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# The Seventeenth Century Dogmaticians as Philosophers

By A. C. AHLÉN

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**T**O assert that philosophy and theology are not identical would obviously be unnecessary in addressing myself to the present group; but to remind you that there are vast areas of common interest shared by these two disciplines is probably not superfluous. Living as we do in a time when reason is often ridiculed and up-to-the-minute theologians present highly rationalized arguments in favor of antirational views, we need to remind ourselves that philosophy is inescapable. The moment we reflect critically upon our experiences and beliefs, we begin to philosophize.

While we thus recognize the inevitability of philosophy, we need to recall that there is no Christian philosophy per se. Some points of view, e. g., materialism, naturalism, agnosticism, are not compatible with the Christian faith. Others, however, are: Augustine, Anselm, Peter Abélard, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Berkeley, and Kierkegaard can all claim a place within the Christian framework; Bruno, Hobbes, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Marx, Spencer, and Russell cannot. Still others, of whom we may take Kant and James as random examples, have propounded systems more or less compatible with the Christian faith. All of this is a commonplace matter. But it is just the ordinary facts that are overlooked when zeal for a particular position becomes dominant.

Philosophy asks fundamental questions about the nature of reality, of value, of man and his destiny. The Christian faith supplies answers; theology attempts to systematize them. Are these rationally defensible, or at least, can they be shown to lie beyond rational criticism? It is here that the work of the philosopher and the theologian overlap. It is here that the scholastic—whether medieval or 17th century—has labored. We may criticize his often-demonstrated narrowness and his intolerance; but we must

admit that his objective was laudable. I am well aware that we are often vociferously reminded that the Christian faith cannot be propositionalized. To be sure, no statement is the equivalent of the reality for which it stands; but neither can we communicate in any meaningful way without recourse to propositions. Even the statement noted above is itself a proposition.

The 17th century has sometimes been spoken of as the Lutheran Church's medieval period. The remark is usually intended to be opprobrious, suggesting that this was an age of brutality during which the theologians having the upper hand fought among themselves, persecuted dissenters, and distorted or trivialized the Christian faith. The defects of the age are undeniable; they do not spring from the basic objectives of these thinkers but rather from the social conditions of the times.

It would be possible to dispose of the 17th-century dogmaticians briefly by describing them as for the most part Aristotelian rationalists who had taken the *Book of Concord* as their material and sought by means of deductive logic to produce an all-inclusive theological system on that basis. That, though true enough, would be an oversimplification of our project, just as a detailed study of their philosophical technique applied to all their problems would be prevented by its magnitude. We shall have to content ourselves with a brief discussion of their procedures in dealing with certain representative questions in the philosophy of religion. Before doing this, however, a brief presentation of a few biographical data are in order.

Abraham Calov (1612—1685), sometime professor at Wittenberg, is often spoken of as the staunchest defender of Orthodox Lutheranism against any and all critics within and without the church. John Gerhard (1582—1637), professor at Jena, though equally a champion of orthodox Lutheranism, was of a far more irenic disposition than Calov. Matthew Hafenreffer (1561—1619), professor at Tübingen, sought to use the then newer methods in philosophy in his exposition of Lutheranism. His work became popular and for a considerable time served as the official textbook in the Church of Sweden. David Hollaz (1648—1713), pastor in Pomerania, is generally spoken of as the last of the great orthodox dogmaticians of this period. Leonhard Hutter (1563—1616),

another Wittenberg professor, has been designated a second edition of Luther; the justification of the label is problematical. John Quenstedt (1617—85) is unique among these persons in that he had served as professor of philosophy at Wittenberg, becoming a teacher of theology in 1660. The designation attached to him, the bookkeeper of orthodox Lutheranism, suggests faithfulness, scrupulous carefulness, and — lack of originality.

Consideration of these champions of orthodoxy would be incomplete without a brief mention of two prominent opponents. John Valentine Andreae (1586—1654), grandson of one of the co-authors of the Formula of Concord, emphasized ethics and discipline as well as doctrine. Though not going to the same length as the man to be mentioned, he stressed the desirability of mutual recognition among denominations on the basis of the fundamental Christian beliefs. His pseudonymous polemic against the mystical vagaries of his own time has undeservedly secured for him the reputation of founding the Rosicrucians.

George Calixt (1586—1656), professor at Helmstedt, deplored the acrimonious polemic of his own day and became himself the object of bitter opposition, especially from Calov. Calixt, usually associated with the term syncretism, has been accused of both crypto-Romanism and crypto-Calvinism. He argued that a distinction must be made between fundamental (essential to salvation) and non-fundamental teachings. On the basis of the former the different denominations should recognize one another. His division of doctrine into antecedents (religious facts that can be known by reason without divine revelation), constituents (the true fundamentals, basic matter of faith ascertainable through revelation alone) and consequents (deductions from the two foregoing) is not only interesting; but it also shows how, from the standpoint of philosophic method, similar techniques were used both by the orthodox and their supposedly heterodox opponents.

Concerning the relationship of faith and reason, of theology and philosophy, the old dogmaticians have much to say that makes them *personae non gratae* to the contemporary exponents of a blatant fideism as well as to some of their own contemporaries. Daniel Hoffman (d. 1611) had echoed the sentiments of Averroes and certain nominalists: "Philosophy is hostile to theology; what is

true in philosophy is false in theology." To this Calov replied: "That philosophy is not opposed to theology, and is by no means to be rejected as brutish, terrene, impure, diabolical, we thus demonstrate: (1) Because the true agrees with the true and does not antagonize it. But what is known by the light of nature is no less true than what is revealed in Scripture; (2) because natural and philosophical knowledge has its origin from God; (3) because philosophy leads us to the knowledge of God."<sup>1</sup>

"We must distinguish between a real and apparent contradiction. The maxims of philosophy and the conclusions of theology do not really contradict each other, but only appear to do so; for they either do not discuss the same subject, or they do not describe the same mode, condition, or relation to it. (Ibid., I, 74)

So also Quenstedt. "Philosophy and the principles of reason are not indeed contrary to theology . . . but there is a very great difference between those things that are revealed in Scripture and those which are known by the light of nature. . . . The formal principle of reason no one rejects . . . its material principles no wise man accepts."<sup>2</sup>

Others could be cited with the same results. To sum up, divine revelation in the realm of the supernatural must be the basis of faith. In matters pertaining to the natural, human reason must judge. Rightly understood, a conflict between them is impossible. Says Gerhard, "Sound reason is not opposed to the faith if we accept as such that which is truly and properly so-called, namely, that which does not transcend the limits of its sphere and does not arrogate to itself decisions in regard to the mysteries of faith, or which, enlightened by the Word and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, does not follow its own principles in the investigation of the mysteries of the faith but the light of the Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

In other words we have here a sharp line of demarcation drawn between the natural and the supernatural. The latter is made up of mysteries beyond, but not contrary to, reason. Hence the laws of abstract thought are applicable in all cases. No repudiation of the

<sup>1</sup> *Systema locorum theologicorum*, I, 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Theologia didactico-polemica*, I, 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Loci theologici*, II, 372.

laws of identity, of non-contradiction, and of excluded middle are set forth here. Theology is no more a rejection of these than it would be a suspension of the laws of mathematics because of the fact that God is Triune. God is not one in the same sense as He is three.

The fundamental problem of any philosophy of religion is, of course, the doctrine of God. While emphasizing the inadequacy of nonrevelational knowledge of the Deity ("The natural knowledge of God is not sufficient to secure salvation . . . nor can anyone be redeemed by it alone," Quenstedt, I, 261), nevertheless the 17th century dogmaticians follow the lead of the ancients and the main succession of the medieval thinkers. Man has an innate knowledge of God. In support of this is quoted Rom. 1:19 and 2:14, 15. Moreover, the very fact that man has a capacity for distinguishing good and evil, that he has a feeling of responsibility and a conscience, constitute further indications of God's existence. (Ibid., p. 253)

Man has also a natural knowledge of God which is derived from observation of the external world and from the events of history. A detailed discussion of these well-known arguments I deem unnecessary at this point. This knowledge of God is not purely theoretical; it has a practical objective. Says Calov: "The use of the natural knowledge of God is (1) pedagogical, for seeking after the true God, who has manifested Himself through the Scriptures in the church; (2) paedetical, for directing morals and external discipline both within and without the church; (3) didactic, because it contributes to the exposition and illustration of the Scriptures if it be rightly employed." (Calov, II, 40)

In all this it is necessary to bear in mind that man's natural capacities have been impaired by the Fall, hence what we have is but a faint recollection of what once was. Gerhard speaks of this knowledge as "sparks and scintillations of that clear light which shone with full splendor in the mind of man before the Fall." (Gerhard, I, 93)

The doctrine of the Trinity provides another situation in which these thinkers made use of their previously noted techniques. The doctrine itself is a mystery; however, once given in revelation it can be shown to be not absurd. "Among Christians, instructed in the

Word of God and embracing by faith the mystery of the Trinity, this can be proved by natural reasons" (*ibid.*, III, 224). We might pause to note here that the dogmaticians could have gone farther than they did. While the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be demonstrated after the manner of a geometrical proposition, it can be shown to provide an answer to a question about God's nature that a unitarian conception of the Deity leaves an even greater mystery.

A detailed discussion of the application of these methods to all areas of theological knowledge is, as has already been said, out of question. It is of particular interest, however, to note their treatment of the problem of human personality or soul. The latter, says Gerhard (*ibid.*, XVII, 147—150), can be shown to be probably immortal by natural reason; in support of this, arguments from Plato and the older scholastics are adduced. The basic proof, though, is to be found in revelation.

Summing up our rather superficial survey, we can say that the 17th century dogmaticians were supernaturalists: God, angels, man as a spiritual entity, were to be sharply distinguished from other forms of existence, and as such are not subject to the so-called laws of nature (observed uniformities). They were, accordingly, metaphysical dualists. Matter and spirit are ultimate realities reducible to no other substance. They were rationalists. By means of reason, though the latter, in common with all things human, has been corrupted by the Fall, man can obtain reliable knowledge of natural phenomena. Man regenerated can also by the same instrument on the basis of revelation arrive at reliable corollaries and conclusions.

We may deplore their intolerance, their polemical attitudes; we may regret their failure to recognize that there is yet more light to break forth from the Word. But we cannot do other than admire their desire to think God's thoughts after Him. In an age that seeks to obscure all distinctions and, weary of thought, seeks to hold on to mutually contradictory propositions in the same context and at the same time, we need to be reminded of those who did not shirk intellectual labor. God desires that His children should also love Him with their entire minds. He desires that men should be rational.

Minneapolis, Minn.