosophy today?

Luther on family in general

For Luther, the three estates (*Stände*) for the governance of earthly society were those of the household of married parents led by the *Hausvater*, the state led by the *Landesvater*, and the church led by the *Gottesvater*. Regarding the first of these estates, the family, he famously wrote in the *Large Catechism*,

> How gloriously God honors and extols this estate, inasmuch as by his commandments, he both sanctions and guards it …. He also wishes us to honor it, and to maintain and conduct it as a divine and blessed estate; because, in the first place, He has instituted it before all others, and therefore created man and woman separately (as is evident), not for lewdness, but that they should live together, be fruitful, beget children, and nourish and train them to the honor of God. Therefore God has also most richly blessed this estate above all others, and in addition, has bestowed on it and wrapped up in it everything in the world, to the end

> that this estate might be well and richly provided for. Married life therefore is no jest or presumption; but it is an excellent thing and a matter of divine seriousness. For it is of the utmost importance to Him that persons be raised who may serve the world and promote the knowledge of God, godly living, and all virtues, to fight against wickedness and the devil.[15]

Luther comments in a sermon:

> The chief virtue of marriage [is] that the spouses can rely upon each other and with confidence entrust everything they have on earth to each other, so that it is as safe with one's spouse as with oneself. … God's Word is actually inscribed on one's spouse. When a man looks at his wife as if she were the only woman on earth, and when a woman looks at her husband as if he were the only man on earth; yes, if no king or queen, nor even the sun itself sparkles any more brightly and lights up your eyes more than your own husband or wife, then right there you are face to face with God speaking.[16]

John Witte writes that according to Luther and his followers,

> the social estate of the family was to teach Christian values … to all persons, particularly children. It was to exemplify for a sinful society a community of love and cooperation, meditation and discussion, song and prayer. It was to hold out for the church and the state an example of firm but benign parental discipline, rule, and authority. It was to take in and care for wayfarers, widows, and destitute persons, a responsibility previously assumed largely by monasteries and cloisters. The social estate of marriage was thus as indispensable an agent in God's redemptive plan as the church had been for the Catholics.[17]

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15 Quoted in Witte 2012, p. 122.
16 Quoted in Hendrix 2000, p. 338; re-quoted in Witte 2012, p. 124.
17 Witte 2012, p. 135.

As for the ways in which Luther's personal zest for his own roles as husband and parent informed his theology, these are richly described in Lindberg 2004.

Lutheranism today

Lutheranism today is no stranger to family role ethics. One current Lutheran guidebook, *Family Vocation*, has the following table of contents:

Introduction: Confusing the Family
Vocation in the Nourishing Estate
The Vocations of Marriage
    Marriage
    The Office of Husband
    The Office of Wife
    Sex and Vocations
    The Crosses of Marriage
The Vocations of Parenthood
    Parenthood
    The Office of Father
    The Office of Mother
    Raising Children
    The Crosses of Parenthood
The Vocations of Childhood
    Childhood
    Growing
    The Crosses of Childhood
    The Rest of the Family
    Conclusion: Restoring the Family.[18]

[18] Veith & Moerbe 2012.

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