



FROM LUTHER TO KIERKEGAARD

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TO
KIERKEGAARD

A STUDY IN THE HISTORY OF
THEOLOGY

By

JAROSLAV PELIKAN

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PREFACE

Like many other theological books, this volume came into being through a series of lectures. In its original form most of this material was presented in various essays before Lutheran pastoral groups in Dubuque, Iowa, Valparaiso, Indiana, and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Though I have made revisions in style for the sake of the shift from the spoken to the written word, the reader will probably still hear echoes of the lecture platform and will, I trust, make allowance for them.

The purpose of this presentation is to analyze the interrelations that have existed between philosophical thought and Lutheran theology since the days of the Reformation. Obviously a work of this size could not hope to touch upon every aspect of those interrelations; I have instead concentrated upon several critical periods and personalities, hoping thereby to highlight some of the principal issues raised by the history of Lutheran theology in its relation to philosophy.

As a result, the material and conclusions presented here should be of some value to students of both philosophy and church history, though my primary concern in these pages has been neither philosophical nor historical, but theological. Philosophy is of interest to me also for its own sake, for I began this work while I was a teacher of philosophy at Valparaiso University. But it is primarily as a student of theology—and, more recently, as a teacher of theology—that I have addressed myself to philosophical problems. This essay, then, is a historical investigation of “Prolegomena” in Lutheran theology. Through it I hope to stimulate a deeper concern for the resources which the confessional heritage of historic Lutheranism provides for theological work.

I owe my thanks to many men—historians, philosophers, theologians—whose work has helped shed light on the trends and problems dealt with in this treatise. I have tried to indicate the extent of my debt to them in the notes printed at the rear of the book. In my method I have been particularly influenced by the work of Werner Elert and of Karl Holl, the latter through Wilhelm Pauck, who was Holl’s pupil and, in turn, my teacher. Above all, however, I have had occasion to draw once more upon the theological wealth, much of it still unadministered, that is latent in the thought of Martin Luther and in the Lutheran Confessions.

Special gratitude is due my parents, to whom I also dedicate this volume as an expression of my continued devotion.

The Anniversary of the Augsburg Confession
June 25, 1950

JAROSLAV PELIKAN

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Luther

Lutheranism has had to face the problem of its relationship to philosophy ever since the Reformation. But if we begin our examination of the interrelations between Lutheranism and philosophy with the period of the Reformation, we must be perfectly clear about the fact that Luther was not a philosopher; nor, for that matter, did he want to be one. Luther's great accomplishment was not philosophical, nor yet theological, but evangelical.

It was Martin Luther's divinely appointed task to restore to its proper centrality the assertion that in the forgiveness of sins Jesus Christ has become the Lord and the Savior, to bear personal testimony to that lordship, and thus to reassert in all its strength the true Christian Gospel. This is not theology as that word is usually understood; for theology in the usual sense of the word does not come until after this personal relationship has been established, until the Christian man gets down to "thinking it over."¹ Much less, then, is it philosophy. For any kind of philosophy, even poor philosophy, is a task of the human reason; but the Gospel is a gift of God. As Karl Holl has pointed out,² the Reformer thought of himself primarily as an expositor of Holy Scriptures, and he deliberately sought to avoid being classified with those whose speculative talents aroused the admiration of his contemporaries. Hence his familiar distinction between the *theologia crucis* and the *theologia gloriae*.³

Nevertheless, like it or not, Luther was faced by philosophy and was forced to take account of it. For, regardless of his own theological or religious stand, one cannot escape the fact that after all these years philosophy seems to be here to stay and that the connection between Christianity and philosophy is probably here to stay, too. Etienne Gilson has taught us to speak of "Christian philosophy" as an historical *fait accompli* and has shown that without at least an historical appreciation of Christian precept and dogma no one can understand or interpret the history of European philosophy since Marcus Aurelius.⁴ If, as Whitehead has observed, all of European thought is a series of footnotes to Plato,⁵ then it is equally true that much of the history of European thought in the past fifteen centuries is a series of footnotes to the New Testament. Even Tertullian had to know a considerable amount of philosophy to repudiate

philosophy,⁶ and at least since his time there has been a relationship between Christianity and philosophy that neither the secularism of John Dewey nor the isolationism of Karl Barth has been able to eradicate. Whether that relationship has been beneficial or detrimental to either Christianity or philosophy is an important question for both to answer. But for our purposes it is more important to note that every major Christian teacher has inherited a Christianity that was tinged with philosophy and a philosophy that was colored by Christian thought.

MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

And so it was with Luther. As a man of the sixteenth century, however, he inherited a tradition in which Christianity and philosophy were much more closely intertwined than they are today. This was particularly true of classical medieval theology and philosophy, as represented by Thomas Aquinas. It was characteristic of the synthesis which medieval piety and thought effected between the *agape* of the New Testament and the *eros* of ancient Greece that philosophy and theology should have interacted as much as they did.⁷ As the *caritas* of St. Augustine symbolizes that synthesis of *eros* and *agape*, so the many *Summae* of the medieval thinkers bear witness to the fact that there was no eminent theologian in the Middle Ages who was not also at least something of a philosopher, and vice versa. This fact, too, Gilson has taught us to appreciate.⁸ But what Gilson does not point out—and what, as a Roman Catholic, he cannot be expected to point out—is that the magnificent combination of faith and reason in the Middle Ages was effected at the expense of faith, and that the impact of the divine *agape* in the Cross of Christ was too often weakened in the *caritas* synthesis of the medieval Church.

LUTHER'S OBJECTIONS

It was primarily against this aspect of medieval theology that Luther revolted. Precisely because his was an evangelical concern, as has already been mentioned, he violently objected to the fact that philosophy had been permitted to mollify theology to the extent that it had. In this objection Aquinas was the particular target of his attacks. The extent of Luther's acquaintance with Aquinas is a problem on which scholarship is not yet unanimously agreed; in fact, we are not sure how well he knew any of the writers of the thirteenth century.⁹ It does seem, however, that he did not know them as thoroughly as he did some of the later scholastics. The schools which Luther attended, as we shall see, were mostly given over to the *via moderna* in both philosophy and theology; the teachers at such schools would not encourage their students to study the theologians of the *via antiqua*. Additional evidence for Luther's rather sparse acquaintance with the classical period of medieval scholasticism is furnished by the fact that while there occur in his writings numerous quotations from the works of men like Aquinas, many of these are repeated several times—at least an indication that his acquaintance with them may have been largely secondhand.¹⁰

But what he did know of Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Peter Lombard he did not like, and that primarily for religious reasons. Though he does accuse them of being poor philosophers as well as incompetent theologians—his expressions, characteristically, were much stronger¹¹—this was not his basic objection. That we can gauge from the fact that Luther has rather high praise for St. Bernard of Clairvaux, whose theology was fully as scholastic as that of Thomas

and whose commentaries on the Holy Scriptures were no more textual than those of the Angelic Doctor. But St. Bernard taught that man is justified before God by faith without the deeds of the Law, and for this Luther held him in regard.¹² Thus it is clear that it was because of what they had done to free grace, and not principally because of what they had done with Aristotle, that Luther repudiated the systems of the medieval thinkers.

WEARINESS WITH SCHOLASTICISM

Yet another factor involved in Luther's attack upon medieval thought was the general weariness with scholasticism that characterized much of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. One has only to read the works of John Hus or of Nicholas of Cusa¹³ to realize that Luther was by no means alone in his contention that scholastic theology and philosophy had lost their validity and relevance. The most virulent source of that contention, however, was within the ranks of the theologians and philosophers themselves, in the phenomenon known as nominalism. Under the auspices of the increasingly powerful national State and armed with all the dialectical subtleties developed by the golden age of scholasticism, the nominalists called classical medieval philosophy very seriously into question. This was the *via moderna* to which Luther was exposed and which he absorbed in his student days.¹⁴

How strongly Luther was affected by the *via moderna* we can judge from his cosmology. The doctors of the thirteenth century had developed an elaborate doctrine of the universe, based partly upon Aristotle and mostly upon the Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy. It is this cosmology that is so beautifully dramatized in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*—a universe which, as Anatole France puts it, "was so simple that it was represented in its entirety with its true shape and motions in certain great painted clocks run by machinery."¹⁵ In keeping with its general re-examination of the tenets of scholasticism, the nominalist school also constructed a new cosmology. One of the leading figures in this was Jodocus Trutvetter, who was Luther's teacher at Erfurt. Because of Trutvetter's influence, Luther remained opposed to medieval cosmology all his life; and though the Reformer's conception of the solar system may not have been the modern one, it was nevertheless well developed for its day and represented the best thought of the period, the theories of the *via moderna*.¹⁶

LUTHER AND NOMINALISM

All of this is not to contend, as some have, that Luther was a mere disciple of one or another of the nominalist theologians. An entire literature has sprung up around Luther's phrase "my master Occam."¹⁷ Some scholars have taken a cue from this phrase and have constructed elaborate parallels to show that Luther's Reformation was an extension of the work begun by William of Occam. After Reinhold Seeberg's detailed investigation of the question,¹⁸ it seems far more valid to hold that in the case of Occam, as in the case of St. Bernard, Luther saw the influence of the Gospel and was happy for it. The phrase does indicate that he knew Occam and probably knew him better than he did the earlier theologians. Similarly, Melancthon tells us that Luther had practically memorized the writings of the fifteenth-century theologian Gabriel Biel.¹⁹ Students of the background of Luther's Bible have carefully measured his

acquaintance with, and debt to, Nicholas of Lyra, another of the later medieval theologians.²⁰ All in all, we may safely say that the young Luther was influenced by the nominalist philosophy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and that this influence is evident throughout his life.

Both classical scholasticism and nominalism were products of the medieval Church, and as a son of that Church Luther had to face up to them, even though chiefly in a negative way. There was another genre of philosophy current in sixteenth century Europe, and we shall not understand the philosophical significance of Luther's work unless we evaluate his relationship to this movement, too. The chief philosophical figures of the period were neither the neo-scholastics, like Cardinal Cajetan, nor the nominalists, like Trutvetter, but the humanist philosophers of the Renaissance, both in Italy and in Northern Europe.

RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY

It is not really accurate to speak of the "philosophy of the Renaissance" as though this were a single philosophical school like Stoicism or Epicureanism, for it was not. Some of what passed for philosophy in the period of the Renaissance we would not call philosophy at all, but popular wisdom at best and crass superstition at worst.²¹ The Renaissance is nevertheless an important period in the history of thought and particularly important for the problem at hand.

One wing of Renaissance philosophy was the revived Platonism of the Florentine academies, whose outstanding figures were Marsiglio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.²² This revival of Platonic philosophy sprang up partly as a result of the influx of Greeks into Italy in connection with the union council held at Ferrara and Florence in 1438 and 1439; prominent among these were men like Bessarion, later on a cardinal in the Roman Church, and Gemisthus, whose reverence for Plato was so profound that he assumed the name Pletho and is known to history as Gemisthus Pletho.²³ Because of the weariness with scholasticism, to which we have already alluded, the search was on for a new philosophy more fruitful than the barren dialectic of the medieval doctors. The Platonism developed by the Byzantine scholars was just such a philosophy,²⁴ and it quickly took root in Florentine soil. We are, unfortunately, accustomed to think and speak of this Florentine Platonism as the philosophical aspect of the general neo-paganism of the Italian Renaissance. This interpretation, which has become standard through Jakob Burkhardt's analysis of the Italian Renaissance,²⁵ overlooks the important fact that these very same Florentine Platonists were also avid students of the New Testament, and that what they were trying to do was not merely to revive the study of Plato, but to effect a harmonization of Christian and Platonic thought.²⁶ One need not agree with their aim to realize that their attempt was no less Christian than that of the medieval Christian Aristotelians, or, for that matter, of many of the early Fathers.

FLORENTINE INFLUENCE

The circle of influence of Florentine Platonism extended beyond the Italian peninsula into Northern Europe and even into England. John Colet, dean of St. Pauls in London, spent considerable time in Italy, where he absorbed the spirit and the method of the Florentine Platonists.²⁷ After his return home, he turned his linguistic and expository talents to the Pauline

Epistles and thus became one of the early founders of the English Reformation. On the Continent, too, the study of Plato increased considerably during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁸ Luther seems to have read considerable portions of Plato. Quite consistently he contrasts Plato and Aristotle, generally to the advantage of Plato.²⁹ He even repeats, and that several times, the old patristic theory that before writing the *Timaeus*, Plato had come into contact with at least parts of the Old Testament.³⁰ Luther's sympathy for Plato cannot be explained by any contention that Plato is more Christian than Aristotle, for he most certainly is not. That sympathy can be explained in terms of the Platonic revival just described. As fine literature the Platonic dialogues certainly outrank the bulk of what Aristotle composed, and as such they must have reacted favorably on the Reformer's sensitive spirit.

THE "PHILOSOPHIA CHRISTI" OF ERASMUS

Another division of Renaissance philosophy to which Luther is frequently linked is the *philosophia Christi*, cherished by Erasmus of Rotterdam. European and American scholars have advanced the theory that the work and thought of Luther was largely anticipated by Biblical humanism and the philosophical speculation that grew out of it.³¹

Erasmus' *philosophia Christi* was in reality an effort to water down the pronouncement of the New Testament to little more than a shallow moralism. Motivated by the same nostalgia for the past which we have seen in the Florentine Platonists, Erasmus and his followers tried to revive the spirit of the New Testament. But because of the excesses of scholastic philosophy and theology, Erasmus put forward what he regarded as the simple message of the New Testament, stripped of all dialectic, of all subtlety, and, unfortunately, of a good part of the Gospel itself. The real meaning of the New Testament, Erasmus professed to find in Jesus' teachings and in the Sermon on the Mount. In order to make all of this more intelligible, he systematized it and produced the *philosophia Christi*.³² There are, to be sure, certain similarities between Erasmus' method and Luther's. Both cried "*Ad fontes*" and turned to the New Testament. Both also laid more emphasis on the life and teachings of Jesus than the high Middle Ages had done.³³ But only one who maintains that Luther's great achievement was the rediscovery of the New Testament rather than the rediscovery of the Christian Gospel could regard these similarities as basic to the Reformation. Luther himself perceived the difference between his theology and Erasmus' *philosophia Christi* very clearly when he excoriated the great humanist in his treatise on the bondage of the will.³⁴

LUTHER'S AMBIVALENCE TOWARD PHILOSOPHY

We cannot claim Luther for nominalism or for the Erasmian *philosophia Christi*; still less can we see in him an apostle of Thomistic scholasticism. Where did Luther stand, then, as a philosopher? Keeping in mind that Luther was not a philosopher and did not want to be one, we must, it seems, come to the conclusion that he maintained an ambivalent attitude toward the place of philosophy in the Church and in the Church's teaching. In general he regarded philosophy as dangerous; and yet, when the occasion seemed to demand it, he was not at all averse to philosophical speculation.

Already in his early writings Luther came to grips with the problem of the relationship between philosophy and theology. One of his earliest known treatises is a discussion of whether the passage “The Word was made flesh” can be proved philosophically.³⁵ His highly significant theses of September, 1517, were directed “*contra scholasticam theologiam*,” as were the Heidelberg theses of 1518.³⁶ In the earlier set of propositions we find the assertion that one cannot be a theologian unless he leaves Aristotle behind.³⁷ The three essays of 1520 abound with denunciations of scholasticism. There is an interesting passage in the *Letter to the Christian Nobility* in which Luther forbids the study of Aristotle’s *Physica* in the schools while endorsing the reading of the *Poetical*.³⁸ We would search in vain for a theological explanation of this passage. Rather, Luther’s opposition to the *Physica* is part of the training he received in the cosmological theories of the *via moderna*, while his approval of the *Poetica* stems from his appreciation of the classical poets.³⁹ He scorned the metaphysics of the Stagirite and claimed that it had wrought much havoc in the Church, as indeed it had.⁴⁰ Luther’s opposition to Aristotle is evident from the fact that while Thomas had consistently referred to him as “that philosopher,” Luther calls him “that damned pagan,”⁴¹ in addition to other choice expletives and epithets that form a long and impressive catalogue.⁴²

THEOLOGY VERSUS PHILOSOPHY

How can we account for Luther’s vehement attack upon Aristotle? Luther himself gives us a hint when he says in one place that he knows more of Aristotle than Thomas did⁴³—not indeed that he could cite chapter and verse as well as Thomas, for Thomas quotes appropriate passages from Aristotle almost at will. What Luther seems to mean is that the Thomistic philosophy had completely perverted Aristotle, and that because he had broken with Thomism, he was now in a better position to understand Aristotle than Thomas had been. As we shall see, this sentiment was to be of great importance for the development of Lutheranism.⁴⁴ In this context it is important to see that what Luther most passionately feared was a repetition of the medieval error by which Aristotelian philosophy had been permitted to obscure the Gospel. Since it was Aristotelian philosophy that had done this, it was against Aristotelian philosophy that Luther directed himself. He would surely have done the same against any philosophy that intruded itself upon the Gospel of the forgiveness.

Luther saw very clearly that philosophy and theology differ as to method, content, purpose, and result. In his calling as the herald of the Gospel he was willing to surrender philosophy or to repudiate it if this would be beneficial to theology. For if, as Ferre puts it, the task of philosophy is the interpretation of fact while the task of theology is the interpretation of faith,⁴⁵ then for Luther faith is the most important fact. It is, in truth, a bet against the obvious facts, a wager that despite death God does not lie.⁴⁶ The work of the theologian, then, is to describe the workings of faith, and to do so in faith’s own terms; for without a knowledge of justifying faith, in Dr. Pieper’s words, the Bible remains “a book locked with seven seals.”⁴⁷ The theologian need not—yea, he dare not—call upon philosophy to explain that which faith leaves a mystery. Nor dare he regard the Biblical revelation which faith grasps as a mere extension of what the

philosophical reason has already perceived. Whenever this has happened, faith has suffered; and this Luther would not permit, even if it should cost him philosophy. Here is the reason for his view that philosophy is dangerous and has to be watched.⁴⁸

LUTHER'S USE OF PHILOSOPHY

But we should not be giving the complete picture if we were to stress only the negative aspects of Luther's attitude toward philosophy. For anyone who has read around even a little in Luther's writings knows that philosophical terminology and philosophical categories play an important role in much of what he wrote and said. One need only look at Luther's use of logical forms to ascertain his dependence upon philosophy, and Aristotelian philosophy at that.⁴⁹ For example, an analysis of his larger *Confession on the Lord's Supper* of March, 1528, reveals the skill with which he refutes, one by one, the arguments of his opponents.⁵⁰ He observes where they have begged the question or where they have been guilty of a *non sequitur*. His table talk is full of intricate logical and dialectical discussions.⁵¹ Some of them were, no doubt, interpolated by well-meaning editors and compilers,⁵² just as Walch ascribed an entire treatise, *On the Use of Dialectics in Theology*, to Luther when it is quite obviously from another hand.⁵³ They do show nevertheless that the Reformer was competent in the use of Aristotelian logic and that he acknowledged it as valid.

PHILOSOPHY IN LUTHER'S DISPUTATIONS

Equally important for an appreciation of the complete picture is the place which philosophy and philosophical method take in certain of his other writings, notably in the essay on the bondage of the will and in some of his disputations. In the treatise against Erasmus he was concerned with demonstrating that he was not alone in teaching the bondage of the human will.⁵⁴ Knowing Erasmus' weakness for the classics, Luther drew upon the ancients for corroboration of his thesis, without taking account of the potentially dangerous fact that by alluding to the Greek *moira* he was leaving himself open to the charge of fatalistic determinism, which has so frequently been leveled against him.⁵⁵ But it is significant that when the opinions of ancient philosophers, dramatists, or poets seemed to coincide with his own, Luther was perfectly willing to cite such opinions as evidence.⁵⁶ The disputations which Luther prepared for the doctoral examinations of various students frequently contain the views of philosophers introduced in support of a particular theological viewpoint.⁵⁷ One must, of course, be careful in using the disputations as an index to Luther's thinking. Many of them were not composed by him personally, and even those that were contain statements obviously intended to present theses for debate rather than positive opinion.⁵⁸ They do show, however, that when philosophy was useful in a theological discussion, Luther was not averse to using it.

Although Luther did not profess to be a philosopher, he still could not avoid being involved in philosophical discussion. This was due, as we have seen, to the fact that he inherited and later opposed a theological and cultural tradition in which philosophy had a definite role. It was also due to the very nature of his polemical and literary activity. Even more significant for

the years that were to follow was the fact that Luther's thought world does provide certain points of contact with the world of philosophy. He created certain patterns of thinking that were to mature into entire philosophies centuries later. He also left certain problems unanswered that could be answered—or that, at any rate, were answered—only in terms of a philosophical orientation. We cannot leave our discussion of Luther and philosophy without considering at least a few of these areas.

LUTHER A SYSTEMATICIAN?

One such problem was the question of a comprehensive theological system, of a dogmatic, or systematic, theology. It is almost trite to say that Luther was not a systematician,⁵⁹ but it is still true. It is also true that later Lutherans were systematicians. Whatever other differences there may have been between Luther and those later Lutherans, certainly one was a philosophical difference. Just why Luther never composed a systematic theology is not easy to explain.⁶⁰ He probably lacked the calmness and poise that seem so necessary for the composition of a dogmatic compend;⁶¹ when he tried something like that in the Smalcald Articles, he was so carried away by his subject and by anti-papal polemic that he completely lost the thread of his development.⁶² Elsewhere, when he sat down to write out his faith “piece by piece,”⁶³ he produced an essay which is in many ways a masterpiece, but which is not a systematic theology in the usual sense of the term. The first generation of a movement only rarely composes a systematic exposition of its beliefs; that is commonly left to what Gasz fittingly terms “das Zeitalter der Epigonen.”⁶⁴

LATER LUTHERANISM

When those later generations took up the task that the Reformation had left them and proceeded to systematize the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith, they were unable to do so without the aid of a philosophy. In a fragment from a work that is lost Aristotle says: “You say one must philosophize. Then you must philosophize. You say one should not philosophize. Then, to say this, you must philosophize. In any case you must philosophize.”⁶⁵ Despite any pretensions to the contrary, most systematic theologians have lived up to Aristotle's dictum. Even Karl Barth has not been successful in his effort to compose a dogmatic work in which philosophy plays no part.⁶⁶ Thus, when Luther's successors began to systematize, they also began to philosophize. By leaving the task of systematization undone, Luther opened the way for philosophy to take a larger part in the theology of the Lutheran Church.⁶⁷

Among those who regarded themselves as Luther's heirs and who devoted themselves to philosophy was the father of existential philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard, whose thought we shall examine more closely in our fifth chapter. Whatever else it may be or may have become,⁶⁸ existentialism is that interpretation of the meaning of life which sees it as a crisis involving the total person. And therefore it seems that existentialism can rightly claim Luther as one of its ancestors, for there are several emphases in Luther's thought that show his kinship to the existentialists.⁶⁹

THE TOTAL MAN

As existentialism is concerned with what has aptly been termed the “whole-reaction,”⁷⁰ so Luther was wont to speak of the total man.⁷¹ Studies of Luther’s concept of concupiscence, for instance, have shown that he saw lust as a corruption affecting the entire person, mind, body, and spirit.⁷² This was, indeed, the burden of his treatise on the bondage of the will and one of his chief objections to Roman Catholic anthropology.⁷³ By placing the seat of sin in the body, specifically in sex, Neo-Platonism and every theology colored by Neo-Platonism destroys the Biblical regard for the man as such.⁷⁴ As an able student and expositor of the Holy Scriptures, and especially of the Old Testament, Luther clearly grasped the implications of Biblical terms like belly, bowels, reins, and similar expressions by which the sacred writers sought to show the divine concern for the total man.⁷⁵ One has only to read some of Luther’s Easter sermons⁷⁶ or his expositions of 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, to find that the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body showed him that Christ died to save not merely souls, but men.⁷⁷ As pastor and as preacher, Luther is ever dealing with the total person, and this eminently Christian, but also distinctively existential, insight is basic to an understanding of Luther’s theology.

Such was Luther’s understanding of the “total person.” Existentialism is not interested, however, in a calm and objective description of the total person: it seeks to call him to account. The only situations with which it deals are those in which the total person is involved. Knowledge and truth are to be viewed in terms of their relationship to such involvement. Thus Emil Brunner has sought to document the thesis that Christian truth is neither subjective nor objective, but always existential. That is to say, the distinction between the knowing subject and the known object, drawn from common sense and Greek philosophy,⁷⁸ becomes worse than meaningless when I make myself the subject and God the object.⁷⁹ In fact, as Gustaf Aulen points out, it would be much more accurate to speak of God as the subject than as the object of saving faith and knowledge.⁸⁰ According to Brunner’s view, it is incorrect to speak of an objective Christian truth which is subjectively apprehended; for it is not the truth which is apprehended, *I*, the total *I*, am apprehended of the living God. Such speaking and thinking bears the mark of existentialism, but it is also the rediscovery of a basic emphasis in Luther’s theology.⁸¹

THE DOCTRINE OF THE WORD

Luther’s view of truth is inseparable from his doctrine of the Word of God. Without entering into the various interpretations of this doctrine that have been advanced in recent years,⁸² it seems clear that his understanding of the Word which God directs to men in Christ Jesus contains just this element of involvement. Nineteenth-century liberals who sought a “*freihere Stellung*” in Luther’s attitude toward the Biblical canon misinterpreted his thought precisely because they overlooked this fact.⁸³ The famous words in Luther’s prefaces about the Christocentricity of the New Testament⁸⁴ are to be understood in the light of the fact that the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ addresses his Word to men through the Holy Scriptures, not to provide them with information about Himself or themselves, but to give

Himself to them. “*Einen Gott haben*” is Luther’s favorite phrase for man’s religious disposition,⁸⁵ an indication of the intensely personal character of faith.

The Word by which God creates that faith is intensely personal, too. When the Enthusiasts wanted to use the Old Testament as a basis for civil law,⁸⁶ Luther vehemently declared: “It is all the Word of God, to be sure. But Word of God or not, I must know and make certain to whom that Word of God is addressed.... It must strike me”⁸⁷ before God’s Word finds its mark. That the Bible is God’s Word even before I receive it Luther stoutly maintained; I do not make it God’s Word by believing it.⁸⁸ But in the relationship which God creates by His Word I am called into fellowship with Him, I am personally, yes, existentially involved.

THE LIVING WORD

In one of his sermons Luther develops this insight in a very remarkable way. Commenting on the words of St. Matthew “And when they were come to Bethphage,” he says: “Bethphage means in German *Mundhaus*. For the Church is a *Mundhaus*, not a *Federhaus*.... It is the manner of the Gospel and the New Testament that it should be preached and proclaimed with the living voice. Christ Himself wrote nothing and did not command writing, but preaching... and the Gospel was brought out of the dead Scriptures into the living voice.”⁸⁹ His favorite word for the Gospel is “*Predigt*”⁹⁰ and he delighted to speak of the “*viva vox evangelii*.”⁹¹ God had committed the preaching of the Gospel to mortal and sinful men rather than to angels because a man speaking to a man could better “put over” the divine message. Hence also Luther’s emphasis upon the “*pro me*” of the Gospel testimony:⁹² Only when I realize that this is directed to me does the truth of the Word accomplish what it was intended to accomplish. The truth of the Word does not come in the imparting of insights, but in the personal fellowship with God for which man was originally created and to which he is now restored in Christ. Thus, despite many serious differences,⁹³ Brunner’s interpretation of truth as existential encounter certainly owes much to Luther.

THE ELEMENT OF CRISIS

We have defined existentialism as that interpretation of the meaning of life which sees it as a crisis involving the total person, and we have seen that it can claim Luther at least partly for its emphasis upon the total person and for its emphasis upon the involvement of that person. The third element of our definition of existentialism—the element of crisis—is not lacking in Luther’s understanding of existence either. How important this element is in existential philosophy can be seen from the apt comment of a recent critic that existentialists all think of themselves as Hamlet, born when the times are out of joint with the destiny of setting them right.⁹⁴

Perhaps the most familiar and probably the most moving of all existential interpretations of crisis is Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Dread*, but dread, or *Angst*, is present in most of his writings.⁹⁵ Kierkegaard’s *Angst*, is, however, more than dread or awe, reverence or terror. It is the fascination that draws me to that which I know can destroy me, it is the painful but

irrevocable experience of the Holy.⁹⁶ Robbed of its transcendental locus, as it is, for instance, in the atheistic existentialism of Heidegger or Jean-Paul Sartre,⁹⁷ *Angst* becomes a fatalistic and at times rather morbid preoccupation with what is weird and painful and ugly. But when it is rooted in the Christian view of God, as it was in Kierkegaard and as it is in some of our contemporaries, it is closely related to the thought and personal religious experience of Luther.

What were Luther's *Anfechtungen*⁹⁸ but extreme instances of this very *Angst*? He describes them as terrifying tensions of body and soul that no man could endure more than one tenth of an hour without turning to ashes.⁹⁹ Probably the clearest instance of Luther's interpretation of crisis is his view of death as we find it in his stirring commentary on the Ninetieth Psalm. Here he contrasts the world of nature, in which spring follows inevitably upon winter, with the world of history, in which no one knows when his spring will turn into winter.¹⁰⁰ Luther students will always be in debt to Gustaf Aulen for his essay on Luther's doctrine of reconciliation.¹⁰¹ From that essay we have learned how intensely personal death was for Luther, so personal that in order to win men from its grip, Christ had to enter into mortal combat with sin and death and the devil. The crisis of man's death is not a mere biological fear of the termination of existence. It is the realization that death brings me face to face with the God against whom I have sinned, who makes demands upon me that I cannot fulfill, and yet without whom I cannot live.¹⁰² This is what Kierkegaard calls "existential pathos," *Angst*,¹⁰³ and, as Elert has shown in his discussion of dread and loneliness in Lutheran thought,¹⁰⁴ Luther's theology is the matrix of existential philosophy in this respect, too.

Though Luther himself never formulated his views systematically, it seems clear that there would be much sympathy between his thinking and the type of philosophy we know as existentialism.

THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

Two fields in which theology and philosophy frequently intersect are natural theology and natural law. Since they are of greater importance for later Lutheranism than for Luther himself, we shall devote more detailed attention to them in later sections of this study. But Luther was forced to deal with these problems, and our discussion of the philosophical implications of his work cannot be complete without at least a brief examination of them.

Like every teacher who has taken up the task of expounding the Epistle to the Romans, Luther was faced with the problem of natural theology when he began to lecture on the first and second chapters of that Epistle. It is significant for the theology of the young Luther that he does not take up the problem in any great detail in his commentary on Romans, and this despite the fact that it was one of the chief areas of contention between the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*,¹⁰⁵ Though he does not sidestep the basic problem, as does Barth in his commentary,¹⁰⁶ Luther touches on it only very sketchily in what is otherwise a rather lengthy and extended analysis of the Epistle.¹⁰⁷ Except for instances like those which have been mentioned earlier, the earlier writings of Luther contain little systematic discussion of natural theology. This is chiefly because his thought during this period was exploratory in nature and