

///// studie / article //////////////////////////////////////

**EARLY LUTHERANISM
AND NATURAL THEOLOGY**

Abstract: *Natural theology can be defined as an attempt of proving the existence of God through the observation of the natural world and the use of reason, without appealing to divine revelation. Many theologians seem to think that early Lutheranism completely rejected the possibility of natural theology, based largely on the view of Luther himself that the human nature has been totally corrupted by sin and can only learn to know God through faith. It was, however, neither the understanding of Luther nor his successors to completely dismiss natural theology. Indeed, Luther is sure that “all men naturally understand and come to the conclusion that God is some kind of beneficent divine power.” Surely, the natural knowledge acquired by reason is distorted by sin and is only “legal” knowledge, but this knowledge still reveals the existence of God and leads us to look for the saving knowledge that can only be attained by faith bestowed by God.*

Keywords: *Martin Luther; natural theology; natural knowledge; reason*

JUUSO LOIKKANEN

University of Eastern Finland
P.O. Box 111, 80101 Joensuu /// Finland
email / juuso.loikkanen@uef.fi

**Rané luteránství a přirozená
teologie**

Abstrakt: *Přirozená teologie se dá definovat jako pokus o dokázání existence Boha pozorováním přírodního světa a užíváním rozumu, aniž by bylo bráno v potaz zjevení. Mnoho teologů si patrně myslí, že rané luteránství úplně popíralo možnost přirozené teologie, a opírají se v tom o názor samotného Luthera, podle nějž lidská přirozenost byla bytostně porušena hříchem a může se naučit vědět o Bohu pouze vírou. Ani Luther, ani jeho následovníci ovšem nebyli přesvědčeni, že je třeba zcela zavrhnout přirozenou teologii. Luther si je jist, že „všichni lidé přirozeně chápou a uznávají, že Bůh je nějakým druhem dobročinné božské moci.“ Přirozené vědění získávané rozumem je porušené hříchem a je pouze „zákonným“ vědění, ale toto vědění přesto odhaluje existenci Boha a vede nás k hledání spásitelského vědění, jehož může být dosaženo vírou poskytnutou Bohem.*

Klíčová slova: *Martin Luther; přirozená teologie; poznání přírody; rozum*

Introduction

In our contemporary society, science and religion are probably two of the most influential forces effecting our lives, and the study of the relationship between science and religion is – citing world-renowned theologian Alister McGrath – “one of the most fascinating areas of human inquiry.”¹ Personally, I could not agree more with McGrath. Throughout the history of Western civilisation, one phenomenon relating to the discussion between science and theology² has been particularly widely debated. This phenomenon is natural theology. In this article, I intend to offer an introduction to Martin Luther’s understanding of natural theology, or, to be more precise, the understanding of early Lutheranism – as well as to correct some common misunderstandings associated with the subject.

Natural theology can be defined as an attempt of proving the existence of God through the observation of the natural world and the use of reason. In other words, natural theology aims at proving the existence of God through our everyday experience of nature – and also through our scientific understanding of nature. Some philosophers and theologians see natural theology more widely, as a way of obtaining information not only about the existence of God, but also about the attributes of God, for example, His goodness, His wisdom, and His righteousness. Regardless of one’s definition, one unchanging feature of natural theology is that does not appeal to any kind of divine revelation or sacred texts such as the Bible or the Quran. It is only based on natural evidence, not on supernatural speculations.³ The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines natural theology rather concisely as follows: natural theology is “theology deriving its knowledge of God from the study of nature independent of special revelation.”⁴ Of course, there are other definitions, but for the purposes of this paper, the mentioned definition is sufficient.

Among many theologians and historians, it seems to be a commonly held perception that early Lutheranism strictly rejected any possibility of natural theology. Consider, for example, the following quotes. One of the

¹ Alister McGRATH, *Science and Religion. A New Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2010, p. vii.

² Actually, it might be more appropriate to talk about the relationship between faith and reason than the relationship between science and theology (I will not be discussing science much in this paper).

³ James BRENT, “Natural Theology” [online]. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/theo-nat/>> [cit. 8.2.2015].

⁴ *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, “Natural Theology” [online]. Available at: <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/natural%20theology>> [cit. 8.2.2015].

most important Lutheran theologians of the 20th century, Rudolf Bultmann, asserted that “for Protestant theology, [...] natural theology is impossible.” To be more precise, Bultmann first refers to the Catholic tradition where “‘natural theology’ means the doctrine of God so far as, without revelation, man can have such a doctrine”, and then continues that “for Protestant theology, such a natural theology is impossible.” Bultmann goes on to argue that natural theology is impossible

not only, nor even primarily, because philosophical criticism has shown the impossibility of giving a proof of God, but especially because this view of natural theology ignores the truth that the only possible access to God is faith.⁵

Another prominent 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, stated rather strongly that “the Reformation and the teaching of the Reformation churches stand in an antithesis to ‘Natural Theology.’”⁶ Of course, Barth was a Reformed theologian, but many Lutheran theologians have offered similar statements. For example, Edmund Schlink writes: “The Lutheran Confessions” – he is referring to the confessions produced by the early Lutherans – “are entirely consistent in denying natural man the ability to know God.” Schlink continues:

God is hidden from the empirical observation of human reality. He is completely hidden behind the simul of creatureliness and corruption. Neither God the Creator nor God the exacting Lawgiver, neither God’s love nor God’s wrath can be recognized in this fallen world.⁷

Carl Heinz Ratschow writes about the Lutheran understanding as follows:

Trying to understand the will and being of God on the basis of the universal Law is a futile task; the only reliable source is the biblical revelation, which in its totality is Gospel over against the universal Law.⁸

⁵ Rudolf BULTMANN, “The Problem of ‘Natural Theology.’” In: *Faith and Understanding*. New York: Harper & Row 1969, p. 313 (313–331).

⁶ Karl BARTH, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation. The Gifford Lectures 1937–1938*. London: Hodder and Stoughton 1938, p. 8.

⁷ Edmund SCHLINK, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg 1961, p. 48.

⁸ Carl Heinz RATSCHOW, “Revelation.” In: GASSMANN, G. – LARSON, D. H. – OLDENBURG, M. W. (eds.), *Historical Dictionary of Lutheranism*. Lanham: Scarecrow 2001, p. 2053.

So, is natural theology really impossible for Lutherans? Of course, it must be admitted that Lutheran thought has always been characterised by the view that human nature has been totally corrupted by sin and can only learn to know God through faith, not through reason. Surely, it is difficult to deny that the superiority of faith over reason is essential to all Lutheran theology – the superiority of the experience of a personal relationship with God over the “empty” philosophical speculation about the nature of being. Nevertheless, I think it is wrong to say that Luther – or early Lutheranism – completely denied the possibility of natural theology. Things just are not that simple. In what follows, I aim to show that it was neither the understanding of Luther himself nor his immediate successors in the 16th and 17th century to completely dismiss natural theology.

Early Lutheranism and the alleged rejection of natural theology

Lutheran views about natural theology are often presented in comparison with the views of the Catholic Church and Catholic theology, just as Bultmann did above. This applies particularly to Lutheranism and Catholicism at the time of Reformation and in the subsequent century, which is not a surprise considering the intertwinedness of the denominations at the time. One of the most significant differences between Lutheran theology and Catholic theology has to do with the ability of human reason to obtain reliable information about the world, and, especially, reliable information about God. Indeed, as Peter Harrison points out, historically, “the whole enterprise of natural theology was premised upon optimistic view of the natural powers of the human intellect”.⁹

Roughly speaking, the Lutheran view is claimed to be that, because of the Fall, because the original sin of Adam and Eve, the human nature has been corrupted so completely that obtaining any knowledge about God through our reason is impossible. We can only learn to know God through divine revelation. Evidence about the existence of God or about the attributes of God cannot be found in the nature. Indeed, Luther himself writes, in his *Lectures on Genesis*, as follows:

⁹ Peter HARRISON, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, p. 46.

Just as leprosy poisons the flesh, so the will and reason have become depraved through sin, and man not only does not love God any longer but flees from Him, hates Him, and desires to be and to live without Him; the will is impaired, the intellect depraved, and the reason entirely corrupt and altogether changed.¹⁰

In *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther depicts human reason as “blind, deaf, foolish, impious and sacrilegious in her dealings with all the words and works of God” leading humans to “deny all the Articles of Faith.”¹¹ In a sermon in Wittenberg, he puts it as follows: “Everyone must also take care that his own reason may not lead him astray [...] Reason mocks and affronts God in spiritual things and has in it more hideous harlotry than any harlot.”¹² One of the basic texts of early Lutheranism, *The Formula of Concord*, follows on the same lines:

We believe that in spiritual and divine things the intellect, heart, and will of unregenerated man cannot by any native or natural powers in any way understand, believe, accept, imagine, will, begin, accomplish, do, effect, or cooperate, but that man is entirely and completely dead and corrupted as far as anything good is concerned.¹³

The Catholic view, instead, has been that although the abilities of human reason have been weakened because of the Fall, reason still remains a reliable way of getting knowledge about God. We can obtain true knowledge about God by observing the world. According to the Catechism accepted in the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century, God did not create the world for “any other cause than a desire to communicate to creatures the riches of his bounty.”¹⁴ This goodness needs to be comprehensible for humans,

¹⁰ Martin LUTHER, “Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5.” In: *Luther’s Works (American Edition)*. 55 Vols. Eds. PELIKAN, J. (Vols. 1–30) – LEHMANN, H. (Vols. 31–55). St. Louis – Philadelphia: Concordia – Fortress Press/Muhlenberg 1955–1986 [1483–1546], Vol. 1.

¹¹ Martin LUTHER, *On the Bondage of the Will. To the Venerable Mister Erasmus of Rotterdam*. London: T. Hamilton & T. Combe 1823 [1525], p. 257. Available at: <<http://palni.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/copebooks/id/798>> [cit. 8.2.2015].

¹² Martin LUTHER, “Sermons I.” In: *Luther’s Works*. Vol. 51. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1959 [1546], p. 374.

¹³ Jakob ANDREÄ – Martin CHEMNITZ – Nikolaus SELNECKER – David CHYTRAEUS – Andreas MUSCULUS – Christoph KÖRNER, “The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord.” Art. II, 7 [1577]. In: *Triglot Concordia. The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. German-Latin-English*. St. Louis: Concordia 1921.

¹⁴ *The Catechism of the Council of Trent. Published by Command of Pope Pius the Fifth*. Baltimore: Lucas Brothers 1829 [1566], Part I, Art. I. Available at: <<https://archive.org/details/thecatechismofth00donouoft>> [cit. 8.2.2015].

so human reason needs to be trustable. Four hundred years later, the Second Vatican Council, following on the lines of the First Vatican Council, declared strongly that “God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason.”¹⁵ So the Catholic standpoint seems to be rather clear, and it certainly seems to be contradictory to Luther’s statements quoted above. Philosopher Richard Popkin notes that, from the point of view of the Catholics, the traditional Lutheran view of natural theology is extremely intolerable, even heretical. Popkin writes: “Roman Catholicism has condemned fideism as a heresy and has found it a basic fault of Protestantism.”¹⁶ Fideism refers here simply to the idea that faith is independent of reason and superior to reason as a way of discovering the truth.

Let us next take a look at one contemporary view on early Lutheranism and natural theology – and, actually, Catholicism as well. In his recent doctoral dissertation,¹⁷ Thomas Woolford makes a clear distinction between Lutheran and Catholic views of natural theology. According to him, Catholic natural theology is best described as “optimistic” and “pre-fideal,” while Lutheran natural theology – and Protestant natural theology in more general – could be described as “pessimistic” and “post-fideal.” By “optimistic,” Woolford means that Catholics believed that there is a lot that can be known about God from the contemplation of God’s creation, and that nature can actually have something to contribute in matters of faith, even in terms of providing a basis for the spiritual life of Christians. The Protestant pessimism, in turn, means that the revelatory capacity of nature was thought to be very limited. Although there might be some knowledge that can be derived from nature, this knowledge is always so corrupted and so partial that we can never learn to know the true character of God through purely the contemplation of nature.

¹⁵ *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Dei Verbum. Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965.* Vatican: Vatican II 1965, Ch. I, 6. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html> [cit. 8.2.2015].

¹⁶ Richard POPKIN, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003, p. xxii.

¹⁷ Thomas WOOLFORD, *Natural Theology and Natural Philosophy in the Late Renaissance.* Dissertation Thesis. Cambridge: University of Cambridge 2011. Available at: <<https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/242394/T%20A%20WOOLFORD%20PHD%20DISS%20-%20Hardbound.pdf;jsessionid=11AC2318D49A1261790558283B1ED333?sequence=1>> [cit. 8.2.2015].

In Woolford's thinking, the term "pre-fideal" refers to the Catholic perception that natural theology is possible for all people, also for non-Christians, because of the doctrine of prevenient grace. Natural theology can be seen as a kind of an "apprenticeship" for the reception of fuller knowledge of God. Woolford maintains that the Catholic view was that pre-fideal natural theology could be a merit in the eyes of God, and that "sincere" natural religion could even provoke God's infusion of saving grace. The term "post-fideal," instead, describes the Protestant view that the Fall has destroyed all abilities of humans to seek God. Therefore, any attempt of natural theology performed by non-Christians is not only no source of merit before God but also perverted and idolatrous. The spiritual understanding of humans needs to be restored before any real knowledge of God can be obtained, and human understanding can only be restored by an act of God, by the gift of grace. Only after this can human reason gain reliable information through observation of nature. In Lutheran, or Protestant, thinking, no "natural" knowledge exists before the eye-opening faith granted by God.¹⁸

This describes the characteristics of Lutheran understanding of natural theology in a way that corresponds well to the consensus view of historians of theology. Now, let us dig a little deeper into the Lutheran thinking.

Natural theology before and after the fall

One of the first points that needs to be stressed is that the Lutherans did not reject the theoretical or historical possibility of natural theology. Lutherans, just like Catholics, believed that the world was originally created as a revelation of God's nature to humans. Luther explains, in a commentary on Genesis, that before the Fall, humans had "perfect knowledge of the nature of the animals, the herbs, the fruits, the trees, and the remaining creatures."¹⁹ And through nature, they also had perfect knowledge about God. In other words, Adam and Eve, regardless of whether they are thought to be a single pair of hominids or a multitude of them (or something else), possessed a reason that was able to investigate nature and reveal all the revelation it contained. One could say that Adam and Eve were perfect natural theologians, perfect interpreters of the Book of Nature written by God.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84, 147–149, 197–198.

¹⁹ Martin LUTHER, *Luther Still Speaking. The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1858 [1535–1545], p. 63, as cited in: WOOLFORD, *Natural Theology*, p. 89.

²⁰ HARRISON, *The Fall of Man*, p. 12.

What, then, did change after the Fall? The popular view among historians of theology is that according to the Lutherans, everything changed. Paraphrasing Luther, they hold that the human will was completely impaired, the human intellect completely depraved, and the human reason completely changed.²¹ And it was not only the human reason that was changed and corrupted, it was also the natural world. The world became distorted and could no more serve as the manifestation of God's providence. Peter Harrison explains that "nature itself had fallen, [...] deviating from the original plan and becoming less intelligible." The big question is whether the nature had become less intelligible or entirely unintelligible – whether we can acquire some knowledge about God through nature or no knowledge at all. In what follows, I intend to show that it was not the understanding of Luther or the early Lutheranism that the nature had become totally unintelligible.

Luther and natural theology

Let us now take a look at what Luther himself said. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Luther writes:

Since no one has seen God, is it possible for me to know God or to arrive at a certainty of the existence of God with one's own innate powers? The answer was yes [Luther is here referring to the answer given by some Catholic scholastic theologians] and St. Paul's words, recorded in Rom. 1:19, were cited in corroboration: the existence of a God is evident to the Gentiles, perceived by them from the works of the creation, 'so that they are without excuse.' Furthermore, their reason tells them that the heavenly bodies cannot run their definite course without a ruler. Thus St. Paul says in Romans 1:20: "The invisible nature of God, namely, His eternal power and deity has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made, namely, in the creation of the world."

Luther seems to have no objections to this view, admitting the possibility of natural knowledge of God. However, this knowledge must be understood to be partial, or as Luther calls it, "left-hand" knowledge of God. Luther continues as follows:

There are two kinds of knowledge of God: the one is the knowledge of the Law, the other is the knowledge of the Gospel. [...] The Law is also inscribed in our hearts, as St. Paul testifies to the Romans. [...] Reason can arrive at a 'legal

²¹ See note 11.

knowledge' of God (*cognitio legalis*). The philosophers, too, have this knowledge of God. But the knowledge of God derived from the Law is not the true knowledge of Him. The people do not obey this Law. Reason has only a left-handed and partial knowledge of God based on the law of nature and of Moses. But the depth of divine wisdom, and of the divine purpose, the profundity of God's grace and mercy, and what eternal life is like – of these matters reason is totally ignorant.²²

In Lutheran theology, of course, the distinction between the Law and Gospel is a very fundamental feature. The legal knowledge that we can arrive to through our reason is knowledge about the Law and incapable of bringing us salvation. Still, the legal knowledge is necessary because it reveals our sinfulness to us. The legal knowledge shows that we are sinners and leads us to look for the saving knowledge of God that can only be attained by faith. Robert Koons explains in like this: “Without the Law, we could not be sinners, in need of salvation. The natural knowledge of God grounds our guilt before God: it deprives of the excuse of ignorance when we fail to honour God as God.”²³

In some of his writings, Luther goes even further than his previous quotes implied. In a commentary on Genesis, he writes:

God indeed promised that He is determined to be God to all men, and this knowledge has been implanted in the hearts of man. [...] Thus all men naturally understand and come to the conclusion that God is some kind of beneficent divine power, from whom all good things are to be sought and hoped for.²⁴

Similarly, in his commentary of Romans, Luther maintains that humans are able to know some “invisible” attributes of God through reason, for instance, the divinity, goodness and righteousness of God.²⁵ In the commentary on Jonah, Luther states it like this

²² Martin LUTHER, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1–4.” In: *Luther's Works*. Vol. 22. St. Louis: Concordia 1957 [1537–1540], p. 149–153.

²³ Robert C. KOONS, “The Place of Natural Theology in Lutheran Thought” [online]. 2006. Available at: <http://www.robkoons.net/media/DIR_5901/69b0dd04a9d2fc6dffff8176ffffd524.pdf> [cit. 10.2.2015].

²⁴ Martin LUTHER, “Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 31–37.” In: *Luther's Works*. Vol. 6. St. Louis: Concordia [1535–1545], p. 113.

²⁵ Martin LUTHER, “Lectures on Romans.” In: *Luther's Works*. Vol. 25. St. Louis: Concordia 1972 [1515–1516], p. 157.

Let us here also learn from nature and from reason what can be known of God. These people [Luther is here talking about non-Christians] regard god as a being who is able to deliver from every evil. It follows from this that natural reason must concede that all good comes from God: the natural light of reason regards God as gracious, merciful and benevolent. And that is indeed a bright light.²⁶

So Luther admits that we can learn about the existence of God, and also about the attributes of God, like His benevolence and wisdom, through nature. On these grounds, it seems very strange and very unfair to claim that Luther denied the possibility of natural theology. Indeed, as Emil Brunner has noted, Luther's attitudes towards natural theology are actually be more positive than most of his contemporaries, and, for example, much more positive than the attitudes of Calvinists, Calvin himself, in particular. Brunner even thinks that it is "well-known" that "Luther makes far greater concessions to *theologia naturalis* than Calvin."²⁷ Yet, reason has two major defects, according to Luther:

First, reason does admittedly believe that God is able and competent to help and to bestow; but reason does not know whether He is willing to do this also for us. That renders the position of reason unstable. [...] The second defect is this: Reason is unable to identify God properly; it cannot ascribe the Godhead to the One who is entitled to it exclusively. It knows that there is a God, but it does not know who or what is the true God. [...] Thus reason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil. So there is a vast difference between knowing that there is a God and know who or what God is. Nature knows the former – it is inscribed in everybody's heart; the latter is taught only by the Holy Spirit.²⁸

To sum up the views of Luther, we can say that he did not deny natural theology – although it was not called natural theology in his time. Luther held that nature can teach us to obtain knowledge of God. Surely, this is only what Luther calls "legal knowledge," but it will lead us to look for the true knowledge of God, the saving knowledge of God, which can only be obtained through special revelation and through Christ. As Luther explains

²⁶ Martin LUTHER, "Minor Prophets II: Jonah and Habakkuk." In: *Luther's Works*. Vol. 19. St. Louis: Concordia 1974 [1525–1526], p. 54.

²⁷ Emil BRUNNER, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Lutterworth 1941, p. 599.

²⁸ Martin LUTHER, "Minor Prophets II," p. 54.

in his *Large Catechism*, “We could never attain to the knowledge of the grace and favor of the Father except through the Lord Christ. [...] outside of whom we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge.”²⁹

Early Lutheranism and natural theology

Also one of Luther’s closest friends and one of the most important figures in early Lutheranism, Philipp Melanchthon, offers extremely optimistic view towards natural theology:

There flashes in the mind the knowledge which affirms not only that there is one God, but also teaches what kind of God He is, namely, wise, beneficent, just, One who assigns like things to like things, truthful, One who loves moral purity, One who demands that our obedience conform to His will, and One who punishes with horrible punishments those who harshly violate this order.³⁰

At first, Melanchthon seems to even come close to the Catholic view. But if we take a further look to what he is really saying, we find out that Melanchthon’s thoughts are not that optimistic. To be sure, he thinks that there are things that can be known through the contemplation of nature. Still, this knowledge is always merely “legal” knowledge. It reveals the Divine Law, God’s demands to us, but not the Gospel, not God’s saving grace. Our natural knowledge cannot reveal the real loving character of God, which can only be known through Christ. So Melanchthon’s views are consistent with those of Luther.

In the 17th century, German Lutheran theologian Johann Andreas Quenstedt, in his massive *Didactic-Polemic Theology or Systematic Theology*, declared that the existence of God should be clear to all men, including non-Christians. At the same time, Quenstedt was also loyal to Luther in making a distinction between the Law and the Gospel:

There indeed remained in corrupt nature after the Fall some knowledge of God and of divine law, but weak, imperfect, and by no means sufficient for salvation.

²⁹ Martin LUTHER, “The Large Catechism.” Art. III, 65. In: *Triglot Concordia. The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. German-Latin-English*. St. Louis: Concordia 1921 [1529].

³⁰ Philipp MELANCHTHON, *Initia doctrinae physicae* [1550], as cited in: Werner ELERT, *The Structure of Lutheranism: The Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism Especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. St. Louis: Concordia 1962 [1931], p. 52.

[...] Natural theology is occupied with a little particle, namely about the existence, power, and righteousness of God and the function of the Law. Revealed theology teaches all things that are necessary for our salvation.³¹

In addition to the names I mentioned before, many other Lutheran theologians held positive attitudes towards natural theology, for example, Johann Gerhard,³² Jacob Martini,³³ Cornelius Martini,³⁴ Abraham Calow³⁵ and Christoph Scheibler. Scheibler even published a book by the name *Natural Theology*³⁶ in 1621.

All these early Lutheran writers followed more or less closely in the footsteps of Luther. An example of Johann Gerhard is a good one. He writes that human reason itself (reason *per se*) does not conflict with the Gospel; it is only the misuse of reason that does. As a result of the Fall, human beings are inclined to misuse reason, elevating their own corrupted opinions above the word of God. So the conflict is not between reason and faith, but between the sinful misuse of reason and the humility of faith.

Of course, the truth might not be quite as straightforward as I have presented here – truth rarely is. There are many subtle differences between the Lutheran writers that I have had to ignore in this presentation, and I could have chosen some other names for the list, too. Still, generally speaking, I hope that it has become clear that natural theology was certainly not thought to be impossible for Lutheran theologians in the 16th and 17th century.

Conclusion

So what should we conclude from all this? It seems that Luther himself was very ambivalent regarding the powers of human reason and, consequently, the ability of humans to do natural theology. Actually, it may even be an understatement to say that Luther is “ambivalent.” Perhaps we should say that he contradicts his own words on many occasions. For instance, on the one hand, Luther says that reason is blind, on the other hand, he says that

³¹ Johann Andreas QUENSTEDT, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologicum*. Th. XIII, XV [1685], as cited in: KOONS, “The Place of Natural Theology,” p. 20.

³² Johann GERHARD, *Loci Communes Theologici*. S.l.: s.n. 1610–1622.

³³ Jacob MARTINI, *Exercitationes Metaphysicae*. S.l.: s.n. 1603–1604.

³⁴ Cornelius MARTINI, *Metaphysica Commentatio*. S.l.: s.n. 1605.

³⁵ Abraham CALOW, *Systema Locorum Theologicorum*. S.l.: s.n. 1655–1677.

³⁶ Christoph SCHEIBLER, *Theologia Naturalis*. S.l.: s.n. 1621.

reason is a bright light. Luther says that reason is an enemy of faith, even the greatest enemy of God, but he also admits that reason is a most useful servant to theology, a gift from God.

What we must acknowledge is that a lot of Luther's writings are extremely situation-dependent and his style of writing very polemical. Luther was not intending to formulate a comprehensive systematic theological theory but to address certain question or certain texts at hand, and did not mind using strong language and making controversial claims – even claims that seemingly contradicted his earlier sayings. However, I argue that there is a common thread to be found in the writings of Luther concerning reason and natural theology, and that thread runs somewhere between these two opposites. Moreover, that common thread continues in the writings of his immediate successors.

To put it short, the common thread is this: The knowledge that humans can obtain through nature is always about the Law, never about the Gospel. We can learn something about God as Creator, and we can learn something about God as Judge, but we cannot learn anything about God as Redeemer or God as a Loving Father.

When compared to Catholic theology, for example, there was in early Lutheranism a clear qualitative distinction between reason and faith, between natural revelation and scriptural revelation. In Catholic theology, the difference was only quantitative: scriptural revelation completed the natural revelation, grace perfected nature, but they were not two completely separate things. According to early Lutheran theologians, it was not possible for humans to reach real divine truths or gain any merit before God through natural theology; natural reason could only lead us to despair and to make us realise our sinfulness. The Catholic view, in turn, was that natural theology could lead to a certain amount of knowledge of God and be a merit before Him. The gift of prevenient grace made it possible for humans to take the first steps towards God through natural reason. These positive aspects of natural theology are missing in Luther and in early Lutheranism. The doctrine of prevenient grace is denied and humans are admitted no power whatsoever to take any spiritual steps toward God. Only God himself can help us take these steps – or, to put perhaps even more fittingly, we are unable to take any steps at all. In fact, God carries us in His arms all the way.

I will end my paper with a quote (one already presented above) from Luther, which sums up the early Lutheran view quite well. Luther writes:

Reason is unable to identify God properly. [...] It knows that there is a God, but it does not know who or what is the true God. [...] There is a vast difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing who or what God is. Nature knows the former – it is inscribed in everybody's heart; the latter is taught only by the Holy Spirit.