

The Place of Natural Theology in Lutheran Thought

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1 Introduction

I deliberately choose a provocative title for this article. I'm sure some of you thought, when reading the title, that there must have been some sort of typo. "The place of natural theology in Lutheran thought"? Isn't that like addressing the place of Marxism in modern conservative thought, or the place of astrology in modern physics? Surely, there is no place for natural theology, for philosophical attempts to demonstrate the existence of God, in *Lutheran* thought, with its emphasis on reason over faith, on the lived experience of a relationship with

our loving Father over the dry formulas of philosophical speculation about the nature of being. Indeed, isn't there a deep tension between Lutheranism and any kind of philosophy, so much so that being a "Lutheran philosopher" is an oxymoronic kind of occupation, like being a Baptist bartender? Didn't Luther call the great Greek philosopher Aristotle a "goat" and a "damned pagan"?

Indeed, the common or received opinion is that, not only is there no place in Lutheran thought for natural theology, it's a very good thing that natural theology has no place there, since natural theology is an embarrassment to Christians, a scandalous failure. Since the days of the skeptical philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant in the late eighteenth centuries, all attempts to provide rational proofs of God's existence lie in shambles and ruins. This failure to prove God's existence to the satisfaction of modern philosophers is, perhaps, an acute embarrassment to Roman Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant theologians, but, far from being an embarrassment to Lutherans, it merely confirms the wisdom of Luther and his followers in turning their backs on rationalistic philosophy as an aid to Christian theology.

Instead, by elevating faith over reason, Lutheran thought is secure in an unassailable citadel, unfalsifiable and immune from philosophical refutation.

This, as I have said, is the common and received opinion among contemporary Lutherans. It is, however, completely and utterly wrong, as I hope I will be able to persuade you tonight. Natural theology, by which I mean rational proofs or demonstrations of God's existence, is absolutely essential and indispensable

to Lutheran thought, including the thought of Luther himself. Lutheran theology is, therefore, every bit as vulnerable to philosophical disputation as is the supposedly rationalistic Thomism of the Roman Catholic Church. The success or failure of natural theology is as critical for Lutheran thought as it is for Catholic or fundamentalist theology.

In addition, far from lying in ruins, the state of natural theology has never been healthier than it is today. We are on the cusp of a new golden age for theistic metaphysics, and the arguments for God's existence that persuaded our medieval and sixteenth century forebears are just as valid today, and more powerfully supported by scientific evidence, than they ever have been in the past. The atheistic or agnostic position is less reasonable today than it has ever been, less reasonable today than it was in Aquinas's day, or Luther's day, or the day of classical Lutheran orthodoxy in the seventeenth century.

2 Natural Theology and the Law/Gospel Distinction

What are the defining characteristics of Lutheran thought? We could talk about the three solas of the Reformation: sola gratia, sola fide, and sola Scriptura, but these solas are also widely embraced outside the boundaries of Lutheranism proper. I have always found that the most useful key to understanding Lutheranism is to start with the distinction between the Law and the Gospel. The first

president of the Missouri Synod, C. F. W. Walther, wrote a famous book entitled, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, in which he put forward twenty theses explicating that distinction. I would like to offer a twenty-first thesis tonight, in the style of Walther:

They do not rightly distinguish the Law and Gospel who say that we know that God exists, that He created the world, and that He is powerful, wise, righteous, etc. by faith alone, and not by an exercise of our natural reason.

In other words, in order to rightly distinguish Law and Gospel, we must affirm that we can know that God exists on the basis of natural reason alone. It is not by the illumination of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace that we first come to know that God exists, that He is our creator, that He is good and wise and powerful. Despite the fall, all human beings inescapably know these things, apart from the Gospel.

All human beings are by nature sinful. But sin cannot exist where there is no Law, where the Law is not known or received. Hence, all human beings know the Law of God by nature — the law is written on our hearts, as Paul teaches in Romans 2:15. The Law includes both tablets, both the first three commandments, relating to our attitudes and actions toward God, as well as the final seven commandments, relating to our attitudes and actions toward our neighbor. The Law teaches that God exists and that God has created us and given to us every good thing: consequently, the Law demands that we worship

God alone and honor His name.

Faith is directed toward the Gospel – the object of faith is the Gospel, the promises of God to forgive us and deliver us from sin and death. The Gospel must not be confused with the Law – the Gospel teaches us what God has done for us, not what we must do. Hence, we do not first learn from the Gospel that God exists and that God must be worshipped – this we learn from the Law, and the Law itself is known by reason, and not by faith.

Lutherans must, therefore, distinguish between a theology of law and a theology of gospel. The theology of law is known by natural human reason: the theology of gospel is revealed only in Christ and is received by faith. Since, natural theology concerns that which may be known of God by means of our natural reason alone, natural theology coincides with the theology of law. To reject natural theology is to reject the law. But Lutherans have never rejected the law – instead, they insist that both the law and the gospel must be preached and affirmed, so long as the two are properly distinguished. This proper distinction of law and gospel entails that we affirm the possibility of natural theology, that is, that we affirm that God’s existence and His creation of the world is rationally demonstrable to all human beings.

3 The Scriptural Basis for Natural Theology

In Lutheran thought, the Scriptures are of course the supreme norm and rule. The Lutheran view of natural theology is no exception: as we shall see, Lutheran theologians have repeatedly found within the Bible itself the clear teaching that natural theology is possible: that all men know by nature that God exists. Before we examine the place of natural theology in the works of Lutherans, it would be wise for us to examine first the Scriptural texts to which they all refer.

The wisdom literature of the Old Testament, especially Job and the Psalms, provide several often-cited passages. The first is the familiar first verse of the nineteenth Psalm:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His
handiwork. (Psalm 19:1)

Here the Psalmist clearly teaches that the astronomical facts of our world point unambiguously to the existence of a creator of superhuman power and skill. The book of Job supplements this idea by directing our attention to the biological world:

But now ask the beasts, and they will tell you; and the birds of the
air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach
you; and the fish of the sea will explain it to you. Who among all
these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? (Job
12:7-9)

Of course, Job is not recommending literal conversations with the animals. Instead, his point is that a careful study of the forms of animal life leads inescapably to the conclusion that they are the creatures of God. In the ninety-fourth Psalm, the Psalmist appeals to a principle that philosophers have labelled *eminent causation*: that God, as the cause of human existence, must possess within Himself qualities of perception and understanding no less than those possessed by His creations:

He who planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye,
shall He not see? He who instructs the nations, shall he not correct,
He who teaches man knowledge? (Psalm 94:9-10)

The most often-cited passage in support of natural theology is in the first chapter of Romans. Here Paul teaches that all human beings inescapably know that God exists, leaving them with no excuse for their idolatry or atheism. Moreover, Paul makes it clear that natural human reason infers the existence and at least some of the divine attributes of God from the character of the creation as they observe it:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of man, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things

that were made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)

Paul's teaching about natural theology is, admittedly, double-edged. All men know that there is a God, but all men naturally suppress this knowledge. This duality of natural theology will prove to be a recurring theme within Lutheran thought: natural knowledge of God's existence is very real and universal in scope, but this natural knowledge of God does men absolutely no good, serving only to bring men under a universal condemnation.

Many Lutheran theologians, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, regularly referred to the wisdom literature of the inter-testamental apocrypha. These books, such as Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Solomon, were not included by Lutherans in the canon of inspired Scripture, in contrast to the practice of the Roman Catholic church, but this wisdom literature was nonetheless held in high respect. It certainly seems plausible that the following passage from the Wisdom of Solomon sheds some light on Paul's claim that God's invisible attributes are "understood by the things that were made":

Surely vain are all men by nature, who are ignorant of God, and could not out of the good things that are seen know him that is: neither by considering the works did they acknowledge the workmaster;

But they deemed either fire, or wind, or the swift air, or the circle of the stars, or the violent water, or the lights of heaven, to be the gods which govern the world.

With whose beauty if they being delighted took them to be gods; let them know how much better the Lord of them is: for the first author of beauty created them.

But if they were astonished at their power and virtue, let them understand by them, how much mightier is he that hath made them.

For by the greatness and beauty of the creatures proportionably the maker of them is seen. (Wisdom of Solomon 13:1-5)

In Ecclesiasticus, the perfection and interdependency of nature is taken as proof of the excellence of God's wisdom in crafting the world:

He hath garnished the excellent works of his wisdom. O how desirable are all his works . . . All things are double against another, and he hath made nothing imperfect. One thing establisheth the good of another; and who shall be filled with beholding his glory? (Ecclesiasticus 42:21-25)

4 Natural Theology in the Works of Luther

A discussion of the place of natural theology in Lutheran thought must of course commence with Luther himself, although I shall avoid the mistake of confusing Luther with Lutheranism. We will find, in the succeeding sections, that Luther's views on natural theology, both positive and negative, were closely followed by his successors.

Many commentators on Luther have claimed that he referred to natural theology only briefly, once or twice throughout his vast corpus. This claim is in fact false. Luther returns to the subject many times, and in each case he clearly maintains the distinction between the legal knowledge of God (natural theology) and the evangelical knowledge of God (the theology of the Gospel). Although it is the latter that is most important, since only through the Gospel can we be saved, Luther never challenges or discounts the validity of our legal or natural knowledge.

Luther draws this distinction most clearly in his commentary on the Gospel of John:

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 [from the Scholastics] was yes, and St. Paul's words, recorded in Rom. 1:19f 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 1:20f: "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..."

There are two kinds of knowledge of God: the one is the knowl-

edge 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 (Rom. 2:15) Although the same truth was stated more clearly still by Moses, it still remains true that all rational beings can of themselves determine that it is wrong to disobey father and mother. . .

Reason can arrive at a “legal knowledge” of God (*cognitio legalis*). The philosophers, too, has 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. (Luther’s commentary on the Gospel of John)

This legal or left-handed knowledge of God cannot save, but it plays an essential role in Luther’s account of the dynamic interrelationship between Law and Gospel. 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 honor God as God, when we fail to love Him with all our strength, as we are bound to do. Luther’s account of the Gospel presupposes the validity of the Law: our evangelical knowledge of God is possible only because of our prior, legal knowledge of God’s existence. For

this reason, Emil Brunner has argued that natural theology plays a much more central role in Luther's thought than it does in the thought of other Reformers, especially Calvin ([?], p. 70, note 13).

Luther makes clear that the legal knowledge of God embodied in natural theology includes, not only God's existence and power, but also His benevolence and justice. Here, for example, is a statement from Luther's commentary on Genesis:

God indeed promised that He is determined to be God to all men, and this knowledge has been implanted in the hearts of man, as Paul testifies in Rom. 1:19. . . Thus all men naturally understand and come to the conclusion that God is some kind of benevolent divine power, from whom all good things are to be sought and hoped for.
(Luther's commentary on Genesis 32:2-9)

In that same commentary, Luther made clear that our natural knowledge of God is based upon our observations of God's creatures. Luther goes so far as to say that each creature is itself a Word of God (a Word, that is, of God's Law, a proclamation of the First Commandment, that we are to have no other God besides Him):

[Scripture] is God's word itself, just as the creature itself is the oral Word by which all nations should know God, as Rom. 1:19 says.
(Luther's commentary on Genesis 28:20-22)

In Luther's commentary on the book of Jonah, Luther takes the reactions of the pagan mariners on the boat as an occasion to describe in detail the natural knowledge of God that all men possess. Here, too, he emphasizes both the positive and the negative. The natural knowledge is a real knowledge of the Godhead, but it suffers from critical defects that prevent its being a means of salvation:

“Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god.” Here you find St. Paul's statement in Rom. 1:19 concerning the universal knowledge of God among all the heathern, that is, that the whole world talks about the Godhead and natural reason is aware that this Godhead is something superior to all other things. . . Although they do not have true faith in God, they at least hold that God is a being able to help on the sea and in every need. Such a light and such perception is innate in the hearts of all men, and this light cannot be subdued or extinguished. There are, to be sure, some people, for instance the Epicureans, Pliny and the like, who deny this with their lips. But they do it by force and want to quench this light in their hearts. They are like people who purposely stop their ears or pinch their eyes shut to close out sound and light. However, they do not succeed in this; their conscience tells them otherwise. For Paul is not lying when he asserts that they know something about God “because God has shown it to them.” (Rom. 1:19)

Let us here also learn from nature and from reason what can be known of God. These people 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.

It manifests two big defects: 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. (Luther's commentary on Jonah 1:4-5, W. XIX, 206)

As we might expect, Luther discusses the scope of natural theology in his commentary on the first chapter of Romans. Here he explicitly lists many of

the attributes of God that can be known through understanding the creation by means of our natural reason.

“The invisible things” — such as goodness, wisdom, righteousness, etc. — “by the things that have been made”, that is, from the works, that when they see that there are works, they also recognize that a Creator is necessary, “are clearly seen”, perceived not by the senses but by the understanding, “eternal power and Deity”, that is, that He really is God. (Luther’s commentary on Romans 1:19-20)

Luther reaffirms these propositions throughout his career, from his commentary on Galatians, to such late works as *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*.

5 Melanchthon and the Birth of Lutheran Aristotelianism

Luther’s close friend and associate Philip Melanchthon had a profound influence on the development of Lutheran thought. Besides authoring the Augsburg Confession and its defense, Melanchthon was largely responsible for the re-organization of the universities within the Lutheran states. Melanchthon’s approach to higher education was quite consistent with his Christian humanism. The study of the classics of Greek and Latin literature continued to provide the core of the curriculum, and this study included very prominently such

philosophers as Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, in both Lutheran and Reformed universities following the Reformation, there was a renaissance of interest in Aristotle, which was also paralleled by a revival of interest in the Aristotelian philosopher of Thomas Aquinas among Catholic philosophers in Italy and Spain, of whom Francisco Suarez is perhaps best known. This period (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) is sometimes known as the “second scholasticism”, and Lutherans, like Jacob Martini, Christian Scheibler, and Cornelius Martini, were major contributors to the movement. This period was one of rich and fruitful ecumenism, with the revival of Aristotelian metaphysics involved frequent interchanges between Lutheran, Reformed and Roman Catholic philosophers.

On the specific issue of natural theology, Melancthon himself was fully in agreement with Luther. While insisting that natural theology could not tell us that God is gracious, nor penetrate such mysteries as the Trinity or the Incarnation, Melancthon nonetheless attributes to natural theology the power of uncovering a large number of characteristics of the divine nature:

The first law of nature is to know that there is one God, an eternal mind, wise, righteous, good, the Maker of all things, who rewards the just and punishes the unjust. by whose agency there has been born in us a distinction between things honorable and base, and it is to know that He is to be obeyed according to this inborn distinction, that we are to pray to this God and expect good things from him.

(Melancthon, *Corpus Reformatorum* 21, 713)

Like Luther, Melancthon associates natural theology with the Law, especially with the First Commandment. Our natural knowledge of God is certainly not sufficient to save, but it is sufficient to condemn.

6 Natural Theology in the Period of Classical Lutheran Orthodoxy

In Lutheran universities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were two, independent movements: one among philosophers and the other among theologians. As I have already mentioned, Lutheran philosophy during this period was part of the so-called second scholasticism, a period in which Christian philosophers throughout Europe were investigating metaphysical questions, including the existence of God and God's agency in creation, within the categories provided by Aristotle's metaphysics.

At the same time, Lutheran theology was entering the period that is commonly called that of "classical Lutheran orthodoxy". In this period, Lutheran theologians attempted to develop systematic and encyclopedic treatments of the theology of the Lutheran confessions. This theological movement was separate from and independent of the re-emergence of Aristotle's philosophy, but it was certainly influenced by these philosophical developments. The theologians of classical Lutheran orthodoxy found it helpful to use the logical and metaphysical categories and ideas of Aristotle in their systematic presentation of Lutheran

theology.

6.1 Johann Gerhard (1582-1637)

Johann Gerhard was one of the most important and influential theologians of the period. He fully and explicitly endorsed the use of Thomas Aquinas's philosophical proof of the existence of God in his *Loci Theologici*. He also helped to clarify the nature of the tension between natural or philosophical reason and the Christian faith. Gerhard argued that right reason or regenerate reason was wholly good, because it always confined itself to operate within the scope of its own limitations, and always allowed itself to be guided by God's word. Thus, reason per se (reason itself) does not conflict with Christian doctrine: it is only per accidens (or accidentally) that human reason often finds itself resisting the mysteries of the Gospel. As a result of the fall, human beings are inclined to misuse reason, setting their own opinions and judgments above the teachings of God's word. However, this involves a conflict, not between reason and faith, but between the sinful misuse of reason and the humility of faith.

At the same time, Gerhard is cautious about the use of philosophy within the boundaries of revealed, Christian theology. When discussing the efforts of Augustine, Aquinas and others to use philosophical categories to expound on such mysteries as that of the Trinity, Gerhard warned that philosophizing concerning such a lofty mystery must be carried out in a sober, cautious and reverent manner.

Some recent thinkers, including the scholar Jaroslav Pelikan at Yale, have accused Gerhard and the other theologians of classical orthodoxy of substituting a dry, rationalistic philosophy for the heartfelt faith of Luther and the other Reformers. In the case of Gerhard, this charge seems to me entirely unfair. Gerhard spent much of his career writing hymns and other devotional materials. In addition, Gerhard disagreed with Thomas Aquinas, who classified Christian theology as a science. Gerhard insisted that theology is an art, and not a science, and that as art, it can be rightly carried out, not as dry, impersonal speculation, but only by a believing Christian for whom the things of faith are a living reality. For Gerhard, a true theologian must be characterized by piety, singleness of heart, and daily prayer.

6.2 J. A. Quenstedt (1617-1688)

The question of natural theology first became a matter of controversy within Lutheranism through the writings of Matthias Flacius in the early seventeenth century. Flacius argued that human nature has been so corrupted by the Fall that men have absolutely no natural knowledge of God's existence, not even that knowledge that is presupposed by the first tablet of the Law (and, especially, the First Commandment). Flacius's opinion was universally rejected by all other Lutheran theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including J. A. Quenstedt, a leading theologian of the late seventeenth century.

That God is, that He exercises care over all things, that He is pow-

erful, wise, one, good, etc. — these things are known through clear demonstration. (Quenstedt, *Systema* P.I, C.5, S.1)

Like Luther, Quenstedt insisted that this knowledge of God's existence is universal: that even those who professed to be atheists or agnostics were in fact in full possession of a knowledge of God's existence: "Even those who deny that God is, still they are not ignorant that God is." (*Systema*, P. I, C.6, S.2, q.1) The controversy raised by Flacius's denial of natural theology (and the denial of natural theology by the heretical Socinians) forced theologians like Quenstedt to be much more explicit and detailed in their accounts of the ways and means of our natural knowledge of God. Like Quenstedt, the Lutheran theologians of this period insisted that we know of God naturally in at least two ways: by innate ideas implanted in our minds, and by inferring God's existence from the existence and order of the created world.

God is known naturally, partly by notions implanted in us by nature, partly by traces of the invisible things of God impressed on created things, so that natural knowledge of God (*theologia naturalis*) is either implanted by way of a connate quality or acquired (Rom. 1:19-20)... 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. . . The world is a book, a theater, and a mirror in which God shows not only His deity but also His benefactions toward us and our obligations toward Him, to be read

and contemplated, in fact, to be touched, as it were. (Quenstedt, *Theologia Didacto-Polemica siva Systema Theologicum*, Thesis XIII)

Quenstedt also perpetuated Luther's distinction between legal and evangelical knowledge of God, and he very clearly located natural theology within the domain of legal knowledge.

Natural theology is occupied with a little particle, namely about the existence, power, and righteousness of God and the function of the Law, Rom. 1:20, 2:15. Revealed theology teaches all things that are necessary for our salvation. (Quenstedt, *Theologia Didacto-Polemica*, Thesis XV)

In addition, Quenstedt agreed with Gerhard in insisting that the conflict between theology and human reason is one per accidens and not an essential or per se conflict. It is only the misuse of reason by fallen men that leads to any apparent conflict.

The articles of faith are in themselves not contrary to reason but only above reason, but it happens by accident that they are also contrary to reason when reason takes to itself judgment regarding them on the basis of its own principles and does not follow the light of the Word but denies and attacks them. (Quenstedt, *Ibid.*, P. 2)

7 The End of the Second Scholasticism, and the Beginning of a Fourth

Thus, we find throughout the centuries following the Reformation, a continuous and uninterrupted endorsement of natural theology by theologians of the Lutheran confession, beginning with Luther himself. Why, then, does natural theology seem to play such a small role in the Lutheranism of the twentieth century?

Jaroslav Pelikan, in *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (1950) attributes the fall of classical Lutheran orthodoxy to the introduction of an impersonal God, understood in philosophical terms as the first cause of existence, in the place of the highly personal God portrayed in Luther's writings. However, this overlooks the fact that these later discussions of God as the cause of the cosmos had their roots in Luther's own account of man's legal knowledge of God. In addition, Pelikan overlooks the importance of the Law/Gospel distinction in classical Lutheran orthodoxy. It is God as known naturally, the God of the first Commandment, who can be characterized in philosophical terms. God as known through the Gospel, the Triune God who has reconciled us to Himself in Jesus Christ, is recognized in classical Lutheran orthodoxy as transcending our natural understanding, and as knowable only in the context of a living faith.

I think the turn by Lutherans away from natural theology has much more to do with Immanuel Kant than with Martin Luther. The famous philosopher

Immanuel Kant, writing at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century in Lutheran Germany, used the skepticism of the Scottish philosopher David Hume to overthrow the long reign of Aristotelian philosophy, and with the downfall of Aristotelian metaphysics went the commonly accepted proofs for God's existence. Kant did not reject our natural or legal knowledge of God in order to make way for a more purely evangelical conception of God. Instead, Kant sought to limit our metaphysical knowledge of God in order to make room for a rationalistic and moralistic version of religion, a new kind of Pharisaical self-righteousness in philosophical garb. Many Lutherans still believe that Kant limited reason to make room for faith, when in fact he limited metaphysics to make room for a new religious legalism.

In reality, Hume and Kant helped make the world safe for a kind of militant atheism that had not been seen in the Western world for millennia. However, the existence of such aggressive atheism would have come as no surprise to Luther or to the theologians of classical Lutheran orthodoxy, or to the matter to St. Paul or the author of the Wisdom of Solomon. Of course, sinful human beings are powerfully motivated to deny the existence of God, but this by no means settles the question of whether they do so with or without the consent of their natural reason. Lutheran theology is committed, irrevocably, I believe, to the proposition that atheism is positively irrational, that atheism, or even agnosticism, flies in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. I conclude that Lutheranism can find an effective voice in the modern world only if it restores

natural theology to its proper place.

The times are ripe for such a restoration. For the third, or perhaps the fourth time, Aristotelian scholasticism is once again rising from the ashes. (Some commentators have labelled the neo-Thomism of the twentieth century, including such philosophers as Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain and Josef Pieper, as the third scholasticism. I think it's too soon to say whether the current revival of scholasticism in analytic philosophy is best thought of as a continuation of that third scholasticism or the birth of a new, fourth scholasticism.)

Like the second scholasticism of the 17th century, this fourth scholasticism promises to be an ecumenical affair, with contributions from Reformed, Lutheran, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic philosophers. Indeed, it may well prove to be an interreligious affair, as interest in Aristotelian metaphysics and natural theology grows in Jewish and Muslim circles, and even among secular, non-religious philosophers and scientists. This renaissance of the legal knowledge of God is an encouraging development for us Lutherans, since, for us, the Gospel can be the Gospel only in the context created by the effective proclamation of the Law.

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