

6-1-1957

## Was Luther a Nominalist?

Bengt Haegglund  
*Lund University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Haegglund, Bengt (1957) "Was Luther a Nominalist?," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 28, Article 31.  
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol28/iss1/31>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

# Was Luther a Nominalist? <sup>1</sup>

By BENGT HAEGGLUND

THE problem of the relation between Luther and the tradition which derives its name from William of Occam <sup>2</sup> has in our time acquired a new interest. Certain Roman Catholic critics are inclined to ascribe the Reformer's heretical ideas to nominalist influences. According to them nominalism bears within itself a ferment of dissolution; it rejects in a radical manner the fundamental presuppositions of the whole scholastic theology. Is such a view based on an accurate representation of nominalism? This is a question which we cannot answer within the limits of the present article. Much can be said in favour of the contention; but it must not be forgotten that the theologians who may be regarded as Luther's masters were not in any marked degree innovators. In addition to William of Occam himself, there were Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly and above all Gabriel Biel, professor at Tübingen, whom his contemporaries regarded as a great theologian. They all kept rigorously within the framework fixed by the Church; though their school met with some opposition at the outset, it ended by becoming dominant in a whole chain of universities that were among the most influential of the period.

There are other reasons as well that make a study of the relations of Luther with occamism highly interesting. In spite of the extensive work that has been done on Luther's theology during recent decades, this particular topic has received hardly any attention. No doubt that is partly owing to practical difficulties in the way of all research into nominalist theology. There are hardly any recent editions of the works of the writers of this school, and their theological method makes it difficult to get a general grasp of their position. But it is worth while, even from a purely historical point

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was written originally by Bengt Hägglund for the French periodical *Positiones Luthériennes*, October 1955. It was translated into English by Dr. A. R. Vidler and appeared in the British magazine *Theology*, June 1956. To the author, the translator, and to both periodicals we are very grateful for their kind permission to make this significant article accessible to our readers. — W. R. Roehrs, Managing Editor, CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

<sup>2</sup> To designate this tradition we shall use the terms "occamism" and "nominalism" indifferently.

of view, to inquire into the connexions between Luther and the occamist tradition. Many of the Reformer's writings make use of nominalist terminology and are so closely bound up with the questions raised by this school that, in some cases, it is impossible to get hold of their meaning unless one is acquainted with their scholastic background.

The best way to approach the subject is to compare those of Luther's writings which depend on the nominalist tradition with the works of the authors to whom he refers. It is no good being content with generalities.

It is chiefly with respect to two matters that Luther's theology has been held to be in accord with that of the occamists; the doctrine of justification, on the one hand, and his conception of the relations between theology and philosophy, on the other. It is on these two questions that we shall concentrate our attention.

### I. THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

Occamist theology presupposes a double definition of justification. According to the idea of the "regular power" (*potentia ordinata*) of God, justification consists in the gift of his grace that God bestows on the man who has known how to prepare himself for it aright. Grace in this case abolishes sin and sanctifies the man; we are then justified in consequence of a new (inner) condition that grace has created in us. According to the idea of the "absolute power" (*potentia absoluta*) of God, however, the nominalists also conceive of justification as the fact that God declares us righteous solely on the ground that he freely accepts us, without regard to what we bring with us in the way either of inherent grace or of holiness.<sup>3</sup> We may call this the doctrine of *acceptance*. Both these lines of thought must be taken into consideration when a comparison is made between nominalist theology and Luther's. We will first see what his attitude was to the usual occamist doctrine. Then we shall deal with the doctrine of acceptance.

From the very beginning of his polemic against nominalism, Luther takes his stand against the idea that there can be a prepara-

<sup>3</sup> Cp. the excellent discussion of this question by C. Feckes, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre des Gabriel Biel" (Münsterische Beiträge zur Theologie, fasc. 7), 1925.

tion of man for grace. This does not mean that he attacks the nominalist system just at one particular point. Rather it means that his conception of man and of grace is altogether different from that of the nominalists.

According to occamism, man who is deprived of grace can prepare himself in several ways to receive it. He can, for example, renounce sin and love God above all things. He can also produce a faith that prepares him for grace; he can accept the Christian message when he hears it. These various preparations are summed up in the idea that man ought "to do what is in his power" ("facere quod est in se" — which became a technical expression).

For Luther such a preparation is impossible on the level of human nature. "On the part of man," he says, "nothing precedes grace but an evil disposition, indeed nothing but rebellion against grace."<sup>4</sup> He explains this state of affairs on psychological as well as on theological grounds. In Luther's view the nominalist psychology is erroneous: it assumes that the will is capable of submitting itself to the imperatives of reason and of conforming itself to the truth once that is known — to the truth, for example, that God, being the supreme being, ought to be loved above all things.<sup>5</sup> In Luther's view man is incapable of controlling his interior will. No doubt his reason and his conscious will allow him to determine his outward acts, but he remains powerless in face of his internal impulses. They can be changed only by a stronger impulse, by a new will. We recognize here Luther's basic conception according to which unregenerate man is incapable of any good; he is the "old man," the corrupt tree that brings forth corrupt fruit. He cannot prepare himself to receive grace, because he is subject to the rule of sin. When he "does what is in his power," it bears the imprint of sin. All the good we are capable of comes from God. It is the Lord who works in us both to will and to do (Phil. 2:13). So Luther looks upon the idea that man, motivated by concupiscence and bound in sin, could love God above all things as absurd and blasphemous. Were it not so, man, who is but dust and ashes,

<sup>4</sup> "Ex parte autem hominis nihil nisi indispositio, immo, rebellio gratiae gratiam praecedit." *W. A.* 1, 225, 29.

<sup>5</sup> "Falsitas est quod voluntas possit se conformare dictamini recto naturaliter. *Contra Sco. Gab.*" *W. A.* 1, 224, 15.

would have something of which to boast before God; then this being whose nature is corrupt could merit divine grace. But before God we are only sin and nothingness.<sup>6</sup>

What then is the truth about justification?

According to occamism, it takes place when God gives his grace to him who, on the natural level, "does what is in his power." Grace is instilled like a new quality which transforms the soul and raises its virtues to a supernatural level. The infusion of grace drives out sin and abolishes transgression. Justification is then the consequence at once of a condition of man and of a gift of God.

According to Luther, justification does not by any means spring from a new quality in regenerate man. Grace does not transform the soul nor does it exalt human nature. It is the divine mercy that brings about the forgiveness of sins. As the Spirit of God gives life, so grace confers that eternal life which is given us in and with the forgiveness of sins. We are not justified by reason of the new life which is in us, but by reason of the grace which is in God. This means that righteousness comes to us from God who imputes it to us by his grace. "Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity" (Ps. 32:2).

Luther's teaching here presents an obvious contrast to the ordinary teaching of nominalism about justification. The fact that nominalism is marked by pelagian tendencies makes this contrast greater than that which exists in a general way between the Reformer's teaching and other areas of scholastic theology.

But when people speak of nominalist elements in Luther's theology they have something else in mind. It is in fact the other nominalist definition of justification that is considered to be the model from which Luther copied his doctrine of imputation. According to this second definition, man would be declared righteous only because God accepts him as such quite apart from any infusion of grace. We must therefore ask what Luther's attitude was with regard to this second occamist doctrine (the doctrine of acceptance). While rejecting the current doctrine, did not Luther

<sup>6</sup> "Veritas itaque est quod homo arbor mala factus non potest nisi malum velle et facere." *W. A.* 1, 224, 13. "Nisi quis ex spiritu renatus sit (sit quantopere coram se et hominibus iustus, castus, capiens), caro est, verus homo est." 1, 146, 20. "Homo vetus, vanitas vanitatum universaque vanitas." 1, 145, 29.

adopt the theory of acceptance according to which God justifies man by his absolute power without respect to the grace that is instilled into him?

We have only to glance at Luther's criticisms of nominalism to be convinced that he did nothing of the kind. Luther not only rejects the pelagianism of his predecessors; he equally criticizes their theory of acceptance. According to him, a man's salvation can be due to nothing but the grace and the mercy of God. On the other hand, the idea that God could declare a man righteous in an entirely arbitrary manner is, in his eyes, only a meaningless formula, a bad joke. To admit that idea would be equivalent to denying the very nature of grace. For grace is not a quality inherent in man. It is the life-giving Spirit of God who really makes man righteous by the forgiveness of sins and gives life to those who are in a state of spiritual death.<sup>7</sup> It would follow from the idea of acceptance that God declares righteous a man who is only a natural man; a purely natural love for God would in that case appear to be the equivalent of supernatural love. This conception, so far from combating the pelagian tendency inherent in nominalism, would only reinforce it by accentuating its rationalism and by reducing the role of grace in the work of salvation. The nominalists do well to say that God declares the sinner righteous; but they deny the miraculous character of this justification.

For Luther, imputation is something other than the entirely arbitrary choice of an absolute power. This term describes an event big with consequences and essential in the divine order of salvation. Imputation is nothing else but the work of grace. And grace, instead of being the arbitrary will of God, works the justification of the sinner because of Jesus Christ. *Acceptance* means that God declares a sinner righteous because he is all-powerful; *imputation* means that God imputes to man the righteousness of Christ by faith. Imputation does not base salvation solely on the all-powerfulness of God; it bases it on the fulfilment of the law by Jesus Christ and on the infinite merits of the Saviour. To the

<sup>7</sup> "Non potest deus acceptare hominem sine gratia Dei iustificante. Contra Occam." *W. A.* 1, 227, 4. "Gratia dei nunquam sic coexistit ut otiosa. Sed est vivus, mobilis et operosus spiritus, nec per Dei absolutam potentiam fieri potest, ut actus amicitiae sit et gratia Dei praesens non sit. Contra Gab." 1, 227, 1.

arbitrary acceptance of nominalism the Reformation opposes its principle of "propter Christum."

For Luther, the whole point is that it is the sinner who is justified. The man of whom he speaks is not predisposed to salvation by any natural love for God. On the contrary, only the sinner can be justified. Only he who sees himself as God sees him—sinful, corrupt and wretched—can become before God what he would wish to be—righteous, good and pious. God's action operates in an opposite direction to man's. He lifts up the humble, justifies the sinner, gives life to the dead. That is why men are required to be humble and sincere and to see themselves as God sees them. Only then can God act as he intends, and give righteousness and life.<sup>8</sup>

The righteousness imputed to the sinner is by no means a declaration empty of real content. It is the very righteousness of God, a "strange righteousness" (*aliena iustitia*) of which we become partakers when God exchanges our guilt for the satisfaction wrought by Christ. There is a sense in which the nominalist idea of acceptance also means that it is the sinner who is justified. But then this justification takes place on the ground of man's natural virtue which the absolute power of God declares to be perfect and supernatural. Punishment is remitted without any satisfaction on man's part and the gift of virtue is conferred without infusion of grace. On the other hand, with Luther it is a real righteousness that becomes ours, although it is strange to us. By it alone we become righteous. It is imputed to us in virtue not of an arbitrary decision but of the faithfulness and mercy of God.

## II. THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Attempts have also sometimes been made to prove that Luther was nominalist in his views concerning the relations between theology and philosophy. The disparity that Luther sees between these two disciplines is taken to correspond to the line of demarcation which nominalism draws between natural knowledge and

<sup>8</sup> "Cum iustitia fidelium sit in Deo abscondita, peccatum vero eorum manifestum in seipsis, verum est, non nisi iustos damnari atque peccatores et meretrices salvari." *W. A.*, 1, 148, 35. "In conspectu meo semper sum peccator." 149, 1. "Stat firma sententia: Qui volet iustus fieri, peccator fiat necesse est." 5, 195, 41. Cp. 7, 546 f.

revelation. In both cases a new point of view will have taken the place of that harmony between faith and knowledge which was characteristic of classical scholasticism. The ultimate consequence of this conception is the theory of two kinds of truth.

But such an interpretation is too simple, and it fails to take account of the real situation. Certainly there are points of contact between Luther and the nominalists here as well as in regard to justification. There is, however, an essential theological difference between them which is of capital importance.

What distinguishes theology from philosophy according to occamism is the fact that the former has to do with revealed truths which cannot be completely proved, whereas philosophy is concerned with knowledge that can be demonstrated with certainty. To the question whether theology is entitled to be called a science, occamism gives a negative answer. Note, however, that this answer assumes a quite precise definition of what a science is. Only axiomatic principles and syllogisms that can be deduced from them are entitled to be termed science (*scientia*) in what was then regarded as the proper sense of the word. Because theology issues from different presuppositions, the information it yields is outside the field of philosophy or scientific knowledge.

At the same time, this clear line of demarcation between theology and science is only one aspect of the occamist theory of knowledge. Occamism also established very close links between the two spheres. Actually the scholastic method of presentation, which characterizes its theology, shows that in practice it hardly establishes an impassable barrier between faith and reason. It seeks, moreover, by considerations of principle to justify the rationalistic way of dealing with theological questions. It supposes that certain theological truths belong also to the sphere of philosophical knowledge; for example, the doctrines of the existence and nature of God. The elements of natural theology are thus within the scope of metaphysics. The fundamental conception that they have in common is that of being. But in this case what is the distinguishing character of theological truths properly so-called? Occam answers that, in so far as such truths are contingent, they cannot be known with certainty. To this class belong such propositions as "God creates" or "God has become man." On the other hand, theological truths

that are necessary, e. g., "God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit," can to some extent be the object of demonstrable knowledge. To be sure, there is no direct perception of them, which is normally the basis of this kind of knowledge. But perception is in this case replaced by a divine intervention: revelation, which is accepted by faith.

These examples show how occamism sought to forge links between theological and philosophical knowledge and to make room for theology in its general theory of knowledge. Not only are certain theological truths accessible to reason, but those that rest on a supernatural revelation can, after the event, become the object of rational speculation. Theological knowledge is, so to speak, on the same level as rational knowledge. The chief difference between them is that the former presupposes revelation and faith, faith being conceived as the submission of the will to the authority of revealed truth. As we have already said, nominalism holds that such a faith is possible on the natural level: man can produce it by his natural powers. Free will is then capable of adhering to truths of faith which ecclesiastical authority proposes to it.

Thus it is by starting from the theory of knowledge that occamism tries to solve the problem of the tension between faith and reason. Theological propositions cannot be demonstrated; some of them cannot be evidently known. They presuppose the submission of faith to authority. But, once these presuppositions are admitted, reason can take hold of them and deal with them according to its own laws. Therefore, although occamism clearly distinguishes between theology and scientific knowledge, it postulates an entire harmony between faith and reason. That is why it has no difficulty in practising scholastic speculation on the content of faith and even carrying it further.

Luther really followed the occamists in regard to theology and philosophy. He also takes the separation of these two spheres as his point of departure. For him as for his precursors the knowledge that faith gives is of a different kind from that which reason gives. It outreaches rational understanding (*supra rationis captum*), and above all it presupposes the existence and experience of faith.

But when Luther says that you can only understand the Gospel in temptation (*in der Situation der Anfechtung*), he is undoubtedly

taking his stand on other presuppositions than those of the nominalists, for whom knowledge through faith is of the same kind as practical knowledge and depends on acceptance by the will of a revealed truth. It is not, however, to be denied that there is a certain kinship in thought between Luther and the nominalists on this point. We meet in both the same conviction that theology has for its object truths which are, in the final analysis, impenetrable mysteries and that it is thereby distinguished from the profane sciences. Still, Luther's point of view is not that of the nominalist theologians. The best proof of this is that he broke radically with all the rational speculation in theological matters which marked the earlier tradition.

Luther sees in the tension between faith and reason something other than a problem connected with the theory of knowledge. For him this tension is primarily a theological problem. The knowledge that faith gives is altogether inaccessible to reason, not only because the natural intelligence is insufficient here, but chiefly because human reason is blinded by original sin and it lacks that spiritual light without which man is incapable of understanding revealed truths. Reason is not only man's natural way of thinking: this term also denotes man's perverted attitude to things divine. Reason bears the imprint of our carnal sentiments. Natural reason is therefore an obstacle to faith. If it cannot understand the Gospel, this is not only because of the supernatural character of faith-knowledge, but also because unregenerate man cannot rid himself of his perverted attitude. In everything he does he seeks his own interests. He tries to become righteous in the sight of God by good works which he produces. For a man to arrive at faith, his reason must first die and new light must be given him by the Holy Spirit. He cannot produce this faith himself. His free will cannot accept truths of faith. All is divine gift: not only the revelation as such, but also the faith that accepts the truth of revelation. "God has convicted the wisdom of the world of foolishness." All that belongs to man must be destroyed before God makes us partakers of the wisdom and spiritual knowledge that belong to faith.

These familiar notions are enough to show us that, for Luther, the relations between faith and reason are closely connected with the basic principles of his theology. This is the measure of the

distance that separated him, at this point, from occamism. For Luther this problem does not belong only to the sphere of the theory of knowledge. The difference between faith and reason must be studied on the basis of an anthropology stamped with the doctrine of original sin. For occamism reason is capable of understanding the content of revelation and making it an object of speculation. According to Luther, on the other hand, natural reason must be annihilated before we can understand "the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:14).

It should not be concluded that Luther denied all activity of reason in the sphere of faith. It is only necessary to recall the part reason plays in his famous words at Worms, according to which, if he was to be made to retract, he must be convinced by arguments drawn from the Scriptures or by indubitable reasons (*ratione evidente*). Plainly, Luther also refers to reason where there is a question of understanding the content of revelation and of formulating it theologically. But in this case it is the regenerate reason which submits without hesitation to divine revelation. There is no question of knowledge derived from natural reason being, so to speak, completed by revealed knowledge. Rather, faith itself becomes for the believer a new reason which Luther calls *ratio renata* or *ratio fidei*.

We find, then, in Luther two different points of view on the relations between reason and truths of faith. On the one hand he can say that faith combines with reason and makes use of it. On the other hand he presupposes that faith fights against reason, which must die and be annihilated in order that faith can arise within us. In the former case he means the natural function of reason as such; in the latter, the term "reason" denotes the perverted and carnal state of mind as also the compromise with the world, which are characteristic of the "old man."

Here is an example that will illustrate what we have said above, and also show, in conclusion, how this theology sets Luther in opposition to the nominalists.

In his "Disputation against Scholastic Theology" of 1517, Luther attacks, among other things, the idea of a "special logic of faith" (*logica fidei*), which was approved by the nominalists. Here is the text of his thesis on this subject: "It is in vain that one imagines

a logic of faith, a *suppositio mediata* beyond terms and number."<sup>9</sup> The addition, "against recent logicians," shows that he was criticizing conceptions that were current in nominalist circles. Some advocates of that system, in fact, thought that the rules of aristotelian logic could not apply to the doctrine of the Trinity without producing heretical conclusions. They applied the same principle to other dogmas as well — for example, to certain parts of Christology. We can see from several of Luther's disputations that he shared this point of view. Nominalism, however, proposed to provide a remedy for this incompatibility between logic and the Church's dogmas by substituting for the current logic another logic. Its rules would be broad enough to make it applicable to the sphere of faith. That is what was called the "logic of faith." This is the best possible example of the way in which the nominalist school separated theology and science. In rejecting the idea of a particular logic of faith, Luther shows that he is critical of the occamist tradition. The idea of a logic of faith assumes that the mysteries of faith can be enclosed within the rules of rational thinking. Even if truths of faith are outside the sphere of properly philosophical knowledge, they are, as it were, *a posteriori* subject to speculation and scientific discussion. Luther's criticism involves the outright rejection of traditional theological speculation. Further, if the thesis cited above is to be explained in harmony with the Reformer's fundamental conceptions, it must be said that he sees in the logic of faith a mixture of theology and science which he felt bound to condemn. Truths of faith ought to be explained in a manner different from profane knowledge. It is useless and vain to want to submit the mysteries of faith to the laws of reason. Faith must not be submitted to reason; that is why no rule of logic should be imposed on divine truth.

If the relation between occamism and Luther is considered only on the ground of the theory of knowledge, then there seems to be only a minimal difference between them, a nuance. But when the theological meaning and the practical consequences of this differ-

<sup>9</sup> "Frustra fingitur logica fidei, suppositio mediata extra terminum et numerum. Contra recentes dialecticos." *W. A.* 1, 226, 19. For the problems involved in this text, cp. Haegglund, *Theologie und Philosophie bei Luther und in der occamistischen Tradition*. Lunds Universitets Arsskrift, vol. 51:4, Lund, 1955, pp. 43 ff.

ence are examined, it seems like a profound and pregnant transformation of all theological methodology and of Christian dogmatic theology.

Lund, Sweden

---

#### THE LAW IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

Under this heading the *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* (February 1, 1957) offers a brief, but penetrating analysis of the Law and the Gospel, based on Rom. 7:7ff. In the passage quoted, Paul, as the writer says, uses the term νόμος as a synonym of ἐντολή: "commandment." The Law consists of the commandments which God revealed and gave to His people. In the light of the Gospel the Law appears as most intimately joined to the former. This intimate union shows itself in the fact that the Law cries out for the Gospel. In themselves the divine commandments are peculiarly powerless. They cannot awaken man to obedience or total dedication to God. The Law works death. Nor is this inability of the Law merely a deplorable *accidens*, but a part of the divine counsel of salvation. It is the weakness of the Law that it must cry out for the Gospel. But it is the strength of the Law that it renders this crying so necessary and urgent. In the service of the Gospel the Law enables man to recognize his sin in its most horrible manifestation. The Law drives sin out of its hiding. It judges my self-love and proves that in my whole existence, both in my supreme human heights and in my deepest inhuman depths, I am an irreconcilable enemy of God. But the Law is also so utterly weak that sin may use it to urge man to approach God as his partner on the ground of his own fulfillment of His commandments. Therefore man remains on the side of sin in all he does. The Law thus demonstrates most emphatically that it cannot be considered as a way to salvation.

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER