



Abstract from Article

CALLING, ESTATE AND VIRTUE: MARTIN LUTHER'S RESPONSE TO THE SCHOLASTIC VIEWS ON THE VIRTUES OF OFFICE

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Abstract

Although the theology and political theory of Thomas Aquinas did not consciously strive to depart from the political and legal conceptions that bore the sanction of Christian antiquity, namely the validity of natural law and its binding authority over rulers and subjects, the obligation of kings to govern justly and in accordance with law, the sanctity of the constituted authority both in church and state, and the unity of Christendom under the parallel powers of *imperium* and *sacerdotium*, he did introduce significant new ideas about law and governance that had a lasting effect on the Western heritage of the nature and institutional effects of office in civil society. Arguably one of the most influential ideas emanating from Thomas's idea of office was the notion that the king himself must not only rule justly, but also must administer the law subject to the ethical standards imposed upon the office of the king. In his consideration of the standards to which the office of bearers of authority are subject, Thomas interpreted Aristotle's views to mean that political society and the state ceased to be considered as institutions of sin – they became instead the embodiment of moral purpose and instruments in the realisation of justice and virtue. Although the shift towards the moral dimensions of the ruler's office was prepared in fundamental ways in the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury, drawing much from the works of Cicero and Seneca, it was Thomas's interpretation of Aristotle that produced the late medieval culture of relying on the Aristotelian conceptions of moral virtue in the social life of the community. By drawing together the traditions of Christian theology and Greek philosophy, Thomas's views on office reflected the complex historical relationships – including its inherent tensions – typical of the Aristotelian medieval tradition. The idea of office and its foundational importance in civil and political life, forms part of the all-embracing system of universal synthesis, the keynote of which is harmony and consilience. Although in Thomas's system revelation is above reason, it is in no way contrary to reason; theology completes the system of which science and philosophy form the beginning, although it never destroys its continuity. Faith is the fulfillment of reason. Together faith and reason constitute the temple of knowledge, and nowhere do they conflict or work at cross purposes. Thomas's conception of social and political life fits directly into his larger plan of nature as a whole, and the most important passages in which he treated the subject were a part of the great systematic work on philosophy and theology – his *Summa Theologica*. Like all nature, society is a system of ends and purposes in which the lower serves the higher and the higher directs and guides the lower. Following Aristotle, Thomas described society as a mutual exchange of services for the sake of a good life to which many callings contribute, the farmer and artisan by supplying material goods, the priest by prayer and religious observance, and each doing his own proper work. The basic theme throughout Martin Luther's work is the statement of the basic antithesis between theology and philosophy. In a lecture on Paul's Epistle to the Romans he expressed himself on this basic contradiction as follows:

"Indeed I for my part believe that I owe to the Lord this duty of speaking out against philosophy and of persuading men to heed Holy Scripture. For perhaps if another man who has not seen these things, did this, he might be afraid or he might not be believed. But I have been worn out by these studies for many years now, and having experienced and heard many things over and over again, I have come to see that it is the study of vanity and perdition. Therefore I warn you all as earnestly as I can that you finish these studies quickly and let it be your only concern not to establish and defend them but treat them as we do when we learn worthless skills to destroy them and study errors to refute them. Thus we study also these things to get rid of them, or at least, just to learn the method of speaking of those people with whom we must carry on some discourse. For it is high time that we undertake new studies and learn Jesus Christ, 'and Him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2)." Neither did Luther hide his opposition to Aristotelianism. In his *Disputatio contra scholasticism theologiam* of September 1517 he observed that it "is an error to say that without Aristotle no one becomes a theologian. On the contrary, one only becomes a theologian when he does so without Aristotle. The assertion that a theologian who is not a logician is an abominable heretic is itself abominable and heretical ... in short, the whole of Aristotle is related to theology as darkness is to light." This does not mean that Luther attacked Aristotle as such, but rather he attacked the manner in which Aristotle's philosophy was applied in the field of theology. Ebeling observes that Luther's attack on Aristotle was a struggle for true theological thought and that a proper understanding of his outlook is consequently to be obtained not from his "general invective" against Aristotle, but "only by a study of the concrete theological context in which the use of Aristotelian thought forms was in fact harmful." In fact Luther relied on Aristotelian psychology in explaining the role of grace, acting as intellectual and moral virtues in perfecting man's faculties of his soul, and as the essence of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Neither does Luther dispute that particular virtues can be achieved in the moral and political spheres, nor does he have any objection to the Aristotelian concept of merit as a substitute for grace; he was aware of the danger of not making a clear distinction between the moral and the theological aspects. Therefore, one must accept the fact that Luther maintained a qualified criticism of scholastic thought. He does not merely play off theology against philosophy, but regards their relationship as one which makes a proper distinction between them and accords its own sphere to each, as can be gleaned from his *Disputation concerning Man* (1536). Correctly understood the reason of man is actually something of divine origin – if kept within its limits it cannot be too highly praised. When reason tyrannizes the conscience and puts itself on the throne of God, it is the duty of faith to oppose it. It is therefore of major importance to state clearly the relationship between theology and philosophy in the light of his contradictory statements concerning reason and virtue. This is also true for understanding his views on the values and virtues governing the execution of their office by rulers in positions of authority. Furthermore Luther's thought on office and political virtues can only be understood and applied if the scholastic background of his thought is taken into account.