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Knowing God and acting for one's neighbor: Contemplative and active life in Luther's theology

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Abstract: Through the exploration of one of the central questions of Christian spirituality, the relation between the contemplation of divine truths and being active in the world, the present author has studied the relationship between knowing God and acting for one's neighbor. In addition to the introduction, the article includes: "Luther on Contemplation", and "Contemplation and Active Life".

Key words: Knowing God, acting for one's neighbor, vita activa (active life), vita passiva, Luther's theology

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1. Introduction

The relation between contemplation of divine truths and acting in the world has been one of the central questions of Christian spirituality-and actually it is much discussed today as well. It is the Christian version of the problem concerning the classical differentiation between theory and praxis. Both the Greek term *theoria* and the Latin term *contemplatio* refer to certain kind of regarding or seeing of the basic reality or the essential truths. *Praxis* or *vita activa* was often understood as preparing and cleaning oneself for contemplation. In the Augustinian tradition both belong to the Christian life, but in spite of the efforts to combine them in an unity, there is certain tension between them.[1] Contemplation is directed upwards to God and active life moves downwards to the world. Especially dangerous is to dwell too much in active life because then one may forget the proper aim of human life.

Martin Luther has not been usually combined with any tradition ofactive and contemplative life. He is better known by his criticism of both of them. As for example Oswald Bayer has noticed, Luther seems to abandon the whole idea of Christian life consisting of active and contemplative aspects. According to Bayer

[1] See, for example, Radler Charlotte Radler, "Actio et Contemplatio/Action and Contemplation" in A. Hollywood, P. Z. Beckman (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism. (2012 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 213-215.

Luther replaces this view with his view of *vita passiva*. The passive life means patient receiving of God's works. It is a state of mind where the believer does not act him/herself but let God do his work in him or her.[2] This view has, however, been recently criticized by Stoellger who says, that in spite of criticism Luther does not consider *vita activa contradictory to vita passiva*.[3]

Awell-known scheme of the Christian meditative life where contemplation is the aim and the highest level stems from Gregory the Great. In his Homilies on Ezekiel St. Gregory has provided the classic definition of the two lives: "The contemplative life is: to retain indeed with all one's mind the love of God and neighbor but to rest from exterior action, and cleave only to the desire of the Maker, that the mind may now take no pleasure in doing anything, but having spurned all cares, may be aglow to see the face of its Creator: so that it already knows how to bear with sorrow the burden of the corruptible flesh and will all its desires to seek to join the hymn-signing choirs of angels, to mingle with the heavenly citizens and to rejoice in its everlasting incorruption in the sight of God.[4] The purpose of withdrawal from exterior action is to concentrate the mind on the love of God and neighbor and thus come to see God face to face. [5] The contemplative life is also characterized by the desire to get from corruptible flesh to incorruption in the everlasting sight of God.

The active life St. Gregory has defined in a practical way: It is "to give bread to the hungry, to teach the ignorant the word of wisdom, to correct the erring, to recall to the path of humility our neighbor when he waxes proud, to tend the sick, to dispense to all what they need and to provide those entrusted to us with the means of subsistence".[6]

The relationship between the two lives St. Gregory describes by stating that the contemplation only begins in this life whereas the active life can be fully laid hold of. Therefore the active life ceases with the present world, but the contemplative life begins here, that it may be perfected in the heavenly country, because the fire of love which begins to burn here, will blaze up the more when it sees Him whom it loves. He explains the relationship with the story of Lea and Rachel, the two wives of Jacob.

Rachel who was beautiful but sterile illustrates the contemplative life. It is lovely in the mind, but because it longs to rest in silence, it does not generate sons by preaching. It sees but brings not forth, because while it loves the pursuit of its quiet, it is less inflamed in gathering others: and what it sees within it is unable to open out to others by preaching. Lea, on the other hand, was dim-eyed but fruitful because of the active life. While occupied in work, it sees less: but while now by word, now by example, it incites others to imitate itself, it generates many children in its good work. Even though it is not able to stretch the mind in contemplation, yet from the fact that it acts exteriorly, it is able to beget followers. The active life is lived

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[2] Oswald Bayer, Theologie. Handbuch systematischer Theologie 1. (1996, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus), 42-49.

[3] Philipp Stoellger, Passivit? t aus Passion. Zur Problemgeschichte einer "categoria non grata". Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 56. (2010, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 302.

[4] The English translation follows Butler, quoted by Green 2007, The Latin source is Corpus Christianorum: Series latine, cxlii, Gregorius Magnus, Homiliae in Hiezechihilem prophetam (Turnholti 1971).

[5] Green (2007, 35) summarizes the purpose of contemplative life similarly except by speaking about "withdrawal from the world". To my understanding this does not express St. Gregory's view exactly. Through the love of neighbor there is an inner relation to the world even though exterior action has ceased.

[6] John D. Green, Augustinianism. Studies in the Process of Spiritual Transvaluation (2007 Leuven: Dudley, MA. Peeters Publishers), 36.

first, that afterwards the contemplative life may be attained to.

In themiddle Ages the idea of contemplative life was developed for example by Guigo II the Carthusian. For him it contains four levels: lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio. Lectio means careful study of the Scriptures with the soul's intention. Meditation is a laborious activity of the soul studying the secrets of truth in the leading of reason. In oration a pious soul is directed to God in order to avoid evil and to reach the good. Contemplation means here the soul's ascension to God and the tasting of sweetness of the eternal joy. For Guigo the three first levels can be practiced by human soul whereas the contemplation as the aim of spiritual life depends on God's grace. This scheme was the basis of practically all medieval forms of spiritual life even though many variations of it were in use. [7]

2. Luther on contemplation

Luther has given a scheme of spiritual life as well, but it differs clearly from the one presented by Guigo. Luther's famous formula consists of *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*. So the Reformer seems to substitute the traditional ways of understanding Christian spiritual life by a formula which leaves the contemplation away. Martin Nicol argues in his study on Luther's view of meditation that in Luther's conception of spiritual exercises the *tentatio* replaces the contemplation.[8] Luther translates tentatio with the German term "Anfechtung", which primary meaning is anxiety, but many English translations have chosen the term temptation. However, even though Luther conception of *tentatio* contains both aspects, it does not refer only to the emotion of anxiety or to the situation of temptation. He describes it as the proof stone which teaches the Christian not only to know and understand but also to experience how correct and truthful as well as how gracious, delightful and consoling God's word is.[9] According to Nicol the anxiety concerns the whole human being with her intellect and emotion so that she is both seized and attacked. Anxiety leads thus to a situation where one's whole existence is threatened. There God's word reaches and touches her. Nicol's interpretation may well follow more the modern existentialist thought than Luther's own intentions, but even though tentatio perhaps does not always threaten the whole existence of the believer, it contains both understanding and experiencing the nature and impact of God's word in a situation where a human being needs consolation, support, and peace.

It is true that in Luther's viewthe Christian way of life was misunderstood when contemplation was placed as the aim of Christian life. His criticism is directed towards the monastic ideal of contemplative life as well as to a certain way to differentiate between it and active life. Here we can't handle the theme how accurate Luther's criticism was. We concentrate first to the question, does Luther's scheme oratio-meditatio-tentatio leave room for contemplation. This is justified, first because Luther's criticism of the ideal of contemplative life does not inevitably lead to the rejection of all contemplation, and second, because Luther explicitly refers

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〔7〕 Martin Nicol, Meditation bei Luther (1991, G? ttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 19, 91.

〔8〕 Nicol 1991, 94.

〔9〕 WA (Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimarer Ausgabe, Bd. 1-80, Weimar: Hermann Böhlau und Nachfolger 1883 – 2009. Weimar) 50: 660, 1-4: Nicol 1991, 92.

also to a correct understanding of contemplation.

Lutherdoes not use the term contemplation very often but this does not exclude the notion of seeing of God from his understanding of theology and spiritual life. He often discusses the true seeing of God in the contexts where he criticizes "speculative" theology. By "speculation" Luther means the human efforts with the natural rational capacities to reach and know God's essence. One example of such critics is his letter of spiritual guidance from 1519: There he writes that one who wants to think and speculate about God in a salutary manner has to begin with Christ's humanity and dwell imaginatively (sibi praefigat) on him nursing at the breast or in his sufferings, until his sweetness softens one's heart. Then one shouldn't remain there but penetrate more deeply and consider how he does these actions not by his own but by the Father's will. Then the Father's most sweet will begin to please her, as the Father displays it in Christ's humanity.[10] According to Jared Wicks Luther describes here the spiritual movement through Christ to laying hold of the Father's loving will as revealed to us.[11]

For Luther the spiritual movement begins by seeing or contemplating the Word of God or the Son of God as a human being. The contemplation takes place by setting in front of oneself the human life of Christ. Luther speaks also elsewhere about drawing the image of Christ in one's heart. This idea is central for Luther when he criticizes the monastic model of contemplative life and presents his own understanding of contemplation. One of the important texts concerning this question is included in Luther Lectures on Isaiah (1527—1530).[12] He tells there that he often advises the young theologians that they must so study the Holy Scriptures that they refrain from investigating the Divine Majesty and His terrible works. He admits that some people-like the sectarians-may meet the naked Majesty of God for a while. But actually they weave then their own phantasies about God. Consequently, they can for a while reach out for the godhead they have invented for themselves. For Luther, however, this is not the way God wants people to learn to know him. It is therefore impossible to associate directly by human reason with God's naked Godhead. So those who speculate about the majesty are crushed and led to despair by the Devil. The reason for this is that they are looking for answers of a kind that they cannot know, such as for the question: Why did God condemn Judas but spare Peter?

In Luther's view God's way to keep us from striving to contemplate God in his essence is His coming into the flesh and presenting the flesh to us. In the humanity of Christ we may then contemplate the bodily present God. The biblical basis for this view is John 14:9 where Christ says to Philip who was contemplating Him: "He, who has seen me, has seen the Father." This is the ground for Luther's view that it is foolish to

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〔10〕 WA Br 1,328,45-329,57: "Et is est unicus & solus modus cognoscendi Dei, a quo longe receserunt Doctores sententiarum, qui in absolutas divinitatis speculationes irrepserunt, omissa Christi humanitate, Et ideo magnitudine potentie, Maie statis, sapientie eius non potest subsistere anima… Ideo repeto itermque monebo: quicunque velit salubriter de Deo cogitare aut speculari, prorsus omnia postponat praeter humanitatem Christi. Hanc autem vel sugentem vel patientem sibi preafigat, donec dulcescat eius benignitas. Tunc ibi non istat, Sed penetret ac cogitet: Ecce non sua, Sed Dei patris voluntate hec & hec facit. Ibiincipit placer suavissima voluntas patris, quam in humanitate Christi ostedit (et isipsum iam est trahere & dare patris). Hac voluntate Deus pater secure potest apprehendi & cum fiducia…" The English translation is from Wicks 1983,123.

〔11〕 Jared S. J. Wicks, *Luther and His Spiritual Legacy* (1983, Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc.), 123.

〔12〕 I use the English translation in Luther's Works Vol. 16, but instead of changing terms as it does I use the word "contemplate" and its forms always when Luther does so.

consider the flesh useless for believers. For him the case is other way round: God is of no avail without the flesh: "No God will benefit humans except the God who sucked the virgin's breasts." Luther exhorts to fix eyes on this kind of God. It is impossible to comprehend God in himself, but in Christ one sees nothing but God's all good qualities and works: sweetness, humanity, gentleness, clemency – in short, the forgiveness of sins and all mercy.

Luther says also that when one has the true faith that in Christ she has her Savior, she sees immediately the merciful God. The faith leads one up and opens God's heart and will where one sees nothing but overwhelming grace and love. But one who sees God as wrathful does not see him properly but only a veil or mask or a dim cloud in front of his face. When she in contrast sees through faith God's fatherly and friendly heart, there is neither wrath nor mercilessness. Only by faith one sees the face of God. Seeing God's face means knowing God properly as merciful and righteous (fromm) Father. From the graceful heavenly Father a human being may wish everything good but this happens only by faith in Christ. Luther criticizes also here the "dreams of the monks", who sit in their cells, turn their thoughts to heaven and lead a contemplative life. However, God has not yet been seen when one has climbed in heaven with one's thoughts. Again Luther emphasizes the opposition between the human efforts to see God by rational means, and beholding Him by faith in Christ as Redeemer. [13]

Luther thus rejects the contemplation of God inHis essence or majesty, but recommends contemplation of the incarnated God, that is, the God who is dwelling in the human flesh. "Flesh" does not refer here only to the human body but to the whole humanity which can be observed in Christ. When contemplation begins by the humanity of Christ, it reveals the goodness of God as well. But if one tries to contemplate God's essence directly, he finds the frightening Majesty.

When Luther says that it is impossible to grasp God's natureas such, he refers primarily to a false method of approaching God. On the other hand it is not possible to trust in God if we do not know his heart like a human does not trust another human being if he does not know the other well. For Luther this apparent contradiction can be solved: if one begins with the despised form of Christ, he may eventually see what is in God's secret will. And when he knows God's heart, he may easily and joyfully trust in God.

What is, then, the place of the contemplation of the divinity that dwells bodily in Christ? The incarnation of Christ calls first powerfully away from speculating about the divinity. But the flesh of Christ, which is like ours, does not strike him down who contemplates it. Luther explains that a human in tentatio either will not know God or his knowledge will not give him hope and deliverance from tentatio. However, Christ is useful to humans for all things and trough him they will come to God. Therefore, when one contemplates Christ in tentatio, Devil is put to flight, and the conscience of a man is made happy and secure. It is thus clear that tentatio does not replace contemplation in the Christian spiritual life but is included in it. Contemplation of Christ is needed in order to overcome anxiety or temptation and to get a hilarious and confident conscience. Luther uses the word conscience in several meanings, but here it is used in the proper theological sense to refer to God's acceptance: The contemplation of Christ leads the Christian in joy and security before God.

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[13] WA 32, 328, 24-329, 3.

3. Contemplation and active life

Luther also criticizes the-as he calls it-"sophistic" distinction between contemplative and active life. In his later lectures on Galatians he states that the right way to draw this distinction were to call contemplative life Gospel and the active life "law". This means that the speculative life is included in God's word and directed by it. In this kind of speculation or contemplation one should observe only the word of the Gospel. The real theological speculation-which Luther here identifies with contemplation-is the means to apprehend Christ.[14] This apprehending takes place by reason or, more exactly, by intellect illuminated by faith. Faith which apprehends Christ does not only know Him in a cognitive sense but has Him present, and holds Him enclosed, as the ring does the precious stone. It is worth of noticing that for Luther whoever shall be found having the confidence in Christ apprehended in the heart, him or her will God accept as righteous.[15] Luther calls the contemplation also the believing and divine beholding of Christ crucified for the sins of the beholder and the whole world. From this kind of beholding Christ becomes apparent that only faith justifies. We could thus say that contemplative faith justifies. And only now, when the believers are justified by faith, they enter into active life. The active life, which consists of law, does not apprehend Christ but it practices the works of love to the neighbor.[16] The law that Luther refers to is the commandment of love or the principle that has later been named "the golden rule."[17] The Son of God has fulfilled this law as he has become man, set himself in human's position and helped her in the way that he would have liked to be helped if he had been in similar distress and need of salvation.[18] The active life that consists of law means also following Christ in applying the commandment of love and the golden rule in relations with other humans. Christ is the subject of such kind of action but the believer acts in cooperation with him.[19]

Luther calls this kind of life sometimes also "evangelical life". It means simply going to those people who need your help and good works. He stresses that one who wants to be pious shall not go to a desert or monastery and do contemplative works in order to serve God but to stay among people. There will always be enough to do.[20] Luther's main point is, thus, that one has to apprehend Christ by the contemplative faith and become justified in order to be able to practice active life, which consists of acting for one's neighbor's in need.

In the Lectures on GenesisLuther discusses the distinction between contemplative and active life as

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〔14〕 See also Antti Raunio, "Speculatio practica. Das Betrachten Gottes als Ursprung des aktiven Lebens bei Luther", in *Caritas Dei. Beiträge zum Verständnis Luthers und der gegenwärtigen Ökumene*, ed. Oswald Bayer, Robert Jenson and Simo Knuuttila (Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 39), (1997, Helsinki), 364-384.

〔15〕 WA 40 I, 233, 16-24. About Luther's understanding of apprehension see Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Justification and Participation in Christ. The Development of the Lutheran Doctrine of Justification from Luther to the Formula of Concord* (1580). (2008, Leiden, Boston: Brill), 31-36.

〔16〕 WA 40 I, 447, 15-28.

〔17〕 For Luther's understanding of the golden rule see Antti Raunio, *Summe des christlichen Lebens. Die "Goldene Regel" als Gesetz der Liebe in der Theologie Martin Luthers 1510-1527*. (2001, VIEG. Wiesbaden: Verlag Zabern; Vandenhoek & Ruprecht).

〔18〕 WA 10 I 2, 42, 5-27.

〔19〕 Raunio 2001, 331-343. See even Stoellger 2010, 306-307.

〔20〕 WA 19, 403, 28-33; "Ergo scito haec dici bona opera die do gehoren zw den lewthen yhn zw helffen. Non illa opera contemplativa et monastica quibus deo servire volumus. Eyn Euangelisch leben heyst dich zw den lewthen die deyn bedorffen, gehen. Non segregat te in desertum et monasterium, ut diabolus fecit. Neyn, spricht er, wyltw frum seyn, bleyb unter den lewthen, ich wyl dyr gnug zw schaffen geben."

well. He combines this theme with the question of correct Biblical interpretation. He criticizes the allegorical understanding of Jacob's wives as models of contemplative and active life. The allegory explains that Rachel, who has beautiful eyes and is loved by Jacob, is an image of the contemplative life and Lea with her weak eyes and neglected by Jacob expresses the active life. Luther's main criticism against this kind of allegory is that its representatives do not see God's hidden governance and guidance in all "orders" of life, also in marriage, family, and political life. The result is the view of contemplative life in the monasteries as beautiful and lovable and the active life in families and political communities as laborious and unpleasing. For Luther this interpretation is not based on the proper theological foundation. Allegory is never the foundation for a correct interpretation. It is important to draw a clear distinction between the foundation or the doctrine itself and the construction that will be built on the foundation. The foundation is the word of God, and its speculation or contemplation presupposes not only abandoning of external works and actions but also leaving of all thoughts of reason so that all own opinions and judgments cease. Instead of own thoughts and words a Christian thinks and speaks God's Word.

Active life is, thus, love (charitas) or faith effective in love and patient in cross. By the word "cross" Luther means different adversities and certainly also anxieties and temptations. The exercise of faith in love and patience is a combination of both contemplative and active lives. This way of life is not only for the monks in the monasteries but for all those in families and political communities who live in faith and exercise even the minor and most despised works.[21]

[21] WA 43, 668, 36-40.

中文题目：
认识上帝和为邻舍而行动：
路德神学中的修道士主义的与积极的生活

拉乌尼奥

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提要：通过将神圣真理的修道士主义的与积极入世的行动之间的关系作为基督教灵性的核心问题进行探索，本文作者研究了认识上帝与为邻舍行动之间的关系。除去导论之外，本文还包括路德对修道士主义的理解、修道士主义的生活与主动积极的入世生活之间的关系两个部分。

关键词：认识上帝、沉思的[被动的、修道主义的]生活、积极主动的入世生活、服务邻舍、路德神学