

The Influence Of Nominalism On Reformation Thinking

A Seminar Paper

Submitted to Dr. Daryl Cornett

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Seminar

The Protestant Reformation (CH 9551-2)

by

Mark Carpenter

12/6/2002

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
PHILOSOPHY IN THE WORLD OF THE REFORMERS . . . . .	3
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTELLECTUAL REACTION TO NOMINALISM . . . . .	5
Nominalism: A Working Definition . . . . .	5
Nominalism: A Reaction to Realism . . . . .	7
LEADERS IN NOMINALISTIC THOUGHT PRIOR TO THE REFORMATION	8
John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) . . . . .	8
William of Ockham (1285-1349) . . . . .	10
Gabriel Biel (1420-1495) . . . . .	13
NOMINALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON LUTHER AND CALVIN . . . .	14
Martin Luther . . . . .	14
His Early Pursuit of Knowledge . . . . .	14
His Later Embrace of Nominalistic Thought . . . . .	15
His Opposition to Aspects of Nominalistic Thought .	16
John Calvin . . . . .	17
NOMINALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MEDIEVAL DOGMA . . . . .	20
The Church . . . . .	20
The Lord's Supper . . . . .	21
Church and State Relations . . . . .	22
NOMINALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON REFORMATION THEOLOGY . .	23
The Trinity . . . . .	23
Predestination . . . . .	23
IMPLICATIONS OF NOMINALISTIC THINKING DURING THE REFORMATION	
	24
Positive Implications . . . . .	24

Negative Implications . . . . . 25  
CONCLUSION . . . . . 27  
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . . 30

## INTRODUCTION

Studying nominalism is no simple task. When addressed, it is almost never concisely defined. Instead, authors offer literary samples of nominalist thinking. Unfortunately, these authors seldom explain what makes their chosen examples nominalistic.

So, what is nominalism? Is it a philosophical and intellectual quest which can be stated explicitly? Or, is it more like a collage of theories and movements that can only be expressed in terms of a mosaic? The answer is yes to both questions. If nominalism is to be studied in its entirety, then its definition must alter with each passing generation. However, if one looks at history in a series of cross-sections he may remove an individual slice and offer a concise definition for that specific time period. The reason for this is simple. As one generation passes information, the following generation takes that information, analyzes it, synthesizes it and then re-defines it to fit their context. Therefore, this paper will attempt to look at one slice of history and define nominalism in the narrow context of the Reformation period and the time immediately before.

For sake of brevity, the personalities addressed in this work will be introduced with little or no biographical

information. The writer is well aware of the importance with cultural, contextual, social and familial factors. However, this paper focuses solely on the way nominalistic thought impacted the theology, not the theologian.

Another reason for this is that many of the adherents of nominalism really had little in common except for the philosophy itself.<sup>1</sup> Some nominalists were Pelagian, others were not. Some were committed to the Catholic church, others were not. Some held on to scholasticism, others rejected it. Some based salvation solely on grace, other gave man the ability to earn merit.

What will be seen is that through the impact of nominalism the metaphysical structure erected during the thirteenth century (Scholasticism) would collapse. Why? Because this new philosophy was not simply "a particular solution to the special problem of universals."<sup>2</sup> It was a new epistemology that challenged the very foundation of the medieval worldview.

This work will first define nominalism. It will do this in the context of sixteenth century medieval Europe. Next, the evolution of nominalistic thought will be traced through the impact of three nominalists thinkers who

---

<sup>1</sup>Allister E. McGrath, "John Calvin and Late Mediaeval Thought: A Study in Late Mediaeval Influences upon Calvin's Theological Development," *Archiv Fur Revormationsgeschichte* 77 (1986): 58-78.

<sup>2</sup>Emile Brehier, *The History of Philosophy: The Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 193.

preceded the Reformation. Then, there will be an attempt to establish the influence of nominalistic thought in the lives of Martin Luther and John Calvin. After this, various dogmas and theologies will be addressed. Finally, the positive and negative implications of nominalism will be visited. The proposition this paper will attempt to establish is that nominalism indeed had a significant impact on the thinking of both Luther and Calvin.

#### PHILOSOPHY IN THE WORLD OF THE REFORMERS

What does philosophy have to do with theology? In today's conservative circles, philosophy is not only avoided, but often ridiculed and even dismissed as irrelevant and worldly. However, in the days of the reformers, philosophy played an integral part in their theological worldviews. In fact, it was foundational to medieval Christianity.

From the twelfth century and on through the high middle ages Western Europe would receive an intellectual migration. During this period an influx of ancient Greek, Arabic and Jewish thought swept the continent. These Eastern intellects brought with them whole new genres of literature and an intimate knowledge of both the Greek classics and the Greek language. This "flood of new knowledge"<sup>3</sup> would ultimately transform both European thought and life.

---

<sup>3</sup>David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 185.

The effect of this influx of new ideas brought both revolution and confusion.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, out of this cauldron of ideas rose powerful personalities and an influential school of thought called Scholasticism.

One may trace the rise and development of medieval philosophy from the early Scholasticism of Anselm and Abelard to the rediscovery of Aristotle, within the rise of the universities, through the high Scholasticism of Aquinas and onto the late Scholasticism of Scotus and Ockham. Ultimately, from the thoughts and debates which flowed through this labyrinth of personalities and institutions, there would diverge two opposing philosophies—realism and nominalism.

The controversies between these two movements were philosophical at the beginning. However, it was not long before they became meshed with both the old schools of Greece and the current theological controversies of the Middle Ages. Any attempt to understand the world of the medieval church and scholastic theology without reference to realism and nominalism would thus prove fruitless<sup>5</sup>

This was the world in which the early protestant reformers lived. These were the philosophies with which the early protestant reformers were educated. It would be incredulous to believe that the leaders of the Protestant

---

<sup>4</sup>David Knowles, 221-222.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Chenevix Trench, *Lectures on Medieval Church History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 268-269.

Reformation were neither impacted, nor influenced by the pervading philosophies of their day.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTELLECTUAL REACTION TO NOMINALISM

##### Nominalism: A Working Definition

Like any other philosophy, nominalism is a moving target. The nominalistic thinking of Abelard and Roscelin (11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century) was not the same as that of Scotus and Ockham (13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century). A problem in explaining nominalism is that one simple definition cannot adequately cover the entire history of this philosophical movement. Therefore, this paper will limit its definition to the nominalistic thinking as it developed after the influence of John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

The word nominalism is derived from the word nomen (name). Nominalism starts with the "epistemological assumption that universals are terms or symbols, which have no reality outside the mind of man."<sup>6</sup> These terms or symbols only have significance once they are distinguished by man.

Only particular "things" are real. Universals are simply words and concepts ascribed to these particular things. For example, the ocean is filled with different fish. They are all fish, not because of some intrinsic universal quality, but because someone saw them and named

---

<sup>6</sup>Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements* Vol. 1, (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1972), 45.

them. "Men, seeing what they believe to be resemblances between objects," such as red fish and blue fish, "invented abstract terms and grouped individual objects under them."<sup>7</sup>

Strictly speaking, nominalism is a term used to describe a philosophy in which only individuals actually exist and universal concepts are not real things, but mental constructs derived from experience. According to Joseph Strayer:

For a nominalist, things of the same species are not similar because they share a common nature that inheres them; rather the coincidence of individual characteristics allows us to form a universal concept. In the broad sense, nominalism refers to a range of philosophical and theological opinions associated with or compatible with the above position.<sup>8</sup>

So, in simple English, what is nominalism?

Nominalism is the belief that the world is filled with individual things. These things (trees, rocks, birds, fish, etc.) are independent of each other. As man encounters these things he names them. As he encounters things that are similar he creates abstract terminology through which he groups these things together. Thus, universal concepts are not inherent. They are created for the purpose of organizing and understanding the world around.

---

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500* Vol 1. (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2000), 498-499.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph R. Strayer, *Dictionary of the Middle Ages: Mystery Religions - Poland* Vol. 9. (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1987), 155.

### Nominalism: A Reaction to Realism

In the past fifty years there has been extensive research into the logical, epistemological and theological views of nominalist writers. There has been a growing consensus that "there appears to be little, other than a rejection of realism, in common between the figures in question."<sup>9</sup>

The nominalism of Ockham and Scotus was then born out of a reaction to the realism propagated by Scholasticism. The extreme side of realism (following Platonic influences) believed that universals existed apart from and antecedent to individual objects. A more moderate realism (following Aristotelian influences) asserted that universals existed only in connection with individual objects.<sup>10</sup>

Realism was thus antithetical to nominalism. Ockham could find no epistemological basis for realism. He recognized things as belonging to the same species not from their similarity to a universal concept, but through his experiences with individuals.<sup>11</sup> To ascribe any universal intrinsic element to thought was mere speculation.

It is important to note that fifteenth century

---

<sup>9</sup>Allister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 70.

<sup>10</sup>Williston Walker, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz and Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Christian* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 325.

<sup>11</sup>Strayer, 156.

nominalists did not deny the existence of universals. They did deny, however, that through universals mankind had a definite perception of the ultimate nature of reality.<sup>12</sup>

In time, realism would come to be known as the *via antiqua* while nominalism would be known as the *via moderna*. The old way verses the new way.

#### LEADERS IN NOMINALISTIC THOUGHT PRIOR TO THE REFORMATION

##### John Duns Scotus (1265-1308)

From the teachings of John Duns Scotus, it is possible to recognize the emergence of a fundamental change from the age of Aquinas' high Scholasticism. Before Scotus, the schoolmen of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries manufactured impressive systems of speculative theology and divinity.<sup>13</sup> However, Scotus embraced a different philosophy. He rejected the extreme realism of former scholastics. In its place, he adopted a more moderate realism. Instead of pondering on speculation, Scotus concentrated on writing commentaries and offering critical expositions of single topics. For him, "The logical analysis of propositions replaced the metaphysical analysis of essence."<sup>14</sup>

The consequence of this epistemological shift varied

---

<sup>12</sup>Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1987), 20.

<sup>13</sup>Walker, 350.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 350.

mainly in its degree of realism. However, with this new "empirical Aristotelianism," Scotus asserted that the mind gained knowledge by "abstracting the essence from the object presented by the senses, thus attaining to the concept." This philosophical position allowed human reason the ability to gain truth with no need for any "direct divine illumination."<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, Scotus' break with realism created more questions than it answered. The problem lies with his epistemology. He seems to have attempted to perceive theology through the lens of philosophy. For example, he believed that God could will as he pleased. As long as he willed, it was just. Therefore, it was the "legislator, not the law that is eternal."<sup>16</sup> If this were true then God's revealed Word would by its very nature be speculative.

Also, Scotus understood Christ's propitiatory death for sin to be an arbitrary act constituted by God. Therefore, any substitute would have been acceptable to God. What mattered is that God was the one to decide who-or what-would be used as a sacrifice. Any sacrifice would have been sufficient whether a man, and angel or an ass. Here, "The omnipotence of God might be honored by such teaching; but at the expense of his justice,"<sup>17</sup> not to mention the integrity of His Son.

---

<sup>15</sup>Knowles, 305.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 307.

<sup>17</sup>Trench, 266-267.

Scotus did approach Scholasticism with a different perspective from his forerunners. Yet, he is still considered the last of the great schoolmen. He too desired and "sought to join the metaphysical study of being with the theological study of God."<sup>18</sup> He would thus never declare (as would Martin Luther some 200 years in the future) *Sola Scriptura*. Nevertheless, notwithstanding his ties with the *via antiqua*, he would be more recognized as the one who ushered in a new phase of scholastic thought. This "late Scholasticism" would come to be more closely connected with the *via moderna*.<sup>19</sup>

#### William of Ockham (1285-1349)

Ockham, as did Scotus, profoundly influenced and altered the direction of late Scholasticism. Though Scotus is credited as being the one who initiated a break from the philosophies and traditions of the great schoolmen, it was Ockham who severed the cord between the worlds of realism and nominalism. He was the authoritative leader of the *via moderna* and was "chiefly responsible for the parting of the ways between 'old' and 'new' Scholasticism."<sup>20</sup>

Ockham's theory of nominalism was explicit. He could not tolerate the realism of high Scholasticism. For him, individual things alone had real existence. Universals

---

<sup>18</sup>Walker, 350.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 350.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 353.

were nothing more than terms or symbols. They were fictions of the mind, or images in a mirror. Ockham argued that if ideas which existed in God's mind were universal entities "then the visible world would have been created out of them and not out of nothing."<sup>21</sup>

Unlike Scotus, Ockham's "epistemology broke with virtually the whole medieval tradition before him." From the time of Augustine through Aquinas, all the great Christian thinkers embraced realism. They believed that "knowledge of individuals is mediated by universals." The mind could not know of a particular thing except by way of the universal concept.<sup>22</sup> However, Ockham viewed external reality as composed solely of substances and qualities.<sup>23</sup> He categorically rejected the premise of realism.

One area of concern was Ockham's soteriology. He believed that salvation depended partly on meritorious works and not solely on God's unmerited mercy. However, he also embraced a covenant theology which "denied any intrinsic connection between salvation and infused habits of grace." This made "God's acceptance the ultimate ground of salvation."<sup>24</sup> These two views appear to conflict with each other. For this reason, many historians and theologians

---

<sup>21</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian* Vol 6 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 190.

<sup>22</sup>Walker, 350.

<sup>23</sup>Strayer, 156.

<sup>24</sup>Walker, 354-55.

have accused Ockham (along with Scotus and Biel) of harboring a form of Pelagianism.

There was another problem with Ockham's nominalism. When taken to its extreme all things are individuals with no universal existence. Therefore, God could not be three in one and one in three. Ockham's theology came dangerously close to tritheism.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the Scholastics with their realism had no trouble accepting the concept of trinity. Why? Because speculating with universals leaves room for an intrinsic union of beings.

Still, Ockham saw no need for speculative theology. There were some things mankind would never understand. For example, he saw no rational basis for belief in God's existence. However, this did not concern him. Why? Because, such things were matters for genuine faith.<sup>26</sup>

Ockham's themes of philosophy and theology were guided by his nominalistic worldview. By applying the principle known today as "Ockham's razor" he insisted that "What can be done with fewer (assumptions) is done in vain with more." He overtly criticized the elaborate speculative systems of his forerunners. Faith alone was necessary for knowing God. Neither reason nor illumination would reveal God's will. Therefore, one had no reason to speculate or

---

<sup>25</sup>This problem with the trinity will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

<sup>26</sup>Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 61.

devise elaborate systems about "things" that are unknowable. It was this kind of thinking that "paved the way for Reformation theology."<sup>27</sup>

Gabriel Biel (1420-1495)

By the time Gabriel Biel arrived on the theological stage the nominalism of Scotus and Ockham had been in circulation for a century. Thus, Biel had the privilege of working with an epistemology that was already developed. He therefore embraced and passed on much of what he had learned from the writings of Ockham. He contributed to nominalism not by defining it, but by expanding it.<sup>28</sup>

Through men such as Biel, nominalism remained a viable and strong philosophical alternative in the generation prior to the Reformation. He would ultimately be the personality most closely associated with nominalistic "philosophy and theology in the polemical literature of the sixteenth century."<sup>29</sup> What may be most noteworthy about Biel is that his writings influence Martin Luther during his early pilgrimage from Catholic Priest to Protestant Reformer.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>Tim Dowley, *A Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1992), 347.

<sup>28</sup>A thorough treatment of Biel can be found in Oberman's book, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*.

<sup>29</sup>Strayer, 157.

<sup>30</sup>Walker, 424.

## NOMINALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON LUTHER AND CALVIN

Martin Luther

## His Early Pursuit of Knowledge

Historians universally agree that Luther was impacted by nominalistic thought. No honest student of Luther would ever deny this. However, the question as to how much he was impacted is still open for debate.

In 1501, Luther entered the university of Erfurt. Though the curriculum there was centered around the theology and philosophy of scholasticism, it was Ockham's nominalism that dominated. Will Durant noted that it was there that Luther probably learned of Ockham's doctrine that popes and councils could err. We also know that while at Erfurt, Luther found any form of scholasticism so disagreeable that he once commended a friend on "not having to learn the dung that was offered" as philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

Luther's access to nominalistic thought would have continued when he joined the Augustinian monastery. Much scholarship has already focused on the relationship between Luther and "the theology of his own, the Augustinian order, or that of the *via moderna*."<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Part VI. The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300-1564* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 342.

<sup>32</sup>McGrath, "Calvin," 73.

### His Later Embrace of Nominalistic Thought

In a fragment of his work *Table-Talk*, Luther discussed the difference between terminism (nominalism) and realism. Luther understood the essential differences between the two and wished himself to be regarded as a nominalist.<sup>33</sup> One cannot draw from this that Luther embraced the whole of nominalism. Only that he preferred nominalism over realism.

Up until 1509, Luther continued to study the nominalist theologies of Ockham, d'Ally and Biel. The development of his dialectical skills, his distrust of speculative theology and perhaps his early understanding of salvation solely on the ground of God's will may arguably be traced to his study of nominalistic thought.<sup>34</sup>

However, by 1510, Luther's study of Augustine started leading him away from a primarily nominalistic theology. In fact, he started to develop a hostility toward the Aristotelian flavor of nominalist theology which he eventually deemed a "new Pelagianism."

The picture here is of a theologian who was first committed to a nominalist Soteriology, but who eventually broke free. If this picture is accurate then one may conclude that nominalism initially played a major role in the formulation of Luther's early theological convictions. It is just as important to note that Luther's "theological

---

<sup>33</sup>McGrath, 74-75.

<sup>34</sup>Walker, 424.

breakthrough did not arise through any fundamental methodological innovation" from the influence of humanism.<sup>35</sup> His whole journey was therefore a spiritual one.

#### His Opposition to Aspects of Nominalistic Thought

In 1517 Luther published his Disputation against Scholastic Theology. In this work he offered ninety-seven theses in which he attacked virtually the whole of medieval scholasticism. He attacked both the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*. Of the ninety-seven theses, no less than thirteen mention either Biel, Scotus, or Ockham by name.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to note that Luther did not reject nominalism as a whole. He rejected any portion of any school of thought which he felt challenged the Scriptures. His foundation would ultimately be *Sola Scriptura*. Regardless of any early philosophical influences, they would all give way if he thought them to challenge the integrity of God's Word. It was mainly his understanding of the Pelegian bent of nominalistic theology that inspired his opposition to the *via moderna*. He once said of nominalistic thought that it was not only "absurd and Pelegian," but "indeed worse than Pelegian."<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>McGrath, 118.

<sup>36</sup>Timothy F. Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 13-19. The following numbers represent the theses in which Luther challenged and opposed nominalistic teachings: 6, 10, 13, 20, 23, 54, 55, 56, 57, 90, 91, 92, 93.

<sup>37</sup>Walker, 424.

Yet, in Luther's *Bondage of the Will* he wrote this following statement while attempting to understand Erasmus' complicated definition of free will:

And here I do not want to hear anything about my friends the Moderns and their subtleties; in the interests of teaching and understanding, we ought to state matters bluntly<sup>38</sup>

Here Luther was referring to Ockham's razor. Also, he considered the "moderns" as his friends. Anyone who knows Luther will know that he would not call someone a friend unless he shared much in agreement.

Luther's relationship to nominalism is a complicated one. But then, Luther was a complicated man. Nevertheless, the influence of nominalism on the life and theology of Luther started early, ran deep and lasted his entire life.

#### John Calvin

The impact of nominalism upon Luther is quite obvious. However, when dealing with John Calvin, the connection is not so apparent. Getting a profile on Calvin is more difficult than for Luther and must be done through a series of inferences. Unlike the early life of Luther, there is little biographical information of Calvin's experience as a student, much less the mitigating factors and impacting personalities which influenced him. One must therefore compare his works with that of his contemporaries and predecessors. For this reason Allister McGrath has

---

<sup>38</sup>Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will* translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2002), 139.

stated:

There has been no serious attempt to document Calvin's relationship to the *theology* of the later mediaeval period, particularly in view of the enormous advances in our knowledge of this subject over the past two decades. In part, this omission reflects the generally-held conviction that there is little, if anything, to investigate, in that there is no significant case to be made for Calvin having been influenced by theological currents then prevalent in the late Middle Ages.<sup>39</sup>

One reason McGrath wrote his article was to counter the belief that Calvin developed a theological system without any philosophical, or outside influence. No person thinks in a vacuum. Just because Calvin did not attribute his Institutes to any former philosophical or theological foundation does not mean there were none existent. In truth, while he was a student at Paris, McGrath argues that Calvin encountered the theology of the *via moderna*.<sup>40</sup>

The *via moderna*, was known to have specific associations with the university of Paris during the later mediaeval period.<sup>41</sup>

Possibly as early as 1521, Calvin went up to a college (Montaigu), which appears to have become established as the Parisian stronghold of the *via moderna* by the second decade of the century.<sup>2</sup> The success of the *via moderna* at Paris reflected a general trend in the faculties of arts throughout the universities of northern Europe in the fifteenth century."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup>McGrath, "Calvin," 59.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 63.

Calvin was educated in the humanist tradition. He was a student of law. In his studies at Paris he would certainly have been given a terminist foundation. This does not imply that Calvin intentionally embraced any form of theology or philosophy. Nevertheless, one may infer that he would have been exposed to nominalist thought<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, this school of thought helped Calvin to develop opinions which, "especially in relation to the doctrine of grace in general, and predestination in particular" foreshadow those of John Calvin.<sup>44</sup>

The essential continuity between Calvin's thought and that of the later mediaeval period in general, and that of the *via moderna* in particular, has been documented in a number of areas. For example, attention has been drawn to the fact that the so-called "extra Calvinisticum" is a well-established feature of the Christology of the *via moderna*"<sup>45</sup>

In the institutes, Calvin declared the supreme and sovereign rule of justice is bound to the will of God. Whatever he wills must be just because he wills it. To question God's will is to ask "for something greater and higher than the will of God, which there cannot be."<sup>46</sup> Such a statement so clearly reflects the determinism of Scotus that one can not honestly deny Calvin's knowledge of it.

---

<sup>43</sup>McGrath, "Calvin," 66.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>46</sup>Francois Wendal, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* translated by Philip Mairet. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000) 128.

## NOMINALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON MEDIEVAL DOGMA

The Church

Nominalism was considered a threat to the Catholic Church. The medieval church had both a theological and political stake in realist epistemology. Nominalism would undermine the mediatorial role of the church.

Fourteenth-century church authority perceived in Ockham's thought a threat to the exclusive mediatorial role of the church. In a world where real relations existed between God and man, the church, as intermediary, held a dominant position. If nature and supernature were bound together in such a way that nature's end was necessarily a supernatural end, and if the church's sacraments and revelation were the indispensable links between nature and supernature, then the medieval church, standing between man and God, nature and nature's end, had a very basic claim on people and the temporal world. It was precisely such an assumption that underlay papal claims to temporal powers."<sup>47</sup>

The church of the fourteenth century was already struggling with the rise of nation-states and secularism-not to mention the Turks to the East. The nominalism of Ockham threatened to transform the church into a "strictly historical reality."<sup>48</sup> If the church had no universal origin then it could not claim to be the one passageway between God and man.

This struggle would not only affect the Catholic church. The reformers also struggled here.<sup>49</sup> What exactly

---

<sup>47</sup>Ozment, 62.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>49</sup>J. Russell Major, *The Age of the Renaissance and Reformation: A Short History* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 204.

was the nature of the Church? Was it mediatorial or not? Despite the rejection of realism, both Luther and Calvin adopted a model of the Church that was more in line with a realistic philosophy than of a nominalist form. However, it probably was not any philosophical mind set which influenced the reformers. But rather, it was a more traditional understanding of how the church should function.

#### The Lord's Supper

Ockham's nominalism not only challenged the validity of the church's mediatorial role, but it also challenged the transubstantial nature of the Eucharist.<sup>50</sup> If all things were particular then the Eucharist could only be bread.

This is one place where Luther would never cross over with the nominalists. Though he did not support transubstantiation, his position of consubstantiation was very similar.<sup>51</sup>

Calvin did not struggle with the Eucharist as did Luther. He had no problem putting the "elements separately into direct contact with the believer."<sup>52</sup> He would have more easily sided with the nominalists challenge of transubstantiation.

---

<sup>50</sup>Spitz, 45.

<sup>51</sup>Felipe F. Armesto and Derek Wilson, *Reformations: A Radical Interpretation of Christianity and the World, 1500 - 2000* (New York: Schribner, 1996), 73.

<sup>52</sup>Wendal, 344.

### Church and State Relations

In medieval times there was a belief in the body politic.<sup>53</sup> The Church worked very closely with the state. Each wielded great power and authority over the common man. A nominalistic philosophy would undermine this also. There could be no body politic if there were no universals. Authority would not therefore be intrinsic and could thus be questioned by anyone for any reason. Once again, nominalism would be antithetical to the current worldview:

The imposing unity of the Middle Ages at their peak was possible only under the premise that there is an ultimate unity of all things, and that this unity is somehow discernible from the human perspective. Universals were real; they were there, with a givenness even greater than one's own personal existence. They could be known with a certainty and permanence far greater than any knowledge of individual beings. Beginning from them, the entire universe was a logical hierarchy of which the ecclesiastical and civil hierarchies were reflections."<sup>54</sup>

Both Luther's and Calvin's support for a symbiotic union between Church and State remained with them. They each perceived that these two entities were ordained by God and should operate in conjunction with each other. It would take the rise of the Anabaptists to separate these two powers.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup>The belief that all forms of authority, whether church or government, were in place because God had established it so. The entire feudal world of Western Europe had been built on this belief.

<sup>54</sup>Gonzalez, 20.

<sup>55</sup>The Anabaptists were the first religious movement to categorically separate the powers of Church and State.

## NOMINALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON REFORMATION THEOLOGY

### The Trinity

Nominalism stressed individuality. When applied to the problem of the Trinity, the obvious result was to overemphasize the distinctions of persons. This challenged divine essence.<sup>56</sup>

Such a dilemma is the logical conclusion of nominalism, yet none of the reformers struggled with this. In truth, neither did Ockham. When addressing the attributes of God he said:

Do not think that one can prove the existence of God or demonstrate rationally the attributes of God. Reason and revelation stand separated. If one is religious, it can only be on the basis of revelation, expressed in the form of religious authority, and supremely the Bible.<sup>57</sup>

There seems to be no impact from nominalism on the Trinity. Regardless of any nominalistic influence, the reformers all maintained an orthodox view of the Trinity.

### Predestination

In the theology of Scotus, Salvation in Christ appears as the necessary consequence of God's eternal decree of election. Redemption is not only part of predestination, but it is founded upon it<sup>58</sup> Thus Scotus "strongly affirmed

---

<sup>56</sup>Strayer, 155.

<sup>57</sup>Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 64.

<sup>58</sup>Wendal, 231.

the absolute independence of the divine will and its priority in relation to faith and to human works."<sup>59</sup>

If there is no relationship between morality and merit then God's favor is bestowed arbitrarily.<sup>60</sup> Such a philosophical foundation can only lead to a double-deterministic theology (which is exactly what Luther and Calvin embraced). All of the nominalist thinkers embraced some form of deterministic theology. The fact that all of the reformers also were deterministic seems much more than a mere coincidence.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF NOMINALISTIC THINKING DURING THE REFORMATION

##### Positive Implications

One positive implication was that nominalism challenged the very essence of the Medieval worldview. In the world of nominalism there would be no body-politic. With no body-politic neither the Church nor secular powers could justify their right to rule merely by virtue of their existence. In the world of the realists, the mere existence of something proved its universal and intrinsic significance. The fact that the Roman Church reigned supreme in Europe proved that it deserved to reign supreme. This notion was unacceptable to nominalistic thought. Thus nominalism not only fueled reform thinking, it may also have aided the growing nationalism of the day.

---

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 273.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 84.

Another positive implication was that there was a transition from the concept of an ontological to a covenantal causality. Suddenly, God could be known personally and intimately. God was in the business of building relationships with individuals.

This final dismantling of the ontological framework of the God-man relationship may be regarded as the necessary prelude to Luther's 'biblical realism', in that it permitted this relationship to be conceived personally... Thus, the concept of grace was no longer considered primarily as a created intermediate species interposed between man and God, but rather as an aspect of God's disposition towards man."<sup>61</sup>

A final positive implication was the development of a new epistemology. Ockham's opinion of realism is that it destroyed all science, truth and reason. The outcome of this new thinking was extremely practical.

It promoted interest in the individual as alone real; it diverted attention away from universals, which had preoccupied intellectuals since ancient times; and it prepared the way for empirical research, providing a basis for the scientific development of the modern age."<sup>62</sup>

#### Negative Implications

The first negative implication was the apparent Pelagianism that hovered around nominalist thinking. Neither Scotus, Ockham, nor Biel could ever completely remove meritorious acts from salvation.<sup>63</sup> There remained a tension between divine election and human merit.

---

<sup>61</sup>McGrath, 82.

<sup>62</sup>Thompson, 63.

<sup>63</sup>Walker, 357-58.

A second negative implication centered on an awkward Christology. "There is an evident Christological lacuna in the soteriology of the *via moderna*." In the nominalist world the "salvation of mankind may be discussed without reference to the incarnation and the death of Christ." For this reason, theologians of the *via moderna* often referred to Christ as Legislator rather than Savior."<sup>64</sup> Christ's incarnation was not really necessary. It happened only because God willed it.

A third negative implication was the vacuum left by nominalism. "While destroying the very foundations of the medieval synthesis, nominalism had little to offer in its place." After dismantling the world of the scholastics, the nominalists could offer nothing in return. There were attempts to create other systems, but these systems could not withstand the very methods of theological critiques that they had used against their opponents. The result was a never ending, increasingly complex cycle of debate. Many of the resulting theologies, were difficult to apply to the life of the church.<sup>65</sup>

A fourth negative implication was that the supporters of nominalism were ultimately left without any clear knowledge as to what was of "immemorial tradition in the Church and what was the speculation of recent schoolmen

---

<sup>64</sup>McGrath, 82.

<sup>65</sup>Gonzalez, 20-21.

or the claim of papal propagandists."<sup>66</sup>

A final negative implication was the inherent scepticism of nominalism. God's grace was arbitrary. His essence unknowable. His law subordinate to his will and thus changeable.

In many circles, nominalism, "left the door open for agnosticism or incredulity as well as for a fideistic acceptance of religious teaching."<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, future skepticism and possibly the Enlightenment would find a great ally with nominalism.

#### CONCLUSION

The nominalists hated speculation. So did the reformers. Some may still ask, if the belief of nominalistic impact upon the reformers was actual are speculative. One cannot deny the affinities between many teachings held by both the 13<sup>th</sup> century nominalists and the 15<sup>th</sup> century reformers. However, affinity does not necessarily mitigate influence.

Both the nominalists and reformers embraced a deterministic theology based on the Scriptures. This was quite unlike the realists were forced to accept a deterministic philosophy that was more fatalistic. Such fatalism would naturally emerge from an ecclesiastical system whose origins were "more Neoplatonic than

---

<sup>66</sup>Knowles, 332.

<sup>67</sup>Knowles, 332.

Christian."<sup>68</sup>

Both nominalists and reformers hated this Neoplatonic realism of the Catholic Church. However, this realism created a comfort zone for the Catholic Church. Everything seen on earth was the reflection of a universal reality. The Catholic Church, therefore, reigned supreme on earth because there was a universal reality of Catholic supremacy. This medieval synthesis allowed the Catholic Church to operate on its own authority. However, both the nominalists and the reformers "undercut the very premises on which that synthesis was built."<sup>69</sup>

True, there was an incredible theological divergence between the 13<sup>th</sup> century nominalists and the 15<sup>th</sup> century reformers. However, it is possible to embrace one's epistemology and reject his theology. Therefore, it should not be surprising to find such a variance of theological positions within the nominalist and reformation camps. The reformers did indeed reject much of the theology of the nominalists. However, the epistemology of nominalism still impacted and shaped the theology of the reformers. Nominalism did not teach its adherents what to think, but how to think.

When the turbulent Middle Ages came to a close and the dust settled the world looked very different. The Church was now fragmented. People swore allegiance to their

---

<sup>68</sup>Gonzalez, 20.

<sup>69</sup>Gonzalez, 20.

kings, not their pope.

Had nominalism never surfaced, would the reformation still have taken place? Probably. Was nominalism the only philosophy to impact the reformers? Certainly not. Was it the most important philosophical presupposition underlying the theology of the reformers? Many historians, perhaps most, would say no. Was nominalism a definite factor aiding in the formation of theological ideas among Luther and Calvin? Absolutely.

Luther and Calvin were brilliant men. They would have flourished in any field of study. In their individual pursuits they both became disillusioned with the theological and ecclesiastical world of a Catholic Church—a world in which both once veraciously embraced. What caused their break?

Before either Luther or Calvin became serious students of theology they were introduced to nominalistic thinking. Thus, they brought a nominalistic philosophy into their theological studies. It is quite possible that aside from the Bible itself, nominalism may have been the greatest academic influence on both Luther and Calvin.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Armesto, Felipe Fernandez and Derek Wilson. Reformations: A Radical Interpretation of Christianity and the World, 1500 - 2000. New York: Schribner, 1996.
- Bainton, Roland H. The Reformation Of The Sixteenth Century. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- Brehier, Emile. The History of Philosophy: The Middle Ages and the Renaissance. translated by Wade Baskin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Carre, Meyrick H. Realists and Nominalists. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Cross, F. L. and E. A. Livingstone. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Davis, R. H. C. A History of Medieval Europe. England: Longman, 1985.
- Donnelly, John P. Reform and Renewal. U.S.: McGrath Publishing, 1977.
- Dowley, Tim. A Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity.
- Durant, Will. The Story of Civilization: Part VI. The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300-1564. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957.
- Evans, G. R. ed. The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Medieval Period. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001.
- Fairweather, Eugene. ed and translated. A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956.
- Fisher, George P. History of the Christian Church. New York: Charles Schribner's and Sons, 1913
- Gilson, Etienne. History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages. London: Sheed and Ward, 1972.

- Gonzalez, Juso L. A History of Christian Thought. vol. 3, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Nashville: Abington Press, 1987.
- Hillerbrand, Hans J. The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation. Vol. 3. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Protestant Reformation. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.
- Knowles, David. The Evolution of Medieval Thought. New York: Vintage Books, 1962.
- Latourette, Kenneth S. A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500. Vol 1. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. A History of Christianity: Reformation to the Present. Vol 2. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2000.
- Leff, Gordon. William of Ockham: The Metamorphosis of Scholastic Discourse. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977.
- Lull, Timothy F. ed. Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Luther, Martin. Bondage of the Will. translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston. Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2002.
- McGrath, Alister. The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
- Major, J. Russell. The Age of the Renaissance and Reformation: A Short History. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970.
- Oberman, Heiko A. The Harvest of Medieval Theology. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Harvest of Medieval Theology. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000.
- Ozment, Steven. The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980.
- Raitt, Jill. ed. World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest. Vol. 17. *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.
- Richard, Lucien Joseph. The Spirituality of John Calvin. Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1974.

- Schaff, Philip. History of the Christian Church: The Middle Ages From Boniface VIII to the Protestant Reformation. volume 6. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.
- Spitz, Lewis W. The Renaissance and Reformation Movements. Vol. 1, Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1972.
- Strayer, Joseph R. ed. Dictionary of the Middle Ages: Mystery Religions - Poland. Vol. 9. New York: Charles Schribner's sons, 1987.
- Thompson, Bard. Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Trench, Richard Chenevix. Lectures on Medieval Church History. New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1878.
- Walker, Williston, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz and Robert T. Handy. A History of the Christian Church. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1985.
- Wendal, Francois. Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought. translated by Philip Mairet. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000.
- Wuld, Maurice De. An Introduction to Scholastic Philosophy. Translated by P. Coffey. New York: Dover Publications, 1956.

#### Journals

- McGrath, Alister E. "John Calvin and Late Mediaeval Thought: A Study in Late Mediaeval Influences upon Calvin's Theological Development," Archiv Fur Revormationsgeschichte 77 (1986): 58-78.
- McGrath, Alister E. The Anti-Pelagian Structure of "Nominalist" Doctrines of Justification," Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaienses 57 (1981): No 1:107-119.