



# The significance of freedom in God's plan

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By means of a synthesis of Christian faith, theology and natural sciences, the significance of freedom in God's plan of creation and redemption was contemplated. The triune God is the foundation of all freedom. The freedom of his creatures is extremely important to God. Despite the Angelic Fall, he created our universe, in which on the path of evolution human beings were given the freedom to choose for or against God. Possibly, the humans who committed the Adamic Fall belonged to the species *Homo heidelbergensis*. Through the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ to the point of death on the cross, the power of evil was overcome. The goal of all creation is 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rm 8:21). This will complete the freedom that God has placed in his creation from the beginning. It can be surmised that 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' includes being integrated into the intra-Trinitarian communion. It is important for the fulfilment of God's plan of redemption that more and more people follow Jesus Christ and try to become more and more like him. A crucial point in following Christ is obedience. Obedience and freedom are not a contradiction, but the two sides of a coin; and the metal of this coin is love.

**Contribution:** The synthesis of Christian faith, theology and natural sciences made it possible to see more clearly how extraordinarily important human freedom is for God. This is not only important for theological research, but also has practical consequences for human beings.

**Keywords:** theology and nature; freedom; evolution; Christology; Angelic Fall; Adamic Fall; theodicy; eschatology.

## Introduction

This article is dedicated to Professor Johan Buitendag on the occasion of his 70th birthday. The essay sets out to look at some aspects of the freedom in God's plan of creation and redemption. This endeavour faces great difficulties because:

- The term 'freedom' is ambiguous and there are numerous, very different definitions (Breul & Langenfeld 2017).
- In recent years, numerous theological publications have dealt with the topic of freedom – Barrigar (2017), Bracken (2022), Jones and Van den Heever (2020), Peters (2020), Visala (2020), Highfield (2012), Tamer and Männle (2019), Veskoukis (2020) and Groppe (2005) deserve special mention.
- Some Christian traditions that play a role in the further consideration – especially the Angelic Fall and the Adamic Fall – are rejected or at least viewed critically by numerous modern theologians.
- There is such a vast amount of literature on every topic addressed in this essay that one could fill libraries with it. This inevitably leads to the fact that this essay can neither address nor deepen many important aspects.

Nevertheless, I will try here to sketch in very broad outlines the extraordinary significance of freedom in God's plan of creation and redemption. To this end, I will develop a synthesis of Christian faith, theology and the natural sciences that reaches from the beginning of creation to its completion. Through this comprehensive view, God's love, which spans space and time, becomes even more clearly visible. In this way, this article is intended as praise to God and thanks for the work of Professor Johan Buitendag.

The synthesis attempted in this article unites knowledge with very different epistemological status. There is, for example, data on evolution and quantum physics that can be verified scientifically. But there is also knowledge about things that we can approach adequately neither with scientific thinking nor with philosophical considerations, such as the existence of angels and the devil. Here, the Christian faith necessarily plays a central role as a source of knowledge.

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Regardless, I do not renounce this knowledge, because only through it the synthesis becomes complete.

This complete synthesis offers a significant gain in insight. It shows that God has decided and committed himself to the freedom of his creation from the beginning and over and over again, and that he will complete this freedom at the end of time. However, in order to be able to carry out this synthesis within the narrow framework of an article, considerable limitations are unavoidable. Controversial issues can only be briefly touched upon, and instead of a presentation or discussion of the arguments offered by the literature, only a reference to the literature itself can be made. Of course, no adequate appreciation of the various literary genres in the Bible is possible within this framework either.

Topics such as the Adamic Fall present a particular difficulty. Here, statements about reality are made in the Bible in images that defy any scientific verifiability. Accordingly, many different theological positions and interpretations are possible on these topics. In order to find an appropriate position, special importance is given here to the Christian tradition, trusting that the Holy Spirit has accompanied the Christian tradition. Because the Roman Catholic Church is the largest particular church in Christendom, its tradition goes back to the Apostles, and the Roman Catholic Church has documented its faith in the 'Catechism of the Catholic Church' (Anonymous 1997), the 'Catechism of the Catholic Church' is taken as reference point. Consideration is also given to Clendenin (ed. 2003) who provides a modern overview of Eastern Orthodox Theology.

Before I dive into the subject, it should be said that here freedom is understood as the possibility to decide for or against someone or something. This definition is chosen because I believe it is a widely used and generally accepted definition of freedom in Western society. Moreover, this definition is positively oriented towards active choice and not only negatively towards the avoidance of restrictions.

In the following, I will briefly elaborate on the triune God as the foundation of all freedom, then I will look at the entire history of the universe from the Angelic Fall to the 'new heaven' and the 'new earth' from the perspective of freedom, and finally I will draw some conclusions from this.

## The triune God as the foundation of all freedom

The triune God is completely free because he can do anything he wishes. He also fulfils other definitions of freedom, such as freedom from external restrictions, for he depends on no one and he needs no one. He is communion in himself, and the three persons of God have each other as their counterparts of love (Parappally 2014). The Christian God is not forced to create something in order to be able to love, for he already lives love in his Trinitarian communion. In him there is eternal, living and life-giving dialogue, giving and receiving of love, eternal exchange.

Although the intra-Trinitarian dialogue is usually given little consideration by theologians, its importance should not be underestimated. Both for Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, and for Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement, the intra-Trinitarian dialogue was very important (Derdziuk 2016; Mollá Llácer 2017:10). Carvajal Blanco (2011:80–84), Vanzini (2015) and Leung (2022) deal more intensively with the intra-Trinitarian dialogue.

Everything that the Christian God creates is the free, not forced expression of his overflowing love, which flows out from the core of the intimacy of the Trinitarian community as from a cornucopia (Stickelbroeck 2017:322). The superabundance of our universe is a faint reflection of the superabundance of love in the triune God. God loves human beings, his creatures, so much that he exercises his freedom by limiting his own freedom and binding himself to human beings in faithful love (Lohmann 2018).

## The Angelic Fall

In the Old Testament, and even more frequently and clearly in the New Testament, it is said that there are transcendent beings, some of whom are good and serve God, and some of whom are evil (Dunnington 2018:266). This is accepted by all Christian churches – see, for example, Anonymous (1997:328–336) for the Catholic Church, Clendenin (ed. 2003:73–75) for the Orthodox Churches and Kuiper (1996) for the Reformed Churches. In order to explain why there are evil transcendent beings when the Creator God is good, the Judeo-Christian tradition (see e.g. Reed 2005) reports that God first created transcendent beings (Anonymous 1997:311, 391–395). To each of these beings, he gave the freedom to decide for him or against him. We call angels those transcendent beings who chose God, accepted the function assigned to them by God, and now, out of their free choice, serve God obediently and lovingly. Those transcendent beings who decided against God and rebelled against him are the devil and the demons.

Many modern theologians believe neither in the Angelic Fall nor in the existence of the devil. Dunnington (2018) discusses various counter-arguments against the 'Satan hypothesis'. For Loke (2022b), Peckham (2018:55–86), Covan (2021), and O'Halloran (2015), the Fall of the angels is a real and important event. A central argument that the Angelic Fall really took place is the existence of non-human evil. For example, O'Halloran (2015) concludes from the existence of non-human evil that there was a primordial deviation from God's original plan prior to the creation of the world because beings had voluntarily chosen evil.

Because they are transcendent beings, they cannot be verified by scientific-empirical methods, but the testimony of the Bible and of numerous people (believers, mystics and theologians) sufficiently documents their existence. Therefore, all Christian churches hold to the existence of the devil and the Fall of the angels (Anonymous 1997:391–395; Clendenin, ed. 2003:74–75; Kuiper 1996:226).

Here we see for the first time that God gives freedom to his creatures, and that some of his creatures abuse their freedom and turn against God. The fact that God allows this and does not immediately destroy these disobedient creatures shows that for God the freedom of his creatures has a value that we cannot imagine. For the devil and the demons seek to this day to harm God and his creation as much as possible.

## Creation and evolution

Although the Angelic Fall clearly shows that it is very problematic to create intelligent beings with free will, God created our universe. This universe is designed to produce life. This is demonstrated by the intensely debated ‘fine-tuning of natural constants’ necessary for life to evolve (Barnes 2015; Chan & Chan 2020; Loke 2022a:142–144; Swinburne 2004:172–188). Attempts are often made to use the ‘multiverse hypothesis’ to refute the view that the fine-tuning of natural constants requires a Creator. But the works of Barnes (2020) and Loke (2022a:175–181) show that, despite the multiverse hypothesis, the fine-tuning of natural constants is clear evidence that our universe was created by a higher intelligent being to bring forth life. Barnes (2020:1251) writes: ‘The fine-tuning of the universe for life shows that, according to the best physical theories we have, naturalism overwhelmingly expects a dead universe.’

From the beginning, God gives freedom to his creation. A first fundamental dimension of freedom arises from Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. It is not possible to predict exactly the position and motion of a particle at the same time (Bollini 2013:181–182). Quantum physics brings indeterminacy into the universe (Ellis 2019; Vanney 2015). The future is therefore no longer clearly calculable. Peters (2019:278–280) and Stapp (2017) even go so far as to say that the indeterminacy of quantum physics is a necessary condition for human freedom. Ulanowicz (2019) also sees room for indeterminacy in other physical laws. This is not yet freedom in the sense of conscious choice, but it is a step in that direction. In this way, from the beginning the physical laws in our universe are the basis for the growth of freedom.

With the evolution of living beings, another dimension of freedom, of unpredictability, of uncontrollable dynamic growth arises in a world determined by natural laws. This increase in freedom is closely linked to an increase in autonomy (Dalleur 2015). All this escalates in the emergence of human beings through evolution. Humans are the culmination of evolution on our planet because they can decide freely.

May (2021a:33) states that God, the Creator of the universe, uses the natural processes of evolution, which are not goal-oriented, to achieve his goals, because he knows that these processes serve his goals, although they are not goal-oriented. Furthermore, May (2021a:23–26) describes four extraordinary events in Earth’s history that were imperative for the development and unfolding of intelligent life on Earth. These four events are as follows:

1. the collision of the Earth with a Mars-sized body,
2. the evolution of the oxygen content of the atmosphere,
3. the mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous period and,
4. the interbreeding of *Homo sapiens* with *Homo neanderthalensis* in the Near or Middle East.

It is very difficult to imagine that it is pure coincidence that these four extraordinary events took place at exactly the right time. Therefore, May (2021a) does not interpret these events as coincidental, but sees in them the work of the Creator of the universe, who intervenes in Earth history through these events in order to influence the course of Earth history and evolution. May (2021a) writes:

An interplay between an evolutionary process in which life unfolds, and seemingly random events that give this evolutionary process a new direction, becomes apparent. This interplay could be described with the image of a constant dialogue between the Creator and his creation. Life enters into the dialogue with the Creator by unfolding independently according to its own laws. From time to time, the Creator responds by intervening and then allowing life to follow its own laws again. (p. 29)

Because, according to May (2021a), the Creator only intervened from time to time – to advance the development of (intelligent) life – and otherwise allowed life to follow its own laws, these interventions cannot be regarded as a substantial restriction on the freedom of his creation. Consequently, they are not a restriction of human freedom either.

Biological evolution involves a great deal of suffering. For example, the biological death of an individual is an important driver of evolution (Clark 1998). Natural disasters are also often inextricably linked to processes that provide important stimuli for evolution – such as earthquakes and continental drift (Miller 2001:87). Seen in this light, natural disasters, physical suffering, disease and death are not only inevitable concomitants, but necessary instruments of creation through evolution (Ruiz Soler & Núñez de Castro 2017:63; Sollereder 2016). Furthermore, God has given the evolutionary process a certain degree of freedom and allowed it to follow its own inner laws. Therefore, evolution does not only produce very intelligent beings, but equally very toxic beings, very dangerous beings and very dangerous pathogens. If you give evolution freedom, you do not get one without the other.

We can accept all the suffering that has happened in connection with evolution as part of God’s very good creation (Lamoureux 2020; Miller 2011:90; Gn 1:31) when we consider how much freedom has come about as a result. This freedom is a necessary condition for being able to love (Peckham 2018:5–6).

The biological evolution of living beings brings with it a great deal of freedom because, on the one hand, it allows living beings to become ever more autonomous (Dalleur 2015) and, on the other hand, it gives rise to a sufficiently complex brain to be able to make decisions. In my opinion, God chose the

slow and laborious path of evolution because he wanted to ensure that we have complete freedom to believe in him or not, to love him, to ignore him, or to reject him. Numerous theologians and philosophers are also of the opinion that God could give his creatures maximum freedom only by way of evolution. An insight into the scientific discussion is given by Wahlberg (2015). Wahlberg (2015) tries to refute this view, but the work of Eikrem and Søvik (2018) and Søvik (2018) invalidates his arguments. Eikrem and Søvik (2018:433) write: 'If the world were created *ex nihilo* it would have been less independent, less self-created, not creative (until now) and not a surprise to God.' Therefore, it is justified to say that God could give maximum freedom to his creatures only by way of evolution.

## The Adamic Fall

Human beings are the crown of creation, for they have the maximum freedom. Only humans are able to ask consciously about God and to decide of their own free will for or against God and his love. Freedom inevitably includes the possibility of evil (Choo & Goh 2019; Kroon 1981; Plantinga 1977). The Judeo-Christian tradition records that the first humans lived in paradisiacal freedom in communion with God until the devil tempted them to evil, to disobey God. Humans abused their newly won freedom and became slaves to sin (Dias Duarte 2019). This story is known as the Adamic Fall (Gn 3:1–24).

In the relevant literature, there are very different opinions on whether the Adamic Fall really took place. While some, with reference to evolutionary research and palaeoanthropology, reject that there was a Fall as a historical event, there are other authors who try to find out when the Fall probably was and whether only one human couple or many people had already lived at that time; and of course there are views that mediate between these extremes. De Smedt and De Cruz (2020:33–44), Cavanaugh and Smith (eds. 2017) and Madueme (2021) provide an overview of the different positions on the Fall and evolution. Houck (2020), Green and Morris (2020), Johnson (2020), Macdonald (2021) and Loke (2022b) take the view that the Fall and evolution are compatible. In contrast, Harlow (2010:191–192), Eitzelmüller (2014), Lamoureux (2015, 2020), Murphy (2016:117–118) and Janssen (2018) explain human sinfulness as a result of the evolutionary process.

If one – like Lamoureux (2015, 2020), for example – is of the opinion that all the observable evil in the world can be explained as a necessary consequence of evolution and human free will, it is quite obvious to no longer believe in the Adamic Fall. But when I see how horrifyingly great the power of evil is in this world and how much suffering people inflict on each other, I have no choice but to assume that the Adamic Fall in Genesis 3 is not just a figurative story, but that it refers to a real event in the early stages of humanity, the consequences of which still make it difficult for us to do good today. Paul, for example, confesses of himself: 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.'

(Rm 7:19). This view is confirmed by the fact that all Christian churches insist that the Fall happened – see, for example, Anonymous (1997:390) and Clendenin (ed. 2003:187). Without the Fall, I do not think it is easy to explain why Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had to die on the cross.

Now the question arises when in the human evolution the Adamic Fall could have taken place. The oldest fossil record of a definite *Homo sapiens* is at least 233 000 years old (Vidal et al. 2022). Suarez (2016) and Johnson (2020) place the Fall much later. Suarez (2016:290) writes: 'Original sin could have happened at the dawn of civilisation, when *H. sapiens* already exhibited a large population size.' Johnson (2020) assumes that the Fall of Man took place about 65 000–75 000 years ago.

In contrast, May (2022), by analysing palaeoanthropological research results, comes to the conclusion that *Homo heidelbergensis* and all its descendants – that is, *H. sapiens*, Denisovans and *H. neanderthalensis* – already possessed or possess a soul. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the humans who committed the Adamic Fall belonged to the species *H. heidelbergensis* or perhaps even to its ancestor, the even older species *Homo erectus ergaster*. Although Herce (2015) has a different chain of reasoning, he comes to similar conclusions. Herce (2015) supposes that the Fall occurred at the time of *Homo habilis* or *Homo erectus ergaster*. Despite all uncertainties, we must assume that human beings in the Judeo-Christian sense (i.e. with soul and Fall) include not only the biological species *H. sapiens*, but also his ancestral species *H. heidelbergensis* and its sibling species, Denisovans and *H. neanderthalensis*.

## Jesus Christ

The first free humans abused their freedom, sinned, thus destroying their communion with God and lost their freedom to become slaves to their fears, desires and sins (Dias Duarte 2019). Now, instead of abandoning the 'human project' as unsuccessful, God tried again and again to resume the dialogue with human beings that had begun in the course of evolution. The goal of this dialogue was and is to lead the entire creation to 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rm 8:21). In the Old Testament, God had acted in an exemplary way on the people of Israel by liberating them twice: firstly, the liberation from slavery in Egypt, and secondly, the liberation from the Babylonian exile.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ can be understood as the culmination of the dialogue between the Creator and his creation (May 2021a:31). Because man, as the crown of creation, evades dialogue with his Creator, God becomes man in order to make it as easy as possible for man to dialogue with him. This is why Jesus sought and continues to seek intimate dialogue with each and every one of us. 'Jesus Christ, in obedience to God, approaches human beings, who live in disobedience to God, to enter into a partnership with them characterised by faith' (Rabie-Boshoff & Buitendag



2020:5). In his incarnation, Jesus gave up the bliss and abundance he had with God the Father. Jesus gave it up in order to let us share in the overflowing fullness of God. Jesus says of himself, 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10).

Jesus enters into dialogue with us in order to bring us home into liberating and blissful communion with his and our Father. In doing so, Jesus is very patient with us and gives us the freedom to freely say yes to God's love. It cannot be made clear enough how central it was (and is) for the triune God in general and for Jesus Christ in particular the freedom of us human beings. At no single moment does Jesus Christ force, always he leaves the freedom of choice to the persons with whom he interacts. And instead of driving out the devil and evil with power and force, Jesus Christ freely handed himself over to the earthly powers and forces that finally killed him on the cross.

The entire life of Jesus is under the sign of freedom and obedience. His incarnation was possible because Mary freely gave her 'yes' to God's plan. Christianity teaches that the final and comprehensive liberation of humans is liberation from the slavery of sin and death. This liberation took place through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus Christ took upon himself death on the cross completely voluntarily. At the same time, he was always completely obedient to God the Father. Through his loving obedience, Jesus Christ liberated us comprehensively. Through the disobedience of some angels, evil entered the world (Loke 2022b; O'Halloran 2015; Peckham 2018) and through the disobedience of the first humans, evil took even more space. But through the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ – obedience 'to the point of death, even death on a cross' (Phlp 2:8) – the power of evil was overcome.

Jesus Christ was perfectly obedient to his Father-God because he lived in a deep, unbreakable trust in his Father-God. Jesus taught us the Lord's Prayer, so that we too can practise and enjoy this trust. Out of this trust, Jesus addressed his Father-God in the Garden of Gethsemane, when it came to his maximum gift of love, with the confidential, tender 'Abba': 'He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want."' (Mk 14:36).

The Garden of Gethsemane is about the whole thing, the complete gift of love, in which free love and free obedience become one (Berry 2020:117–118). In this moment of total obedience, Jesus is the freest human being and the most obedient human being who has ever lived on Earth. Obedience and freedom are not a contradiction, but the two sides of a coin; and the metal of this coin is love, the unconditional giving of himself to the Father in Heaven by the loving Son. Because of this love, Jesus can say:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have

power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father. (Jn 10:17–18)

Jesus also had to painstakingly learn and practise this loving obedience to his Father:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered ... (Heb 5:7–8).

It is very important to understand that in Jesus, total freedom and total obedience are not contradictory, but are mutually dependent. Jesus loves his Father completely, without any separation, rift or distrust. The true lover wants what the beloved wants. Therefore, Jesus wants exactly the same as God the Father (ed. Martínez Sáez 2014:74–75). Seen from the outside, Jesus' behaviour is absolute obedience to the Father, but seen from the inside – from the inner-Trinitarian relationship – Jesus' behaviour is perfect love for the Father. Because his will is identical to the Father's will, Jesus acts completely according to his own will, that is, completely freely (Jn 10:17–18). Because Jesus lives in perfect freedom, he can also set us free: 'So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (Jn 8:36).

## The goal of the creation

Christianity believes that at the end of time, when Jesus Christ will come again, the whole world, indeed the whole universe, will be transformed (Anonymous 1997:1042–1050), for the Revelation of John speaks of 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rv 21:1). In the Letter to the Romans (Rm 8:18–23), we learn more about this. In this section of Romans, Paul contrasts the current state of creation with the final state of creation. Today, creation is 'subjected to futility' and there is suffering. But Paul does not see the present only negatively, for he highlights that God gave creation hope. This hope of the whole creation is inseparable from the hope of human beings, 'for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God' (Rm 8:19). On the one hand, this 'revealing of the children of God' is linked to the Last Judgement. On the other hand, the 'revealing of the children of God' begins earlier, already now. Every time a person discovers the meaning of their life, lives in conscious communion with God and strives to become more and more like Jesus Christ, the 'revealing of the children of God' begins. It becomes apparent that the fate of humanity is inextricably linked to the fate of the whole of creation – not only in this universe, where the survival of humanity depends on natural resources and fellow creatures, but also in the 'new heaven' and the 'new earth', which the 'children of God' are already helping to prepare (May 2021b:241).

The goal of all creation is 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rm 8:21). This will complete the freedom that God has placed in his creation from the beginning. Through the making of the 'new heaven' and the 'new earth', the whole creation will also participate in the highest degree

of freedom possible: the freedom of the children of God. It turns out that freedom and dialogue are two central concepts that like a red thread run through God's entire plan of creation and redemption. Here, freedom is the fundamental element, because without freedom, true dialogue is not possible. And without freedom and dialogue, true love is not possible.

It can be surmised that 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' includes being integrated into the intra-Trinitarian communion. This would mean that the whole of creation would return to where it started from: into the free, overflowing, giving love of the Trinity. For us humans, as rational beings, it could mean that we will participate in the intra-Trinitarian dialogue of love (Carvajal Blanco 2011:83–84). What it might mean for the rest of creation, I cannot fathom.

What is certain is that 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' will not mean separation or unconnectedness. On the contrary, at and through Jesus' return, living beings and human cultures that have become increasingly differentiated and separated in the course of Earth and human history will be united (May 2021b:242). Diversity and freedom will be preserved in this unification; they no longer separate, but complement and unite. This unification in and with and through Jesus Christ will not erase diversity and difference, but complete them. 'In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all!' (Col 3:11). To better understand this unification, one can take as a model the triune God, for even their diversity and difference are not erased and the freedom of all three persons is preserved.

This process of unification in Jesus Christ exceeds the possibilities and abilities of creation. Therefore, God, the Creator, who conceived this plan of salvation, must and will also carry it out. Even though God is the actual agent, all human beings and especially all Christians are called to support God in this plan of salvation already today. In this regard, it is of existential importance that more and more people become aware that they are called to follow Jesus Christ and to become more and more like him (ed. Martínez Sáez 2014:36–41; May 2021b:242–243).

## Practical consequences

This contemplation of freedom in God's plan shows that for God the freedom of his creatures has an extraordinary value. Every single human being should take this as a model. If every human being would try to respect the freedom of other human beings even only rudimentary to the extent that God does, our world would be considerably more peaceful.

Furthermore, it turns out that it is important for the fulfilment of God's plan of redemption that more and more people follow Jesus Christ and try to become more and more like him (ed. Martínez Sáez 2014:36–41). The more one learns again to live from God's loving gaze over oneself – just as

human beings did before the Adamic Fall – the more one can let go of all those facades that so enslave and separate one from another, and live more and more in the freedom of the children of God (Highfield 2012:181–190). The more one opens oneself to God and accepts his truth about oneself, the freer one becomes. However, this only works if one obeys what one understands from God (Ja 1:22–25).

A crucial point in following Christ is obedience. Obedience and freedom are not a contradiction, but the two sides of a coin; and the metal of this coin is love, God's love for us and our love for God. By giving one's freedom back to God the Son as loving obedience, one's own freedom does not become smaller, but quite the opposite, greater: the more one obeys Jesus Christ, the freer one becomes. The more one's will deviates from God's will, the less free, the more enslaved one becomes. There are two reasons for this:

- We are created to love God and to live in intimate communion with him. The more we move away from God, the more we move away from the meaning of our lives, and the more we die inside, the more we lose life.
- There is no neutral zone between God and the devil. Either we move towards goodness, truth and love, that is, towards God, and then we move away from evil. Or we move away from God and move towards evil, lies and hatred, and inevitably move closer to the devil. The devil knows no freedom and no love, but only submission and enslavement.

Against this background, 'the traditional Eastern Orthodox theological understanding of human freedom as submission to the Church's teachings, regulations, and laws' is comprehensible (Veskoukis 2020:142–143).

Because it is difficult for us humans to trust and obey God, Christian traditions have developed numerous methods and tools to help us do so – such as the so-called 'evangelical counsels': poverty, chastity and obedience (ed. Martínez Sáez 2014: 49, 329–331). I am convinced that the division of Christianity into numerous churches can only be overcome through obedience.

## Conclusion

Our freedom, indeed the freedom of all creation, is enormously important to God. By means of the fine-tuning of natural constants, the indeterminacy of quantum physics and the processes of evolution, God made human freedom possible. God gave the angels and human beings the freedom to choose for or against him, knowing full well how much suffering, horror and evil would result from these free choices: one of his most powerful angels, called the Devil or Lucifer, created to spread the light of God, turned against him and has since tried to spread as much darkness as possible and incite all to fall away from God.

With us humans, the devil achieved a stage victory with the Adamic Fall. And how many terrible things we humans have done, do and will do out of our freedom! And God knew that

he would have to pay a terrible price for the freedom he gave us – namely, that his own Son had to die on the cross, killed of his own free will by his own creatures, us, the human beings.

We, human beings, had freely thrown away our God-given freedom and placed ourselves in slavery to sin. In order to free us from this slavery and to give us the freedom of the children of God, God's Son became man in Jesus Christ and died on the cross: 'O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave you gave away your Son!' (From the Exsultet, the hymn of praise at the beginning of the Easter Vigil). The highest possible act of freedom and love that a human being can do is to give back to God – out of love for God the Father and/or God the Son – this freedom for which God the Son died on the cross, as loving obedience. By giving one's freedom back to God the Son as loving obedience, one's own freedom does not become smaller, but quite the opposite, greater: the more one obeys Jesus Christ, the freer one becomes.

And yet all that we can experience of the 'freedom of the children of God' in this biological life is only a fraction of what awaits us in God's Heaven, in transcendence with the Creator of the universe. There, in the 'New Jerusalem', the 'freedom of the children of God' will not be limited to human beings, but will encompass the whole of creation. It will be unimaginably glorious (Rm 8:21).

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## Author's contributions

A.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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