

Theistic Evidences in Contemporary Protestant Theology

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I have capitulated at the outset to the improbability (if not impossibility) of my chronicling in twenty minutes how contemporary Protestant theology deals with evidences for God. Instead I propose to lead our seminar into a consideration of what I consider necessary preliminary questions for any Protestant theologian as he does deal with theistic evidences. My own Lutheran roots will become obvious as I do this.

Thus my questions this afternoon are along the following lines: When a Protestant theologian takes up the question of God's existence, *how* does he do that? What is a Protestant on the look-out for when he addresses the problem of our experiencing God in our time? What expectations about God's existence does he have a *priori*, which condition the kind of questions he asks, the sort of evidence he seeks, and above all the places he looks for evidence? Finally, how is the question *de Deo* related to the Protestant reformation's central concern for justification by faith, which the 16th century reformers boldly designated as *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*?

Most of my data will be drawn from my own way of reading the

16th century reformation literature. I do this because, on the one hand, I know that literature a bit better than I do the rapidly expanding corpus of contemporary Protestant theology; on the other hand, I find that extensive chunks of the Protestant literature which I do know seem to me to bypass these uniquely Protestant postures for addressing the *de Deo* question.

I

One of the corollaries to the Protestant article on justification-by-faith is the anthropological thesis that all men live by some faith. Man *qua* man is inevitably theolatrous. This is valid for both fallen man and redeemed man. The difference between them comes in the gods on whom the faith is focused. Man *qua* man is faith-full.

The classic reformation-era treatment of this is the explanation to the First Commandment in Luther's *Large Catechism*. "To have a God" in the words of the first commandment, says Luther, is to designate some reality in our world as "that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To *have* a God is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. ... For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.¹

In his discussion of this Luther designates creatures as the *false* gods that men naturally have. It is significant that he does not specify the true god as the *totaliter aliter* of creaturely reality. He does contrast creator/creature, but does so in a way that lets the evidence of the creator be as close to man as the creatures themselves. "We receive our blessings not from them [sc. creatures], but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings."²

What Luther designates as “true faith” at this point is not yet specified as the faith that justifies. Yet it is fruitful to note that the focus of man’s faith is always on a creaturely reality. And the focus of the true faith, when writ large as the faith that justifies, is also on creaturely realities. What makes “true faith” a *justifying* faith is the very creaturely reality on which it focuses, viz., Christ the justifier. For those not living in Palestine ca. 30 A.D. the creaturely realities in focus for the faith that justifies are the *media gratiae*, word and sacraments. These are the “non natural” theistic evidences to which justifying faith clings. Yet although uncommon in the world of nature, they are not external to the created world any more than Jesus of Nazareth was in the first century A.D.

II

Because man is naturally theolatrous and because he is naturally inclined to select as gods for his faith such as are “false,” Protestant theology was at the outset skeptical of any theistic evidences that struck man as automatically compelling and persuasive. In fact the New Testament itself gave the Protestants the biggest clue of all in this regard. The scandal of Jesus and his cross in confrontation with the Judaism of his age led his contemporaries to an almost total rejection of the evidences accompanying him as anything theistic at all. And this was no rejection by spokesmen for an atheism, but for an alternative theism. The word and work of Jesus did not conform to the “Vorverständnis,” to the expectations of either Jew or Greek. Thus they initially saw no compelling theistic evidence in Jesus at all—or if any evidence at all, then evidence to the contrary (Matt 12:24). Saint Paul summarized this scandal in his phrase “word of the cross.” Latching on to rhetoric of I Corinthians 1:18ff. the Protestant reformers began talking about

theologia crucis (and its antithesis *theologia gloriae*).

It seems fair to say that at the heart of *theologia crucis* for Luther was the discovery that on Good Friday we finally see (if we have missed it all along) what theology is all about, because here we see what God is and what he is up to. In the crucified Christ we see that God acts in creation in contradiction to what men naturally and reasonably expect, especially in contradiction to man's religious expectations. The cross exposed (and thus Luther can call it "*Deus revelatus*") what Luther called the "rule of opposites", which is God's basic ground rule—mercy through judgment, life through death, exaltation via humiliation. Genuinely Christian theology means "knowing God" via this avenue. The cross of Christ is not merely primary evidence, but it refashions a man's notion of what "evidence-of-God" is in the first place. Thus *theologia crucis* entails also a *metanoia*, a change of mind-set, within the theologian in his very looking for theistic evidences.

In the so-called "Heidelberg Theses" which Luther debated in April, 1518 at the general chapter of the Augustinians of Germany in Heidelberg, he spelled out the difference between *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae* as he saw it.³ Even though he was not wrestling with the specific problem of this conference, his thought is fruitful for our concern about theistic evidences. *Theologia gloriae* is not simply a different way of doing theology by treating the same evidences in a different fashion, but *theologia gloriae* works basically with different evidences from those treated in *theologica crucis*. Three of those theses are related to this concern. #19 That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in the things that have been made (Romans 1:20). #20 But rather the one who perceives what is visible of God, God's 'backside' (*posteriora Dei*) (Exodus 33:23), by beholding the

sufferings and the cross. #21 A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. [My translation]

Apropos of theistic evidences it is interesting to note that both theologies deal with creaturely data. But the attempt of the *theologia gloriae* is to get behind the visible data to the *invisibilia Dei*, to deal with God directly, with *Deus nudus* in Luther's language. Luther's judgment on this natural yen, to see God the way he "really" is, is two-fold. In the first place it cannot be done, since we have no access to such data. Secondly if we did, it would do us no good. Fact is, it would kill us, as Isaiah 6:5 vividly illustrates.

III

In this critique of *theologia gloriae* Luther is challenging what might be called the dominant model in the theology of western Christendom, viz., the two-storey model for reality, with the two storeys variously labelled as nature and supernature, matter and spirit, time and eternity, mortal and immortal—finally, man's realm and God's realm.

In Christian theology and in the practical functioning of the Christian faith, this God of the upper storey is not the one we are dealing with. *Theologia crucis* makes such an assertion. It "says it like it is." If discussion about transcendence is concerned with the inhabitant in that upper storey, then Christians have no reason for mourning what is currently called the "death of transcendence." This god is not the one to whom the Holy Scriptures attest. He is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, nor the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a strong note of pastoral pragmatism in this approach. Frequently, Luther will say that God-talk in the *theologia*

gloriae vein doesn't help people, so why bother with it. At other times, he shows how the God encountered in the evidences of *theologia gloriae* actually becomes a threat to the man encountering him. For this is really *Deus absconditus*, the God of law, of judgment, of wrath, of condemnation, finally, of death. The ultimate comment from a theologian of glory after dealing with his God (if he really did deal with him) would properly be a cry for help! In short, it would be a cry for other theistic evidences contrary to those just encountered that he can latch onto to hold up against this God who will not leave unscathed the one who seeks to find out what makes him tick in terms of this theology.

By contrast the reformation concern with justification by faith was focused on the *posteriora Dei*. That term is both a *local* designation and a *value* label. It points to things in creation as the location where one looks for theistic evidences, and it also says that the evidences are not going to appear very extraordinary; they are not going to be so very razzle-dazzle. Justification by faith is tied in with the poor posterior data of *theologia crucis*, just as its opposite, works-righteousness, is tied in with the automatically attractive "front side" data of *theologia gloriae*. In commenting on Thesis #21 Luther says:

He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly [the terms are taken from I Corinthians 1:18-25], and in general good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18), for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the

cross works are dethroned and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.⁴

IV

What does the centrality of Christ do for the question of theistic evidences? As already indicated above, Christ does not automatically supply evidence *for* God's existence vs. evidence to the contrary. If that is the problem of *de Deo* today, that there seems to be insufficient grounds for God's existence at all, then the Protestant will not expect much in the way of theistic evidences from Christ—unless he sees in the cross of Christ the genuine answer to the authentic problem man has with theistic evidences. This at least is the reformation tradition. The point where the first Protestants needed Christ was in their grappling with the theistic evidences that came to them through the natural working of their world and culture. Ultimately this theistic evidence was bad news. Man's problem about God is not that the world is so god-empty, but that it is so god-full. The problem is that the Creator in, with, and under the "normal" instrumentalities of creation and history not only brings man into existence and sustains him but also and ultimately calls him to account, evaluates, and finally cuts him down like the grass of Psalm 90. Needed here is evidence for God's graciousness in the face of evidence to the contrary. As the Reformers read the Scriptures they found such theistic evidence to the contrary in the words and works of Jesus culminating in Good Friday and Easter.

When Protestants subsequently talk about Jesus as the Word of

God, they do not only designate him as a personified message from God, but they also specify that he as “word” is the tangibly perceivable and palpably contact-able point of encounter with the only resource for withstanding God’s own condemnatory judgment. He is God’s forgiving word of grace. Needed is not just news from God, but good-news, gospel, because even an unredeemed ear (they said) could hear the bad news from God coming through loud and clear on the normal channels of human creaturely history.

Justifying faith is not trust that the answer is affirmative to the question: Are you still there, God? It is instead the trust that the answer is affirmative to the question: Is God my Father and does he consider me his son? There will always be theistic evidences to the contrary, and thus the problem *de Deo* is never “solved.”

Instead it is met head-on by the Protestant emphasis that faith is “faith in God’s Word.” It is trusting the means of grace in, with, and under which the promissory commitment of my Creator comes through to me *for* me—and not *against* me. Thus the theistic evidences man needs for faith are called the means of grace: Christian preaching, baptism, holy absolution, the Eucharist, and even the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren.”⁵ Here too the compelling character of these evidences must pass the sieve that separates *theologia gloriae* from *theologia crucis*. The means of grace are no more razzle-dazzle than was Jesus himself. Both he himself and the means of grace derivative from him are indeed *the* theistic evidence that my creator affirms me. Yet the evidence for this affirmation is always *sub cruce tecta*, whereby paradoxically enough the cross itself, when it is my cross, seems to be overwhelming evidence to anything but God’s affirmation of me.

V

Thus perhaps one might conclude, Protestants concerned with theistic evidences, if they stick to the rock from which they were hewn, would distinguish theistic evidences that are “bad news” from those which are good. That means distinguishing law from Gospel. And in their work with the evidences of Gospel, they know that Gospel always comes *sub cruce tecta*. It is not invisible, but it is hidden under apparently contrary visible data.

Consequently Protestant weighers of theistic evidence should first of all be on the look-out for data on the divine which the Reformers labelled “Law”. Law as a theological term was the rubric for God at work in the world in an infinite multitude of masks—creating, preserving, continuing creation but also calling man to account for the stewardship of his life within creation. The fact that some or all of these *larvae Dei* have a natural explanation does not de-theosize them for a *theologia crucis*, although it might for a *theologia gloriae*. These kinds of evidences, however, if found, would not on their own strength lead anyone to sing a *Te Deum*. Yet they are the sorts of things Protestants expect to find as elements in the “normal” actions of God in his world after the Fall.

The non-normal non-natural evidences of God’s grace, the good news that is the novelty of the *novum testamentum*, which a Protestant as Protestant ought to be looking for, are the data of God’s affirmation and restoration and new creation, affirming, restoring, and re-creating man in the very face of these “legal” theistic evidences to the contrary. But this means looking for more than the affirmative and rejuvenative energies available in the old creation. Simply stated it means looking for the Gospel. It is not looking for “grace-in-general” (which will very likely be no better than “religion-in-general”) but

grace-in-particular—the kind of particularity that happened on Good Friday and Easter and that comes to men of later ages through the particularities (yea, peculiarities!) of baptism, absolution, Eucharist, and the talked-Gospel. Where these “word-of-God” actions are happening (which is to say: where these sacramental actions are happening, which is to say: where “church” is happening), there the Protestant sees evidences of God in action redemptively. But he expects these evidences to be no more compelling than was Jesus himself. Grace then and grace now is *sub-cruce tecta*. Yet it is about this that the church does sing her *Te Deum*.

Protestants ought to be initially skeptical of the atheism of any age, in view of their own expectation that every man has his own particular gods going for him. This might suggest the strategy of being unconcerned to get modern man to admit the existence of some god, but rather to get him to expose the god(s) he operates with in terms of the first commandment. It may indeed be possible for an age to be blasé about God the transcendent one (Luther held that genuine Christian faith was this way too), but it has not yet been shown that our culture or any individual within it has demonstrably established godlessness in the sense of not having his heart hanging on anything, expecting no good from anything, and running nowhere when trouble comes.

What Protestants have to demonstrate in the current debate about transcendence is that the God of the Gospel is not to be “caught” with any of the nets of *theologia gloriae* tossed out to perceive and retrieve him. Even if a Protestant apologete would get his audience to admit: “I affirm that God is,” he must ask himself just what sort of victory such an admission really is. What has God himself gained by such an admission? It may be that this is a necessary strategy in the current situation—although Protestants are skeptical about absolutizing any strategy for

any “current” situation. Yet it is the Protestant expectation in view of Protestant theological anthropology to see apologetics as the task of getting man to “switch” gods, and not the task of moving God into a spot which has been vacant. Protestants are radical doubters that such vacancies factually exist.

Finally Protestants who have not succumbed to a psychological interpretation of the theological struggle of the reformation know that the search for an affirmative answer to the quest for a gracious God is not the quirk of super-sensitive religious personality types. Protestants who have not opted for a pan-grace-ism that automatically expects God to be gracious *per se* and *a priori*, will sense that the crucial question of this age too might still be: How do I find a gracious God? It doesn’t take too many hours of the Huntley-Brinkley report to convince one that the theistic evidence in the world really is “bad news”, that the really tough problem about theistic evidences is not “Is he there?”, but “Is he gracious to us?”

The evidence for an affirmative answer to that question is not to be expected from the normal run of the news of the world, but from the new news promoted by the new reality called “church”. Such evidence is adduced when the church via any one of its members administers one of the means of grace to the questioner. The Gospel in the means of grace cannot be made more credible *sub cruce tecta* than the Lord of the church himself makes it. When we administer one of the means of grace to such a questioner, the only supportive evidence we can offer is to join him in trusting it ourselves.

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1 Theodore G. Tappert, ed. *Book of Concord, The Confessions of*

the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959, p. 365.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 368

3 For the theses and Luther's commentary on them see J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works*. Philadelphia and St. Louis: 1957 ff., pp. 39ff.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

5 Tappert, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

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