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# The Natural Knowledge of God

By RALPH A. BOHLMANN

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** This essay was presented for discussion to the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., on Sept. 4, 1963.

This study grows out of a request for guidance from the Commission on Fraternal Organizations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Over the years this commission has been meeting with leaders of a number of fraternal organizations in an effort both to explain our synod's position on lodgery as well as to encourage the removal of objectionable features from lodge rituals. These groups have shown readiness to make many of the ritualistic changes suggested by our commission. In one area, however, these groups refuse to yield. They insist that requiring belief in the existence of a Supreme Being of their members or that mentioning the name of God occasionally in their ceremonies must be retained. They suggest that this is no more "un-Christian" or "un-Lutheran" than using the name of God in courtroom oaths ("So help me God"), on our national currency ("In God we trust"), or in referring to our nation as being "under God" in our pledge of allegiance to the United States flag.<sup>1</sup>

Clarification is therefore sought on these points: Is it possible for us to regard the recognition of the existence of a Supreme Being by these groups as being in harmony with the Biblical and confessional understanding of man's natural knowledge

<sup>1</sup> In Los Angeles, the American Civil Liberties Union has reportedly started action to delete these words. Cf. *Christianity Today*, VII, No. 23 (August 30, 1963), p. 30.

of God? Can certain descriptive references to this Supreme Being (as Creator, Preserver, Almighty, etc.) also be understood within the framework of man's natural knowledge of God? If so, at what point does such reference to God become objectionable?

These questions are similar to others confronting the church. Some observers see a national trend to go beyond the constitutional separation of church and state into a virtual separation of God and state.<sup>2</sup> What should our attitude be toward the use of the name of God in the secular or civic domain? Again, is there any *Anknüpfungspunkt*, point of contact, in the religion of natural man for the proclamation of the *kerygma*? What is the Christian responsibility in combating the atheism and skepticism sweeping the world today? To what extent should the church foster a "natural ethic" or promote civic and social morality, without which society itself cannot exist?

These questions bring us into the area of the natural knowledge of God (*notitia Dei naturalis*), which we here define as *all knowledge of God possessed by natural man apart from or outside the historical revelation in Christ*. At the outset we should like to distinguish three general points of view with regard to the *notitia Dei naturalis*.

First, there is the rather complete affirmation of natural theology in 19th-century

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph M. Hopkins, "The Separation of God and State," *Christian Herald*, LXXXVI (July 1963), 16 ff.

liberalism and in some contemporary Protestant thought. In this view, the moral and humanitarian achievements of man are emphasized at the expense of God's revelation in Christ. The Bible is a document in the history of religions, and Christianity is one among many valid religions. In a sense, man's natural knowledge of God has become the essence of theology, for natural religion is the "religion within the religions"—and as such lies behind all valid religious experiences. God's general revelation ultimately is valued more highly than His gracious revelation in Christ.

Second, there is the scholastic view, which to a large extent is the position of Roman Catholicism. Expounded with remarkable skill and energy by the doctors of the Middle Ages, especially Thomas Aquinas, this view maintains that proofs of God's existence may be gained *a posteriori* from inferences drawn by man's discursive reason from the sense-observation of the corporeal world.<sup>3</sup> Like the views of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics developed centuries ago,<sup>4</sup> the scholastic view

<sup>3</sup> Prominent here are the *Quinque viae* of Thomas: the argument from communicated motion to an unmoved First Mover; from the chain of causation to a First Cause; from the contingency of the world to a Necessary Being; from the observed fact of lesser and greater degrees of goodness to a Perfect Goodness; and from the observed design in nature to a Divine Designer. (*Summa theologiae*, I, *quaest.* 2, *art.* iii)

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the natural theology of the ancient Greeks, see John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 168—174. The Stoic position is set forth by Günther Bornkamm, "Die Offenbarung des Zornes Gottes," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, XXXIV (1935), 239—262. Cf. also Robert Hoferkamp, "Natural Law and the New Testament," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXIII (1952), 657—661.

holds in principle that man's reason is able to prove God's existence. A place for this idea was assured in Roman theology when the First Vatican Council declared that man must distinguish between the natural and supernatural orders, and in accordance with this distinction contrasted "truths which have come down to us from heaven" with the "interpretation of religious facts which the human mind has acquired by its own strenuous efforts."<sup>5</sup> The relation between the two spheres of nature and grace is summarized in the Thomistic proposition: *gratia supponit et perficit naturam*.<sup>6</sup> Man's natural knowledge of God is like the first story of a two-story house: he must pass through the first before reaching the second story and ultimately the roof.<sup>7</sup> This theological stance has not been limited to Roman Catholicism, for in some respects 16th and 17th-century Lutheran theology approximates this point of view.<sup>8</sup>

Third, there is the total rejection of all natural revelation and theology in the posi-

<sup>5</sup> See the untitled essay by Father M. C. D'Arcy, S. J., in *Revelation*, edited by John Baillie and Hugh Martin (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), pp. 181 f.

<sup>6</sup> This thesis has been criticized, for example, by Rudolf Hermann, *Fragen um den Begriff der natürlichen Theologie* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1950), pp. 42—46.

<sup>7</sup> For an elaboration of this analogy see Paul Lehman, "Barth and Brunner: The Dilemma of the Protestant Mind," *Journal of Religion*, XX, No. 2 (April 1940), pp. 124—140.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 68, as well as the same author's article, "Natural Theology in David Hollaz," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XVIII (April 1947), 253—263 and Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), pp. 49—58.

tion of Karl Barth and his followers.<sup>9</sup> Reacting drastically against the anthropocentric theology of the 19th century as well as against the idea of an *analogia entis*<sup>10</sup> inherent in the Thomistic view, Barth is "Christomonistic": there is no other self-manifestation of God than in Jesus Christ. Claiming the Reformers as his supporters, Barth asserts that it is first through the Gospel that man becomes responsible to God, for there exists no prior word of God. This position, which has been widely accepted and roundly condemned,<sup>11</sup> has

<sup>9</sup> Barth's position is evident in many of his writings, especially the following: *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), II, 1, 3—254; *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 3—109; *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1959), especially chapter ii, "The Gospel as God's Condemnation," pp. 24—41; and an untitled essay in *Revelation*, pp. 41—81.

<sup>10</sup> The "analogy of being" suggests that man can infer the Creator's existence and power from the phenomena of creation because of a similarity of being between God and man.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the best known critic of Barth's position is Emil Brunner. His attack on Barth appeared in his monograph, *Natur und Gnade—zum Gespräch mit Karl Barth* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1935). Barth replied with his "Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner," *Theologische Existenz Heute*, Heft 14 (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1935). Brunner's best definition and elaboration of the problem is in his *Man in Revolt* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939) and *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946). Other evaluations of the Barthian position are the following: W. G. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S. P. C. K., 1948), pp. 325—328; John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God*, pp. 177—182; Paul Lehman (see fn. 7 above); L. Harold De Wolf, "The Theological Rejection of Natural Theology: An Evaluation," *Journal of Religious Thought*, XV (Spring-Summer 1958), 91 to 106; Max Lackmann, *Vom Geheimnis der*

achieved quasi-confessional status in Thesis One of the Barmen Declaration, which states:

Jesus Christ, wie er uns in der Heiligen Schrift bezeugt wird, ist das eine Wort Gottes, das wir zu hören, dem wir im Leben und im Sterben zu vertrauen und zu gehorchen haben. Wir verwerfen die falsche Lehre, als könne und müsse die Kirche als Quelle ihrer Verkündigung ausser und neben diesem einen Worte Gottes auch noch andere Ereignisse und Mächte, Gestalten und Wahrheiten als Gottes Offenbarung anerkennen.<sup>12</sup>

It is not our purpose to deal explicitly with these three positions or their many and various refinements in this paper. We shall rather attempt to summarize the teaching of Scripture, Luther, and the Confessions on this subject, and conclude with some implications for the church of today.

*Schöpfung* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1952); Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, trans. T. G. Tappert (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), pp. 153—170; Rudolf Hermann (see fn. 6 above); Kurt Leese, *Recht und Grenze der Natürlichen Religion* (Zürich: Morgenarten Verlag, 1954); Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in Conflict*, trans. Eric H. Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), pp. 23—44; and Paul Jersild, "Natural Theology and the Doctrine of God in Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, XIV (August 1962), pp. 239—257.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Günther Backhaus, *Evangelische Theologie der Gegenwart* (München: Ernst Reinhardt Verlag, 1956), p. 44. For Barth's comments on this thesis see his *Church Dogmatics*, II, 1, 172—178. See also Lackmann's criticism, pp. 276—278. The Barmen Declaration, adopted May 31, 1934, by the "Bekennende Kirche" in protest against the Nazification of the German Protestant Church, has since been used in connection with the ordination of pastors in some German territorial churches; cf. Backhaus, p. 44, and Sasse, pp. 168 f.

I. HOLY SCRIPTURE

A. Holy Scripture teaches that an absolute face to face knowledge of God this side of eternity is impossible for man. No man can see God and live (Ex. 33:20; John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). Even the Christian has only a partial knowledge of God. (1 Cor. 13:12)

B. Holy Scripture teaches that God's nature is inaccessible to man's natural faculties for research and discovery. God dwells "in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen nor can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). Therefore, man must reply negatively to Zophar's question to Job: "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" (Job 11:7). For the world cannot know God through wisdom. (1 Cor. 1:21)

C. Scripture teaches that in spite of man's limitations, God manifests Himself to man in the works of His creation and reveals Himself to man in Jesus Christ. We are here concerned especially with the former: God's self-manifestation in the works of creation. This theme, found repeatedly in the "nature Psalms," is summarized in the opening words of Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork." The same idea is evident elsewhere in the Old Testament, as for example in Job 38—40, where God speaks and demonstrates that the processes of nature prove themselves to be His activity. But the clearest Biblical witness to God's self-manifestation in the cosmos is given by the apostle Paul in Romans 1 and 2, Acts 14 and 17.

1. *Romans 1 and 2* (especially 1:18-32; 2:14-16)

In verses 16 and 17 Paul has announced the theme of the epistle—that in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed (ἀποκαλύπτεται) from faith to faith. But Paul can speak of the revelation of the righteousness of God only when he has proclaimed that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men (note the thrust of the γάρ in verse 18). The following verses, all the way to chapter 3:20, explain this revelation of God's wrath. Let us summarize their essential content.

- a. God's wrath is revealed from heaven against every ungodliness and wickedness of men. (V. 18)
- b. God's action is justified because men have the truth but suppress it by their unrighteousness. (V. 18 b)
- c. This truth, that which is known of God (τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ), God Himself has manifested (ἐφανερώσεν) in them. (V. 19)
- d. This self-manifestation of God has continued since the creation of the world, being mediated by the things God has made (τοῖς ποιήμασιν). Thereby God's invisible qualities of eternal power and divinity (θεϊότης) are clearly perceived (νοούμενα καθορᾶται). (V. 20)<sup>13</sup>
- e. Men are therefore without excuse (v. 20). This is shown from the fact that although they knew God (γνόντες τὸν θεόν) they did not worship and thank Him as God, but deliberately darkened their minds and made themselves foolish (vv. 21, 22), showing this by giv-

<sup>13</sup> θεϊότης, God's specifically divine quality, is not a precise equivalent of θεότης, divine essence, employed by Paul in Col. 2:9.

- ing the glory they owe the immortal God to images representing creatures. (V. 23)
- f. Because they exchanged the truth of God (*ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ*) for a lie (v. 25), because they did not value the retention of God in their knowledge (v. 28), God's wrath delivered them up to various immoral perversions (vv. 24-27) and to all manner of personal and social wickedness. (Vv. 28-31)
- g. Men know that God's judgment on such evildoers is death, but persist in and approve of evildoing nonetheless. (V. 32)
- h. Therefore, all men are inexcusable, for all are guilty of the same things and stand under God's condemnation (2: 1-11), whether Jew or Gentile. Nor is there advantage in being a hearer of the Law, for only doers of the Law will be justified. (Vv. 12, 13)
- i. The Gentiles are included in God's judgment because, although they do not have the Law written on stone or scroll, they are their own Law whenever they naturally (*φύσει*) do whatever the Law requires. The fact that they do what the Law requires, even when they do not have the Law in written form, plus the internal testimony of their conscience, indicates that what God's Law requires has been inscribed on their hearts. (Vv. 14-16)<sup>14</sup>
- j. The Jews who boast that they have the written Law but sin against it are justly

under the condemnation of God. (2: 17—3:8)

- k. Therefore, both Jews and Gentiles are under the power of sin (3:9) and accountable to God (3:19). For *all* have sinned and justly deserve the condemnation of God's wrath. Their only hope is in the righteousness of God which is apart from Law, namely, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. (3: 21-24)

Thus when the two passages on natural theology (1:18-32; 2:14-16) are viewed in their larger context, it becomes obvious that Paul is not attempting to construct a natural system of divine truth in order to lead men to strive for it. It is rather man's perversion of this divinely manifested truth that renders him inexcusable and places him under the wrath of God. For Paul the knowledge of God is not merely a possibility open to man, but the inexorable reality under which the whole world stands. The reason for man's godlessness is not merely that he errs in knowledge, but that he rebels against God *although he knows Him*. Paul's preaching of the self-manifestation of God in the cosmos is Law, not Gospel.

## 2. Acts 14:15-17

This passage is the impassioned speech of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra to the crowd of people who have mistaken them for Mercury and Jupiter after Paul had healed a lame man. This speech is the first public address of Christian missionaries to non-Jewish people recorded in the New Testament. Its content can be summarized thus:

1. The crowd is not to worship Paul and Barnabas, for they are only *men* whose

<sup>14</sup> See R. Caemmerer's exposition of this passage in his essay, "A Christian Concept of Law: A Theologian's View," *Colloquy on Law and Theology, Papers Presented at Valparaiso University, October 1960* (St. Louis: Lutheran Academy for Scholarship, 1962), pp. 3—19. See also Hoferkamp's treatment of *Nomos* (fn. 4 above).

purpose there is to bring the "Good News." (V. 15)

2. The "Good News" requires that they turn from their idolatry to the living God who is the Creator of all. (V. 15 b)
3. Although in times past God allowed all nations to walk in their own ways, He continued to witness to Himself by doing good, providing rain and fruitful seasons, and satisfying men with food and gladness. (Vv. 16, 17)

As in Romans 1, the accent here is theocentric. God the Creator has witnessed to Himself by the benevolent preservation of His creation. Instead of worshipping Him, men have worshiped other deities, thereby spurning God's self-manifestation in creation. Thus the idolatry at Lystra is used by the apostles as their "point of contact" in preaching the Good News: in showing them what the *martyria* was they had not accepted, and as a basis for proclaiming the true God.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Acts 17:22-31

This passage is St. Paul's famous speech on the Areopagus in Athens. Having aroused the curiosity of the Stoics and Epicureans by his preaching of Jesus and the resurrection, Paul was invited to give a full exposition of his views. His recorded remarks may be outlined as follows:

1. The "point of contact" (vv. 22, 23). The "religious scrupulosity" (δεισιδαιμονιστέρους)<sup>16</sup> of the Greeks is dis-

<sup>15</sup> Note the close parallel in 1 Thess. 1:9, 10: "... how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come."

<sup>16</sup> Cf. H. Armin Moellering, "Deisidaimonia, a Footnote to Acts 17:22," CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XXXIV, (August 1963), 466-471, for a helpful explanation of this term and excellent bibliographical references.

played in their worship, including their worship of an "Unknown God." The intent of the apostolic message is to identify and proclaim Him whom they worship as unknown.

2. The wrongness and folly of idolatry. (Vv. 24-29)
  - a. God, the Creator of all things, does not dwell in man-made shrines as though He needed anything from men, for He is the Giver of all things, including life and breath. The human race has its common origin in God, and God has imposed His own limitations of time and space on men. (24-26)
  - b. This controlling activity of God has as its purpose that men should seek God and perhaps feel after Him and find Him. This is a possibility because "He is not far from each one of us," for in Him "we live and move and have our being." (Vv. 27, 28)<sup>17</sup>
  - c. Since men are the offspring (γένος) of God, the Deity cannot be like a product of human artifice. (V. 29)

3. The call to repentance (vv. 30-32). God has overlooked the times of ignorance (ἀγνοία) in the past,<sup>18</sup> but now He calls to repentance (v. 30). For God has fixed a day when He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He appointed. All men can be assured of this because God has raised this Man from the dead. (V. 31)

The basic content of this speech is sim-

<sup>17</sup> Paul here quotes Epimenides, and in the next verse, Aratus. Cf. Hoferkamp, p. 653. (See fn. 4 above)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Acts 14:16 and Rom. 3:25, "Because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins."

ilar to the Acts 14 passage. God is nearer to each of us than our own inner consciousness, and has fashioned and controlled our lives to seek Him and find Him. Yet man has in effect done the opposite by turning his worship from God to images and idols devised by himself. Therefore Paul preaches repentance, for the Man whom God ordained to judge the world, whom God raised from the dead, came into the world to turn men from their ἀγνοία back to God.

D. So complete is man's rejection of God's self-manifestation in creation that the Scriptures can describe non-Christians as "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12), as people who "do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:5; Gal. 4:8), or who "have no knowledge of God" (1 Cor. 15:34). In terms of its spiritual value, that is, in relation to Christ, man's natural knowledge of God is worthless; worse than that, it is ignorance.

## II. LUTHER

Luther had little use for the scholastic idea that man can rationally attain a knowledge of God by inference from nature. On the one hand, the reason of fallen man is utterly incapable of apprehending divine truth of itself. On the other hand, "knowing God" for Luther is something more than reaching conclusions or receiving information about Him: Men naturally know that there is a God, but what His will is, or what is not His will, they do not know. He regards the endeavor to comprehend God in His majesty as vain, and describes it as a "theology of glory" to which we must oppose the "theology of the cross."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), p. 78. Cf. also Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin*

However, Luther does not deny all natural knowledge of God, even though he sometimes speaks of Christ as the one and only source of our knowledge of God. A passage from his Galatians commentary of 1535 is most illustrative of his views on the subject. Commenting on Gal. 4:8, 9, Luther writes:

But here again someone may raise the objection: "If all men know God, why does Paul say that before the proclamation of the Gospel the Galatians did not know God?" I reply: There is a twofold knowledge of God: the general and the particular. All men have the general knowledge, namely, that God is, that He has created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked, etc. But what God thinks of us, what He wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and to save us . . . this men do not know. Thus it can happen that someone's face may be familiar to me but I do not really know him, because I do not know what he has in his mind. So it is that men know naturally that there is a God, but they do not know what He wants and what He does not want. . . . From the acceptance of this major premise, "There is a God," there came all the idolatry of men, which would have been unknown in the world without the knowledge of the Deity. But because men had this natural knowledge about God, they conceived vain and wicked thoughts about God apart from and contrary to the Word; they embraced these as the very truth, and on the basis of these they imagined God otherwise than He is by nature. Thus a monk imagines a God who forgives sins and grants grace and eternal life because of the observance of his rule. That God does not exist anywhere. Therefore the monk

*Luthers* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1962), pp. 37—42.



neither serves nor worships the true God; he serves and worships one who by nature is no god, namely, a figment and idol of his own heart, his own false and empty notion about God, which he supposes to be the surest truth.<sup>20</sup>

Thus Luther can clearly teach a natural knowledge of God, yet assert that this is not knowledge at all! For without the particular knowledge of Christ, men do not really know God, just as "that man does not know a prince who knows his power and his wealth, but he who understands the affections and all the counsels of the prince."<sup>21</sup> In his 1526 commentary on Jonah, Luther distinguishes sharply between the rational knowledge that there is a God and the revealed knowledge of who God is.<sup>22</sup>

The same accents occur in Luther's lectures on Romans. The heathen have a certain concept and understanding about God. But their sin consists in perverting this original knowledge of God, and changing the truth of God into a lie. In addition to "coarse idolatry" Luther indicts also the

"fine idolatry" of work righteousness; for in both cases man makes an image of God on the basis of his own ideas. Thus Luther can group together as idolaters the Jews, Mohammedans, and papists. While the "Erkenntniss von auszen" can lead to monotheism, only the "Erkenntniss von innen" can lead to the Trinity. In other words, the general or natural knowledge of God remains within the bounds of the Law and does not contain the Gospel at all.<sup>23</sup>

For Luther, God is not to be sought behind His creation by inference from it but is rather to be apprehended in and through it. Here Luther's views on the *larvae Dei* (masks or veils of God) is most instructive. Because God cannot be seen by man in His naked transcendence, God must wear a mask or veil in all His dealings with men to shield them from the unapproachable light of His majesty. This He has done preeminently in His Son, who is the "veil in which the Divine Majesty with all His gifts presents Himself to us."<sup>24</sup> And yet Luther can assert that

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen, 26 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 399 f. Cf. WA, XL, 1, 607, 26 ff.

<sup>21</sup> In Luther's 1538 commentary on Psalm 51:18, WA, XL, 2, 458, 30 f. Cf. also WA, XXXIX, 1, 177, 24 ff.: "Imo cognoscere Deum quidem aliud est, quam nosse, quod sit creator omnium."

<sup>22</sup> WA, XIX, 206, 32 ff.: "Das ander: Das die vernunft nicht kan die gotheyt recht aus teylen noch recht zu eygen, dem sie alleyne geburt. Sie weys, das Gott ist. Aber wer oder wilcher es sey, der da recht Gott heyst, das weys sie nicht. . . . Darumb ist gar eyn gros unterschied, wissen, das eyn Gott ist, und wissen, was oder wer Gott ist. Das erste weys die natur und ist ynn allen hertzen geschrieben. Das ander leret alleyne der heylige geyst."

<sup>23</sup> In a 1537 sermon on John 1:18, Luther explains: "So weit kömet die Vernunft in Gottes erkenntnis, das sie hat *cognitionem legalem*, das sie weis Gottes Gebot, und was recht oder unrecht sei. Und die Philosophi haben die erkenntnis Gottes auch gehabt, aber es ist nicht das rechte erkenntnis Gottes, so durchs Gesetze geschiet. . . . zur linken hand kan sie Gott kennen nach dem Gesetz der natur und nach Mose, denn das Gesetz ist uns ins hertz geschrieben. Aber das sie sonst solt erkennen den abgrund Göttlicher weisheit und willens und die tieffe seiner gnaden und barmherzigkeit, wie es im ewigen leben zugehen werde, da weis Vernunft nicht ein tropffen von, und ist jr gar verborgen, sie redet davon als der blinde von der farbe." WA, XLVI, 668, 9 ff.

<sup>24</sup> "Dei filius igitur Incarnatus est illud involucrum, in quo divina Maiestas cum omnibus suis donis sic se nobis offert." WA, XLII, 296, 22 f.

"every creature is His mask" (*Ideo universa creatura eius est larva*).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, all created ordinances are masks of God and are meant, as it were, to contain Christ.<sup>26</sup> We do not reach God by inferring His existence, nature, and attributes from His masks and veils, but God Himself comes to meet us in them. To be sure, natural man does not rightly recognize God in His veils, for this is possible only for the Christian. Yet all men have some awareness of the God who confronts them in the midst of their creaturely environment.<sup>27</sup>

Commenting on Romans 1:19, Luther explains that this knowledge of God comes from God Himself; nor is it limited to the fact of God's existence, but includes certain divine attributes as well.<sup>28</sup> Luther emphasizes especially the natural awareness of the power and justice of God. The latter is derived from the law impressed

<sup>25</sup> WA, XL, 1, 174, 3 [Gal. 2:6].

<sup>26</sup> "Omnes ordinationes creatae sunt dei larvae, allegoriae, quibus rhetorice pingit suam theologiam: sol als Christum in sich fassen," WA, XL, 1, 463, 9 ff. [Gal. 3:16, 17].

<sup>27</sup> Commenting on Gen. 17:7, Luther writes: "Sicut hunc sensum naturali instinctu etiam gentes habent, quod sit aliquod supremum numen, quod colendum, invocandum, laudandum, ad quod in omnibus periculis confugiendum sit, sicut Paulus dicit, Romanorum 1: 'Gentes agnovisse Deum natura.' Haec enim notitia divinitus plantata est in omnium hominum animis, quod vocant Deum auxiliatorem, beneficium, placabilem, etiamsi in eo postea errent, quis nam ille Deus sit, et quomodo velit coli." WA, XLII, 631, 36-42.

<sup>28</sup> ". . . Quod notitiam seu notionem diuinitatis habuerunt, Que sine dubio ex Deo in illis est, sicut hic dicit. . . . Cognouerunt ergo, Quod diuinitatis siue eius, qui est Deus, sit esse potentem, Inuisibilem, Iustum, immortalem, bonum; ergo cognouerunt Inuisibilia Dei sempiternamque uirtutem eius et diuinitatem. Hec Maior syllogismi practici, hec Synthesis theologica est inobscurabilis in omnibus." WA, LVI, 177, 6 ff.

upon the hearts of all men. No one can be ignorant of this law, even though such knowledge is very weak, being obscured by sin.<sup>29</sup>

In short, Luther will have nothing to do with a natural theology that assumes the capacity of man to make his own way to God or discover God for himself. For the natural knowledge of God is wholly God-given. This is not to suggest that those who possess this knowledge are in harmony with its Giver. On the contrary, without the proper knowledge of God given in Christ men can never avoid idolatry.

### III. THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

The Lutheran Confessions are not directly concerned with the natural knowledge of God, and touch on it only in connection with other topics.

Some of Luther's previous accents are heard again in his exposition of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism. Luther does not here explain the truth that was self-evident for him and most of his contemporaries, that men have a certain knowledge of God from nature. He is rather concerned with exposing the idolatry of all who put their trust elsewhere than in the true God, for the "world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry." Yet "there has never been a people so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. Everyone has set up a god of his own, to which he looked for blessings, help, and comfort." Luther assumes that the heathen acknowledge the existence of God and may even know some of His attributes; but, as Luther remarks, "the trouble is that their

<sup>29</sup> See WA, XLII, 374, 11 ff. and LVI, 22, 2 ff. For Luther's understanding of natural law, cf. Caemmerer, loc cit.

trust is false and wrong, for it is not founded upon the one God, apart from whom there is truly no god in heaven or on earth. Accordingly the heathen actually fashion their fancies and dreams about God into an idol and entrust themselves to an empty nothing" (LC, I, 17-20). Moreover, natural man's worship of God is perverted by his wrong understanding of the Law; his worship consists in offering God his own merits (Ap, IV, 49), "for by nature men judge that God ought to be appeased by works." (Ap, IV, 394)<sup>30</sup>

Basic to these assertions is the confessional rejection of the spiritual capabilities of natural man. Nowhere is this more evident than in the doctrine of original sin. Negatively, original sin means that man "is unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God." Positively, it means that "all men are full of evil lust and inclination from their mothers' wombs" (AC, II, German). This sin of origin, or root sin (*Hauptsiinde*), is responsible for all the "subsequent evil deeds which are forbidden in the Ten Commandments, such as unbelief, false belief, idolatry, being without the fear of God, presumption, despair, blindness—in short, ignorance or disregard of God—and then also lying, swearing by God's name . . . etc." (SA, III, 1, 2). We note especially Luther's use of "ignorance or disregard of God" (*Gott nicht kennen oder achten*) as a summary description of the results of man's original sin. Melancthon uses similar terminology in Article II of the Apology to describe the ravages of sin:

They do not mention the more serious

<sup>30</sup> All English quotations from the Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord*, edited by T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).

faults of human nature, namely, ignoring God [*ignorationem Dei*], despising Him, etc. (Ap, II, 8)

Original sin also involves such faults as ignorance of God [*ignorationem Dei*], contempt of God, lack of the fear of God and of trust in Him, inability to love Him. (Ap, II, 14)

Thus when the ancient definition says that sin is lack of righteousness, it not only denies the obedience of man's lower powers, but also denies that he has knowledge of God [*notitiam Dei*], trust in God, fear and love of God, or surely the powers to produce these things. Even the scholastic theologians teach that these things cannot be produced without certain gifts and help of grace. To make ourselves clear, we are naming these gifts knowledge of God, fear of God, and trust in God. From this it is evident that the ancient definition says just what we do when we deny to natural man not only fear and trust of God but also the gifts and power to produce them. (Ap, II, 23)

These statements on natural man's *ignoratio Dei* should not be interpreted to say more than was intended.<sup>31</sup> Properly understood, they do not deny the natural knowledge of God, but rather point to the perversion of this knowledge into an idolatry that is in effect a practical, if not a theoretical, ignorance of God. In other words, man's natural knowledge of God is always *ignoratio Dei* when contrasted with the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> It seems to me this is done by Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, translated by P. F. Koehnke and H. J. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), pp. 48-52.

<sup>32</sup> As Elert (see fn. 8 above) points out, Melancthon, the author of the Apology, was far from denying the natural knowledge of God. That the Confessions understand the natural knowledge of God as *ignoratio Dei* only in con-

In spite of their blistering attacks on original sin, the Confessions are careful not to identify the wholesale corruption of man by original sin with human nature itself. This error is thoroughly condemned in Article I of the Formula of Concord as perverting the correct understanding of creation, redemption, sanctification, and the resurrection. It had quite logically led Flacius, in his disputation with Strigel,<sup>33</sup> to deny the possibility of an innate natural knowledge of God and divine law. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Formula of Concord does not deny all natural knowledge of God. In Article II we read:

In the first place, although man's reason or natural intellect still has a dim spark [*ein tunkel Fünklein*] of the knowledge that there is a God, as well as of the teaching of the law (Rom. 1:19-21, 28, 32), nevertheless, it is so ignorant, blind, and perverse that when even the most gifted and the most educated people on earth read or hear the Gospel of the Son of God and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot by their own powers perceive this, comprehend it, understand it, or believe and accept it as the truth. (FC, SD, II, 9)

Again in distinguishing between Law and Gospel, the Formula states:

Dr. Luther very diligently urged this dis-

trast to the gracious knowledge of God in Jesus Christ is evident from the Augsburg Confession (XX, 24, German): "Whoever knows that in Christ he has a gracious God, truly knows God, calls upon Him, and is not, like the heathen, without God. For the devil and the ungodly do not believe this article concerning the forgiveness of sin, and so they are at enmity with God, cannot call upon Him, and have no hope of receiving good from Him."

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Preger, *Matthias Flacius Illyricus und seine Zeit* (Erlangen: Verlag von Theodor Bläsing, 1859), II, 213 ff.

inction in nearly all his writings and showed in detail that there is a vast difference between the knowledge of God which comes from the Gospel and that which is taught by and learned from the law, since from the natural law even the heathen had to some extent a knowledge of God [*etlichermaßen ein Erkenntnis Gottes*], although they neither understood nor honored him rightly (Rom. 1:21). (FC, SD, V, 22)

Similar statements can be adduced with regard to a natural knowledge of the Law. For example, the Apology states, "For to some extent human reason naturally understands the law since it has the same judgment naturally written in the mind."<sup>34</sup> But the Decalogue does not only require external works that reason can somehow perform" (Ap, IV, 7). And Luther writes in the Large Catechism: "The Ten Commandments, moreover, are inscribed in the hearts of all men." (LC, II, 67)<sup>35</sup>

Of course, confessional statements with regard to the natural knowledge of God and His law are rarely to be found and are always qualified. For the Confessions ruthlessly insist that natural man is totally incapable of self-redemption, and that he can contribute absolutely nothing to his own conversion. In fact so dreadful is the corruption of his reason by the ravages of sin that natural man must be divinely taught not only the Gospel, but also the Law. As Luther puts it: "This hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand it. It must be believed because of the revelation in the

<sup>34</sup> The translation "naturally written" is incorrect; it should read "divinely written." The original text has: "habet enim idem iudicium scriptum divinitus in mente."

<sup>35</sup> Cf. also FC, SD, VI, 5 and Ap, XII, 48.

Scriptures" (SA, III, I, 3). Thus the Formula of Concord adds that the Holy Spirit "must not only comfort, but through the office of the law, must also convince the world of sin" (FC, SD, V, 11). Man's natural knowledge of law is both incomplete and false: *incomplete* because it is limited to the external works commanded by the Law (Ap, IV, 7, 131) and fails especially to understand the requirements of the first table of the Law, which is "far beyond the senses and understanding of all creatures" (Ap, IV, 131) and which the "human heart cannot perform without the Holy Spirit" (Ap, XVIII, 7). It is *false* because natural man does not understand that he cannot keep the Law and imagines that he can gain forgiveness of sins and justification through it (Ap, IV, 7, 159, 265). This opinion of the Law—and it is the *false opinion*, not the Law itself that is at fault—"clings by nature to the minds of men, and it cannot be driven out unless we are divinely taught." (Ap, IV, 265)

Thus the Confessions steadfastly bring the natural knowledge of God and law under the indictment of God's wrath. In short, the Formula of Concord declares:

The Scripture denies to the intellect, heart, and will of the natural man every capacity, aptitude, skill, and ability to think anything good or right in spiritual matters, to understand them, to begin them, to will them, to undertake them, to do them, to accomplish or to cooperate in them as of himself. (FC, SD, II, 12)

But right here we should underscore the words "in spiritual matters" (*in geistlichen Sachen*). For the Confessions distinguish sharply between the spiritual and the temporal when speaking of natural man's freedom and ability. Apology XVIII, 9, is instructive here with its distinction between

"spiritual righteousness and civil righteousness." The point of this article is that the former can only be attributed to the operation of the Holy Spirit. Yet the article also speaks about natural man's ability in the area of civil righteousness:

We are not denying freedom to the human will. The human will has freedom to choose among the works and things which reason by itself can grasp [*quas ratio per se comprehendit*]. To some extent [*aliquo modo*] it can achieve civil righteousness or the righteousness of works. It can talk about God and express its worship of him in outward works [*potest loqui de Deo, exhibere Deo certum cultum externo opere*]. It can obey rulers and parents. Externally, it can choose to keep the hands from murder, adultery, or theft. Since human nature still has reason and judgment about the things the senses can grasp, it also retains a choice in these things, as well as the liberty and ability to achieve civil righteousness. This righteousness which the carnal nature—that is, the reason—can achieve on its own without the Holy Spirit, Scripture calls the righteousness of the flesh. (Ap, XVIII, 4)

To be sure, "men obey their evil impulses more often than their sound judgment," and the devil never ceases to incite this feeble nature to various offenses; for these reasons "even civil righteousness is rare among men" (Ap, XVIII, 5). Moreover, these hearts lack the fear and trust of God, and are therefore ungodly, and without true faith, fear, knowledge, and trust in God. And yet this "civil righteousness" of natural man is not to be despised, and that for two reasons: first, it "safeguards outward discipline, because all men ought to know that God requires this civil righteousness and that, to some extent, we can achieve it";

second, it shows the manifest difference between "human righteousness and spiritual righteousness" and thereby "points out the need for the Holy Spirit." (Ap, XVIII, 9)

Similar thoughts are expressed elsewhere in the Apology. In Article IV we read:

We for our part maintain that God requires the righteousness of reason. Because of God's command, honorable works commanded in the Decalogue should be performed, according to Gal. 3:24, "The law is a custodian," and 1 Tim. 1:9, "The law is laid down for the lawless." For God wants this civil discipline to restrain the unspiritual, and to preserve it he has given laws, learning, teaching, governments, and penalties. To some extent, reason can produce this righteousness by its own strength, though it is often overwhelmed by its natural weakness and by the devil, who drives it to open crimes. We freely give this righteousness of reason its due credit; for our corrupt nature has no greater good than this, as Aristotle correctly says, "Neither the evening star nor the morning star is more beautiful than righteousness." God even honors it with material rewards. Nevertheless, it ought not be praised at the expense of Christ. (Ap, IV, 22—24)

The Formula of Concord has similar statements. "To some extent reason and free will are able to lead an outwardly virtuous life" (FC, SD, II, 26). It denies the Stoic and Manichean view that "even in external works man's will has no freedom or power whatever to achieve a measure of external righteousness and honorable behavior and to avoid manifest sins and vices" (FC, SD, II, 74). The confessional view on the "righteousness of reason" is expressed and summarized in Article IV:

For works which belong to the main-

tenance of outward discipline and which unbelievers and the unconverted are also able and required to perform, are indeed praiseworthy in the sight of the world, and even God will reward them with temporal blessings in this world, but since they do not flow from true faith, they are sinful (that is, spattered with sins in the sight of God), and God regards them as sin and as impure because of our corrupted nature and because the person is not reconciled with God. (FC, SD, IV, 8)

Thus the Confessions uphold a minimal amount of natural knowledge of God and His law. In the area of "spiritual righteousness" this knowledge is of no value, for sinful man perverts it into idolatry. However, in the area of "civil righteousness" the knowledge is to be valued, for it is basic to the structure of society.

#### SUMMARY

The natural knowledge of God has its source in God, who manifests Himself to man. The neutral, impersonal God who is "discovered" through thought processes is always different from the God of revelation. The philosophical "proofs" for the existence of God may have negative value in demonstrating that thinking does not necessarily lead to a denial of faith in God, but they often rest on an undue confidence in the power of fallen man's reason and fail in the decisive point: to impart true knowledge about the true God. In this doctrinal area, we should therefore accent *God's* self-manifestation in the natural order rather than *man's* natural knowledge of God.

The content of natural knowledge includes the knowledge that God exists (which is everywhere presupposed in Scripture and is not the *specific* emphasis of any

passage we have discussed); that He should be worshiped and thanked; certain qualities of God, especially His eternal power and divinity, as well as His goodness in preserving His creation; His moral demands and retributive justice. This "truth" is mediated by God through "the things that are made" (Rom. 1:20), through God's benevolent preservation of His creation (Acts 14:16, 17), and through the work of Law inscribed on man's heart. (Rom. 2:15)

God's self-manifestation renders man inexcusable before God, and yet has the purpose of leading man to seek and find Him. By reason of his original sin, man in varying degrees suppresses and perverts the truth of his knowledge of God into a lie, and precisely in his best religious efforts, worships an idol instead of God. Thus, man's suppression of the truth is against his better knowledge, for his basic problem is idolatry, not atheism. His spiritual ignorance is not a lack of knowledge, but a perversion or suppression of knowledge. Accordingly, the natural knowledge of God has no spiritual or redemptive value, for natural man is under the wrath of God.<sup>36</sup>

In a sense, both the Biblical and confessional understanding of man's natural

<sup>36</sup> F. Bente wrote: "Wahrheit auf natürlichem Gebiet ist uns nicht bloß alles, was der natürliche Mensch mit seinen natürlichen Kräften wirklich erkennt, oder doch erkennen kann, sondern alles, was Gott mit der Schöpfung gesetzt und gegeben hat, wenn gleich die Kraft des Menschen zur Erkenntnis desselben nicht hinreicht." In "Wie unterscheidet sich die Erkenntnis auf natürlichem und geistlichem Gebiet," *Lehre und Wehre*, XLV (1899), 68. This lengthy article appeared in the following numbers: XLV, 9—16; 33—40, 65—73, 106 to 114, 129—138; XLVIII, 257—264, 356 to 365; and XLIX, 201—214.

knowledge of God is dialectical or paradoxical. Man has a certain knowledge of God and this knowledge is "truth" (Rom. 1:18); yet in failing to know Jesus Christ man does not "know" God at all. Man has a certain knowledge of God's law, but in reality learns the divine law only through the Holy Spirit. He has freedom of will in civil righteousness, but not in spiritual righteousness. He worships God, but this worship is idolatry. His works of civil righteousness are "praiseworthy in the sight of the world" and even receive God's temporal blessings; yet they are through and through sinful and merit only the condemnation of God. His civil righteousness is necessary for the maintenance of outward discipline and in a sense is the basis of society;<sup>37</sup> but in terms of spiritual value it is worthless and stands under God's law and judgment.

The Biblical and Lutheran view of man's natural knowledge of God is thus opposed to the exaggerated scholastic and the "liberal Protestant" affirmation of natural theology because it assumes varying degrees of spiritual ability in natural man, and in so doing detracts from the work of Christ;<sup>38</sup> it rejects the Barthian denial of natural theology because its "Christomonism" negates man's pre-Christian responsibility to God and subsumes the con-

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Gerhard Huebener, "Was lehrt die Schrift über die *iustitia civilis*?" *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, IX (1938), 728 to 735, 821—827. The second part of this article suggests implications for the Christian in society.

<sup>38</sup> Bente, p. 110, states: "Die im gefallenen Menschen *de facto* noch vorhandene Erkenntnis von Gott und dem Verhältnis des Menschen zu Gott, abgesehen von Christo, reicht nicht aus, dem Evangelio den Boden zu bereiten, und sie kann darum auch nicht, wie man gesagt hat, 'die natürliche Unterlage der christlichen Theologie' abgeben."

demnation of the Law under the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

#### *Implications*

1. The confessional distinction between spiritual and civil righteousness should be utilized in evaluating lodges or fraternal organizations. Where a given organization is operating in terms of "spiritual righteousness" (either through explicit statements or an abundant use of religious rites and forms), any acknowledgment, worship, or theology of God must be considered idolatrous *per se* so long as Jesus Christ is denied or omitted (where Christ is mentioned, the problem shifts from this area to the question of fellowship). On the other hand, when an organization has abandoned its pretensions to religion and is clearly operating in the area of civil righteousness, it cannot be considered objectionable when its rituals require belief in a Supreme Being or refer to God in terms of His self-manifestation in nature. That is to say, references to belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, descriptions of God as Creator, Preserver, or Judge, and references to His power and sovereignty or His goodness in nature cannot automatically be condemned. Thus an organization otherwise free of religious rites and forms, but maintaining a belief in God's existence, should not on that account be labeled

"deistic" or considered objectionable to members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

2. On the one hand, we must despise natural man's use of his knowledge of God as idolatrous and standing under the wrath of God. But on the other hand, we must value it as God's way of maintaining law and order in society. Thus combating atheism—especially morally nihilistic atheism—is a Christian's *civil* (as well as spiritual) concern, even as combating mere theism is his steadfast Christian obligation. Therefore every effort to separate *God and state* merits our dedicated resistance.

3. In our preaching to the pagan at home and abroad, God's self-manifestation in creation and Law should continue to furnish the "point of contact" for our proclamation of God's Law, wrath, and judgment as the necessary precedent and background for the proclamation of the Good News in Jesus Christ.

4. The inadequacies of man's natural knowledge of God should lead us constantly to invoke the gift of the Spirit to confess with life and lip: "This is life eternal, that they know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." (John 17:3)

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