

Luther and the Medieval Inheritance

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For at least three decades now, Luther scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the use Luther made of the medieval tradition. The result is that we now understand Luther's appropriation, rejection or sublation of various elements in this tradition as never before. Our picture of Luther has been permanently altered by this determined effort to see him in his medieval context. With this in mind, the original purpose of our seminar was twofold. First, the seminar aimed to make new particular contributions to this ongoing field of research, and second, it proposed to sum up the general theme by a comprehensive analysis of the *status quaestionis*. With regard to the second goal, some tentative steps were taken in this direction but it remained largely unfulfilled. The massive quantity of scholarship makes this a formidable task, and the fact that our work continues in ever new directions should be taken as a sign that such a project is premature. It remains as a *desideratum* for the future. On the other hand, our first purpose, to add specific original contributions to this body of scholarship, was richly fulfilled.

Eight papers were distributed in advance, and each was thoroughly discussed by the eight participants and several observers. The first was a report on research in progress by PETER BREITSCH entitled »Late medieval apocalypticism: its influence and transformation in the thought of Martin Luther.« This project entails a close examination of Luther's »*Supputatio annorum mundi*« (1541) against the background of John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Nicholas of Lyra and Giles of Viterbo. Focusing on the themes of history, the millennium and the Antichrist, this research supports the view that Luther »did not break

with late medieval apocalyptic tradition, but adapted and extended the old patterns of thought«.

Second, Kari Kopperi contributed an essay on »Renaissance philosophy: an unknown field in Luther research«. According to him the philosophical discussions of Renaissance thinkers are an important but rather neglected area of research. Luther was not philosophically naive; his philosophical presuppositions may well have been shaped by the Renaissance debates. Furthermore, there are fascinating parallels between Renaissance philosophical thought and Luther's theology. What is needed for a better understanding of Luther's theology is, first, a more thorough analysis of the intellectual atmosphere in the early sixteenth century. And second, scholars must begin to compare Luther's theological and philosophical ideas not only to Gabriel Biel, but to Renaissance thinkers such as John Buridan, Giles of Viterbo, Jodocus Trutfetter, and Bartholomaeus Arnoldi aus Usingen.

Lei Yutian reported briefly on the state of Luther scholarship in China, and contributed a paper on »Luther and humanism: inheritance and transcendence«. Focusing on Luther's use of the ancient classics, his critical spirit, and his humanistic praxis, this contribution argued that the humanistic impulse was at the heart of Luther's spirit and that his Reformation was in fact the wider practice of humanism. In Luther's movement humanism was deepened and developed, and in the end linked with practical reform. Luther struggled not only for the liberation of human beings from spiritual dictatorship but also for the liberation of humanism

from the studies of the intellectuals and the courts of the nobility. Thus Luther both inherited and transcended the humanistic project. Without humanism there would have been no Reformation, but without the Reformation there would have been no rebirth and deepening of humanism.

Christoph Burger submitted a paper under the title »Wir sollen Gott über alle Dinge fürchten, lieben und vertrauen: das Reden von Gottesfurcht bei einigen spätmittelalterlichen Theologen und in Luther's Kleinem Katechismus«. The comparison proposed to shed light on the relationship of fear and trust in Luther's explanation of the first commandment. »Fear before God« can be understood as the first stage of trust in God, but it can also be understood as a means of engendering *Angst*. On the other hand, if fear of God grows out of trust, such fear can only be interpreted as reverence toward God and not fear before God.

Late medieval theologians distinguished precisely between fear of divine punishment, which can exist without faith, and reverence for God, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Already in Luther's 1518 short explanation of the ten commandments, the fulfillment of the first commandment grows out of »right faith and firm trust« which express themselves in fear and love of God. If one understands Luther's explanation of the first commandment in his Small Catechism in light of this early forerunner, here too fear of God must be seen as a result of trust. Thus the »we should« cannot simply be understood as a demand. The words »and trust« are used only once, but they bear a great deal of weight: they must be seen as words of central importance for the understanding of *all* the commandments. The discussion revolved around the central questions of whether Luther's »we should« is not in fact a demand, and whether the »and trust« which is used only once can bear this interpretive weight.

Denis Janz presented a paper entitled »Luther and late medieval Albertism«. This was intended as a contribution to the understanding of a relatively unknown current of thought in Luther's intellectual milieu. The reformer often refers not only to the Thomists, the Scotists, and the *moderni*, but also to the »Albertistae«: it is, according to him, one of the four main »sects« of scholasticism. Yet scholars have paid almost no attention to it. This paper begins with an outline of the history of Albertism, and then turns to a precise examination of what Luther had to say about it. In summary, Luther contends that the »rediscovery« of St. Paul and Augustine has made this world of thought obsolete. Albertism is destined for the dustbin of history, and its demise cannot come soon enough. Yet the story of Luther and Albertism does not end here, for unbeknownst to Luther, Albertus Magnus had a profound influence on what has come to be called German Dominican mysticism (Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, Heinrich Suso, the *Theologia Deutsch*, etc.). And, as is well known, this style of mysticism influenced Luther profoundly. Thus, indirectly at least, Luther came under the influence of another of his medieval intellectual forbears.

Sammeli Juntunen submitted a study of the topic »Some similarities in the use of the concept ›Nothing‹ (nihil) in the Western ontological tradition and in Luther's theology«. Comparing the medieval tradition and Luther, this paper pointed out interesting similarities in the use and meaning of the concepts »nihil« and »annihilatio«. Not only does this comparison shed light on Luther's use of these terms, but it also calls into question the views of those such as Gerhard Ebeling and Wilfried Joest who find in Luther a fundamentally new ontology.

Theo Dieter contributed a paper entitled »Non enim, ut Aristoteles putat, iusta agendo iusti efficimur: zum Sinn von Luthers Kritik«. It raised the questions of the objects of this

critique and its meaning. While it can be applied to Aristotle himself only in a limited way, it applies directly to John Buridan's commentary on the relevant text in Aristotle: because of the *libertas arbitrii*, morally good acts both before and after the origin of a virtue are of the same kind. What Buridan and also Biel say about the *virtus acquisita*, Biel also says about the grace of *caritas*: the act of loving God before and after the reception of the *gratia infusa* are, according to their type, the same. In this regard, Luther characterizes this doctrine of grace as the Aristotelian teaching that humans become righteous by repeated righteous actions without any preceding change in the person. This only makes sense if one understands that in his criticism of Biel's scholastic theology of grace, Luther concentrates on the *substantia actus*, and that in this context grace does not fundamentally change the human power to act. This critique of Luther's in this form at least, does not apply to Thomas's theology of grace (against Ebeling and Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen).

Theo Bell addressed himself to the subject of »Luther's Reception of Bernard of Clairvaux«, inquiring first into the question of exactly which writings of Bernard Luther actually knew, and then into the question of Luther's image of Bernard. There is no doubt that Luther was much more familiar with Bernard's sermons than with his treatises (»*De consideratione*« excepted). This corresponds with Luther's lifelong image of Bernard, not as first and foremost a mystic, but rather as a preacher

in the tradition of the church fathers. This should be kept in mind for a future comprehensive comparison of Bernard's and Luther's theologies. The first step towards such a project must be an analysis of all Bernard references in Luther's works, and this has recently been done by Bell in his »*Divus Bernhardus*«. The question of monastic theology must also be resolved. If Bernard was a monastic theologian in his own right, to what extent can the same be said of Luther? The development of monastic theology is relevant here. But also Luther's early exegesis (especially on the Psalms) has to be reread with monastic eyes, as a mirror reflecting the experience of a monastic life in search of God.

In the end, the seminar participants agreed that the primary research submitted and discussed represents a significant contribution to the general theme of »Luther and the medieval inheritance«. At the same time, it was recognized that this theme and type of research now seems to be moving away from center stage in Reformation scholarship due to the ascendancy of social historical approaches. While affirming the contributions of social history, participants were critical of its more extreme proponents who see it as a potentially comprehensive explanation of the Reformation.

The importance of theology and the methods of the intellectual historian were reaffirmed and the participants, accordingly, seemed resolved to continue their study of Luther's theology in its medieval context.