

Luther and the Apophatic Tradition

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Reporter: Knut Alfsvåg

There has been a growing consensus among Luther scholars that authors of a mystic persuasion were indeed important for Luther's theological development. This was even emphasized through one of the plenary sections of the congress. This seminar concentrated more specifically on the problem of unknowability in Luther's thought and his relation to Dionysius and Dionysian spirituality.

Knut Alfsvåg underlined that Luther in his struggle to find his own footing in relation to the *via moderna* he was taught at the university, found the Dionysian spirituality of unknowability to be of great help. However, in his early lectures he oscillates between a positive and more critical assessment of Dionysius. In the philosophical theses of the Heidelberg Disputation, he goes directly to the Dionysian tradition's philosophical source, Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*, which in his

view has an open-minded approach to the problem of infinity that he finds to be vastly preferable to Aristotle's anthropocentrism. In *Operationes*, which arguably is Luther's concluding discussion of Dionysius, he finds him (or his interpreters) wanting both concerning existential relevance and Christological depth. However, an understanding of unknowability and nothingness inspired by the Dionysian tradition continues to be central, e.g., for the emphasis on salvation as *creatio ex nihilo*. In *De servo arbitrio*, divine unknowability remains central, but in a way that qualifies and emphasizes the significance of incarnational, scripturally transmitted revelation. This reveals an understanding of *deus absconditus* that is unrelated to the *potentia absoluta*-doctrine of *via moderna* and dependent on Dionysian apophaticism. However, Luther has appropriated the latter in an independent

way, which lets us see him more as an important contributor to this tradition than its opponent. Later Lutheranism lost Luther's emphasis on unknowability, which made it very difficult for it both to find a way between Calvinism and Arminianism, and to oppose Enlightenment anthropocentrism consistently.

Jakob Wolf maintained that for Luther and apophaticism, God is indefinite and therefore not a concept. Conceptualizing God by maximizing the concepts therefore does not work. However, radically negative theology ends in silence. Rudolf Otto maintained that one, while not being able to conceptualize God, can still sense him. This is close to Luther, who has both a transpersonal and a personal understanding of God. A revealed God without a hidden God does not make sense for Luther. Here Luther is radically different from 20th century dialectical revelation theology, which never could make sense of Luther's distinction between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*. This distinction remains theologically indispensable, though. God is omnipotent. To deny God's omnipotence is to deny God. This means that God is the active force behind all our ambivalent experiences. There is thus no escape from the conclusion that God is the

cause of evil. Even Luther tries in *De servo arbitrio* to soften this conclusion, but we have to live with the paradox that God is the cause of what is against God. In Christ God still reveals that his essence is love. *Deus absconditus* makes it possible to live with this paradox, while the alternative, a rejection of God's omnipotence, is fatal, because it makes the understanding of God blurred.

Stephen Paulson sought to highlight the difference between Erasmus's and Luther's approach to hiddenness. For Erasmus, God is hidden while the law is clear. However, for Luther, God has attached to the moral precepts an accusation with death as a result. One will therefore never obtain clarity by looking for a law that does not accuse. The law is therefore what for Luther ends in mystical silence, i.e. in faith, which from the point of view of the law and its companion—reason—is total darkness. Faith thus negates everything, even the very best thing ever made by God for life. Luther's apophaticism is thus pure negation that negates the dream of fulfilling the law in one's self. However, in this silenced darkness the preached Christ is present and promises the forgiveness of sins. He is still present, though, as the Christ who is cursed because the sins of humans

are placed on him. There will therefore never be conformity of the sinner into the shape and order of the eternal law. One implication of this approach is that God's hiddenness is not due to human finitude, but to human sinfulness. It will therefore disappear in the light of glory as hinted at in the concluding paragraphs of *De servo arbitrio*. Other implications are that it may lead to a rather negative view of Dionysian apophaticism and to a rejection of the possibility of a growing conformity to the law on this side of death.

Even *Gordon Isaac* emphasized the understanding of darkness within the apophatic tradition; the wisdom of heaven can only be found in the darkness beyond everything perceived and understood. Moses' ascent to Sinai is an often-used metaphor for this approach to darkness. In his *Greater Commentary on Galatians*, Luther similarly speaks of Christ sitting in the darkness as God sat in the darkness of Sinai. This makes the question of Luther's relation to the apophatic tradition an important question to ask, and Luther indeed repeatedly refers to Dionysius in his early lectures. While being critical of Dionysius in *Operationes*, Luther continued to speak of the situation of faith

as being enveloped in a dark cloud. This, then, is a transformation of the medieval Dionysian tradition; it is put to new use in a different context. In the Galatian lectures 1531/35, Luther speaks of the darkness of faith as a way of illustrating the necessity of distinguishing the law/reason from the gospel/faith in the doctrine of justification. He can also speak of darkness as a description of Christ's presence in faith; it is a sort of knowledge that cannot see anything, and as a metaphor for faith's destruction of reason. In a similar way, Luther in the Genesis lectures speaks of faith as a shutting of the eyes to the senses and withdrawal into the darkness of believing the promises even when they appear impossible. This emphasis on darkness may be related to the fact that for Luther reason is unable to apprehend God without twisting the promise into law.

Jeannine Olson took us in a somewhat different direction by presenting a discussion of democracy in Calvin's Geneva. The pastors could have quite open discussions among themselves, but remained outwardly united and reacted negatively toward an attempt of introducing a more open way of communication. The discussion focused on the underlying epistemological is-

sues and the lack of an appreciation of unknowability in the Reformed tradition.

Jeffrey Silcock looked at the relation between Luther's theology of the cross and the apophatic tradition. He documented that the term ›theology of the cross‹ only occurs in early texts, and argued that it belonged to the thought of the pre-reformational Luther. It is related to apophaticism in that it emphasizes the difference between God's *opus alienum* and his *opus proprium*, and in that it rejects the self-sufficiency of humans. These elements remain central in Luther's thought, which can be seen, e.g., in *On the Councils and the Church*. However, in the early Luther, justification is by humility and not by faith; thus, it lacks certainty, which becomes essential for the later Luther. A theology of the cross remains, but it means something different in Luther's later works than it does in the Heidelberg Disputation.

Timothy Dost discussed Luther's apophaticism of the will in some of the theses in the Heidelberg Disputation. Luther repeatedly makes use of apophatic theology in his descriptions of the results of the attempts to approach God directly. This applies even to his approach to free will, where Luther empha-

sizes negativity to the extent of rejecting that the term ›free will‹ refers to anything at all. It therefore does not make sense to describe its attributes, and Gabriel Biel's understanding that God saves the one ›who does all that is within him‹ is rejected. In a similar way, Luther attacks the Thomist understanding of salvation as a development from potential to actualization. In Luther's view, this is to ascribe to the will a positive role that does not exist; for Luther, the will has only a passive or subjunctive possibility. The human will only functions as an object. In addition, as the biblical narrative tells us, human will leads to sin even in its original, pure state; how could one then possibly trust it now? Luther in this way applies a theology of negativity in rejection of all possibilities of bargaining with God.

The discussion in the seminar focused on a number of topics, some controversial, some considerably less so. There was consensus in the seminar that the topic of ›Luther on apophaticism‹ is a rewarding topic that allows for an interesting discussion of the relation between soteriology and the understanding of God. If God is different to the extent of being unapproachable by means of the endeavours of *liberum*

arbitrium, access is only possible through divine grace. There was also agreement that the question of where Luther is to be placed in relation to Dionysian apophaticism is intriguing, though there was no unanimous attitude in the group on how the question should be answered. However, difference of opinion in this regard may relate more to disagreement in the interpretation of the thought of Dionysius than in actual disagreement on whether or not Luther represents an original and creative attitude toward the tradition of Dionysian apophaticism. There also seemed to be agreement that one must speak of a development of Luther's understanding of the relationship between God and the human until at least about 1519, which certainly makes it sensible to speak about a late date of Luther's theological breakthrough in so far as this is the correct term. This latter consensus arguably also pertained to the discussions in the plenary sessions of the conference. There was also agreement in the seminar that God is indeed both omnipotent and omnipresent, that the precise relation between his love and his power is inscrutable, and that this aspect of Luther's thought remains a valuable part of his legacy. There was also agreement concerning the fact

that Luther's distinction between law and gospel is indeed related to mysticism and apophaticism, and that his emphasis on this aspect of negativity remains essential in his thought.

While there is no doubt that Luther speaks about the darkness of faith as a way of emphasizing trust beyond rationality, the precise implication of this remained controversial. While we may agree that the law for Luther never loses its accusatory role, how is this to be interpreted in relation to his distinction, e.g., in *Antilatomus*, between Christ as grace and Christ as gift, the latter seemingly being related to a process of the believer's growing conformity with Christ?

Neither is there any doubt that the difference between Creator and creation in Luther's view never will disappear, but there was disagreement as to the understanding of its precise nature. Is this difference mainly a moral difference, the implication of which is that it largely will disappear in the eternal kingdom? Or does it retain an epistemological element, the implication of which is that divine hiddenness is eternal? Will the problem of predestination, i.e. the relation between God's omnipotence and God's love, be solved, or will it just fade away

as irrelevant? Alternatively, is this question itself to be referred to the hiddenness we experience on this side of the eternal kingdom?

Finally, there is the question of method, which is closely related to the relation between Luther studies and systematic theology. Is Luther the point of orientation according to which the stronger and weaker points of apophaticism is to be evaluated? Alternatively, is the apophaticism of the Church Fathers and arguably of the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds as well, to be con-

sidered as the point of orientation, according to which Luther's contribution to this tradition is going to be evaluated? The seminar allowed for a discussion of this topic, though not for a thorough evaluation of it. There seems to be no doubt, though, that the discussion of Luther's relation to apophaticism in this way opens the perspective for a discussion of Luther's ecumenical significance that could not be sufficiently explored at this congress and in this seminar. This thus remains as an important task for future research.

Lutherforschung der letzten drei Dekaden

Seminarleiter: Heinrich Assel

Berichterstatter: Heinrich Assel

Das Seminar »Luther-Forschung der letzten drei Dekaden« widmete sich dem Thema, ob vom »jungen Luther« heute (noch) fundamental-theologische und religionstheoretische Innovationen ausgehen. Die Beiträge sollten mindestens einen zentralen Text Luthers nicht nur genetisch-historisch, sondern wirkungsgeschichtlich und systematisch interpretieren. Als mögliche Topoi galten: Ontologie und Dialektik der Person; Rhetorik, Dialektik

und Ikonik des Kreuzes; Gnade als Opfer und Gabe; sozial- und religionsphilosophische Luther-Interpretation.

Anne Vinds (Kopenhagen) Beitrag »»Servire in timore et laetitia«, Psalm 6 in *Operationes in Psalmos*« besprach zu Anfang die Lutherforschung von Eilert Herms, Wilfried Härle, Oswald Bayer, Wilfried Joest und Gerhard Ebeling. Ziel war es, jeweils nach deren Interpretation von Luthers Verwendung von *fides*