

THE 'NATION' EDITORIAL BOARD

A REPLY

Honors

This is a fascinating piece of analysis,
 but also pretty opaque in spots.
 It is perhaps methodologically
 over-complicated. As a general
 rule, the time for methodological
 reflection is after one has done
 a piece of work that seems to
 one enlightening and reliable.
 Then one can profitably ask
 what procedures were followed and
 whether they were legitimate.
 In reference to the present essay, it
 probably would have helped to
 concentrate on the thesis that Luther & Aquinas
 are fundamentally distinguished by their
 respective attitudes to truth and
 reality are one. This should have
 been explained and illustrated from
 various angles so that the reader would
 really know what you mean by it. Why
 at least, is not sure ^{exactly} what you have
 in mind. Is. I

LUTHER & AQUINAS
 THE NATION
 DR. GEORGE LIAISON

THE 'NATURE' MOTIF IN THOMISM AND LUTHER

A Comparative Study

Luther and Scholasticism
Fall Semester, 1960-61
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Hence, Paul does not even deign to call that realm of reason world, but rather calls it the form of the world.

— Martin Luther

A study which attempts to explore the relationship between two, fundamental, historically-continuous expositions of (or within) a given religious tradition must proceed according to a prescribed methodology. In order that uncovered differences and/or similarities of phenomenological import be sustained, comparative analysis must discover their issuance from certain underlying presuppositions within the general perspectives of the positions under scrutiny. Hence, the student moves from significant simple data through a kind of motivforskning (or a structural examination of controlling motifs) to those definitive elements, which, because of their foundational status, are regarded as axiomatic to the explication of the entire orientation and provide the basis to which is referred all questions of continuity or discontinuity with other orientations.

Since both positions purport to be presentations of the same tradition (as appears in the furor with which they vie for that distinction!) and use similar terminology to deal with similar issues, the relationship between Luther and the Thomists provides the occasion for the application of the structural methodology. To be sure, there are many who regard such application as misapplication, supporting the thesis that no relevant data for comparison is available below surface generalities since the one approach constitutes a radical break with the other. This assertion (which admits

only historical linkages) joins with that which advocates a strong but modified unity to provide the framework in which all 'relational' discussion is placed, the avenue of the one tending by degrees to emphasize discontinuity, and the other, continuity. Yet, significantly, a frequent candidate for discussion as descriptive of both the unifying and differentiating characteristics of Luther and Thomism is the category of nature as it pertains to the possibility and/or the status of natural theology within the Christian economy.

It is the intent of the writer of this paper to examine the nature-motif as it appears, primarily, in the early writings of Luther vis-a-vis the Thomistic interpretation. The purpose of the study is the further illumination of the relation of the two positions, not concerning nature solely, but as this further reflects basic orientations and perspectives. Since Luther's understanding comes via his reaction to an already-flourishing conception, we begin our study with an exposition of the view of Thomas of Aquinas.

I

The notion of nature, in Thomism, is cast within the logically-prior Aristotelian world scheme. A more contemporary spokesman, Etienne Gilson, emphasizes that the "eternally necessary and necessarily eternal world of Aristotle is there, as something that has always been and always will be."¹ This

¹ Etienne Gilson, God and Philosophy. 1941, pp. 33 ff.

4.
3.

the realization of his telos or potentiality. In that very Aristotelian world is a world of change consisting of individual activity he is united with all of nature which is moving toward things which follow an orderly succession and development toward the realization of the perfection of the universe. Aristotle himself defined nature as 'the totality of sensible objects capable of spontaneous change' and these 'sensible objects' are 'processes of fulfillment in which what is potential becomes actual.' Motion consists of the successive changes according to which all things being must move from potency to act while Perfect Being follows a proper pattern toward a telos, or, the form which is eludes potentiality with actuality and comes into being when the thing's purpose or fulfillment. In order to understand any-potency is transformed into actuality, but the Creator's existence, one must relate it to the subsequent stages in the series of which it is a part, the Good being that which ultimately satisfies that thing. Nature is then, according to Aristotle, the totality of sensible objects in which articulation and fulfillment of form are achieved by motion.²

The Thomist paraphrase has it that the movements in the world, taking place from potentiality to actuality, are but ways of potency or limitation of any kind.³ Man, as "one of those beings that go to make up the universe,"⁴ is a material and spiritual being, an animal of nature, but a rational one. As such he has been given the power to trace intelligible reality back to God, the reality, from the highest to the lowest grade of perfection. Divine being so implicated within the world that it cannot be contemplated without contemplating Him. In striving toward God, man acts according to his nature, simultaneously moving toward

² Aristotle, Physics (Book II), as quoted in W. T. Jones, A History of Western Philosophy. 1952, p. 190.

³ Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles (Book III), as included in Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Anton C. Pegis, ed., 1945, p. 27.

⁴ Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy. 1936, p. 168.

the realization of his telos or potentiality. In that very activity he is united with all of Nature which is moving toward the realization of the possibilities of the universe.

Man is also the creature of God. Since God is 'Active Being,' to be created in imago Dei is to be linked with the Creator by a common participation in being. God and man are linked according to the analogia entis, yet, man as imperfect being must move from potency to act while Perfect Being includes potentiality with actuality; man comes into being when potency is transformed into actuality, but the Creator's existence, as it were, is already included in his essence. The purpose, or telos, for which the creature strives is the fullness of being, perfection, beatitude.

The Aristotelian-Thomistic world contains, then, a hierarchy of being at the summit of which is God: "self-subsistent esse, absolute actuality and perfection in whom there is nothing of potency or limitation of any kind."⁵ From God a descending scale of being, ordered according to proportions as perfection becomes more restricted and the limiting potentiality more pronounced, includes the angels along with the world of inanimate reality, from the highest to the lowest grade of perfection. Since this deals with the relation of creatures to God, it constitutes "the philosophical basis of the whole of Thomism."⁶

⁵ Hilary Carpenter, "The Ontological Roots of Thomism," in Essays in Thomism. Robert E. Brennan, editor., 1942, p. 97.

⁶ Ibid.

Thomas further distinguishes between the states of integral nature and corrupted nature. If man were still in the original state of integral nature, he would naturally move from potency to act and refer all love to God, being dependent upon grace only in the motivation toward this.⁷ Since man stands, however, in the state of corrupted nature, he is dependent upon God's help not only in the initiating of the telos movement, but also in the entire activity of loving God:

In the state of corrupted nature man falls short of this in the appetite of his rational will, which, unless it be cured by God's grace, follows its private good, because of the corruption of nature...

which man is created. As true man he is the telos, the manified

Thomas strongly asserts that man can do no good whatever without grace in his present state, that if he is to 'do what is in him,' he is dependent upon that "power according as he is moved by God."⁹

To be sure, nothing is evil by nature.¹⁰ Evil is fundamentally privation: the lacking of the good of the thing, the diminishing of a thing's fulfillment, a tending-toward-non-being. Sin would imply then not only lack of perfection, but a willingness to take a subordinate end as one's telos, the

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, The Summa Theologica, I-II, (Pegis edition), Q. CIX, Art. 3, (p. 984).

⁸ Ibid., especially, Christopher Dawson, The Historic Realism of Christian Culture, 1930.

⁹ Ibid. (p. 989).

¹⁰ Thomas, The Summa Contra Gentiles, III. (Pegis edition), chap. VII, (p. 14).

See also, S. J., "Towards a Christian Humanism," A Philosophical Symposium, Guthrie and Walsh, eds., 1941.

Incarnation itself verifies the principle of the constant
 worship of the creature rather than the Creator, an act con-
 trary to the ordered and eternal law¹¹—just as the split in
culture which contemporary Thomists decry¹² is attributable to
 a like relational failure between cultural phenomena and their
 respective ends. Since the disposition to use surrogates for
 ultimate satisfaction stems from a perverted will, since the
 right will is present only "in the perfection of the divine
 likeness,"¹³ the state of corrupted nature is dependent upon an
 initiation into the spiritual realities inherently related to
 the redemptive activity of Jesus Christ.

2
 Don't understand

The Imago Dei, Jesus Christ, is the divine likeness to
 which man is created. As true man he is the telos, the manifes-
 tation of perfected humanity. Yet in revealing Himself also as
true God He affirms the insufficiency of all things human.¹⁴ In
 Him humanity is made one with the Imago Dei as nature is trans-
 formed to participate in the divine life. This union, or real-
 ized telos, is mediated to men through the Sacraments which thus
 make possible the extension of the Incarnation throughout time
 and history into eternity. The participants in the union com-
 prise restored humanity, but in that restoration nature is not
 destroyed nor rejected but offered for fulfillment; indeed, the

¹¹ Thomas, Summa Theologica. I-II, (Pegis edition), Q. LXXI, Art. 6, (p. 567).

¹² See, notably, Christopher Dawson, The Historic Reality of Christian Culture. 1960.

¹³ Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy. op. cit., p. 287.

¹⁴ John C. Murray, S.J., "Towards a Christian Humanism," in A Philosophical Symposium. Guthrie and Walsh, eds., 1941, p. 109.

Incarnation itself verifies the principle of the continuity between nature and grace: grace crowns all which is truly human, including, indeed, Aristotelian philosophy.

The writings of Martin Luther manifest a different spirit. Though there is concern there with nature and grace, man's ability to 'do what is in him', fallen and corrupt nature, and the like, one searches in vain for the utilization of 'grades of perfection', 'motion taking place from potency to act', and the verification of these in the literature of a philosopher. The cardinal Thomistic principles, the continuity between nature and grace and the analogia entis, form no basis for Luther's thought and, instead, are rejected or rendered irrelevant by lack of attention. Luther distinguishes between two states, not however between integral and fallen nature (although he occasionally utilizes the differentiation between essential and existential), but between man as flesh and man as spirit. He too speaks of 'doing what is in one' and of a movement taking place toward God, but he adds that this motion is undertaken "out of fear of punishment, of love of gain...pride...through fear and self love"¹⁵ and that "man does what is in him when he sins."¹⁶

These writings also express a shift in orientation. No longer is the theological framework provided by the Aristotelian

¹⁵ Luther, Vorlesung über den Römerbrief. (comment on 3.9), 1515-16, p. 106.

¹⁶ Luther, Heidelberg Disputation. Corollary 26, 1518.

¹⁷ Luther, Recherches. op. cit., p. 96.

worldview. "The whole Aristotle," states Luther, "is to theology as darkness is to light,"¹⁷ yet this protest—with Aristotle serving as 'the paradigmatic case'¹⁸—is lodged also against the entire philosophic intrusion into theology.¹⁹ Luther's more personal criticism—that the Aristotelian god never becomes involved nor troubled about the world²⁰—suggests by contrast his own particular stance.

The world and man, for Luther, stand coram deo. In that presence of God man discovers that he is sinful, that his righteousness, truth, wisdom, and virtue are nothing and must die.²¹ In that identity-revealing-posture the confession is appropriate: "It is true that before thee I am a sinner, that my nature, my very beginning, my conception, is sin."²² Luther speaks also of two ways of beholding,²³ of the incomprehensible judgments of God justified of His Word,²⁴ the folly in Christ which opposes the wisdom of the world. This contrast between the ways of grace and of nature—in contradistinction to the Thomistic continuity—presupposes throughout a perspective which must give evidence of feature differences which are

¹⁷ Luther, Disputation against Scholastic Theology. No. 50, 1517, (A.E. pp 12).

¹⁸ Bernhard Löhse, Ratio und Fides. 1958, pp. 25 ff.

¹⁹ Gordon Rupp, The Righteousness of God. 1953, p. 93.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, Luther und Aristoteles. 1883, p. 5.

²¹ Luther, Vorlesung...Romerbrief. op. cit., (comment on 3.4). p. 96.

²² Luther, Sermon on Psalm 51. (A.E. Vol. 14, p. 169).

²³ Luther, Sermon on the Man Born Blind. (A.E. Vol. 51).

²⁴ Luther, Romerbrief. op. cit., p. 96.

of differing order. Nature, within the coram-deo context, is without claim or value, evil, even sin itself,²⁵ corrupt (but not strictly as this is opposed to the Thomistic 'integral'), not a candidate via sacrificial offering for grace's crowning but for soteriological irrelevance, not deficient nor incomplete but outrightly depraved and without possible appropriate goodness.

If a pause for a premature comparison's reflection is in order, a query might be placed concerning the extent to which phenomenological differences exist through presuppositional implication, and the degree to which these in turn are dependent, or conversely, upon the contextual variance between the Aristotelian, metaphysical perspective and the Reformer's own coram-deo opposition to a 'Begriff Synteresis'.²⁶ In other words, is it possible—moving from significant simple data via a kind of motivforskning to definitive elements—to refer all questions of continuity and discontinuity to variances in orientation and contextual implication? The refutation of this possibility must give evidence of feature differences which are not entirely attributable to axiomatic involvement. The testing of the respective contexts themselves for axiomatic status might constitute an avenue of approach to the discernment of the relation between Luther and Thomism. Perhaps the context was the possibility only because of an awareness of something more basic.

²⁵ Luther, Psalm 51., op. cit.

²⁶ See Lennart Pinomaa, Der Existenzielle Charakter Der Theologie Luthers. 1940, p. 39 ff.

survey of the Catholic world. The rise of the early universities (Salerno, Bologna, and Paris) in the 12th century is poorly written - one has to read Eriugena in order not to totally misunderstand what you say.

The challenge of 'nature' to the later middle ages appears as a problem neatly posed as early as John Scotus Eriugena (810 to 877). In his De Divisione Naturae he brings to awareness a contradiction involved in the simultaneous rendering of a transcendent Creator and a dependent creature. If God does stand in an external relation to the world, as the doctrine of transcendence would assert, then the world in turn must stand in some external relationship to God. Transcendence implies distinctness or separateness, suggests John Scotus, just as distinctness implies independence. Standing within the Augustinian tradition, John's significance (at least for our purposes) lies in his representation of a dissatisfaction with the description of the world as 'an apparition of God'. As interests turned with greater intensity to the natural world and its affairs—and certainly not always, then, away from 'the other world'—discontent became a concern to discover a basis upon which the world (and the domain of natural science, or knowledge) could be rightfully affirmed within a Christian context. The result for John—and we refrain from evaluating his conclusions—was an attack upon the dualism to which was attributed the 'contradiction' and a consequent neglect, or denial, of transcendence.

Though John's work demonstrated the difficulty involved in attempting a construction of the Christian world-view upon a Platonic basis, others following in his tradition took up the task with a vigor which increased as more matters of political, social, aesthetic, and ethical interest sought incorporation in the

purvey of the Catholic Church. The rise of the early uni-
 versities (Salerno, Bologna, and Paris in 1200), new crafts
 and skills, new interest in medicine, law, science, the na-
 tural world—these and others brought pressure to support
 a growing necessity to provide a Christian orientation of
 sufficient breadth to include all rightful pursuits, unified
 to maintain proper relations between the arts and sciences,
 and religion with culture, and strongly undergirded by prin-
 ciples which serve also to enhance the Faith.

The appearance of Aristotle in the west at a time most
 opportune seemed an event of divine origin. Upon whom else
 could one draw for classified information on such a variety
 of topics of natural interest—complete with catalog? The
 results are well known! Plato's dualism was pitted and lost

against his disciple's more adequate approach to thirteenth-
 century Christian concerns. Thomas Aquinas, using Aristotle's
 notion of the nature of reality, defined man not only as a
 child of God but as a rational animal of nature. The world
 of nature lost its relegation as a shadowy imitation of the
 true reality, God (to bow in submission to the realm of grace);
 instead creature and Creator now comprised a single universe

with angels, all other animals, matter, and so on, and formed
 one continuous hierarchy of being. For Aristotle there is only
 one world, the world of actual things. Hence, analogia entis,
 continuity between the realms of nature and grace, motions of
 each seeking God, telos, science as knowledge of ends, theology

³⁰ Gordon Lect. Medieval Thought. 1958, p. 280.

as queen of sciences, the medieval synthesis, and the place for natural theology. Since the world cannot be fully contemplated without contemplating the Creator, since motion represents the questing after God of each entity, it becomes appropriate to refer to degrees of knowledge from the level of common sense through the metaphysical to revelation²⁷ (just as there are grades of perfection), to speak of an academic curriculum which mirrors and inheres in the 'unchangeable laws of human thought',²⁸ to establish religious rapport prior to revelation, and to seek approach to God via both speculative and practical intellect.²⁹ In its tracing in the God-ward direction, nature expresses its yearning for completion and perfection.

The foundation upon which the entire Thomistic synthesis is built—the analogia entis (with its corollary, nature's continuity with grace)—was severely battered by the nominalist reaction. In an effort to free God from human calculation and incursion—such as is implied in the hierarchy of being and Aristotelian causality—the nominalists tended to place their emphasis upon the "unconstrained play of God's will".³⁰ Indeed,

²⁷ See Jacques Maritain, The Degrees of Knowledge. 1959.

²⁸ Pierre Conway and Benedict Ashley, "The Liberal Arts in St. Thomas Aquinas," in The Thomist. Vol. XXII, No. 4, October, 1959, p. 468 ff.

²⁹ See Jacques Maritain, Approaches to God. 1954.

³⁰ Gordon Leff, Medieval Thought. 1958, p. 260.

* This, despite Leff, is a highly questionable way of describing the nominalists' motives

the entire nominalist tradition has been described as "the reflection of its concept of God's potentia absoluta."³¹ } *This is true, but potentia absoluta leads to nominalists' conclusions when taken in conjunction with their logic.*

Duns Scotus (1270 to 1308), an Augustinian, Franciscan, and early commentator on Thomism, called attention to a difficulty similar to that found by the earlier John Scotus. However, the problem wasn't created by a contradiction between a transcendent Creator and dependent creatures in their 'external' relations to one another as before, but by a unified relationship so dependent that the claims of the created were tending to despoil the Creator of the fulness of divinity. If, as was asserted by Thomas, contingency leads to necessity and a cause can be reached through its effects, then the Creator's actions are so correlated with His creatures' that God's activity can be not only explained but even calculated by human reason. This implicit denial of the infinite freedom of God, thought Duns, rests upon the conception of the Creator in terms of the created. Duns asserted that proofs taken from the created world do not go outside of creation. To enclose God in the contingent world of the created is to do violence to His nature.

Duns' criticism was focused at the principle of analogia entis against which he suggested the concept of univocity. The difference is significant. According to the analogy of being, the properties of the creature are realized each according to its particular mode of being (via potency to act);³² univocity,

³¹ Heiko A. Oberman, "Theology of Nominalism," in Harvard Theological Review. January, 1960.

³² See Dorothy M. Emmet, The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking. 1944, pp. 169-188.

on the other hand, reduces being to its most basic degree of abstraction as applicable in uniformity to all being.³³ Instead of discussing particular modes of being for each particular being (as in analogia entis), univocity acts to deduce modes for being in general. God is still linked with man in being, but only as the mode of infinite being is related to finite being.

Though God retains traditional attributes (justice, omniscience, mercy, etc.), the creature no longer retains the ability to ascertain his connection with the divine; the attributes of infinite being cannot be traced in finite being. The pursuit which began as an attempt to recover God's potentia absoluta from philosophy's captivating intrusion works (despite the effort of its author) to destroy the Thomistic continuity between the created and the divine, nature and grace, reason and faith. God's nature (as unincircumcised power governed only by the dictates of His will) is made so undefinable that reason can no longer lay hold of it. The result is the necessity to discover another, more-adequate instrument of religious beholding.

The realms of philosophy and theology, separated by Duns but held within his metaphysical framework, were even more sharply defined by William of Ockham (1300 to 1349). Restricting Duns' univocity to concept—so that there is one concept of being common to God and creatures—and limiting knowledge

³³ Copleston, S.J. A History of Philosophy.

³³ Leff, op. cit., p. 265.

³⁶ Petrarch, "The Ascent of Mount Ventoux," in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man. E. Cassirer, P.O. Kristeller, and P.J. Edwards, Jr. 1948, p. 36.

to practical experience, Ockham rejected metaphysics and natural theology.³⁴ Reason and faith became so separated that they tended toward contradiction. Since extra-sensory truth was not capable of rational verification, truths of revelation were to be received and authenticated by faith. Proofs for God's existence were without meaning; universals and value theories were without reality. The nature of the Creator could be known only through the medium of the concept, but there was no assurance of a reality corresponding to that concept which could be predicated univocally.³⁵

Thus the project of several centuries, which began out of concern to discover a basis upon which the interests of the natural world could receive rightful attention and affirmation within a Christian context, produced that desired result but certainly not within the desired context. Though the medieval synthesis had remained intact, it did not evoke universal acceptance. Alongside the analogia entis ranged the theory of equivocity. The natural, once repulsive and corrupt, though continuous with grace but imperfect and incomplete, became self-sufficient and actually enjoyed. In 1323 Thomas Aquinas was canonized by Pope John XXII; in that same decade an Italian, Petrarch, climbed a mountain with "nothing but the desire to see its conspicuous height."³⁶ The choice, as in the ninth

³⁴ See Anton C. Pegis, "The Dilemma of Being and Unity," in Essays in Thomism. op. cit., p. 151 ff.

³⁵ Frederick Copleston, S.J. A History of Philosophy. Vol. III, 1953, p. 64.

³⁶ Petrarch, "The Ascent of Mount Ventoux," in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man. E. Cassirer, P.O. Kristeller, and F.H. Randall, Jr. 1948, p. 36.

century, still "lay between God and the world."³⁷ The selection of the latter, and the discovery of its inhabitant, who

no longer felt like a tiny speck of dust, thirsting after the dew of divine grace, but as the center of variegated happenings, as strong caryatides sustaining the universe,³⁸

has been called "the essence of the Renaissance."³⁹ But it constituted a look at the world and not beyond it. When, in 1517, a young preacher was posing these words, "it is true that before thee I am a sinner, that my nature, my beginning, my conception is sin," another spokesman was jubilantly exclaiming: "Immortal God! What a world I see dawning! Why can I not grow young again?"⁴⁰ Signifying the ambiguity of the age, he had not many years earlier complained: "Who, being a good man, does not see and lament this marvelous corrupt world?"⁴¹

And, in the other realm, if reason is removed from the sphere of faith, then the alternative emphasis selects tradition, dogma, church authority, and the Scriptures. If, in fact, the created has no claim in the divine, then isn't worth to be

³⁷ Johan. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages. 1954, p. 40.

³⁸ Stefan Zweig, Erasmus of Rotterdam. 1934, p. 29.

³⁹ Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy. 1954, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Desiderius Erasmus, "An Age of God," in the Portable Renaissance Reader. James B. Ross and Mary M. McLaughlin, eds., 1953, p. 80.

⁴¹ Erasmus, quoted in The Portable Renaissance Reader, op. cit., p. 1.

identified with supernatural goodness,⁴² and wouldn't grace, mercy, and election assume a new prominence along with that worth which God bestows? If man is denied a knowledge of God, it would seem that God's Word could become more relevant as the alternative means by which God is made imminent to participate in human affairs. This entire new emphasis would be harmonious, then, with a new stance, the coram-deo dimension, and serve as the replacement for the earlier, defective framework.

Concerning nature specifically, if goodness becomes solely an attribute characteristic of the divine and if man has no rightful claim, it wouldn't be inappropriate to confess that man's entire righteousness, truth, wisdom, and virtue are nothing, and for philosophical reasons alone! If one could further discover the ^{authenticity?} for this in a position of prominence in the Scriptural authority, then the confession's propriety would become even more compelling.

III

But the question still remains: to what extent is it possible to refer phenomenological differences concerning the concept of nature in Thomism and Luther to contextual variation? Could one probe even deeper, in other words, and lay hold of an axiomatic variance which is responsible not only for differing facts as they appear in context but also for differing contexts?

⁴² Luther, Heidelberg Disputation. Philosophical Thesis 38.
⁴³ Gordon Leff, Bradwardine and the Pelagians. 1957, pp. 264 ff.

⁴⁴ Richard Wolff, Studien Zu Luthers Weltanschauung. 1923, pp. 38-39.

This question becomes more pertinent following an historical survey, for a descriptive tracing of facts within their respective contexts does not necessarily constitute an explanation.

Luther is seen clearly as one who gathered together the varied strands of philosophical and religious thought which were present to his day, yet his greater significance is demonstrated in his utilization of these in a united means of communicating his 'rediscovered Gospel'. Though a resolution of implications from nominalism's influence upon faith is an extremely important contributing factor,⁴³ the Reformer would insist that his discovery—even regarding nature—was of greater than inferential depth.

The definitive element in Luther's understanding of nature is his rejection of the thesis fundamental to Thomism, that truth and reality are one. This is implicit in the nominalist denial of necessary connections between God and the world,⁴⁴ but it is also enhanced by a Platonic influence within the Augustinian tradition. Luther had harsh words for philosophy's intrusion into matters of faith, yet, it will be remembered, he much preferred Plato to Aristotle.⁴⁵ This Platonic strain is present in his recognition of the Christian state as a postulate,⁴⁶ for example,

⁴³ Karl Adam, One and Holy. 1951. pp. 34-76 especially.

⁴⁴ Franz Xaver Arnold, Zur Frage Des Naturrechts Bei Martin Luther. 1936, p. 101.

⁴⁵ Luther, Heidelberg Disputation. Philosophical Thesis 36, 1518, (A.E. Vol. 31, p. 42).

⁴⁶ Richard Wolff, Studien Zu Luthers Weltanschauung. 1920, pp. 38-58.

and can be discovered at the root of his rejection of natural law as a direct impression of eternal law.⁴⁷ As this illumines a concept of nature, Luther's significance results from a particular blend: as a student of nominalism he relates realism with the Platonic theory of ideals.⁴⁸ But this merger is applied not to logical-ontological categories, but to the ethical-religious, and the focal point is not being (as in Thomism) but deed.⁴⁹

One can discover specific definitions of nature in Luther only by inference. He describes God not in terms of esse, or static qualities, but in terms of His activity. When he refers to the divine righteousness, for example, he is speaking of the righteousness which God gives. His analyses of nature are not theoretical interpretations, but are implications from man's consciousness of standing in God's Presence as this dimension is present through a deed of God. All attention quickly focuses upon the Word of God, redemptive and revelatory deed, in whose light man discovers his nature—that he must be brought to nothing—a judgment already implicit in the nominalist distinction between the created and the divine.

Concerning Luther's utilization of the modified Platonic influence, a kind of 'sacramental view' emerges—not based upon

47 Ruben Josefson, Den Naturliga Teologins Problem Hos Luther. 1943, p. 127.

48 Friedrich Nietzsche, Luther und Aristoteles. p. 9.

49 Jaroslav Pelikan, "Luther the Expositor," Luther's Works: Companion Volume. 1959, p. 54.

the Scholastic analogia entis, but upon an understanding of the forgiveness of sins⁵⁰—which allows the natural world to provide introduction into the spiritual realities of God. According to the nominalist strain, it is God's activity which is revealed through certain significant events and persons (the larvae dei) while God Himself remains concealed.⁵¹ God, then, is not to be sought behind His creation by inference, "but is rather to be apprehended in and through it."⁵² And the radiance of that apprehension does not come from 'in front', from the inferential goal in any causal nexus, but 'from behind', from the source, according as the believer himself is faithful.⁵³ Knowledge of God becomes related to will, and to obedience.⁵⁴ The realm of God made known in this way is not comprehended in qualities of relation between Thomism and Luther, is the Reformer's esse, but, through the Word, is received in terms of redemptive and revelatory deed. In the light of that activity—in that presence—man discovers anew just whom he is.

By his own insistence, Luther's approach to the question of 'nature' rests upon a break with the Thomistic tradition. His fidelity to a nominalistic background sustains the rejection of analogia entis and the continuity between nature and grace. His radical associating of worth and value with the divine

⁵⁰ Einar Billing, Our Calling. 1955.

⁵¹ Rupp, op. cit., p. 293.

⁵² Philip S. Watson, Let God be God. 1947, pp. 79 ff.

⁵³ Billing, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵⁴ Lohse, op. cit.

goodness (upon whom the created has no claim) is fortified by Scriptural verification in the consignment of "the whole world, or whatever is called man, to sin and the power of Satan."⁵⁵ Since that world is passing away, its wisdom must also be brought to nothing. Since divine reality is not continuous with the created and divine truth not identical with the human, Luther is more than content, as the crucified One, to rely upon the spiritual reality which God, in mercy, bestows coram-deo. His "brief summary of the definition of man" comes then not in philosophical categories of esse, but simply: man is justified by faith.⁵⁶

Of greatest import, therefore, in the discernment of the relation between Thomism and Luther, is the Reformer's omnipresent exposition of nature by contrast. The entire posture maintains a persistent beholding of the nothingness of human works as opposed to the entirety of God's activity even in the careful selection of Scriptural verification—primarily in portions of the Pauline corpus—where the same contrast is emphasized and in similar environments. Thomas, on the other hand, did not always define nature in a faith-versus-works context; yet he also could speak without contradiction of the corruption of nature and of the perpetual necessity of divine grace.

Though it would appear that phenomenological differences in language and content are increased and similarities dissolved

⁵⁵ Luther, The Disputation Concerning Man. No. 34, 1536. (A.E. Vol. 34, pp. 135 ff.)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

when these are known in contextual implication, of greater differentiating significance is the role subsumed in the respective acceptance or rejection of the undergirding thesis that reality and truth are one. To this thesis must all valid concluding be referred. Variant views in the nature-illuminated relation between Thomism and Luther cannot be adequately comprehended terminologically. Similar and differing features do not merely inhere contextually. But, by a subtle kind of medieval proportionality, neither need they be understood completely antithetically.

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