

# LOGIA

## A JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

REFORMATION 2001

VOLUME X, NUMBER 4

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# A Lutheran Response to the Christology and Natural Theology of the Papal Encyclical *Dominus Iesus*

KLAUS DETLEV SCHULZ



THE PUBLICATION OF POPE JOHN PAUL II's encyclical *Dominus Iesus* on September 5, 2000, created quite a stir in the Protestant world. There is no gainsaying its destructive effect on the hopes of rapprochement entertained by many supporters of the *Joint Declaration* and of religious pluralism. Cowering in the corner like a beaten dog, they look upon the encyclical as nothing but an acrimonious recourse to a pre-Vatican II "imperial" claim of the Roman Catholic Church's hegemony within the ecumenical and religious world. This claim was first officially passed by Pope Boniface VIII, in his bull *De unitate et potestate Ecclesiae (Unam Sanctam)* from 1302, which declared unequivocally that "it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of all men that they submit to the Roman Pontiff."

Among all these outcries are the appraisals of the encyclical by concerned Lutherans, though far less in number and not as perspicuous. In their opinion the declaration casts a badly needed sobriety on the ecumenical discussion, which over the years has lost much of its clarity and honesty on the issues involved. Instead, a cover-up tactic had been employed that belied the real positions and distinctions of churches and religions, not only to one another, but also to the truth itself, Jesus Christ. In view of the eroding giant postmodernism, appraisals such as these have their validity, but they also elicit some amusement: Opposites attract, or as Shakespeare already once said: "misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows."

## THE HISTORICAL EPISCOPACY: A FUTURE ITEM ON THE AGENDA?

So have the ecumenical discussions reached a cul-de-sac? Now that the prospects of a final agreement on the doctrine of justification have been somewhat subdued, one ponders the question: Which items will most likely be on the agenda of future ecumenical discussions? It is likely that the ecclesial hierarchy itself will become an important topic. Inroads into this area have already been made. In past years Lutherans and Episcopalians have come together and now also seem to flaunt romantic notions of a historic episcopate based on an apostolic succession found acceptable by Rome. In view of this, the tactic of the pontifical declaration *Dominus Iesus* is a clever subterfuge. Yet it is not a total rebuttal of ecumenical

unification. It is willing to make provisions for it under the precincts of the Roman hierarchy, that is, an ecumenical and worldwide recognition of a papal structure, which in the encyclical *Dominus Iesus* is deceptively proposed under a Christological mantle. Many Lutherans in America and Scandinavia, though disgruntled for their own non-recognition as "churches in the proper sense," will find the declaration's positive view of some churches in view of their apostolic succession and a valid eucharist at least somewhat intriguing. To be sure, for the time being the sole beneficiaries of this positive appraisal are the Orthodox churches. The Protestants, even those who claim apostolic succession, must contend with the papal Bull *Apostolicae Curae* of 1896 in which Pope Leo XIII declared that even its closest Protestant affiliate, the Anglican Church, performs a rite of ordination that is defective in both form and intention. Without claiming infallibility in his pronouncement, Pope Leo XIII nonetheless considered it "definitively fixed, valid, and irrevocable." But here too there is still hope that the pope might declare such a judgment of his predecessor as historically conditioned, being compelled by his own "church's better understanding of its faith" to propose a "more perfect expression." Thus the back door, if now closed, could still be opened. In the meantime, these Lutherans may take either pride or consolation in the fact that they at least offer a "Roman-like" structure, with which they believe Rome may be best approachable in a post-*Dominus Iesus* era of inter-denominational dialogue. There are already strong indications that these high-church-oriented Lutherans, such as those in Scandinavia and the United States, will increasingly part from the other Protestant churches of a presbyterial or synodical structure and take the middle position in the Roman-Protestant dialogue. Auspicious signs from Rome have already reached the ears of those who flaunt with Melancthonian-like proposals. Cardinal Ratzinger, the prime mover behind the papal encyclical *Dominus Iesus*, already speaks of a misunderstanding that this encyclical letter has created and that Rome will do everything in her power to approach these Lutherans.

## LUTHERANS AND THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

Naturally, with our own particular ecclesial structure, more conservative Lutherans will fall by the wayside in the above-mentioned dialogue proposals. Although certain conservative trends in Roman Catholicism, such as the moral and liturgical matters and now even an appealing Christology in the encyclical, might sound alluring to us, we should not be deceived or even falter on

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KLAUS DETLEV SCHULZ is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

the real issues involved. The encyclical has shown that any dialogue with Roman Catholicism will give Lutherans, and any other Protestant church, for that matter, the short end of the stick. If the Vatican had shown any sincerity on their side in the last number of years, they would surely have removed Luther from the list of excommunicated theologians before the fatal signing of the *Joint Declaration* on October 31, 1999. Ever since Donatism, nothing has rocked or will rock the Roman Church more than a well-argued and adamant Lutheran theology, which in its anti-Roman critique has lost nothing of its accuracy. Shared sentiments against post-modernity give no reason to abandon our theological prowess. The key question for our inquiry here is not merely to acknowledge the encyclical's reassertion of the traditional claim of the unicity of Christ in the context of religious pluralism. It is its *why* that matters.

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### *What kind of Christ do we have to contend with in this document?*

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In all of this, it is of the essence that we keep our attention on the doctrine of justification as the critical yardstick for our proclamation and our church structure. To sidestep it with fallacious arguments, as some Lutherans have done, is to bypass the essence of Lutheranism itself. For the sake of preaching the doctrine of justification, the *de iure divino* instituted office (*ministerium*) of word and sacrament remains indispensable in our church structure. A Roman-style pontificate may not be accepted in negotiation, however, since it is *de iure humano* by our standards. Such an acknowledgement is an elementary affront against our belief in Scripture and the mediating position of Christ in our soteriology. As the reign of the latest pope, John Paul II, and his encyclical letter *Dominus Iesus* indicate, a reformed papacy is out of the question. In the meantime, we must continue the anti-Roman spirit of the Confessions with Luther's own indictment as our watchword: "He cannot do it."

#### VATICAN II AND THE ENCYCLICAL ON CHRIST AND NATURAL THEOLOGY

The same critique applies to the Christology promoted by the encyclical. What kind of Christ do we have to contend with in this document? Beyond the fact that it underscores a Roman structure, it is also a rallying cry to all its own deserters within who have increasingly merged the Roman Catholic distinctiveness with other denominations and religions. For many supporters of Rome, this was a call long overdue. Nevertheless, despite all the talk of Christ as being unique and the fulfillment of God's promises, it fails to erase all doubts in a reader's mind concerning the actual reality of Christ's uniqueness in the Roman Catholic economy of salvation. Is it true that the positive statements of Vatican II to other religions were just arbitrarily made? Certainly not! Vatican II theology had taken its economy of salvation seri-

ously; here not Christ alone, but man himself played a major role as well. In contention here is the "ray of truth which enlightens all men" as professed in the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* and reaffirmed in the encyclical *Dominus Iesus*. Are these rays of truth merely a product of human initiative or actually of divine origin worked through the Holy Spirit? Are they, as is often stated, expressions assigned to a *preparatio evangelii* or actually salvific in and of themselves? The latter seems to be the most logical, although the *Dominus Iesus* remains ambiguous enough to confuse the reader, especially now that a more definitive Christology is offered. A realistic appraisal of the spiritual state of humankind cannot but conclude that two thirds of the world's population has and will remain unchristian despite all mission fronts mustered. One senses that Vatican II was willing to acknowledge the presence of a salvific character amongst adherents of other faiths with a pledge to their innocence:

Those also can attain everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God.

As said, such a concession, however, is not arbitrarily made but actually in line with the doctrine of grace and moral theology. Therein lie the roots of the problem for a document such as the *Dominus Iesus*, which in fact puts its Christology and the traditional maxim "Extra ecclesia nulla salus est" to the test. Incidentally, from the very moment it was proclaimed in 1312, the latter was neither convincing for many Roman Catholic theologians nor leakproof.

Indeed, the encyclical *Dominus Iesus* perpetuates a high esteem for "the true and holy things in these religions," such as "manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings . . . which reflect a ray of truth which enlightens all men." This is a tribute to its doctrines of natural theology, grace, and moralism associated with the *synteresis* or *synderesis*, a habitual moral capacity (*potentia habitualis*) with which natural man may enact his conscience (*conscientia*) to perceive the principles of morality. This is a far more generous concession to natural theology than Luther ever made. In the Roman Catholic system, man's innate knowledge of God's existence and his will (Rom 2:14-15: "cognitio Dei naturalis innata"), as well through his acquired understanding of God (Rom 1:18-20: "cognitio Dei naturalis acquisita"), may engage both abilities of will and reason to make moral decisions between good and evil and "finally also pass judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed." Such abilities are not self-induced, but, when a person applies his conscience, God himself actually is speaking to him.

#### LUTHER AND THE CONFESSIONS

Since his 1513-15 lectures on the Psalms, Luther was no longer willing to acknowledge such use of reason and the will as saving faith (*fides specialis*). Instead, he posited a harmatological motif that

stressed the absolute sinfulness of fallen man and a total moral captivity of man's will and reason to concupiscence. Because of this incessant proclivity of man to sin, Luther was radical enough to call concupiscence itself sin, as well as to hold to its continued existence after baptism. Consequently, although he acknowledged a natural knowledge of God and worship on the basis of the First Commandment as an ideal, he would not accept it in reality on the basis of man's total corruption through original sin. His most evident witness to this fact is given in his famous explanation in the Large Catechism: "That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God." From the theological layout of the Catechisms, we know that for Luther the God to whom this true worship is to be directed is not just theism in general, but the persons of the Triune God as revealed in the Christian faith. The true nature of God as love and grace cannot be understood and worshipped outside a faith in Christ. In all of this Luther had discarded the natural habitual remnant associated with *synderesis* and placed in its stead the Pauline *syneidesis*, the conscience, in which he placed the act of justification, so that the conscience and faith became one. Luther's famous words before the Diet of Worms (1521) were thus not a mere invocation of his autonomous conscience per se, but that which is bound to God's word or to a truth of law and gospel placed above man.

In the controversy over the "modus agendi" and the "facultas aplicandi se ad gratiam" of natural man, the authors of the Solid Declaration rejected any proposition that claims God uses man's natural will and reason. Rather, in terms of his inclination or possession of a spark towards any good by way of his natural strengths (*scintillula reliqua*), man is totally corrupt and dead ("ad bonum prorsus corruptus et mortuus est"). Most importantly, God, through the Holy Spirit, never builds upon anything as already existing in man in the sense of fulfillment, but rather as transformation or creation of new spiritual gifts and strengths (*vires spirituales*). With this clear doctrine on natural man, the *causa efficiens* is solely the Holy Spirit through his word. From the time of Abraham Calov, Orthodoxy, with its clear doctrine of inspiration, has maintained that the true religion and revelation were tantamount to the inspired word of God in Scripture: the true religion is the one that conforms to God's word. As a result, Roman Catholicism, though still in possession of a *veritas residua*, was also not spared. Because of its false teachings, it was placed in the category *religio falsa*.

#### ROME AND KARL RAHNER

The Romans obviously failed to follow the Reformers in all this. In its third session on 17 June 1546, the Council of Trent rejected the idea of an existence of sin and concupiscence (as sin) after baptism. In its sixth session on 13 January 1547, the council passed canons against a falsely understood justification: "If anyone says that after Adam's sin the free will of man is lost and extinct, he is expelled from the church," and "If anyone says that all works performed before justification are truly sins or deserve God's hatred, he is expelled from the church."

But what about God's response to man's natural ability and the "ray of truth which enlightens all men"? Does he reward them with salvific intentions? The answer given to this question varies, depending on which Roman Catholic one speaks to or

which document one reads. There is much ambivalence and ambiguity in this. Confusing in this context are the theological dictums called "merits of congruity and condignity" ("meritum de congruo et de condigno"), as the Lutheran Confessions themselves already indicate. Obviously, a favorable response on behalf of man is a result of prevenient grace and acknowledged theologically as a "merit of congruity." This is a proportionate merit, upon which grace is conferred if it is performed first. In the scheme of things God, in his ordained grace (*potestas ordinata*), would bind himself to such favorable responses with his infused grace. There must be some law of contingency between

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***Vatican II has argued for a cosmic Christ of ubiquitous dimensions, who, without their knowledge, rules the hearts of all those who belong to other religions.***

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deed and reward. The only problem is that God does this as a rule through his church, to those in contact with it. Two thirds of the world's population, however, will never be in the church or connected to it. How then can a church be a "universal sacrament of salvation" if there are many people who have no knowledge of the church and regions in the world where the church is not allowed to be present? Since this contingency cannot be so easily broken, Vatican II has argued for a cosmic Christ of ubiquitous dimensions, who, without their knowledge, rules the hearts of all those who belong to other religions. Karl Rahner, who spearheaded the theological direction of Vatican II, is its most consistent proponent by enunciating the consequences of the moral theology presented above. God's salvific will is universal, and therefore he offers his grace to everyone. This grace elicits a human response, which to Rahner has the nature of an act of faith, even if at this point man may have no explicit concept of God and knows nothing of Christ. On the basis of the moral theology of Roman Catholicism, Rahner can infer that the conscience (*synderesis*), because it is not completely destroyed, implicitly becomes the organ of God's self-communication to the human spirit. The demand of the conscience to transcend egoism and to love others as themselves is actually an absolute demand from God. But since the grace of God is always the grace of Christ, all charitable acts of man are also directed to Christ, even though those who do them may never attain church membership or arrive to an explicit faith in Christ. Rahner thus chose the term "anonymous Christians" to describe these people.

How far is the encyclical *Dominus Iesus* from Rahner's position? It seems to have abandoned his theological innovations and posits a Christology much more closely aligned to ecclesiology, that is, to the actual historic church. It too professes a cosmic Christ, who as a paschal mystery dominates the world,

yet who should not be divorced from the church. Christ is therefore propagated as the fulfillment that comes through the mission of the church. This explains the stronger missionary-apologetic character of the encyclical.

But has it thereby abandoned its moral theology? At best it may be granted that this is subdued somewhat. Yet, as long as it is stated that the grace of Christ extends over all (and a certain ambiguity in wording is maintained), it is only a matter of time before the serpent again rears its head and takes the doctrines of

grace, revelation, and moral theology to their extreme logical conclusion. In the meantime, should we be as radical as Luther was in his Smalcald Articles? While Rahner posited a Trinitarian theology and Christology that he believed Lutherans and Romans could confess together, he declined to insert the word "believe" in this context. Due to Rahner's lack of a clearly elucidated *satisfactio vicaria* against the position of the pope, Roman Catholics and Lutherans no longer share faith in the same Christ (*idem Christus*). **LOGIA**

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Delhi, NY 13753-0327  
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